Predictors of Student Satisfaction: A Mixed-methods Investigation in UK Higher Education.

Alison Ritchie

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines which factors best predict students' satisfaction with their university experience. High levels of student satisfaction at university are important for a positive student experience as well as benefiting the institution in relation to their reputation and student recruitment success. Much of the previous research focuses on predictors of student satisfaction at one level, institutional or individual factors, and there appears to be little research conducted across multiple UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI's). Therefore, the research within the thesis aimed to examine predictors of student satisfaction at both the individual and institutional level across UK HEI's.

A mixed methods approach was taken. The first two studies used a quantitative approach examining data from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES). Study-1 examined predictors of overall satisfaction on the NSS, focusing on which questions on the NSS best predict overall satisfaction. This study extended the previous work of Bell and Brooks (2018) by analyzing data from the updated NSS survey questions. Findings supported that of previous research and showed that 'teaching' and 'organisation and management' were the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction ratings. Study-2 examined individual and institutional level predictors of student satisfaction on the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) developed by HEPI using Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM). The results revealed that student level variables of *ethnicity*, *nationality*, *residency*, *life satisfaction* and *student-staff liaising* were predictors of satisfaction at university, and the institutional level variable *tutorial-style classes* significantly predicted student satisfaction.

Higher levels of satisfaction were reported by students who were white, international students, rated their life satisfaction highly, liaised with staff members more frequently and spent more time in tutorial-style classes. The strongest predictor of student satisfaction was a students' life satisfaction rating. This study makes an original contribution to knowledge as it is the first large scale study examining both individual and institutional level predictors of student satisfaction. Study-3 then aimed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the factors influencing student satisfaction by adopting a qualitative approach. Students took part in focus groups to explore variables related to their satisfaction with their university experience. Key themes emerging from the study indicated that students consider both individual and institutional factors as important to feel satisfied overall with university. Key over-arching themes were socioeconomic status, psychosocial wellbeing, personal life, course, and teaching. Much of the findings in the third study supported and expanded upon those from the first two studies in that students reported feeling more satisfied with university when they perceived the quality of teaching and course content to be good, had good mental health and lived on campus.

In summary, the findings of the thesis suggest that it is important that institutions consider individual student requirements and their wellbeing in order to have high levels of student satisfaction. Having good quality courses, teaching and campus environment is important, but caring for students is more important and beneficial for student satisfaction levels.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The current thesis examines predictors of student satisfaction in UK Higher Education
Institutions (HEI's). The topic of student satisfaction is of great importance and high levels of
student satisfaction are important and beneficial for both the student and the institution. Some
positive associations with high levels of student satisfaction include increased student
attainment, increased student retention and improved institution reputation (Bell & Brooks,
2019; Gibbons, Neumayer & Perkins, 2015; Letcher & Neves, 2010), among others.

Although student satisfaction is a topic that has been researched in earlier work, the research of
the current thesis aimed to address the limitations of previous research on the topic and make an
original contribution to the literature. The previous research tends to be conducted outside of the
UK, at a single institution, within a single discipline and at one level, usually looking at
institutional factors only (Bell & Brooks, 2019). It also tends to be mostly quantitative in
method, using self-report measures. Therefore, in order to gain a general overview of the
predictors of student satisfaction across a variety of disciplines, within multiple HEI's and
account for individual student factors as well as those controlled by the institution, the research
within the thesis analysed various datasets and adopted a variety of methodologies.

The research of the thesis begins broad, at the institution level to gain a wider, more general
understanding of the factors associated with student satisfaction. The first study analyses the

NSS dataset which includes students from various disciplines and institutions and measures their satisfaction with a variety of factors which are at the institution level, for example, the organisation, management and teaching of a course. The research then becomes more focused in Study-2, looking at student level data to identify the individual differences which may predict student satisfaction as well as institutional factors. The second study analyses the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) which measures student satisfaction with various factors at the institution level such as contact hours and class type as well as the individual level such as personal study hours, life satisfaction and residency. Finally, in Study-3 the research becomes more focused, using a qualitative method to elicit a deeper understanding of the factors that influence student satisfaction and to gain a better understanding of how these factors impact the student experience. The final study interviewed students in a focus group setting and asked openended questions to give the students the opportunity to offer their views on any factors which they believe influences their overall satisfaction levels with university.

Objectives of the Thesis

Each of the research studies throughout the thesis have their own research questions and predictions, although the main objectives of the thesis were to:

1. Identify the sub-areas of the National Student Survey (NSS) which relate to students' overall satisfaction ratings.
2. Examine which individual and institutional level factors are the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction.

3. Explore students' perceptions of the most important factors in influencing their overall satisfaction with university.

Thesis Structure

Chapter two of the thesis reviews the existing literature in the field of student satisfaction. The review critically evaluates the research to develop a rationale for conducting the research which forms the current thesis. The chapter ends by presenting the proposed contribution to the existing literature. Chapter three examines the predictors of student satisfaction at the institution level. The research in this chapter used National Student Survey (NSS) data and multiple regression analysis to explore the relationships between the sub-sections of the NSS and students' overall satisfaction ratings. Chapter four examines the predictors of student satisfaction at the individual and institutional level. The research in this chapter used Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) data and multilevel modelling to analyse factors of student satisfaction at both the institutional and individual level. The research aimed to identify the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction. Chapter five introduces a qualitative aspect to the thesis. The research in this chapter used focus group interviews with an aim of gaining a deeper understanding of factors which students perceive to be important in predicting their overall satisfaction with university. The research used thematic analysis to identify the main themes which were apparent throughout the research which described the strongest predictors of student satisfaction from the student's perspective. Finally, in Chapter six the key findings of all three research studies are discussed. The key findings of each study are discussed in relation to the existing literature and in relation to one another. The chapter concludes by stating the contribution of knowledge, evaluating

limitations of the research, suggesting the potential impact that the findings could have for HEI's

and proposing suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The satisfaction of higher education students has been a topic of interest for some time, and it has been argued that interest has increased following the 2012 tuition fee increase (Bell & Brooks, 2019). The large increase in fees has been thought to strengthen the idea of students as consumers and that students are more focused on receiving good 'value for money' from the 'service' (Bell & Brooks, 2018). It is important to Higher Education Institutions' (HEI's) for their students to be satisfied as high satisfaction rates have been linked to student loyalty, retention and achievement as well as the reputation and rankings of the institution. (Bell & Brooks, 2019; Gibbons, Neumayer & Perkins, 2015).

An individuals' satisfaction level is a subjective construct, and so it can be difficult to accurately measure and define. No single definition of service quality in Higher Education (HE) has been agreed upon as each stakeholder (i.e., students, government, professional bodies) has different views of what quality means for them (Gruber, Fub, Voss & Glaser-Zikuda, 2010). However, this thesis focuses on the students' perceptions of quality and one common definition of student satisfaction in HE is that it occurs when the "actual performance of the institution meets or exceeds a students' expectations" (Szymanski & Henard, 2001).

This thesis focuses on students' perspective as it is argued that HEI's can only provide a quality service that will satisfy students if they know what their students really want (Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Winsted, 2000; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1985). It has been argued that there has not been enough focus placed on the student perspective (Joseph et al, 2005) or much research

on student satisfaction in Higher Education in general in the UK (Bell & Brooks, 2019). By

knowing what students want, the HEI can alter their services in a bid to increase satisfaction

(Gruber et al., 2013) and in turn experience positive outcomes such as increased retention,

student loyalty and reputation (Bell & Brooks, 2019; Gibbons, et al., 2015). This viewpoint

influenced the focus of the thesis being on satisfaction from the students' perspective. Students

were surveyed and interviewed directly to gain trustworthy measures of what makes them

satisfied with their university experience. The studies throughout the thesis use varying

methodologies to examine what influences student satisfaction.

Using Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1985) as a theoretical framework, this chapter

will examine the existing literature surrounding the topic of student satisfaction in higher

education in relation to the studies which form this thesis. Based on Astin's (1985) theory, both

institutional and individual factors will be considered in relation to predicting student's overall

satisfaction levels with university. The chapter will evaluate the existing literature, identify areas

which require further development and describe how the thesis aims to address these and make

an original contribution to the literature.

Student satisfaction

The satisfaction of students is of critical importance for institutions both strategically and

economically (Santini, Ladeira, Sampaio & Costa, 2017). Institutions are thought to be interested

in student satisfaction not only to increase their public rankings in a bid to recruit the highest

quality students and meet their annual new student Quota, but to increase the retention and

achievement of their students (Letcher & Neves, 2010). Recruiting and retaining the highest

quality students is thought to be more important than ever due to poorer economic conditions, increasing competition and increasing tuition fees (Trowler, 2010).

It is argued that student satisfaction is important for retaining current students as well as recruiting new ones via satisfaction league tables (Stewart et al., 2018), which students have been found to use to inform them when making such an important decision as choosing which university to study at (Angell et al., 2008; Donaldson & McNicholas, 2004). In fact, Gibbons et al., (2015) argue that the overall ranking of an institution is one of the most important drivers for university choice by students.

The benefits of highly satisfied students

Regardless of the differences in how student satisfaction is defined, it is mostly agreed that having high levels of student satisfaction is of high importance for an institution, not only for the benefit of the students but also for the institution.

First, it is largely found that students who are more satisfied with their university experience are more likely to achieve higher grades than their less satisfied peers. Student satisfaction has been argued to be the strongest predictor of attainment (Aitken, 1982; Letcher & Neves, 2010). Higher levels of achievement benefits both the student, by putting them in a stronger position on the job market following graduation, and the institution in recruiting high quality students in future years due to higher league table rankings and reputation.

It is argued that retaining current students is equally as important as attracting new ones (Helgesen & Nesset, 2007) and student satisfaction has been found to influence retention by

reducing drop-out rates (Bell & Brooks, 2019). It is also thought that if students are satisfied, it may increase the likelihood of undergraduate students then choosing the same institution for their postgraduate studies (Gruber et al., 2013). Student recruitment is also influenced by wordof-mouth recommendations from alumni (Elliot & Healy, 2001; Khoo et al., 2017) and recommendations from previous students has been found to be a more effective recruitment method than sponsored promotional activities (Henning-Tharau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004).

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

The methodological approaches taken in the current thesis are guided by Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1985). The theory focuses on student's level of involvement with their university experience, which Astin argues is the 'amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to the academic experience' (Astin, 1984, p. 518). This includes time spent studying and involvement in societies and extracurricular activities. Astin argues that the theory accounts for 'virtually every significant effect ... that contributed to the student's remaining in college' (Astin, 1984, p. 302).

The social aspect of university has been found to be associated with a variety of benefits such as increased grades (Belch, Gebel & Mass, 2001; Bryant & Bradley, 1993) and retention (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). More recent research has supported the theory. It is often found that students who are involved in student organisations, in leadership positions and who take part in activities in halls of residence are less likely to drop out of university (Forrester, 2006; Kuh & Pike, 2005), suggesting that they are more satisfied overall.

The current thesis was guided by Astin's theory (1985) due to the holistic approach it takes to student satisfaction. As will be demonstrated in the review of the previous literature, student satisfaction is often measured by exploring only factors relating to the institution or the individual student, rarely both. Whereas the current thesis aims to explore student satisfaction in relation to the entire student experience, not only the academic or social aspects. For example, research within the thesis measures the number of hours students spend in different class types, and also adopts a qualitative approach which allows students to explain which class types they prefer and why. It is also recognised from the existing literature that demographic factors such as age, gender and ethnicity can influence a student's level of 'involvement' and so the current thesis also accounts for demographic factors. For example, research has found that black students, who have been noted to report lower levels of satisfaction than their white peers (Keohane & Petrie, 2017), who have higher levels of involvement in university clubs and organisations feel more satisfied with their university experience than peers of the same race who have lower levels or no involvement (Allen, 1992; Strayhorn, 2010). However, it is important to note that previous research based on Astin's theory is conducted in America which is not entirely generalisable to the UK HE population due to differences in HE systems.

Measures of student satisfaction

Measuring student satisfaction allows institutions to monitor the effectiveness of their efforts to meet student expectations (Elliot, 2002). Student satisfaction in HE is often measured via selfreport methods (Leckey & Neill, 2001). Various surveys have been designed to measure

student satisfaction levels, though this review will focus on the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) as they provide large datasets, so are used more frequently in scholarly research. Subsequently, the NSS and SAES data were utilised in the quantitative component of this thesis. Data from such surveys are often used by league tables available to prospective students, for example, the Guardian University Guide and the Complete University Guide use statistics from the NSS as a way of ranking and marketing institutions to prospective students, making it of high interest for institutions to perform well (Letcher & Neves, 2010).

National Student Survey

The NSS is a survey, established in 2005, which is completed by third year undergraduate students in the UK. The survey assesses students' satisfaction with different aspects of their educational experience and aggregates these assessments into an overall satisfaction score (Douglas et al., 2014). The purpose of the NSS is to audit course quality, hold HEI's accountable for quality and to help students make informed decisions on which university to choose to study at. The NSS has been found to be a reliable and valid measurement tool over time (Cheng & Marsh, 2010; Surridge, 2009) and is used as a means of competing in league tables for HEI's as the results are published and made available to prospective students, which has been noted to be important for student selection (Asthana & Biggs, 2007; Hewson, 2011). The increasingly competitive market now means that high rankings are viewed as a legitimate, if not the most important, objective for HEI's rather than a bonus on top of good performance (Bell & Brooks, 2018). The NSS scores have been found to have a significant effect on home student applications (Gibbons et al., 2015) and affect future demand (Broecke, 2015; Elliot & Soo, 2010). The

introduction of the NSS and its' impact on league tables and student selection has led to an increased focus on the student experience (Gibbs, 2010; 2012). As discussed, focusing on improving the student experience can be beneficial for both the student and the institution.

Bell and Brooks (2018) used NSS data to determine the types of students who are most satisfied, and which sub-areas of the survey are most related to students' overall satisfaction. They found satisfaction with teaching quality to be the factor which influences overall satisfaction the most, followed by the organisation and management of a course. They also found a difference in satisfaction levels between different groups of students. Students who studied humanities and clinical degrees were noted to be most the most satisfied as well as those who study part-time at Russell group, Post-1992 institutions. By using this data set, which is argued to be the most comprehensive coverage of subject and institutional dimensions of student satisfaction in the UK, completed by more than 300,000 students in 2017, research findings can be generalised to the UK HE population (Bell & Brooks, 2018).

The value of surveys such as the NSS have been questioned (Gibbs, 2010) and the best way in which to respond to national-level student evaluations is still undecided (Brown, 2011). Surveys have also been criticised for encouraging a 'consumer ethos' of HE students rather than viewing them as active participants in their education (Hazelkorn, 2007). The NSS has been criticised for the questions not accounting for the differences between disciplines and learner typologies (Yorke, Orr & Blaire, 2014). It also does not account for individual factors such as age, gender and nationality (Bennett & Kane, 2014), nor does it represent the entire HE experience, focusing solely on factors relating to the institution (Eley, 2001). It is argued that more sophisticated, multivariate data analysis is required in HE research (Langan et al., 2013).

Therefore, the current project employed multivariate analyses including path analysis and multilevel modelling. These approaches allow for the identification of direct and indirect relationships between variables and overall satisfaction and the impact of variables at different levels (institution and individual) on overall satisfaction. Study-2 of the thesis aimed to address the limitations of the NSS by utilising data from the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), which looks at both the institutional and individual factors which may predict student satisfaction, such as personal study hours, part-time work and residency.

Student Academic Experience Survey

The Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), run by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), measures various aspects of the student experience. It was introduced in 2006 to examine the impact of tuition fee increases (Buckley et al, 2015) and is thought to complement the NSS well (Bell & Brooks, 2018). Unlike the NSS, the SAES provides data at the student level which allows for individual characteristics, such as age, gender and nationality, to be analysed as well as those of the institution in relation to overall student satisfaction. Study-2 of the thesis utilises the SAES data to explore the impact that both individual and institutional factors have on students' overall satisfaction using multilevel modelling.

The findings from the SAES are presented in a report each year (Neves & Hillman, 2017) and have impacted government policies for HEI's. However, the data has rarely been utilised in further scholarly research. Although Williams (2020) used the 2014-15 SAES data to measure a very specific aspect measured by the relationship between teaching staff on casual contracts and

18

student satisfaction and found that an increase in casual teaching contracts related to decreased student satisfaction. Study-2 of the thesis expands on the analysis conducted in the 2017 annual report (Neves & Hillman, 2017), which is based on simple descriptive and inferential analysis (e.g., Pearson's correlation). In particular, Study-2 uses multilevel modelling with an aim of analysing several variables at the individual (level-1) and institutional (level-2) level.

Although the SAES addressed the limitations of the NSS in terms of including individual level factors, there are still some limitations of the survey. It is possible that questions may be misinterpreted, missed out or thought not to be relevant to the individual completing it without the guidance of a researcher. In addition, even if all relevant topics are covered in a self-report survey, there are no opportunities for the students to expand on their answers. These limitations of the self-report method influenced the inclusion of a qualitative aspect in this thesis, as did the argument that there is an overemphasis of recent experiences (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). Due to the subjectivity of the topic of student satisfaction, it has been argued that quantitative methods alone are not an appropriate measurement tool (Gruber et al., 2010). Therefore, Study-3 of the thesis adopted a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the predictive factors of student satisfaction. Open-ended questions were asked to allow the students to offer information that they thought of or perceived to be important to them rather than only answering on topics they are asked about. This is more likely to encourage the students to consider their entire HE experience as opposed to their most recent experiences.

Qualitative Analysis of Student Experience

It has been argued that it is difficult to measure student satisfaction using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach such as national surveys because student satisfaction is complex and multi-faceted (Douglas, McClelland & Davies, 2008). It is thought that a more flexible approach is required to measure student satisfaction more accurately, particularly because student satisfaction has been found to vary at different points throughout the academic year (Pennington et al., 2017) and across subject area (Umbach & Porter, 2002). The complimentary role of qualitative data when looking into human behaviours, feelings and attitudes has been endorsed throughout the literature (Draper, 2004; Fade, 2004), although appears to be sparse within UK research. Previous research supports that a qualitative method is a rational methodology to adopt when researching student satisfaction because, although it is common for HE to be viewed as a service offered to consumers, the differences between tangible services (e.g., the sale of goods) and educational services mean that they cannot be measured entirely in the same way, using the same methodology (Patterson & Johnson, 1993; Shank et al., 1995). It is thought that the unique characteristics of the HE experience separate it from other service providers, for example, it requires input and effort from the student (Zeithaml et al, 1985). Interviews and focus groups have been used to examine student satisfaction, although not as often as quantitative methods. This is likely to be due to time and cost and the ability to obtain more student responses via large surveys.

When conducting interviews to explore the areas of the NSS which were evident in students' own accounts of their HE experience, Bates, Kaye and McCann (2019) reported that the main themes surrounding student satisfaction were, 'learning environment', 'work-life balance' and 'wider university community'. As discussed, often factors surrounding a students' personal and social life are not included in surveys and so these factors, which have been identified as important to students for their satisfaction with their HE experience, can be missed.

Focus groups are widely used within the social sciences (Hopkins, 2007) and have been defined as 'a one-off meeting of between four and eight individuals who are brought together to discuss a particular topic chosen by the researcher(s) who moderate or structure the discussion' (Bedford & Burgess, 2001, p. 121). They are thought to be effective in assessing the thoughts, experiences and attitudes of individuals in relation to a particular topic (Myers, 1998) and more time and cost effective than other qualitative methods (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

Focus groups can be used as a basis for developing a survey. Clemes, Gan and Kao (2008) ran two mini focus groups as a basis for forming a survey. The key areas they looked at were institutional factors such as lectures, university environment and learning outcomes. This is again institution focussed and was conducted at one institution in New Zealand. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to a UK population. Cultural differences can influence predictors of student satisfaction. For example, it has been found that Chinese students place a higher importance on availability of recommended reading materials than students of other ethnicities and is thought that this may be due to the learning style in China which favours learning a lot from one or a few books as opposed to having a wider knowledge across a subject (Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

Alternatively, focus groups can be conducted to further explore the topics measured by a survey. Frawley, Goh and Law (2018) used focus groups to further examine the aspects of student satisfaction gathered from a survey. They found that it was the standard of education that influenced student satisfaction that the students placed high importance on practical training classes. However, this was a sample of ten students on a hotel management course at an Australian university and it is recognised that different disciplines have different preferences.

Similarly, Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes (2006) utilised focus groups to gain a greater understanding of the factors important for student satisfaction following a questionnaire. The results suggested that students considered the quality of teaching as much more important than the physical aspects of university, such as furnishings and that students would often base their module choices on their favourite teaching staff. Students reported feeling dissatisfied when staff were unresponsive, and feedback turn around was viewed as slow. They also reported feeling less satisfied when tutorial-style classes were too large, which in this case the students considered as having more than 20 students. The students reported that this is because they then feel that they do not receive enough individual attention from the teacher. Hill et al., (2003) also used focus groups to examine how students defined quality in HE and found similar findings. The most common themes identified surrounded the quality of the lecturers including their teaching style, the quality of their feedback and their relationship with their students.

Astin (1984) argues that students' university experience has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively by measuring the number of hours a student spends studying, and qualitatively by measuring whether the student reviews and comprehends the material they read or simply stares

at the textbook daydreaming. This is an idea which influenced the mixed methods approach of the current research project, as well as the thought that factors important to students for their satisfaction levels may be missed in quantitative research methods. Therefore, Study-3 of the thesis used focus groups to collect data and thematic analysis to identify themes which surround the factors that students believe to be important in impacting their overall satisfaction with university.

Students as Consumers vs Partners

It has been argued that HEI's are experiencing a 'buyers' market' in which students are evaluating their choice of where to spend their money based on the facilities available such as the curriculum, faculties, and resources (Ehrman, 2006). Higher Education students can be viewed as customers receiving a service (Gremler & McCollough, 2002; Hill, 1995; Sanders et al, 2000), co-producers of knowledge who share a responsibility for their learning with the HEI (Armstrong, 1995) or as products of the university who are placed on the job market postgraduation (Guolla, 1999).

It is argued that following the increase in tuition fees In 2012, students are less likely to be perceived as co-producers of their education and more like consumers receiving a service that they expect to be of good value for money (Narasimhan, 2001; Watson, 2003). In response to students' expectations, needs and requirements it is argued that HEI's act as a service provider (Williams & Cappucini-Ansfield, 2007). Also, ranking universities by quality in league tables as a way of helping prospective students choose a university is thought to imply that students are consumers rather than learning partners (Brennan, 2012; Marope et al, 2013). However, research

reviewing the outcomes of the first ten years of the NSS found no evidence of the 2012 fee

increase influencing the outputs. This suggests that how students view HEI's may not have been

altered by fee increases and that they do not view themselves as customers paying for a service

of which they evaluate the quality of in relation to price (Burgess, Senior & Moore, 2018).

Similarly, the introduction of quality assurance frameworks such at the Teaching Excellence

Framework (TEF) and national surveys such as the NSS which rely on student evaluation of

service quality are also thought to position students more as customers or consumers of their

education (Singh, 2002). Student satisfaction has been found to be similar to service quality in

other service types as service quality elements have been found to be good predictors of

satisfaction (Dabholkar & Overby, 2005; Sureshchandar, Chandrasekharan, &

Anantharaman, 2002). Students' service quality rating has been found to be associated with their

overall satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009) which, again, supports

the idea of students as consumers.

Viewing the HE experience in a similar way to other service types also influences viewpoints

surrounding how a student (consumer) evaluates the quality of the service (the university). When

doing so, it is argued that the evaluation of service quality is the result of a variety of

subjudgements of different areas of the service. Specifically, contact with personnel (i.e.,

university staff), the physical environment (i.e., the buildings and campus), the services system

(i.e., enrolment and lessons) and other consumers (i.e., other students). It is argued that it is the

accumulation of all of these sub-judgements which make up a student's overall satisfaction

(Anderson, Pearo & Widener, 2008; Mittal, Kumar & Tsiros, 1999).

However, it has been argued that people do not evaluate their overall satisfaction in this way and instead evaluate specific salient moments and the final state (Ariely & Carmon, 2000). In a higher education context this may be more likely because of the length of the 'service'. Most services received outside of education are likely to be much shorter than the typically three-year long degree. Therefore, when asked at the end of their degree how satisfied they are overall with the experience, students may be less likely to evaluate all aspects of their university experience evenly, and instead, base their evaluation on the most memorable aspects of their experience as well as their final grades or degree classification (Williams, 2013). If this is the case, then the way in which the NSS is divided into sub-groups of variables may help the students to consider several areas of their experience. However, their 'overall satisfaction' rating may still not reflect all of those sub-ratings.

Viewing students as consumers has been 25eneraliza and it is thought they should instead be viewed as active participants in their education (Hazelkorn, 2007). It is argued that by positioning students as consumers it impacts the university-student and student-staff relationships (Singh, 2002) and wrongly suggests that the university experience is a product rather than a process and that students are merely passive 'consumers' receiving the service (Clayson & Haley, 2005; McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) suggest that this viewpoint may encourage a situation where students want to 'have a degree' as opposed to 'be a learner'. Viewing students as passive and going to university to 'get a degree' has led to much concern about viewing students as consumers (Afolabi & Stockwell, 2012; Bay & Daniel 2001; McMillan & Cheney, 1996) and it has been argued that educational services are different from other services (Hennig-Tharau et al., 2001). This is because unlike other types of services, HE plays a significant role in the students' life and requires input from the student such

as the motivation and intellectual skills to attain their goals and what they want from the 'service' (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). Thus, various other positionings have been put forward with researchers arguing that in the HE setting, students are researchers (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Jenkins & Healy, 2009), producers (Neary & Winn, 2009) or co-producers (McCulloch, 2009) and partners (Cook-Sather, 2014; Little, 2011), all of which imply that students are not passive in the HE process, but proactively participate and are responsible for their learning.

Furthermore, a UK government paper on HE, The White Paper (2011), argues that the view of students as consumers should be altered towards a more collaborative approach in which students are viewed as partners and have more of a say in their HE experience. This suggests that students ought to be more engaged in the entire HE process and that their views and opinions on the institution should be valued and acted upon rather than offering them a service which the institution thinks they want.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that whether students are viewed as consumers or partners depends on the student. Bell and Brooks (2018) suggest that the way in which the student views themselves in relation to the HEI influences how they rate their satisfaction levels. Due to the increase in student fees in the UK, it means that most of the money received by HEI's comes from the student rather than the government which is thought to have increased students' expectations because they view themselves as consumers paying for a service (Bell & Brooks, 2018). In exchange for their fees, they expect a high quality of teaching, facilities and high levels of professionalism and organisation (Kay, Dunne & Hutchinson, 2010). Although, it may be that if the student works collaboratively with staff members (e.g., to develop the curriculum), then they may be more likely to see themselves as a partner than a consumer. This may in turn

influence how they rate their overall satisfaction and the types of factors that they consider when doing so. Student involvement in co-curricular activities such as student organisations and leadership positions has been found to be associated with retention rates; higher involvement increases retention (Kuh & Pike, 2005).

Predictors of student satisfaction

Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) identified two groups of influences on student satisfaction in higher education: personal and institutional factors. They noted that personal factors cover age, gender, employment, preferred learning style, student's grades. Institutional factors cover teaching style, quality of instructions, feedback and clarity of expectations.

Previous research has found that overall student satisfaction is driven by how the student perceives curriculum-related factors controlled by the institution such as course work quality (Browne, Kaldenberg, Browne & Brown, 1998). Universities typically focus on the academic dimension of a student's educational experience, particularly the quality of the course, staff credentials and the student-to-staff ratios. Although it has been argued that students are often satisfied with their course but less satisfied with areas of support such as academic advising and career counselling (Kotler and Fox, 1995). It is thought that more than just the academic aspect of university is important for overall student satisfaction, but also their social, physical and spiritual experiences (Sevier, 1996). This is supported by Astin's theory of involvement (1985).

Institutional Factors

Research often finds that the main factors which influence student satisfaction are those which are controlled by the institution rather than the individual student. For example, Masserini, Bini and Pratesi (2019) found the main determinants of student satisfaction and loyalty were teaching, lectures, course organisation and institutional image.

The institutional factors appear to be more teaching and interaction focused rather than on the physical aspects of the institution. Learning resources have often been reported to have no correlation with student's overall satisfaction rating (Agnew et al., 2016; Burgess et al., 2018; Fielding et al., 2010). This suggests that investing in buildings, the highest quality equipment and such like may not be effective in increasing student satisfaction. This is demonstrated further by Agnew et al., (2016) who reported no correlation between spend-per-student and student satisfaction levels. This suggests that large-scale investments are not important for student satisfaction ratings, although they may be useful for attracting new students (Burgess et al., 2018). It is important to note, however, that these types of factors can be of more importance to some types of students than others and also vary between disciplines.

Student satisfaction with teaching has often been found to have the strongest influence on overall satisfaction (Bell & Brookes, 2016) and has been found to significantly predict students' overall satisfaction ratings on the NSS for over a decade (Burgess, Senior & Moores, 2018). Douglas, Douglas and Barnes (2006) found the most influential factors on student satisfaction to be those associated with teaching and learning, whereas the least important related to the physical facilities of the institution. In addition, students are more likely to be accepting of a certain level

28

of deficiencies in the physical aspects of the institution, if they perceive the teaching to be of good quality (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006).

Teaching quality (Alves & Raposo; Clemes et al., 2008; DeBourgh, 2003; Sabihaini & Satoto, 2016) as well as teaching style (Dana, Brown, & Dodd, 2001) has been found to influence student satisfaction. Satisfaction has been found to increase when the student perceives their lecturers to be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, approachable, and friendly (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; Voss, Gruber & Szmigin, 2007). These findings support findings of research carried out by Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly (1973) which found that a lecturer who was actually an actor acting as a lecturer delivering nonsense content but with a 'warm manner' was favoured over an experienced professor delivering the relevant content with 'low seduction' by students. This suggests that the way in which a lecturer 'performs' their lessons, or their teaching style, is as important as the content within the lesson.

Research into the importance of teaching quality in HE for student satisfaction led to the development of The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which measures students perceived quality of teaching they receive on their course. The results of the TEF act as another resource to help students make an informed decision of which university to attend alongside NSS satisfaction results (Gunn, 2018). It has been argued that students 'vote with their feet' based on their experiences in the classroom and are more likely to enroll on an optional module delivered by a teacher perceived as providing good teaching (Banwett & Datta, 2003).

The size of class size has also been noted to influence student satisfaction levels (Alves & Raposo, 2009; Krentler & Grudnitski, 2004), although has been found to differ between

disciplines. It appears to be more important to some disciplines than others. For example, business students have been found to show a decrease in satisfaction as class size increases (Coles, 2002), whereas psychology students' satisfaction has been found not to be affected by class size (Cheng, 2011). Overall, the literature notes that institutions with higher student numbers have lower levels of student satisfaction, whilst those with more staff are likely to have higher levels of student satisfaction. This is also the case at the subject level; higher numbers of students on a course are associated with lower levels of student satisfaction whereas, courses with more teaching staff are associated with higher levels of student satisfaction (Williams, 2020; Lenton, 2015). Reasons for this have been explored and it is thought it may be related to the amount of time the teacher has for individual students (Hill et al., 2003).

In addition to teaching quality, relationships with academic staff have also been found to influence student satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Dicker et al., 2017) as well as the availability of staff members (Alves & Raposo, 2009; Elliot 2003). Browne et al., (1998) found that the likelihood of students recommending a university to their family and friends is heavily influenced by the extent of interaction with staff members. Students who interact frequently with staff members are more likely to recommend the university to their family and friends and word-of-mouth recommendations are highly influential in recruiting prospective students. Having good relationships with teachers also leads to a feeling of 'student-centeredness,' (Elliot, 2003), which Elliot (2002) found to be the most significant factor in predicting student satisfaction. Having good relationships with staff has been found to give students a sense of wellbeing and to deepen their30enection and commitment to the institution (Peterson, Wagner & Lamb, 2001).

Individual Factors

Elliot and Shin (2002) argue that what happens in the classroom is not independent of other aspects of campus life which happen outside of class. However, these individual student characteristics have been examined less frequently as predictors of student satisfaction than those that occur within the classroom (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). Individual factors such as age, gender, temperament, preferred learning style and employment have been found to significantly predict student satisfaction (Akareem & Hossain, 2016; Brokaw, Kennedy & Merz, 2004; Fredericksen, Shea & Pickett, 2000). Others have found more specific factors which influence student satisfaction such as the students' status for scholarship, their parents' age, involvement in extracurricular activities (Akareem & Hossain, 2016) the expectations that they have of university (Lobo & Gurney, 2014) and level of self-confidence (Letcher & Neves, 2010).

Moreover, as previously stated, Astin's (1985) Theory of Student Involvement focuses on the level of involvement a student demonstrates both in and out of the classroom, such as time spent on studying and involvement with societies and clubs. The theory suggests that it is more than academic engagement that is important for student satisfaction, but also the extra-curricular experience. In support of this, students who are involved in student organisations, in leadership positions and who take part in activities in halls of residence have been found to be less likely to drop out of university (Kuh & Pike, 2005). This suggests that students are more likely to feel satisfied with their HE experience overall. Similarly, non-traditional students are less likely than their peers to be involved in extracurricular activities such as research activities, internships and study abroad opportunities (Lerer & Talley, 2010; Price & Baker, 2012) which may contribute to explaining why non-traditional tend to be less satisfied overall.

Similarly, it has been argued that a holistic approach must be taken to increase students' life satisfaction through mindfulness and self-compassion leading to greater coping skills such as resilience (Mantzios, Egan, Cook, Jutley-Neilson & O'Hara, 2019). Mantzios et al., (2019) argues that by doing so, this will in turn reduce students' anxiety and distress, enabling them to perform better academically and be more satisfied with their university experience. This holistic approach, in theory, could increase attainment and characteristics related to greater wellbeing, both of which have been found to be significant in predicting a students' satisfaction rating (Letcher & Neves, 2010; Mantzios et al., 2019).

Previous literature has found a variety of individual differences that influence student satisfaction. For example, white students are more likely to be satisfied than their Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) peers and Black students are one and a half times more likely to drop out of university in the UK than White and Asian students (Keohane & Petrie, 2017). However, the findings of international student satisfaction are mixed. International students are sometimes found to be less satisfied due to factors such as having less social support (Kawaja & Dempsey, 2008), struggling to develop friendships with other students (Yu, Isensee & Kappler, 2016), an unfriendly host community (Brown, 2009), and loneliness and racism (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland & Ramia, 2012; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2005). Research has suggested a need to identify how the needs of international and domestic students differ in the HE setting. Key factors identified include pre-enrolment support, ongoing support and academic guidance (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Bowden, 2013; O'Driscoll, 2012; Sultan & Wong, 2012, 2013; Zhou & Cole, 2017). On the other hand, due to differences in student expectations, international students have been found to report higher levels of satisfaction than

their domestic peers. For example, Mavondo, Tsarento and Gabbot (2004) reported that international students had lower expectations of the resources required to complete their degree and so they were more satisfied with fewer resources than their domestic peers.

Where the student lives can also impact their predictors of satisfaction. Students who commute to university have been found to be less satisfied than students who live on campus (Astin, 1984). This is thought to be because living on campus makes it easier to partake in all of the factors outside of the classroom which have been found to improve satisfaction such as extracurricular activities and forming stronger relationships with staff and peers (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009). Students living off-campus have been found to be less engaged than their peers living on-campus (Kuh, Gonyea & Palmer, 2001). Social integration at university has been found to increase student satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2015) and make students less likely to drop out (Kuh & Pike, 2005). Wilkins et al (2015) found that 33eneralizabili identification – a students' perception of belongingness to the institution – was a stronger predictor of student satisfaction than their individual social identification. The differences in student satisfaction in relation to ethnicity, nationality and where a student resides will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

As research has shown that both individual and institutional factors can significantly influence student satisfaction, this influenced Study-2 of the thesis to examine both the individual and institutional factors which predict student satisfaction overall, as well as the qualitative aspect of the thesis in Study-3.

Summary

The current thesis will adopt the following definition of student satisfaction: student satisfaction occurs when the "actual performance of the institution meets or exceeds a students' expectations" (Szymanski & Henard, 2001). This is because it focuses on satisfaction being a personal view of the individual student. The thesis aims to view student satisfaction from the student's perspective.

Multiple factors have been noted to influence student satisfaction levels, which can be grouped into two main categories – individual and institutional factors. With the findings of the literature review and theoretical framework based on Astins's Theory of Student Involvement (1985), which also suggests that individual student factors influence satisfaction as well as those controlled by the institution, the research studies of the thesis will aim to examine both levels of predictive factors. The methodology used throughout the thesis was also chosen based on the view that both levels of factors are involved in a student's evaluation of their overall satisfaction with their HE experience.

Aims and Objectives

- Identify the sub-areas of the National Student Survey (NSS) which relate to students' overall satisfaction ratings.
- Examine which individual and institutional level factors are the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction
- Explore students' perceptions of the most important factors in influencing their overall

satisfaction with university.

Proposed contribution to knowledge

Through evaluating the existing literature, limitations were identified, and the research of the current thesis aims to address these. First, there is a lack of student satisfaction research conducted in the UK. The thesis therefore aims to address this by first analysing UK wide data and then a qualitative analysis at a UK institution. Next, the qualitative research in the field is limited, with research mostly being quantitative in nature. This influenced the addition of a qualitative research study in the current thesis. Study-3 involves student focus groups and thematic analysis in an aim to gain a deeper understanding of the predictors of student satisfaction.

The thesis also aims to address the limitations noted in each research study within the following research study. For example, the NSS data analysed in Study-1 only accounts for institutional factors influence on student satisfaction. Therefore, Study-2 utilised the SAES data and multilevel modelling to analyse both the individual and institutional level factors which predict overall student satisfaction simultaneously. Few studies have previously controlled for demographic factors. Furthermore, Study-3 aimed to address the limitation associated with using large, quantitative study survey data in Study-1 and Study-2 by using a qualitative methodology to gain a deeper understanding of the factors which influence student satisfaction and how they do so.

In summary, this chapter reviewed the existing literature in the field of student satisfaction in Higher Education. Limitations within the research and gaps in the literature were identified to support the formation of a rationale for the research conducted in the current thesis. The next chapter will present the first research study conducted which employed NSS data to analyse the sub-sections of the survey which have the strongest relationship with students' overall satisfaction rating.

CHAPTER 3

Study 1: The Relationship Between National Student Survey Sub-sections and Overall Student

Satisfaction Ratings

Student satisfaction is frequently measured using self-report methods (Yorke, 2009). This method

of measuring student satisfaction is thought to give students a collective voice and is lower in cost

than some alternative methods (Richardson, 2005). The results of national-level surveys in

particular are thought to be valuable to HEI's in informing quality enhancement (O'Neill &

Palmer, 2004).

The most comprehensive measurement of student satisfaction in UK universities, it is argued, is

the National Student Survey (Bell & Brooks, 2018). The National Student Survey (NSS) was

established in 2005 to measure the satisfaction of students completing their undergraduate degree.

The survey has consistently been found to be a reliable and valid measurement tool (Cheng &

Marsh, 2010; Surridge, 2009), despite limitations that come with the self-report method in general.

However, the results of the NSS do not only provide an overview of student satisfaction levels in

a given academic year, but they are also used as a tool for the recruitment of prospective students.

The results are used by institutions to compete in league tables made available to prospective

students (Asthana & Biggs, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2015; Hewson, 2011). Ranking highly in league

tables in the increasingly competitive market has been argued to now be one of the most important

objectives for HEI's (Bell & Brooks, 2018; Gibbons et al., (2015). By ranking highly in league

tables, institutions are more likely to attract high quality students (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000;

Letcher & Neves, 2010). In an aim to achieve this objective, HEI's are now focusing more on the

student experience (Gibbs, 2010; 2012).

Previous research in student satisfaction tends to focus on the satisfaction of students at a particular institution or disciplines, and so the results of such research therefore have limited 38eneralizability (Bell & Brooks, 2018). Whereas the NSS covers multiple universities across the UK in various disciplines. This provides an overview of the satisfaction levels of students studying at UK universities. And despite criticisms of national surveys such as the NSS being reductive (Elliot & Shin, 2002; Sutcliffe, Sparks & Geldart, 2014), it is argued that some picture is better than no picture at all (Beecham, 2009).

There is significant interest in the relationship between students' satisfaction ratings with specific factors which contribute to their experience of university and their 'overall satisfaction' rating (Burgess et al., 2018; Langan et al., 2013). Bell and Brooks (2018) examined the areas of the 2014 NSS which influenced students' overall satisfaction ratings. They found that satisfaction within the sub-section 'teaching' had the strongest relationship with overall student satisfaction, followed by the organisation and management of a course. Similarly, Burgess, Senior and Moore (2018) found that the 'teaching' and 'organisation and management' subsections of the NSS were the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction across the first ten years of the survey. In addition to this, organisation has been consistently found to be key for high quality teaching (Hativa, Barak & Simhi, 2001; Young and Shaw, 1999), suggesting that these two variables are related to one another.

This research inspired the current study to examine the updated 2017 survey which saw the addition of nine new questions based around student engagement and updated questions on assessment and feedback and learning resources. The current study also expanded upon that of Bell and Brooks

(2018) by extending the multiple regression analysis with a path analysis. A path analysis allows us to further analyse the correlation between predictors and the dependent variable into direct and indirect and spurious effects (Salkind, 2010). The path analysis was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how the sub-sections of the NSS predict students' overall satisfaction rating as well as examining the relationships between the NSS sub-sections.

Research Questions:

1. How does the satisfaction rating of each sub-section of the NSS correlate with students' overall satisfaction rating?

2. How are the NSS sub-sections related to one another in predicting overall satisfaction?

Predictions:

- The NSS sub-sections will be significant predictors of overall student satisfaction. The correlations will be of moderate to strong magnitude. Based on the findings of previous research (Bell & Brookes, 2016), it is expected that the 'Teaching' and 'Organisation and Management' sub-sections of the NSS will be the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction.

Method

Sample

Data of over 300,000 students formed the 2017 NSS. Students were from multiple institutions across the UK and were in the final year of studying for their degree. The survey was completed

by students between January and April 2017. Demographic data were unavailable as the NSS results do not permit individual data.

Procedures

The data were student responses to the 2017 National Student Survey (NSS) obtained from the Office for Students website (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk). Although the data is available to the public, ethics was obtained from UCLan BAHSS ethics committee to conduct the study. The NSS comprises of 27 items which are grouped into eight sub-categories; 'teaching', 'learning opportunities', 'assessment and feedback', 'academic support', 'organisation and management', 'learning resources', 'learning community' and 'student voice'. Questions such as, 'Staff are good at explaining things' and 'I have been able to contact staff when I need to' are asked within the sub-sections. There is also a 27th item measuring overall satisfaction. Each question is answered on Likert scale of 1-5 (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree). The current study only included institutions with a response rate of more than 500 in the analysis.

Data Analysis

First, descriptive analysis was carried out obtaining the means, standards deviation and ranges for the percentage of students satisfied (who responded with 4, 'agree' or 5, 'strongly agree') with each of the sub-sections of the NSS and their overall satisfaction (see Table 1). Second, a correlation was conducted to explore the relationship between students' overall satisfaction and

their satisfaction with various areas of the institution, as measured by each sub-section of the NSS. These areas were *teaching, learning opportunities, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, learning community* and *student voice*.

Subsequently, a backward stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine which variables predicted overall satisfaction. This analysis allowed for the consideration of all NSS sub-sections, before removing non-significant factors, as well as reducing the risk of multicollinearity. The criterion variable was *overall satisfaction* and the predictor variables were the NSS sub-sections; *teaching, learning opportunities, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, learning community* and *student voice*. First, all predictor variables were included in the analysis, and thereafter non-significant factors were excluded from the analysis until only significant predictors of overall student satisfaction remained. This method resulted in the production of a final and parsimonious model of student satisfaction.

Results

Descriptive and correlational analyses

Means, standard deviations, ranges and correlation coefficients are displayed in Table 1. The descriptive analysis shows that the areas with the highest level of satisfaction on average across all institutions are teaching (M = .84, SD = .03) learning opportunities (M = .84, SD = .03) and student voice (M = .84, SD =.03). The areas with the largest range in satisfaction between institutions were learning resources (.41) and learning community (.40).

The correlation analysis revealed that each of the areas considered in the NSS are significantly related to students' overall satisfaction. The area with the weakest relationship with overall satisfaction was assessment and feedback (r = .39, p <.01). Whereas teaching (r =.89, p <.01) and the organisation and management of the institution (r =.84, p <.01) have the strongest, statistically significant relationship with overall satisfaction.

Table 1

Descriptive and correlational matrix of student satisfaction factors.

Variables	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Overall Satisfaction	.84	.04	.63 - .94									
2. Teaching	.84	.03	.72 - .92	.89*	-							
3. Learning opportunities	.84	.03	.69 - .90	.62*	.75*	-						
4. Assessment and feedback	.73	.05	.56 - .85	.39*	.48*	.65*	-					
5. Academic support	.80	.04	.64 - .90	.63*	.67*	.73*	.70*	-				
6. Organisation and management	.75	.05	.56 - .90	.84*	.72*	.44*	.42*	.62*	-			
7. Learning resources	.78	.05	.52 - .93	.65*	.49*	.33*	.18*	.40*	.58*	-		
8. Learning community	.69	.05	.50 - .90	.50*	.57*	.76*	.41*	.73*	.40*	.37*	-	
9. Student voice	.84	.03	.53 - .83	.55*	.60*	.70*	.52*	.72*	.59*	.42*	.78*	-

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Regression analyses

A backward stepwise multiple regression analysis was adopted to explore the predictive power of each of the areas of the NSS on overall student satisfaction. A significant regression equation was found (F [8, 131] = 143.24, *p* <.001), with an R^2 of .903. This suggests that 90% of the variance of overall satisfaction can be explained by all eight predictors.

However, the regression shows that only *teaching* (β = .52, t = 8.96, *p* <.001), *organisation and management* (β = .39, t = 7.41, *p* <.001) and *learning resources* (β = .19, t = 5.34, *p* <.001) were statistically significant (p < .05) individual predictors of students' overall satisfaction. Although, *learning opportunities* (B = .17., t = 1.71, *p* = .089) and assessment and feedback (β = - .08, t = 1.88, *p* = .062) met marginal statistical difference requirements (*p* < .10). See Table 2 for step 1 regression results.

Table 2

Step 1 of MR results with all predictor variables input

Variable	B	β	t	p
Teaching	.76	.52	8.96	<.001
Learning Opportunities	.17	.11	1.71	.089
Assessment and Feedback	-.08	-.09	-1.88	.062
Academic Support	.03	.03	.52	.601
Organisation and Management	.32	.39	7.41	<.001
Learning Resources	.15	.19	5.34	<.001
Learning Community	.01	.01	.19	.850
Student Voice	.13	-.14	-2.53	.013

Because *academic support* (β = .03, t = .52, p = .601) and *learning community* (β = .01, t = .19 p = .850) did not reach marginal significance, the regression was run again, excluding these predictor variables. The removal of these variables was the final step of the regression and resulted in the overall model as all remaining variables were then significant. The regression equation of the final model was significant (F (6, 131) = 193.20, *p* <.001, R2 = .903) and suggested that *teaching* (β = .77, t = 9.06, *p* <.001), *learning opportunities* (β = .19, t = 2.15, *p* = .033), *assessment and feedback* (β = -.08, t = -2.07, *p* = .040), *organisation and management* (β = .33, t = 7.87, *p* <.001), *learning resources* (β = .15, t = 5.44, *p* <.001), and *student voice* (β

= -.12, t = -2.75, p = .007) were significant predictors of students overall satisfaction. The R^2 suggested that 90% of the overall variance can be explained by these variables (see Table 3 for final regression model results).

Table 3

Final regression model results

| Variable	β	β	t	p
Teaching	.77	.52	9.06	<.001
Learning Opportunities	.19	.13	2.15	.033
Assessment and Feedback	-.08	-.08	-2.07	.040
Organisation and Management	.33	.40	7.87	<.001
Learning Resources	.15	.19	5.44	<.001
Student Voice	-.12	.12	-2.75	.007

Path Analysis

The multiple regression analysis was extended upon using path analysis. A path analysis was conducted to further understand the directions of the effects and the causal relationships between variables as well as on the outcome variable. The following guidelines were used to indicate good fit of the models: Chi-square with non-significance, comparative fit index (CFI) ≥0.95, root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) ≤0.08, standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤0.06 (Kline, 2011).

Hypothesised structural model

The hypothesised model was based on the multiple regression results. The significant NSS subsections from the multiple regression were included in the model (Figure 1), although learning opportunities was removed as it correlated closely with all other variables. Therefore, it was predicted *that teaching, organisation and management, learning resources* and *student voice* would directly influence students' overall satisfaction rating. The model allowed for 11 degrees of freedom with $\chi2$ (11) = 177.41, *p* <.001, CFI = .61, SRMR = .29, RMSEA = .34. This model did not adequately fit the data. Therefore, modification indices and theory were considered to propose a revised model with an improved model fit.

Figure 1

*Path Analysis Hypothesised Model of Predictors of Overall Student Satisfaction*
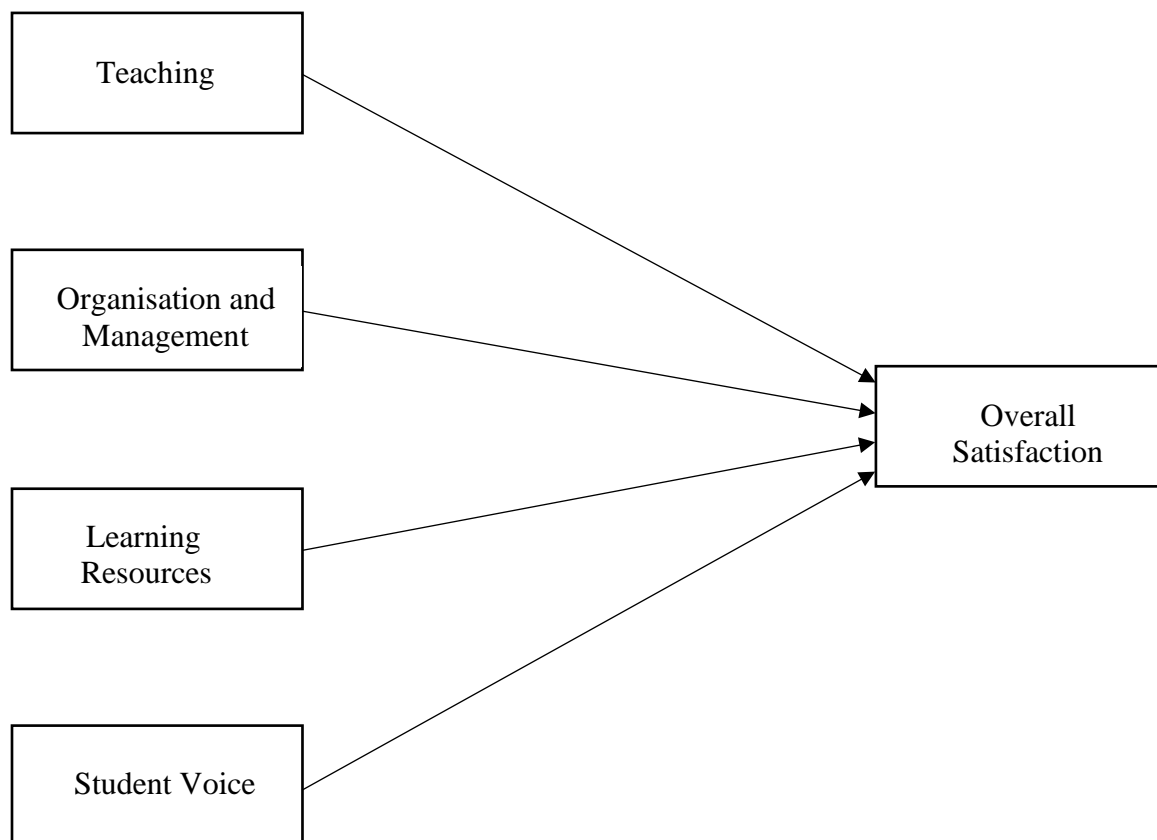
Model 1

In response to the modification indices, *student voice* was removed, resulting in Model 1 (Figure 2). This model allowed for 1 degree of freedom with $\chi2$ (1) = 1.38, *p* = 0.24, CFI = 0.10, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.05. This model is a good fit for the data and modification indices did not suggest any statistically meaningful adjustments. Thus, the model was considered to be the final model that best fits the dataset.

Figure 2

*Path Analysis Final Model of Predictors of Overall Student Satisfaction*
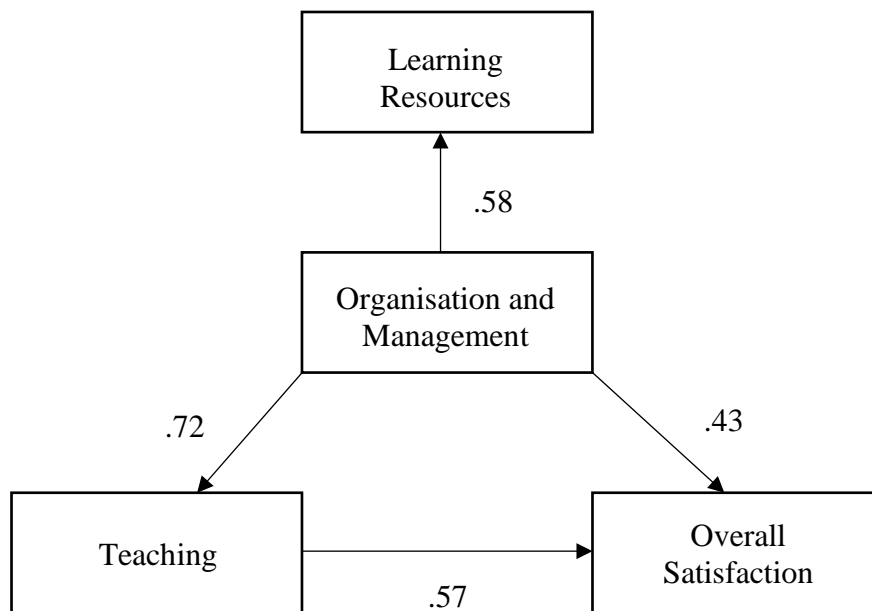
Alternative model

Despite a model of good fit being found, it is good practice to consider alternative models to explain the dataset (Hershberger, 2006). The alternative model (Figure 3) had the same level of fit as Model 1, allowing for 1 degree of freedom with $\chi2$ (1) = 1.38, *p* = 0.24, CFI = 0.10, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.05. However, the alternative model suggests that organisation and management and teaching co-vary as opposed to organisation and management influencing teaching.

Figure 3

Path Analysis Alternative Model of Predictors of Overall Student Satisfaction
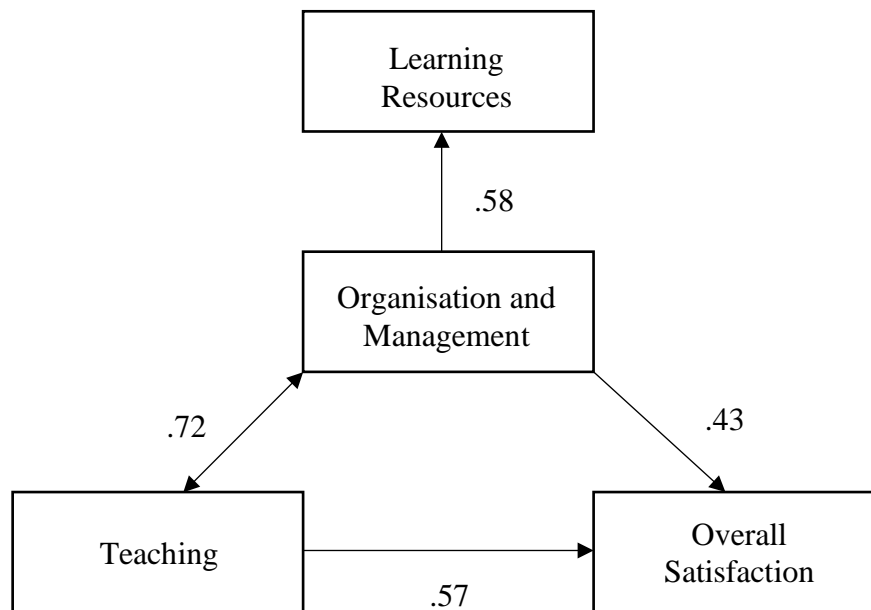
Discussion

The current study examined which of the areas of the 2017 NSS are the strongest predictors of student's overall satisfaction rating. It was predicted from previous research that teaching and organisation and management sub-categories would be amongst the strongest predictors, although the impact of the new sub-sections added to the 2017 NSS would have on overall satisfaction. First, a multiple regression was conducted to identify the areas associated with overall satisfaction. Then, the analysis was extended using path analysis to better understand the causal relationships between variables and test the hypothesised model. Overall, the findings suggested that the teaching and organisation and management of a course are the strongest predictors of students' overall satisfaction rating on the NSS. They also suggested that the organisation and management of a course can have an impact on the quality of teaching on that course.

First, the multiple regression showed that the sub-areas of the NSS which are significantly related to student overall satisfaction ratings are: *teaching*, *organisation and management, learning resources, learning opportunities, assessment and feedback and student voice.* Teaching had the strongest relationship with overall satisfaction scores, followed by the organisation and management of a course and then learning resources.

The findings of the multiple regression analysis concur with the findings of previous research. Bell & Brooks (2018) looked at the 2014 data and also found that teaching and course organisation and management were the most influential factors on overall satisfaction. Similarly, Burgess, Senior and Moore (2018) looked back at the outcomes of the first ten years of the NSS

and found that teaching and organisation and management were consistently the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction. Also, using machine learning, Langan and Harris (2019) analysed patterns in the NSS data between 2006 and 2015, totalling more than 1.8 million responses. The results showed that teaching was consistently the most influential area of the NSS on overall satisfaction ratings. Thus, it appears that the NSS results appear to be consistent across time and that teaching, followed by the organisation and management of a course are the areas of satisfaction on the survey which influence overall satisfaction.

Following the multiple regression, the path analysis revealed two models with the same level of fit for the dataset. The first model of best fit (Model 1) showed that *teaching* and *organisation and management* are directly related to overall satisfaction. It also suggested that student's satisfaction with *teaching* is influenced directly by their satisfaction with the *organisation and management* of the institution. Furthermore, *learning resources* was noted as a significant factor in the analysis, although did not directly relate to overall satisfaction in the model. *Learning resources* was an exogenous variable, influenced by organisation and management but not influencing any other variables. This model suggested that although *teaching* was the sub-section of the NSS which had the strongest relationship with overall satisfaction, it is *organisation and management* which is key as this variable is not only directly related to overall satisfaction, but also indirectly via *teaching*.

The alternative model had the same level of fit as Model 1. The alternative model showed that *teaching* and *organisation and management* relate directly to overall satisfaction. It also showed that *teaching* and *organisation and management* co-vary. This difference between the two models suggests that rather than the organisation and management of a course influencing the

teaching quality of the course, this relationship is interdependent. Again, *learning resources* was significant in the results, but within the model was an exogenous variable which does not directly relate to overall satisfaction. It is influenced by student's satisfaction with the organisation and management of the institution but does not influence any of the other variables. As both Model 1 and the Alternative Model were of good fit for the data, theoretical findings of the existing literature were considered when deciding the final model which best explains the dataset.

When considering the model which explains the dataset best in relation to theory and existing knowledge from the literature, it was important to evaluate what each of the sub-sections of the NSS were measuring. The individual questions that form the sub-sections were considered and it is worth noting that *organisation and management* covers how smooth the course runs, timetabling, how effectively any changes were communicated to students. These types of factors are usually controlled by the management and administration teams of a course rather than by teaching staff. The *teaching* sub-section covers topics such as how well topics are explained and how intellectually stimulating the content is.

Organisation is consistently noted to be a key element of quality teaching (Hativa, Barak & Simhi, 2001; Young and Shaw, 1999). Therefore, it is argued that, as predicted, the organisation and management of a course can influence the teaching quality on the course. This could be due to efficient timetabling in which teaching staff are assigned an appropriate amount of teaching hours for example, allowing them time to plan quality sessions. Also, if the correct types of classrooms are booked for particular sessions, then this can influence the quality of teaching (e.g., having a computer room booked with appropriate software available on all machines for a

statistics workshop). Similarly, if the correct class types are scheduled (e.g., smaller seminar style sessions for topics which require more detailed, small group discussion as opposed to a large group lecture theatre session) this could maximise learning. If there were management issues that the teaching staff were to spend time amending, this may take time away from their teaching time and leave students feeling disgruntled. As the teaching sub-section covers areas such as how well things are explained and how intellectually stimulating the course is, then if teaching staff have the correct class types, sizes and spaces scheduled by management then they will be more likely to maximise the quality of their teaching in order to achieve these aspects of teaching for their students.

In contrast, the idea that *teaching* and *organisation and management* co-vary is not supported by the literature. The quality of teaching in the classroom does not appear to influence the organisation and management of a course. As noted earlier, it is not usually teaching staff who control the aspects covered in the organisation and management sub-section. Therefore, the quality of teaching in classrooms is unlikely to influence aspects of the course such as timetabling and effective communication of changes made which are the responsibility of the course management and administration team. Therefore, it was decided that the most theoretically sound model which best fits the dataset is Model 1. The organisation and management of a course directly influences the teaching quality on that course, which in turn influences overall student satisfaction ratings.

Overall, the findings of the current study suggest that the teaching quality on a course has the strongest influence on a students' overall satisfaction, concurring with those of previous research (Alves & Raposo; Clemes et al., 2008; Dana, Brown & Dodd, 2001; DeBourgh, 2003; Douglas,

Douglas & Barnes, 2006). The findings also suggest that the organisation of a course is also important for students to feel satisfied. However, despite these findings being consistent from NSS research across time, we are still unable to identify these factors as the strongest predictors of satisfaction overall. This is because the NSS only covers particular areas of satisfaction, all of which relate to the academic aspects of HE.

One limitation of using NSS data is that it is self-selecting, and this may result in a bias in the characteristics of participants, for example, it may only be students with extreme views who participate. In support of this, the 2017 NSS dataset used in the current study shows that 86% of institutions had fewer than 15% of students giving a neutral response to question 27 measuring overall satisfaction. Most students reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' overall. In addition, categories may not be interpreted correctly. For example, the questions within the sub-category 'Organisation and management' are 'The course is well organised and is running smoothly', 'The timetable works efficiently for me' and 'Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively'. First, the term 'running smoothly' is vague and open to interpretation. The course being well organised is also open to interpretation and students may consider how the course is organised in terms of the balance in class types (e.g., appropriate mixture of lectures, seminars and online sessions) or the number of contact hours when answering this question. Therefore, students may not be assessing the same issue when answering the questions within the survey.

Another main limitation of using NSS data is that, because the data is provided at course level, it does not account for demographic information. Student characteristics such as age, gender, nationality and residency, all of which have been found to influence student satisfaction

(Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Astin, 1984; Brokaw, Kennedy & Merz, 2004; Fredericksen, Shea & Pickett, 2000; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Mavondo, Tsarento & Gabbot, 2014; Yu, Isensee & Kappler, 2016), cannot be examined. Although studies have looked at these types of individual factors separately, it is important to analyse a combination of these factors simultaneously with institutional factors in order to gain a better understanding of the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction.

Conclusion

The above discussion has confirmed that the 2017 NSS findings concur with those of the previous decade. The current study also contributes to the existing literature by examining the relationship between the variables as well as their relationship with the outcome variable. The findings show the relationship between organisation and management and teaching and suggest that course management influences teaching staff's ability to provide quality teaching. It is therefore argued that it is important for management and teaching staff to work closely together and discuss what would work best for the teaching staff and their students in terms of course organisation such as timetabling.

As previously noted however, the NSS cannot provide us with the whole picture and only accounts for institutional focused factors. Students are individuals who have different characteristics and circumstances which previous research has found can influence how they experience university and rate their satisfaction levels. Therefore, in the next chapter a dataset at the individual level will be analysed to allow us to account for the individual characteristics of the students as well as those of the institution to gain a better understanding and more holistic view of the type of factors which predict the overall satisfaction levels of UK HE students.

CHAPTER 4

Study 2: A Multi-Level Analysis of Predictors of Student Satisfaction in UK Higher Education

Institutions

The previous chapter examined the data of the National Student Survey, focusing on the extent

of which institutional factors influence student satisfaction. The analysis was done at institution

level and revealed that students' satisfaction with teaching has the strongest influence on their

overall satisfaction rating on the NSS. When the analysis was extended upon using Path

Analysis, it was found that although teaching is the strongest predictor of overall satisfaction, the

organisation and management of a course is at the centre of the matter as this has a direct impact

on overall satisfaction as well as an indirect impact via teaching. The research study in this

chapter expands on the previous by exploring a different data set that includes individual level

data as well as institutional level data to allow for the exploration of how both types of factors

may predict students' overall satisfaction with university.

Although often overlooked in the literature, some research argues that individual factors, those

outside of the classroom, are stronger predictors of overall student satisfaction than institutional

factors such as teaching and campus buildings (Elliot & Shin, 2002; Letcher & Neves, 2010).

Therefore, the current study extended the previous by examining individual and institutional

predictors of overall student satisfaction. The Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES)

provides data at the student level, depicting each individuals' responses to each question on the

survey.

As previously discussed, Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1985) argues that a students' involvement in the social aspect of university is important for them to be satisfied as well as the academic aspect. The theory suggests that regardless of the quality of the institutional factors, students must put in some effort to the experience such as attending extracurricular activities in order to feel fully satisfied with their HE experience. In addition, interventions that are more student-focused such as social activities, close peer relationships and counselling services have been noted to significantly impact student satisfaction levels (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). Therefore, it was thought to be important to examine individual student factors that may predict overall student satisfaction. As noted in the literature review (Chapter 2), individual factors such as ethnicity, residency and student wellbeing can impact student satisfaction levels.

The current study analysed the 2017 SAES data and analysed both individual and institutional factors simultaneously using Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) to establish which factors predict students' overall satisfaction at university. The predictor variables included a range of individual (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, residency, life satisfaction, personal study hours and paid work) and institution (e.g., university group, university region, contact hours, class size and class type) factors from the SAES survey which were thought to be potential predictors of overall satisfaction levels based on previous literature. Previous research on individual factors suggests that white students, students with higher levels of student wellbeing and those that live on campus are more likely to have higher overall satisfaction with university than their peers (Astin, 1984; Keohane & Petrie, 2017; Mantzios et al., 2019). And institution factors such as small class sizes and high levels of contact hours have been associated with

higher levels of student satisfaction with their HE experience overall (Douglas, Douglas &

Barnes, 2006; Hawthorn & Young, 2010; Hill et al., 2003; Ning & Downing, 2012).

Research Questions:

1. Which factors significantly predict students' overall satisfaction?

2. Are the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction at the individual or
   institutional level?

Method

Sample

Participants were 12,607 full-time undergraduate students who completed the Student Academic

Experience Survey (SAES) in 2017. The majority of the participants were white (68%), female

(68.1%), domestic students (87.6%) with a mean age of 20.44 (SD = 3.02).

Procedures

Data were obtained from the 2017 SAES, which is a UK-wide survey designed by the HEPI and

the HEA and conducted by Youthsight. This survey has been conducted annually across the UK

since 2006 and recruit's respondents from Youthsight's student panel. The survey has 90 items

on (a) student-level data such as age, gender, ethnicity and life satisfaction; and (b) institution

level data, such as university location, course type and hours scheduled per week. The survey

also asks on a scale of 1-5, "To what extent are you satisfied, or not, with the overall quality of

your course?" which the current study used as a measurement of overall student satisfaction.

The current study used the 2017 data, collected between 13th February and 17th March 2017. Ethical approval was obtained from UCLan BAHSS ethics committee and data were accessed via HEPI.

Data Analysis

The SAES data was analysed using Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM). This was conducted at two levels, individual factors at level one and institutional factors at level two. The data was screened for the purpose of the current study and some variables were excluded from the analysis which were thought not to relate to the aims of the current study. Several peer-debriefing meetings were conducted in which the supervisory team discussed each variable before a full consensus was reached of which variables would be included and excluded from analysis. The data set was then cleaned, removing any outliers which may have affected the accuracy of results.

The outcome variable was 'overall satisfaction' which was measured by the question, 'To what extent are you satisfied, or not, with the overall quality of your course?'. A total of 13 level-1 variables and eight level-2 variables were included in the analysis. (See Table 5 for all variables included in analysis). Dichotomous variables were uncentered, and all other variables were group centred akin to current guidelines in multilevel modelling (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). First, the model was run with only the outcome variable to provide a baseline model for future model comparison. Subsequently, all level-1 predictors were included in the analysis, with all nonsignificant variables being removed from the model. Then, all level-2 variables were analysed, and only significant predictors were included in the model. This was done to ensure

that the most parsimonious model was chosen as final, and thus the final model only contained

significant predictors at level-1 and level-2 (see Table 5, p.66 for a display of each level of the

model).

Table 4

Level-1 and Level-2 variables included in analysis

Variables	Coding description
Dependent Variable	
Overall satisfaction	Grouped; 1 = Not satisfied, 2= Fairly satisfied, 3 = Very satisfied
Level-1	
Age	Continuous (16-42)
Gender	Dummy coded; 0 = Male, 1 = Female
Ethnicity	Dummy coded; 0 = White, 1 = Other
Nationality	Dummy coded; 0 = Domestic, 1 = International

Disability	Dummy coded; 0 = No disability, 1 = Disability
Residency	Dummy coded; 0 = University halls of residence, 1 = Other
Life satisfaction	Scale of 0 (Not at all) – 10 (Completely satisfied)
Personal study	Continuous; 0-40 (average hours per week)
Attendance	Continuous; 0-40 (average hours per week)
Assignments' submitted	Continuous; 0-30 (average per week)
External university work	Continuous; 0-40 (average hours per week)
Paid work	Continuous; 0-30 (average hours per week)

Level-2

Current course year	Grouped; 1 = 1st year, 2 = 2nd Year, 3 = 3rd Year, 4 = 4th year and above
University group	Grouped; 1 = Russell Group, 2 = Pre-1992, 3 = Post-1992, 4 = Other institutions

University region	Grouped; 1 = North West, 2 = North East, 3 = Yorkshire & Humberside, 4 = West Midlands, 5 = East Midlands, 6 = Eastern, 7 = South West, 8 = South East, 9 = London, 10 = Wales, 11 = Scotland, 12 = Northern Ireland, 13 = None
School type	Grouped; 1 = Fee paying school/college, 2 = State funded school/college, 3 = Other
Sessions scheduled	Continuous (0-40)
Class size *Average number of hours per week in a class with; no others, just you and a member of staff, 1-5 other students, 6-15 other students, 15-50 other students, 51-100 other students, more than 100 other students*	Continuous (0-40)
Class type *Average number of hours per week in; lectures, seminars, tutorials, project supervision, demonstrations, supervised time in a studio*	Continuous (0-40)

Course type	Dummy coded (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
Medical and Health Sciences, Engineering and Technologies, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Business and Law, Arts, Humanities, Combined/General subject unspecified	

Results

The results suggested that the majority of predictors of student satisfaction can be predicted by factors at the individual rather than group level (see Figure 1). A students' life satisfaction rating was the strongest predictor of overall satisfaction with university ($y40 = .11$, $p <.001$). The other significant individual-level predictors were: *ethnicity (y10 = -.09, p <.001)*, *nationality (y20 = .06, p <.001), residency (y30 = -.05, p <.001), life satisfaction* ($y40 = .11$, p $<.001$) and *staffstudent liaising (y50 = .03, p <.001).* Noteworthy, hours in tutorial-style classes ($y01 = .03, p = .015$) was the only institutional variable found to be a significant predictor of overall student satisfaction.

Table 5 displays the results of all models tested until the final solution was reached. The final model explained 23% more variance than the baseline model. The intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) and the reliability of the final model remained similar to that of the baseline model. Moreover, the ICC indicates that only 1% of variance was due to institution-level factors, suggesting that overall satisfaction was largely explained by factors at the individual level.

Table 5

Pseudo R2, ICC, Deviance and Reliability figures from the Baseline to the Final Omnibus Model

.

	Description	Pseudo R^2	ICC	Deviance (% Change) *	Reliability
Baseline	Outcome variable only	-	0.02	23543.63	0.42
Model 1	All level-1 predictors	0.15	0.01	21998.94 (-7%)	0.41
Model 2	All significant level-1 predictors	0.15	0.01	21966.56 (-7%)	0.41
Model 3	Final level-1 model (all level-1 predictors with null or trivial effect sizes excluded).	0.18	0.01	22027.99 (-6%)	0.40
Final	Omnibus Final Model with the consideration and inclusion of level-2 predictors	0.23	0.01	22030.77 (-6%)	0.39

Note. *Change in % of deviance from baseline model

Figure 4

A schematic description of the final two-level model.
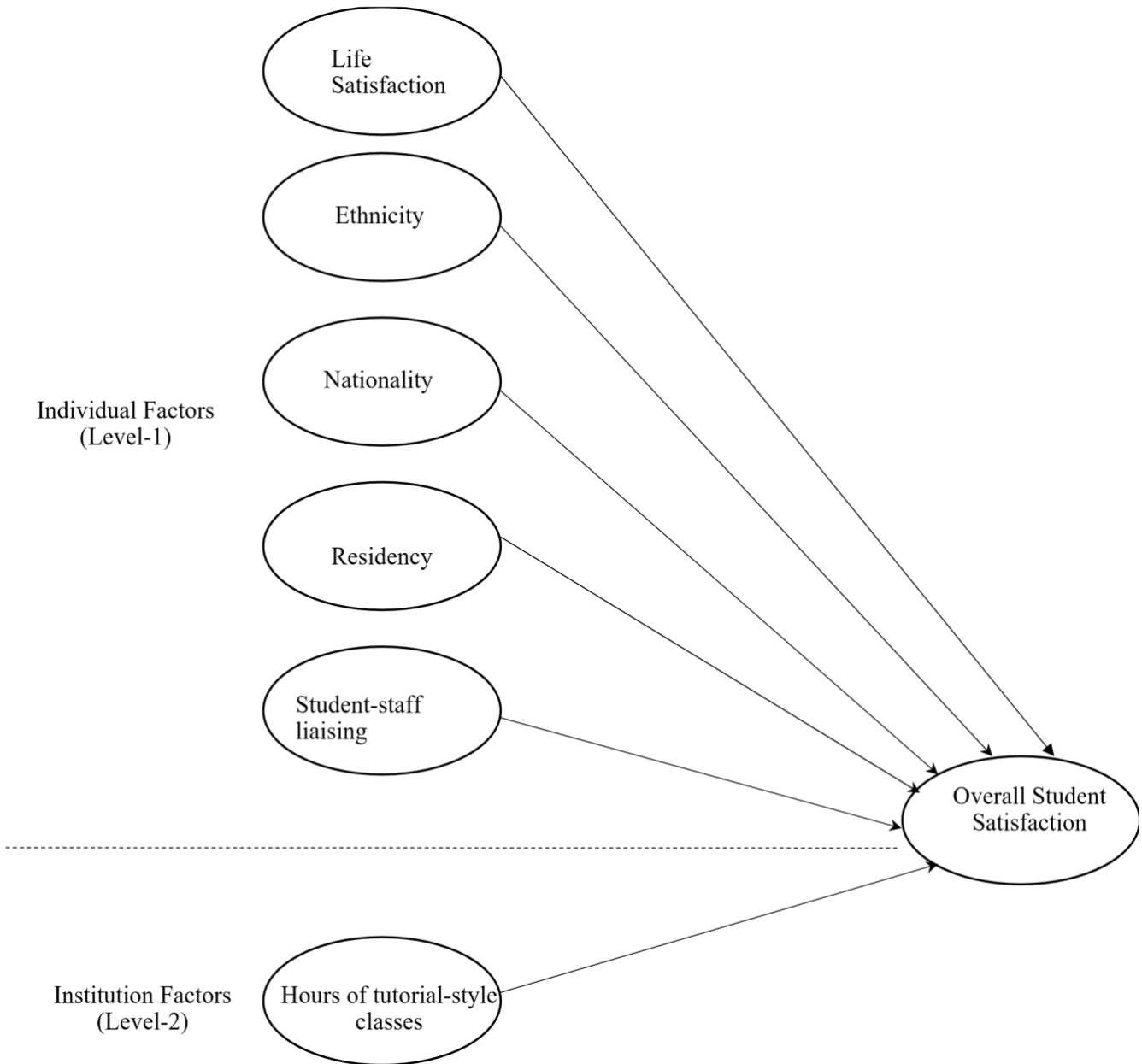
Discussion

The current study aimed to examine which factors from the SAES significantly predict students' overall satisfaction rating with university and whether these predictors were at the individual or institutional level. The analysis looked at the 2017 SAES dataset, expanding on the findings of Study-1 as both individual and institutional factors were included. The results of the current study revealed that five individual factors (*ethnicity, nationality, residency, life satisfaction* and *student-staff liaising*) and one institutional factor (*tutorial-style classes*) significantly predicted students' overall satisfaction. The findings suggest that student satisfaction is mostly predicted by factors at the individual level, as opposed to those controlled by the institution. It is suggested that institutions may benefit from focusing satisfaction interventions at the student level.

Previous research has suggested that both educational and non-educational factors influence a students' satisfaction with university. Arambewela and Hall (2009) found that more student focused interventions such as social activities, counselling and close working relationships with other students were significant variables in explaining student satisfaction. As the current study's findings do, Arambewela & Hall's (2009) results suggest that individual student factors must be considered by institutions as well as their academic needs when targeting student satisfaction levels. The results of research also using HLM by Baek and Shin (2008) did not concur with the findings of the current study. However, the study was conducted with a sample of students studying liberal arts from a single university in South Korea, which is likely to explain the differences in results. Cultural differences as well as differences in disciplines are likely to

influence perceptions of satisfaction. They analysed seven student variables and six course variables and found that most of the variance was explained at course-level (65.8%). There was less variability at level-1 as all students were studying liberal arts, so the predictors were noted to be at level-2 whereas, the current study had variability at both levels, with various institutions across the UK and students studying a variety of disciplines, making the analysis more balanced.

The current study found that the strongest predictor of overall satisfaction was a students' life satisfaction rating. The higher the student rated their life satisfaction on the scale of one to ten, the higher their overall satisfaction rating was. For each point increase on the Likert scale for life satisfaction (0-10), the students' overall satisfaction with their course increased by .11. Thus, if a student is 'completely' (a score of 10) satisfied with their life, this would increase their overall course satisfaction rating by more than one point on the Likert scale, enough to increase overall satisfaction from 'not satisfied' to 'satisfied'. This suggests that it is more than academic factors which are important for student satisfaction, but the students' general happiness and wellbeing too.

Individual Factors

Life-satisfaction and Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a factor which has been related to satisfaction in the literature and is defined by the World Health Organisation as, "a state of mind in which an individual is able to realise his or her own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (WHO, 2014, p. 2). This definition

suggests that a high level of wellbeing could increase student attainment, which is another factor found to be strongly related to satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010). Mantzios et al., (2019) found that wellbeing is a factor which increases student satisfaction and attainment. In their study they found that traits related to wellbeing such as mindfulness, resilience and positive affect significantly predict how students report their overall satisfaction with university. Mindfulness has been found to be a strong predictor of life satisfaction and also contributes to an increase in wellbeing (Zhao, Wang & Kong, 2014). This was demonstrated in a HE setting when students who participated in a mindfulness-based programme displayed an increase in engagement and satisfaction with their HE experience.

Other research has suggested that practicing mindfulness can increase attainment and exam performance (Bellinger, DeCaro & Ralston, 2015) which, again, has been related to increased satisfaction, and has been argued to be the strongest predictor of student satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010). Some evidence to support the implications of mindfulness improving satisfaction in HE is provided by Aherne et al's (2016) findings. It was found that a mindfulness-based programme lead to an increase in student satisfaction and engagement. In addition, Arambewela and Hall's (2009) findings that various non-educational factors were significant in explaining student satisfaction including counselling, social activities, close working relationships with other students and orientation programmes, are likely to be the type of interventions which increase student wellbeing which may be why they influence satisfaction. It therefore appears to be that life satisfaction, wellbeing and student performance are interconnected in relation to a students' rating of their overall satisfaction with university.

Liaising with staff

Another factor frequently linked to student satisfaction relates to liaising with staff members of the institution. The current study found that students who liaised with staff members more frequently were more likely to be satisfied overall. This could relate back to the idea that student satisfaction is based on student expectations being met (Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Students may expect frequent interaction with staff members based on their previous experiences at school and college where class sizes were possibly smaller and staff members have more contact time with students. This could contribute to understanding why the number of hours a student spends in tutorial-style classes significantly predicted a students' overall satisfaction in the current study, but class size did not. Tutorial style classes usually involve more interaction between staff and students than, for example, a lecture. These tutorial style classes may fit better with or be more likely to meet students' expectations as they are more similar in style to how teaching is conducted in school and further education. Furthermore, it may be that liaising with staff members may result in building relationships with staff members which a student may view as a form of support and as part of their support system which could increase their wellbeing which, again, has been found to be related to increased satisfaction. In support of this finding, research suggests that having good relationships with faculty leads to a feeling of 'studentcenteredness' (Elliot, 2003). This makes students feel more submersed in their university experience, making them more likely to feel satisfied overall with their university experience and therefore complete the course.

Residence

How submersed a student is in the university experience can be influenced by where they live.

Living on or off campus can influence students' support systems and their sense of belonging in the campus community which can also impact on happiness and wellbeing. The current study found that students who live in university halls of residence are more likely to be satisfied overall than their peers who do not. This finding can be supported by Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1985) which states that feeling part of a community on the university campus increases student engagement and satisfaction. Astin (1985) argues that students who commute to campus are less able to get involved with the extracurricular activities that occur outside of the classroom and are less likely to feel a part of the community, therefore feeling less satisfied overall. The Guild Report (2018) noted that friendship at university is important for a students' wellbeing and, similar to Astin's theory, that friendships may be easier to form when living in halls of residence and being able to take part in extracurricular activities. These findings suggest that even if a student is satisfied with their course, if their social needs of support and a sense of belonging and community are not met, then this will significantly impact their overall satisfaction rating. Astin's theory supports the idea that it is more than the academic needs of a student that are important for their overall satisfaction, which is often the main focus of student satisfaction surveys. That is why surveys such as the SAES, which measure a variety of individual and institutional factors, are considered to be so valuable.

International students

The literature often concludes that because international students do not have their family and friends support network close to them, they are less satisfied than domestic students (Guild HE, 2018). However, the current study found that international students were more likely to be satisfied overall than their domestic peers. This could be explained by the differences in

71

expectations held by international and home students. For example, Mavondo, Tsarento and Gabbot (2004) found that international students rated their satisfaction with facilities at the Australian university higher than their domestic peers and concluded that this was due to the international students' lower expectations of resources required to complete their degree. If the institutions and their facilities in the students' home country are of lower quality, then this may influence the students' expectations, meaning that the facilities on offer at their UK institution exceeds their expectations, which has, in turn, been related to high levels of satisfaction. In addition, differences in satisfaction may be due to differences in what international and domestic students need. For example, research has found international students ranked the 'responsiveness of teaching staff to requests' much higher than their domestic peers (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006), which may be due to requiring extra support if English is not their first language. International students also rated the availability of textbooks in the library highly which is argued may be due to a lack of financial resources to purchase key texts (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). This previous research contributes to our knowledge of significant differences in student satisfaction between international and domestic students – because they hold different outlooks, expectations and requirements.

Ethnicity

The current study found that white students are more likely to be satisfied than their Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) peers. These findings concur with those of the previous literature and could be due to a variety of reasons (Havergal, 2016). First, as noted, attainment has been argued to be the strongest predictor of student satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010) and an attainment gap between white and BAME students has been widely researched. A gap of 13% in the likelihood of white and BAME students achieving a first or upper-second class degree at

72

university in the UK in 2017/18 is apparent (OfS, 2018), noting that this is only the measurement of those who completed the degree and not accounting for those who left prematurely. It is important to recognise the differences between BAME students. For example, Black students are one and half times more likely to drop out than their White or Asian peers (Keohane & Petrie, 2017). In addition, a lack of BAME staff in universities could also impact BAME student satisfaction. The low level of representation and diversity in faculty can impact students' sense of belonging and their perceived career opportunities, both of which can influence satisfaction (Rollock, 2019). This may also prevent the students from feeling like they can relate to staff as much, affecting their staff-student relationship, which is also something that influences satisfaction levels (Astin, 1984; Browne et al., 1998, Dicker et al., 2017). Staff demographics is not something that is covered in the SAES, although would be interesting to include in future. In addition, BAME students have reported experiencing a bullying culture at university as well as racial stereotyping and microaggression which affects student wellbeing, which may then impact their overall satisfaction (Sawir et al., 2012; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2005).

Therefore, BAME student satisfaction appears to be a wider issue than what makes students satisfied, it is tackling the various issues that are found to be occurring within a university such as the attainment gap, racism and faculty diversity. Upon addressing these issues, satisfaction may increase for BAME students. The current research analysis did not allow for multiple groups of ethnicities due to the small percentage of the data they made up and therefore had to group data into white students and non-white students. Therefore, in future research it would be interesting to look at each ethnicity and their satisfaction levels in more detail as well as the

factors which influence their satisfaction specifically as this is an area which is sparse in the UK research.

Institutional Factors

Class type; tutorial-style classes

The current study found that hours spent in tutorial-style classes was the only significant predictor of overall student satisfaction at the institutional level. It is thought that this finding is related to staff-student liaising as tutorial-style classes tend to be smaller in size, allowing for more staff-student interaction and relationship building. As discussed, the current study and previous research found that increased staff-student liaising increases student satisfaction levels (Astin, 1984; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Dicker et al., 2017; Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Propp & Rhodes, 2006). Tutorial-style classes have also been argued to be the optimal learning environment (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). When students are learning effectively, they will be more likely to achieve higher grades. Attainment has been argued to be one of the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction within the literature (Aitken, 1982; Letcher & Neves, 2010). Therefore, a combination of the associated benefits of tutorial-style classes could explain why this type of class over other types significantly predict overall satisfaction. And again, relating back to the organisation and management of a course, institutions may find it beneficial to timetable these types of classes more frequently for students in an aim to increase student satisfaction.

Limitations

Although the SAES data is large and covers students of varying courses and institutions, there are limitations to using this dataset. The students recruited for the SAES were from the Youthsite student panel who have signed up to be part of the panel and are paid for their time and opinions. This may produce a biased population of engaged, motivated students who may feel the pressures of social desirability to answer in a particular way. This also could mean that students who are less motivated, engaged and may be less satisfied with their HE experience may be missed from the data.

In addition, the grouping of some categories could affect the quality of analysis. First, the small number of participants in ethnic minority groups meant that a category for each ethnic group was not possible and all ethnic minority groups were combined into one category. Therefore, only the ethnic groups 'white' and 'other' could be compared and each ethnic group could not be compared against one another, which would have allowed for a more detailed and inclusive analysis. In the same way, the grouping of nationality into 'international' and 'domestic' could be improved by specifying the country participants are from to, again, allow for a more detailed analysis. Also, as the student's residency status was grouped as 'halls of residence' or 'other' this does not inform us whether the student lives on campus or not and just not in university halls of residence. Larger groups of students in each category would allow for a more detailed analysis of each student characteristic, for example, between those who live on campus but not in halls of residence and those who live on campus in halls of residence.

Finally, when using a secondary dataset such as the SAES it can mean that the research is limited by the questions asked in the survey, as well as the format of the response scales. For example, teaching quality variables from the SAES were not comparable to those in Study-1 due to the specific topics of the teaching questions and the differences in the response scales.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of the current study can help to inform UK universities of areas they should focus on when looking at student satisfaction levels. It also informs UK institutions of the types of students they may wish to focus on more (i.e. international, BAME and commuter students). The results are useful for UK universities as they are the result of a large sample consisting of a variety of different institutions and disciplines, giving more of an overall view of student satisfaction than previous studies which use data from one university, specific course types or in different countries. From these results, institutions should ensure they focus on the non-academic factors that affect students, particularly the wellbeing of their students. For example, provide counselling or mindfulness-based programmes, both of which have been found to increase student attainment, engagement and satisfaction (Aherne et al., 2016; Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Bellinger, DeCaro & Ralston, 2015). In future, to ensure that surveys of student satisfaction are comprehensive, they should measure individual factors as well as academic factors as they are too influential to be ignored.

As touched on throughout the discussion, it is recommended that future research should separate student ethnicities and explore the differences in student satisfaction between BAME students in

UK universities as opposed to only separating White from BAME students to allow for a more meaningful analysis. This would help to better understand the types of students who are and are not satisfied with their university experiences because, for example, the Black student community may have a very different experience to their Asian peers. It would then allow us to identify the specific groups who are least satisfied, which could be further examined to explore why this is. Following from this, interventions for specific student groups could then be implicated for those students in a bid to better their experience and increase their satisfaction levels.

Another interesting addition to the current study would be to expand on individual demographic-style factors and look further into individual students' personality traits such as determination, ambition and resilience. Because, for example, even if a student commutes, does not have friends or an on-campus support system, low levels of wellbeing and does not liaise frequently with staff members etc., if they are extremely determined to achieve their degree, then this may result in them feeling more satisfied that they have achieved their degree. As research has found, satisfaction levels are often related to attainment (Aitken, 1982; Letcher & Neves, 2010) and the student may report feeling satisfied overall due to achieving their degree despite the number of adverse factors or setbacks they have had.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In conclusion, this study identified the significant predictors of overall student satisfaction in a large, UK wide, multi-discipline and institution sample. The results suggest that student

satisfaction, although a multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept, can mostly be explained at the individual level by personal student factors. It was found that a student's life satisfaction rating, nationality, ethnicity, residency, how frequently they liaise with staff members and attend tutorial style classes significantly predict how they rate their satisfaction overall. These results suggest that intervention at the individual level may be the most effective in improving student satisfaction.

In an aim to address the limitations of the self-report method used in the current study, the next chapter of the thesis takes a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the factors which influence student satisfaction and why. Because, although the research in this chapter has shed light on the factors which influence student satisfaction, it does not expand to why these things predict satisfaction levels. For example, the results suggest that liaising more frequently with staff members is associated with higher levels of satisfaction, but we can only speculate why that is. A qualitative approach is hoped to help understand more about why particular predictors do predict students' overall satisfaction. It aims to give students an opportunity to explain how, and why particular factors predict their overall satisfaction rating with their HE experience.

CHAPTER 5

Study 3: A Qualitative Analysis of Predictors of Student Satisfaction in UK Higher Education

Institutions

The previous chapters explored student satisfaction via quantitative methods. The findings of the previous study suggest that student satisfaction can be mostly explained by factors personal to the individual student as opposed to those controlled by the institution. In particular, it was noted that student life satisfaction predicts overall satisfaction with university. As 'life satisfaction' rated on a scale of 1 – 10 is rather broad and open to interpretation, it was thought it would be useful to employ a qualitative approach in attempt to understand exactly what students find influences their life satisfaction ratings, which then in turn influence their satisfaction with their university experience.

As student satisfaction is a subjective topic, it has been claimed that quantitative methods alone are not an appropriate measurement (Gruber et al, 2010). The complimentary role of qualitative data when looking into human behaviours, feelings and attitudes has been endorsed in the literature (Draper, 2004; Fade, 2004). The literature supports a qualitative approach for this topic area because, although it is common for HE to be viewed as a service offered to consumers, the differences between educational services and business services mean that they cannot be measured in the same way, using the same methodology (Patterson & Johnson, 1993; Shank et al., 1995). It is the unique characteristics of the HE experience which separates it from other service providers (Zeithaml et al., 1985) in that it requires input from the student as well and is not just a one-way transaction.

Therefore, it is thought to be important to employ a mixed methodology for this project. As Study-1 of the thesis gained a broad overview of student satisfaction at course level and Study-2 gained further understanding by analysing student level data, this third study aims to deepen understanding further still by adopting a qualitative method in the form of focus groups. The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors considered to be significant in predicting students' overall satisfaction by asking participants open questions in person. It was thought that this would allow the students to offer information surrounding the factors which they perceive to be important to their overall satisfaction as opposed to surveys which ask about specific factors.

Focus groups are broadly used within the social sciences (Hopkins, 2007) and have been defined as 'a one-off meeting of between four and eight individuals who are brought together to discuss a particular topic chosen by the researcher(s) who moderate or structure the discussion' (Bedford & Burgess, 2001, p. 121). Focus groups are effective in assessing the attitudes, opinions and experiences of individuals in relation to a particular topic (Myers, 1998) and are time and cost effective in comparison to other qualitative methods (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). The focus group data was analysed using thematic analysis due to its flexibility in not being tied to a specific theory and allowing for the generation of unanticipated insights from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is also a method recommended for researchers new to qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Aim: to gain a deeper understanding of what factors students consider when they evaluate their overall satisfaction with their university experience.

Method

Pilot Study

Prior to conducting the research, a pilot study was conducted to check the quality of the focus group questions and moderator. Participants were four students from two different courses. The purpose of the pilot study was to ensure that representatives of the target population understood the questions and to evaluate the moderation skills of the researcher. The participants completed an evaluation form (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the Pilot Study Evaluation Form) at the end of the focus group to provide feedback on the question set and moderator quality.

The evaluation form asked students to rate the quality of areas such as the topics discussed, how easy the questions were to understand and if they felt they had a chance to have their say. These areas were rated on a scale of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. There was also area for the participants to write comments on what they liked and did not like about the focus group. Two questions on the form were to rate the quality of the focus group overall and the quality of the facilitator. The participants could choose from 'Great', 'Good', 'OK' or 'Poor'. Half of the participants rated the focus group overall as 'great' and the other half rated it as 'good'. Three out of four participants rated the facilitator as 'great' and the other participant rated the facilitator as 'good'. The participants demonstrated good understanding of the questions. For the question, 'The questions were easy to understand', three of the four participants 'strongly agreed' with the other 'agreeing'.

It was therefore decided that the question set was suitable for the focus groups and the questions remained the same (see Appendix 2 for the Pilot Study Schedule). One question, "Do you think that your life satisfaction affects your satisfaction with university?' was added as it was decided that this was an area from the findings of Study-2 that the researcher would like to explore more (see Appendix 5 for a copy of the focus group questions).

Sample

Participants were 22 full-time undergraduate studying in their first (n = 18) and second (n = 4) year at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). Participants ranged from 18 to 43 years old (M = 27). Half (n = 11) were 'mature students' (over the age of 21 at the start of their course). The students were enrolled on four different courses across two faculties, providing a multidisciplinary insight to student satisfaction. Nineteen were female and three male, one participant was an international student and fourteen lived off campus and commuted to university. Participants were recruited via volunteer sampling. The research was advertised on posters (see Appendix 4 for a copy of the recruitment poster) across the university campus and participants received a £5 Amazon gift card as a reward for participating in the research.

Procedure

Five focus groups were conducted over a period of eight weeks between January and March 2020 at the University of Central Lancashire. Focus groups were conducted to allow the students the freedom to offer the information as opposed to being asked about specific factors as is done in quantitative research. The students are not confined to pre-determined topics and can share their views, thoughts and feelings on what they perceive to be predictive factors in their overall satisfaction with university.

The number of participants in each focus group ranged from three to six as it is suggested that smaller sized 'mini focus groups' (Krueger, 1994; 2000; Morgan, 1997) are more effective than larger sized groups when the participants are experience in, and passionate about the topic in discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015). When higher numbers of participants are involved in a focus group, the likelihood of conformity is increased (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) and there may be less opportunity for participants to share their ideas (Wibeck, Abrandt, Dahlgren & Öberg, 2007). In addition, they are easier to recruit and organise due to fewer participants to arrange a mutually convenient time and date for. It is also argued that they are more comfortable for participants, (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) so it was thought that participants would be more confident in sharing their views and experiences in smaller sized groups.

The focus groups were conducted by the researcher and, with written consent from participants, were recorded using a Dictaphone for later transcription. In advance of the focus groups, participants were informed that their data would remain anonymous and that they were free to withdraw at any point during the focus group (see Appendix 6, 7 & 8 for participant information sheet, consent form and debrief sheet). Participants also completed a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix 9 for a copy of the demographic questionnaire) prior to commencing the interview. At the beginning of the focus group interview, each participant was assigned a participant code (e.g., 1A), to ensure anonymity. The participants were encouraged to discuss their views with one another, allowing the researcher to act as a moderator rather than an interviewer. The questions asked in the focus groups (see Appendix 5 for a copy of the focus

group questions) covered the following key areas: how satisfied students felt with their university experience so far overall, how they identify when they feel satisfied, the factors that they consider when asked to rate their overall satisfaction with university and how they feel their satisfaction levels could be increased. It is worth noting that the due to the national COVID-19 lockdown, data collection was disrupted, and the decision was made as a team to halt data collection due to the unknown duration of the lockdown. As a team, it was agreed that a sufficient level of data had been collected for the purpose of the research.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the focus group data. Themes were identified at a semantic level and a realist approach was taken throughout the analysis. The explicit meanings and reality of the participants were analysed, as their views and opinions in relation to how they rate their satisfaction levels with their university experience is the focus of the research. Although hypotheses were made based on previous research findings, an inductive approach to coding was carried out, identifying themes in the data by reviewing the entire data set. Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework and 15-point checklist were used to ensure methodological rigor, ensuring disciplined transcription, coding and analysis. First, data was transcribed by the researcher, onto NVivo software and the transcriptions were read through several times to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then identified, working through the entire dataset systematically on NVivo (see Appendix 10 for a list of initial codes). The initial codes were then reviewed, some formed main themes and sub-themes and others were discarded. The themes that had been developed were then reviewed and refined, ensuring that the

data extracts were suitable for each of the themes they were assigned to. Supervisory team

discussions were held throughout the process to allow for peer debriefing. Thoughts and ideas

surrounding theme development were shared and recorded as a way of documenting the

evolution of the themes. These records serve as an audit trail to support the trustworthiness of the

analysis process (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Figure 5 displays the final themes and

sub-themes in a thematic map.

Figure 5

Final Thematic Map Showing Two Main Themes
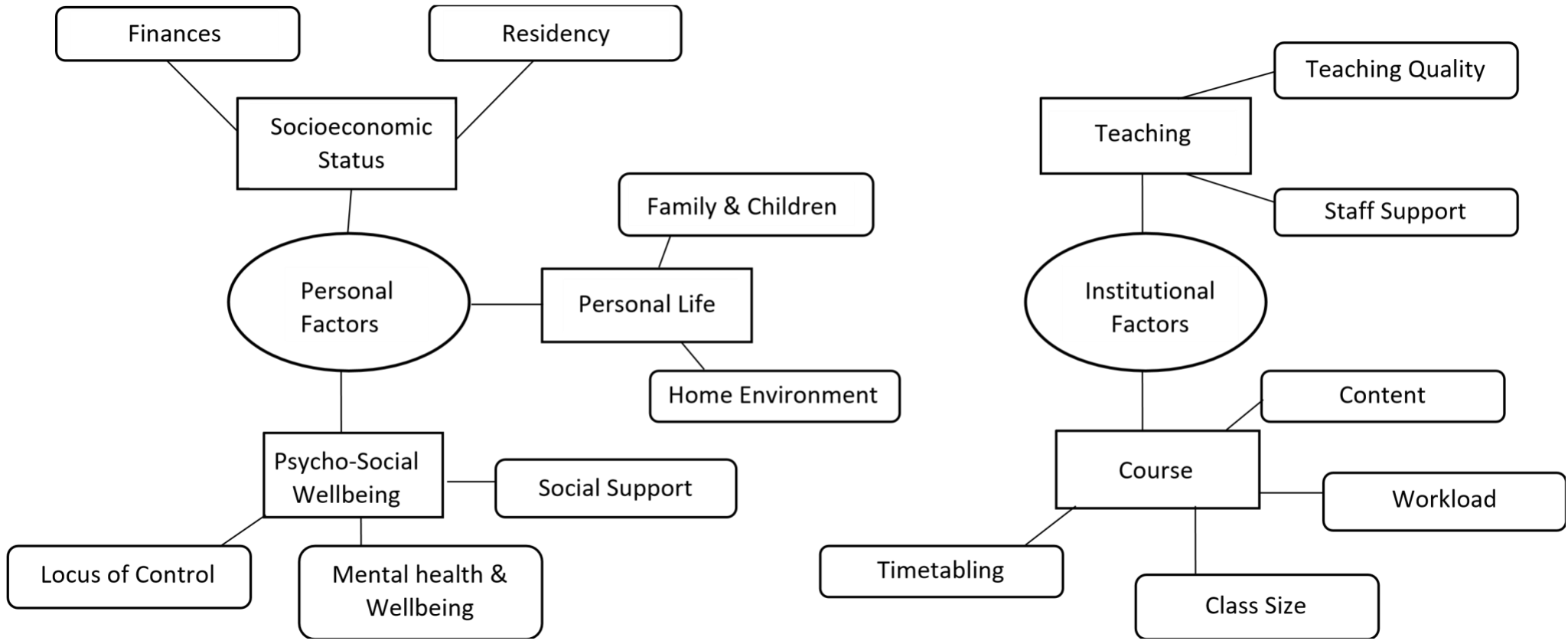
Results

A total of two over-arching themes of student satisfaction were identified from the data, personal factors and institutional factors (See Table 6 for all themes identified). Within the personal factors, were three themes (*socioeconomic status, psycho-social wellbeing, personal life*) made up of eight sub-themes (*finances, residency, social support, mental health and wellbeing, locus of control, family and children, home environment*). There were two institutional main themes (*course, teaching*) comprising of six sub-themes (*content, course organisation, workload, class size, teaching quality, staff support*).

Table 6

Themes and sub-themes identified from the data.

Over-arching theme	Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Extract example
Personal Factors	**Socioeconomic Status**	Finances	Relating to money in general	*"It costs so much in like it'll cost a tenner in petrol, plus like say fiver for parking so it's fifteen pound you know."* (5C).
		Residency	Relating to where the student lives (e.g., on campus)	"*yeah we live in halls, so it's like… part of the whole experience … It's just easier to get here really isn't it?"* (2C)
		Social Support	Support the student has from their peers	*"I feel like the, the emotional aspects and support, we get from each other… I don't think I'd have been here still if it wasn't for the people in the group."* (1D)

Psycho-Social Wellbeing	Mental health and wellbeing	Any aspect of a students' wellbeing	*"Cause if you have like a bad day then you won't really wanna go to lectures … you wouldn't wanna like participate…"* (4C).
	Locus of control	The degree to which the student feels they are responsible for their satisfaction as opposed to external factors	"*I do think that it's us. Like it's not the university controlling our satisfaction it's how we are looking at stuff, how we interpret things."* (5D).
Personal Life	Family and children	References to the students' family and children	*"…my son was born in November, which threw everything up, so I've had to, needed extensions, you know, all that I've been supported."* (3F).
	Home environment	References to the students' home environment (e.g., siblings, study space)	"*I know for a fact that if I was still living at home, I'd probably already drop out of uni. Because my life at home is pretty hectic because I've got seven siblings at home." (3D).*

Institutional Factors	Course	Content	Referring to the content of the course, how relevant and interesting the student feels it is.	*"I'm on the clinical route. So, um, like neuroscience is interesting, but it doesn't interest me. It's not something that I came to uni for. Uh, and sometimes I think things are weighted towards other disciplines in psychology than mine. Um, which is a bit frustrating." (3F).*
		Timetabling	Referring to the organisation of classes on student timetables	*"...on a Friday we have like one two hour and one one hour. If they were together then it would be like easier to have another day that you could get everything done as well."* (4D).
		Workload	Referring to the number of assignments and studying required on the course	*"...if our work is spread out equally, I feel I can cope a lot better." (1B)* *"I would never ask a question in one of the big lectures because I feel like you've got like 300 heads turning and*

	Class size	Referring to the number of other students in the class (e.g., larger lecturestyle class or a smaller tutorial-style class)	*looking at you and feel like a mug,* *like no chance. Whereas in a* *classroom, I'd still feel like a bit of a* *mug but I wouldn't feel as mugged."* (5D)
Teaching	Teaching quality	Evaluation of the teaching staff's style and knowledge	*"I think that's mostly it, just how they* *teach, how the lecturers are. That's* *most likely to affect us 'cause we* *spend most of our time in lectures* *anyway. So if we don't like our* *lecturers then it's really gonna affect* *how satisfied we are."* (4B).
	Staff support	The support students feel they receive from teaching staff	*"...do you need help? Are you okay?* *... they were more worried about my* *mental health and like how I was* *doing than the fact that I missed* *a lesson, which I thought was* *really good."* (3C)

Personal Factors

SES: Finances

Finances was identified as a significant theme throughout the focus groups. The students' focus surrounded the day-to-day cost of attending university and working paid jobs as well as attending university. They explained how being in a poor financial situation and having to work a paid job can affect their attendance, personal study time and organisation. Most of those who spoke of financial issues and working part-time spoke of their financial responsibilities, for example, having a family to provide for.

First, the costs associated with attending campus for scheduled classes were discussed by the students in the focus groups.

"It costs so much in like it'll cost a tenner in petrol, plus like say fiver for parking so it's fifteen pound you know." (5C).

Finances were also discussed in relation to timetabling. For example, Participant 5C explains their preference for classes to be condensed into fewer days to leave more days of the week free for them to work and earn money to support their family.

"That's what I mean as well, like 'cause we've got jobs, if we weren't in on a Tuesday for 40 minutes, we could work on that day and make money for our family, you know what I mean? (5C).

Also related to timetabling is the cost of attending campus for one short class. Participant 5D explains how they have to pay the same amount of money to travel to campus regardless of the amount of classes there is that day.

"Yeah and if we come in early to get a decent parking space, then you're paying for longer parking because you want to get in at a decent time so, you know. I mean I come in early but then I'm paying for what, if you don't pay for - the one we park on, you pay for four or ten hours. You've gotta pay for ten hours of parking when you're here for fifty minutes at the lecture." (5D).

The issues spoken about by the students surrounding finances often overlapped with self organisation and workload. In the extract below, participant 3D explained that they have a parttime job in their hometown that they travel to from university. It appears that by having to work alongside their studies, this brings more pressure surrounding organisation of workload.

"I have a part time job as well. So, balancing that with everything else, yeah, it is a bit of a challenge, especially because it's in a different city, so you have to keep going back and forth…it does influence you, especially 'cause it takes up hours of your time. So yeah, during, during that time you could have done some (university) work, but you're at work." (3D).

Having to work in a paid job can impact a students' academic performance. Participant 4C explains how they can often be too tired from their paid job to attend classes. This could in turn negatively impact their attainment, which is something which has been identified to correlate with student satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010).

"'Cause I do and sometimes find difficult to like come from work and then go to lectures at the same time. Like sometimes I just miss lectures cause I'm too tired." (4C).

Also, students can find it difficult to organise their work schedule with their managers at work to fit around class times, as Participant 4A explains below. This extra stressor could also impact their satisfaction overall.

"Or even just making the schedule with like your, your manager or whatever at work like to fit with uni like sometimes they put you in like right after class and then like your just like ah come on. So that is like a huge external factor, part time work yeah, that's definitely." (4A).

SES: Residency

Students frequently discussed factors which influence their satisfaction in relation to how close they live to campus. Differences in experience for students who live on campus versus those who commute to university were identified by the students throughout the focus groups. Usually, commuters discussed feeling that things are more difficult and that they must account for more

factors when attending university such as travel time, childcare and costs to travel. Friendships and attendance were also related to where the students reside.

First, students who lived on campus reported that simply having less travel time and no need to take public transport to attend class increases their level of satisfaction. The convenience of being close to the university is a factor related to satisfaction. Participants 2B and 2C discuss this, explaining that the ease of being close by and not having to take a bus or train to class like they would have to from home, this increases their satisfaction levels.

"yeah we live in halls, so it's like… part of the whole experience … It's just easier to get here really isn't it? Rather than like spending hours on like trains or busses or… because we'd have to get a train and a bus to get here so –" (2C)

"Yeah. So it makes us more satisfied overall in the fact that we can just like cross a road to get to our lecture instead of like having to get a train and a bus." (2B)

In contrast, students who commuted to university reported that this can sometimes make it difficult to attend classes. The students discussed factors out of their control often affecting their attendance too such as train cancellations and weather.

"Yeah, because it takes me an hour and a half to come in so it's quite a big factor. Especially if there's like disruption to the like train tracks, like there has been with the storm and stuff. It's difficult to get in." (2A).

This could possibly affect attendance which, as Participant 4D suggests, could then impact performance. If students then cannot 'catch up' with the work and fall behind, this could impact on their academic performance.

"Yeah, I think travel as well. Cause like I have to travel in. Sometimes I can't help missing the lecture when like my train's cancelled and then you can't always catch up on everything, you know when you've got lectures right after each other? And like traveling in for one hour and then traveling back it's like..." (4D).

Students also discussed how the time it takes to travel to and from campus can negatively impact their home life, leading to feelings of stress and dissatisfaction. Below, participant 1A explains their routine and how they feel that they have no downtime in the evening between family life and personal study time.

"It's like we get home and like some of us live close, I live in Burnley but like we finish at four so it takes over an hour to get home. I'm home, I don't even take my shoes and coat off, I go straight into the kitchen, start making tea, make tea, give it to the girls, put the girls to bed, and then I sit down on a laptop until bedtime constantly typing." (1A).

On the other hand, students who live in halls of residence reported feeling that living in halls of residence with peers is a large part of university. Participant 3C explains how they feel that living with friends on campus is an important aspect of the university experience to them. They

explain how they associate it with gaining independence, becoming an adult and having more freedom than they did in the family home.

"Cause you always have this experience, like this expectation of like living with your flat mates and having a nice time. So you want them to be met. So that's what you think about, that's what I think about… part of the uni experience is living with your friends or going out and having more freedom, so I would take that into factor yeah. Yeah. And I think it's part of the experience, especially as a young - like when you're just out of college or sixth form - like you're trying to find your way in the adult world." (3C).

Although, the social experience of living in halls of residence is not always a positive experience. Participant 2B explains that relationships with those who they live with can affect their overall satisfaction with university because they view this to be a significant aspect of their university experience.

"*Sometimes you don't always get along with who you live with and things and that can like affect your overall satisfaction with the university because like it's part of the whole experience."* (2B).

Friendships were spoken of frequently throughout the focus groups in relation to residency. Students suggested that it is more difficult to make friends as a commuting student than living in halls of residence. As Participant 2A explains in the extract below, if the only time you spend on campus is in classes, then this does not allow much time to form friendships because this is where learning is encouraged rather than socialising.

"Yeah. But I know you (other participant) live in halls so you get to know people, but I've - because I travel and no one's near me, if I walk in there, there's literally so many people that know each other. And because there is so many, you can't really get to know people that well." (2A).

In the extract below, Participant 4E also suggested that it may be easier to build relationships with staff if you live on campus because it is easier to meet with staff. They explain that it is difficult to do so when living off campus, which may negatively affect overall satisfaction as student-staff interaction has been associated with student satisfaction.

"It's also harder if you wanted to go see them (teachers) as well, if you live off campus. That's also harder than if you lived on campus." (4E).

The costs of commuting to university were also spoken of by the students in the focus groups. Participant 5C below discussed the costs of travelling to campus in relation to the amount of contact time they receive. The participant implies that the money it costs to attend to university is not worth it for such a little amount of contact time.

"Yeah, it's again, it's again that coming in for 40 minutes, like it costs so much in like it'll cost a tenner in petrol, plus like say fiver for parking so it's fifteen pound you know when you could just do it on the day you're in." (5C).

In addition to the costs of commuting, students also discussed the practicalities of commuting such as parking. Participant 3F explains how issues such as parking can affect their enjoyment of and engagement in class.

"I, I travel in, um, I live about an hour away um and I travel to uni. Um, honestly, I know it's a tiny issue but it's like parking is a nightmare. Like an absolute nightmare, they're spending all this money building an open space, build a bloody car park instead. Um, it's, you're not like penalized for driving, but like there's no, nowhere just for students. Do you know what I mean? There's nowhere close, like, um, last Friday it was absolutely throwing it down. I got to my lecture and I'm just soaking wet and it's like, I'm just like, how am I, I can't enjoy this, you know? Um, and you're sat there and I'm just trying to like engage and no It's horrible." (3F).

Psycho-Social Wellbeing: Social Support

The social support students receive from other students was often referred to throughout the focus groups. The students felt that having friends on the course increased their happiness, emotional wellbeing, academic support and helped them to see different perspectives. They also spoke of having friends who are not on the same course, made through extracurricular activities, as being useful. The students appeared to value friendship and their peer support as much as they valued their academic performance.

Any problems the students have, they feel they have a support system within each other to discuss any problems they have, as participant 1A explains in the extract below. They explain how they feel that without their friendships that they would 'struggle'.

"Yeah. And I think it's really good because we've all got like really good support with each other, haven't we? Like if we do have a problem, we can discuss it with each other… I don't think for our relationship with each other I would struggle so much." (1A)

The students feel that it is helpful offloading to peers, as participant 5D explains below, which is likely to help with their emotional wellbeing, which is often associated with satisfaction.

"To be fair, if we're miserable we come in and whinge to everyone else about it so that helps" (5D).

Participant 5C explains how having a social support system in their peers and feeling like they belong to a group makes their experience more enjoyable and a happier experience.

"Yeah, cause we all make it - we all have a laugh don't we? And it just cheers you up anyway… But I think it's us lot that make that. Like as you know, like as a group." (5C).

The students also explained how, as well as having fun with their peer support group, they also find it helpful to support one another with the academic aspect, as explained in the extract below from participant 4D.

"And having a group of friends as well. I think like with my group of friends, I think I'd find it less interesting if I didn't have them. Like obviously we do like assignments together as well so, I think that helps me as well." (4D).

Students view building relationships with peers at university as an important aspect of attending university. Participant 3F below explains how by making friends on their course, this has given them more than they expected to gain from their university experience. They explain that these personal goals are as important to them as their academic goals.

"I'm quite satisfied with it to be honest. It, it's more than what I expected. Um, I expected just to turn up, go to my lessons and leave. I'm the only person I knew who went to uni this year, I didn't know anyone uh you know, but I've made friends. So yeah, I've kind of already got out more than I thought? I done alright on my assignments, but yeah, it's, it's my, I've met my personal goal, so I'm happy with it." (3F)

Participant 1D even expressed feeling that having support from their peers is the most important aspect of university as without it they do not think they would continue with the course.

"I feel like the, the emotional aspects and support, we get from each other… I don't think I'd have been here still if it wasn't for the people in the group." (1D)

In addition, interacting with peers can be useful and important for student development. They can learn from one another and from different types of people. Participant 3F uses the example of different age groups. They explain that by having the opportunity to engage with other

students, it allows them to see others' perspectives and views on the topics they are learning about.

"It's been nice to talk to younger people and see their points of view and their thoughts, and then argue with them and debate with them and stuff like that and learn." (3F).

As well as other students who are similar to them, Participant 5D uses the example of having other mature students as friends. They are likely to have similar experiences, therefore the students feel they can receive support from one another, which Participant 5D believes increases their satisfaction levels.

"We always say that we're dead glad that we met each other…the rest of us are mature students and it was a bit worrying. Especially 'cause I was coming from far away, I didn't know anyone. At all. But, I think that played a huge part cause I think if you know, if you were just coming here for the lessons it might affect your satisfaction levels." (5D).

Students also spoke about how useful they find organised peer-support by the institution. It appears to give students a sense of belonging and something to aim towards being a part of. Participant 3F explains how they enjoy working with their peers on different academic topics and how they look forward to becoming a mentor in the future.

"Like the PASS session study session. So, it's Peer Assisted Study Sessions. So, it's like people from third year almost mentoring, but not teaching. So, they, they're under the supervision of,

um, I can't think of her name… (staff name), uh, so they, they're given like a topic to discuss. So like today - you get it for an hour a week… I really liked the PASS sessions, you know, with the working with like, you know, people who are in their third year. I really enjoy it. I'm actually looking forward to applying to be a PASS leader. Uh, I, I'd do more of them." (3F)

Finally, it was noted that extra-curricular activities were also a good source of peer support and places to make friends. Participant 3C explains that they think it is a good opportunity to meet friends from other disciplines not just based on the same academic interests. They explain how they see it as an escape from academic focus and to have fun in a change of scenery.

"And I feel like for me also another factor would be like extra curriculum, like societies, like, I'm in a drama society and I'm doing a play and I think that really helps because, as much as work is fun and meeting your friends is fun, I think it's nice to have that time away. And it's still like with your uni friends that you can still have longer experiences but yeah, I think it helps 'cause you meet a lot of new people and you learn on a lot of things, so that would help with my satisfaction." (3C).

Psycho-Social Wellbeing: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Students discussed how their mental health and wellbeing can influence their university experience. They explained that this can impact on their levels of concentration, attendance and personal study.

Students mood can influence how they perform in class. Participant 2B explains that if they are not feeling their best then this can affect their levels of concentration in class. Poor concentration could influence the quality of their work and impact on their grades if this is a recurring issue.

"Probably concentrate less and things as well when you're not feeling the best. So, it does definitely impact like your day at uni, if you're feeling overall sad or something." (2B)

The students also reported finding it more difficult to understand the information being taught in class if they are not in the right mindset. Participant 4A explains that it is particularly difficult to understand more complex topics when their mind is preoccupied with other things going on in their lives.

"It's hard to focus obviously because like some of them are like, some of them are not that easily grasped and if you need like, if you have something in the back of your head, something else, like it's, obviously you're not gonna like fully understand it and things like that so." (4A).

Student wellbeing can also influence attendance. As Participant 4C explains below, students are unlikely to want to participant or even attend classes if they are feeling low or having a 'bad day'.

"Cause if you have like a bad day then you won't really wanna go to lectures like if you're not feeling well you wouldn't wanna like participate and stuff like that." (4C).

This may be the case more so for students who commute because it requires more effort to travel to campus. Participant 2A explains that when they are 'feeling down', they find it difficult to make this effort and travel to university.

"I think quite a lot because if you're feeling down, especially when I've got to come quite far, I don't always want to come in… it feels worse having to get up if you're not having a good time." (2A).

Psycho-Social Wellbeing: Locus of Control

This sub-theme encapsulates students' views surrounding who is responsible for their satisfaction with university. It looks at the extent to which the student believes their overall satisfaction with university is their responsibility or that of the institution. The student may rate their satisfaction overall highly if they believe the university is doing all it can, and it is them as an individual that could do more. Whereas students with an external locus of control may rate their satisfaction with university negatively as they are more likely to believe that the source of their dissatisfaction is external, from the institution (e.g., poor teaching or bad timetabling). Overall, the students in the focus groups felt that it was their responsibility to ensure they were satisfied with their university experience.

The students' perception of responsibility for satisfaction may depend on how the individual defines feeling satisfied with university. For example, Participant 3F explains in the extract below that they relate their satisfaction with their achievements. They believe that regardless of

how satisfied they feel with other aspects of their university experience, if they do not achieve the goals they set for themselves, then they will not feel satisfied. This suggests that the student feels that they are responsible for their satisfaction with university, not the university.

"Um, you know, but it depends if I've achieved the goals that I've set out to achieve you know. So, um, did I enjoy uni? Yeah, I might have done. Did I achieve? No. So I'm not satisfied by it. But that's not uni's fault. That would be me not hitting my targets." (3F).

Some students discussed perspective and how this can influence their satisfaction. Participant 5D explains in the extract below that they believe that satisfaction is controlled by the student as an individual and their perspective, as opposed to what the university does.

"Yeah, I do think that it's us. Like it's not the university controlling our satisfaction it's how we are looking at stuff, how we interpret things." (5D).

In the extract below, Participant 3C explains how they believe that workload, as an example, is something that they must work to satisfy themselves with. They suggest that by working harder, they can have more control over their workload and how overwhelming they find it rather than the workload being something should be controlled by the institution, for example, by reducing the workload or reassessing the timeline in which it is assigned to allow students more time to work on assignments.

...it'll also depend on me 'cause I need to work hard so I can satisfy myself with that workload. But if there's a lot that it might get overbearing, so I'll get really like nervous and yeah, find it harder." (3C).

Even when students do recognise that the university can help with issues that they may have, they still note that they feel it is their responsibility to seek that help. Participant 3C appears to internalise responsibility for their satisfaction, stating that it is their responsibility to 'reach out' and ask for the help that they need.

"I think there's stuff that could increase my satisfaction is dependent on me and how I handle uni rather than like external…Like for me, I know in my situations like the stuff that I can do to help myself become more satisfied is down to me… I feel like, yeah, university could help with a lot, like with the work, but, if I reach out, they will respond to me. So I think it's more down to me as an individual." (3C).

Personal Life: Family and Children

Having a family and/or dependents can make the university experience different for students. The students who have family commitments can perceive the workload as more intense and the hours involved in completing the course feel impossible because they have less spare time in comparison to a student who does not have these responsibilities and is more likely to be able to make university their first priority. Below, Participant 1C explains the individual differences in perceived intensity and how they believe that having a family is a factor that can influence this.

"What is intense to me might not be intense to the next person and dependent on whether someone has a family or if they don't have a family, can, can really impact on how intense it is." (1C).

Students who have children may find it more difficult to make time for personal study and balance their work and home life. As participant 1C explains in the extract below, they feel that they have to choose between spending time with their family or completing their course work. Missing out on family time due to workload at home could impact on students' satisfaction with university. They may feel guilty about the quality of their parenting and time they are able to spend with their families and begin to resent university if they feel this is what is affecting the quality of their family life, as explained in the extract below.

"I miss bedtime with kids 'cause I say, 'oh, I need to get this essay started'. Or weekends, I don't get a full weekend with my kids or my husband because I've got so much work to do… am I giving up, you know, play time in the park with my kids? And I don't want to have to be making that choice between my husband, my kids and my uni work every weekend... My kids are honestly, it's like, 'Oh, you're not working again mum?' Oh, you know, and you feel terrible. And it's that - and I just think, is this worth it? Do you know what I mean?… And that impacts then on everything else because then I resent having to do the work. I resent having to come in." (1C).

However, if the university are supportive and understanding of student circumstances such as having a child, then the student is likely to have a positive view of the university and more likely

to feel satisfied with their experience overall. For example, as Participant 3F describes below, being given extensions where needed can help to make students feel supported.

"Um, I've had a, my, my son was born in November, which threw everything up, so I've had to needed extensions, you know, all that I've been supported." (3F).

The amount of family support a student receives can also influence how a student views their university experience. Participant 3C provides an example of how if a student does not have the familial support for attending university then this may impact their views on university and attendance and that this could result in the student leaving university.

"*Some people that I know, their parents don't think uni should be, like their kids should go to uni, they think their kids should just have a job straight away. So I feel like your influences around you could also affect that cause if your parents saying that to you, you might think, Oh, then what's the point of me going to uni? You might drop out then cause you might think, oh I'll just get a job and do what my dad says."* (3C).

Whereas, if students do have a family that supports their decision to attend university then this could have the opposite effect. Participant 3F explains how their partner is supportive of them attending university and they believe that they would feel differently about university if they did not have the support of their partner. Having no feelings of disapproval is likely to have a positive impact on how they perceive their university experience.

"Yeah. I think my wife encourages me to go to uni. She's like, come on you gotta go. Um, she definitely does. She's at uni too, um, she's taking a year out. Um, but if I was in a situation where she was, like oh we've got no money, we've got this and the other, that would affect it massively." (3F)

Personal Life: Home Environment

A student's home environment was also identified as a factor which influences their satisfaction with university. The students discussed how their home environments can be busy and not an ideal setting for studying due to children or siblings. Some students viewed attending university as a break from their busy home environment whereas others felt that their busy home environment negatively affected their performance at university.

One factor that students discussed surrounding their home lives was having siblings living with them. Participant 3D explains that they feel it would be impossible to complete their course if they were living in their family home with seven siblings. They explain that it is 'hectic' which is likely to make it difficult to conduct personal study at home and also that they have some responsibility for their siblings which would mean they would have less time for study and revision too. This could also relate to the sub-theme 'Family and Children' in which students shared that this impacts their perceived intensity of the course. With more responsibilities, the student may feel less satisfied with the workload if they feel unable to complete it because they are required to prioritise other things at home.

"I know for a fact that if I was still living at home, I'd probably already drop out of uni. Because my life at home is pretty hectic because I've got seven siblings at home. Yeah. So, uh, I know for a fact that if I was to stay at home, I don't know how I'd be doing any of my work because I've got younger siblings and obviously, um, like even lately, like they were ill and my parents were working, I had to stay with them, so I had to miss lectures. And even though I'm not home, it still affects my uni life in a way even though I'm not even there, but I had to come home to help, do you know what I mean?" (3D)

Some students view university as a break from a busy home life. Participant 3F explains in the extract below that they feel 'relief' when attending university. They explain that this may be why they enjoy university, because it is a calm environment for them to focus in and work. They suggest that if they were unhappy with their lives outside of university then going to university could help improve their mood and satisfaction.

"In my situation, coming to uni is a bit of relief, to be honest. Like I said, I've got an awesome three and a half month old. He's amazing. But sometimes I need a break so coming to uni yeah that's so. Maybe that's why I like uni so much, 'cause I don't have screams or sick on me or anything. Um, but yeah, no, I think it's a two way street. So if I wasn't satisfied at home, you know, I'd be perked up by coming to uni, do you know what I mean?" (3F).

Other students reported feeling the opposite. For example, participant 3C explains how they believe that their home life impacts their university experience. They explain how having a negative home environment makes it difficult for them to focus and carry out personal study and

revision for assessments. This may then have a negative impact on their academic performance which could cause the student to feel less satisfied with university overall, if they are not achieving the grades that they would like or feel that they have the potential to if it were not for their negative home environment.

"I feel like the other way around as well. Like if my life outside of uni is quite, like the environment's quite bad or there's a lot of things I'm experiencing, then my uni life will be hard because at the end of the day when I come back from a lecture, that's what I see this is what I'm gonna be surrounded in. So it's going to be hard like, and also say you have to revise for an exam, but you've got situations that you can't, you can't do that. So that's going to affect that." (3C).

Participant 3D expands on this and suggests that a negative home environment could impact a students' mindset causing them to feel demotivated. This may then in turn cause them to feel dissatisfied with their experience and possibly 'drop out'.

"Yeah, because if you're tired from, you know, your life at home and stuff, I don't think you would have the motivation or, you know, yeah, you wouldn't have the motivation to do anything for uni I think. So I think that's why a lot of people drop out because, um, they might find it boring, they might find it, you know, like, Oh, this is so much worse than I thought it was gonna be. And I think most of that does come from like your home environments." (3D).

Institutional Factors

Course: Class Size

In this sub-theme, students relate the size of their classes to their satisfaction with their course. Overall, students reported feeling more comfortable in smaller classes and found it easier to make contributions to discussions, ask questions and form friendships with peers.

In the extract below, from participant 2C, they explain how they feel more confident approaching their peers in smaller sized classes. They explain that this then makes it easier to make friends with others in their class. This could then help facilitate a more comfortable and productive interactive type of session with group work and discussions. In addition, the literature notes course friendships to be important for student satisfaction (Survey Unit, 2008).

"Because I feel like if you've got smaller lectures, you're more likely to go up to people and make friends rather than like walk into like 200 people. You feel a bit like, there's a lot of people." (2C)

Participant 5C agreed and expanded on this idea, explaining that it is easier to engage with their peers in smaller sized classes. This may help students working together, brainstorming, sharing ideas and debating issues in and outside of the classroom.

"Yeah, I think if you're in smaller groups…You can engage more all together can't you?" (5C)

It appears that it may also be the case that smaller class sizes facilitate better learning due to students feeling more comfortable in a smaller setting. They may feel more comfortable to ask questions and for information to be clarified by the teacher, as participant 5D explains in the extract below. Large class sizes may deter students from asking questions or joining in discussions which could impact on the quality of their learning experience. Research has previously found that a smaller, tutorial style class environment is the optimal learning environment (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; Shavelson & Huang, 2003).

"And you don't feel like an idiot if you've got a question. I would never ask a question in one of the big lectures because I feel like you've got like 300 heads turning and looking at you and feel like a mug, like no chance. Whereas in a classroom, I'd still feel like a bit of a mug but I wouldn't feel as mugged." (5D)

As an extension of this, if students also feel that they cannot hear teachers in larger sized classes, they are less likely to ask for clarification or for volume issues to be resolved. Instead, they are likely to refer to online resources as participants 5C explained in the following extract.

"And it's hard work when you can't understand some sum-it (colloquial something) teachers, you just can't can you? And especially when it's in a big lecture theatre, you can't even hear them, what, you know? So you just end up looking on Blackboard." (5C)

Students also reported that larger class sizes made them feel that they are less able to build a relationship with teaching staff, something which is noted throughout the literature as a strong predictor of student satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Dicker et al., 2017; Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Propp and Rhodes, 2006). As participant 2A explains in the extract below, if the student and teacher have not had the opportunity to build a relationship, then the student will not feel comfortable to approach the staff member outside of the classroom if they were to have any issues.

"I think it'd be good if you got, I know obviously there's a lot of people in the lectures, but you don't really get to know the lecturers much. But if I had a issue with something, I wouldn't really know who to talk to that much." (2A).

Course: Content

In this sub-theme, the students placed a high level of importance on the quality of their course content. They reported that they like the content to be relevant to their interests and chosen career routes as well as assessments.

In the extract below, Participant 3F explains how they would like the course content to be closely related to their interests and career goals. The student discusses what their expectations of the course content were and feelings of disappointment when they were not met. Student expectations have been related to student satisfaction in the literature (Kay, Dunne &

Hutchinson, 2010) and a possible suggestion to manage these expectations of course content may be to clearly state in the module handbook what it will entail, and the assessments included.

"I'm on the clinical route. So, um, like neuroscience is interesting, but it doesn't interest me. It's not something that I came to uni for. Uh, and sometimes I think things are weighted towards other disciplines in psychology than mine. Um, which is a bit frustrating. Uh, like there's like, we had a brain imaging techniques, um, essay. Uh, which is great, but I could have just done with learning about it. I didn't need to write an essay about that. I'd rather do one on clinical psychology and I'd rather do one about like even a counselling or therapy one, or working disorders and stuff. So that's been a bit disappointing if I'm honest, um, because I'm learning something, one I've not come to uni for really, two I didn't know I'd have to learn about it because, you know, you think clinical, I didn't know we would all be together in the same group." (Participant 3F)

Similarly, students expressed feeling frustrated by course content required for course accreditation. Participant 5C is studying Psychology (a course that has specific content requirements to be accredited by the British Psychological Society). In the extract below, they express feeling that the course content in their first year has been 'rubbish' due to it being generalised. The student explains how this makes them feel bored and that they find it difficult to concentrate on the topics that interest them. This concurs with research which has shown lower levels of satisfaction in students completing compulsory modules earlier in their degree programme as opposed to optional modules (Coles, 2002).

"Erm, I think this first year has been a bit rubbish. Cause I think it's so generalised. You know, it's boring really because you just want to concentrate on, you know what you're actually here for instead of hearing all the other bits on top of it." (5C).

Students also expressed a preference for content being directly related to assessment. In the extract below, participant 5E explains how they feel that attending sessions which do not cover content which the students will be assessed on is 'pointless'.

"I think it feels a bit pointless because we've already had like the whole assessment for that module. We've already done it. So now the lectures are just like, they feel like empty cause we're not… we're not getting tested on them so." (Participant 5E).

Similarly, if the content is covered in multiple lessons and overlaps, this is something that students feel unhappy with. Participant 5A explains this leaves them feeling disheartened. It appears that this relates to all of the factors that students account for when travelling to campus for a class such as the costs and organisation of childcare.

"…we've done the work for it now and sometimes the lectures are something we've already covered in another thing and it can be really disheartening… If I'm coming in for that day, I'd like it to be sum-it (colloquial something) relevant." (5A).

Course: Timetabling

This theme encapsulates the student's feelings towards the organisation of their course timetable. The main areas of discussion related to how contact hours are spread out across the week and the times that classes begin. It appeared that different students (e.g., commuters versus those who live on campus) had differences in opinion surrounding timetabling.

An important aspect of course organisation that was noted from the focus groups was timetabling. Participant 4D suggests that they would prefer their lessons to be scheduled together rather than spread throughout the day to give them more free time for the remainder of the day. Having a larger amount of free time together may allow them to be more productive in personal study rather than having an hour of free time each time between classes, for example.

"And we have like on a Friday we have like one two hour and one one hour. If they were together then it would be like easier to have another day that you could get everything done as well." (Participant 4D).

In particular, students who commute and work part-time jobs noted a preference for contact hours to be condensed into fewer days. Participant 5C below explains the issues surrounding travelling to campus for one short lesson. They go on to explain that if they have one whole day available then this allows them to work part-time to earn money for themselves and their family.

"You know like on a Tuesday, we're in for literally forty minutes, and for people travelling at a distance, why not just put it on one of other days that we're here when we've got long gaps

between? It just doesn't make any sense… 'cause we've got jobs, if we weren't in on a Tuesday for forty minutes, we could work on that day and make money for our family, you know what I mean?" (Participant 5C).

Although, preferences for timetabling are sometimes due to personal preference such as what time of day the student works best. Participant 4B explains that they are not a 'morning person' and are therefore dissatisfied with their timetable which consists of classes beginning at 9am. This may have a negative impact on their attendance as they state they 'can't be bothered' which could then impact negatively on their grades.

"For me it's my timetable's really bad. I have nine am's pretty much every day and it's just like, sometimes - I'm not a morning person – so sometimes I can't be bothered to go to a nine am." (4B).

Course: Workload

This sub-theme covers the workload of a course and the organisation of assignments in relation to one another. The students reported often struggling with prioritising assignments, their work and home life and feeling stressed and overwhelmed when they had various pieces of work to complete at one time.

Students expressed how they would prefer their assignments to be more spread out and to overlap less. Below, Participant 1B explains this makes them feel much more able to 'cope' and that the course is less intense.

"So for me, like 1A was saying before, if our work is spread out equally, I feel I can cope a lot better but because of the course that we're on, it's quite intense and I just feel we get one piece of work in, and then it's like there's your next one, that one's in, there's your next one, and we don't get any respite. So, I find it really hard at the moment." (1B).

Although, students often feel that the workload is not spread evenly. Participant 5B explains that they feel that the workload is low for some time and then they have multiple pieces of work assigned to them at one time.

"It all seems to come at once. Like, for me, like I've felt like we've kind of bumped along a little bit then all of a sudden you've got like six assignments due in the next couple of months and you think oh, God." (5B).

Many of the students shared the same view, that when they have several assignments to complete at one time, they find it difficult to balance the workload and prioritise tasks.
In the extracts below from Participants 1B and 3C, they explain the difficulty they experience in prioritising the workload on their course. An intervention to help improve these feelings may be for the institution to hold sessions on how to organise and prioritise workload to help students with this skill.

"Sorry, but you're trying to prioritise your work. So I've got to do this presentation, I've got this portfolio to do, I've got this essay to do. What do I do first?" (1B).

"Um, the workload. Cause like some modules have a lot more work and a lot more time you need to put in than others. So it's a lot more, you need to balance how much effort and work you put in to certain modules." (3C).

By having a balanced workload, students are less likely to feel overwhelmed and will be able to feel organised. Below, Participant 1F explains how they feel more satisfied when they have a clear plan in place to complete their work than when they feel that the workload is too much to have a clear plan in place.

"I feel like I'm satisfied when I know what I'm doing. Like I've got plan. But sometimes when we've got several assignments, several assessments to do, it's hard to get a plan in place and then know what you're doing." (1F).

Student often related their views on workload to their family life. They find that when the workload is high, it affects their home lives. In the extracts below, Participants 1A and 3D express how they feel overloaded with work which means they are left with no free time at home to spend with their families or doing other things that they would like to at home, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction.

"I'm home, I don't even take my shoes and coat off, I go straight into the kitchen, start making tea, make tea, give it to the girls, put the girls to bed, and then I sit down on a laptop until

bedtime constantly typing. And it's like there's no downtime and it's quite impossible, isn't it really?" (1A).

"Yeah. Because obviously you don't want to be like overloaded with work because you have other things going on in your life and it's like you don't want to be sitting there at home twentyfour seven doing, you know, whatever you need to do for your course." (3D).

An overwhelming workload may also deter students from partaking in extra-curricular activities, which have been noted to impact overall satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2009), if they feel that they would not have the time. Participant 3D explains how important it is to manage their time effectively to allow them to study a language alongside their degree.

"Yeah, it is because, um, like other people might want to do something else on the side. So like I'm doing language on the side of my course. So, it's like I have um an exam coming up on the language course and it's like you have to balance everything out so then you have to like manage your time wisely so then you have time for both. Especially cause like the language is so much harder to learn if you have, you've never learnt it before. So yeah, it, yeah, it is the workload, I guess. Well, one of the aspects." (3D).

Teaching Staff: Teaching Quality

This sub-theme includes how students feel about staff members abilities and expertise as well as specific aspects of teaching such as consistency between staff members.

First, students discussed how they felt there were inconsistencies between instructions of how to complete assignments between staff members. Participant 1A provides an example of a specific assignment in which they felt there were inconsistencies between staff instructions.

"...different people give you different advice. Like we had a portfolio in the first week we got told this is a completely reflective portfolio of your experiences. And then we'd all started it and then like a few weeks before it was due we got told oh it's not a reflective portfolio, you need to do it this way." (1A).

The students expressed that they like to have clear and consistent expectations set out for them to work towards. Participant 1B explained how confusion is caused by differences between instructions for assignments.

"I think the confusion was some lectures were saying you could write parts reflective, and 'I', you know, that context, but then one of the lecturers was like, no, it all has to be in third person. So it was, there's inconsistencies in what they're expecting." (1B)

It also appears that students take into consideration the staff members that will be marking their assignments and find it easier when the same member of staff who assigns the work also marks it to, again, keep constituency between instructions. In the extracts below, Participants 1B, 5B and 5C discuss how assignments are marked differently amongst staff members.

"And it's quite difficult, well actually, who's going to mark it? Because if you're going to mark it and you're happy for 'I found this in practice', but actually this lecturer marks it and I've done that, am I going to fail because I've gone off what that lecturer says, rather than what that lecturer says." (1B).

"...the conclusion thing. Some people want you to put 'to conclude' or 'to summarise', others hate that, like how do you know? Are you going to be penalized for that?" (5B)

"Yeah, because each lecturer marks on how they prefer, so how are you supposed to know how to set your essay out when every single lecturer has a different thing they are looking for?" (5C)

Some students feel that the teaching quality and style of staff is the most influential factor for their satisfaction levels. Participant 4B explains feeling that because this is the most contact time they have with staff, that it is important to be satisfied with this area. They mention how much they 'like' the lecturer which suggests that the staff members personality in addition to their teaching style is important for students' satisfaction levels.

'I think that's mostly it, just how they teach how the lecturers are. That's most likely to affect us 'cause we spend most of our time in lectures anyway. So if we don't like our lecturers then it's really gonna affect how satisfied we are.' (Participant 4B).

Some traits that the students reported liking about teaching staff were being passionate about the topics they teach and personable. Participants 3D and 3F explain how they believe that when a lecturer appears to be passionate about the topics they teach, this helps with the learning process.

'I think it's because they're so passionate about what they do… So, that that really shows in their lectures. So, it's like it really helps you like get a bit of a perspective, I guess.' (3D)

"It's like, you know, 'I think in the 60s the scientist did this theory, oh this is me next to them.' You know? And it's kind of, it kind of breaks down a bit of a barrier of them. But they're not elitist with it, they're not, 'I'm the expert.' Um, so yeah, no, definitely the passion is really good." (Participant 3F).

Participant 3F expands further on this, explaining how they find it when teaching staff are experts in the field. They explain appreciating it when teaching staff have worked in the field or still do work in the field as well as teaching. They view this as a good opportunity to learn from the teachers 'lived experience'. This appears to bring excitement to the topic for the student.

'…one of the things that I suppose helps is, uh, the people who do the, the workshops are like world experts…That helps massively because, you know, we're with people who have lived experience, who talk the talk about walk the walk. So like, it's really interesting to sit there with people who are, you know, I say world leaders, you know, just like people who are really specialized, people are respected. Um, and that's awesome…Um, you know, even some of the professors who have a different, more academic teaching style, you know, I can still sit there and be like, wow, this person really knows their stuff. Um, and that kind of learning off them is kind of an opportunity, you know, I'm not just the teacher, you know, that they are, you know they're proper people.' (Participant 3F).

Teaching Staff: Staff Support

Another aspect of teaching that was identified as significant throughout the focus groups was how supported the students feel by their teaching staff. The students reported that they like to build good relationships with teaching staff and to feel supported by them with academic and pastoral issues.

Students reported that when they feel supported and treated well by staff, it increases their satisfaction. Participant 3F said that they feel more than satisfied because of the way that they have been treated by staff. They explain that they act as a 'cheerleader' who makes recommendations about the university to others.

"I'm not just satisfied, I'm like a bit of a, I suppose a cheerleader now. Cause I'm like, yay, you know, go to this person, go to that person. Um, so yeah, I'm, I'm kind of more than satisfied really, um, because of the way that the staff have been." (3F)

A caring approach from staff is favoured by students. They like to feel that they have support in relation to their personal lives as well as academic lives. In the extract below, Participant 3C describes feeling pleasantly surprised when a member of staff appeared concerned about their health and offered support instead of punishment or threats of consequences following a reduction in their attendance.

"I missed like two lectures and they emailed me and I, I thought it was like I was - I thought it was going to be if you miss another one, there'll be consequences. But it's more like, do you need help? Are you okay? ... they were more worried about my mental health and like how I was doing than the fact that I missed a lesson, which I thought was really good." (3C)

In particular, students expressed how they would specifically like support surrounding career options and what modules would be most beneficial for their chosen career route. The extract from Participant 3F below demonstrates this. They feel that more information from staff surrounding career options would be useful to them.

"I think as um, talking about booking and looking at things uh, our choices for next year. Um, you know, the first year, obviously, you know, it's, it's, it's introduction to this, but, um, next year is, is when you really start to kind of get into some proper choices. We're just given a list of them. Pick what you want to do, you know, I have no idea what will benefit me. Um, I've tried the, tried to get an appointment with a couple of members of staff and they just don't, they're not available. They just don't have the time, which is not their fault. But I'd just like a little bit more information if, if this course is gonna benefit me, if that is, um, like I said, doing the clinical route is, you know, I know where I wanna be. I, it's not like a, I just want to get my degree and see what happens. I know I want to work with young people, but what will help me. Yeah. So having a, you know, even a session where they just go right this course entails this, this, and this, and it's great for this career, this course entails this would be great for this. And that would be really useful instead of just going, there's your options, let us know. Right that's great and then, yeah." (3F).

In the extract below, Participant 3D explains how they received further help with their career options in relation to module selection because they were asked to meet with their advisor due to attendance concerns.

"Cause I had a meeting with my, um. Yeah, I think he's called an advisor? Um, and the only reason why I had to meet him was because of my attendance and the only reason he wanted to meet me is just to see like where I was, how I was doing cause I did miss quite a few sessions because some other things that were going on. Um, and the only reason why I asked him was because of that meeting, you know, and I asked him about what am I supposed to do in the second year? Like what choices do you think would best benefit me?" (3D).

Students identified a difference in relationships with teaching staff at university compared to those in Further Education. In the extract below, Participant 5E explained that they feel their relationship with staff at university is not as strong as it was with teaching staff at college and that they feel like they are a burden and therefore less likely to talk to staff.

"It doesn't feel like a, more of like a like a relationship as like, kind of like college, like where I went to college it felt like you could speak to your tutor and it'd feel – but yeah, it's like quite unclear… doesn't feel like a proper like relationship it just sort of feels - … It does feel like you're annoying them - I don't know, I dunno why for some reason I felt like if I e-mail them, I felt like I was annoying. Annoying them." (5E).

Participant 5A expands on this, explaining that they do not have the opportunity to build a strong relationship with staff members because of a lack of contact time with them. In the extract

below, they explain how they felt that they needed someone to speak to about various things in the lives outside of university but did not know who to go to, to speak about such personal matters.

"One thing I miss is like someone… you haven't got that one person. Okay, you've got your academic advisor and there's course leader but you don't have much regular contact with them. So I've had like massive changes the past six months. My marriage has broken down, um, you know, different placements in fostering and I don't feel… I, I felt like I needed to speak to someone about it. Who?" (5A).

When students do not feel supported by staff, this can impact their wellbeing and satisfaction with their course. Participant 1D explains this in the extract below. They express that staff tell the students that they are available to support them but the student feels that this is not the case in reality.

"…there's so many aspects that teeter with your emotional health I think. You know and I don't think there's that support there. You know, they make, you know, don't they say how many times they're kind of like we're here for you, we're here for you. They're not. They're not." (1D).

In addition to this, when students do not feel supported, they may feel that staff are only interested in the work that they produce or the institutions statistics as Participant 1C expresses in the extract below.

"And then you're going home and you're trying to do that. But then you can't focus on anything and then you can't focus on what's going on at home because you're thinking I need to get this done but they haven't told me how to do, or they haven't kind of given me that proper support like, um. Like a couple of weeks ago I had like a kind of quite a serious, um, issue a home and I had to get an extension and I just think, well, I'm telling you why I need this extension and not one of the lecturers, nobody has actually come to ask me, is everything okay? So, my whole world could be falling apart and it's just deadlines, deadlines, and deadlines… nobody's bothered whether we get a job at the end of it or whether our marriages stay intact or whether our mental health stays intact. They just want to see you, you started it and you finished it and this uni looks good as a result of it. And that's how I actually feel." (1C)

Discussion

The current study used a qualitative method, aiming to further examine the factors which students believe predict their overall satisfaction with university. It was hypothesised that students would report individual factors as significant predictors of their satisfaction with university and that individual differences (e.g., commuters vs on-campus residency) would result in differences in predictors of overall satisfaction levels.

While Study-1 and Study-2 used pre-existing self-report measures (NSS and SAES), it is argued that these do not always allow for a detailed understanding of an individual's experiences and do

not allow for further 'probing' as interviewing does (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Therefore, focus groups were used to gain a deeper understanding of the factors which students perceive to be predictors of their satisfaction, a common and familiar topic amongst the student group (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Denscombe, 2010). Focus groups in particular are thought to be effective in assessing individuals' attitudes, opinions and experiences of a topic (Myers, 1998) and more likely to provide truthful answers than in an interview (Kreuger, 1994). Furthermore, the group setting of a focus group allows the participants to build on one another's ideas during discussion, known as 'piggybacking' (Mansell, Bennett, Northway, Mead & Moseley, 2004). The data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes of factors important to students in relation to their overall satisfaction with university.

The findings provided insight into the factors which influence student overall satisfaction with university and expanded upon the findings of the previous two studies. The students discussed their views on a variety of individual and institutional factors which they believe to influence their satisfaction levels. Overall, the students appeared to relate more personal and external factors to their satisfaction with university than factors controlled by the institution. The findings concur with those of Study-2, which also found that student satisfaction can be mostly explained at the individual level. Personal factors appeared to influence the students' satisfaction levels in the following ways.

Socioeconomic Status

The results suggest that when considering what influences their satisfaction with university, with no explicit questions surrounding finances or fees, it is the daily costs and financial implications that students perceive to be important. Previous research examining how finance predicts student satisfaction tends to focus on the impact of tuition fees. It is thought that an increase in tuition fees has led to an increase in students' expectations of their institution and the 'services' that they offer (Kay, Dunne & Hutchinson, 2010). The current study however, found that students' focus surrounded the daily costs of attending university when considering their overall satisfaction with university. Specifically, the students identified a reduction in income from their paid jobs, childcare costs and the cost of commuting such as petrol, train tickets and parking. Financial worries are likely to have a negative impact on the student experience and may influence how they rate their overall satisfaction. These findings are supported by research which looked at the overall satisfaction results from the NSS across a ten-year period and found that increases in tuition fees did not influence satisfaction ratings (Burgess, Senior & Moore, 2018).

The findings also suggested that the proximity in which the student lives to the university is important for satisfaction with their overall experience. Students who lived on campus appeared to be more satisfied and positive about their university experience than their peers who commuted. Those who lived on campus reported finding it easier to attend classes, make friends and get involved in extra-curricular activities. These findings concur with those of previous research that found that students who live in halls of residence and are more involved in the

social aspect of university are less likely to drop out of university, suggesting higher levels of satisfaction (Kuh & Pike, 2005). This is also supported by Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1985) based on findings from a longitudinal study which found that students with higher levels of involvement (i.e. spend time on campus, interacts with staff and peers and devotes time to personal study) are more likely to continue on their course and complete their studies, whereas those with lower levels of involvement are more likely to drop out (Astin, 1984). Even small acts of engagement such as participating in research can increase student's satisfaction with their university experience (Bowman & Waite, 2003). Because these types of engagement are easier to do when living on campus, it may be that these types of students are younger with fewer responsibilities and more time to socialise.

Psycho-Social Wellbeing

Peer relationships were identified as an important factor for students' satisfaction levels, as it has been in previous research (Survey Unit, 2008). The findings of the current study suggest that social support predicts student satisfaction levels. In particular, the students explained that having friends who act as a support system on their course is especially important. The students reported that having friends on their course means they are more likely to attend classes as it is easier and more appealing, they help one another with assignments and provide one another with emotional support.

Student wellbeing and mental health was also identified by the students as significant in influencing their overall satisfaction. This concurs with the existing literature which notes that

wellbeing significantly predicts a student's satisfaction rating (Letcher & Neves, 2010; Mantzios et al., 2019). The students in the focus groups reported that poor mental health can negatively affect their attendance. They explained how this can then impact on their ability to concentrate and understand the information being taught when they do attend classes. This could then negatively impact the grades the student achieves, a factor which has been consistently associated with student satisfaction in previous research (Letcher & Neves, 2010). This could result in a cycle of students having poor mental health, struggling with their academic work, seeing a reduction in their grades which could then make them feel worse, resulting in lower satisfaction levels. This may also increase the risk of dropping out.

Another individual factor that appeared to influence how a student rates their overall satisfaction with university was locus of control. Individuals with an internal locus of control attribute their success and failure to their own efforts, whereas those with an external locus of control attribute external factors outside of their control for this. The students in the focus groups frequently referred to their satisfaction being their own responsibility, suggesting an internal locus of control. It may be that how a student rates their overall satisfaction with university depends on who they view to be responsible for their satisfaction. If the student perceives this to be the institutions responsibility and they feel that their needs are not being met, they may, for example, rate their satisfaction on surveys more negatively. Those students with an internal locus of control may rate their satisfaction levels differently if they feel that the institution is performing its role but they as an individual are not. Whereas students with an external locus of control may attribute their feelings of dissatisfaction to the institution as they are more likely to believe that the source of their dissatisfaction is due to external factors, for example, poor teaching or bad timetabling.

Personal Life

A student's personal life can affect how they experience university. The findings from the current study suggested that students with a family or dependents appear to find the experience more difficult as they perceive the workload to be less achievable and often feel resentment towards their course for taking up time that they feel could be spent with their families and children. This can affect their satisfaction levels with university overall. These findings are supported by previous research which finds that mature students with more responsibilities are less satisfied overall with their HE experience (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006).

The sample was not typical of an undergraduate population as half of the participants were mature students but gives perspective of both types of student. Throughout the focus groups, it appeared that commuter students and mature students had more negative comments to make about their university experience than those who were younger and lived on campus. This may be due to the impact that aspects of their university experience such as timetabling and workload can have on their personal lives because they have more responsibilities and sometimes children. It could also be related to the idea that students feel more immersed in the university experience when living on campus with a stronger student identity, which has been related to increased overall satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Wilkins et al., 2015).

A home environment in which students can successfully carry out personal study is likely to have a positive impact on satisfaction levels and a negative home environment can negatively affect student's satisfaction with university overall. The findings of the current study suggest that

students who view their home environment as negative, for example it is busy with lots of sibling or has a lack of space or negative family dynamics, are at risk of feeling less satisfied with their university experience overall than their peers. The students in the focus groups explained that a negative home environment makes it difficult to conduct personal study. They may not have the space to study, or the home environment may be too loud for them to concentrate on their studies. This could have a negative impact on the students' grades which could then affect their satisfaction levels if they feel that they are not achieving what they set out to.

Course

The main institutional factors identified surrounded the quality of aspects within the course (*content, time tabling* and *class size*) and teaching (*quality* and *staff support*). Course content was identified as an important aspect of the course for students. The students reported feeling more satisfied when course content is relevant to their interests and career aims. This concurs with the findings of Coles (2002), who found that student satisfaction is lower when students must complete compulsory modules rather than optional ones. Although, the findings do not concur with research that suggests that content is not as important to students as how the teacher delivers the content (Naftulin, Ware & Donnelly, 1973). Rather, the students in the focus groups appeared to place equal importance on the content of their classes and the quality of the teaching of the class, which will be discussed further in the next section. Institutions may benefit from providing prospective students with detailed course information to allow students to choose a course which best suits their interests and career goals.

The findings of the current study suggest that class size predicts student satisfaction, as the literature does (Alves & Raposo, 2009; Coles, 2002; Krentler & Grudnitski, 2004). The students reported feeling more comfortable in smaller sizes classes, more confident to engage in discussions, ask questions and form friendships with peers; all of which are associated with increased satisfaction. First, smaller classes tend to be more interactive in style, allowing more opportunity for discussions (Iaria & Hubball, 2008). These types of classes with more discussion opportunity may allow for peer and staff-student relationship development, which have been associated with increased satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Dicker et al., 2017). In addition, interactive sessions have been found to facilitate optimal learning (National Survey of Student Engagement 2005; Shavelson & Huang, 2003), possibly because students feel more confident to ask questions and for clarification as the focus group data stated. If students are achieving optimal learning in these types of classes, then they are more likely to achieve higher grades which, again, is associated with higher levels of satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010). Therefore, it may not be the class size that directly impacts satisfaction, but the benefits that are associated with smaller sized classes; optimal opportunity to learn and build stronger relationships with staff and peers. This may also help understand the findings from Study-2 in which hours spent in tutorial style classes significantly predicted overall satisfaction levels. This will be discussed in more detail in the general discussion (Chapter 6).

Also, within the research, differences between disciplines have been noted. Research suggests class size does not significantly predict Psychology students' satisfaction (Cheng, 2011) but does for Business Studies students (Coles, 2002). This is an area that would benefit from further

research in the future. Researchers should recruit students from a variety of disciplines and note in which disciplines class size is a significant predictor of satisfaction. Disciplines can then tailor their class types and styles to their student's preferences in an aim of producing optimum outputs (i.e. high satisfaction ratings, attainment and engagement).

Next, it was identified across the focus groups that timetabling was important to students when considering their overall satisfaction with university. Previous research has found that students expect a high level of organisation from the institution (Burgess, Senior & Moore, 2018; Kay, Dunne & Hutchinson, 2010) and in the current study, students appeared to place high importance on timetabling and how contact hours were organised throughout the week. The influencing factors within this sub-theme overlap with other sub-themes identified in the current study. For example, students discussed timetabling in relation to their paid jobs. They expressed that they would like their contact hours at university to be condensed together into fewer days rather than spread across five days to allow them more full days to work at their paid jobs. The students also related this preference to earning money for their families which relates to the personal life sub-theme. This suggests that timetabling is a factor which is more influential on the satisfaction of students who have jobs and dependents, which supports the idea that students are individuals who are influenced by different factors in relation to their overall satisfaction with university. It was noted however, that it appeared evident in the focus groups that students may not have a strong understanding of course organisation and difficulties associated with arranging such a large number of students across a university and that not everyone's preferences can be facilitated.

Teaching

The findings of the current study suggested that teaching was a significant factor associated with student overall satisfaction. This concurs with the existing literature which has consistently identified teaching quality as a significant predictor of student satisfaction literature (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Banwett & Datta, 2003; Burgess, Senior & Moore, 2018; Masserini, Bini & Pratesi, 2019; Sabihaini & Satoto, 2016) and often as the strongest predictor (Bell & Brookes, 2016; Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). In the focus groups of the current study, students reported that they prefer teaching staff to be personable, passionate about their work and experts in their field. From the data, it appeared that when teaching staff were perceived by the students to be passionate about, and an expert in, the topic they are teaching, students are more likely to enjoy learning about the topic. This is supported by previous research which found that student satisfaction increases when students perceive teaching staff to be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, approachable and friendly (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; Voss, Gruber & Szmigin, 2007).

The current study also found that students place a high importance on supportive staff members. The students reported that they like to build strong relationships with staff members in order to feel comfortable approaching them with any issues they have. This concurs with previous research which has also found that staff-student relationship quality is related to student satisfaction levels (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Propp & Rhodes, 2006). These findings also support the findings of Study-2, which found that students who liaise more frequently with staff report higher levels of overall satisfaction. In the current study, the students

reported that they like to be supported by staff with pastoral issues as well as academic and career issues, which concurs with the existing literature (Cahill et al., 2014). Previous research suggests that feeling satisfied with their levels of staff support influences students' satisfaction with the university environment, encourages learning, reduces attrition rates and increase attainment (Hawthorn & Young, 2010; Ning & Downing, 2012). All of these benefits are associated with students feeling satisfied overall with their university experience, which suggests that staff support is a factor which has a high level of impact on this. Douglas, Douglas and Barnes (2006) reported that students in their focus groups considered the quality of teaching to be much more important than the physical aspects of the institution and that students sometimes choose modules based on the staff that teach on the module. This supports the idea that interpersonal relationships and other individual student factors have the strongest impact on student overall satisfaction as opposed to the physical aspects of an institution.

Links Between Themes

Some links between themes have been touched on throughout the discussion section, although this section will cover the links between themes in more detail. First, the students frequently related their views on *timetabling* and how it impacts their satisfaction to *finances*. It appeared to be students who had paid jobs that felt that their satisfaction is influenced by the timetabling of contact hours. This was mainly because they often found it difficult to arrange their paid working hours around contact hours. They also stated a strong preference for contact hours to be condensed into fewer days to allow them to work more to earn more money. This was also related to the *Personal Life* sub-theme as when students talked about wanting to increase their

140

opportunity to earn money, they often mentioned that this was to provide for their family. This suggests that timetabling is most likely to be a factor which impacts the satisfaction of mature students and those who commute.

The sub-theme *finances* also appeared to be related to *residency*. The focus group data showed that students who commuted to campus often related their overall satisfaction to the costs associated with attending university. This may be because those students are more likely to see the costs daily, for example when paying for train tickets, petrol or parking fees. Students who live on campus on the other hand, are likely to see their outgoings related to attending university such as rent payments less regularly.

A student's *residency* may also impact their *social support*. Living on campus could mean it easier to make friends because students live together and attend campus social events together outside of the classroom, as argued by Astin (1985). A student's *residency,* therefore, may also relate to their *mental health and wellbeing*. Living on campus means it is easier to engage in campus activities such as social events and sports teams, which can give students a sense of belonging, increasing their wellbeing. This may be because students living on campus feel more socially integrated, a greater sense of belonging and social identity, for example, as a university student or as a team member of a university sports team. Social integration at university and a strong sense of social identity have been related to higher levels of student satisfaction (Wilkins, et al., 2015) as well as well-being (Lyer et al., 2009), which is also associated with satisfaction (Mantzios et al., 2019).

The findings that suggest students prefer a smaller *class size* may be related to *social support*. As it has been noted that smaller classes tend to more interactive in style, involving student discussions, they are more likely to allow for peer relationships to form. When the students have friends in their classes, as they reported in the focus groups, they can then help one other with their academic work and support one another emotionally too. *Class size* may also be related to *teaching support* for similar reasons. Students may perceive staff to be more supportive in smaller classes as the staff member is more likely to have time to liaise with each student than in a large lecture in a lecture theatre, for example. It has been noted in previous literature that the reason why students prefer smaller class sizes is because they receive more individual attention from the teacher (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). Therefore, as the students in the focus group stated, the students are able to ask for clarification, ask questions and build a rapport with the teacher. By building a stronger relationship with staff members, students are then more likely to feel that they can approach staff outside of the classroom for support with pastoral issues too.

In terms of institutional factors, there appears to be links between *course content* and *teaching quality*. Previous literature has found that both the content and how it is taught is important to students and good quality teaching of course content has been associated with increases student satisfaction (Bell & Brookes, 2016; Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). In the focus groups in the current study, students stated that even when the topic is not of much interest to them, if the teacher has a good quality teaching style, then this can help to make the content more interesting or easier to understand. This suggests that it is important for institutions to ensure their staff are knowledgeable on their teaching topic as well as able to deliver it in a way that students can learn from them and enjoy the learning experience.

Limitations

Using volunteer sampling means that the students who took part in the research are likely to be

similar types of people, giving less variance in the sample. For example, they may be confident

to be able to have a discussion in a group setting, and students who are less confident are less

likely to volunteer for this type of research methodology. Although, when in the group setting,

they may not feel comfortable sharing their views with other present and therefore not express

their honest opinion, a common disadvantage of focus groups (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Also, a

group setting means that sensitive topics such as ethnicity being a predictor of student

satisfaction cannot be explored as they were in Study-1 and Study-2. Students may not feel

comfortable discussing this in a group setting and so this would possibly have to be examined

further in individual interviews. In addition, the students who volunteered to attend a focus group

to discuss their satisfaction with university are also likely to have strong opinions. They are

likely to be strongly satisfied or strongly dissatisfied. Additionally, individuals who volunteer to

attend a discussion are likely to have some negative views that they are looking to share or are

looking for somewhere to complain and to have their voice heard. As noted, due to COVID-19

restrictions preventing further participant recruitment, the students were from a limited range of

disciplines. It is suggested that future research aims to increase the range of disciplines.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

It is hoped that the findings of the current study add clarity to the types of factors that students

associate with their satisfaction with university and why particular factors are important for this.

The findings can help to guide institutions with areas that require focus and further work.

The findings may also influence the topics covered on student satisfaction surveys as the current study identified topics which students offer themselves with little prompting. The students were asked open-ended questions and allowed to offer their thoughts and opinions on topics that they may not be given the chance to in a structured interview or self-report survey. Institutions may encourage staff in different disciplines to hold focus groups with their students to gain an understanding of what their student's preferences are in a bid to increase course satisfaction.

The types of institutional changes suggested by the current study's findings are as follows. Universities should ensure a high quality of support for student's mental health and wellbeing is in place. The institution may want to ensure that smaller, more interactive styles of lessons are incorporated into their courses to allow students to form relationships with staff and their peers. This could benefit both the students and the staff as the interaction in smaller classes between the staff and students may result in greater job satisfaction for the teachers as well as improving student learning and wellbeing. In addition, ensuring that students are aware of financial support that is available to them such as student rail cards, reduced childcare costs and council tax, may help to reduce their worries surrounding finances and costs associated with attending university. Similarly, it is important to manage expectations before students start their course, for example on open days and information sources, to ensure that students are aware of exactly what will be covered in the course. It may also be useful to increase students' understanding of institutional organisation to manage their expectations surrounding timetabling, for example.

It is suggested that future research should utilise focus groups more to gain the benefits associated with a group of students sharing their experiences among peers. Future research should recruit students from a large variety of disciplines to explore if there are general disciplinary views from students.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of the current study suggest that it is not enough for an institution to have a strong academic component (e.g., good course content and teaching quality), but that they must consider individual students' needs and situations (e.g., commuters, parents, wellbeing). This supports the findings of Study-2, which the current study aimed to expand on. The general consensus from the focus group findings was that students like to feel supported as an individual. If institutions implement the suggested interventions and conduct focus groups across disciplines within their institution, this will help to target individual student requirements. And, although students are individuals, by simply having the knowledge of the type of students on a course, for example, that most of the students are mature students who commute, then this may help to understand the type of factors that may impact their overall satisfaction with university and what types of interventions would be helpful.

CHAPTER 6

General Discussion

Thesis Overview

The current thesis comprised of three studies which aimed to extend our knowledge of the main predictors of student satisfaction in UK HE. The research was designed to examine both individual and institution-focused factors and incorporated qualitative and quantitative data. The research of the thesis begins wide, at the institutional level in Study-1, analysing National Student Survey (NSS) data. Then, Study-2 narrows in focus, analysing data from the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) to examine predictive factors at the individual level. Study-3 then aimed to gain a deeper understanding by adopting a qualitative approach and giving students a voice and opportunity to offer factors that they perceive to be predictive of their satisfaction with university overall without the limitations associated with self-report questionnaires. Each of the research studies aimed to build on the previous study and make an original contribution to the literature.

Student satisfaction is of high interest for HEI's and is a topic that has been frequently researched. High student satisfaction levels have been associated with current student retention and university rankings, increasing appeal to prospective students (Bell & Brooks, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2015; Letcher & Neves, 2010). However, much of the research to date is conducted outside of the UK, at single institutions, within single disciplines and at one level, usually the institutional level (Bell & Brooks, 2019). Previous research is also heavily

quantitative in method, often using self-report measures usually to obtain large amounts of data for analysis and implication. The current thesis aimed to address these limitations of previous research throughout the three studies by focussing on UK institutions, analysing the data from multiple institutions across the UK within multiple disciplines and adopting a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The current research also aimed to extend on the current level of understanding of the previous literature, which will be discussed throughout this chapter. This chapter will recap the aims and objectives of the research. It will discuss the main findings of all three research studies and implications these may have as well as evaluate the limitations and suggest improvements for future research.

Key Findings of the Thesis

Study-1

Study-1 aimed to identify the areas of the NSS which are most significant in predicting students' overall satisfaction ratings and to explore the direction of these relationships between one another and overall satisfaction. The study extended the research of Bell and Brooks (2018) which also looked at the sub-sections of the NSS which are most related to overall satisfaction. First, by analysing the more recent 2017 NSS results, which included the addition of new questions. And secondly, by extending the level of analysis from a multiple regression providing relationship strength between the sub-sections of the NSS and overall satisfaction to a path analysis which provided more understanding of the direction of those relationships between one another as well as their relationship with overall satisfaction levels.

The key findings of Study-1 suggested that, in line with previous research (Bell & Brooks, 2018; Burgess, Senior & Moore 2018; Langan & Harris, 2019), *teaching* has the strongest relationship with *overall satisfaction*, followed by the *organisation and management* of the institution. The Path Analysis found that *teaching* and *organisation and management* were directly related to *overall satisfaction*. It also showed an indirect relationship between *organisation and management* and *overall satisfaction* via *teaching*. This suggests that although the factor with the strongest relationship with overall satisfaction was teaching, organisation and management is more central to the model because it is directly and indirectly related. In addition, despite the relationships between learning resources and overall satisfaction being noted as significant in the multiple regression, the path analysis revealed that, although part of the model, this was an exogenous variable which did not relate to overall satisfaction directly or indirectly. These findings concur with those of previous research which has looked at NSS data over time. For the first ten years NSS data was collected, teaching and organisation and management were consistently the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction (Burgess, Senior & Moore, 2018) as well as more recently (Bell & Brookes, 2018).

However, Study-1 then extended on the current knowledge of the NSS sub-sections which influence overall satisfaction levels with the results of the Path Analysis. The Path Analysis results allowed the relationships between sub-sections of the NSS to be understood more as well as how they relate to overall satisfaction. Again, the results supported that of previous research as teaching and organisation and management were central to the model. The model suggested that the organisation and management of a course has a direct impact on teaching quality of a course. It appears that the organisation and management is central to overall satisfaction because

148

it is directly and indirectly related to overall satisfaction via teaching. This level of information allows for better understanding of what can be done and implemented to increase overall satisfaction as opposed to simply knowing which areas influence overall satisfaction.

Organisation has been consistently noted to be a key element of quality teaching (Hativa, Barak & Simhi, 2001). Stronger organisation and management of a course may allow for higher quality teaching, for example, if a teacher is provided with an appropriate teaching space with the correct equipment and materials then this will allow them to focus on teaching as opposed to the organisation of the class and perform at a higher standard. Path Analysis results from Study-1 argued this to be the case as organisation and management had a direct impact on overall satisfaction as well as an indirect impact via teaching. It was thought that by having strong levels of organisation and management on a course, this allows for more time to focus on teaching quality. For example, if appropriate spaces are booked for specific types of classes such as computer rooms with the correct software downloaded for statistics workshops. The smooth running of a course allows more time for teaching and teacher-student rapport building.

The main limitation of Study-1 was the use of course-level data. Although this does have benefits as it provides us with a general overview of factors which are related to student satisfaction in a large sample, it does not provide individual student information such as age, gender and ethnicity, excluding possible predictive factors of overall satisfaction. Demographic factors such as these have been found in previous research to influence student satisfaction (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Astin, 1984; Brokaw, Kennedy &

Merz, 2004; Fredericksen, Shea & Pickett, 2000; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Mavondo, Tsarento & Gabbot, 2014; Yu, Isensee & Kappler, 2016). The dataset used in Study-2 included both individual and course level data in a bid to overcome this limitation.

Study-2

Study-2 aimed to examine the strongest predictors of student satisfaction at both the individual and institutional level, expanding on Study-1 which focused on institutional factors. Multilevel modelling was conducted, analysing multiple individual and institutional factors simultaneously. This advanced modelling technique is rarely used in the literature when researching overall student satisfaction. One study which used Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) as Study-2 did was conducted in one South Korean institution with liberal arts students (Baek & Shin, 2008). Study-2 aimed to add to the UK literature by conducting HLM within a sample of students from various institutions across the UK from a variety of disciplines.

The findings of Study-2 indicated that five factors at the individual level (*ethnicity, nationality, residency, life satisfaction* and *student-staff liaising*) and one at the institutional level (*tutorialstyle classes*) significantly predicted student satisfaction. The findings suggested that student satisfaction can mostly be explained by factors at the individual level. These results did not concur with that of Baek and Shin (2008) who found that most of the variance in overall student satisfaction could be explained at course-level. However, these results are not comparable as the research was conducted at one institution in South Korea with only liberal arts students. Study-2 found that students' life satisfaction rating, ethnicity, nationality, residency and frequency of staff-student liaising significantly predicted their overall satisfaction rating. The

150

results suggested that white students, international students, those with higher life satisfaction ratings, students who live in halls of residency and frequently liaise with staff are more likely to be satisfied overall than their peers.

Life satisfaction was the strongest predictor of student satisfaction; the higher students rated their life satisfaction, the higher they rated their overall satisfaction with university. This suggests that the students' overall wellbeing predicts their overall satisfaction ratings on such surveys. Specifically, for each point increase on the 1-10 scale of life satisfaction, overall satisfaction with university increased by .11 on the scale of 1-3. Student wellbeing has previously been associated with student satisfaction (Mantzios et al., 2019) and should be of high interest for institutions not least for the health and wellbeing of their students but also for their satisfaction ratings, which are known to be associated with an institution's reputation and league table rankings (Bell & Brooks, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2015).

Although the literature does not look specifically at life satisfaction ratings, it looks at student wellbeing in relation to overall satisfaction with university. Wellbeing is defined as, 'a state of mind in which an individual is able to realise his or her own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community' (WHO, 2014). The literature has noted several interventions found to increase student wellbeing. Firstly, mindfulness has been found to increase life satisfaction and wellbeing (Zhao, Wang & Kong, 2014). Research has found that mindfulness-based programmes increase student engagement and overall satisfaction (Aherne et al., 2016). Mindfulness has also been related to student attainment (Bellinger, DeCaro & Ralston, 2015), which has been argued to be

the strongest predictor of student satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010). Other factors found to

significantly predict overall satisfaction include counselling, involvement in social activities and

close working relationships with peers (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). It could be argued that these

types of interventions are likely to increase wellbeing which may be why they increase

satisfaction levels. This relates back to Astin's Theory of Involvement (1985) as the theory

argues that student satisfaction is related to a student's investment of psychosocial and physical

energy which can include forming close relationships with peers and being involved in

extracurricular activities. As these are factors found to increase student wellbeing, it may be that

there are indirect factors which must be focussed on to increase wellbeing which in turn could

increase overall satisfaction. Institutions may implement programmes such as counselling, buddy

programmes, social events, etc., in a bid to nurture student wellbeing and this may then lead to

an increase overall satisfaction.

In relation to these findings, Study-2 found that staff-student liaising and time spent in tutorial

style classes significantly predicted overall satisfaction. These findings suggest that building

good relationships with staff and small class sizes are important for students' overall satisfaction.

This concurs with findings from previous research. Having a good relationship with academic

staff has been noted as a predictor of student satisfaction in the literature (Astin, 1984; Campbell

& Nutt, 2008; Dicker et al., 2017; Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Propp & Rhodes, 2006) as well as

the availability of staff members (Alves & Raposo, 2009; Elliot 2003). The literature has also

found tutorial style classes are an optimal learning environment (National Survey of Student

Engagement, 2005; Shavelson & Huang, 2003). It has also been found that students prefer

smaller sized classes due to receiving more individual attention from the teacher (Hill et al.,

2003; Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). Study-3 also found this to be the case and students explained they preferred smaller sized classes because they felt more comfortable and able to ask questions and have group discussions which maximises their learning. It may be that smaller, tutorial style classes increase student satisfaction because they allow for greater staff-student liaising and optimal learning, which leads to increased attainment, a factor strongly associated with satisfaction (Aitken, 1982; Letcher & Neves, 2010).

Furthermore, higher student numbers are associated with lower student satisfaction levels at both institution and course level (Lenton, 2015; Williams, 2020), which again may be due to having less opportunity to interact with staff members. Courses with more teaching staff have been found to have higher levels of student satisfaction (Lenton, 2015; Williams, 2020) which is thought to be because staff have more time to spend with students and build a stronger rapport with them (Hill et al., 2003). It has also been found that students who liaise more frequently with staff members are more likely to recommend a course to their friends and family (Brown et al., 1998), a sign of satisfaction. Strong staff-student relationships have been found to lead to a feeling of 'student-centeredness,' (Elliot, 2003), which Elliot (2002) found to be the most significant factor in predicting student satisfaction. When students feel satisfied with the levels of staff support they receive, this impacts their overall satisfaction with the institution, reduces attrition and increases attainment (Hawthorn & Young, 2010; Ning & Downing, 2012). This could relate to student expectations which they bring with them from school and Further Education (FE) as they still feel able to build a rapport with staff and not feel that the experience is completely autonomous.

The idea of student-centeredness also appears to relate to Astin's Theory of Involvement (1985) as students feel a deeper connection and commitment to the institution when they have a good relationship with staff (Peterson, Wagner & Lamb, 2001). This may also help explain why students who liaise more frequently with staff members are more likely to recommend an institution to their family and friends (Brown et al., 1998). It could be argued that smaller class sizes allow for a stronger relationship between staff and students and therefore having smaller class sizes and tutorial-style classes which involve more discussion and interaction with teaching staff have been found to increase student satisfaction levels.

The findings of Study-2 supported those of the previous literature in the sense that personal factors such as life satisfaction and relationships with staff members predict student satisfaction. Although previous research has not analysed personal and institutional factors simultaneously to compare the strength of them as predictors of overall satisfaction. Overall, the findings from Study-2 suggest that student satisfaction is predicted mainly by student personal factors, their general life satisfaction in particular, although there are things that the institution can do to support students and increase their general life satisfaction such as increase access to counselling, have staff available to support students with non-academic issues and so on. The possible implications of the findings will be discussed later in this chapter. The findings suggest that an institution could have the best course, buildings, halls of residence and so on, but if student wellbeing is not cared for, student satisfaction levels will reflect this. The main limitation of Study-2 was the lack of possibility for students to expand on their views on the survey and explain further why or how particular factors predict their overall satisfaction levels with university. In a bid to understand these findings further, Study-3 was qualitative in nature and

aimed to gain a deeper insight into why and how these significant predictors affect student satisfaction.

Study-3

Study-3 aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors which predict student satisfaction and expand on the findings of the previous two studies by gaining an understanding of why the factors influence satisfaction. The study also aimed to address the limitations of the previous two associated with the self-report methodology. By asking open-ended questions in a focus group, students were given the opportunity to offer their views and opinions on anything that they perceived to be important to their satisfaction with their university experience. Students were not asked about specific factors as they are in self-report surveys used by the first two studies. The focus groups also gave students a chance to discuss amongst themselves and share ideas and thoughts and build on these from their peers.

The main findings of the thematic analysis (TA) in Study-3 suggested that student satisfaction is influenced by the following factors: socioeconomic status, psycho-social wellbeing, personal life, course and teaching. This supports the findings of Study-2, that satisfaction is predicted by both individual and institutional factors, but mostly at the individual level.

The findings suggested that students prefer smaller sized classes which concurred with the institutional finding from Study-2, that time spent in tutorial style classes significantly predicted overall satisfaction. In the focus groups, students explained that they preferred smaller class sizes because this allowed them to interact more in discussions with staff and peers as they felt more

confident and comfortable to do so than in larger classes. This also concurs with previous

research which also found that students prefer smaller classes because they receive more

individual attention from the teacher (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006). By receiving more

individual attention they are likely to form a better rapport with staff and therefore feel more

comfortable offering their thoughts, asking questions and getting involved in group discussions.

This also supports the findings from Study-2 that staff-student liaising also predicts overall

satisfaction as well as the previous literature (Brown et al., 1998; Hawthorn & Young, 2010; Hill

et al., 2003; Ning & Downing, 2012).

Students in the focus groups also placed a large importance on course organisation in relation to

their satisfaction levels, in particular, timetabling. The students preferred their contact hours to

be condensed into fewer, longer days. This was particularly important to those who commute

and with family responsibilities at home and, or with paid jobs. This concurs with the research

which has looked at the NSS data. The organisation and management of a course is consistently

associated with overall satisfaction in the literature (Bell & Brooks, 2018; Burgess, Senior &

Moore,2018) and was also supported by the findings of Study-1. The focus group findings

support these findings and expand on them, suggesting that it is specifically timetabling that is

the most important aspect of the organisation and management of a course to students in relation

to their overall satisfaction.

The findings of Study-3 also concurred with those of Study-1 that teaching is associated with

overall satisfaction, as well as expanding on these by gaining further explanation of which

aspects of teaching are important and why or how they influence student satisfaction. The

thematic analysis found that teaching quality was important for student satisfaction and that students perceived staff who appeared to be an expert in, and passionate about their topic, to be of higher quality. They reported enjoying classes taught by these types of teachers most. This concurs with previous research which has found that students choose modules based on teaching staff (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006) and student satisfaction increases when students perceive teaching staff to be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, approachable and friendly (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; Voss, Gruber & Szmigin, 2007).

Another aspect of teaching that Study-3 found to be important for student satisfaction was staff support. Students reported that they like to build strong relationships with staff and like to feel supported with academic and pastoral issues. This concurs with the findings in Study-2 that student-staff liaising significantly predicted overall satisfaction. Strong staff-student relationships have been associated with student satisfaction throughout previous literature (Astin, 1984; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Dicker et al., 2017; Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Propp & Rhodes, 2006). Previous research suggests that feeling satisfied with the levels of staff support received not only influences students' satisfaction levels, but encourages learning, reduces attrition rates and increase attainment (Hawthorn & Young, 2010; Ning & Downing, 2012). All of these benefits are associated with students feeling satisfied overall with their university experience, which suggests that staff support is a factor which has a high level of impact on this.

When asked open-ended questions about their satisfaction with university, students focus mainly on individual factors rather than those controlled by the institution or course related factors. The students did not discuss ethnicity or nationality as factors which influence their satisfaction

157

levels, two factors which in Study-2 significantly predicted overall satisfaction. It was thought that these factors may not have been discussed in the focus group setting due to their sensitive nature. In future research, it may be beneficial to conduct individual interviews for such sensitive topics as opposed to focus groups to understand more about how students' ethnicity and nationality relates to their overall satisfaction levels.

Individual factors that were discussed included where the students resided. The students in the focus groups stated that living on campus makes it easier to make friends, attend class, build relationships with staff. These findings support those of Astin's theory of Involvement (1985) as students who live on campus are more likely to spend more time on campus and feel more integrated in university life. This also concurs with previous research which found that social integration and identity leads to increased student satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2015). It may be that students living on campus feel a stronger identity as a university student than those who commute. Social integration and identity have also been noted to increase levels of wellbeing (Mantzios et al., 2019), which has also been related to student satisfaction levels, as supported by Study-2 findings.

Furthermore, the focus group results suggested peer support was also important to students for their overall satisfaction levels, concurring with previous literature (Survey Unit, 2008). The students reported that having friends on their course increased their happiness, emotional wellbeing and academic performance, all of which have been noted throughout to be associated with overall student satisfaction (Letcher & Neves, 2010; Mantzios et al., 2019). The focus group discussions identified that friendships have these benefits because having friends on the

course means that the students are more likely to attend classes, they help one another with assignments and provide one another with emotional support. This may also contribute to explaining why students who live on campus report higher levels of satisfaction, as the students report that it is easier to make friends when living on campus and attending extra-curricular activities.

Study-3 also found that students associated their mental health and wellbeing with their overall satisfaction with university. This finding supports the main finding of Study-2, that student life satisfaction is the strongest predictor of overall student satisfaction and concurs with those of previous research (Letcher & Neves, 2010; Mantzios et al., 2019). Study-3 expanded on our knowledge as the students explained how their wellbeing affects their overall satisfaction with university. For example, the students stated that poor mental health can negatively affect their attendance. They explained how this can then impact on their ability to concentrate and understand the information being taught when they do attend classes. Low attendance and concentration levels may negatively impact on students' academic performance, which is a factor consistently associated with student satisfaction in previous research (Aitken, 1982; Letcher & Neves, 2010). It is thought that this could result in a cycle of students having poor mental health, struggling with their academic work, seeing a reduction in their grades, resulting in lower satisfaction levels.

The factors associated with overall satisfaction throughout Study-3 appear to be initially influencing a students' wellbeing, for example, feeling supported by staff and peers. It may be

that, in support of the findings of Study-2, it is factors which have a direct positive impact on student wellbeing that indirectly predict overall satisfaction with university.

The consensus from the focus group findings was that students like to feel supported as an individual. The findings of Sudy-3 support those of Study-2 in that institutions must consider students individual needs and circumstances. It is not enough to have a good course, teaching and campus. Institutions must look after their students.

Original Contribution to the Literature

The way in which each part of the research within this thesis has contributed to the literature has been discussed throughout this chapter. This section will therefore summarise these contributions. First, Study-1 extended that of Bell and Brooks (2018) research by not only conducting multiple regression to identify the relationships between the sub-sections of the NSS and overall satisfaction rating, but a path analysis also extended this knowledge, providing insight into the direction of these relationships and whether these were direct or indirect. Also, the 2017 NSS had new questions added since the 2014 survey results used in Bell and Brooks (2018) research. Study-2 contributed to the literature by employing a multi-level analysis methodology to the dataset. This methodology is only known by the researcher to have been used before at a single institution within a single discipline (Baek & Shin, 2008). Study-2 was able to conduct this on a larger scale, at the individual level to extend our knowledge of the factors at which level are the strongest predictors of satisfaction for students at multiple HEI's studying a variety of subjects. In particular, student life satisfaction is a factor that has not been

previously noted as a predictor of student overall satisfaction. Future research would benefit from investigating further into which aspects of a students' general life satisfaction predicts their satisfaction with university. Study-3 added to the student voice. Much of the student satisfaction literature is dominated by quantitative research which provides data for league tables and strategies, but it is believed that it is important to include a qualitative aspect to gain a better understanding of why these factors which have been identified as predictors of student satisfaction predict satisfaction. For example, that students who live on campus are more likely to be satisfied because of, or in relation to, a variety of other factors such as travel time, social opportunities and friendships.

Findings of Study-2 supported that of previous literature in the sense that personal factors such as life satisfaction and nationality predicted student satisfaction. Although previous research has not analysed personal and institutional factors simultaneously to compare the strength of them as predictors of overall satisfaction. The main conclusion is that institutions must look after their students, as they could have the best course, buildings, halls of residence, etc., but if student wellbeing is not cared for, satisfaction levels will reflect this.

Implications and Recommendations

 The research findings of the thesis suggest that institutions should maintain focus on the teaching quality, and organisation and management of the institution as well as focusing on individual student factors such as their wellbeing and categories that they are part of such as commuters and mature students. The findings from Study-2 and Study-3 suggest that institutions should aim to make university a personal experience for students, with a focus

being on building strong relationships between staff and students in an aim to not only increase student wellbeing but student satisfaction, loyalty and recommendations to family and friends. The findings suggest that it is important for institutions to hire staff members who are passionate about their subjects and are personable and able to build strong relationships with their students.

The research findings could influence HE institutions in terms of what areas they invest their resources in when attempting to increase their students' satisfaction rating. For example, the strongest predictor of student satisfaction being a students' life satisfaction suggests an importance of student wellbeing for satisfaction with university experience. This may influence institutions to invest resources into increasing students' wellbeing by offering wellbeing classes or meditation areas, for example. Research in this area is increasing and a recent international study found that in the last year, 31% of students screened positive for at least one common mental health disorder (Aurebach et al., 2018). This supports the importance of institutions focusing on students' general happiness and wellbeing in addition to their academic needs. Institutions may promote accessing counselling and mindfulness-based programmes for students, which have both been found to increase student attainment, engagement and satisfaction levels (Aherne et al., 2016; Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Bellinger et al., 2015).

Institutions may also benefit from tailoring their services offered to different types of students such as those who live off campus and commute or are mature students with family responsibilities as Study-3 demonstrated that often different types of students have different

needs and preferences. An example of this may be offering online drop-in sessions outside of regular hours for students to access staff support with academic and pastoral issues. This would allow students who may have been unable to attend campus at any time due to caring responsibilities, for example, to catch up and still receive support or be able to ask questions as they would in class. Although, as this could have an impact on staff workload, a student forum may be of benefit for students to utilise in between staff support sessions. The forum would be an online space for students to discuss topics with their peers outside of class. As well as hopefully lightening the load during staff support sessions, it would give those students who are less confident to speak in class or form friendships in person an opportunity to build friendships on their course. This could positively impact student wellbeing, giving them a sense of community, regardless of whether they live on campus or struggle to attend events on campus.

As the research within the thesis suggested, students prefer smaller sized classes. Although it is noted that with large cohorts staffing and budgeting may not allow for small classes all of the time, where possible, it would be beneficial to combine larger lecture classes with smaller, more interactive classes within the teaching schedule. One suggestion to try to give students the sense of a smaller class and still experience the benefits of a smaller class (i.e., group discussions) when not possible may be to present the lecture to the large group and then split the students into smaller groups for discussions before rejoining as a large group again. Thoughts and ideas from the groups can then be shared by the lecturer to the larger group. This way, all students get involved but do not have to speak to the large class and the ideas of more students are shared. On campus, this may not always be possible due to space and room

bookings, although technological advances mean that this can be achieved when classes are delivered online. This also encourages students to engage with other students in the online 'break out rooms' that they may not meet when in class on campus, giving them the opportunity to widen their social circle. This may help students feel more immersed in the university experience.

It is recognised that these recommendations could negatively impact on teaching workload, as finances mean that staff resources are limited. If class numbers are doubled, for example, to make them smaller in size, staff numbers cannot be doubled also. Therefore, it is important to be innovative when considering how to improve the student experience, possibly making the most of technological advances which allow for more of a classroom feel now online with smaller group discussions throughout and student forums, for example. It is important to aim to achieve a balance in trying to improve student satisfaction whilst considering staff job satisfaction.

Evaluation of Research

The limitations associated with each of the research studies have been discussed throughout this chapter, therefore this section will summarise these and evaluate the strength of the research overall. With each research study, attempts were made to address the limitations of the previous study if possible. For example, individual-level data was included in Study-2 as Study-1 was only able to focus on institutional factors. Then, student voice and the opportunity to expand and

explain further was available in Study-3 after using self-report methodology in the first two studies. The thesis therefore aimed to provide a strong overall understanding the predictors of student satisfaction, although as with all research there were still some overall limitations that could be improved in future research.

First, the NSS provides average scores at institutional level, therefore it does not allow for the analysis of individual level data such as gender, residency and nationality. However, it was thought to be appropriate to use the NSS data to gain a wider overview of the predictors of student satisfaction before conducting analysis at the individual level.

Using questionnaire data in general has limitations as the students are then limited to the topics they can discuss which means topics of importance to them may be missed. However, it was thought that using self-report data, as it allows for a large amount of data to be collected, was useful to gain an idea of the types of predictors of student satisfaction and which areas may be important to expand on in the qualitative aspect of the research.

Similarly, although the SAES data used in Study-2 is large and covers students of varying courses and institutions, there are limitations to using this dataset. The students recruited for the SAES were from the Youthsite student panel who have signed up to be part of the panel and are paid for their time and opinions. This may produce a biased population of engaged, motivated students who may feel the pressures of social desirability to answer in a particular way. This also could mean that students who are less motivated, engaged and may be less satisfied with their HE experience may be missed from the data. This may have also been the case with using

students who opted to participate in the focus groups in Study-3, they may be likely to have strong opinions of either being extremely satisfied or dissatisfied with university that they use the focus groups as an opportunity to share.

The small sized focus groups in Study-3 may have meant that limited viewpoints were obtained and that participants agreed with one another due to social desirability. Although, the small focus groups were justified for the type of topic being researched and thought that students may have felt more comfortable to share their views in a smaller setting. Focus groups in general as opposed to individual interviews meant that students were able to add to and expand upon the views of their peers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from the current research have led to the development of further questions. Further research is suggested to examine these. First, ethnicity has been noted across the literature to be an influencing factor in student satisfaction (Keohane & Petrie, 2017). The current research (Study-2) supported previous research and found ethnicity to be a significant predictor of student satisfaction; white students were more likely to be satisfied overall with their HE experience than their BAME peers. As previously discussed, the current research grouped ethnicity into two groups: white and non-white students due to small samples of BAME students. Thus, future research which includes larger samples of each ethnic group, allowing for each ethnic group to be measured as an individual group would be of importance. In addition, as mentioned, it may be more effective to research the topic of ethnicity via individual interviews due to the sensitivity of

the topic for students. The students may be more open about the reasons why and how their ethnicity predicts their overall satisfaction with university when alone with the researcher rather than in the presence of peers.

Furthermore, future research should incorporate students from a wider range of disciplines in focus group research in order to gain a wider perspective of the specific views of courses across the institution. This would provide more disciplines within the institution with course specific areas of focus to increase student satisfaction. Finally, in general, it would be useful for more research to analyse both the individual and institutional factors as the existing research often overlooks individual factors, which the current research has shown to be too influential to be omitted.

Conclusions

The current thesis aimed to provide insight into the predictors of student satisfaction in UK Higher Education. The thesis used a variety of methodologies and data sets to gain a strong overall understanding of the predictors of student satisfaction. The thesis extended previous work in the field with students providing rich and detailed information on how different factors impacted their university experience. The research conducted has provide HEI's with crucial information to base their strategies and interventions on when focusing on student satisfaction levels.

The main aims of the thesis were to:

1. Identify the sub-areas of the NSS which relate to students' overall satisfaction ratings with university

2. Examine which individual and institutional level factors are the strongest predictors of overall student satisfaction

3. Explore students' perceptions of the most important factors in influencing their overall satisfaction with university.

These aims have been met by the research reported in the thesis. First, Study-1 examined the NSS using multiple regression and path analysis and found that teaching, and organisation and management of a course were the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction. In particular, organisation and management is at the core of institutional predictors of overall satisfaction as it influences overall satisfaction both directly and indirectly via teaching also. Next, Study-2 examined potential individual and institutional predictors of overall student satisfaction in the SAES using multilevel modelling. It was found that individual student factors were the most important predictors of overall satisfaction with university, as opposed to institutional factors. Higher levels of satisfaction were reported by students who were white, international students, rated their life satisfaction highly, liaised with staff members more frequently and spent more time in tutorial-style classes. In particular, a student's general life satisfaction rating was the most important factor predicting overall satisfaction. Finally, Study-3 utilised focus groups to gain a students' perspective of what factors are most important to them for their overall satisfaction with university. The qualitative findings supported those of the first two research

studies as themes identified included socioeconomic status, psychosocial wellbeing, personal life, course, and teaching. Students appeared to place great importance on receiving a personalised experience at university that took into consideration their own personal situation and needs.

Overall, a combination of all three research studies suggests that student individuality is at the core of all predictors of student satisfaction. For example, even the institutional predictor in Study-2 '*time spent in tutorial-style class*' appeared to relate back to the students' comfort of having a smaller sized group to hold discussions with their peers and ability to build stronger relationships with teaching staff when explored further in the focus groups. It appears that students' overall happiness and wellbeing lies at the core of their overall satisfaction with university. It is therefore important for HEI's to account for their students' wellbeing and individual needs as well as academic aspects of university to maximise student satisfaction.

References

Aherne, D., Farrant, K., Hickey, L.., McGrath, L., & McGrath, D. (2016). Mindfulness based stress reduction for medical students: Optimising student satisfaction and engagement. *BMC Medical Education, 16*, 209.

Aitken, N., D. (2016). College student performance, satisfaction and retention. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *53*(1), 32-50.

Akareem, H. S., & Hossain, S. S. (2016). Determinants of education quality: what makes students' perception different? *Open Review of Educational Research*, *3*(1), 52-67.

Allen, W. (1992). The color of success: African-American college student outcomes at predominantly white and historically black public colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*(1), 26–45.

Alves, H., & Raposo, M. (2007). Conceptual model of student satisfaction in higher education. *Total Quality Management*, *18*(5), 571-588.

Alves, H., & Raposo, M. (2009). The measurement of the construct satisfaction in higher education. *The Service Industries Journal*, *29*(1), 203–218.

Anderson, S., Pearo, L., & Widener, S. (2008). Drivers of service satisfaction. *Journal of Service Research*, *10*(1), 365.

Angell, R. J., Heffernan, T. W., & Megicks, P. (2008) Service quality in postgraduate education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *16*(3), 236-254.

Appleton-Knapp, S. L., & Krentler, K. A. (2006). Measuring student expectations and their effects on satisfaction: The importance of managing student expectations. *Journal of Marketing Education*, *28*(3), 254–264.

Arambewela, R., & Hall, J. (2009). An empirical model of international student satisfaction. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *21*(4), 555–569.

Asthana, A., & Biggs, L. (2007, February 11). Students pay more but receive less. *The Observer.*

Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 25*(4), 297-308.

Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cujipers, P., & Kessler, R. C. (2018). WHO world mental health surveys international college student project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *127*(7), 623–638.

Baek, S., & Shin, H. (2008). Multilevel analysis of the effects of student and course characteristics on student course evaluation: Focused on the undergraduate liberal education program. *Journal of Educational Evaluation, 21*(2), 1–24.

Banwet, D.K., & Datta, B. (2003). A study of the effect of perceived lecture quality on postlecture intentions. *Work Study*, *52*(5), 234-43.

Bates, E. A., & Kaye, L. K. (2014). 'I'd be expecting caviar in lectures': The impact of the new fee regime on undergraduate students' expectations of higher education. *Higher Education 67*(5), 655–673.

Beecham, R. (2009). Teaching quality and student satisfaction: Nexus or simulacrum?. *London Review of Education*, *7*(2), 135 -146.

Belch, H. A., Gebel, M., & Mass, M. M. (2001). Relationship between student recreation complex use, academic performance, and persistence of first-time freshmen. *NASPA Journal, 38*(2), 254-268.

Bell, A. R., & Brooks, C. (2018). What makes students satisfied? A discussion and analysis of the UK's national student survey. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 42*(8), 1118–1142.

Bell, A. R., & Brooks, C. (2019). Is there a 'magic link' between research activity, professional teaching qualifications and student satisfaction? *Higher Education Policy, 32*(2), 227-248.

Bellinger, D., DeCaro, M., & Ralston, P. (2015). Mindfulness, anxiety, and high-stakes mathematics performance in the laboratory and classroom. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 37, 123-132.

Bennett, R., & Kane, S. (2014). Students' interpretations of the meanings of questionnaire items in the National Student Survey. *Quality in Higher Education, 20*(2), 129–164.

Bowden, J. L. H. (2013) What's in a relationship? Affective commitment, bonding and the tertiary first year experience - A student and faculty perspective. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 25*(3), 428–451.

Bowman, L. L., & Waite, B. M. (2003). Volunteering in research: Student satisfaction and educational benefits. *Teaching of Psychology, 30*(2), 102-106.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Broecke, S. (2015). University rankings: do they matter in the UK? *Education Economics*, *23*(2), 137-161.

Brokaw, A. J., Kennedy, W. A., & Merz, T. E. (2004). Explaining student satisfaction. *Journal of the Academy of Business Education*, 62–72.

Brown, L. (2009). A failure of communication on the cross-cultural campus. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *13*(4), 439–54.

Browne, B. A., Kaldenberg, D. O., Brown, W. B., & Brown, D. (1998). Student as customer: Factors affecting satisfaction and assessments of institutional quality. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *8*(3), 1-14.

Bryant J. A., Bradley, J. L. (1993). Enhancing academic productivity, student development and employment potential. *Recreational Sports Journal*, *18*(1), 42-44.

Burgess, A., Senior, C., & Moores, E. (2018). A 10-year case study on the changing determinants of university student satisfaction in the UK. *PLoS One, 13*(2).

Chatterjee, A., Ghosh, C., & Bandyopadhyay, S. (2009). Assessing students' rating in higher education: A SERVQUAL approach. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, *20*(10), 1095-1109.

Cheng, J. H. S., & Marsh, H. W. (2010). National Student Survey: are differences between universities and courses reliable and meaningful? *Oxford Review of Education, 36*(6), 693–712.

Clayson, D. E., & Haley, D. A. (2005). Marketing models in education: Students as customers, products, or partners. *Marketing Education Review, 15*(1), 1–10.

Clinton, B., Schertzer, C. B., & Schertzer, S. M. B. (2004). Student satisfaction and retention: A conceptual model. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *14*(1), 79-91.

Coles, C. (2002). Variability of student ratings of accounting teaching: evidence from a Scottish business school. *International Journal of Management Education*, *2*(2), 30-9.

Dana, S., Brown, F., & Dodd, N. (2001). Student perceptions of teaching effectiveness: A preliminary study of the effects of professors. Transformational and contingent reward leadership behaviors. *The Journal of Education for Business*, *2*, 54-71.

Debnath, M. D., Kumar, S., Shankar, R., & Roy, R. K. (2005). Students' satisfaction in management education: Study and insights. *Decision*, *32*(2), 139–155.

DeBourgh, G. A. (2003). Predictors of students satisfaction in distance-delivered graduate nursing courses: what matter most? *Journal of Professional Nursing*, *19*, 149-163.

DeShields, O.W. Jr, Kara, A., & Kaynak, E. (2005). Determinants of business student satisfaction and retention in higher education: Applying Herzberg's two-factor theory. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, *19,* 128–139.

Dicker, R., Garcia, M., Pond, A., Pond, N., Modabber, P., O'Farrell, A., Kelly, A., & Mulrooney, H. (2017). Student perceptions of quality in higher education: effect of year of study, gender and ethnicity. *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences*, *12*, 1-14.

Donaldson, B., & McNicholas, C. (2004). Understanding the postgraduate education market for UK-based students: a review and empirical study. *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing, 9*(4), 346-360.

Douglas, A., Douglas, J., & Barnes, B. (2006). Measuring student satisfaction at a UK university. *Quality Assurance in Education, 14*(3), 251–267.

Draper, A. (2004). The principles and application of qualitative research. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, *63*(4), 641-646.

Eley, M. (2001). The course experience questionnaire: altering question format and phrasing could improve the CEQ's effectiveness. *Higher Education Research and Development, 20*(3), 293–312.

Elliott, C. F., & Soo, K. T. (2010). Does price matter? Overseas students in UK higher education. *Economics of Education Review*, *29*(4), 553-565.

Elliott, K. M. (2003). Key determinants of student satisfaction. *Journal of College Student Retention*, *4*(3), 271-279.

Fade, S. (2004). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis for public health nutrition and dietetic research: a practical guide. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society, 63*, 647–653.

Forrester, S. (2006). An Examination of the Factors Contributing to Student Satisfaction with their Overall Academic Experience. *A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education*, *21*(1), 21-33.

Fredericksen, E., Pickett, A., Shea, P., Pelz, W., & Swan, K. (2000). Factors influencing faculty satisfaction with asynchronous teaching and learning in the SUNY learning network. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 4*(3), 245–278.

Gibbons, S., Neumayer, E., & Perkins, R. (2015). Student satisfaction, league tables and university applications: Evidence from Britain. *Economics of Education Review*, *48*(1), 148-164.

Gruber, T., Fub, S., Voss, R. & Glaser-Zikuda, M. (2010). Examining student satisfaction with higher education services using a new measurement tool. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, *23*(2), 105-123.

Grudnitski, G., & Krentler, K. (2011). Moving beyond satisfaction: Perceived learning as an assessment measure. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC), 1*(10).

Hativa, N., Barak, R., & Simhi, E. (2001). Exemplary university teachers: Knowledge and beliefs regarding effective teaching dimensions and strategies. *Journal of Higher Education*, *72*(6), 699–729.

Havergal, C. (2016, June 9). Ethnic minority students less satisfied with university experience. *Times Higher.* Retrieved from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ethnic-minoritystudents-less-satisfied-university-experience

Hawthorne, M., & Young, A. (2010). First generation transfer students' perceptions: Implications for retention and success. *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention*, *17*(2).

Hazelkorn, E. (2007). The impact of league tables and ranking systems on higher education decision making. *Higher Education Management and Policy, 19*(2), 1–24.

Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: the battle for world-class excellence*. Springer.

Helgesen, O., & Nesset, E. (2007). What accounts for students' loyalty? Some field study evidence. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *21*, 126-143.

Hemwall, M.K., & Trachte, K.C. (2005). Academic advising as learning: 10 organizing principles. *NACADA Journal, 25*, 74-83.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K.P., Walsh, G., et al. (2004) Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *18*, 38-52.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Langer, M. F., & Hansen, U. (2001). Modeling and managing student loyalty: an approach based on the concept of relationship quality. *Journal of Service Research*, *3*(4), 331-44.

Hofmann, D., & Gavin, M. (1998). Centering decisions in hierarchical linear models: Implications for research in organizations. *Journal of Management*, *24*, 623-641.

Iaria, G., & Hubball, H. (2008). Assessing student engagement in small and large classes. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, *2*(1).

Iyer, A., Jetten, J., Tsivrikos, D., Postmes, T., & Haslam, S. A. (2009). The more (and the more compatible) the merrier: Multiple group membership and identity compatibility as predictors of adjustment after list transitions. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 48*, 707–733.

Joseph, M., Yakhou, M., & Stone, G. (2005). An educational institution's quest for service quality: Customers' perspective. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *13*(1), 66-82.

Keohane, N., & Petrie, K. (2017). *On course for success? Student retention at university*.

London: Social Market Foundation.

Khawaja, N., & Dempsey, J. (2008). A comparison of international and domestic tertiary

students in Australia. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, *18*(1), 30-46.

Khoo, S., Ha, H., & McGregor, S. L. T. (2017). Service quality and student/customer satisfaction

in the private tertiary education sector in Singapore. *International Journal of Educational

Management*, *31*(4), 430-444.

Kotler, P., & Fox, K. (1995). Strategic Management for Educational Institutions (2nd ed.).

Prentice Hall.

Krueger, R. & Casey, M., (2015). Focus Groups. Sage Publications

Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (2nd ed.). Sage.

Krueger, R. A. (2000). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (3rd ed.). Sage.

Kuh, G. D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement.

Journal of College Student Development, 50(6), 683-706.

Kuh, G, D., & Gonyea, R. M., & Palmer, M, M. (2001). The Disengaged Commuter Student: Fact or Fiction? *Commuter Perspectives,* 27.

Landrum, R. E., & Braitman, K. A. (2008). The effect of decreasing response options on students' evaluation of instruction. *College Teaching*, *56*(4), 215-218.

Langan, A. M., Dunleavy, P., & Fielding, A. (2013). Applying models to national surveys of undergraduate science students: what affects ratings of satisfaction? *Educational Sciences, 3*(2), 193–207.

Leckey, J., & Neill, N. (2001). Quantifying Quality: The importance of student feedback. *Quality in Higher Education*, *7*(1), 19-32.

Lent, R. W., Singley, D., Sheu, H., Schmidt, J. A., & Schmidt, L. C. (2007). Relation of social cognitive factors to academic satisfaction in engineering students. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *15*(1), 87-97.

Lenton, P. (2015) Determining student satisfaction: An economic analysis of the National Student Survey. *Economics of education review*, *47*(1), 118-127.

Lerer, N., & Talley, K. (2010). National survey of student engagement's (NSSE) benchmarks one size fits all? *On the Horizon*, *18*(4), 355–363.

Letcher, D. W., & Neves, J. S. (2010). Determinants of undergraduate business student satisfaction. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, *6*(1), 1-26.

Mai, L. (2005). A comparative study between UK and US: The student satisfaction in Higher Education and its influential factors. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *21*(7), 859-878.

Mansell, I., Bennett, G., Northway, R., Mead, D., & Moseley, L. (2004). The learning curve: the advantages and disadvantages in the use of focus groups as a method of data collection. *Nurse Research*, *11*(4), 79-88.

Mavondo, F. T., Tsarenko, Y., & Gabbott, M. (2004). International and local student satisfaction: Resources and capabilities perspective. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *14*(1), 41-60.

McMillan, J. J., & Cheney, G. (1996). The student as consumer: The implications and limitations of a metaphor. *Communication Education 45*(1), 1–15.

Mittal, M., Kumar, P., & Tsiros, M. (1999). Attribute-level performance, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions over time. *Journal of Marketing*, *66*(1), 38–54.

Molesworth, M., Nixon, E., & Scullion, R. (2009). Having, being and Higher Education: The marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. *Teaching in Higher Education, 14*(3), 277–287.

Money, J., Nixon, S., Tracy, F., Hennessy, C., Ball, E., & Dinning, T. (2017). Undergraduate student expectations of university in the United Kingdom: What really matters to them? *Cogent Education*, *4*(1), 1-11.

Morgan, D. L. (1997). Focus groups as qualitative research (2nd ed.). Sage.

Narasimhan, K. (2001). Improving the climate of teaching sessions: the use of evaluations by students and instructors. *Quality in Higher Education*, *7*(3), 179-190.

Nevill, A., & Rhodes, C. (2004). Academic and social integration in Higher Education: A survey of satisfaction and dissatisfaction within a first-year education studies cohort at a new university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education 28*(2), 179–193.

Ning, H., & Downing, K. (2012). Influence of student learning experience on academic performance: The mediator and moderator effects of self-regulation and motivation. *British Educational Research Journal*, *38*(1), 219-237.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.

O'Driscoll, F. (2012). What matters most: An exploratory multivariate study of satisfaction among first year hotel/ hospitality management students. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *20*(3), 237–258.

O'Neill, M. A., & Palmer, A. (2004). Importance-performance analysis: a useful tool for directing continuous quality improvement in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education, 12*(1), 39–52.

OfS (2018). Topic briefing: Black and minority ethnic (BAME) students. Retrieved from https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/145556db-8183-40b8-b7af-741bf2b55d79/topicbriefing_bme-students.pdf

Oldfield, M., O., & Baron, S. (2000). Student perceptions of service quality in a UK university Business and management faculty. *Quality Assurance in Education, 8*(1), 85-95.

Outcalt, C. L., & Skewes-Cox, T. E. (2002). Involvement, interaction, and satisfaction: The human environment at HBCUs. *The Review of Higher Education*, *25*(3), 331-347.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research.* Jossey-Bass.

Patterson, P. G., & Johnson, L. W. (1993). Disconfirmation of expectations and the gap model of service quality: an integrated paradigm. *Journal of Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, *6*, 90-9.

Pennington, C. R., Bates, E. A., Kaye, L. K., & Bolam, L. T. (2018). Transitioning in higher education: an exploration of psychological and contextual factors affecting student satisfaction. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 42*(5), 596-607.

Peterson, M., Wagner, J. A., & Lamb, C. W. (2001). The role of advising in non- returning students' perceptions of their university. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 10*(3).

Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). A typology of student engagement for American colleges and universities. *Research in Higher Education, 46*(2), 185–209.

Price, K., & Baker, S. N. (2012). Measuring students' engagement on college campuses: Is the NSSE an appropriate measure of adult students' engagement? *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *60*(1), 20–32.

Propp, K. M., & Rhodes, S. C. (2006). Informing, apprising, guiding, and mentoring: Constructs underlying upperclassmen expectations for advising. *NACADA Journal*, *26*(1), 46- 55.

Rapert, M. I., Smith, S., Velliquette, A., & Garretson, J. A. (2004). The meaning of quality: Expectations of students in pursuit of an MBA. *Journal of Education for Business, 80*(1), 17–24.

Reed, W. D., & da Silva S. P. (2007). The relation between college student involvement and satisfaction. *Modern Psychological Studies, 12*(2), 21-33.

Rollock, N. (2019). Staying Power: The career experiences and strategies of UK Black female professors. Retrieved from https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10075/Staying-Power/pdf/UCU_Rollock_February_2019.pdf

Salkind, N. J. (2010). Encyclopedia of research design (Vols. 1-0). SAGE Publications.

Santini, F., Ladeira, W. J., Sampaio, C., & Costa, G. S. (2017). Student satisfaction in higher education: a meta-analytic study. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 27*(1), 1–18.

Saunders, S., M., Petrik, M. L., & Miller, M. L. (2014). Psychology doctoral students' perspectives on addressing spirituality and religion with clients: Associations with personal preferences and training. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 6*(1), 1-8.

Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Forbes-Mewett, H., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2012). International student security and English language proficiency. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *16*(5), 434–454.

Sevier, R. A. (1996). Those important things: What every college president needs to know about marketing and student recruiting. *College & University*, *71*, 9-16.

Shah, M. (2012). Ten years of external quality audit in Australia: evaluating its effectiveness and success. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 37*, 761–772.

Shank, M. D., Walker, M., & Hayes, T. (1995). Understanding professional service expectations: do we know what our students expect in a quality education? *Journal of Professional Services Marketing*, *13*(1), 71-83.

Shavelson, R., & Huang, L. (2003). Responding responsibly to the frenzy to assess learning in higher education. *Change, 1*, 1-18.

Shuxin, G., Fei, T., Jiannan, G. & Yang, S. (2014). The construction of college student's satisfaction model based on structural equation model. *Journal of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Research, 6*(6), 164-169.

Singh, G. (2002). Educational consumers or educational partners: A critical theory analysis. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting 13*, 681–700.

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). Focus groups: Theory and practice. Sage.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2010). Majority as temporary minority: Examining the influence of faculty student relationships on satisfaction among white undergraduates at historically Black colleges and universities. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(5), 509–524.

Sultan, P., & Wong, S. (2013). Antecedents and consequences of service quality in a higher education context: A qualitative research approach. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *21*(1), 70–95.

Sutcliffe, R., Linfield, R. S., & Geldart, R. (2014). Student surveys – 'You don't think about the good things'. *Research in Education, 91*(1), 78-80.

Szymanski, D. M., & Henard, D. H. (2001). Customer Satisfaction: A meta-analysis of the empirical evidence. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *29*(1), 16-35.

Thomas, L. (2012). *What works? Student retention & success summary report*. Retrieved from https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Works-Summary-report.pdf

Trowler, V. (2010) Student Engagement Literature Review. Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/StudentEngagementLiteratureReview_1.pdf

Vaughn, S., Schumm, J. S., & Sinagub, J. (1996). Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology. Sage.

Voss, R., Gruber, T., & Szmigin, I. (2007). Service quality in higher education: The role of student expectations. *Journal of Business Research*, *60*, 949–959.

Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). The psychology of culture shock. Routledge.

Watson, S. (2003). Closing the feedback loop: ensuring effective action from student feedback. *Tertiary Education and Management*, *9*, 145-157.

Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Kratochvil, D., & Balakrishnan, M. S. (2015). The effects of social identification and organizational identification on student commitment, achievement and satisfaction in Higher Education. *Studies in Higher Education, 41*(12), 2232–2252.

Williams, R. (2020). The Effect of Casual Teaching on Student Satisfaction: Evidence from the UK. *Education Economics.* https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2021.1958168

Winsted, K., F. (2000). Service behaviors that lead to satisfied customers. *European Journal of Marketing*, *34*(3/4), 399-417.

Yorke, M. (2009). 'Student experience' surveys: some methodological considerations and an empirical investigation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 34*(6), 721–739.

Yorke, M., Orr, S., & Blair, B. (2014). Hit by a perfect storm? Art & design in the National Student Survey. *Studies in Higher Education, 39*(10), 1788–1810.

Young, S., & Shaw, D. G. (1999). Profile of effective college and university teachers. *Journal of Higher Education*, *70*(6), 670–686.

Yu, X., Isensee, E., Kappler, B. (2016). Using data wisely to improve international student satisfaction: Insights gained from international student barometer. In Bista, K., Foster, C. (Eds.), Exploring the social and academic experiences of international students in higher education institutions (1st ed., pp. 212-232). IGI Global.

Zeithaml, V. A., Parasuraman, A., & Berry, L. L. (1985). Problems and strategies in services marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, *49*(2), 33-46.

Zhao, J., Wang, Y., & Kong, F. (2014). Exploring the mediation effect of social support and selfesteem on the relationship between humor style and life satisfaction in Chinese college students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *64*, 126–130.

Zhao, N., & McDougall, D. (2008). Cultural influences on Chinese students' asynchronous online learning in a Canadian university. *The Journal of Distance Education*, *22*(2), 59-80.

Zhou, J., & Cole, D. (2017). Comparing international and American students: Involvement in college life and overall satisfaction. *Higher Education*, *73*(5), 655–672.

APPENDIX 1

Pilot Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a pilot research study entitled "Student satisfaction in Higher Education in the UK: An exploratory qualitative analysis". Please read the information below to gain an understanding of the research and can freely decide whether you would like to participate.

Purpose of the study. The purpose of this research is to examine factors which influence student's satisfaction with their higher education experience. The purpose of the pilot study is to test the effectiveness of the focus groups before conducting the main study. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You will receive a £5 Amazon voucher as a reward for your time.

What do I have to do if I choose to participate in this study? As a participant in the study you will participate in a focus group with other students and will be asked questions which will focus on your experience of university as an undergraduate student here at UCLan. You will then complete an evaluation form to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the pilot study. This should take no longer than 90 minutes of your time.

Are there any risks associated with participating? Some participants may feel uneasy discussing their views, particularly if they are negative. They may also feel uneasy discussing their experiences in the presence of their peers. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason with no consequences. You may also choose not to respond to any of the questions presented to you.

Are there any benefits associated with participating? As a result of participation in this study, you may benefit from sharing your experiences with your peers and gain comfort from others possibly having the same experiences.

Confidentiality. Information obtained during this study will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law. You will be given a participant ID number for anonymity. All participants will be asked not to discuss the contents of the focus group outside of the focus group. During the study, all data will be password protected and only accessible by the researchers of the study.

What will happen to the results of the research study? After completion of the study, all electronic data will be safely stored for five years. The results of this study may be published but your name will not be used.

Who is responsible for this study? Alison Ritchie is a PhD student studying within the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at the University of Central Lancashire. Her PhD project looks at the predicting factors of student satisfaction in higher education in the UK.

This research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Central Lancashire.

Contact for further information.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research project, or if you feel that you have been placed at risk, please contact Alison Ritchie (afritchie1@uclan.ac.uk) or the University Ethics committee at the University of Central Lancashire (OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX 2

Pilot Study Questions

<u>Questions</u>

1. How would you describe feeling satisfied, or how do you know when you feel satisfied?

2. How satisfied would you say you feel with your university experience currently?

_____

3. What type of factors do you consider when asked the previous question? I.e. 'How satisfied are you with your university experience?'

4. Which aspects of your **course or the university** affect your satisfaction with your university experience?

5. What aspects **external to your course**, if any, affect your satisfaction with your university experience?

6. What do you think could increase your satisfaction with your university experience?

_____

7. Is there anything else you wish to add about your satisfaction with your overall university experience?

Pilot Participant Evaluation Form

Focus Group Evaluation Form

Your feedback will help with the planning of future focus groups.

uclan

Beside each of the following statements, please place a tick in the appropriate box.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The focus group was better than I expected					
The topics discussed were interesting					
The questions were easy to understand					
I enjoyed discussing this topic with my peers					
We were given enough time for discussion					
The facilitator encouraged participation					
I got a chance to have my say					
I felt that I was listened to					
A focus group is a good way of consulting with students					
I would participate in another focus group					

Please tick the response you agree with:

Overall, the focus group was:	☐ Great	☐ Good	☐ OK	☐ Poor
The facilitators were:	☐ Great	☐ Good	☐ OK	☐ Poor

Was there something you think we should have discussed but didn't?

_____

_____

_____

What did you like about the focus group?

_____

_____

_____

What didn't you like about the focus group?

_____

_____

_____

How do you think the focus group could be improved in future?

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your feedback.

Focus Group Participant Recruitment Poster

APPENDIX 5

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. How do you know when you feel satisfied?

2. How satisfied do you feel with your university experience overall?

———————————

3. What type of factors do you consider when asked the previous question? I.e. 'How satisfied are you with your university experience?'

4. What aspects of your **course or the university** affect your satisfaction with your overall university experience?

5. What aspects **external to your course**, if any, affect your satisfaction with your overall university experience?

6. What do you think could increase your satisfaction with your university experience?

————————————————

7. Is there anything else you wish to add about your satisfaction with your overall university experience?

Appendix 6

Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study entitled "Student satisfaction in Higher Education in the UK: An exploratory qualitative analysis". Please read the information below to gain an understanding of the research and can freely decide whether you would like to participate.

Purpose of the study. The purpose of this research is to examine factors which influence student's satisfaction with their higher education experience. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You will receive a £5 Amazon voucher as a reward for your time.

What do I have to do if I choose to participate in this study? As a participant in the study you will participate in a focus group with up to seven other students and will be asked questions which will focus on your experience of university at as an undergraduate student here at UCLan. This should take no longer than 90 minutes of your time.

Are there any risks associated with participating? Some participants may feel uneasy discussing their views, particularly if they are negative. They may also feel uneasy discussing their experiences in the presence of their peers. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason with no consequences. You may also choose not to respond to any of the questions presented to you.

Are there any benefits associated with participating? As a result of participation in this study, you may benefit from sharing your experiences with your peers and gain comfort from others possibly having the same experiences.

Confidentiality. Information obtained during this study will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law. You will be given a participant ID number for anonymity. All participants will be asked not to discuss the contents of the focus group outside of the focus group. During the study, all data will be password protected and only accessible by the researchers of the study.

What will happen to the results of the research study? After completion of the study, all electronic data will be safely stored for five years. The results of this study may be published but your name will not be used.

Who is responsible for this study? Alison Ritchie is a PhD student studying within the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at the University of Central Lancashire. Her PhD project looks at the predicting factors of student satisfaction in higher education in the UK.

This research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Central Lancashire.

Contact for further information.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research project, or if you feel that you have been placed at risk, please contact Alison Ritchie (afritchie1@uclan.ac.uk) or the University Ethics committee at the University of Central Lancashire (OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 7

Focus Group Participant Consent Form

uclan

**Centre Excellence in Learning and
Teaching,
University of Central Lancashire,
Preston,
Lancashire,
PR1 2HE**

An investigation into factors which influence student satisfaction in Higher Education.

Please sign below to give your consent to participate in this study.

I have read the information sheet and any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I that I am not obliged to answer any question, but that I do so at my own free will and may withdraw at any time without reason at any time during the focus group.

I am fully aware that my data will be anonymised by receiving a participant ID number and therefore understand that it is not possible to withdraw my data from the analysis after the focus group.

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not used.

I am fully aware that data collected will be stored securely, safely and in accordance with Data Collection Act (1998) and personal information will be treated within the guidelines of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018).

I agree to have the focus group recorded, so it can be transcribed after the focus group is held.

Participant:…………………………………………… Date:………………

Researcher: ……………………………………………… Date:………………..

Appendix 8

Focus Group Participant Debrief Sheet

**Centre for Excellence in
Learning and Teaching,
University of Central Lancashire,
Preston,
Lancashire,
PR1 2HE**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research.

The purpose of this study is to examine factors which influence students perceived overall satisfaction with their higher education experience. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the research, please do not hesitate to contact us.

As mentioned previously, it is now not possible to remove your data from the analysis due to the logistics of a focus group and anonymisation. However, be assured that all data has been anonymised and your identity will remain unknown throughout the analysis and write up of the results and paper.

Thematic analysis will be conducted on all data collected with the aim of identifying key factors which influence the satisfaction of undergraduate students here at UCLan.

If you experienced any emotional distress or discomfort throughout the focus group, please contact the university counselling service (wellbeing@uclan.ac.uk). Alternatively, should you wish to speak to someone external to the university, please contact the Samaritans jo@samaritans.org or call them on 116 123 for a completely confidential conversation.

If you wish to raise any concerns about the research with people who are independent of the research team, please contact the university officer for ethics. You can contact them at ethicsinfo@uclan.ac.uk.

Thank you again for taking part. If you have any questions, please feel free to email Alison Ritchie afritchie1@uclan.ac.uk, my Director of Studies Dr Jamie Taylor jataylor2@uclan.ac.uk, or my project supervisors Dr Edson Filho efilho@uclan.ac.uk or Dr Richard Davies rdavies15@uclan.ac.uk.

uclan

Demographic Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by ticking the box or filling in the blank.

1. **Please select your gender**

   o   Male

   o   Female

   o   Other

If other, please specify _____

2. **How old are you?**

_____ (years)

3. **What course are you enrolled on?**

_____

4. **What is your current year of study?**

   o   1
   o   2

   o   3

   o   4

5. **Are you studying at UCLan as a:**

o   Home student

o   International student

6. **Where do you live during term-time?**

o   On campus

o   Off campus

7. **How long does it take to travel to university from your term-time address?**

    _____ (minutes)

8. **On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (completely), how satisfied are you with your life currently?**

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

APPENDIX 10

NVivo List of Initial Codes