

Redemption and retention: considering the experiences of the 'saved students', those who have chosen to remain in university despite seriously considering leaving.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the factors that influence student continuation and retention within UK higher education. Situated within a realist social constructivist epistemology, the study recognises both the structural and individual dimensions that shape students' experiences, motivations, and outcomes. While existing research often focuses on why students leave, this study instead seeks to understand why students stay, aiming to develop a holistic understanding of the factors that protect against attrition.

The research employed a sequential mixed-methods design, comprising two interrelated phases. Phase One involved semi-structured interviews with thirty-six participants who had seriously considered leaving their degree programmes but ultimately continued to completion. Thematic analysis identified interconnected themes, which informed the development of an analytical framework. A further output from phase one was the creation of a model of retention factors. This 'Student Continuity Factors Model' was explored further in phase two, which utilised Q methodology as a confirmatory and exploratory tool to refine and test the model and analytical framework. Participants ranked concourse statements representing potential risk and protective factors for continuation, allowing for the identification of five distinct student viewpoints. These findings confirmed the model factors of continuation while revealing additional nuance within student experiences.

Drawing together the findings, the study proposes a holistic model of attrition risk and four sub-models (belonging, demographics, supportive influences, and engagement dynamics), providing a conceptual tool for understanding retention across student populations. The model recognises the intersectionality of demographic, psychological, and institutional influences and highlights the protective role of support, belonging, and student agency. Therefore, the research contributes to the field by challenging deficit perspectives and advancing an asset-based, student-centred approach to retention. Offering practical implications for policy, pedagogy, and institutional practice; including early intervention, data-informed student support, and the cultivation of belonging across varied student contexts.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Chapter One: Introduction to the Research Study

This chapter discusses the rationale for the study, considering how personal interest in this topic has shaped the focus and influenced the research aims. The background discussion for the continued academic interest in this research area, will be explored, in relation to existing theory. As will how the research study intends to provide a unique contribution to this area. There will be an overview of the thesis layout, including the reasoning for a mixed methods methodology. The theoretical frameworks used within the study will also be discussed.

1.1 – Background to the Study

Interest in student retention is not a new phenomenon, with specific academic interest dating back to the 1970's (Aljohani, 2016). According to Longden (2002), concern for retention stems from three main stakeholders, students, institution, and state. Though this research takes a student focus, considering the holistic implications of retention and attrition. There are also implications for both state and institutions, and therefore this research is situated within this complex and evolving context. It responds to the need for a deeper, student-informed analysis of what supports persistence in higher education, going beyond statistical indicators to explore the lived realities, motivations, and support systems that shape retention across diverse student groups.

i.The Effects of Attrition on Students

Retention directly influences academic success, personal development, and future opportunities (Pedler et al., 2022). University life can be daunting, marked by growing academic demands and increasing levels of personal responsibility (Addison and Williams, 2023). High retention rates may indicate that students have the necessary support to overcome academic challenges. Research suggests that strong retention strategies typically offer robust academic advising, tutoring services, and access to learning resources (Naylor and Mifsud, 2020). These features help students navigate these challenges effectively (Thomas, 2012). This

support enables students to maintain their academic performance and stay on track for graduation, thus preventing the frustration and anxiety with academic struggles (Kinzie and Kuh, 2017; Neria, 2023).

Additionally, retention efforts that focus on fostering a sense of belonging and community are crucial for student well-being (Pedler et al., 2022). The university experience extends beyond academic matters; it includes social integration and personal development (Morgan, 2022). Students who feel connected to their peers and faculty are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their studies (Addison and Williams, 2023). Retention programs that promote extracurricular activities, student organisations, and campus events create opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships and support networks (Ani et al., 2025). This sense of community can be particularly beneficial for first-year students and those from underrepresented backgrounds, who may feel isolated or overwhelmed (Fernández et al., 2023). Mental health support is another critical aspect of retention from a student perspective. University life can be stressful, with pressures from academic workloads, social dynamics, and future career planning (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). Knowing that the university cares about their well-being can significantly enhance students' sense of security and belonging (Sithaldeen et al., 2022). Therefore, strategies that offer comprehensive mental health services, such as counselling, workshops on stress management, and wellness programs, are vital in helping students manage their mental health, which in turn supports their academic success and retention (Chaudhry et al., 2024; Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

Many students face financial pressures that threaten their ability to continue their studies, including tuition costs, living expenses, and the need to balance part-time work with academic responsibilities. Therefore, retention initiatives that address financial challenges can have a significant impact on continuation (Ani et al., 2025). Furthermore, students are increasingly aware of the importance of gaining skills and experiences that will enhance their employability post-graduation. Universities that offer career counselling, internships, networking opportunities, and skills workshops

help students feel more prepared boosting confidence in prospects and reinforcing the value of their education, encouraging them to stay the course (Nieuwoudt et al., 2025).

Overall, from a student perspective, retention in higher education is vital for ensuring academic success, personal well-being, financial stability, and career readiness. Therefore, universities that prioritise retention through comprehensive support systems, community building, mental health resources, financial aid, and career services provide students with the tools and confidence needed to persist and succeed in their academic journeys (Neria, 2023). As such, effective retention strategies are fundamental to the overall student experience and the realisation of their long-term aspirations.

ii. The Importance of Retention in the Current Higher Education Context

The landscape of UK higher education has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, driven by shifts in policy, funding, and student demographics. The expansion of the sector, particularly following the 2012 tuition fee reforms in England, has led to increased scrutiny of institutional performance and student outcomes (Bond et al., 2020). In parallel, widening participation agendas have sought to increase access to higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds, including those from lower socio-economic groups, ethnic minorities, mature learners, and disabled students, etc (Office for Students [OfS], 2023). While these initiatives have contributed to a more diverse student population, they have also presented challenges for universities in addressing the varied needs, expectations, and barriers experienced by their increasingly heterogeneous cohorts (Fernández et al., 2023).

Student enrolment patterns reflect this complexity. In 2021–2022, there were over 2.8 million students enrolled in UK higher education, with significant increases among first-generation students and those from areas of lower higher education participation (HESA, 2023). However, access does not equate to success. Despite the policy emphasis on widening participation, continuation and completion rates remain uneven

across demographic groups, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to withdraw early from their studies (OfS, 2022).

The increasing marketisation of higher education, coupled with public discourse around value for money, graduate employability, and student satisfaction, has intensified institutional focus on student retention (Bond et al., 2020). Degree completion is now linked not only to individual student success but also to key performance indicators, funding mechanisms, and reputational metrics such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and National Student Survey (NSS). As a result, retention has become a critical measure of institutional effectiveness and equity.

Yet, student attrition remains a persistent challenge. According to recent figures, approximately 6.8% of full-time undergraduates in England fail to continue into their second year, with higher rates among students who are older, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or commuting from home (OfS, 2022). Attrition has also been compounded by rising levels of mental health concerns, financial pressure, and cost-of-living challenges, particularly in the post-COVID context (Copeland et al., 2021). Placing growing pressure on support services and calls for a more holistic, evidence-based understanding of the factors that influence student continuation and success (Morgan, 2025).

1.2 – Rationale for the Study

The issue of student retention remains a central concern in UK higher education, particularly as institutions face increasing accountability for student outcomes, widening participation, and social mobility (Bond et al., 2020). With rising tuition fees and growing expectations around graduate employability and return on investment, there is both political and institutional pressure to ensure that students not only access but also complete their degree programmes (Thomas et al., 2021).

Despite a substantial body of research on student withdrawal, existing institutional responses are often framed around deficit-based models that focus on identifying what is "lacking" in students who leave, for example, resilience, preparedness, academic ability (Bond et al., 2020; Pedler et al., 2022). These approaches risk overlooking the structural, contextual, and relational factors that contribute to disengagement and may unintentionally pathologize individuals from marginalised backgrounds (Zawada, 2024). Furthermore, much of the literature on attrition tends to be retrospective and quantitative in nature, which can obscure the complexity and subjectivity of students lived experiences during critical periods of indecision (Kelly et al., 2024).

There is also a notable gap in research that explicitly explores why students stay (Bradley, 2017). Retention is frequently treated as the absence of departure, rather than a positive outcome. Yet, literature suggests that continuation is not merely a passive state but often the result of active negotiation, support, and adaptive coping strategies (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Understanding these protective factors, and how they are shaped by demographic, institutional, and interpersonal influences, is essential for designing more effective, student-centred retention strategies (Ani et al., 2025).

This study responds to these gaps by exploring retention through the lens of student voice and experience. By engaging directly with students who have considered leaving but ultimately persisted, and by integrating qualitative and Q methodological approaches, this research aims to generate a holistic, context-sensitive model of retention. In doing so, it shifts the discourse from one that focuses on student failure to one that prioritises student success, resilience, and institutional responsibility.

i. Personal Rationale

This study is also rooted in lived experience, as a student who once made the difficult decision to withdraw from university. Returning to higher education years later, I successfully completed my studies but not without facing significant personal and psychological challenges, including persistent imposter syndrome (Holden et al., 2021)

and a sense of disconnection from academic culture. These experiences deeply influenced my interest in understanding what keeps students engaged and what conditions make it possible for them to persist, particularly when continuation feels uncertain or precarious. The lack of visibility of such internal struggles within institutional data or policy frameworks motivated me to explore student retention not simply as a statistical outcome, but as a complex, emotional, and social process. This personal perspective has reinforced my commitment to a research approach that centres student voice, challenges deficit narratives, and recognises the diversity of pathways through which students succeed.

ii. Significance of the research

The decision to leave university can be difficult, prolonged and often anguished. It can have a lasting impact on the life of the individual (Thomas et al, 2017). However, there is little data on why students may choose to stay, despite a serious intention to leave (Bradley, 2017; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). As a result, many interventions aimed at encouraging retention are based on addressing the reasons for leaving rather than the reasons for staying. This study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the experience of students who make an active decision NOT to leave university. Hence, it contributes to an understanding of student retention as opposed to attrition.

The study investigates the idea that ‘leaving is not the mirror image of staying’ (Tinto, 2008) by exploring how this notion is disjointed from the existing culture of interventions aimed at encouraging retention. The significant gap in the current literature discussing the journey of those who have considered leaving but have ultimately decided to stay (Bradley, 2017), will be addressed. These are the ‘the saved’ students that this research studies. The literature tends to present dropping out as a process (Bean, 1983; Naylor et al., 2018) and this research will interrogate this idea. First, the study will consider the perspective of the ‘saved student’ who, despite a serious intention to leave, ultimately decides to stay. Insights from this will be used to identify factors that pose a risk to retention and those that mitigate against attrition. Following this, the study will examine students’ perceptions of the ‘risk’ and supportive factors that were identified in phase one. This provides a thorough understanding of what students value

during their higher education experience. Understanding this intersectionally, through a holistic approach allows a full picture of often overlooked issues, such as domestic circumstances, employment demands and university culture (Naylor et al., 2018; Tuero et al., 2024).

Therefore, this research has provided a further understanding of how students perceive their own higher education experience and how internal and external factors can influence this. Viewing each student through an intersectional lens, whilst having an awareness of contextual pressures on academic staff and higher education institutions, allowed for the development of a model of retention that can be utilised within the 'home' institution and wider sector. As such, it has scope to make a significant contribution to wider understanding of attrition/retention in higher education in the UK and beyond.

1.3 – Research Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to develop a holistic, student-informed understanding of the factors that influence retention and continuation in UK higher education. Grounded in the lived experiences of students who have seriously considered withdrawal but ultimately remained, the research seeks to move beyond deficit-based models of attrition and towards a framework that foregrounds resilience, belonging, and institutional responsibility.

This aim is addressed through the following research aims and objectives:

- **To explore the experiences and perceptions of students who have expressed a serious intention to leave university.**

This objective focuses on capturing the lived realities of students during periods of vulnerability, uncertainty, or disengagement.

- **To analyse the existing theoretical perspectives regarding students' reasons for leaving university.**

This involves a critical review of major retention and attrition

models, identifying their strengths, limitations, and applicability to diverse student populations.

- **To explore how student's construct their university experience.**

This objective considers how students make meaning of their academic, social, and institutional environments, and how these interpretations shape their engagement and persistence.

- **To gain greater insight into the motivations of students to remain in university.**

Moving beyond why students leave, this line of inquiry examines the protective factors, both personal and institutional, that support retention.

- **To develop a holistic understanding of student retention in UK higher education.**

The final objective integrates empirical findings with theoretical frameworks to construct a nuanced model that reflects the complexity and diversity of student continuation pathways.

These objectives are addressed through a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative interviews (Phase One) with Q methodology (Phase Two) to triangulate insights and ensure the model reflects both individual narratives and shared perspectives.

1.4 – Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

This study aims to take a person-centred approach that is informed by a combination of conceptual and theoretical perspectives that together provide a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of student retention. Using these principles, a critical theory approach has been adopted (Brookfield, 2015). This theoretical approach suggests that there is a contradiction which exists between the dominant view of society and the way it exists, which corresponds with realist social constructivist view of reality, being that knowledge is constructed within the reality of the individual but is shaped by the dominate discourse of the culture (Elder-Vass, 2010; 2012). Critical theory is a foundational philosophy in social justice education, informing

approaches to education and practice (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2025). By recognising that student continuation is shaped by both individual agency and structural conditions, the research draws on theories from education, sociology, and psychology to examine how students experience and navigate their university journey (Kelly et al., 2024).

Underpinned by a holistic theoretical framework, which positions student retention as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal, institutional, and societal factors. A holistic approach does not seek to isolate single causes of attrition but instead considers how interrelated domains, such as academic integration, social identity, emotional wellbeing, and structural access, intersect to shape student experiences and outcomes (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). This theoretical stance guides the development of a model that is responsive to the complexity of student persistence and rooted in student experience.

At the core of this study are the existing theories of student retention and attrition that have been developed over the past 60 years (Godor, 2017). These models provide guidance on how an individual's integration into university life and successful transitions, support continuation (Tareke et al., 2025). However, these models have been critiqued for providing limited attention to external factors, such as socio-economic background, caregiving responsibilities, and institutional culture, which may disproportionately affect non-traditional or underrepresented students (Burke, 2019; Tareke et al., 2025). The inclusion of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of habitus, capital, and field has been used to better understand how students' backgrounds shape their perceptions, aspirations, and sense of belonging in higher education. Habitus refers to the ingrained dispositions shaped by one's social environment, while cultural and social capital influence how students engage with the academic setting (Bourdieu, 1993). These concepts are particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of first-generation students, working-class learners, and others navigating institutions whose norms may not reflect their own (Thomas, 2002; 2012; 2021). Furthermore, Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping identities, such as race, gender, disability, and socio-economic status, interact to shape unique experiences of marginalisation or privilege, is used to understand how

multiple demographic characteristics compound or mitigate the risk of attrition (Fernández et al., 2023).

Underlying the study is a realist social constructivist paradigm (Elder-Vass, 2012), which acknowledges that while student experiences are socially constructed, they are also shaped by real structural conditions and institutional practices (Bogna et al., 2020; Elder-Vass, 2012). This epistemological stance allows for the integration of both student narratives and systemic influences, ensuring the findings reflect not only what students feel, but also the broader context in which those feelings emerge. Therefore, these theoretical foundations support a critical, multidimensional analysis of student retention that moves beyond linear, individualised explanations and towards a holistic, context-sensitive understanding of what supports student continuation in contemporary higher education (Bogna et al., 2020).

1.5 – Methodological Overview

This study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design, combining qualitative interviews and Q methodological approaches to generate a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of student retention in UK higher education (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008). The methodological choices were guided by the study's aim to develop a holistic, student-informed model of continuation, grounded in both lived experience and shared patterns of meaning across the student population.

i. Scope and Focus of the Research

This study focuses specifically on undergraduate students in the English higher education system. With phase one looking at the retrospective accounts of students who have persisted and completed, despite a desire to leave, across multiple English Universities and phase two exploring the student experience of current undergraduates from one institution.

The scope of the research is further defined by its emphasis on students who have seriously considered leaving their undergraduate programme but ultimately persisted. This decision point offers a valuable perspective into the often-overlooked experiences of students who navigate significant challenges but remain within the system (Bradley, 2017; Lynam et al., 2024). The study aims to explore the factors that contribute to their continuation, with a particular interest in how these students interpret their experiences and the kinds of support that influence their decision to stay (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021).

In line with current widening participation agendas, the research included so called ‘non-traditional’ student populations, including mature students, commuter students, first-generation university attendees, student parents, and individuals with caring responsibilities or disabilities (Fernández et al., 2023). Participant recruitment was purposeful in its design, to secure a range of experiences that reflected the demographics of the study populations. By capturing a range of perspectives across identity and experience, the study has generated insights that are both contextually rich and applicable to broader equity and access discussions in UK higher education.

ii. Phases of the study

Phase One employed semi-structured interviews with previous undergraduate students, from English universities, who had seriously considered withdrawing from their studies but ultimately chose to remain. This exploratory phase was designed to elicit rich, contextualised narratives that illuminated the personal, academic, and institutional challenges these students encountered, as well as the protective factors that supported their persistence. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023) was used to identify key themes across the data, which were subsequently synthesised into an initial analytical framework comprising four overarching domains. This was then developed further into a model of factors that support retention – the ‘*Student Continuity Factors Model*’ (Figure 18).

Building on these findings, Phase Two utilised Q methodology (Brown, 1993) to further refine and test the analytical framework and model. The population in this phase of the study was one 'home' post-92 institution. Participants in this phase sorted a series of statements, derived from the themes identified in Phase One, according to the degree to which they resonated with their personal experience. Factor analysis of the Q-sorts revealed clusters of shared perspectives, allowing for the identification of distinct student profiles and the validation (or reconfiguration) of key constructs from the initial framework.

iii.Epistemology

The use of a realist social constructivist epistemology (Bogna et al., 2020) underpinned both phases of the study. This position assumes that while knowledge is socially constructed, there are real structural and institutional forces that shape how students experience and interpret their educational journeys (Elder-Vass, 2012).

The methodology therefore enabled the research to explore not only the meaning students attribute to their experiences, but also the broader systems that enable or inhibit student success.

iv.Acknowledging the elephant in the room – Covid 19 and its implications for this study

It is impossible to have conducted research within the last 5 years and not acknowledge the implications of the pandemic and its influence on HE. The post-pandemic landscape of higher education in the UK has been significantly reshaped by the experiences and adaptations necessitated by COVID-19 (Liu et al., 2022). While the immediate-crisis of the pandemic has subsided, its long-term effects continue to influence teaching methods, student engagement, institutional policies, and the overall structure of higher education (Copeland et al., 2021; Morgan, 2024).

This study straddled the Covid 19 pandemic; the phase one interviews took place before the pandemic lockdowns and phase two afterwards. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the findings from phase 1 and phase 2 show a commonality of experience and though the impact of the pandemic has seen a greater need for student supportive services, the types and nature of this support is consistent with the phase one findings.

1.6 – Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured across 14 chapters, each building towards a comprehensive understanding of student retention and the development of a holistic, student-informed model that accounts for the complexity of continuation in UK higher education.

- **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research Study**

Introduces the context, rationale, and aims of the research, alongside the theoretical and methodological underpinnings. It sets the stage for the exploration of student retention and outlines the scope and structure of the thesis.

- **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Critically reviews existing literature and theoretical models on student retention and attrition. This chapter uses a level of influence approach and includes discussion of the contributions and limitations of key frameworks such as Tinto's model, Bean's theory of attrition, Bourdieu's sociological concepts, and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. The chapter identifies gaps in the literature, particularly around student voice and protective factors influencing continuation.

- **Chapter 3: Reflexive Researcher Positionality: A Changing Insider Status**

This chapter then explores how this research project has been shaped by the researcher's changing insider status and how that status has affected methodological decisions, analysis and interpretations.

- **Chapter 4: Methodology and Method**

Provides a detailed explanation of the research design, including philosophical positioning, participant recruitment, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and analytical procedures for both the qualitative interviews (Phase One) and Q methodology (Phase Two).

- **Chapter 5: Phase One Findings – Thematic Analysis of Participant Narratives**

Presents the findings from Phase One, identifying the key themes that emerged from interviews with students who had considered leaving. These include resilience, motivation, personal circumstances, belonging, peer relationships, external pressures, and expectations of study.

- **Chapter 6: Discussion of Phase One Findings**

Integrates the findings from phase one with the existing literature to address the research aims. The discussion highlights key insights into why students stay, the role of intersectional identity, and institutional responsibilities in retention building an analytical framework.

- **Chapter 7: Creating a Model of Factors that Protect Continuation**

Describes the process of developing the phase one findings into a holistic retention model which considers the factors that support continuation. This is done through exploring the risk of attrition when students lack support networks and have certain demographic characteristics and personal circumstances that pertain to challenges in HE.

- **Chapter 8: Phase Two Findings – Part A: Factor Analysis**

The Q Methodology factor analysis findings are discussed. Factor arrays and factor profiles are explored with a consideration of consensus statements and alignment of student perspectives with the retention model.

- **Chapter 9: Phase Two Findings – Part B: Interview Findings**

The Q methodology post-sort interview data is explored thematically with key themes discovered on what is important for student experience and continuation.

- **Chapter 10: Phase Two Discussion**

Explores the shared viewpoints identified through Q methodology in-line with the literature, illustrating how students prioritise different factors related to continuation. The findings are used to confirm and refine the initial analytical framework.

- **Chapter 11: Refining the *Student Continuity Factors Model***

Describes the process of refining the holistic retention model, using the findings of the phase two – Q methodology.

- **Chapter 12: Development of Four Thematic Sub-Models of Student Retention**

The creation of four thematic sub-models: Demographic Factors, Student Belonging, Supportive Influences, and Engagement Dynamics. The chapter also discusses theoretical implications and the value of disaggregated approaches.

- **Chapter 13: Overall Findings and Discussion**

Provides the final summary of the research, where it is established how the findings address the research aims. To do this, the individual research aims are explored using the ‘What’ model of critical reflection (Driscoll, 2007).

- **Chapter 14: Conclusion and Recommendations**

Summarises the study's contributions to knowledge, methodological innovation, and implications for policy and practice. It concludes with recommendations for future research and institutional strategies aimed at improving student continuation and success.

1.7 – Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the background, rationale, and focus of the study, positioning student retention as a complex and timely issue in UK higher education. The study's overarching aim, to develop a holistic understanding of student retention, was outlined alongside five specific research objectives. The conceptual and theoretical foundations were presented, combining well-established retention models with sociological and intersectional frameworks, all within a holistic, realist social constructivist perspective. The scope of the research was defined as was a summary of the mixed-methods approach, highlighting how semi-structured interviews and Q methodology were used to explore both individual experiences and shared viewpoints. The chapter concluded with an outline of the thesis structure, previewing how the argument will unfold across the literature, methodology, findings, model development, and discussion.

The next chapter presents a critical review of the literature, examining existing theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and policy discourses related to student retention and attrition within a 'levels of influence' structure (Agars et al., 2008).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides a critical examination of the literature on student retention and attrition, progressing from macro-level structural and policy factors to meso-level institutional dynamics and finally to micro-level individual and psychological influences. This layered approach reflects the complex and interdependent systems that shape students' decisions to stay or leave university. The discussion draws upon both classic theoretical models (e.g., Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1980; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980) and contemporary frameworks (e.g., Thomas, 2002; Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998) to trace how understandings of retention have evolved from structural-functional and behavioural perspectives toward more relational and sociocultural interpretations.

The analysis is framed through a realist social constructivist epistemology (Elder-Vass, 2012), which holds that social phenomena such as retention and attrition have real effects but are understood through the meanings individuals assign to them (Maxwell, 2012). This stance acknowledges that while institutional structures and material conditions influence continuation, students actively interpret and construct their experiences within these frameworks (Miller, 2016).

Retention research has expanded beyond a sole focus on deficits, why students fail to persist, toward identifying protective and enabling factors that promote student success (O'Shea, 2016). This shift aligns with this study's emphasis on students who seriously considered leaving university but ultimately chose to remain. Understanding the interconnections between structural barriers, institutional supports, and individual agency enables an understanding of retention that is both empirically grounded and practically applicable.

This chapter adopts a 'Levels of Influence' (Agars et al., 2008) approach to structure the review of literature, integrating macro (structural and policy), meso (institutional and environmental), and micro (individual and psychological) perspectives. Recognising that no single factor can explain student continuation; rather, outcomes emerge from interactions between systems of influence (Oseguera and Rhee, 2009). This conceptual

framework aligns with ecological and systems-based approaches to understanding student success (Kitchen et al., 2019; 2021) and provides a scaffold for synthesising diverse theoretical and empirical insights. By mapping these interconnected levels, this review aims to demonstrate how retention operates as a multi-layered and intersectional process (Naylor and Mifsud, 2020).

2.1 – Introduction

Retention in higher education is a central concern for policymakers, institutions, and researchers across the United Kingdom (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2021). Defined as the capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) to retain students from enrolment through to qualification, retention is closely associated with educational equity, institutional accountability, and the socio-economic returns of degree attainment (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Office for Students, 2023a). In recent years, intensifying public scrutiny on graduate outcomes, sectoral performance indicators, and widening participation initiatives have further elevated retention as a measure of institutional quality and student success (Thomas, 2021; UUK, 2023).

The implications of student attrition are wide-ranging. For individual students, early withdrawal from university can lead to debt accumulation without the benefit of a qualification, reduced lifetime earnings, and disrupted personal trajectories (Belfield et al., 2018). For institutions, high non-continuation rates may lead to reputational damage, funding penalties, and challenges in meeting regulatory benchmarks set by bodies such as the Office for Students (OfS) in England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and equivalents in Wales and Northern Ireland (OfS, 2023b). These issues are compounded by sector-wide pressures, including Brexit-related shifts in funding, post-pandemic disruptions, and rising student demand for wellbeing and pastoral support (Iannelli et al., 2025; Kitchen et al., 2021).

Despite the proliferation of institutional strategies and national policy frameworks, student retention remains uneven across the sector. Non-continuation rates vary by region, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, mode of study, and subject area, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of the issue (HESA, 2023).

The following section synthesises classical and contemporary models of retention and attrition, highlighting how they conceptualise these multi-level dynamics and their implications for understanding student persistence in UK higher education.

2.2 – Theoretical Models of Retention and Attrition

The study of student retention and attrition has evolved significantly over the past five decades, reflecting broader shifts in educational theory, social structure, and higher education policy (Burke, 2019; Manyanga et al., 2017). Early models primarily sought to predict withdrawal by identifying individual characteristics or institutional variables, while later approaches have adopted more relational, contextual, and constructivist perspectives (Caballero, 2020; Kerby, 2015). Within this trajectory, theoretical models have moved from deficit-oriented frameworks, which positioned attrition as student failure, to holistic understandings that emphasise the interplay of structure, agency, and environment (Thomas, 2012; Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

This section critically examines key theoretical models of student persistence and attrition, mapping their conceptual contributions across macro, meso, and micro levels of influence (Kitchen et al., 2021). It explores how these models align with the study's realist social constructivist epistemology, acknowledging both the objective structures of higher education and the subjective meanings through which students construct their experiences.

i. **Spady's Sociological Model (1970)**

Spady's (1970) Sociological Model of Student Dropout was among the first comprehensive attempts to theorise attrition, drawing on Durkheim's theory of suicide to propose that student departure results from a lack of integration within the academic and social systems of the university (Burke, 2019). Spady identified key variables such as grades, intellectual development, friendship support, and normative congruence. His model positioned social integration as the primary mechanism linking individual experience and institutional environment.

Spady's framework reflects both meso-level institutional factors (peer and faculty relationships, campus culture) and micro-level personal characteristics (motivation, ability, values). Its emphasis on normative congruence, the alignment between student and institutional values, anticipated later discussions of belonging and institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002). However, Spady's model assumed a relatively homogenous student population, overlooking the diversity and inequality that characterise contemporary higher education (Reay, 2018).

ii. Tinto's Model of Integration (1975; 1993)

Tinto's model remains the most influential theoretical framework in the retention literature. Building upon Spady's work, Tinto (1975; 1993) proposed that persistence depends on the degree of academic and social integration within the institution. Students enter university with specific background characteristics (e.g., family background, prior education, skills), which shape their initial goals and commitments. These commitments evolve through interactions with institutional structures and communities; where integration is strong, persistence increases, and where it is weak, withdrawal is likely.

Tinto's model operates across all three levels of influence:

- *Macro*: Structural inequalities influencing access and preparedness.
- *Meso*: Institutional culture, teaching quality, and social systems.
- *Micro*: Student motivation, self-efficacy, and belonging.

While Tinto's framework advanced understanding by linking individual and institutional dynamics, it has been critiqued for its individualistic and assimilationist assumptions (Burke, 2019; Thomas, 2012). It presumes that students must conform to institutional norms rather than expecting institutions to adapt to diverse student identities. In UK post-92 contexts, where diversity is pronounced, the expectation of assimilation risks marginalising non-traditional learners. Later models, such as Thomas (2002) and Kahu and Nelson (2018), reframed integration as reciprocal, emphasising shared responsibility between students and institutions.

iii. Bean's Model of Student Attrition (1980; 1983)

Bean (1980; 1983) introduced an alternative approach grounded in organisational theory, conceptualising attrition as analogous to employee turnover. His '*Model of Student Attrition*' highlighted the role of satisfaction, institutional commitment, and external influences (such as finances or family) in determining persistence. Bean proposed that student behaviour is shaped by both attitudinal and situational factors, bridging psychological and structural perspectives (Burke, 2019).

Bean's model aligns strongly with meso-level and micro-level influences. Satisfaction and commitment are mediated by students' perceptions of institutional support and fairness, while external pressures reflect real-world constraints. Bean's later integration of psychological theories, particularly Ajzen's (1991) '*Theory of Planned Behaviour*' introduced the idea of intentions as predictors of persistence, offering a bridge to contemporary models that emphasise self-efficacy and agency (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Critics have noted that Bean's model, like Tinto's, assumes a linear relationship between satisfaction and persistence, overlooking the emotional and cultural dimensions of belonging (Pedler et al., 2022; Thomas, 2020). Nonetheless, its incorporation of external variables represents a significant step toward holistic, contextually grounded understandings of retention.

iv. Pascarella and Terenzini's General Model of Student Persistence (1980; 1983)

Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) expanded on Tinto's model by emphasising the quality of student–faculty interactions. Their *General Model of Student Persistence* identified five key domains: background characteristics, structural characteristics of institutions, interaction variables, quality of effort, and satisfaction. The model demonstrated that meaningful engagement with faculty and peers has a direct effect on persistence, even when controlling for academic ability (Burke, 2019).

Their contribution lies in positioning interaction as a dynamic process rather than a static condition, thereby integrating meso-level institutional context with micro-level engagement. This relational view resonates with the realist constructivist emphasis on meaning-making, the idea that persistence emerges through the student's ongoing negotiation of academic and social identities (Biasi et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2021). It therefore bridges classical integration theory with contemporary insights on belonging and engagement.

v. Contemporary Models: From Deficit to Relational Frameworks

More recently, models of retention have shifted from focusing on why students leave to understanding why they stay. This movement reflects both a philosophical change, from positivist prediction to constructivist interpretation, and a policy shift toward improving the student experience (Thomas, 2012; 2021; Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Ozga and Sukhnandan's (1998) *Student/Institution Negotiation Model* further reinforced the relational understanding of retention by conceptualising student persistence as an ongoing negotiation between individual expectations and institutional responses. Their model captures the fluid, non-linear nature of continuation decisions and recognises the diversity of student experiences, particularly relevant in post-92 environments.

Thomas's (2002; 2012) work on engagement and belonging reconceptualised retention as an outcome of social and academic belonging fostered through inclusive institutional practices. Unlike earlier models, Thomas's framework placed responsibility on the institution rather than solely the student, reflecting a shared ownership approach. This aligns with the meso-level of influence, emphasising relational pedagogy, inclusive curriculum design, and proactive support.

Similarly, Kahu and Nelson (2018) framed student engagement as a dynamic interaction between personal, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Their work discussed the idea of psychological engagement as a mediator between structural conditions and student outcomes. Engagement, in this view, is both subjective and situated, influenced

by students' self-efficacy, wellbeing, and sense of belonging, but also by institutional affordances and constraints.

2.2.1 – Synthesising the Models

Synthesising these theoretical developments highlights that no single model adequately captures the full complexity of retention. Instead, each contributes insights that can be mapped across the *Levels of Influence* framework (Agars et al., 2008) adopted in this literature review. With the differing models including core concepts such as, access, systemic inequality, belonging, habitus, motivation, wellbeing, engagement, etc, which support influence at the macro, meso and micro levels (Burke, 2019; Patton, 2023).

This synthesis reveals a conceptual trajectory, with early models conceptualising attrition as an individual's failure to integrate and later models redefining retention as a relational and institutional responsibility. Finally, contemporary frameworks position persistence within broader ecological systems of influence (Kitchen et al., 2021). This evolution reflects a growing recognition that retention outcomes emerge from the interaction of real social structures (e.g., policy, economy, institutional culture) and constructed meanings (e.g., belonging, identity, aspiration). As such, existing models of retention are not competing explanations but complementary perspectives that illuminate different layers of a complex, interdependent phenomenon (Patton, 2023).

2.3 – Exploring the Interconnected Levels of Influence

This section of the chapter discusses the levels of influence that effect student retention. By looking at the existing literature using this framework, the 'problem' of attrition can be explored as interconnected systems. Which at each level, macro, meso, and micro, contribute to student experiences and outcomes.

Level of Influence	Key Drivers	Examples of Impact on Retention
Macro (Structural)	Policy, funding, widening participation, labour market	National access initiatives, tuition fee regimes, socioeconomic disparities
Meso (Institutional)	Culture, pedagogy, staff relationships, support systems	Inclusive teaching, belonging initiatives, early intervention strategies
Micro (Individual)	Motivation, resilience, belonging, demographic characteristics	Self-efficacy, peer networks, career aspirations, wellbeing

(Table 1 – An Example of the Levels of Influence)

2.3.1 – Macro-Level Structural and Policy Factors

This section will explore the institutional and policy dimensions of student retention in UK higher education. While effective student support services and sector-wide policies such as Access and Participation Plans (APP's) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) play a critical role, disparities in resources, priorities, and cultures across institutions result in uneven outcomes (Naylor and Mifsud, 2020; Pedler et al., 2022). Retention is increasingly understood as a collective institutional responsibility, one that demands collaboration across academic, professional, and regulatory domains (Thomas, 2021). Therefore, addressing persistent inequalities in student retention requires a structural reconfiguration of institutional cultures, not just compliance with policy frameworks (Al Hassani and Wilkins, 2022).

i. The Policy Context of Retention in UK Higher Education

At the macro level, student retention and attrition are shaped by the broader policy and funding landscape of UK higher education, which has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). Since the expansion of participation following the Dearing Report (1997) and the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, higher education has been redefined as both a personal investment

and a public good (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). The establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018 further cemented this shift by placing institutional accountability for student outcomes, including continuation and progression, at the heart of regulatory practice (OfS, 2022).

This policy landscape has resulted in a growing emphasis on “value for money” (OfS, 2018) and the measurable outcomes of higher education, particularly for undergraduate students. Retention has therefore become not only an indicator of institutional quality but also a proxy for student satisfaction, graduate employability, and fiscal efficiency (Mccaig, 2018). As a result, universities operate within a framework that prioritises retention as both an ethical and economic imperative. While this has encouraged data-informed interventions, it has also been criticised for commodifying education and framing students as consumers rather than participants in a learning community (Nixon et al., 2018).

The marketisation of higher education has also influenced student expectations. As universities compete for enrolments, the student experience has become a central site of policy and institutional focus. However, these reforms have not eliminated disparities in outcomes. Despite widening participation initiatives, data from the higher education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2023) show persistent differences in continuation rates between socio-economic and ethnic groups. Students from lower-income households, care-experienced backgrounds, and certain ethnic minorities remain at a higher risk of withdrawal. This highlights how national policy frameworks can inadvertently reinforce pre-existing social inequalities, as structural disadvantage continues to shape educational trajectories (Nieuwoudt et al., 2025; Reay, 2018).

ii. Widening Participation and Social Mobility

The UK’s widening participation (WP) agenda has sought to increase access to higher education among underrepresented groups, yet retention within these groups remains a concern (Sapir, 2022). Policies promoting access have not always been accompanied by the necessary structural changes to support student success once enrolled. Post-92 universities have absorbed a greater proportion of non-traditional entrants, including

mature, part-time, and first-generation students, yet often with fewer resources per capita (Breeze et al., 2020).

The WP discourse is frequently positioned within a neoliberal policy framework that emphasises individual responsibility for success (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Consequently, attrition is sometimes framed as a personal failure rather than a symptom of systemic inequality. This deficit framing obscures the role of institutional and structural barriers, such as financial insecurity, limited access to academic capital, and inadequate support systems (Nieuwoudt et al., 2025; Reay, 2018).

It is suggested that the rhetoric of fair access has produced a paradox: while more students from diverse backgrounds are entering higher education, their likelihood of successful completion remains uneven (OfS, 2022). For example, data indicates that working-class and first-generation students are more likely to commute, work part-time, and experience social isolation, factors associated with lower retention (Thomas, 2017; Trent et al., 2021). These patterns suggest that structural inequality persists within massified systems of higher education, where diversity in the student population is not always matched by inclusive institutional practices (Breeze et al., 2020; Reay, 2018).

iii. Economic Pressures and Funding Models

Economic policy and funding structures exert great influence on retention. The increasing financialisation of higher education has shifted the cost burden onto students, with tuition fees, living costs, and debt anxiety shaping students' engagement with their studies (Callender and Mason, 2017). For many, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, financial pressure is a major reason for withdrawal (HESA, 2023). The student loan system, designed to widen access, has paradoxically introduced new forms of inequality, as students without financial safety nets experience higher stress and reduced capacity to participate fully in university life (Kaye, 2021).

This economic framing also influences institutional priorities. Universities are incentivised to retain students for financial stability and reputational performance metrics (Mccaig, 2018). While this can lead to the development of targeted

interventions, it may also risk reducing complex educational experiences to statistical indicators (Sapir, 2022). Critics argue that such quantification of retention neglects the relational and emotional dimensions of persistence (O'Shea, 2016). Therefore, economic structures are constraints that materially affect student agency, yet their impact is mediated through students' subjective interpretations, their perceptions of debt, value, and belonging (Breeze et al., 2020).

iv. Institutional Diversity and Retention Strategy

The UK higher education sector is highly diverse, encompassing ancient universities (e.g., Oxford, Cambridge), research-intensive Russell Group institutions, specialist colleges, and post-1992 universities. This diversity has significant implications for how student support, and consequently, retention, is resourced and prioritised (Preest, 2021; Sapir, 2020).

Post-1992 universities, many of which serve higher proportions of commuter, working-class, mature, and racially minoritised students (Hallam, 2023), often prioritise retention through structured student services, embedded academic support, and inclusive pedagogies (Addison and Williams, 2023). These institutions are more likely to adopt whole institution approaches to widening participation and often maintain retention officers, transition teams, and targeted support schemes (Breeze et al., 2020).

By contrast, research-intensive universities, though typically reporting higher average continuation rates, may experience deeper stratification among underrepresented students. As Reay (2018) argues, elite institutions often retain a "hidden curriculum" that favours students with high levels of cultural capital, leaving others feeling alienated or unsupported. Students in these settings may struggle to access tailored support services due to decentralised faculty structures or implicit assumptions of academic self-sufficiency (Chrysikos and Catterall, 2020).

2.3.2 – Meso-Level Institutional and Environmental Factors

At the meso level, the university itself, its culture, practices, and environment, plays a central role in shaping student experiences and outcomes. Institutional structures and the local ecology of support mediate the relationship between macro-level forces such as policy and funding, and micro-level factors such as motivation and belonging. Within a realist social constructivist framework, institutions are understood as both real social structures with material effects and as sites of meaning-making through which students interpret their engagement and identity (Maxwell, 2012). The meso level therefore represents the interface between systemic constraint and individual agency, the point at which institutional habitus, teaching practices, and support systems interact with student habitus and expectations to influence continuation (Reay, 2018; Thomas, 2020).

i. Institutional Culture and Habitus

Institutional culture, encompassing the norms, values, and expectations that underpin university life, has been widely identified as a critical influence on student retention. Thomas (2002) introduced the concept of institutional habitus, drawing from Bourdieu's (1984) sociological theory and building on the work of Reay et al (2001), to describe how institutional norms and practices either facilitate or inhibit students' sense of belonging and academic integration (Thomas, 2002).

Habitus, the internalised dispositions shaped by early life experiences and social positioning (Bourdieu, 1984), plays a crucial role in shaping students' orientation to academic life. In the context of retention, students whose habitus aligns with the implicit norms and values of the university environment are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and succeed academically (Reay, 2018; 2021). This sociologically grounded theory of retention critiques individualised explanations of attrition and challenges the dominant psychological models such as Tinto (1975) and Spady (1970). Thomas

(2002) argues that student retention cannot be fully understood without accounting for how institutional structures reflect and reproduce social inequalities.

First-generation students or those from working-class backgrounds often enter university with a habitus that clashes with dominant institutional cultures, which continue to privilege middle-class norms of communication, confidence, and academic engagement (Haktanir et al., 2021; Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). This mismatch contributes to feelings of alienation, a diminished sense of belonging, and, according to Tinto's updated model (1993), reduced academic and social integration, all of which are predictors of withdrawal.

Furthermore, Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital, the knowledge, behaviours, and cultural competencies valued by dominant institutions, is critical in explaining differential retention outcomes (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Students with limited cultural capital may find it difficult to interpret institutional expectations, access academic resources, or build relationships with staff (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023; Thomas, 2002; 2012). As Spady (1970) and Bean and Metzner (1985) note, students who cannot navigate institutional demands may experience declining satisfaction, disengagement, and ultimately attrition. Additionally, Belando-Montoro et al. (2022) argue that universities often assume a level of familiarity with academic norms, such as independent study, academic conventions, or institutional etiquette, that is more accessible to students from privileged educational backgrounds. This assumption leads to 'institutional misrecognition', whereby students feel they are not the kind of people who belong in higher education, even if they perform academically (Reay, 2018).

Social capital, the networks and relationships that enable individuals to access support and resources, is a critical but unevenly distributed factor in retention (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022). Tinto's model posits that peer relationships and informal networks enhance integration (Tinto, 1993). However, from a Bourdieusian perspective, not all social networks are equally valued or supported by institutional structures (Reay, 2018). Research shows that students who live at home, commute, or have caring responsibilities are less likely to participate in peer learning communities or social activities that facilitate social capital (Brooks, 2019; Thomas and Jones, 2017). As a result, these students may become isolated from the core community of the institution

(Rotar, 2022). Their retention is not only a function of individual attributes but of limited access to the kinds of capital the institution implicitly values and rewards (Sá, 2023; Webber and Dismore, 2021).

Additionally, universities wield symbolic power, the authority to legitimise certain ways of speaking, behaving, and being as 'academic' or 'professional.' This symbolic power shapes who feels included or excluded (Reay, 2018). Therefore, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) traverses with habitus and capital by showing how students at the intersections of race, gender, class, and disability may face compounded forms of exclusion from the institutional norm (Nichols and Stahl, 2019). Tinto's emphasis on integration is therefore limited unless contextualised within a deeper critique of institutional culture. The What Works? programme (Thomas, 2012) sought to address this by advocating a "*culture of belonging*", but retention strategies still often fail to interrogate the symbolic hierarchies embedded in curriculum, assessment, and university life (Reay, 2018; Thomas, 2020).

ii. Learning, Teaching, and Pedagogical Design

Pedagogical practice is said to be a key mediator of retention, as it shapes students' engagement, self-efficacy, and perception of relevance. Yorke and Longden (2008) and Thomas (2012) highlighted that positive learning experiences and meaningful staff–student interactions are among the strongest predictors of student continuation. This has been built on by later research, which concurs that learning environments and staff relationships are key indicators of continuation (Ani et al., 2025; Bowden et al., 2021; Tight, 2020). While there is now focus on inclusive and applied pedagogies, which emphasise accessibility, employability, and flexible delivery modes (Bowden et al., 2021). These approaches are not always sufficient to counteract systemic pressures such as large class sizes, heavy workloads, or insufficient academic feedback (Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Nieuwoudt et al., 2025).

Kuh's (2008) concept of High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs) provides a useful framework for understanding how pedagogical design supports retention. HIPs - including collaborative learning, research engagement, and community-based projects,

are associated with deeper learning and stronger student–institution connections. When effectively implemented, they promote belonging, confidence, and self-efficacy, all of which contribute to persistence (Kuh et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the adoption of HIPs is uneven across the UK sector and is often constrained by institutional resources and disciplinary norms (Zepke, 2014).

Furthermore, academic expectations and assessment practices significantly influence students’ perceptions of competence and fit (O’Shea et al., 2024). Students who perceive assessment as opaque or inconsistent may question their belonging and capability, especially those from non-traditional educational backgrounds (O’Shea, 2016). Conversely, clear expectations and formative feedback foster academic buoyancy, the ability to recover from setbacks (Martin and Marsh, 2008), and strengthen students’ belief in their ability to succeed (Rafsanjani et al., 2024). This aligns with Tinto’s (1993) model of academic integration, which identifies effective teaching and feedback as critical elements of student persistence.

iii. The role of Student-Staff Relationships

Research indicates that lecturer-student relationships significantly impact on students’ decision to persist or withdraw (Wakelin, 2023; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). With university lecturers contributing to retention through effective teaching, mentorship, academic support, and creating inclusive learning environments (Curran, 2021). Research consistently shows that positive interactions with academic and support staff enhance students’ sense of belonging and academic confidence (Thomas, 2012; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). These relationships are particularly important for students who may lack access to informal networks of social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2018).

However, institutional hierarchies and workload pressures often limit the capacity of staff to provide consistent, personalised support (Cotton et al., 2017). Paitaridou et al. (2024) discuss the link between staff wellbeing and student success, with increasing workload from student support due to retention pressures leading to burnout. This has led to calls for relational pedagogy (Noddings, 2013), an approach that prioritises

mutual respect, recognition, and empathy within academic relationships (Su and Wood, 2023). Relational pedagogy is especially significant for widening participation students, where students' diverse life experiences and commitments demand flexible and responsive engagement (Bell, 2022; Bovill et al., 2025). When staff adopt relational approaches, students report feeling valued, reinforcing their commitment to study (Walker, 2020).

Importantly, the perception of staff care is not only emotional but academic (Bovill et al., 2025). They play a key role in motivating students and fostering academic resilience, as students are more likely to persist in higher education when they feel that their lecturers are invested in their success (Kuh et al., 2008). Actions such as recognising students' efforts, encouraging participation, and setting realistic academic expectations can enhance motivation (Bond et al., 2020). Consequently, identifying at-risk students early, such as those struggling academically or disengaging from class, allows lecturers to provide timely interventions and referrals to university support services (Thomas, 2012; 2018; 2021). Thus, staff–student relationships function as protective factors that mitigate risks associated with disengagement and attrition (Walker, 2020).

iv. Student Support Systems

Student support services form another vital meso-level structure influencing retention. Lizzio (2006) suggests that there is a commonality of needs for students as they enter university, however, he also acknowledges that universities should not treat transition as a one size fits all approach. Effective support systems integrate academic, pastoral, and wellbeing provision to address the multifaceted challenges students face (Thomas, 2012). While universities increasingly promote whole institution approaches to student wellbeing (Hughes and Spanner, 2019), support mechanisms are often fragmented, reactive, or poorly communicated (Morgan, 2025; OfS, 2022).

The literature identifies several characteristics of effective support systems: accessibility, early identification, and relational engagement. Accessibility ensures that students know where and how to seek help; early identification relies on predictive data

and staff awareness to intervene before crisis points; relational engagement ensures that support interactions foster trust and agency rather than dependency (Thomas, 2020).

Recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of mental health support within retention frameworks. The *Student Minds University Mental Health Charter* (2019) advocates an integrated approach in which wellbeing is embedded across academic and social structures. Given the sharp rise in reported student mental health difficulties since 2017 (OfS, 2022), this area has become a central policy and practice concern. Universities that proactively address mental health and wellbeing demonstrate improved continuation rates (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

However, institutional responses to support must also consider issues of equity. Research by Kaye (2021) indicates that marginalised students, such as carers, mature students, and those with disabilities, may find support structures less accessible or culturally relevant. Thus, while student support is a key determinant of retention, its effectiveness depends on how inclusively it is designed and implemented.

v. Student engagement

Student engagement is widely recognised as a cornerstone of retention within higher education (Tight, 2019). Broadly, engagement encompasses the attention, curiosity, interest, and participation students demonstrate in both their learning and wider university experience. Researchers have linked higher levels of engagement to increased motivation, persistence, satisfaction, and successful completion (Mandernach, 2015). Despite its recognised importance, engagement remains a concept that is difficult to define consistently, with multiple theoretical models and interpretations existing within the literature (Evans et al., 2015; Bowen et al., 2021). While definitions vary, many approaches emphasise the active participation of students in academic and institutional life. Earlier engagement research often focused on behavioural indicators, particularly time spent on educational tasks (Mandernach, 2015), with later approaches adopting broader understandings that include emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of student experience (Tight, 2019).

Astin's (1984) *Theory of Student Involvement*, posits that the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to academic and co-curricular activities determines their likelihood of persistence and success. Involvement is seen as both quantitative (time spent) and qualitative (degree of effort), with Astin arguing that students learn and persist more when they are actively engaged. This theory frames retention as the outcome of ongoing personal investment, suggesting that universities should design learning environments and opportunities that demand and reward such involvement. Moreover, Tinto's (1993) *Model of Student Departure*, which suggests that academic and social integration are critical to student persistence. According to Tinto, when students feel connected to the academic content, faculty, and peers, they are more likely to commit to the institution. Engagement, in this model, can be understood as the process through which students integrate into the academic and social fabric of university life. Students who fail to engage meaningfully are at increased risk of attrition due to weak commitment and a lack of belonging (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Bean and Metzner (1985) reinforce the importance of engagement, especially in academic contexts. Although their model downplays the role of social integration for students who may commute, work part-time, or have family commitments, it underscores how academic engagement, through teaching quality, timely feedback, and curriculum relevance, is fundamental for encouraging persistence. In this model, disengagement is conceptualised as the student's psychological withdrawal from the educational process, even if they remain physically present. In contrast, Ozga and Sukhnandan's (1998) shift the focus from student deficits to the relational dynamic between students and their universities. They conceptualise engagement and persistence as the outcomes of an ongoing negotiation between what students expect from university and what they receive. Disparities between expectations and experience, especially regarding support, curriculum relevance, and inclusion, can disrupt this negotiation and lead to withdrawal. Engagement here is not just about student effort but about how institutions respond to and adapt to student needs. This is especially important in widening participation contexts where students may bring diverse expectations and backgrounds that differ from institutional norms (Moore et al., 2013; Reay, 2018).

Thomas (2012) discusses how student engagement should be considered relational and institutionally fostered, rather than purely behavioural or individual. Suggesting that inclusive practices can support students' engagement through fostering a higher sense of belonging. Moreover, Coates' (2007) engagement framework introduces a nuanced understanding by differentiating between types of engagement: academic, social, and emotional. These dimensions are interrelated and collectively shape a student's overall university experience. A student may be academically engaged (e.g., attending classes, completing assignments), but if they are socially isolated or emotionally distressed, their risk of withdrawal remains high (Belando-Montoro, 2022).

This multifaceted view challenges institutions to develop holistic strategies that address more than just academic metrics. Additionally, students who participate in co-curricular activities, engage with student unions, or take on leadership roles are more likely to persist (Evans et al., 2015). Similarly, Zepke (2014) argues that engagement is not just an input from students but an output of the learning environment, shaped by staff attitudes, institutional culture, and policy structures. They stress the importance of developing a learner-centred ethos where students feel supported and motivated. Subsequently, engagement also intersects with identity and equity. Consequently, first-generation students and those from working-class backgrounds may struggle to engage due to feelings of alienation or a mismatch between their cultural capital and institutional norms (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021).

vi. Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is widely recognised as a key determinant of student retention in higher education, particularly within increasingly marketized university systems such as the UK (Wong and Chapman, 2023). While satisfaction itself is a complex and multifaceted construct, it typically reflects students' perceptions of their academic experience, support systems, learning environment, and wider university life. As such, it functions both as an outcome of institutional processes and as a predictor of persistence, making it central to models of student retention (Bell and Brooks, 2018). Additionally, the preparedness of the student to enter HE is highlighted within

Nicholson's cyclical transition model (1990), which empathises that an individual must develop precise and realistic expectations of the environment that they are about to enter (De Clercq et al., 2018).

The role of satisfaction is implicitly present in Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, where retention is linked to academic and social integration. According to Tinto, students who engage meaningfully with their academic studies and feel connected to their peers and faculty are more likely to develop institutional commitment and thus remain enrolled. While he does not use the term 'satisfaction' explicitly, student satisfaction can be interpreted as an indicator of successful integration (Bell, 2022). A student satisfied with their course, teaching quality, and university environment is more likely to feel they 'fit' within the institution (Wong and Chapman, 2023). Similarly, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model, which focuses on non-traditional students, places satisfaction with the academic experience as a central determinant of retention. Therefore, satisfaction is not merely a by-product of integration but a direct influence on the decision to stay or leave. Widening participation policies have diversified the student body and brought in more students with complex external commitments and expectations (Breeze et al., 2020). Yorke and Longden (2008) found that satisfaction with the quality of teaching, assessment, and student support were among the most significant predictors of persistence. Students who felt their academic needs were met, and who perceived a clear value in their educational experience, were more likely to remain engaged and less likely to consider withdrawal.

Furthermore, Kuh's (2008) work on High-Impact Practices (HIPs) offers concrete strategies through which institutions can improve student satisfaction and retention simultaneously. HIPs include learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, capstone projects, and frequent feedback, all of which encourage deep learning and foster a strong connection between the student and the institution. Kuh argues that participation in HIPs correlates with increased engagement, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Reay, 2021). When students are involved in practices that challenge them academically while also providing support and a sense of purpose, they report higher satisfaction with their educational experience. This in turn strengthens the likelihood of retention, as students feel their time and financial

investment are worthwhile (Breeze et al., 2020). Initiatives inspired by HIPs, such as co-curricular transcripts, authentic assessments, and reflective learning portfolios, are increasingly being used to enhance both academic identity and institutional belonging (Sapir, 2022).

Moreover, the psychological model of retention by Bean and Eaton (2001) adds a cognitive dimension to this discussion. It suggests that student satisfaction is shaped by self-efficacy, perceived institutional support, and cognitive evaluations of the learning environment. When students feel confident, competent, and supported, they are more likely to interpret challenges as surmountable, contributing to both satisfaction and retention. While higher satisfaction does not guarantee retention, a pattern of dissatisfaction is a well-documented precursor to attrition, particularly in the first year of study when students are adjusting to the demands of academic life (Bell and Brooks, 2018).

vii. Institutional Belonging

The concept of belonging has emerged as a central theme in retention research, particularly in the UK context (Pedler et al., 2022). Within retention research, belonging is a multi-dimensional theme that spans emotional, social, and academic domains. Across theoretical models and empirical studies, it consistently emerges as a determinant of student retention. As such, students stay when they feel seen, valued, and supported within a community (Wilcox et al., 2005). Therefore, contemporary models of retention and attrition emphasise how institutional efforts to improve retention must prioritise creating conditions for all students to feel that they belong (Dutta and Bhatia, 2025).

According to Crawford et al. (2023) a students' sense of belonging, the feeling of being accepted, valued, and connected within their university community, acts as a mediating factor between personal attributes and institutional engagement. Belonging intersects with psychological safety, peer relationships, identity affirmation, and the student-staff dynamic (Pedler et al., 2022). A student's sense of belong is said to be constructed through their perceptions of their place within the educational community (Fernández

et al., 2023). Tinto (1993) argued that student retention depends heavily on academic and social integration, which are inextricably linked to the development of a sense of belonging. Similarly, Spady's (1970) emphasises normative congruence, suggesting that retention increases when students' values align with institutional culture. Therefore, in both models, belonging is implicit, yet foundational (Burke, 2019).

Belonging is not merely a psychological outcome but is shaped by institutional structures and practices (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). The What Works? Programme (Thomas, 2013), foregrounds belonging as the core condition for retention. Students are more likely to persist when universities foster a welcoming, inclusive, and relational culture, particularly through curriculum design, peer learning, and student support (Gilani and Thomas, 2025; Holt and Fifer, 2018). These findings challenged universities to shift from deficit models of student behaviour toward institutional change that promotes inclusion (Pedler et al., 2022). Recent UK-based research continues to confirm that students from minoritised or underrepresented backgrounds, first-generation entrants, students of colour, mature learners, often experience a lack of belonging due to structural marginalisation (Crawford et al., 2023). When belonging is fractured, students may disengage, even when academically capable (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023).

Academic belonging, feeling connected to course and lecturers, is said to be equally crucial (Zawada, 2024). According to Thomas (2012), inclusive pedagogy, early formative assessment, and accessible teaching styles help students see themselves as legitimate learners. This reinforces Tinto's assertion that faculty–student interaction plays a pivotal role in student integration.

Accordingly, higher education students with a stronger sense of belonging have been found to have a greater academic self-confidence, increased motivation, advanced levels of academic engagement and higher achievement (Maunder, 2018). The Model of Student persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980) discusses instructional quality, intellectual engagement, and academic support. These contribute to a student's academic self-concept, motivation, and commitment, which are key components of academic belonging (Fernández et al., 2023). Therefore, students who feel confident in their academic role are more likely to see themselves as legitimate members of the

academic community (Wilcox et al., 2005). Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) state that intermediate psychological outcomes, like sense of purpose, self-efficacy, and institutional commitment, or psychological belonging, are predictors of whether a student continues or withdraws.

Consequently, belonging is closely tied to recognition of identity. Crenshaw's (1991) framework of intersectionality illuminates how race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability can affect who feels they belong. When students perceive that their identities are marginalised or misrecognised, they may feel alienated from institutional norms. Belonging is thus not only social but symbolic, requiring the university to validate diverse identities through curriculum, support systems, and institutional messaging (Reay, 2021).

2.3.3 – Micro-Level Individual and Psychological Factors

i. Motivation and Goal Commitment

Motivation plays a foundational role in influencing students' decisions to persist or withdraw. Tinto's (1993) model identifies goal commitment as a key determinant of persistence, emphasising the importance of clear academic and career objectives. Students with a strong sense of purpose, often linked to career aspirations or personal fulfilment, are more likely to continue through challenges (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Conversely, when academic expectations or perceived course relevance do not align with students' motivations, disengagement may occur (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998).

Research distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Morris et al., 2022). Intrinsic motivation, driven by interest or personal growth, is associated with deeper engagement and greater resilience (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation, such as career progression or financial stability, can also be protective, particularly for mature or first-generation students (Reay, 2018). For example, career-focused students often perceive their degree as an essential credential, fostering persistence despite adversity (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

However, motivation is not static. It fluctuates in response to academic feedback, social experiences, and external pressures (Kelly et al., 2024). Therefore, motivational orientations are socially influenced; they emerge from the intersection of personal aspirations and institutional signals of recognition, inclusion, and success (Pedler et al., 2022). Consequentially, understanding motivation in the context of retention requires recognising both individual agency and the socio-institutional processes that sustain or erode commitment (Rafsanjani et al., 2024).

ii. Resilience, Academic Buoyancy, and Self-Efficacy

Resilience, the capacity to recover from setbacks, persist in the face of difficulty, and adapt to new or challenging environments, has become a significant focus in the discourse on student retention in higher education (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Tuero et al., 2024). As the demographic profile of the UK student population diversifies and external pressures on learners intensify, institutions are increasingly recognising resilience as a critical psychological and social asset underpinning student persistence (Abulfaraj et al., 2024; Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Resilience is particularly important during transitional periods such as the first year of study, which is often marked by adjustment to academic expectations, financial stress, social displacement, and emotional upheaval (Brewer et al., 2019; de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). Students who possess or develop strong resilience are more likely to engage meaningfully with academic content, seek help when needed, and maintain a sense of purpose despite adverse experiences (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). Research also indicates that resilience is not simply an individual trait, but an outcome influenced by environmental and relational factors such as institutional support, peer networks, and the responsiveness of teaching staff (García-Martínez et al., 2022; Tuero et al., 2024).

In the context of widening participation, resilience plays a mediating role between structural disadvantage and academic success (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). First-generation students, mature learners, care leavers, and students from racially minoritised backgrounds often face heightened challenges that can undermine academic confidence and belonging (Abulfaraj et al., 2024; Reay, 2018). For these

groups, resilience is not about conforming to dominant academic cultures but navigating and resisting them while maintaining engagement (Tuero et al., 2024). Scholars have warned, however, that framing resilience in purely individualistic terms can obscure systemic inequities and shift responsibility away from institutions (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). Instead, resilience should be understood as a relational capacity that universities have a duty to nurture (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). Resilience is also closely tied to the concept of academic buoyancy, the everyday capacity to deal with typical academic challenges such as poor grades, deadline stress, or feedback criticism (Putwain et al., 2012). Students who are resilient or buoyant are not only more likely to stay but also to thrive within the academic environment. They are better equipped to interpret setbacks as part of the learning process rather than as evidence of inadequacy or failure (Putwain et al., 2024).

Furthermore, higher education environments can cultivate resilience through curriculum design, pedagogical approach, and student support structures (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). Embedding challenge, autonomy, and feedback into learning processes can strengthen students' confidence and ability to manage failure (Brewer et al., 2019). Similarly, mentoring schemes, peer learning, and mental health services provide scaffolding that enables students to persist even when external stressors are high (Ceglédi et al., 2022). Importantly, institutional efforts to foster resilience must be inclusive and affirming, considering diverse cultural backgrounds and lived experiences (Advance HE, 2021).

iii. Belonging and Social Integration

Peer belonging has consistently been identified as a key predictor of student continuation. Tinto (1975, 1993) argued that successful persistence depends on academic and social integration, the extent to which students feel connected to both the intellectual and social fabric of the institution. When students experience alienation or marginalisation, their likelihood of withdrawal increases (Thomas, 2012; Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Social integration encompasses peer relationships, participation in learning communities, and involvement in extra-curricular activities. Research by Wilcox et al. (2005) found that friendships, particularly those formed early in the academic experience, were crucial in helping students manage the transition to university life. These relationships provide emotional support, practical help, and validation, all of which foster belonging and engagement. However, not all students experience equal opportunities for integration. Commuter students, carers, and mature learners may find it difficult to participate in campus-based activities (Turner et al., 2024).

Additionally, peer networks play a critical role in fostering belonging. Students who develop friendships, find communities, or engage in extracurricular activities are more likely to feel emotionally connected to their institution (Maunder, 2018). The development of friendships and informal support networks helps students navigate both academic and social challenges, contributing to emotional wellbeing and institutional commitment (Wilcox et al., 2005). Belonging is not merely about presence within a space, but about being recognised, accepted, and included functions often fulfilled through meaningful peer interactions (Thomas, 2012). For first year and first-generation students in particular, peers can act as cultural translators, reduce feelings of alienation and increase confidence in navigating university norms and expectations (Maunder, 2018). Research suggests that students who lack peer connections are more likely to feel isolated, contributing to lower satisfaction and increased risk of withdrawal (Kelly et al., 2024). This resonates with Bean and Metzner's (1985) findings that social involvement mitigates nontraditional students' withdrawal. For commuter students or those with external responsibilities, reduced opportunities to build peer networks can heighten isolation and attrition risk (Hallam, 2023; Thomas and Jones, 2017).

Overall, if an individual does not fully connect across all factors, this can have an impact on their academic performance, social integration, motivation and attrition (Kelly et al., 2024). Therefore, creating a sense of belonging and supporting the transitional period is thought to be crucially important to persistence, progression and success (Morgan, 2022). Maunder (2018) suggests that the successful development of a place within the new environment is crucial for first year students and if the student fails to successfully integrate into the new environment this would have ongoing

consequences. This is further supported by research that looks at the university transition (Morgan, 2022), which consider how students can be effectively supported through the transitional stages. Furthermore, it is notable that best practice on student induction looks at the effective integration of students into their new environments (Ahn, 2025; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023).

iv. Student Attributes

In many foundational and contemporary models of student retention and attrition, the attributes of the student, both fixed (e.g., age, gender, socio-economic background) and malleable (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, engagement), are considered central to understanding patterns of continuation and withdrawal (Burke, 2019; Kerby, 2015).

These models vary in the degree to which they view student attributes as internal dispositions, contextualised identities, or as dynamic responses to institutional environments (Aljohani, 2016). Across the literature, models of attrition acknowledge that student continuation is shaped by a dynamic interaction between personal factors, social integration, and academic engagement (Ahn et al., 2025). Attributes such as motivation, resilience, self-efficacy, socio-economic background, and identity markers (e.g., age, ethnicity, or caring responsibilities) are consistently found to influence persistence decisions (Tinto, 1993; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Thomas, 2012).

Students who enter university with strong academic skills, clear career goals, and a belief in their ability to succeed are better positioned to engage with both the curriculum and the wider university environment. Tinto's (1993) widely cited model of institutional departure highlights the importance of academic and social integration, proposing that students are more likely to persist when they successfully adapt to university life. However, Tinto also recognised that this process is influenced by pre-entry attributes, such as academic preparedness and intentions. Attributes such as intrinsic motivation and grit (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021) enable students to manage the inevitable challenges of higher education, while also fostering a sense of belonging that supports retention.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model further expands the understanding of student characteristics by focusing on non-traditional students, those who may not engage in the typical campus-based experience. This model places greater weight on external variables such as financial status, work commitments, and family responsibilities, as well as psychological outcomes like stress and satisfaction. From this perspective, student attributes include life circumstances and structural constraints, which directly affect the ability to continue (Burke, 2019; Kerby, 2015).

Sociological models, such as Spady (1970;71) and Draper (2002) also emphasise student background but add a valuable dimension by introducing the role of normative congruence, how well a student's values align with those of the institution (Aljohani, 2016; Dutta and Bhatia, 2025). Attributes such as political beliefs, religious identity, or gender expression may affect how students experience inclusion, recognition, and legitimacy within the academic setting (Burke, 2019). Where a mismatch is perceived, the likelihood of withdrawal increases (Spady, 1970). Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) recognises that student attributes are multi-layered, and that exclusion may arise through the compounding effects of race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability (Zawada, 2024).

Recent empirical studies further affirm that student agency and personal identity are central to understanding retention (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). Factors such as self-regulation, coping strategies, and goal orientation often differentiate students who persist from those who consider leaving (Neria, 2023). Students who possess the skills and confidence to seek help, plan, and bounce back from failure demonstrate a psychological readiness for academic life (Flake and Gabriel, 2023). However, these attributes are not static or evenly distributed, they are shaped by students' backgrounds, prior educational experiences, and access to resources (Reay, 2018).

However, overemphasis on student attributes can risk individualising responsibility for continuation, thereby obscuring systemic inequalities (Neria, 2023). While personal resilience and motivation are important, they cannot compensate for a lack of institutional support or culturally inclusive pedagogies (Pedler et al., 2022). The Student/Institution Negotiation Model (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998) recognises this tension by framing retention as a co-produced outcome, where both students and

universities must adapt. From this standpoint, institutions have a duty to recognise and support diverse attributes, rather than expect students to conform to narrow norms of success (Fernández et al., 2023).

2.3.4 – Interconnections and Summary of Micro-Level Factors

Micro-level factors are integral to understanding why students persist or withdraw. Motivation, resilience, and belonging represent the psychological and social dimensions of continuation, but their influence is contingent on broader institutional and structural contexts (Kelly et al., 2024). The literature demonstrates that students' personal characteristics, dispositions, and life circumstances intersect with academic environments to shape individual trajectories (Addison and Williams, 2023; Burke, 2019).

Through a realist constructivist lens (Elder-Vass, 2012; Miller, 2016), these factors are understood as emergent phenomena - the outcome of interactions between structure, culture, and agency (Maxwell, 2012). Students construct meaning from their experiences, yet these meanings are constrained by real-world inequalities and institutional structures. Recognising this correlation provides a foundation for developing holistic models of retention that reflect both the complexity and individuality of student experience.

The next section discusses the demographic and personal circumstances that can influence a student's likelihood of discontinuation. Highlighting key research that has been undertaken to explore these risk factors and how they can lead to attrition.

2.4 – Demographic Characteristics and Personal Circumstances

Factors that Influence Retention

There has been considerable research highlighting factors increasing the likelihood of 'dropout'. Social class, gender and ethnic minority status are all seen to impact on dropout rates (HEFCE, 2013, 2014). The OfS has introduced the Equality of Opportunity

risk register to address some of the sector wide risks that may affect student's opportunity to succeed and access HE. Attrition is caused by an interaction of the institution's societal pressures and personal characteristics (Kember and Fan, 2023). Included in these personal characteristics are the pre-entry attributes of the student, which focus on previous educational input, family history and the individual's own abilities (Morgan, 2024). The individual's values, academic intentions and commitment to the educational process then arise from these pre-entry attributes (Cotton et al, 2017). Understanding of the experience of students of different backgrounds has been greatly enhanced as has the appreciation of how a broader array of cultural, economic, social, and institutional forces, shape student retention (Bradley, 2017; Nieuwoudt et al., 2025). It was once argued that retention required students to break away from past communities, it is now suggested that for some if not many students the ability to remain connected to their past communities is essential to their persistence (Cotton et al, 2017).

Carroll et al. (2009) outlined three distinct categories of factors that are both facilitators and barriers to student retention, these categories are situational factors, institutional factors, and dispositional factors (Ajjawi et al., 2020). Situational factors encompass life circumstances like physical health, employment status, and family responsibilities (Bowman et al., 2019). Dispositional factors, on the other hand, apply to individual characteristics, including self-confidence, attitudes, and beliefs (Naylor et al., 2018). The third category, institutional factors, comprises elements within the control of educational institutions, such as policies, support programs, financial aid, and staff responsiveness (Carroll et al., 2009). Understanding these multifaceted factors is essential for developing comprehensive strategies aimed at enhancing student retention in higher education settings (Bowman et al, 2019). In addition, there are attributes associated with belonging that have been frequently attributed to student success and completion (Pedler et al., 2022). Individuals who possess a strong sense of belongingness are predisposed to encounter heightened positive psychological functioning, positive academic outcomes, motivation, and overall greater well-being (Crawford et al, 2023). Moreover, literature suggests that characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, health, and socioeconomic status can have an implication for risk of non-

completion (Advance HE, 2021; HESA, 2023), these factors will be explored in greater detail below.

i. Mental Health and Student Wellbeing

Mental health has become one of the most critical determinants of student retention in UK higher education. Increasing levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout among university students have placed considerable pressure on institutions to provide adequate mental health support (Liu et al., 2022). According to Universities UK (2022), demand for student counselling services has risen by over 50% in the past five years, and suicide rates among full-time students have become an alarming concern (ONS, 2021).

Students experiencing mental distress are more likely to disengage from their studies, perform poorly academically, and consider withdrawal (Copeland et al., 2021). Mental health challenges disproportionately affect marginalised student groups, including care-experienced students, those with disabilities, and students from low-income households (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). The relationship between mental health and retention is both direct, through missed assessments, disengagement, and dropout, and indirect, as students with poor mental wellbeing often avoid help-seeking, further exacerbating their isolation (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Recent policy responses, including the Student Mental Health Charter, promote whole institution approaches that embed mental health into academic design, personal tutoring, and wellbeing services (Student Minds, 2020). However, variation in institutional resources means that access to support services remains uneven. Post-1992 institutions with higher numbers of widening participation students may face greater demand yet have fewer resources per student (UUK, 2022).

ii. First-Generation Students

First-generation students, defined as a student whose parents did not attend or complete university and first in family students, those who are the first in their family to

attend university, often face distinctive challenges that impact their ability to persist in higher education (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Research has shown that first-gen students may lack access to the informal rules of academic success that are transmitted intergenerationally in middle-class families (Reay, 2018). This absence of familial capital can result in difficulties navigating academic systems, building relationships with staff, or managing workload expectations (Naylor et al., 2018).

Using Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical concepts, scholars have argued that many first-gen students experience a misalignment between their inherited dispositions and the dominant institutional culture of higher education (Reay, 2018). This misrecognition can lead to feelings of not belonging or impostor syndrome, weakening their sense of institutional commitment (Holden et al., 2021). The cultural capital embedded in the university space often privileges those who can speak the language of the academy, engage confidently in seminars, and navigate bureaucratic systems, skills not always accessible to students from working-class backgrounds (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021).

Although many UK universities promote widening participation through outreach and recruitment, much less attention is paid to post-entry support for first-gen students. Research by O'Shea et al. (2024) underscores the importance of relational pedagogy, a practice that emphasises empathy, dialogue, and staff-student connection, as an effective response to retention challenges in this group.

iii. Socioeconomic Status and Structural Inequalities

Socioeconomic disadvantage remains one of the most consistent predictors of non-continuation in UK higher education. Students from low-income households often face multiple, overlapping barriers to retention, including financial instability, part-time work commitments, housing precarity, and first-generation status (Crawford et al., 2023).

According to HESA (2023), the non-continuation rate for students from POLAR4 Quintile 1 (the most disadvantaged) is significantly higher than for those from Quintile 5.

Moreover, students from backgrounds with limited or no exposure to higher education may find adapting to university life more challenging than their counterparts who have

familial or peer experiences with higher education (Hagler et al., 2023). The concern extends to the pressure of adapting to university, particularly for first generation students, lacking familial examples of the university experience. These adaptability issues bring forth considerations about students' expectations of university life (Cotton et al., 2017). Additionally, research has found that areas of attainment inequality are shortened if students complete a foundation year, as this allows for the student to complete an extra year to develop the university specific skills (Zhang, 2019).

Bourdieu's (1984) theory of capital is again useful in explaining these patterns. Economic capital (e.g., the ability to afford textbooks, laptops, transport), cultural capital (e.g., familiarity with academic discourse), and social capital (e.g., access to professional networks) are unevenly distributed across class lines. While widening participation policies have increased access to higher education, the structures of the university have not always adapted to accommodate the lived realities of working-class students (Breeze et al., 2020).

In addition to financial pressure, low-SES students often experience what Reay (2018) describes as stranger status, a deep sense of alienation in predominantly middle-class institutions. This estrangement can be particularly acute in elite universities where the student body is less diverse (Allen et al., 2024). Conversely, post-1992 universities, which cater to a greater proportion of low-income and local students, may offer more inclusive environments, though often with fewer resources to support struggling students (Graham, 2022).

iv. The influence of Gender

Gender is still commonly associated with attrition, with males not only being less likely to attend university but also being far more likely to drop out (Ceglédi et al., 2022). Fernández et al. (2023) argues that part of this trend is aspirational, with females being aware of the great financial benefit of university. Female graduates earn on average three times more than non-graduate females do, with males earning two times more than their non-graduate counterparts do (HEPI, 2016). There is also the suggestion that an increase in female graduates is due to the necessity of a degree for what are viewed

as traditionally female careers such as nursing and teaching. The HEP report (2016) goes on to suggest that just discussing the issue in terms of gender without considering other factors reduces policy making to a zero-sum game. Therefore, it is not possible to tackle the rates at which different groups reach higher education unless and until you recognise the linkages between different issues. The group least likely to make it to university are poor white men, each of those three characteristics (poor, white, male) matters. If the focus is on poverty or ethnicity but ignores gender, it is unlikely to even up the gaps. An alternative argument by Ferreira (2003), suggests the impact of gender has often more to do with the split of the university course and environment. If a school or course has a higher balance of one gender over another then the gender in the minority is more likely to have poor attrition rates. However, Wilshaw (2023) suggests there is less impact on attrition and more on attainment in female dominated groups.

v. Students with Adult Caring Responsibilities

Students with caring responsibilities, those who provide unpaid care to family members due to illness, disability, or age, represent a frequently overlooked demographic in retention literature. Recent estimates suggest that around 6% of UK university students identify as carers, though the actual number may be higher due to underreporting (Carers Trust, 2022). These students often face acute time pressures, emotional labour, and role conflict, all of which significantly increase their risk of withdrawal (Bowman et al., 2019).

Many carers are women, often from racially minoritised or low-income backgrounds, who experience layered disadvantage (Webber and Dismore, 2021). The dual demands of academic study and caregiving are seldom recognised in institutional structures, which are typically modelled on the “traditional” full-time, campus-based student (Reay, 2021). Students with caring responsibilities are more likely to study part-time, at local or post-1992 universities, and via flexible delivery modes (HEPI, 2021;). However, these institutions often lack the tailored pastoral support or flexible assessment structures that carers require to succeed. Institutional good practice includes offering caring-aware support teams, adjustments to deadlines, and inclusive personal tutoring

systems. Carer-friendly policies, embedded within Access and Participation Plans (APPs), can help normalise recognition and accommodation of caring roles (Moore et al., 2023). However, implementation remains inconsistent across the sector, and few universities systematically track outcomes for student carers (Carers UK, 2022).

vi. Student Parents: Balancing Study and Family Life

Student parents, much like student carers, face considerable challenges in balancing academic responsibilities with family life. While precise figures vary, recent surveys estimate that over one in ten students in UK higher education are parents, with a higher proportion concentrated in post-1992 institutions and among mature learners (NUS, 2015; HEPI, 2021). These students often juggle complex schedules involving childcare, school runs, paid employment, and study commitments, leading to high stress levels and, in many cases, interrupted study or early withdrawal (Webber and Dismore, 2021).

Student parents are more likely to study part-time and live off campus, which may limit their engagement with university life and reduce opportunities for integration. Moreover, many report a lack of visibility and institutional understanding, with limited access to affordable childcare, inflexible timetabling, and stigma around their status (Reilly et al., 2023). McCulloh (2022) suggests that support measures such as family-friendly campuses, childcare bursaries, flexible assessments, and targeted wellbeing services are effective in enhancing retention among this group. Embedding parent-aware approaches into institutional strategies and APPs is increasingly seen as an equity issue, with retention implications tied directly to broader commitments around inclusion and student success (UUK, 2022).

vii. Homesickness and Place-Based Disconnection

According to Biasi et al., (2018), homesickness is a common emotional response among students transitioning into higher education, particularly for those living away from home for the first time. Characterised by feelings of longing, anxiety, sadness, and disconnection from familiar environments and relationships, homesickness can

significantly affect student wellbeing and engagement, both of which are critical to retention (Boddy, 2020).

For many students, the shift to university marks a profound change in their social, emotional, and physical environments (Baisac et al., 2022). The loss of familiar support networks and routines may lead to difficulty adjusting, particularly during the early stages of transition (Morgan, 2022). Homesickness can result in a diminished capacity to form new social connections, reduced academic concentration, and lower levels of motivation. Students who feel isolated are less likely to engage meaningfully with university life, both socially and academically, which in turn compromises their sense of belonging, a key predictor of student persistence (Boddy, 2020).

Moreover, homesickness often intersects with other risk factors, such as, coming from a low-income background, or being the first in the family to attend university. These students may already face challenges in navigating unfamiliar academic cultures and expectations (Reay, 2018), and homesickness can further exacerbate their vulnerability. For students from minoritised backgrounds, cultural dissonance and lack of representation within the institution may intensify the emotional strain of separation from home (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Reay, 2021).

However, despite its prevalence, research suggests that homesickness is often under-recognised in institutional retention strategies (Baisac et al., 2022). This oversight can result in a lack of timely interventions, leading some students to silently disengage (Boddy, 2020). Additionally, students who leave university due to homesickness often cite not just the emotional toll, but also the perception that their struggles were not taken seriously (Li and Carroll, 2020).

viii. Commuting and live at home students

Commuter students, many of whom live at home for financial or cultural reasons, face a different set of retention risks. These students, often from working-class, first-generation, and racially minoritised backgrounds, may struggle to engage fully with campus life due to time constraints, travel fatigue, or a sense of marginality (Thomas and Jones, 2017). Commuter students often feel they do not belong to the university nor to their home environments, which can inhibit both social integration and academic

identity formation (Turner et al., 2024). Commuter students, who often leave campus immediately after lectures and may not participate in extracurricular activities, can find it difficult to establish peer relationships or develop a sense of belonging (Thomas and Jones, 2017).

Furthermore, the experience of commuting can have practical and psychological effects that indirectly impact retention. Long or unreliable commutes contribute to student fatigue, lateness, and reduced attendance, issues that can weaken academic performance and engagement (Hallam, 2023). The physical separation between university and home may also inhibit the psychological transition to student identity, particularly for first-generation students or those from non-traditional backgrounds (Turner et al., 2024). As Reay (2021) argues, remaining in the home environment may limit the development of autonomy and academic confidence, reinforcing a sense of outsider status.

Financial pressures and cultural expectations also shape the commuter student experience (Thomas and Jones, 2017). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to commute to save on accommodation costs, but this economic decision may come at the expense of their academic and social development (Southall et al., 2016). For some, particularly women and students from minority ethnic communities, cultural and familial expectations may encourage them to remain in the home environment, sometimes leading to restricted participation in university life and conflicting identities (Hallam, 2023).

ix. Care leavers and estranged students

Those who have been in care have been found to have higher rates of attrition than their peers. As with other students who lack family support they can suffer from financial difficulties, according to Jackson and Cameron (2012), care leavers are more likely to rely on part-time work to fund their studies, which can detract from their academic focus and performance. The financial stress can lead to higher dropout rates as care leavers may prioritise immediate financial needs over long-term educational goals.

Additionally care leavers lack a family support system, they cannot rely on family members for support and often other siblings have had similar higher education experiences and therefore lack the social capital to offer advice and support (Stein, 2006). Navigating the academic environment can be particularly challenging for care leavers, who may lack the guidance and preparation that other students receive from their families (Jones-Devitt et al., 2020). Many care leavers have had disrupted educational experiences prior to entering higher education, which can leave them less prepared for the academic demands of university life (Jackson et al., 2005). The lack of academic preparedness, coupled with limited access to advice and mentorship, can make it difficult for care leavers to adapt to and succeed in higher education.

Furthermore, the trauma and instability associated with being in care can result in higher levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. According to Marvell and Child (2023), care leavers are more likely to experience mental health problems compared to their peers, which can adversely affect their academic performance and persistence. The stigma and stress related to their background can also hinder their ability to seek help and access mental health services. As does the assumption that their trauma is their entire identity, leading to stigma seeking support (Marvell and Child, 2023)

Estranged students, defined as those who have no communicative relationship with their biological or adoptive parents due to a permanent breakdown in the relationship, face unique challenges that can significantly impact their retention in higher education (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021). One issue for estranged students is financial instability. Without parental support, estranged students often struggle to cover tuition fees, accommodation costs, and living expenses. Many students face financial difficulties that can lead to part-time employment, which in turn detracts from study time and academic performance (Stand Alone, 2015). The lack of financial security can cause significant stress and anxiety, further impacting their ability to focus on their studies and increasing the likelihood of dropping out (Spacey, 2019).

Estranged students frequently report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to their peers (Samuels, 2018). The pressure to manage their academic responsibilities without familial support exacerbates these mental health challenges.

Furthermore, the stigma associated with estrangement can prevent students from seeking help, thereby exacerbating their difficulties (Spacey, 2019). The absence of a reliable support system is a significant barrier for estranged students. Universities often assume that students have some level of parental support, especially during holidays and emergencies. Estranged students, however, may have nowhere to go during university closures and may struggle to find accommodation and resources during these periods (Blake, 2015).

x. Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities face significant structural and institutional barriers in higher education that can adversely affect their ability to persist and succeed. In the UK, over 16% of students in higher education declare a disability, with the proportion continuing to rise due to improved disclosure practices and widening access efforts (Advance HE, 2021). Despite policy protections under the Equality Act 2010, disabled students are statistically more likely to withdraw from university than their non-disabled peers (Office for Students, 2023). These disparities reflect the complex intersection of accessibility, support provision, and institutional culture.

Retention challenges for disabled students vary by type of impairment. Students with mental health conditions, for instance, often experience fluctuating engagement due to episodic illness and limited access to timely support (Brown, 2021). Those with specific learning differences or physical impairments may face difficulties accessing appropriate adjustments, such as alternative formats or exam accommodations, particularly in large or under-resourced institutions (Holloway, 2022). Research highlights that inadequate communication between academic staff and disability services can result in gaps in provision and feelings of exclusion (Hibbert, 2020).

Moreover, disabled students are more likely to experience social isolation, stigma, and marginalisation, all of which undermine a sense of belonging, widely recognised as critical to student retention (Thomas, 2022). Effective retention strategies include proactive support planning, inclusive curriculum design, and institutional cultures that

normalise diversity rather than treat disability as a deficit. Embedding accessibility as a core institutional principle, rather than as a reactive service, is essential to promoting equity and improving continuation outcomes for disabled students (Advance HE, 2021; UUK, 2022).

2.4.1 – Conclusions

Overall individual demographic characteristics, including age, socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, and caring responsibilities, shape how students experience and respond to higher education (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Stevenson, 2020). These characteristics interact with institutional and structural conditions, influencing both risk and protective factors for continuation.

While demographic factors can increase risk, they do not determine outcomes. A realist social constructivist interpretation emphasises that students interpret these circumstances in ways that shape their agency. Supportive networks, role models, and self-awareness can transform potential barriers into sources of strength, echoing asset-based perspectives that focus on what students bring, rather than what they lack (Yosso, 2005).

2.5 – Moving Beyond the Deficit Lens of Retention

Research into student retention has undergone a significant transformation over recent decades. Early models, such as Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration theory, viewed attrition largely through the lens of individual student failure to integrate academically or socially. Similarly, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model focused on external and psychological variables but still framed non-persistence as a consequence of student inadequacy, adaptation issues, or lack of motivation. These frameworks, while foundational, implicitly placed responsibility on the student to conform to institutional expectations, constructing withdrawal as a personal failure rather than a shared institutional issue (Burke, 2019).

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly shifted this narrative. Researchers such as Thomas (2012) argue for a co-constructive understanding of retention, where the university environment and institutional practices play a central role in fostering student belonging and success. Initiatives like the UK's What Works? programme reflect this move towards recognising the responsibility of institutions in cultivating supportive, inclusive, and engaging educational environments. The focus has gradually evolved toward understanding how systems, cultures, and pedagogical practices influence student experiences and outcome.

However, despite these progressive developments, much of the literature and institutional practice still operates within a deficit paradigm, focusing predominantly on why students leave, rather than why they stay (Bradley, 2017; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). There remains a tendency to centre analysis on at-risk groups and individual risk factors (e.g. first-generation status, low socio-economic background, disability, or mature age), which while important, may inadvertently frame such characteristics as problematic or abnormal (Neria, 2023). As O'Shea (2016) notes, framing these attributes in isolation risks reducing students to their vulnerabilities, rather than recognising their resilience, strengths, and contributions. Furthermore, much of the literature that does explore retention-enhancing strategies tends to do so through narrow lenses, focusing on specific groups, interventions, or institutions. For instance, studies may examine peer mentoring schemes for commuter students or employability modules in post-1992 universities, without exploring how these interventions translate across broader and more diverse contexts. This fragmented approach limits our understanding of how to construct holistic, scalable models that respond to the complexity of student lives across the sector. Burke (2012) and Reay (2021) argue that retention must be understood through an intersectional lens that considers how overlapping identities (gender, race, class, care status) shape student experience and engagement.

Moreover, the focus on retention as a measurable outcome frequently aligns with institutional performance metrics, which can obscure the deeper relational and cultural factors that underpin persistence (Bradley and Quigley, 2023). In marketized systems like UK higher education, where student satisfaction surveys and continuation data are

linked to funding and reputational indicators, there is a risk that retention strategies become technocratic rather than transformative (Bell, 2022; Mccaig, 2018). Therefore, to advance retention research meaningfully, scholars and practitioners must move beyond identifying problems within students to examining and reconfiguring institutional practices, power structures, and curricula (Nieuwoudt et al., 2025; Reay, 2021). A strengths-based, relational, and systemic approach is required, one that values student voice, understands belonging as dynamic and co-created, and attends to the broader socio-cultural and political dimensions of higher education (Almond, 2023; Daily et al., 2025).

2.6 – Research Aims

The literature review has strengthened the research perspective that retention is an intersectional concept that contains multifaceted factors. Although retention has been researched throughout the last 50 years (Burke, 2019), there is still a lack of understanding on what works to support students. This reinforces the notion that leaving is not the mirror image of staying (Tinto, 2006) and therefore to understand why people stay, there is a need to investigate what kept students who had wanted to leave (Bradley, 2017; Kelly et al., 2024).

2.7 – Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed the literature on student retention in UK higher education, integrating theoretical models, research findings, and policy frameworks. It has argued that retention is shaped by a complex interaction of individual, institutional, and structural factors, which are unevenly experienced across student demographics and institutional types. While many UK universities have expanded support services and embedded retention within access and participation plans, disparities persist, particularly for first-generation students, carers, student parents, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The literature increasingly recognises that retention is a social justice issue, requiring not just individual support, but cultural transformation

and structural accountability. Therefore, research in this area must centre student voice, intersectional experience, and institutional reflexivity.

The following chapter will detail the positionality of this research through an exploration of a changing insider status, before moving on to the chosen methodology and research phases and results.

Chapter Three: Reflexive Researcher Positionality: A Changing Insider Status.

This chapter discusses my positionality as a researcher, through the lens of my changing insider status (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). I will consider the ways in which this may have influenced the design, analysis, findings, and conclusions of the research. A substantial part of the change in positionality is due to my shifting role in higher education, throughout this doctoral study. This has been characterised as a move from being a research student to a sessional lecturer, full-time lecturer, finally taking on a leadership role in my area of study. Additionally, my positionality is formed through my own educational experiences in HE, in particular my unsuccessful undergraduate experience, and my doubts during my successful undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and this doctoral experience.

The importance of a reflexive stance in research is acknowledged by methodologists (Dodson, 2019; Fook and Gardner, 2007; Rabbidge, 2017). Reflexivity involves examining your own personal, political, and intellectual backgrounds as a researcher, and explicitly identifying your position relative to your research participants (Patnaik, 2013). May and Perry (2017) discuss how reflexivity, explains, elaborates and deliberates the way research is theoretically contextualised. This is echoed by Czerniawski and Thomason (2025), who suggest that it is a vital skill within a doctoral study as students evolve into emergent researchers. Furthermore, Savolainen et al., (2023) advise that reflexivity needs to move beyond simple statements of researcher positionality within opening paragraphs of studies or declarations of conflict of interest.

The concept of positionality in qualitative research acknowledges that all knowledge is situated, shaped by the researcher's social identity, experiences, and relationship to the research context (Berger, 2015). The insider/outsider doctrine provides a framework for understanding this relational positioning, exploring the extent to which a researcher shares membership, identity, or experience with the participants being studied (Merton, 1972). An insider researcher holds shared cultural, social, or experiential characteristics with participants, which can enhance rapport, access, and depth of

understanding (Yvonne Bulk and Collins, 2023). Insider status allows the researcher to recognise subtle meanings, non-verbal cues, and emotional nuances that might otherwise be overlooked (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

According to Merton (1972: p24) overemphasis on the insight and subjectivity afforded to 'insider' and 'outsider' status is "deceptively simple and sociologically fallacious".

Therefore, it is important to question the presumed authenticity often afforded to researchers with sociologically privileged status (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

Reflexivity allows for researchers to critically and recursively analyse their position to the research process (Ademolu, 2023; Berger, 2015). Savvides et al., (2014) advise that it is important for the researcher to acknowledge how their biases, assumptions, values, interests and individual preferences influence and combine with methodological decisions and knowledge claims. Researchers must also continuously challenge these value laden beliefs, especially as they will be modified and adapted during data collection and analysis (Ademolu, 2023; DeLyser, 2001).

3.1 – The Role of the Researcher

Buchanan and Bryman (2007) consider the location of the researcher to the research subject; they argue that the identity of a researcher influences the choice of methodological framework of any study. This reflexive influence extends to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data itself. Researchers and their subjects are interactively linked; knowledge is value laden, and any claims made by a research project are relative to the values of the researcher, regardless of the methodological framework (DeLyser, 2001; Hayfield and Huxley, 2015). Working in several university roles during this study has inevitably influenced my approach. This has been characterised by shifting insights into policy and practice, coupled with a change in my relationships with research participants as I transitioned from a student to a member of university staff. As mentioned above, this incorporates the current context experiences of being a student both from a successful and unsuccessful position. Making my role as a researcher 'uniquely valuable' (Adam, 2013), for this study, due to my understanding of the impact that doubts can have, even if seemingly overcome, and the potentially

stigmatising impact of having struggled in HE. Whilst also adding to the complexities due to the potential '*double-edged sword*' of insider knowledge (Mercer, 2007).

3.1.1 – Potential Impact of the Researcher on the Study

This research does not claim to be wholly objective; the decision to use realist social constructivism as a methodology is an indication of this. Within a realist social constructivist framework, reflexivity is understood as a means of acknowledging that while an external social reality exists, the researcher's access to it is inevitably mediated by personal and contextual interpretation (Bogna et al., 2020; Maxwell, 2012). Subjectivity as part of this research methodology allows for the re-evaluation of ways of knowing and how the developing theories on student retention can be understood (Elder-Vass, 2012; Miller, 2016). The influences and the impact that my identity will have on the research is acknowledged, with an assertion that personal involvement in the research process is an opportunity rather than an intrusion (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Reflexive interplay is crucial in ensuring transparency of the research and acknowledges how researcher interactions with participants may have affected the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The relativist ontology of realist social constructivism accommodates this ongoing reflexivity, and the constructionist epistemology enables the recognition of this as part of the research process (Elder-Vass, 2012). Therefore, rather than striving for detachment, reflexivity recognises that the researcher's subjectivity is both a resource and a lens through which meaning is co-constructed (Holmes, 2020).

3.2 – Exploring Insider Research

Insider research is described by Greene (2014) as a study or project that is conducted by a researcher who is part of the culture or group that is being investigated, which could be considered the case for this study, both as a student who left and considered leaving their studies and as an academic staff member for the 'home' university used in phase two. Therefore, this section will integrate what it means to conduct insider research and how it may affect the research processes (Berkovic et al., 2020). Toy-

Cronin (2018) states that insider research has a long history of use in education settings and by academics. Breen (2007) suggests that it is possible to be an insider of experience rather than a group member, and in this way parts of my experience can be said to be shared with my participants, due to my own unsuccessful and challenging HE experiences.

Traditionally, it was felt that researchers should maintain detachment from their subjects (Mercer, 2007; Savvides et al., 2014). This principle is consistent with the scientific tradition, which demands objectivity; from a positivist perspective, being an insider can compromise the validity of research. This aligns with Merton's (1972, cited in Mercer, 2007) 'outsider doctrine,' which asserts that only neutral observers can objectively assess human interactions. The assumption being that if a researcher cannot remain objective, their findings are likely to be distorted (Yvonne Bulk and Collins, 2023). This view follows a realist ontological perspective, which posits that an independent truth exists and can only be established through complete impartiality (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008).

In contrast, insider research aligns more closely with a constructivist paradigm, which assumes the existence of multiple realities (Berkovic et al., 2020). Within this paradigm, it is acknowledged that researchers play a role in constructing realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This does not imply that insider research is without challenges, Mercer (2007) notes that insiders must avoid the risk of 'myopia,' where they assume their perspective is universal rather than personal. However, such concerns are more easily addressed in conventional qualitative research practices, where researchers are typically expected to explore their motivations for conducting research, with explicit attention to their insider/outsider status (Adam, 2013; Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). While insider research does not necessarily undermine the epistemological foundation of qualitative research, the dilemmas associated with insider investigation are frequently discussed in qualitative literature (Savvides et al., 2014; Yvonne Bulk and Collins, 2023). Conversely, these issues are rarely considered in the context of quantitative research (Toy-Cronin, 2018).

3.3 – Potential Complexities of Insider Research

Being an insider can offer distinct advantages in the research process. It provides extensive knowledge of the institutional habitus that an outsider could neither access nor analyse (Toy-Cronin, 2018). Brannick and Coghlan (2007) describe this as a ‘pre-understanding’ of what is acceptable and taboo. Consequently, the researcher has an intuitive grasp of the macro, meso, and micro-political landscape of the organisation (Merriam et al., 2001). This understanding includes awareness of institutional and personal sensitivities, which can be leveraged to gain support and facilitate access (Dhillon and Thomas, 2019).

A significant benefit of being an insider is the credibility the researcher has with participants (Mercer, 2007). Participants may feel more comfortable engaging with someone familiar, enhancing the fidelity and authenticity of the information (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015). In this case, however, the notion of credibility differs slightly from its usual presentation. Breen (2007), for example, discusses how shared identity can encourage trust between participants and the researcher. In this project, the participants were current and previous students, some of whom had considered leaving university. Though there was a shared experience of struggling during university, with many of the participants, especially in phase one. My role as a lecturer requires a different interaction with the university and provides a different insider status. Therefore, in this study, credibility was based on familiarity, experience, and authority (Rowlands, 2022).

Insider educational research must adhere to the same ethical standards as any other type of research (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). Key ethical considerations include ensuring that participants are not put at risk, maintaining voluntary participation, protecting the identities of respondents, providing enough information for informed consent, allowing participants to withdraw at any time, and securely storing data (Toy-Cronin, 2018). Floyd and Arthur (2012), suggest that Insider research can have long-term impacts on relationships within the organisation, for example managers might not welcome analysis that reveals institutional flaws. Educational research often involves power dynamics between tutors and students (Yvonne Bulk and Collins, 2023). Mercer (2007)

describes insider research as a double-edged sword. On one hand, the researcher benefits from easy access to participants and a clear understanding of the research context. On the other hand, they have preconceptions about the issues and must navigate preformed relationships (Mercer, 2007).

3.4 – My Experiences in Higher Education

I will now provide an overview of the dual insider positions within this research, this will consider my higher education student experiences, at undergraduate and postgraduate taught, and my later academic roles. Though autoethnographic accounts are becoming more prominent as a research approach, it is important to note the possibilities of unreliable narration (Mizzi, 2010) such as exaggerated or misremembering. Therefore, I acknowledge that the following summaries cannot provide a full picture of my interactions or experiences of higher education. However, as Méndez (2013) states, they will allow me the space to articulate feelings and emotions on a particular topic through narrative writing. This will provide further insight into how my potential biases can be minimised, and the opportunities that I believe insider access affords me (Beattie, 2022).

3.4.1 – My Student Experiences

My interest in the topic of student retention in higher education has been shaped by a history of personal experiences within the university system. Having withdrawn from my initial undergraduate degree programme and having seriously contemplated withdrawal during both further undergraduate and postgraduate study, I acknowledge that my doctoral journey was also accompanied by moments of doubt and vulnerability.

i. Unsuccessful University Experiences and Emotional Complexity

Reflecting on the early departure from my first university programme, I have come to recognise a retrospective uncertainty around my decision to leave. The reasons, while

once seemingly clear, now appear emotionally layered and difficult to pinpoint. While my public explanation was that the course had not met my expectations, the enduring memory of that period is characterised by an overarching sense of unhappiness and disconnection. This aligns with the work of Pedler et al. (2022), who describe student withdrawal as a non-linear process, often involving prolonged uncertainty and emotional complexity.

The catalyst for withdrawal emerged during an unplanned return home while family members were away. In that moment of solitude, I recognised an unwillingness to return to university, a recognition that was not discussed with family members, and one that led to feelings of shame and perceived failure. The absence of immediate support or discussion reinforced the sense of finality in the decision. I now reflect on how adequate institutional or relational support might have changed the outcome (Pedler et al., 2022). Nevertheless, I acknowledge that support was neither sought by me nor do I remember it being visibly available at the time. This echoes findings from Hlioui et al. (2021) who suggest that a key challenge for student support services is the invisibility of students at the point of crisis, when they are most at risk of discontinuing their studies. During these periods, students often withdraw socially and academically, disengaging from lectures, support services, and institutional communications, behaviours that can render them undetectable to standard support mechanisms (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Mental health difficulties, personal circumstances, or academic struggles may not be disclosed (Liu et al., 2019; 2022). This temporal and situational invisibility makes it exceptionally difficult for universities to intervene at the right moment and poses methodological challenges for researchers attempting to understand the lived experiences of this group (Naylor et al., 2018).

Through engagement with the literature and a growing realisation of my own experiences, I came to understand the decision to leave as a form of loss, not only of an educational pathway but also of an identity and imagined future (Tinto, 2008). The departure challenged deeply held self-perceptions and aspirations, transforming the image of an independent, self-sufficient student into someone framed by failure and unmet expectations. This perceived loss had lasting consequences for my self-belief,

manifesting later as recurring doubt, especially in moments approaching academic completion (Ramos and Wright-Mair, 2021).

Though I was unaware of it at the time my lack of cultural capital due to nontraditional and first-generation status led to feelings of alienation, diminished belonging, and lowered academic confidence, during my unsuccessful experience of HE. Reay (2018) suggests that higher education institutions often reflect and reproduce middle-class norms and values, privileging students who already possess the cultural competencies aligned with academic expectations. Therefore, students from working-class or first-generation backgrounds may encounter implicit barriers to participation, such as unfamiliarity with academic conventions, uncertainty around seeking support, or discomfort in navigating institutional hierarchies (Bathmaker et al., 2016). This was true of my experience, where I felt confused by university expectations and unable to seek support from friends or family as they had not attended university or were themselves struggling with this disconnection.

Following my return to higher education, I found that this mismatch was better supported through my life experiences as a more mature student, single parent, and my confidence from the workplace (Cotton et al., 2017). However, when considering my academic abilities, I was now struggling with a lowered academic confidence. Though this was eased through completion of assignments, enjoyment of the course and pleasing results, at times of struggle I would have significant doubts about my ability to be in university. I now understand this to be imposter syndrome, a pervasive psychological phenomenon in which capable individuals doubt their competence and fear being exposed as frauds (Clance and Imes, 1978). For me, this experience of feeling an imposter has been both personal and formative, shaping approaches to study, research engagement, and interactions within academic spaces (Parkman, 2016). My imposter feelings have been particularly salient during periods of transition, when progressing from undergraduate to postgraduate study and into doctoral research, echoing findings that such transitions heighten vulnerability to self-doubt (Hutchins et al., 2017).

Through my reflections I now realise that experiencing imposter syndrome created tension between confidence in my intellectual ability and an internalised fear of inadequacy (Parkman, 2016; Slank, 2019). This has manifested in perfectionist tendencies, avoidance of my supervision team, reluctance to share early drafts, and worries before supervisory meetings - behaviours commonly identified among doctoral students experiencing imposter feelings (Sverdlik et al., 2020). Yet, while emotionally challenging, I can see that these experiences have also fostered a reflexivity and empathy (Adam, 2013), which has allowed me to further understand how my own fragility of academic confidence may have deepened my sensitivity to the participants expressions of self-doubt and disengagement, throughout the study.

ii. The unexpected effects of leaving.

I had anticipated that reflecting on my early university withdrawal would evoke feelings of embarrassment. However, what emerged instead was a deeper awareness of its long-lasting emotional and psychological impact. After leaving university, I avoided the city where the institution was located for many years, the place was associated with feelings of anxiety and failure (Bradley, 2017). Years later, during a PhD research seminar, I revisited the city and experienced a strong visceral reaction, triggered by familiar sights and smells that unexpectedly reignited emotions from that earlier time (Feigenbaum, 2021). Despite having at this time successfully completed both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, the experience of "dropping out" resurfaced powerfully, revealing the extent to which withdrawal can linger in one's identity and sense of self-worth (McDermott et al., 2019; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). This resonated with the wider literature, in suggesting that for many, the consequences of leaving or struggling may extend far beyond the event itself (Pedler et al., 2022).

The experience of leaving also shaped my subsequent educational pathways. I frequently questioned my academic legitimacy throughout my later study, not due to performance but to persistent feelings of inadequacy and fraudulence (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). These experiences are closely aligned with what Holden et al. (2021)

describe as imposter syndrome. This is particularly prevalent among first-generation and non-traditional students, which I was, originally conceptualised by Clance and Imes (1978), imposter syndrome refers to the inability to internalise accomplishments, often accompanied by heightened anxiety and diminished confidence. I recognise these patterns in my own journey, exacerbated by earlier educational experiences and long-standing self-doubt, feelings that were reinforced, not resolved, by progression into postgraduate study.

Yet, despite these challenges I persevered. Therefore, I considered what had changed between the first and later experiences of higher education. One significant change was my changes in circumstance due to family commitments. Being ten years older than my first undergraduate experience, I had a young child, work commitments, and a need to remain close to home for study. Non-academic pressures such as relocation, the loss of familiar social networks, and balancing caring responsibilities have continued to shape the student experience (Pedler et al., 2022). Yet, caring responsibilities for me became a source of motivation, as they provided a clear sense of purpose. This reinforced my research believe that factors that impact on the likelihood of completion, do not affect all students homogeneously. For many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, completing a degree represents a pathway to upward mobility and improved economic prospects (Reay, 2018). Which can be a motivating factor for those with families not just a factor that predicts attrition, due to financial pressures and time constraints (Nieuwoudt et al., 2025); in my case, they reinforced my commitment to study.

Another critical shift appeared to be the development of clear career goals. Unlike the first attempt, the return to education a decade later was fuelled by a stronger awareness of the economic limitations of non-graduate employment and the aspirational desire to create a better future (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Research supports this idea: students with well-defined career trajectories are significantly more likely to persist and complete their degrees (Tinto, 2017; Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

The reflection illuminated an increased academic self-concept and resilience as protective factors of later success. Academic self-concept, the belief in one's capacity

to succeed academically, has been shown to strongly predict academic outcomes and transition success (Haktanir, 2021; Wouters et al., 2011; Henderson et al., 2017). However, the pressures of high academic environments can disrupt self-concept, particularly in students who are high achieving in prior settings but struggle with new peer comparisons, an outcome explained by the Big Fish Little Pond Effect (Fang et al, 2018).

I also reflected on how support systems may have influenced my journey. During my initial attempt at university in 2002, student wellbeing was not a major focus; support was largely academic or financial in nature (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). By the time of my return in 2012, the landscape had begun to change, with growing emphasis on mental health and pastoral care, driven in part by widening participation agendas (Moore et al., 2013; Sapir, 2022). Though I had not sought out pastoral support in my first university experience, I also do not recall building a relationship with the lecturers or feeling connected to the institution. It could be suggested that Tinto's theory of social integration (1975; 1982; 1987) is relevant here, with my early withdrawal corresponding to an inability to establish meaningful institutional connections.

Furthermore, unlike my first experience where I had struggled to leave behind my partner and friends (Pedler et al., 2022), in this instance I would be commuting to university and could still frequently see my friends and family which I found supportive (Hallam, 2023). Though it is suggested that for commuter students it can be hard to make social connections (Thomas and Jones, 2017), I found a group of good friends during my second undergraduate experience, which was key to my continuation (Maunder, 2018). We were mainly nontraditional students - three of us mature students, two of us with children and all of us commuting to university - which did connect us within those first few days. These demographic characteristics will have been relational to the university of study, may have been connected to the choice of degree programme, and are of course reflective of the widening participation narrative that had grown during the 10 years of my absence (Marshall et al., 2016; Nieuwoudt et al., 2025). These strong friendships, which were absent in my first experience of HE,

acted as a protective support throughout my studies. We all struggled at some point but were a key network of support to help one another reengage.

In hindsight, the fear of failure a second time may have been a decisive motivator for my persistence. I knew the shame associated with failure and did not want to go through that experience again. Additionally, that initial failure had provided me with a resilience that was built on a stubbornness to succeed (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). I had felt more in control of my choices the second time around, I was no longer going to university as it felt like ‘what was done’ for people my age, in fact the opposite was true (Cotton et al., 2017). Therefore, I had something to prove to myself and the naysayers who could not understand my decision to return, there was a discourse from family that I had tried and failed at that and what would be different this time around (García-Martínez et al., 2022). Overall, by looking at why I had left the first time and what had been different for me in my successful studies, I could understand that there was not one reason for my departure and not one reason for my success (Naylor et al., 2020). This positional awareness deepens my understanding of the emotional, social, and institutional barriers to student success, and underscores the importance of holistic, inclusive approaches to retention in higher education, proving key for this study (Breeze et al., 2020; Morgan, 2022; Thomas, 2022).

3.4.2 – My Experiences as a Member of Academic Staff

I have worked in higher education for eight years in a variety of roles in the same university. Initially, these were short-term, part-time positions, such as teaching assistant or sessional lecturer. In 2022, I secured a permanent lecturing post and have recently been promoted to Senior Lecturer and Year Leader for the first year (level 4) cohort of a large undergraduate programme. My interest in student continuation and completion has been intensified due to key areas of responsibility as a Year Leader, as this role is tasked with ensuring that engagement, continuation and progression targets are met. Selection for this role was due to my ongoing research in this area and an interest in using this to develop pedagogy and programme support for students. As a

result, this PhD research has informed the role, and the role and access has informed the research.

i. The importance of the changing nature of my role

My earlier roles were strictly supportive in nature with minimal direct involvement in decision making. As an academic tutor, I was tasked with providing students with additional support with their learning and assessments. This role highlighted the context of HE, specifically that of continuation and student success, from a student facing role rather than that of the student, for the first time. University staff are under increasing pressure to support students with ever increasing complexities, in respect for greater needs in pastoral support and this aspect of their role is often overlooked (Lainidi and Paitaridou, 2024).

Lecturers must be aware of student attendance and engagement, and part of the role is to encourage students with poor engagement to connect. Indicators of student success, such as grades and student feedback, through module evaluations and the National Student Survey - must be acknowledged (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). This knowledge of student voice and student success metrics developed a wider knowledge of the student experience and can contribute to my understanding of the research topic. For example, monitoring student attendance and submissions is viewed as a measure of how engaged students are in their programme of study and if they are likely to continue. Although attendance alone is not a complete indication of progression and engagement (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017), attendance can play a vital role in building a sense of belonging within the academic community (Tinto, 2012). Research suggests that attending sessions fosters peer interactions, participation in discussions, and relationships with lecturers, all of which contribute to student motivation and institutional commitment (Kuh et al., 2008; Trowler et al., 2022). It is also useful as a means of identifying students who may be at risk of leaving (Villano et al., 2018).

In addition, the role involves personal tutoring which is a pastoral role that requires working with students to support with their individual academic needs and often includes support with personal difficulties during their time on the course (Beckingham

and Garnham, 2025). This role allows for further insight into the student experience, through supporting students with aspects such as homesickness, academic struggles, time management and occasionally thoughts of leaving (Wakelin, 2023). This has allowed for greater understanding of factors that affect student continuation, completion, and progress. To illustrate, as a member of staff I have witnessed the increasing support needs of the student population, which has seen increasing pressures on student support services (Brewster et al., 2022) and the resultant need to expand their provision. This is reflected in wider sector pressures and has therefore resulted in the further incorporation of these services in university and sector wide policy (Thomas, 2021). The demand for mental health support in UK universities has increased significantly in recent years, driven by rising levels of anxiety, depression, and academic stress among students. Research indicates that mental health disorders among university students have surged, with a fivefold increase in reported mental health conditions between 2007 and 2021 (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). Factors contributing to this trend include academic pressures, financial stress, social isolation, and the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Conrad et al., 2021). To address this growing need, sector-wide initiatives, such as the Student Mental Health Charter, advocate for integrated mental health support, early intervention programs, and stronger collaboration between universities and the NHS (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Interactions with support services, within my role, suggest that poor mental health was seen as a growing cause of attrition, with students disengaging from their programmes of study due to anxiety and depression, even prior to the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic (Knapstad et al., 2021).

Overall, the interactions and knowledge that my university roles provide me with, have led to a deeper consideration of what attrition means from the lecturers', programme team, and institutional viewpoints, not just those of the student. This knowledge informed the research directly, as it led me to focus on developing a holistic understanding of retention that could provide practical tools for improving retention, which would benefit students and staff.

ii. How my role has impacted on the research study

My role provides me with an insider status, regarding student experience, continuation, completion and progress targets and policies and colleague experiences. Though I occupied an insider-of-context position rather than that of a traditional insider (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). As a member of university staff, I possess an informed understanding of institutional structures, support mechanisms, and the broader organisational culture that shapes student retention (Curran, 2021). This familiarity provided me with valuable contextual insight into how policies and practices intersect with student experience, offering interpretive depth when analysing participant accounts of engagement, belonging, and persistence (Mercer, 2007; Greene, 2014).

However, though I am still a doctoral student, I was no longer an undergraduate student and therefore did not share the immediate lived reality of those participating in the study for phase two. This distinction created a form of partial insider status (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), combining experiential empathy with analytical distance. Such positioning allowed for a reflexive balance (Yip, 2024), I could understand institutional nuances that might otherwise be overlooked, while still approaching student narratives with curiosity rather than assumption. This insider-outsider hybrid stance aligns with contemporary understandings of positionality as fluid and contextual rather than fixed (Merriam et al., 2001; Yip, 2024).

All of this directly contributes to my knowledge on the focus of my research topic and has influenced my decision making during the stages of the research. By adopting a reflexive stance (Yip, 2024), I can address how this additional insider knowledge has developed my research (Merriam et al., 2001). I will inevitably have gathered ‘incidental’ data through these workplace interactions (Mercer, 2007), which can be viewed as an ethical dilemma. Use of ‘incidental’ data must be scrutinised by the researcher, to ensure it does not become an abuse of power rather than a feature of insider status (Perryman, 2011). However, Carey (2013) described these workplace interactions as pertinent to his doctoral research forming “*a lubricant to the research process*” (Carey, 2013. p. 74), meaning that this ‘incidental data’, though not cited directly, had contributed to mechanisms of the research. Overall, I believe that my changing insider status has had a complementary effect on my research, with the sequential approach

allowing previous phases to inform subsequent phases and the contextual knowledge allowing me to consider the next steps of the project with a pragmatic constructivist viewpoint (Miller, 2016).

3.5 – The Use of Critical Reflection to Address Insider Complications

I have used Brookfield's lenses (1995; 2017) to reflect upon the knowledge gained from my insider status. This model of critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995) encourages reflection through four distinct lenses: the autobiographical (self), the student's perspective, the colleagues' perspective, and the theoretical lens. This framework provided a structured means of interrogating my assumptions, positionality, and interpretive biases that might emerge from shared experiences with participants (Brookfield, 2015).

The autobiographical lens has enabled me to examine how my personal history, particularly previous experiences of disengagement and persistence, may have shaped my emotional responses to participant narratives. By acknowledging these connections, it was possible to identify moments of empathy that risked over-identification and to consciously maintain analytical distance (Finlay, 2002). The student lens facilitated reflexive engagement with the participant perspectives, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in their lived realities rather than filtered solely through my prior experiences (Ide and Beddoe, 2023). My dialogue and interactions with peers throughout the research process, formed the colleague lens. This provided me with an external perspective that challenged my assumptions and enhanced methodological rigour (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Hickson, 2011). This collaborative reflection acted as a safeguard against the potential echo chamber of my insider interpretation (Berger, 2015). Finally, the theoretical lens encouraged me to situate insights and findings within existing literature and frameworks (Brookfield, 1995; 2017), aligning personal understanding with scholarly evidence and ensuring conceptual coherence (Richards and Malomo, 2025).

Therefore, by intentionally engaging with all four lenses, I believe that I was able to transform my insider proximity from a potential source of bias into an asset that

deepened understanding and authenticity (Lee et al., 2024). This process ensured that the knowledge I gained from my insider status was critically mediated, ethically grounded, and analytically robust (Brookfield, 2015; Richards and Malomo, 2025), and aligned with the study's realist constructivist emphasis on reflexivity, context, and co-construction of meaning (Bogna et al., 2020; Elder-Vass, 2012).

3.6 – Chapter Summary

Adam (2013) discusses the need for critical reflection to navigate the insider status; this process has been used throughout the study to manage the merging of researcher and professional identity within the research spaces. This chapter has used a reflexive autobiographical lens to consider the implications of insider research (Brookfield, 2017; Rowlands, 2022), through a changing insider status.

My personal experience of discontinuation and resulting imposter syndrome, throughout my subsequent studies, has fundamentally shaped my methodological and interpersonal approach throughout this research process. Having personally navigated self-doubt and feelings of academic inadequacy, there was an acute awareness of the emotional vulnerability that can accompany discussions of disengagement, failure, and belonging in higher education (Pedler et al., 2022). It is my belief that this awareness fostered an empathetic and non-judgmental interview environment, allowing participants who had previously considered withdrawal to share their experiences openly and without fear of stigma (Neville et al, 2016). Similar to the findings of Hutchins et al. (2017), my recognition of shared emotional struggles has helped me to build authenticity and rapport, with my participants, which are essential components of trustworthy qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Moreover, my experiences encouraged a reflexive stance that resisted framing participants' difficulties through a deficit lens (Kinzie and Kuh, 2017). Instead, participants were approached as resilient individuals navigating complex structural and personal challenges (García-Martínez et al., 2022) - an orientation aligned with the asset-based and holistic perspectives underpinning the study. This interpretive empathy strengthened the credibility and ethical integrity of the research (Gewirtz and

Cribb, 2006), ensuring that participants' narratives were analysed not as evidence of failure, but as insight into the relational and contextual dynamics of persistence.

Furthermore, my experience of working within higher education and engaging with student attrition from a staff perspective provided a valuable yet complex lens through which to approach the study (Rowlands, 2022). This professional insight offered a practical understanding of the institutional mechanisms surrounding student withdrawal, such as academic monitoring, pastoral support, and progression processes (Roberts, 2018), and highlighted the limitations of administrative data in capturing the lived experiences behind non-continuation (Villano et al., 2018).

This dual perspective shaped the study's epistemological orientation, situating it at the intersection of practitioner awareness and interpretivist inquiry (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015; Savvides et al., 2014). While the staff role offered contextual knowledge that enriched data interpretation, it also required careful reflexivity to avoid privileging institutional narratives over student voices (Finlay, 2002). By maintaining a critical awareness of this positionality, the researcher was able to bridge practitioner understanding with participant experience, contributing to a more nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between institutional structures and individual agency in student retention (Hlioui et al., 2021; Iannelli et al., 2025). The next chapter discusses these methodological choices, alongside the epistemological positions for this study, and how this has shaped the overall research design.

Chapter Four: Methodology and Method

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in this study, which sought to explore the complex and multifaceted factors influencing student retention in UK higher education. Given the study's aim to develop a holistic understanding of student experiences, a mixed-methods design was employed, comprising an exploratory Phase One involving semi-structured interviews, followed by a Phase Two Q methodology study. This chapter discusses the rationale for the research design, the philosophical positioning of the researcher, data collection and analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

Section one discusses how a mixed methods methodology aligns with the positionality and researcher intentions. Section two then discusses the rationale for the methods used and outlines the research process.

4.1 – Methodological Choices

Bourke (2014) suggests that the thinking and understanding of the world, which influences a researcher's actions, are reflected in their ontological and epistemological positionality. Therefore, before selecting methods and beginning the data collection, the researcher's epistemological and ontological stance must be established, to consider how the paradigm will shape the research (Yip, 2024).

A mixed-methods design was selected to enable the research to explore both the depth of individual experiences and the breadth of shared perspectives (Cameron, 2009). The study followed a sequential exploratory strategy, beginning with qualitative interviews to generate themes, followed by Q methodology to examine how students prioritised and interpreted those themes across a purposeful sample. This design supports methodological triangulation and enhances the validity of the findings by integrating narrative and structured data (Plano Clark, 2017; Shan, 2022).

4.1.1 – Mixed Methods

Mixed methods are defined as “research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or programme of inquiry” (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007, p. 4). The rationale for selecting a mixed methods design is based on aligning research procedures with expected outcomes and ensuring that the chosen methodology effectively addresses the research aims (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The integration of both qualitative and quantitative data collection enhances the understanding of students’ perceptions of their educational experience and its relationship to key factors and levels of influence associated with student persistence in higher education.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) describe mixed methods research as a “research design in which QUAL and QUAN approaches are used in types of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures, and/or inferences” (p. 711). It is founded on the premise that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single study leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem than either method alone (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Greene (2007) conceptualises mixed methods as an approach to investigating the social world that incorporates multiple methodological traditions, thereby enabling diverse ways of knowing. This involves the application of various techniques for collecting, analysing, and representing human experiences, to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding (.

4.2 - Researcher Positionality

Crotty’s (1998) explanation of epistemology as the theory of knowledge underpinning the theoretical perspective and the methodology, has been used. Each of the epistemologies appeals to specific research paradigms: empirical-analytic (positivist), interpretive (subjectivist, constructivist), and critical (Mingers and Brocklesby, 1997). For mixed methods, some researchers (Barkin, 2015; McBride et al., 2019) propose that

one single research paradigm should be used throughout the project, while other researchers (Ahmed et al., 2024; Bennet, 2015; Mingers and Brocklesby, 1997) propose mixing paradigms in the same research project.

This project aims to provide insights into student experience and retention in HE, by using an intersectional approach. To decide on the research paradigm, the socially constructed influences of people's behaviour, was used as an explanation of observed differences. After being drawn towards both social constructivism Garrison (1995) and critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979; 1993), an overarching research paradigm of realist social constructivism (Elder-Vass, 2012), was selected. This allows me to mix critical social constructivism with critical realism for the various elements of the study, leading to an understanding of the participant's experiences of retention that was as multifaceted as possible (Bogna et al., 2020; Maxwell, 2012).

i. Realist social constructivism

Elder-Vass (2012) argues that combining social constructionism with critical realism creates a robust framework for understanding social phenomena. This synthesis preserves the critical insights of social constructionism while grounding them in a realist ontology, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of the causal powers at play in the social world (Maxwell, 2012). Which can be particularly valuable in mixed methods research, which seeks to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more holistic understanding of research aims (Bogna et al., 2020). By integrating the realist emphasis on causal mechanisms and structures with the constructionist focus on discourse and social interaction, this approach provides a balanced and nuanced perspective (Elder-Vass, 2010; 2012). It allows researchers to uncover the deep-seated causal processes that shape social reality while appreciating the role of human agency and social constructs in mediating these processes. This enhances the explanatory power of social research and can ensure a more ethical and grounded approach to understanding and addressing social issues (Bogna et al., 2020).

Methodologically this approach begins with a realist ontology, specifically drawing on critical realism's understanding of causality, which involves multiple interacting causal powers that produce social events (Elder-Vass, 2012). This perspective acknowledges that both social structures and individual agents possess emergent causal powers. These powers are not merely the sum of their parts but arise from the complex interactions and organisations within the social realm. The argument emphasises that both social structures and individual agents exhibit emergent properties arising from their organisation and interaction. This view reconciles methodological individualism, which focuses on individuals, with collectivism, which emphasises social structures (Bogna et al., 2020; Maxwell, 2012). By acknowledging emergent properties, the approach provides a more holistic understanding of social phenomena that encompasses both individual and collective dimensions.

4.3 – Research Design

After reviewing the dominant discourses on retention and attrition, during the literature review, it was found that studies of retention primarily used a deficit perspective that focused on why students might leave HE. As a result, there was little known about why those who had considered leaving had remained, and multiple questions on '*what works*' to engage students and promote continuation (Thomas, 2012). Additionally, it was noted that although there was research on factors of risk that made students more likely to leave, there was little focus on the intersectionality of those factors and how they might detract from or support progression. This inquiry, emerged from noticing this scholarly gap, and has tackled what is viewed as a less chartered area of research (Bradley, 2017; Nieuwoudt, J.E. and Pedler, 2023).

The questions that are addressed within this study are listed below:

- To explore the experiences and perceptions of students who have expressed a serious intention to leave university.
- To analyse the existing theoretical perspectives regarding students' reasons for leaving university.

- To explore how students construct their university experience.
- To gain greater insight into the motivations of students to remain in university.
- To develop a holistic understanding of student retention in UK higher education

The research design is sequential with the previous phase informing the subsequent. This dynamic design allows for methods to be chosen based on ‘best fit’ for addressing the research quandary that has developed rather than those that fit a particular paradigm (Cameron, 2009; McBride et al., 2019). The study began with an exploratory qualitative phase that used interviews to discover how those who had seriously considered leaving university felt about their higher educational experience and why they had ultimately remained. The study then transitioned into a confirmatory phase that used Q methodology to look at the views of higher education undergraduate students, to consider what is important to their student experience. This design combines confirmatory and exploratory at different stages of a single study, due to the investigation of the same underlying phenomenon (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Ramlo, 2015).

4.4 – Phase One – Interviews

The first phase of the research study used qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore the views of participants who seriously considered leaving their undergraduate degree programmes. This exploratory phase provided greater insight into the motivations of students who seriously considered leaving, before ultimately remaining and therefore began to answer the research aims. A quasi-narrative interview style was used, as this allows for the participant to lead the discussion and the interview to adopt a conversational tone. This supported the interviewees in recounting their individual experiences and helped to hopefully minimise the hierarchical relationship between researcher and participants (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Originally, participant recruitment for phase one was to be from within the ‘home’ university, using the student support services team as a gatekeeper. However, this was switched in favour of another method of recruitment, following several months of

unsuccessful recruitment and a realisation that for both ethical and methodological purposes it was beneficial to use retrospective accounts. Ethically it was deemed potentially irresponsible to discuss leaving with those who were still within that process and possible trauma. Additionally, experience in working with students from both the researcher and gatekeeper perspectives had illustrated that often students who are vulnerable to discontinuation are invisible to the university until 'after the fact'.

Methodologically, there was a need for consistency, therefore, having all participants be successful graduates looking back upon their challenges provided this stable approach.

The recruitment procedure chosen led to potential participants being recruited from all over the UK, providing a much wider participant population and data from across numerous institutions rather than focusing on one university. Therefore, to remove the need for researcher and participant travel, an online interview method was selected. After investigation, instant messenger was chosen due to its successful usage in the pilot stage.

i. Why use qualitative interviews in mixed methods research

Qualitative interviews are widely used as an exploratory phase in sequential mixed methods research because they provide rich, detailed insights that guide the subsequent phases (Cameron, 2009). This approach capitalises on the strengths of qualitative data to contextualise and refine research aims, ensuring that following phases are informed by real-world perspectives (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

A key advantage of qualitative interviews is their ability to uncover nuanced and in-depth information. Narrative interviews allow participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words, offering insights into complex topics that may not be apparent through quantitative methods alone (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This inductive process is particularly valuable when studying under-researched areas or addressing questions requiring a deep contextual understanding (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016). In an exploratory to confirmatory phased approach, insights from the qualitative interview phase can help refine research aims, develop hypotheses, and identify constructs or variables that are relevant to the study's context (Bryman, 2016).

This ensures that the following confirmatory methods are tailored to the needs and lived experiences of participants.

Additionally, qualitative interviews can help to reveal social, cultural, or contextual factors that could influence the interpretation of quantitative results (Maxwell, 2013). By understanding these factors early, researchers can design more comprehensive and robust quantitative investigations. Furthermore, qualitative interviews offer flexibility, allowing researchers to adapt the study's focus based on emergent findings. This iterative process ensures that the research remains dynamic and responsive to participant input (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2023).

ii. Recruitment

The criteria were set out as the following:

- Participants had to self-identify as having seriously considered leaving university study during their undergraduate degree programme.
- Participants needed to be UK residents at the time of study
- Participants needed to have studied at an English university
- Participants had successfully completed or were near completion of the degree programme.

Recruitment was completed through social media (Facebook and Twitter now known as X) using a snowball sampling technique (Parker et al., 2019). The call for participants was shared within the researcher's personal networks and then shared by 'Facebook Friends' and Twitter contacts within their own networks. Potential participants were asked to self-identify as someone who had seriously considered leaving their university programme of study. After they initially self-selected, they were contacted and asked some questions about their experience, and this process was used to confirm they met the criteria. This was a form of purposive sampling where only participants that met the researcher's criteria were invited to take part (Sadler et al., 2010). To maintain the robustness of the sample, potential participants with personal relationships were not

selected, as there may have been prior knowledge of their challenges, which may have affected the data collection or analysis (Guest, 2014).

A total of 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted, a sample size consistent with recent guidance on saturation thresholds in higher education research contexts. Data saturation refers to the point at which additional data collection no longer yields new insights or themes relevant to the research aim (Guest et al., 2006). It is a key criterion for determining adequate sample size in exploratory studies and provides a robust justification for concluding data collection once thematic redundancy is achieved.

Guest et al. (2006) argue that saturation often occurs within the first 12 interviews when the sample is relatively homogeneous; however, more heterogeneous populations may require significantly larger samples. Given the diversity of the sample, spanning student demographics, subject areas, and various institutions, achieving saturation necessitated a larger pool. Hagaman and Wutich (2017) note that 20–40 interviews may be necessary when exploring complex social phenomena across varied sub-groups. Furthermore, Fusch and Ness (2015) emphasise that saturation is not solely about sample size but about the depth and breadth of information obtained. As themes began to recur consistently after approximately 30 interviews, the decision to cap the sample at 36 allowed for confirmation of existing patterns, while remaining open to nuance or minority perspectives (Guest, 2014). Moreover, this number aligns with qualitative best practice in studies using semi-structured interviews for thematic analysis, especially when triangulated with other methods (e.g., Q methodology). It ensured analytical richness while respecting feasibility and ethical considerations. Therefore, 36 interviews provided a methodologically sound basis for thematic exploration, balancing the need for depth with practical considerations and satisfying widely accepted standards of data saturation in qualitative inquiry (Hagaman and Wutich, 2017).

iii. Online interview methods

The decision to pivot from using one university to recruit, by way of a case study to a wider participant population, spanning any English university, meant that the geographical distance to meet with participants had broadened. While this led to a

richer insight into the research topic, it did pose the challenge of how to meet with participants who lived across wide distances. As this can contribute to complications such as travel expenses for the researcher and participant, and logistical difficulties around interview spaces, risk assessments and lone travel (Thunberg and Arnell, 2021), it was decided to conduct the interviews online, with instant messenger selected as the 'best fit' option.

As more people congregate online, qualitative researchers are exploring the use of online tools for research. These tools include email interviewing, instant messaging, and (a)synchronous online focus groups. Using IT to collect qualitative data fits comfortably within many contemporary technologically imbued lifestyles, with online culture increasingly becoming a norm (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009). However, using this method for qualitative interviews must be appropriate; to plan qualitative interviews of this nature it is important to acknowledge the values and limitations of the process (Volda et al, 2004).

The use of IT allows researchers to extend their access to potential participants. This can be especially advantageous when geographical distance is too great to travel (Gibson, 2020), and when seeking access to difficult to reach populations. Due to the asynchronous communication of place, one of the advantages of messenger interviewing is the extended access to participants, when compared to Face-to-Face interviews (Thunberg and Arnell, 2021).

Additionally, Neville et al. (2016), suggest that when collecting data from vulnerable groups there should be a move away from face-to-face options to online methods that allow for greater anonymity. Though my participants may not have seemed vulnerable against standard ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024), there remained the potential for stigma or for participants to discuss a challenging period of their lives. Therefore, there was a focus on methods that provided some security for the participants by way of anonymity (Neville et al, 2016).

Instant messaging (IM) platforms are gaining traction as viable tools for conducting qualitative interviews, particularly with university students and other digitally connected populations (Gunawan et al., 2022). Compared to face-to-face or synchronous video

platforms like Microsoft Teams, IM interviews offer a unique set of advantages that make them particularly suitable for flexible, inclusive research designs. Participants can engage from any location and at their own pace, reducing the pressure often associated with face-to-face or video settings (Gibson, 2020). This is especially valuable for students balancing study, work, and caring responsibilities, or for those with anxiety or communication difficulties, who may prefer text-based, asynchronous formats (Page et al., 2022). IM interviews also provide increased control and reflection for participants. The written format allows respondents to consider their responses more carefully, potentially leading to more thoughtful and articulate insights (Thunberg and Arnell, 2021). Furthermore, the semi-synchronous nature of IM allows participants to pause, reflect, and revise, which may be particularly useful when discussing sensitive topics (Kaufmann et al., 2021).

From a data quality perspective, IM interviews create automatic transcripts, reducing transcription errors and researcher bias. These text-based logs enhance transparency and facilitate easier coding and thematic analysis (Gunawan et al, 2022). The informal nature of instant messaging can also promote openness, as the perceived informality may reduce hierarchical barriers between interviewer and participant (Thunberg and Arnell, 2021). Additionally, IM interviews reduce logistical barriers such as scheduling conflicts, internet bandwidth issues, and camera fatigue, making them a cost-effective and inclusive option.

iv. Potential limitations of instant messenger as an interview method

While instant messenger (IM) interviews offer several practical and ethical advantages, their use also presents several methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. One key limitation is the absence of non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language, which are often central to interpreting meaning in qualitative research (Gibson, 2020). The lack of these cues may restrict the researcher's ability to identify emotional nuance, hesitation, or discomfort, potentially limiting the depth of interpretation in sensitive discussions (Gunawan et al., 2022; Thunberg and Arnell, 2022).

IM interviews are also often shorter and more fragmented than face-to-face or video-based interviews, as participants may provide concise responses or multitask during the interaction (Kaufmann et al., 2021). While brevity can enhance clarity, it may reduce opportunities for spontaneous elaboration or narrative flow (Maeng et al., 2016). Additionally, the asynchronous nature of some IM interviews can disrupt conversational momentum, making it more challenging to probe emerging themes in real time (Hinchliffe and Gavin, 2009).

There are also issues of digital literacy and access, as participants' familiarity with IM platforms can shape the quality of engagement (Gunawan et al., 2022). Variations in typing speed, confidence in written communication, or access to stable internet connections may influence participation and data richness (O'Connor and Madge, 2017). Furthermore, the written format may privilege participants who are more articulate in text-based expression, potentially marginalising others (Gibson, 2020). Finally, ethical considerations arise around privacy and confidentiality, particularly if participants engage from shared or unsafe environments.

Despite these limitations, the use of instant messenger interviews was considered appropriate and methodologically justified for the aims of this study. Following the pilot study, discussed below, several strategies were employed to mitigate potential drawbacks and enhance data quality. These measures ensured that IM interviews produced data that were sufficiently rich, ethically sound, and aligned with the study's realist social constructivist emphasis on participant meaning making, while also enabling access to a population that may have been less accessible through traditional interview methods.

4.4.1 – Pilot

i. Rationale

There are two rationales for the use of pilot studies in social sciences research - feasibility and pre-testing (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). Feasibility studies are small scale versions, or trial runs, done in preparation for the major study (Polit and Beck, 2004), whereas pre-testing studies involve the trial of a particular research instrument (Ismail et al., 2018). One of the advantages of conducting a pilot study is that it might give advance warning about where the main research project could fail, where research protocols may not be followed, or whether proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or unhelpful. In the words of De Vaus (1993: 54) "*Do not take the risk. Pilot test first*". In this study, the pilot was a chance to assess research design, chosen method, personal skills and attributes regarding working with participants within an interview format, and improve the interview schedule themes to ensure that the questions asked, met the requirements of the study. Therefore, it was both trial run and testing.

ii. Pilot interviews

Interviews were conducted with four participants; these were recruited via social media and were purposely selected as they had expressed struggles during their undergraduate studies. As they were known to the researcher, they were deemed as unsuitable for participation in the phase one data collection, due to the potential for bias. However, they were suitable for the aims of the pilot, testing the interview method and refining the interview schedule.

iii. Pilot outcomes

The pilot interviews confirmed the chosen focus of the research was worthwhile to pursue, with the interviews confirming the researcher's philosophy that the experience of staying at university (despite a serious intention to leave) is a journey that is filled with challenges and difficulties, and that "*leaving is not the mirror image of staying*" (Tinto, 2006). Therefore, by exploring the experiences of those who recovered from a decision to leave and went on to successfully complete, we may gain greater insight into the

student who remains and completes their studies. Although this was a small sample, it provided a range of experiences and challenges and supplied the opportunity to question and develop a theoretical perspective, whilst interrogating existing theories on attrition and retention. The pilot confirmed the need for a larger sample size than is typical for qualitative interviews, suggesting that the broad variety of themes would require the use of data saturation rather than a fixed participant amount (Braun and Clarke, 2021c).

Furthermore, the pilot established that messenger interviews were not only a viable alternative to face-to-face methods, but they were also for the chosen participant group the preferred option. I asked the four participants for feedback on the use of this interview method, and all were positive, stating that it was a typical communication method for them and though they typically would have used it asynchronously rather than during a 60 min conversation, doing so did not feel out of place. One participant mentioned the ease of using this method, as they had children, pets, etc in the background and would have found it more distracting via telephone or Skype as they would have been concerned about audio quality and potential judgement from the other people in the room. Gibson (2020) found that by adopting communication methods that suit the participant group, participants can feel empowered and traditional power relations may be minimised, potentially allowing greater freedom to discuss sensitive issues.

Although the transcripts were shorter than face to face interviews of a similar length (Neville et al., 2016), I found that the data was not less rich, as suggested, but more succinct. As typing allowed for a natural pause in conversation participants were able to consider their response before sending this to me. In some cases, their replies took several minutes to come through with responses rewritten for clarity before sending on, highlighting how the asynchronous pace allowed for deeper reflection and clarity of thought. This mirrors findings by Jowett et al. (2011), who suggest that the written nature of IM can encourage participants to be more concise and considered in their responses. However, it is worth noting that these pauses and re-writes could suggest a sanitised version of the participant story being provided (Fontes and O'Mahony, 2008), but arguably this could be highlighted in all interviews as there is much discussion about

the performativity of the formal interview process (Burkette, 2022). The absence of non-verbal cues was partially addressed using iterative probing, clarification questions, and reflective summaries, which encouraged participants to elaborate on meaning and emotion within their written responses (Gunawan et al., 2022).

Furthermore, participants expressed a greater sense of autonomy and comfort using IM, citing the ability to pause and respond thoughtfully in familiar, less formal environments (Gibson, 2020). Contrary to concerns about the brevity of digital interviews, some sessions spanned over 90 minutes, as participants were able to respond in their own time without the social fatigue that often accompanies in-person interviews. Hanna (2012) supports this, arguing that IM and online methods reduce interviewer dominance and allow participants to remain in control of the conversational pace, thereby potentially extending engagement.

This comfort factor was felt to be particularly evident among participants who disclosed sensitive topics, such as relationship break down or mental health challenges. The absence of physical presence was perceived by the researcher to reduce perceived judgment for the participant, with instances of the use of emojis, swearing and informal text-based colloquialisms. This is supported by Gunawan et al. (2022) who suggest that online environments foster greater openness in sharing emotionally nuanced experiences. Additionally, the asynchronous and non-intrusive nature of IM interviewing may reduce cognitive overload and fatigue, particularly for participants managing multiple demands or mental health concerns (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021).

4.4.2 – Interview Structure

Participants were interviewed over a period of seven months, from August 2019 to March 2020. Interviews were conducted using a quasi-narrative approach, that adapted the person-centred storytelling principles of narrative interviews for use with instant messenger interviews. This involved the acknowledgement that sections of data would be less wordy than standard qualitative data but would have the same depth of quality. A further difference with face-to-face interviews is that IM requires textual prompting, as

compared to the use of facial expression or gesture. This at times was difficult to gauge, with text prompts often coming too soon, in retrospect, particularly in earlier interviews.

In narrative interviews researchers often begin with a broad prompt or question, such as *"Can you tell me about a significant experience in your life?"*, this open-ended approach encourages participants to take the lead in sharing their stories (Safari et al., 2023). This approach was utilised in the interviews with a short blurb provided about the purpose of the study, followed by a prompt to start the flow of conversation. All participants were given the same opening paragraph to digest before the interview commenced (*appendix i*). This process is said to orientate the interviewee by telling them what the focus of the interview is (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016). Following the blurb, the initial prompt was: *"Please consider your educational journey up until this point, can you describe how you view yourself within education"*. The interviewee was given complete freedom in their response, and in remembering and constructing the story that they felt best responded to the question. As is advised in narrative research, the interviewer is fully present but does not influence the storytelling by asking questions, until the interviewee comes to a natural pause. During this process the interviewer makes a note of areas of interest within the 'story' to pick up later. This method was used to help the participant reflect and construct their memories of their experiences.

Throughout the interview process, careful consideration was given to minimising researcher bias and avoiding the privileging of pre-existing assumptions or themes identified in the literature, pilot phase, or earlier interviews. A semi-structured approach was adopted, allowing interviews to remain flexible and participant-led, supporting the co-construction of meaning between participant and researcher (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Rather than using a fixed interview schedule with predetermined sequential questions, the study utilised a flexible framework of interview themes (*appendix ii*) to guide discussion while still allowing participants to prioritise experiences that were personally meaningful to them (Knott et al., 2022). This approach was selected to support rich narrative accounts and minimise the imposition of overly structured questioning that may have constrained participant storytelling, functioning as a flexible prompt rather than a prescriptive framework (Patton, 2002). It was used selectively to revisit points introduced by participants or to support the flow of conversation, rather

than to direct participants toward predetermined themes. This approach ensured that the breadth of relevant topics was considered while maintaining openness to new and unanticipated perspectives (Bearman, 2019). This proved particularly important given that participants were reflecting on periods during which they had seriously considered leaving higher education, experiences that were often associated with feelings of disappointment, frustration, self-doubt, and uncertainty (Thomas, 2021). Several participants commented that they had not revisited these experiences since they occurred and appeared to find the interview process cathartic, providing an opportunity to reflect upon and make sense of events that had previously remained unexplored (Rowlands, 2021). Therefore, had a more structured interview schedule been employed, focused primarily on predetermined questions relating to persistence and continuation, there is a risk that participants' narratives would have been constrained by the researcher's agenda rather than their own priorities (Bearman, 2019). As illustrated in *appendix iii*, participants often introduced issues that were not immediately related to the question of why they stayed at university, but which were nevertheless important in understanding their overall experience. For example, their feelings towards the structure of higher education or relationships outside of HE which may have supported their continuation. The thematic map allowed the researcher to follow these narratives and explore the emotions associated with them before returning to themes related to continuation and persistence. In this way, the interviews sought to understand not only the factors that supported continuation, but also the lived experience of reaching a point where withdrawal was actively considered.

To mitigate confirmation bias, interview questions were framed in an open and non-leading manner, and care was taken not to impose pre-existing categories onto the data, consistent with constructivist approaches to qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014). Each participant was treated as an independent contributor, allowing both convergent and divergent perspectives to emerge, rather than reinforcing patterns identified in earlier interviews. As such, themes were not applied identically across every interview. Instead, they functioned as sensitising concepts informed by the study aims, relevant literature, and issues emerging from earlier interviews (Bearman, 2019). This allowed interviews to remain participant-led while ensuring consistency in

addressing core areas relevant to the study (Knott et al., 2022). Therefore, while some interviews covered broadly similar domains, the depth and sequencing of themes varied according to participant narratives. Across interviews, similarities and differences were explored by revisiting recurring topics. Exploring these contrasting accounts allowed the study to examine both shared patterns and points of divergence across participant experiences.

Several strategies were employed to minimise researcher bias in selecting and prioritising themes during interviews. The use of a predefined thematic framework (*appendix ii*) ensured that interviews remained anchored to the research objectives rather than being guided solely by the researcher's assumptions or interests (Bearman, 2019). Through the narrative interview approach, participants themselves determined the order, emphasis, and depth of discussion through their descriptions, thereby reducing excessive interviewer direction (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016). Additionally, reflexivity was an integral component of the research process, with ongoing critical reflection on how the researcher's own perspectives and assumptions might shape both the questioning and interpretation of data (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). This included a conscious effort to avoid selective probing that might privilege particular narratives or confirm emerging interpretations (Robinson, 2023). While the iterative nature of qualitative research allowed for the recognition of emerging patterns, care was taken to avoid prematurely solidifying these during data collection (Knott et al., 2022). This ensured that themes remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than shaped by prior expectations. Following the interviews, transcripts were reviewed for assumptions and areas where the researcher may have unintentionally influenced the discussion. These reflections informed subsequent interviews and supported ongoing critical awareness of researcher positioning (Robinson, 2023).

The use of instant messenger interviews also created opportunities for ongoing reflexive practice during the interview process itself (Gibson, 2020). Throughout data collection, the researcher audio recorded reflective thoughts during interviews to document decision-making processes, emotional responses, and reflections regarding interviewer influence. An example of this can be seen in *appendix iii*, which provides an illustrative example of this reflexive decision-making process, showing how concurrent audio-

recorded reflections informed the timing and direction of questioning during an interview. Reflexive memos are recognised as an important strategy for enhancing transparency and critical awareness of researcher positioning (Mruck and Mey, 2019). The text-based nature of instant messenger interviewing also provided additional time to consider responses before sending them, supporting more deliberate and reflexive questioning (Kaufmann et al., 2021). Rather than responding immediately, the researcher was able to reflect on whether a proposed question would further the participant's narrative or inadvertently redirect it towards topics of greater interest to the researcher.

As an example (see *appendix iii*), during one interview the participant discussed how a desire to achieve their future career aspirations had contributed to their decision to persist despite expressing significant dissatisfaction with their programme. As career aspirations and motivation had emerged as recurring themes across earlier interviews, the researcher initially considered pursuing this line of enquiry further. However, the accompanying reflexive notes demonstrate a conscious decision not to privilege this emerging theme and instead allow the participant to continue exploring their feelings towards their degree programme and their experiences with academic staff (*appendix iii*). Similarly, later in the interview, when the participant described feeling 'not good enough' for the programme, the reflexive notes record the need to first acknowledge and explore these emotional experiences before returning to questions relating to institutional support and persistence. These examples demonstrate how the interview process remained participant-led, with questions shaped by the participant's immediate concerns rather than by themes emerging from previous interviews or the developing analysis. This approach is consistent with narrative interviewing principles that emphasise preserving participant meaning making and avoiding premature interruption or redirection of narratives (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016). The process also reflected an awareness that qualitative interviewing involves co-constructed interaction requiring continuous reflexive consideration of interviewer influence (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Collectively, these strategies enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), while remaining aligned with the study's realist social constructivist position, which recognises that meaning is

constructed through the interaction of individual experience and wider structural context.

To allow for further reflective process to take place, the participants were given two weeks to return to their interview transcripts and add any supplementary information, if they so wished. This practice, of offering participants the opportunity to review and then respond to an interview transcript and/or findings (i.e. by agreeing or disagreeing, clarifying or proposing changes to the same), is known as Respondent Validation (RV) (Torrance, 2012). For this study, I used the form of RV where transcripts are shared which is known as 'Interviewee Transcript Review' (ITR) (Hagens et al., 2009). Six participants chose to review and edit their transcript. No comments were removed, though points were added to provide further explanation and clarity of information. As an example, Participant 22 added the following comment.

“sorry I was talking about being positive during my PGCE there not my degree, sorry if that was confusing”

As discussed by Rowlands (2021) this process can provide participants with a reassurance that their comments have been recorded accurately, with an opportunity to add anything they feel is needed for clarity, and the confidence that they will not be identifiable from the data. Unlike with face-to-face interviews where there may be mistaken dialogue during the transcription process, the use of IM interviews means that both interviewer and interviewee have access to the full written transcript. This allows the participant to access the data easily making any required changes.

4.4.3 – Data Analysis

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021). This approach was selected due to its flexibility, accessibility, and alignment with the study's realist social constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges both individual agency and the influence of broader structural forces on the student experience. The analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for

themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Interviews were downloaded from the source, WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, and copied to Microsoft word, where they were checked for accuracy. During familiarisation, transcripts were read multiple times, and initial notes were made to capture early analytic insights.

A worked example of this process is outlined below to demonstrate how data was developed into themes.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Interview transcripts were read and re-read to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' accounts. Initial observations were noted, particularly around how students described moments of uncertainty about continuing and the factors that influenced their decision to stay.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Segments of data were systematically coded across the dataset. For example, statements such as "*I didn't feel like I belonged at first*" and "*I felt like an outsider in my classes*" were coded as *lack of belonging*, while comments such as "*my tutor really helped me through it*" were coded as *academic support*. Coding remained open and inclusive at this stage to capture the breadth of student experiences.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into potential themes. For instance, codes such as *lack of belonging*, *peer isolation*, and *feeling out of place* were clustered under a broader candidate theme of *belonging*, while *academic support*, *pastoral support*, and *peer encouragement* were grouped under *support*.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Candidate themes were reviewed in relation to both the coded data and the full dataset to ensure coherence and distinction. Some themes were refined, merged, or separated at this stage. For example, initial overlap between *support* and *engagement* was addressed by clarifying the distinction between relational support and active participation in learning.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

The themes were then clearly defined and named to capture their essence. For example, *belonging* was defined as the extent to which students felt socially and academically integrated within the university environment, while *support* captured both formal and informal sources of assistance that enabled continuation.

Phase 6: Producing the report

The final themes were used to structure the findings chapter, supported by illustrative participant quotes.

Thematic coding was conducted in two distinct stages to support both exploratory and theoretically informed analysis. In the first stage, an inductive approach was used, consistent with ‘open coding’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), allowing themes to emerge directly from the data without being constrained by pre-existing frameworks. This phase prioritised participant voice and resulted in an initial set of themes, which were developed and written up as data-driven findings (Chapter 5).

i. Example of inductive coding process

The table below provides an example of the coding process, demonstrating the progression from semantic coding to latent interpretation, theme development, and reflexive engagement, in line with Braun & Clarke’s (2019) reflexive thematic analysis.

Data Extract	Initial Codes (Semantic)	Reflexive Interpretation (Latent)	Theme(s)	Reflexive Note
“I felt that everyone on the course was really clever... I felt out of place... not carrying on.”	• Struggling academically • Feeling less capable • Loss of confidence • Feeling out of place	• Expectation–reality mismatch • Identity disruption • Comparative self-evaluation • Conditional belonging	• Expectations of study • Belonging • Motivation • Resilience	Initially coded as academic difficulty; refined to identity disruption and belonging.

	• Considering withdrawal			
“There were times I felt overwhelmed... my family were really supportive...”	• Feeling overwhelmed • Considering leaving • Persistence • Family support	• Interaction of internal and external factors • Relational support • Co-constructed resilience	• Resilience • Motivation • Personal circumstances	Initially seen as resilience; refined to relational, context-dependent resilience.
“I wanted to prove the naysayers wrong...”	• Proving others wrong • External judgement • Determination	• Motivation shaped by external validation • Identity affirmation	• Motivation • External pressures • Resilience	Initially coded as motivation; refined to socially constructed motivation.
“they both can’t work... they used to ask me for the loan money...”	• Financial dependency • Giving wages to family • Lack of autonomy • Family control	• Constrained agency • Financial control in family context • Structural pressure	• Personal circumstances • External pressures • Demographics • Resilience	Initially coded as financial hardship; refined to relational control and constrained agency.

(Table 2 - Example of the inductive data analysis of phase one)

ii. Deductive Thematic Analysis

In the second stage, a deductive approach was applied separately, drawing on key concepts from the literature on retention and attrition, to produce a deductive coding framework (see *appendix iv*). This process involved revisiting the data to explore how it aligned with, extended, or challenged existing theoretical understandings. The transcripts were then systematically re-analysed using the framework, with extracts coded according to their relationship with these theoretically informed concepts.

Conceptually related codes were subsequently grouped and refined into broader analytical categories. To support analytical separation between the two stages and reduce the influence of the initial coding process, the deductive analysis was conducted several months after the inductive analysis using new copies of the interview transcripts. This deliberate gap allowed the data to be revisited with greater analytical distance and reduced the likelihood of the deductive stage simply reproducing the earlier inductive themes.

The outcome of this deductive analysis was twofold: (1) the development of an analytical framework describing why students continue despite challenges (Chapter 6), and (2) the creation of a model of attrition risk factors informed by both participant insight and theoretical constructs (Chapter 7). These outputs directly informed the design and statement selection for the Phase Two Q methodology, ensuring theoretical continuity and participant-informed rigour.

An example of the deductive coding process can be seen in the table below.

Participant Extract	Initial Inductive (Descriptive) Codes	Deductive Analytical Lens	Analytical Category
“Sometimes it depended on the tutor. I feel like the setup of the course was good for people with extra responsibilities but then it made it seem easy to complete the course with a job when in fact it was really hard” (Participant 3)	Course flexibility; employment pressures; balancing responsibilities; tutor influence	Examined in relation to external pressures and institutional structures influencing continuation	Demographic Factors that Affect Attrition
“I felt like everyone just wanted me to finish the course... I really only stayed to make everyone else happy... In hindsight I wish I had left at 2.5 years...” (Participant 31)	External expectations; pressure to continue; lack of fulfilment; persistence despite dissatisfaction	Re-analysed through concepts of relational influence, external motivation, and engagement with study	Influences that Support Retention / Engagement Dynamics
“I feel like I’m here for a different reason than most. I’m focused on the career outcome, but	Social isolation; career motivation; lack of connection;	Examined through belonging and social integration theory	The Importance of Student Belonging

socially, I don't really connect. It makes you question if you belong here." (Participant 12)	questioning belonging		
"It's hard being the only one [openly trans] in the group. People don't say anything directly, but it's the looks and silence..... You start to feel like leaving might be easier." (Participant 8)	Identity; exclusion; social discomfort; thoughts of withdrawal	Re-analysed through theories of belonging, inclusion, and marginalisation within higher education	The Importance of Student Belonging

(Table 3- Example of deductive coding)

4.4.4 – How Phase One Influenced Phase Two

Using an exploratory/confirmatory mixed methods research design allowed for full consideration of the potential next phase of the research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Although I had initially planned to conduct further interviews as phase two of the work, with a purposive sample from phase one, the scope of the research had changed as a consequence of the findings in phase one. Though further interviews with participants would have provided further narrative on their experiences, the research aims called for research of current student experiences. Furthermore, there was a need to 'test' the model, perhaps by using a large quantitative data set using a questionnaire or survey. I however did not want to merely evaluate my existing findings but also develop them and provide further insight into my research aims.

According to Nieuwoudt and Pedler (2023) to implement effective strategies to support students, it is necessary for universities to have a clear understanding of the student experience. Furthermore, this can only be obtained through research that foregrounds student voice and student perspectives (Beer and Lawson, 2017). Tight (2020) advocates the need for higher education to have a better understanding of what it is like to be a student today, to better understand how likely students are to choose to remain at university. Therefore, a method that allowed for this exploration was chosen.

4.5 – Phase Two – Q Methodology

This phase was designed to capture the voices of current students across various undergraduate degrees, using Q method, to collect both qualitative and quantitative data and provide insight into what is important to student experience and therefore why students choose to remain at university. The research phase took place in the ‘home’ institution with current undergraduate students from across the faculties.

i. Explanation of Q Methodology Terms

As Q methodology contains several technical terms that may be unfamiliar to readers outside the field, the table below provides a brief explanation of the key terminology used throughout this study.

Term	Explanation
Q Methodology	A mixed-method approach designed to explore subjectivity by examining how participants rank and prioritise viewpoints about a topic (Watts and Stenner, 2012).
Concourse	The broader collection of ideas, opinions, and viewpoints that exist around a topic area from which Q-set statements are derived.
Q Set	The final collection of statements presented to participants for sorting during the Q-sort exercise.
P-Set	The participant group who complete the Q-sort exercise. In Q methodology, participants are selected for the diversity of viewpoints they may represent rather than statistical representativeness.
Q Sort	The process by which participants rank statements according to a condition of instruction (for example, from “most important” to “least important”).
Condition of Instruction	The question or instruction that guides how participants should sort the statements.
Factor Analysis	A statistical process used within Q methodology to identify patterns of similarity between participant Q sorts, indicating shared viewpoints or perspectives.
Factor	A shared pattern of viewpoints identified through analysis. Participants loading significantly on the same factor are understood to share a similar perspective.
Factor Loading	A statistical indication of the extent to which a participant’s Q sort aligns with a particular factor.

Distinguishing Statements	Statements ranked significantly differently within one factor compared to others, helping define the unique characteristics of a viewpoint.
Consensus Statements	Statements ranked similarly across factors, indicating areas of shared agreement between viewpoints.
Structured Q Set	A Q set developed using predefined thematic categories to ensure broad coverage of the topic area.
Quasi-Naturalistic Sampling	A Q-set development approach that combines participant discourse with external sources such as literature or theoretical frameworks (McKeown and Thomas, 1988).

(Table 4 - Key Q method terminology)

ii. Overview of Q Methodology

Though there are many variants of this methodology, the following elements are common to all Q method studies and will be used within this study (Stephenson, 1936):

- The researcher creates a set of items (the Q set). Each item corresponds to an opinion about the topic under consideration and is rateable by individuals. The items are usually statements, with individuals able to say how much they relate or agree with the statement.
- The participants (the P set) are asked to give a rating to each item in the Q set by placing it in a grid, with each column representing a discrete numerical rating of the item. There are as many spaces in the grid as there are items, so the number of items that can be given a rating is fixed. As a result of this process, the participant has assigned a numerical value to each item.
- Each participant's response to the Q set can be represented as the numerical values assigned to the items. Commonalities between these responses are discovered through a statistical analysis of the correlations between responses. This can be termed a 'by subject' analysis. It produces very different results to a 'by variable' analysis, which is based on correlations between variables, such as items on a questionnaire. 'By variable' analysis is commonly known as R-methodology.

- Through the analysis, groups of participants who respond in a similar way (showing a similar viewpoint) are identified. The way that each group arranges the Q set is interpreted to generate a textual description of the viewpoint.
- Interviews with the participants to discuss their responses to the Q-Set and sorting process, these can be done during, directly following or later. All participants may be interviewed or often a smaller purposeful sample.

With its use of textual statements, textual output and interpretation, Q methodology shares some elements of qualitative research paradigms. However, the use of statistical analysis is clearly quantitative. Hence Q methodology has been termed 'qualiquantillogical' (Watts and Stenner, 2012).

iii. Why Q Methodology was selected

The Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods design of the study allows for the previous phase to inform the next. As a result of using qualitative interviews for the initial exploratory phase, the subsequent phase allows for consolidation of the initial themes and findings (Cameron, 2009). Traditionally, mixed method studies of this nature would have a qual-QUANT design whereby the researcher would use the next stage to test their findings or interrogate a particular theme. Although quantitative questionnaires and surveys were considered as an option which would allow for further consolidation and confirmation of findings about the student experience, they would not, in themselves 'advance' the data, in my view. Quantitative methodologies use deductive reasoning to test hypotheses and gather empirical evidence (Polit and Beck, 2004). Quantitative studies often employ numerical approaches to their methods (such as questionnaires, measuring tools, controlled trials) to produce data that is claimed to be objective, to minimise the degree of error and bias (Mertens et al., 2017). The notion of 'truth' is accepted as a single objective reality which can be observed or measured and therefore accepted or rejected based on the evidence presented (Sheard, 2018). This positivist view of the subject was in opposition to the researcher's ontological view and

went against the purpose of the research study which was to explore the intersectionality of the student experience.

Q methodology permits for the variation of viewpoints that people create to be explored, concentrating on their subjective understanding and experiences (Cross, 2005). As a result, Q method is often used in studies which explore student perceptions of teaching and learning, student voice, and course evaluation (Zaitseva and Law, 2023). The intention of Q methodology is to highlight differing patterns of thinking amongst participants (Stenner et al., 2008). It allows for the expression of competing stories about a single social subject (Ramlo, 2015), thus allowing for participants to prioritise the debates surrounding viability according to their opinion. Q methodology then provides an opportunity to "reveal dynamic structures and connections of which those individuals who provide the Q sorts are often unaware" (Brown 2006 p. 376).

Q method was ultimately selected due to its founding in holism and Gestalt theory, which states that perception of the 'real world' is done as a whole rather than a collection of bits and pieces (Stephenson, 2018). According to Watts and Stenner (2012), Stephenson developed the Q sort method to facilitate a gestalt form of data collection, highlighting that the holistic nature of the procedure distinguished it from 'atomistic' (by-variable or by-item) methods. As such this method appealed to the desire to understand how differing factors, categories of risk, or circumstances affected the student experience.

4.5.1 – Processes and Procedures

iii. Creating a Q-set (concourse)

A Q set is a collection of items that participants in the study can rate according to a dimension given by the researcher. This set of statements or concourse can be produced through several methods. McKeown and Thomas (1988) separate these into "naturalistic" and "ready-made" sampling methods and structured and unstructured sets. Adopting a structured quasi-naturalistic approach allowed the use of the phase one data, scoping information, literature, and the model categories to develop an initial

Q-set. Though a structured approach that covered the themes within the topic area, was used, Brown's (1993) assertion that all themes must have equal numbers of statements was rejected. The themes selected were to evaluate the model and ensure that all participants had sufficient options to express their viewpoints, this approach would also allow a structure for analysis and discussion points. According to Curt's (1994) typology the items are "understanding" items as they were used to find the participants' viewpoints on their own experience and what they value as an individual. As previously discussed, Q method acknowledges subjectivity and places the interpretation of the researcher as centre in the analysis and creation process (Watts and Stenner, 2012).

The findings of phase one were the primary source of the concourse, including the risk attrition model and the analytical framework. Additionally, themes from the literature were included to develop a concourse that would provide coverage of the topic area.

iv. Rationale for the Sampling Approach

A structured quasi-naturalistic sampling strategy was adopted for the development of the Q set. This approach enabled the integration of multiple sources of knowledge, including:

- findings from the phase one interviews.
- observational information.
- literature relating to student experience and retention.
- concepts generated through the development and evaluation of the proposed model.

This approach was considered particularly appropriate because the study aimed both to remain grounded in participant experiences and to evaluate the broader applicability of the developing conceptual model. The use of multiple sources also aligned with Brookfield's (1995; 2017) multiple-lens framework by incorporating participant perspectives, theoretical literature, researcher reflection, and professional understanding, throughout the Q-set construction process.

Although a structured approach was adopted, Brown's (1993) suggestion that all themes should contain equal numbers of statements was not followed rigidly. The themes were instead used as organising principles to ensure adequate coverage of the topic area and to provide participants with sufficient opportunities to express differing viewpoints. The number of statements within each thematic area varied according to the complexity and prominence of issues identified within the data and literature. As acknowledged within Q methodology, subjectivity is not removed from the research process but instead forms part of the interpretative framework through which the concourse is developed and analysed (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Reflexive consideration was therefore maintained throughout the statement generation and refinement process.

v. How the Phase One Interviews Informed the Initial Q-Set

The primary source informing the initial development of the Q set was the phase one interview data. Although phase one focused specifically on students who had considered leaving their degree programmes, participants also discussed broader aspects of their student experience, including factors that contributed to persistence, engagement, belonging, and perceptions of success. These narratives provided a source of experiential material from which potential Q-set statements could be developed. Rather than extracting participant quotations verbatim, the interview data were analysed to identify recurring ideas, concerns, and areas of importance discussed across participant narratives. This decision was made because direct quotation extraction, as proposed by Brown (1993), risked producing an excessively lengthy and highly context-specific Q set that would have been difficult for participants to complete meaningfully. Instead, participant narratives were interpreted and synthesised into concise statements capable of representing broader subjective viewpoints.

The phase one analysis generated four overarching themes that informed the initial structure of the Q set:

- Supportive influences

- Engagement dynamics
- Demographic factors
- Belonging

Within each theme, statements were developed from specific issues repeatedly discussed by participants during interviews. For example, discussions relating to supportive influences generated statements concerning family support, institutional encouragement, and access to personal support networks. Narratives surrounding engagement dynamics informed statements relating to academic motivation, career aspirations, course satisfaction, and relationships with staff. Experiences of belonging informed statements relating to peer relationships, inclusion, identity, and feeling connected to the university environment. The interview data therefore informed the Q set in two distinct ways. First, the themes identified during phase one provided the overarching conceptual structure used to organise the concourse. Second, participant experiences and recurring viewpoints within those themes informed the wording and focus of individual statements.

vi. Linking Interview Themes to Model Factors

An additional aim of phase two was to evaluate the relevance and transferability of the proposed model categories with a different participant group. Consequently, the Q-set statements also needed to address the continuation factors identified within the developing model. To achieve this, the risk factors within the model were mapped against the themes generated from the phase one interview data. This process enabled the researcher to identify where themes and risk factors overlapped and where additional statement coverage was required.

(Table 5 - Example of concourse creation)

Theme	Relevant Factors
Supportive influences	Parents/family, caring responsibilities
Engagement dynamics	Academic success, career aspirations

Demographic factors	Socio-economic status, financial circumstances, age, caring responsibilities
Belonging	Age, friendship groups, first-generation status

As shown above, several risk factors intersected with multiple thematic areas. This resulted in some concepts generating a greater number of potential statements than others. Consequently, the study moved away from the assumption that all themes or risk factors required equal representation within the Q set (Brown, 1993). Instead, statement inclusion reflected the prominence and interconnectedness of issues identified across the data sources.

vii. Refinement of the Initial Concourse

Following the generation of an initial pool of statements from the interview data, model evaluation, and literature review, the concourse underwent a process of refinement and reduction. According to Watts and Stenner (2012), one of the main criteria for an effective Q set is the coverage of the topic area. If this criterion is not met successfully, the participants undertaking a Q sort find that certain aspects of their viewpoint cannot be expressed due to statements not being included, this can lead to frustration and a distorted data set. Although the Q-sort contains an area for neutrality, this needs to be for statements that participants felt did not overtly impact their experience rather than statements that had little relevance to their reality. As a result, there is a need to ensure that statements are not too specific in that they do not apply to all participants but also not too general in that they exclude a relevant topic or viewpoint (Kirschbaum et al., 2022). The following guidelines are proposed by Webler et al. (2009) on what makes a good Q-Sort statement:

- Statements must be ‘salient’ – most important, prominent, relevant, significant.
- Statements must be meaningful to the people completing the Q sorts.
- Statements must be understandable.
- Statements must have excess meaning – can be interpreted in slightly different ways.

- Statements must be something that people are likely to have opinion about.
- Statements must be both positively and negatively framed to provide balance.

To improve coverage and ensure that important areas had not been overlooked, the developing statement pool was compared against relevant literature concerning student experience, retention, and success. This introduced an additional ready-made element to the sample (McKeown and Thomas, 1988). In particular, the Advance HE Framework for Student Access, Retention, Attainment, and Progression was used as a reference point to ensure that the statements reflected a broad range of factors associated with student experience (Advance HE, 2024).

The resulting statement pool was then reviewed iteratively to:

- remove duplication.
- simplify complex wording.;
- ensure statements reflected a single idea.
- improve clarity and accessibility.
- maintain coverage across the identified thematic areas.

There is a lack of agreement on an ideal size for a Q-set, with some suggestions that it should range from 30-60 statements (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Though 30 is believed to be sufficient to cover the topic and 60 the maximum that is manageable for participants. There was a decision to aim for 40 statements in the initial concourse as this is described by van Exel and de Graaf (2005) as the typical expectation for a Q set.

The preliminary Q set (*see appendix v*) was subsequently piloted with colleagues and student interns to assess clarity, balance, and usability. Feedback from this process informed further refinement of statement wording, relevance, and overall set length. This process enabled the development of a manageable but sufficiently comprehensive Q set capable of capturing a range of viewpoints relating to student experience and persistence. The final Q set, following piloting, was 44 statements.

After creation of the initial concourse and removal of duplications or statements deemed to be too specific, for example those that asked about the impact of child caring responsibilities. The Q-sort exercise was piloted with a small group of colleagues; this was done to ensure that the statements were detailed enough to allow for true reflection but also clear and relevant to a general group, the creation of a Q-set is a difficult and time-consuming process and it is certainly ‘one place where Q-method is noticeably a craft’ (Curt, 1994: 128–9). As most of the pilot P-set were not current students (and those that were, were postgraduate students), they were asked to complete the task by reflecting on their time as an undergraduate student and considering what was important to them. Feedback from the pilot suggested some positive aspects of the design, for example they felt that the size of the Q-set was appropriate and had a good balance of statements to reflect on. However, there were several development points:

1. There were statements that read as yes/no questions which made them difficult to place within an agree/disagree scale.
2. The statements that were based around demographic questions would be better suited to a short demographic questionnaire for each participant.
3. Some of the questions needed to be rephrased to allow them to be relevant to each participant, for example the statement ‘caring responsibilities have a negative influence on my study time’ was said to be exclusionary of those without caring responsibilities and would lead to a high number of participants placing the statement in the neutral field, when it was not applicable for them.

Following the completion of the Q-sort, the pilot participants were asked to review the model and use their own knowledge about student experience to suggest any areas of relevance on the topic that they felt were omitted from the statements. All participants were happy that my required themes were covered by the concourse but did suggest that there could be another statement that dealt with disability and SEND provision.

This pilot was then followed by a further two small pilots with student interns and volunteers, to assist in finalising the Q-SET (Concourse) (see *appendix vi*) and to train the student interns on the processes of Q method data collection.

ix. Use of student interns

This phase of research was conducted in collaboration with four student interns. They were three 2nd year undergraduate degree students and a MA student from within the university. The interns were recruited from across the university and were required to have completed a research methods module within their programme, additionally completing the online student ethics training which is required before students can embark on field research. The interns were involved in the study in the following ways:

- Participation in the 2nd Q Sort pilot
- Refinement of the Q Set (Concourse)
- Creation of the demographic questionnaire
- Involvement in the final pilot as facilitators and observers
- Facilitators in the Q-Sort data collection
- Interviewers for the post sort participant interviews

Using this approach leveraged the unique insights and perspectives of the students, ensuring that the Q-sort accurately reflected their experiences. Cook-Sather (2006) suggests that the use of student interns as *"experts by experience"* underscores the importance of the student voice in shaping educational policies and practices. Student voice is critical in research on student experience because it provides authentic insights that are often inaccessible to external researchers. The concept of *"expert by experience"* highlights the value of individuals' lived experiences in contributing to knowledge production. The student interns, through their interactions within the institution, possess a deep understanding of the student experience that cannot be replicated by external observers. Their involvement confirmed that the concourse and interpretations are grounded in the realities of student life. Students are one of the three stakeholders in higher education settings (Longden, 2002), and their firsthand experiences offer a rich source of data for understanding various aspects of campus life, learning environments, and institutional policies. Therefore, working with the student interns provided nuanced information that reflects the real challenges and opportunities that HE students face. The changing status of the researcher from student

to staff member, had led to their removal from the participant group to part of the institution. Therefore, the inclusion of student interns allowed for the research to continue to be informed by a shared experience that felt authentic.

4.5.2 – Participant Recruitment

McKeown and Thomas (1988) describe ‘theoretical sampling’ as choosing participants based on them having a relevant connection to the topic. Watts and Stenner (2012) also advise Q researchers to choose participants who will have something important to say about the topic at hand and suggest ‘strategic sampling’. As the main aim of the current study is to uncover a variety of viewpoints that are present in the student population, it is important that the sample is as varied as possible in terms of factors such as age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, education history etc. Though, it is not deemed necessary to ensure that the sample is representative of the general population (Watts and Stenner, 2012), it was felt that the sample needed to be carefully considered and adapted, if necessary, to ensure that many viewpoints were collected. For example, it was of importance to the research that opinions from those who are minoritised in higher education and those who have caring responsibilities, was gathered. However, it was also a consideration to not overrecruit from those groups. Additionally including a wide range of subject areas would increase the validity of the findings by including all student typologies (Simpson, 2015).

The participant sample for this phase of the study can be both described as a convenience sample and a purposive sample (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Andrade (2020), states that a convenience sample is one that is drawn from a source that is conveniently accessible to us, in this instance students from the home institution. There are numerous reasons why a researcher may choose this method of sampling, they may want to conduct research that specifically supports this population, or they may choose a convenience sample as this is a community or network that they have easy and open access to (Brown, 2019). For this research both rationales were appropriate the access as an insider meant that there was a ready-made large pool of potential participants to recruit from and knowledge of the characteristics of the

university allowed the familiarity that a sample that met the demographic mix required was attainable.

Purposive sampling, is suggested to be better for matching the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigour of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020). It is used often in qualitative research or where the research study has specific aims. According to Gallagher and Porock (2010), if a study is interested in sampling a P set which had more of a theoretical relevance to the investigation, systematic criteria can be applied in the form of factorial designs. A factorial P set "marks an overt attempt to sample people of theoretical interest" (McKeown and Thomas 1988 p.38), hence who are theoretically relevant to the problem under consideration. Therefore, for this study a purposeful sample was chosen from the convenience sample the home university provided.

Participants were found by contacting key staff members in each faculty, who had the role of a gatekeeper by which they shared the call for participants with relevant student groups, rather than me contacting students directly. The only requirement for the participants of this phase was that they were current students of the home institution on undergraduate courses, and they were willing to take part in the Q-sort exercise, interview and provide demographic information. The literature on Q-method reveals little agreement about how to decide on an appropriate number of participants. One point of agreement, exemplified by Brown (1980) is that ascertaining the existence of different viewpoints and comparing them can be achieved with a small number of participants. According to Brown (2019), it is generally found that as participants are added, a point of saturation is quite quickly reached where no further useful information is gained. In fact, some Q studies have been criticised for having more participants than statements in the Q set (Watts and Stenner, 2012). However, one area of agreement is that a lower number of participants does limit the number of factors that emerge. In the current study one of my main aims is for multiple viewpoints to emerge, and so the number of participants used needs to be high enough for this to occur. No firm decision on the number of participants was made prior to data collection, and it was decided to observe participant saturation based on the data obtained and the demographics of the participants that were needed to offer full coverage (Fusch and Ness, 2015).

In total 37 participants took place in the Q-Sort exercise, with all participants also being interviewed about the Q-sort during the session.

4.5.3 – Conducting the Q-Sorts

The Q-Sorts were conducted face-to-face in five sessions (27 participants), for these sessions all Q-sorts were completed by using physical sorts on paper (*see appendix vii*). All four student interns were present at these Q-sorts, aiding participants during the sorting procedure and were involved in the interviewing process, each interviewed participants during the Q sorts to allow participants to be interviewed as soon as they had finished. Participants were given a Q-sort template, and the Q-set statements individually printed with numbers to help track the sorts. These numbers were from 1-44 but the numerical order of statements had been randomised during the concourse finalisation stage, and statement cards were shuffled before being given to the participant. This was to ensure that preference was not based on the numerical order of the statement within the concourse list, or the order in which the participants were provided with them (Dieteren et al., 2023).

The participants were asked to consider the impact of the statements in relation to their student experience. They were then asked to complete an initial pre-sort of the statements into agree, disagree and neutral piles. This allowed participants to sort statements onto the grid based on the pre-sort piles rather than the order in which they came to them in the main pile (Brown, 1993). The participants were then asked to sort the statements on to the Q grid, ensuring that they sorted all statements and only filled the spaces on the grid. The time taken to complete the sort ranged from 15 mins to 45 mins, with the average being 25 mins. Each individual interview averaged 30 mins. Most of the participants had completed the activity and interview within 1hr with the maximum being an 1hr35mins.

To allow for the remainder of participants to complete their sorts at a distance, the remainder of the sorts (10) took place online. This was done using Microsoft Teams and the completion of the sorts using Microsoft PowerPoint (*see appendix viii*). Participants were provided with a template to complete and given instruction together during a main

Teams call before being sent into a breakout space to complete the task, once completed they were then interviewed in the breakout room to allow for privacy. On average the participants completed the task in 20-30 mins, with interviews lasting for 20 mins. Most of the online sessions had 2-3 participants, though some were completed one to one. The success of this in allowing for a greater participant sample, once again reinforces the advantages of utilising online methods and procedures within this study.

4.5.4 – Data Analysis

The Q-sort data were entered into KENQ for statistical analysis – a free software package designed to analyse Q data - using by-person factor analysis, a core component of Q methodology that identifies patterns of similarity across individual Q-sorts (Brown, 1980). The data were subjected to centroid factor extraction followed by varimax rotation to identify interpretable factors representing shared viewpoints among participants. Several rounds of extraction were trialled, with four to six factor solutions explored to determine the most meaningful and stable configuration.

A five-factor solution was ultimately selected based on the following criteria:

- Eigenvalues > 1.00
- Each factor comprising at least two significant Q-sorts (loading at $p < 0.01$)
- Theoretical coherence with Phase One themes
- Clarity of distinguishing statements across factors

Each factor was interpreted through a combination of distinguishing statements, factor arrays, and post-sort qualitative comments from participants. Statements with high positive or negative z-scores helped to define each viewpoint's unique profile, while consensus statements provided insight into shared values across the cohort.

In addition to the factor analysis and interpretation, the post sort interview data was analysed thematically using a deductive approach that utilised the stages as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2008).

4.6 – Ethical Implications

i. Phase one

Research involving participants who previously contemplated withdrawing from university, even if they ultimately completed their studies, raises several important ethical considerations. While these individuals are no longer students, discussing their past vulnerabilities may evoke distressing memories, particularly if their consideration to leave stemmed from personal, mental health, financial, or social challenges (Neville et al., 2016). Researchers must therefore design interviews with sensitivity and adopt trauma-informed approaches that prioritise participant wellbeing. This includes providing clear information about the nature of the study, ensuring voluntary participation, and offering access to support resources if distress arises during or after the interview (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024).

Another ethical issue involves confidentiality and anonymity. Graduates may feel more comfortable disclosing sensitive experiences after leaving the institution, but the risk of identifying individuals remains, especially in small cohorts or specific disciplines. Researchers must ensure that all data is anonymised and securely stored, in compliance with GDPR and institutional ethics protocols (Rawnsley, 2025). This process is conducted through the institutions University Research and Ethics Committee (*see appendix ix to xi*). Ethical concerns relation to the interview method, such as considerations relating to privacy were addressed through clear guidance on participation settings and secure data handling protocols.

ii. Phase two

Due to my academic role at the university, this phase involved an element of insider research (Mercer, 2007). While this position provided contextual understanding and access, it also introduced risks related to power dynamics, perceived coercion, and potential bias in data interpretation. Measures were taken to mitigate these risks.

Caruana (2015) suggests that the researcher might also feel pressure to present findings that align with the institution's interests or avoid topics that could be seen as critical of the institution. Ethical reflexivity is necessary to manage such concerns and avoid coercion. However, the ethical benefit of including such participants lies in giving voice to those who persisted despite serious challenges. This can inform institutional practices and support services in ways that pre-empt attrition for current students. Therefore, by foregrounding these stories ethically and respectfully, the research can contribute to more inclusive, student-centred retention strategies.

Undergraduate research interns supported the research phase. This raised additional ethical considerations, particularly regarding confidentiality, role boundaries, and training. Interns received comprehensive guidance on ethical research practices, including data protection and the importance of anonymisation. They were supervised closely by the lead researcher. The use of student interns was approved as part of the ethics application, with safeguards in place to protect both participant and intern wellbeing.

A small incentive, an online gift voucher valued at £20, was offered to each participant. The use of incentives in qualitative research can raise concerns around undue influence, especially when participants may be economically vulnerable (Head, 2009). However, the value was kept deliberately low to acknowledge participants' time and contributions without exerting coercive pressure. The information sheet clarified that participation was voluntary and that the incentive would be provided regardless of whether participants completed the entire process. This aligns with ethical standards that recognise participant autonomy and respect for persons (NHMRC, 2018).

iii. How were these concerns addressed

To mitigate these ethical issues, established ethical guidelines were followed and approval sought from an independent ethics review board (UREC). This process ensured that the research design and methods were ethically sound and that potential conflicts of interest were managed appropriately. As an example, most of the participants within the study were not students within the researcher's department, of those students who

were it was ensured that any grading activities had been completed before their participation in the research. Also, these participants were interviewed by a student intern unknown to them and not an intern from their programme. This practice removed potential for the participant to receive any additional benefit for taking part, or to feel swayed to provide a Q-sort or interview that was positive about the practices within their department.

When considering the insider status in this phase of the research, the potential for bias and other concerns is acknowledged. However, it is felt that the benefits afforded through insider status greatly outweigh the negatives. Although some commentators would consider that the notion of objectivity remains a concern (Mercer, 2007), objectivity in a pure form, was never something aimed for, as, subjectivity could not be avoided as it has informed the interpretations, allowing for synthesis of the data between phases and the inclusion of the various lenses required for the study.

Subjectivity plays a crucial role in research inquiry, acknowledging that research is a co-constructed process shaped by the perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of both researchers and participants (Berger, 2015). Rather than viewing subjectivity as a limitation or source of bias, contemporary epistemological positions, particularly within realist social constructivism, recognise it as a vital element in generating depth and authenticity in social research (Elder-Vass, 2012; Maxwell, 2012).

In this sense, subjectivity enriches rather than diminishes credibility. By embracing multiple perspectives, the researcher produces findings that are situated, contextual, and meaningfully representative of lived experience. This aligns with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of '*trustworthiness*', which emphasises authenticity and resonance over objectivity. Consequently, recognising subjectivity allows research to remain both interpretively rigorous and ethically grounded, acknowledging that knowledge in the social sciences is always partial, relational, and co-produced. According to Finlay (2002), 'systematic reflexivity' is an explicit methodological self-consciousness which is required of the researcher. Consequently, limitations to the research study including recommendations and possibilities for further interrogation of the research outputs, will be considered in the final summary and conclusion chapters.

4.7 – Potential Limitations of the Study

When reflecting on their research, researchers can often worry about failure or mistakes in the research design, or method, or analysis, this is said to be particularly frequent for PhD researchers who are viewed as somewhat of a novice (Pinkett, 2023). Therefore, something that has come up continually throughout this process, has been the question of overcoming what ‘went wrong’ or pivoting to a new avenue. However, by addressing the perception of limitations or errors, the positive outcomes of these changes can be illuminated (Langdon, 2025).

First, in research there is often a desire for findings to be generalisable and have wide reach, this reflects a positivist perspective that research should seek an objective truth (Gerrits and Pagliarin, 2021). It is accepted that this research focuses on subjective understanding of participants’ experiences (Elder-Vass, 2010). However, the creation of the model and sub-models suggests an intention that these findings as can be generalised to the wider context (Safari et al., 2023). This begs the question why a traditional quantitative method of data collection was not employed for phase two (Mukumbang, 2023). Safari et al. (2023) argue that using a multiple case narrative approach, allows for qualitative data to be generalised to a wider population. Furthermore, Q-Methodology is recognised as suitable for researching subjective experiences that can be structured into wider contexts (Kirschbaum et al., 2022; Zaitseva and Law, 2023). Additionally, the relevance of the data gathered in both phases to wider literature, suggests the validity of the findings (Guenther and Falk, 2019).

Another question of legitimacy of the findings could be the sample used. Though participants outside of the ‘home’ institution were used for phase one of the research, the other phase took place within one university. It could be therefore argued that much of the findings are only pertinent to that sole institution and therefore not of use to the wider understanding of the student experience (Guest, 2014). However, as the findings suggest that the student experience is intersectional, which is supported by the literature and wider HE context, the extent of this limitation is questionable (Harland, 2014). Additionally, the conclusion that the findings from phase two validated the model, analytical framework and findings from phase one, suggest that the data

gathered represented the student experience beyond one institution (Marshall and Case, 2010).

The sample used for phase one also showed some potential areas of limitation, with the sample being previous students who are reflecting on their previous educational experience. There is therefore the potential for misremembering (Jaeger, 2015). As I have acknowledged within my reflections (chapter three), I told a sanitised version of my own experiences, perhaps to place the fault with the course rather than myself. Therefore, could this unreliable narration have impacted the feasibility of the phase one data (Bolton, 2012). The alignment of the findings with wider literature which contains various differing samples would suggest that this has not been a significant limitation to the study (Harland, 2014). Additionally, the positionality of the research accepts that all reflections of experience are constructed truths, within my own reflection and those of my participants (Elder-Vass, 2012). Moreover, the inclusion of this group introduced an interpretive richness that rebalanced the potential bias that would have come from students still within that moment of ‘crisis’. As discovered earlier in the participant recruitment process, there is an invisibility of students at the point of crisis, when they are most at risk of discontinuing their studies (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Therefore, by collecting data on participants who were no longer at this juncture, the participants’ narratives illuminated the complexity of decision-making processes, challenging binary assumptions of “stayer” and “leaver” embedded in traditional models and allowing for the discussion of what worked to get them to reach final completion, rather than what had kept them enrolled at the point of potential withdrawal. In doing so, the research contributes to a more granular and humanised understanding of retention that aligns with holistic and intersectional approaches (Reay, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991).

A further potential limitation of this research lies in its use of a deductive analysis approach to explore an area that has already been widely theorised within higher education studies, namely, student retention and attrition. Deductive research, which begins with established theoretical frameworks and tests or refines them through empirical data (Bryman, 2016), can risk constraining findings within existing conceptual boundaries. This may limit opportunities for unanticipated discoveries or the development of new theoretical insights, particularly in mature fields where dominant

models, such as those proposed by Tinto (1993), Bean (1980), and Thomas (2012), already shape much of the academic discourse. The deductive design therefore required careful reflexivity to avoid reproducing entrenched perspectives or overlooking emerging nuances in student experience.

However, this was counterbalanced by the study's focus on an underrepresented participant group, students who had seriously considered leaving higher education but ultimately persisted. This population occupies an underexplored position within the retention continuum: neither the successful completer knowingly examined in satisfaction studies nor the withdrawn student whose departure is captured in institutional data (Bradley, 2017; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). Therefore, their experiences provided a unique window into the 'tipping points' of persistence, revealing both the vulnerabilities that lead to disengagement and the protective factors that sustain continuation. By applying a deductive lens to this specific cohort, the study was able to test, refine, and extend existing theories in ways that highlight their applicability, and limitations, for diverse student populations. Consequently, while the deductive design anchored the study within established theory, the focus on students who had persisted, despite challenges, facilitated theoretical innovation through contextual expansion, reaffirming the value of combining structured analysis with emergent, experience-led insight.

A further limitation of this study relates to the timing of the data collection in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift in higher education practices. The Phase One interviews, which formed the basis of the concourse and initial thematic development, were conducted prior to the pandemic. As a result, issues that later became significantly more prominent within higher education, such as digital communication competencies, online engagement, access to learning technologies, and digital poverty (Gulzar et al., 2024), were not strongly reflected within the initial participant accounts or the resulting Q-set. Although Phase Two of the research was conducted post-COVID-19, the Q methodology concourse and statement set had already been developed from the Phase One data. Consequently, while participants in the later stage may have experienced the ongoing impact of increased digitalisation within higher education, these issues were not explicitly foregrounded within the sorting

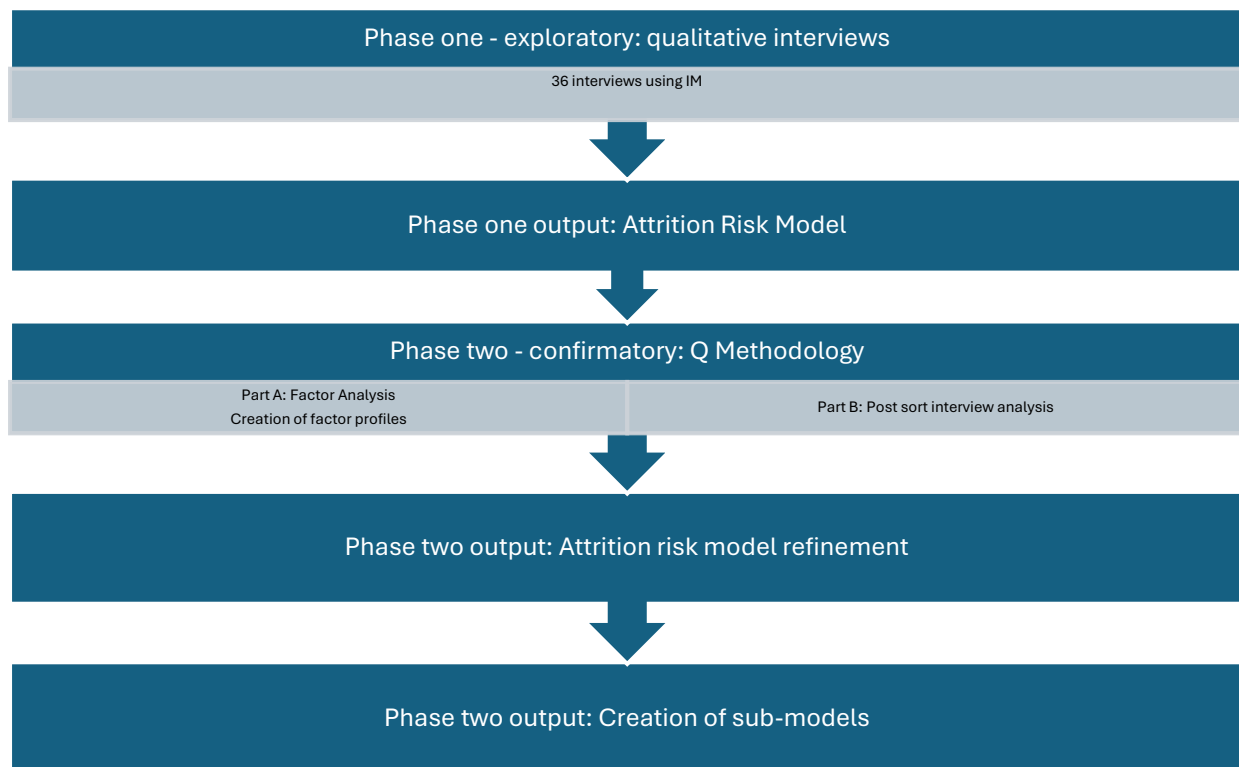
framework. This means that the model may not fully capture the extent to which digital access, digital confidence, and online forms of belonging and engagement now shape student continuation. Given the growing body of post-pandemic literature highlighting the impact of digital poverty and digital exclusion on student engagement and educational participation (Cullinan et al., 2021; Russo and Emtage, 2023), this omission will be addressed in future research (see Chapter 14).

4.8 - Final Structure of the Study

The integration of multiple methods in mixed-methodological research often involves sequential or concurrent data collection and analysis. Sequential designs involve the use of one method followed by another, with the results of each phase informing subsequent phases. Concurrent designs involve the simultaneous use of multiple methods, with researchers collecting and analysing data from different sources concurrently. This study takes an exploratory sequential approach with the findings from phase one (qualitative interviews) informing phase two (Q methodology). Scoping exercises and the use of student interns also informed the exploratory nature of the study. During the final phase the findings from phase two were used to evaluate and adapt findings from phase one leading to integration and additional outputs (Creswell et al., 2011).

i. Structure and timeline of research phases.

The diagram below shows the structure of the research design and the sequential nature of the data collection, with each phase informing the subsequent stage. This design is reflected in the following chapters which detail each stage before moving on to the following stage. This is then concluded with a final summary chapter which reflects on the research aims, discussing how each question has been addressed by the study data and analysis.



(Figure 1 – Study Structure)

4.9 – Chapter Conclusion

This study adopts a realist social constructivist approach, recognising that while reality exists independently of individual perceptions, knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through experience and interaction. This ontological and epistemological positioning allows for an exploration of both subjective experiences and underlying structures influencing them. To address the research aims, a sequential mixed methods design is employed, integrating qualitative narrative interviews and Q methodology to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. This approach ensures both depth and breadth in data collection and analysis.

In the first phase, interviews were conducted to capture participants lived experiences and perceptions in their own words. This qualitative stage enabled an in-depth exploration of individual meaning-making processes, aligning with the study's constructivist orientation. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and key constructs that informed the development of the Q methodology phase. In the

second phase, Q methodology was utilised to systematically investigate shared viewpoints among participants. By integrating qualitative narratives with the structured analytic approach of Q methodology, this study leverages the strengths of both interpretivist and empirically driven methodologies. The sequential design ensured that the initial qualitative phase informed the quantitative structuring of Q methodology, fostering a more nuanced understanding of social constructions and underlying realities.

This methodology aligns with a realist social constructivist paradigm by acknowledging the socially constructed nature of meaning while also seeking to identify patterns and structures that transcend individual experiences. The combination of narrative inquiry and Q methodology offers a robust framework for exploring complex subjective phenomena in a systematic yet interpretive manner. The following chapters will discuss the phase one data analysis and findings, before moving on to the Q methodology stage which will discuss the findings split into parts a and b.

Chapter Five: Phase One Findings - Thematic Analysis of Participant Narratives

This chapter discusses the findings of phase one of the research and key discussion points. These are separated into eight themes, spanning different aspects of the students' experience and show the individual, institutional, socio-cultural, and economic impacts on their educational journey. This again reinforces the intersectionality of student experience and how for retention to be understood it must be viewed holistically.

5.1 – Participant Information

Thirty-six participants were included within the data set for interview analysis; 28 participants were within five years of graduation with the remainder ranging from six to 14 years post-graduation. All participants had self-identified as 'having seriously considered leaving their degree', this status was then confirmed through pre-interview interactions where their understanding of this statement was discussed. The criteria within our discussion being, that they had considered what their life would be like if they left university and that they had voiced this desire to leave to someone, e.g. friend, family member, course tutor, academic or pastoral member of staff. All participants had completed their original degree programme within the institution within which they had commenced studies. Though this research views all completion of a degree as success, those who had returned to a new course following a break or who had transferred during their studies did not fit the specifics for this study.

(Table 6 – Participant Information: Phase One)

Participant demographic information				
Participant number	Age during undergraduate degree	Gender	Ethnicity	Years since completing the programme of study
Participant 1	19 - 22	Male	White British	5 years
Participant 2	18-22	Female	White Irish	13 years
Participant 3	Mature student	Male	Unknown/British	2 years
Participant 4	Mature student 28 on start date	Female	White/ British	5 years
Participant 5	18 - 21	Female	White/British	Less than a year
Participant 6	19 -	Female	White/British	Less than a year
Participant 7	18	Male	White/ British	1 year
Participant 8	Mature student	Female	White British	Less than a year
Participant 9	Mature student	Male	White British	2 years
Participant 10	18	Female	White British	4 years
Participant 11	19	Male	White British	4 years
Participant 12	Mature student	Female	White European	1 year
Participant 13	18	Male	Black British	3 years
Participant 14	18	Female	Black British	2 years
Participant 15	18	Female	White British	3 years
Participant 16	19	Male	White Irish	2 years
Participant 17	18	Female	White British	14 years
Participant 18	18	Female	White British	5 years
Participant 19	18	Female	White Irish	1 year
Participant 20	18	Female	White British	3 years
Participant 21	19	Female	White Irish	4 years
Participant 22	18	Female	White British	2 years
Participant 23	19	Female	White Irish	5 years
Participant 24	18	Female	White British	3 years
Participant 25	19	Male	White British	2 years
Participant 26	Mature student	Male	White British	1 years
Participant 27	18	Female	White British	7 years

Participant 28	18	Male	White British	10 years
Participant 29	Unknown	Unknown	White British	3 years
Participant 30	19	Male	Unknown	3 years
Participant 31	19	Female	White British	6 years
Participant 32	18	Unknown	Unknown	3 years
Participant 33	19	Male	Unknown	6 years
Participant 34	18	Unknown	White British	5 years
Participant 35	19	Unknown	Unknown	8 years
Participant 36	20	Unknown	Black British	9 years

5.2 – Themes

From the stages of data analysis, described above, eight themes were identified when discussing their higher education student experience: resilience, motivation, demographics, personal circumstances, connection to the environment and belonging, expectations of study, peer relationships, and external pressures. These factors had different effects on the participants' higher educational journey, which then impacted on their retention choices. Each theme is examined in relation to existing theoretical frameworks, including Tinto's (1993) model of integration, Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus, and recent literature on equity and belonging in higher education. With supporting quotations taken from the interview data to illustrate the themes. The discussion aims to contextualise the lived experiences of participants within broader structural and institutional dynamics, offering insight into how personal, social, and institutional dimensions converge to influence student continuation.

5.2.1 – Resilience

Resilience emerged as a central theme in participant narratives, encompassing both academic and emotional dimensions (Ceglédi et al., 2022). Resilience is a multi-layered concept that broadly refers to the capacity of individuals, to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversities, challenges, or significant sources of stress (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). This capability encompasses both the ability to maintain stable

functioning during stress (resistance) and the capacity for positive adaptation and recovery following adversity (bounce back) (Tuero et al., 2024).

The resilience of the participants was found to have played a part in their persistence and completion, with many participants stating or alluding to their ability to overcome adversity (Tuero et al., 2024). In some individuals, resilience appeared to have been a pre-existing quality, whereas others had developed this as they progressed through education. Often this process of developing resilience was shaped during their educational experiences, prior to higher education.

i. Educational resilience

In relation to educational resilience, it became apparent that students who had previously experienced uninterrupted academic success often lacked academic buoyancy (Putwain et al., 2024), defined as the ability to effectively deal with the routine academic challenges and setbacks such as low grades, difficult content, or performance pressure (Rafsanjani et al., 2024). Without prior exposure to failure or struggle, these students had not developed the coping mechanisms required to respond adaptively when confronted with academic adversity at university. As a result, receiving unexpectedly poor grades or facing unfamiliar academic content significantly disrupted their self-confidence and engagement (Kember and Fan, 2023). This finding aligns with research suggesting that academic buoyancy acts as a protective factor, enabling students to maintain motivation and persistence in the face of daily academic stressors (Putwain et al., 2012; Rafsanjani et al., 2024). In contrast, those who had encountered earlier academic difficulties were often better equipped to manage current challenges, having developed resilience through past experiences (Tuero et al., 2024). This distinction underlines the importance of recognising not just students' academic preparedness, but their readiness to rebound from difficulty, an increasingly relevant concept in retention discourse (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021).

"I enjoyed it for the first few months, but when the first essay was due I was really struggling with writing. I felt that everyone on the course was really clever and I didn't have a clue, I'd always been top of the class. So, struggling was unusual, I felt out of place. Just before the first essay was due, I asked for an extension and

spoke to my tutor about finishing the first set of credits and not carrying on.”
(Participant 15)

Another important dimension of educational resilience identified in the findings was participants' ability, or lack thereof, to recover and re-engage following a period of struggle. Conceptualised through constructs such as academic buoyancy, refers to a student's capacity to overcome everyday academic setbacks, such as low grades, workload pressure, or disappointing feedback (Ceglédi et al., 2022). While some students had not experienced significant difficulty with academic content itself, the emotional and psychological impact of seriously contemplating withdrawal from university had caused them to disengage from their studies (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). Several participants described a subsequent challenge in 'bouncing back' from this disengagement, even after deciding to remain enrolled. This highlights the importance of recovery as a key facet of resilience, not merely the capacity to endure difficulty, but to re-establish motivation and academic connection after a setback (Tuero et al., 2024).

“My motivation academically tanked. I didn't much like studying [redacted] anymore and just tried to finish the degree so it was over and done with. I think this problem is partially caused by the period in Nov-Jan of the year abroad when I did little or no academic work because I was struggling so much; so, it was hard to get back on track.” (Participant 7)

Participant 13 discussed how they had initially been successful in their studies, but the barrage of other circumstances had caused them to stop attending and consider leaving the course. Even after they decided to continue, they found it difficult to come into university and get back on track with their assignments. This led to some bad results and knocked their confidence, though they saw an increase in grades, those poor grades during their struggles were too much to overcome in regard to degree classification and they attained a lower grade than they felt they were capable.

“I only got a 2:2 which annoys me to this day. I should have put more effort into [getting back into] my studies... But I had a lot going on at the time” (Participant 13)

Those with academic resilience tended to be those who had struggled in education previously, they seemed to have built coping strategies and were able to overcome the

academic challenges. Therefore, participants who had previously experienced academic setbacks often reported a greater ability to persevere through new challenges. Putwain et al. (2024) argue that students who possess coping strategies and goal orientation are better positioned to adapt to the academic environment.

“So, I went to 6th form in '08 and left January '09 for personal reasons and due to school issues. Then after I went to college, but it lasted about a month. Finally in September '10 I did a BTEC in health and social care and found something I really enjoyed and did well in. So, my pathway was something of a mess with a few pitfalls along the way” (Participant 1)

The concept of post-adversity recovery within academic contexts is closely related to academic buoyancy, which refers not only to resistance against day-to-day academic stressors, but also the capacity to resume effort and performance after academic downturns (Tuero et al., 2024). For some participants, the emotional toll of disengagement was compounded by feelings of guilt, self-doubt, or having ‘fallen behind’, which further delayed their ability to re-engage with learning. These findings suggest that supporting students in recovery-oriented coping strategies may be as critical as preventing initial disengagement, especially in promoting continuation and long-term academic persistence.

There were however differences in how that support was accessed, for example those who had received help in the past, were more inclined to seek it out again. For example, participant 34 described how during GCSE and A-Levels they had received support from tutors due to their circumstances, yet when they had arrived at university, they had realised that their support network had disappeared.

“I was very close to my high school teachers, and the style of teaching was very different, I felt like I’d lost my support network when I transitioned to sixth form....yes it was similar when I started uni but worse as I didn’t have my boyfriend or friends” (Participant 34)

They went on to acknowledge how much they had valued that support, and that they were lucky to be able to get support from the university, through academic and pastoral staff.

“I spoke with my [personal] tutor..who put me in touch with academic support and the counselling team. I’d not realised how much I had needed the support until it was absent” (Participant 34)

Regarding academic self-efficacy, defined as a student's belief in their capability to successfully perform academic tasks (Bandura, 1982; Van Dinther et al., 2011), some participants described the emotional and motivational impact of receiving lower grades than anticipated. These unexpected outcomes led them to question their academic competence and altered their self-perception (Mana et al., 2022). Several participants expressed a sense of inadequacy and described feeling like a "fraud," indicative of imposter syndrome and diminished self-efficacy (Holden et al., 2021). These internal doubts often resulted in reduced engagement and heightened anxiety about academic performance, reinforcing a cycle of disengagement that can place students at risk of attrition (Lin et al., 2022).

“I’d failed all the first assignments, then went home and didn’t submit any of the others....no I wasn’t going to go back” (Participant 32)

“the feedback was very hard to read and It made me question if I was good enough to be there” (Participant 31)

While most participants described failing or unexpectedly low grades as the primary trigger for diminished academic self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy, a notable minority reported that even ‘good’ grades, when perceived as below their personal expectations, had a similarly negative impact on their academic experience. These findings reflect research suggesting that students’ academic self-efficacy is not solely influenced by objective performance but is also shaped by personal benchmarks, perfectionism, and comparative standards (Lin et al., 2022; Meng and Zhang, 2023). The discrepancy between expected and actual outcomes, even when objectively positive, led some participants to question their academic potential, experience emotional distress, and withdraw from academic engagement. This aligns with Bandura’s (1997) view that self-efficacy is shaped by perceived mastery experiences rather than absolute outcomes. Moreover, such internalised disappointment may exacerbate imposter feelings and create additional pressure, particularly among high-achieving or first-

generation students (Meng and Zhang, 2023), further influencing their sense of belonging and persistence in higher education.

“I had worked really hard on the assignment and only got 64, which was a 2.1 but I was used to getting firsts on all of them and I’d put all this effort in and felt awful. When you are used to getting 80’s you have this expectation from everyone, I had a total mental health spiral...complete freeze I had to defer my dissertation” (Participant 29)

For some participants, previous experiences of academic failure were described not as purely negative, but rather as resilience-building. These individuals framed past failure as a formative experience that redefined their relationship with higher education. Having already navigated the personal and academic challenges associated with leaving or failing a course, they felt more secure in the knowledge that withdrawal would not necessarily mark the end of their educational journey. Instead, it could be a temporary pause, allowing for re-engagement at a more appropriate time or under better circumstances (Rodriguez et al., 2023). This aligns with the findings of Arshad and Arshad (2024), who argue that educational pathways are often non-linear, particularly for non-traditional students, and that withdrawal does not always equate to permanent disengagement.

“It gave me a certain mistrust of education that would mean if I became detached from things I would feel quite willing to leave and try to find what is right” (Participant 33)

“It’s odd, the experience of [considering] leaving probably led to some of the darkest times in my life but retrospectively I’ve always been glad of it” (Participant 1)

Such narratives reflect a resilient mindset, where past setbacks foster self-awareness and a broader view of success and failure (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Participants who believed they could overcome setbacks and re-engage with their studies were more likely to continue, while those expressing doubts about their abilities were more prone to disengagement (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). Feelings of impostorism or not belonging often co-occurred with periods of low confidence, a finding consistent with research on the role of identity and self-concept in academic retention (Fang et al., 2018).

These students displayed what García-Martínez et al. (2022) describe as adaptive academic agency, wherein learners develop flexible attitudes toward academic identity, allowing them to see leaving as a strategic or self-preserving decision rather than a definitive failure. This perspective also reflects elements of academic redemption narratives (Reddick, 2023), where the capacity to return to education becomes a source of empowerment, mitigating the stigma often associated with attrition.

ii. Emotional resilience

When considering emotional resilience, the ability to adapt to and recover from emotional distress, variation between participants was evident. For some, the onset or exacerbation of mental health challenges during their studies had a significantly debilitating effect on their university experience (Salimi et al., 2023). These students often described periods of low motivation, withdrawal from academic and social life, and difficulty accessing or engaging with support services. In contrast, other participants who had previously navigated episodes of poor mental health prior to entering higher education reported feeling better equipped to manage these challenges, including a greater willingness to seek help proactively and utilise support mechanisms effectively (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). This distinction reflects the role of prior experience in shaping emotional coping strategies and reinforces the idea that resilience is contextually developed and dynamic rather than innate (Tuero et al., 2024).

“so the degree itself worked as a recovery from earlier education related depression” (Participant 6)

“I think the failure becomes a voice my head. If I stop, (sic) breather and thought rationally I always knew the answer was things just weren't right. Unfortunately, there is always a thought of ‘what if you're just a failure’.” (Participant 10)

Emotional resilience was strongly associated with the presence of positive support networks, including family, friends, and university staff. Many participants emphasised the importance of feeling noticed and acknowledged during periods of emotional struggle. This sense of being ‘seen’ was a pivotal factor in enabling students to access

appropriate support, maintain their connection to their studies, and rebuild emotional stability. Consistent with Thomas's (2012) findings on belonging and engagement, some participants indicated that when academic staff or peers showed awareness of their wellbeing, it fostered a sense of relational connectedness, which in turn bolstered emotional resilience and reduced the risk of attrition.

“There was one tutor who noticed my depression growing and arranged a counselling appointment and ensured I tried it” (Participant 25)

Additionally, family and friends often provided emotional reassurance and motivation, helping students to reframe difficulties and persist through challenges (Chaudhry et al., 2024). University-based support, particularly when proactive rather than reactive, also contributed significantly (Kitchen et al., 2021). Participants who experienced supportive tutor relationships or accessible pastoral care described feeling psychologically safer and more confident in their ability to manage distress (Wakelin, 2023).

“at the time I was really struggling but didn’t know how to ask for help. It wasn’t until one of my lecturers emailed me after I missed a few sessions and just asked if I was okay... that made a huge difference. Just knowing someone noticed made me feel like I wasn’t invisible and gave me the push to reach out and get support.” (Participant 12)

This aligns with research suggesting that the interplay between social support and individual resilience is critical in mitigating mental health risks and enhancing continuation (Walker, 2020). The data thus underscore the role of institutional attentiveness and peer understanding in fostering the emotional resilience needed for successful student retention (Kitchen et al., 2021).

Participants also discussed the need for developing their own coping mechanisms when struggling during their studies; this included both personal and university support. Adaptive coping strategies, such as help-seeking, time management, and cognitive reframing, are associated with greater academic resilience and reduced withdrawal intentions (Chaudhry et al., 2024). In contrast, avoidance-based coping can exacerbate stress and disengagement. Many participants in this study described learning to

effectively plan or reach out for support as essential practices in maintaining their studies.

“I found letter-writing especially valuable, because it's kind of meditative to sit down and write a physical letter, and it's more personal and less instant than email, and it can say whatever you want it to say, and you don't have to keep up an instant conversation like in phone calls or messaging apps” (Participant 26)

However, some participants felt that they could not reach out for support as their issues were too trivial or they were unsure how to access help. Additionally, others did not feel that support was for them as they had been ‘taught’ that they should deal with problems themselves. Though the growing focus on mental health is making strides in dispelling this attitude, there are still stigmas attached to needing and seeking support (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

“I'm the type of person though that I probably would not approach support services, And to be honest I felt like I'd got myself into this mess and I'd do what I had to do to get out of it” (Participant 9)

“I knew I needed to get some help I was just too nervous to ask” (Participant 14)

These findings align with existing literature suggesting that emotional resilience, can influence students’ capacity to persevere through psychological adversity while maintaining functional engagement with their studies (Tuero et al., 2024). Importantly, those with prior mental health management experience often exhibited greater emotional literacy and help-seeking behaviour, which served as protective factors during times of academic stress. This underscores the value of equipping all students with preventative mental health education and early intervention strategies to build emotional resilience across the wider student population (Abulfaraj et al., 2024). Ultimately, resilience within these findings functioned as both a buffer against withdrawal and a facilitator of engagement, highlighting its integral role in understanding student continuation and success.

5.2.2 – Motivation

Participants' motivations to study are key within the literature. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors can significantly influence a student's decision to continue with their studies, particularly when faced with academic or personal challenges (Morris et al., 2022). Intrinsic motivation, which relates to a student's internal drive for learning and achievement, has been positively linked to greater engagement, academic success, and long-term commitment (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Thomas, 2012). Students who are genuinely interested in their subject area are more likely to find purpose and resilience during difficult periods. Extrinsic motivators, such as career aspirations, social mobility, or financial outcomes, also serve as powerful drivers. Research shows that students who can clearly articulate the value of their degree in relation to future employment or personal goals are more likely to persist (Pedler et al., 2022). Motivation is often reinforced through supportive learning environments and positive student–staff relationships, which can help sustain a student's sense of purpose (Kelly et al., 2024). Institutions that acknowledge and nurture individual motivations, through academic support, career services, and inclusive teaching, are better positioned to reduce attrition and foster student success (Rafsanjani et al., 2024).

i. Career goals

The Office for Students (OfS) has emphasised the importance of value for money in higher education, linking degree completion not only to personal achievement but also to progression into graduate employment and the acquisition of workplace-relevant skills (OfS, 2022). This policy framing aligns with broader sector discourse that increasingly treats higher education as an investment with expected returns in employability and career development (Tomlinson et al., 2023). This emphasis was reflected in participant accounts, where future career aspirations were cited as a primary motivation for continuing their studies despite academic or personal difficulties. For many, the pursuit of a university degree was explicitly tied to long-term professional goals, and the perceived necessity of a degree for entry into their desired

field served as a strong protective factor against withdrawal (Bradley and Quigley, 2023). Such findings resonate with earlier research suggesting that career clarity and instrumental motivation can significantly enhance student persistence (Gibbons et al., 2015).

“I am a [redacted] and I wanted to become a teacher because I love to share my passion with [redacted] to the next generation” (Participant 3)

“I chose my degree of [redacted] because I wanted to travel and teach, so that was why I kept going” (Participant 17)

In fact, in some instances the participant remained unhappy on the course all the way through their studies yet continued as they were so committed to their career end goal. For first-generation students or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the pursuit of higher education was framed as a means of social mobility, often accompanied by an unspoken obligation to succeed (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). This reflects Reay et al.’s (2005) findings that students from working-class backgrounds frequently experience education as a moral responsibility, rather than a personal journey.

“I think in the end I had a goal in sight, and I just had to jump through the hoops to get a piece of paper” (Participant 19)

This career motivation was not only true of those who were unhappy with the course content or university but also those who were struggling due to external factors, such as family relationships.

“I’m glad I stuck with it because we ended up divorcing. So if I had quit teaching he would have taken that away from me too” (Participant 17)

Gender could also be seen as a motivator for continuation in relation to future career aims. Some participants discussed the idea of them being in the gender minority as having had a positive motivation upon their continuation. They felt that they could be viewed as a ‘trendsetter’, or as someone who would be more likely to do well in the chosen field, such as males in teaching, due to a requirement in the sector to invest or promote underrepresented groups.

“they told me there are less men, especially in primary but they want role models for boys. They seemed really interested in me pursuing teaching and said I’d be on the fast track to being promoted. Probably be a head in 5 years” (Participant 11)

“There’s a lot more male sports writers than female ones, I felt proud of myself that I was the only girl but a little disappointed.... she really helped yeah, told me it takes guts to be a pioneer” (Participant 5)

ii. Tenacity and internal motivations

Tenacity, the determination to persist despite challenges, is increasingly recognised as a critical personal attribute that supports student retention. Students who face social or academic barriers, including those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds, often exhibit a strong internal drive to defy expectations and succeed against the odds. This form of motivation, often described as a ‘need to prove others wrong’, can become a powerful psychological resource, particularly when students feel underestimated or stereotyped by peers, educators, or society (Reay, 2017). This can be seen in the data where participants discussed how they had friends, family and others who had shown negative beliefs about their choice and ability to complete a degree.

“Yes I wanted to prove the naysayers wrong” (Participant 12)

“Yeah one of the other reasons I wanted to finish was to prove to others, specifically my parents, and myself that I can and did do it.” (Participant 12)

In other cases, this was viewing graduation as an end point. The degree process was difficult but once it was over, they could move on to the next phase of their life.

“The course was a complete joke, most of my cohort agreed on that. But I just kept saying, just a bit more and you will never have to go back to university again!” (Participant 2)

“The light at the end of the tunnel, haha!.. Even if that light is coming through the eye of a needle!” (Participant 31)

iii. Success as a motivation

The findings suggest that success is a key motivational force that influences student engagement and retention in higher education. Success is often conceptualised by students not only as academic achievement but also as progress toward personal development, self-fulfilment, and career advancement (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). For many, the experience of success, such as passing assessments, receiving positive feedback, or progressing through their degree, serves to reinforce self-efficacy and affirm their place in the academic community.

“Once I got my marks back for the first essay it gave me more confidence to carry on.” (Participant 36)

Others worried about the impact dropping out would have had on their relationships with others and how this could impact how they felt about themselves. The motivation to stay was due to fear of being viewed by others as a failure.

“Yeah 100% you tell everyone you are going to do the course then if I didn't complete it I'd look a bit thick and it would be something that I failed to complete. Like I felt like I should be in control of it because it was my decision to do it” (Participant 17)

Additionally, motivational influences were not always stable. Some participants described how initial motivations, particularly extrinsic ones, became less compelling when faced with academic or emotional difficulties (Wouters et al., 2011). In these cases, those who had stronger intrinsic interest or had developed a deeper connection to their course were more likely to re-engage (Addison and Williams, 2023). Eccles and Wigfield (2002), argue that value and identity alignment sustain motivation over time.

Overall, motivation functioned as both a protective and developmental mechanism. Whether rooted in future career ambitions, family legacy, or a personal drive for knowledge, it underpinned participants' capacity to overcome the barriers they encountered. Yet, motivation was most enduring when students experienced a sense of meaning in their studies, supporting the notion that purpose-driven engagement is critical to student retention (Tight, 2019).

5.2.3 – Demographics

Analysis of the data revealed that demographic characteristics played a meaningful role in shaping students' experiences and decisions about continuing in higher education. Themes related to age, gender identity, sexuality, cultural background, and relationship status intersected with students' sense of belonging, academic engagement, and access to support (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021; Webber and Dismore, 2021). These characteristics frequently intersected to create unique patterns of risk, in line with the principle of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991).

Consistent with Yorke and Longden's (2008) conceptualisation of 'disadvantage', the findings revealed that demographic factors often operate cumulatively, compounding the challenges faced by students. For example, mature students who were also first in their family to attend university and balancing work or caregiving were more likely to report feelings of social isolation, fatigue, and role strain (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). These experiences mirror findings from Thomas (2012), who argued that demographic 'risk' is amplified when structural supports fail to acknowledge the diverse realities of the student body. Older participants described feeling out of place socially, despite being academically motivated. One student explained.

"I feel like I'm here for a different reason than most. I'm focused on the career outcome, but socially, I don't really connect. It makes you question if you belong here." (Participant 12)

Some participants who disclosed LGBTQ+ status raised concerns about visibility and inclusion, often linking their sense of safety to university culture and peer support. One participant discussed how in smaller groups their differences became more prominent, with them feeling isolated from other members of the cohort and though they felt protected from direct bullying, they often experienced micro aggressions or 'shunning'.

"It's hard being the only one [openly trans] in the group. People don't say anything directly, but it's the looks and silence..... You start to feel like leaving might be easier." (Participant 8)

Due to the sample, ethnicity and religious identity were more variably discussed, but where referenced, they were often linked to subtle experiences of marginalisation, exclusion, or limited cultural representation in the curriculum and staff body (Boyd et al., 2022; Trent et al., 2021). For Black and ethnically minoritised students, institutional climate and a lack of visible role models were identified as factors influencing their sense of belonging (Boyd et al., 2022), consistent with findings from researchers, who have long called for structural transformation in higher education to support minoritised students (Trent et al., 2021). Several students described feeling culturally isolated or underrepresented within the institution:

*“There was no one on my course who looks like me or shared my background. It’s hard to feel like you belong when you don’t see yourself anywhere.”
(Participant 13)*

While these characteristics contributed to higher risk of attrition, many participants also articulated strong resilience and motivation to persist, especially when supported by peers or inclusive services.

“It’s was tough, but my friends and support staff helped me stick with it. Sometimes just being seen and listened to makes a difference.” (Participant 25)

Overall, this theme recognises that demographic characteristics are not neutral categories but can deeply shape students' capacity to persist, and without adequate recognition and support, the institutional environment risks reproducing patterns of exclusion (Fernández et al., 2023).

5.2.4 – Personal Circumstances

The theme of personal circumstances was central to many participants' reflections on their university experience, often cited as a major contributor to moments of withdrawal consideration (Pedler et al., 2022). These circumstances encompassed a range of individual risk factors, including caring responsibilities, health concerns, disability, financial stress, and living arrangements, all of which intersected with broader

demographic characteristics that are frequently associated with attrition risk in higher education (de Oliveira Durso, 2021).

Caring responsibilities were found to be both a challenge to university life and also a factor in continuation. One participant discussed how they had been a child carer and although their parent now had additional support, they had felt guilty for moving away.

“I think they all expected that I would stay near home but there aren’t many uni’s near home, and I didn’t get the grades so I had to come here, they ring me complaining about the carers and I feel really bad so I travel home loads but it’s expensive” (Participant 20)

Relationship status also shaped student integration. Those in long-term relationships or with caregiving duties often felt a reduced sense of connection to campus life.

“I go straight home after lectures to take care of my partner. It’s hard to get involved, and sometimes I’d wonder if it was sustainable.” (Participant 12)

Another student spoke of the financial burden of adult caring responsibilities and how they were often left short of money due to their parents taking their student loan payments.

“they both can’t work and haven’t for years, when I was at home I was expected to give my wages to my mum, I’d have to ask for money to go out. So they used to ask me for the loan money. All my letters would go home so they knew when it was due and how much” (Participant 19)

Financial stress also emerged as a recurring theme, participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds spoke about the dual burden of academic demands and the need to undertake part-time work, often resulting in time poverty and fatigue (Drăghici and Cazan, 2022). The pressure to fund living expenses, contribute to family income, or manage student loans was a significant factor in their emotional and academic stress, consistent with findings on the deterrent effect of financial hardship on student continuation (Russell et al., 2025).

Commuter students, often living at home to save money or care for family members, faced challenges in establishing social networks and engaging in university life (Thomas

and Jones, 2017). The lack of informal peer contact and limited time on campus contributed to feelings of isolation and reduced belonging (Turner et al., 2025). Similarly, participants from first-generation backgrounds and working-class families described feeling like outsiders within the university setting, citing differences in cultural capital and a lack of inherited knowledge about navigating academic systems (Reay, 2018).

The role of finances was also seen in those with children or spouses, where participants would have to work alongside their studies to contribute to the household, particularly if the household income had been altered through a return to education (Cronshaw et al., 2021). This often had a negative impact on their student experience as they would struggle with time management and tiredness (Webber and Dismore, 2021).

“Yes there were times I still felt a bit out of it because I couldn’t attend additional lectures. I spoke to work as well and got my hours slightly changed so I went to work earlier but finished earlier which gave me more time” (Participant 17)

One participant reflected on their part time job during university, they enjoyed being at work more than at university and did consider leaving the course. However, they had a social group at work and liked the city, which influenced them to stay as they felt they belonged.

“when I did get a minute I often thought...hmmm..I dont need to do this. I could earn more if I worked full time and do I even need a degree now? But I wanted to stay in [city] as I felt more at home there and had friends” (Participant 36)

Participants also discussed the need to work more hours than the university suggested in order to support themselves and continue with the degree but working long hours made their studies suffer.

“I hardly had any time to read and because my job was quite challenging, I was really tired. I thought it would be easy to juggle the both. It would have been a lot different if I worked part time or didn't work at all, but I couldn't afford not to work” (Participant 18)

Several participants reported mental health difficulties that had impacted their academic engagement and sense of belonging (Liu et al., 2019). For some, these challenges were pre-existing and well-managed; for others, the transition to university life marked the onset or worsening of psychological distress (Liu et al., 2022). Students with disabilities frequently cited barriers in institutional accessibility, limited understanding from staff, and the difficulty of securing reasonable adjustments, echoing concerns raised in the literature around inclusion and support for disabled students (Shaw, 2023). These findings align with broader research showing that students with long-term health conditions or special educational needs are statistically less likely to persist without substantial support (Byrne, 2014; Moriña, 2017).

Participants highlighted that living circumstances, especially during the first year, played a significant role in shaping their overall university experience and decisions about staying or leaving. Several students reported difficulties related to incompatible housemates, including conflict, lack of shared values, or disruptive behaviours, which contributed to stress and feelings of isolation.

“I didn’t feel safe or comfortable in my accommodation. I was constantly anxious because my flatmates were noisy, messy, and sometimes aggressive. It made everything harder” (Participant 11)

Poor residential experiences were often compounded by financial limitations, preventing relocation or access to private housing. Some felt these conditions were dismissed or inadequately addressed by institutions, which reinforced feelings of invisibility.

“My housemates would stay up until 7:00 am 3 times a week drinking, playing music and doing drugs. I do not engage with any of this stuff and as a result would hardly sleep and began having daily panic attacks... My mental health tanked and it became very difficult for me to even get out of bed” (Participant 25)

Collectively, these personal and demographic factors support the framework developed by Yorke and Longden (2008), which identifies ‘disadvantage’ as cumulative and often rooted in students’ life contexts rather than academic ability. This highlights how demographic characteristics, such as socio-economic status, disability, and

family educational history, can compound risk, particularly in the absence of targeted institutional support (Fernández et al., 2023).

5.2.5 – Connection to the Environment and Belonging

This theme encompasses relationships with academic staff, perceptions of institutional culture, and the broader fit between the student and their university setting (Chrysikos and Catterall, 2020; Roberts, 2018). Resonating with Tinto's (1993) theory of academic integration, which posits that student retention is strongly influenced by the degree to which students feel connected to the academic and social fabric of the institution. Participants discussed how important it was that they felt connected to their environment, whether that be the university, place that they were living or the course that they were a part of. This forms part of a larger discussion on belonging, however as a factor this influenced the majority of participants, both negatively and positively.

Some participants discussed the importance of enjoying their place of study and feeling that they belonged in the environment. While for other participants it was more important that they had a strong course community, including the relationship with both peers and academic staff.

“on that first day it immediately became home. The people at my university (students and staff) gave me a close and friendly community right away, and during my years here I've continued to be part of wonderful communities, through student societies, and in the wider city outside the university.”
(Participant 3)

One participant discussed how a placement abroad caused them to consider leaving the course. Though they had moved away from home to study, they had formed an instant connection with their place of study and not experienced any homesickness. However, this changed during a year abroad where they experienced isolation, depression and disengagement. After overcoming these challenges, they have found even more solace in their university home.

“Yes, very much. I found that home right away when I arrived here in 2016, but the experience of the year abroad and considering dropping out has made my home here stronger and more important to me.” (Participant 7)

Academic integration was reflected in participants’ experiences with teaching quality, tutor accessibility, and the overall learning environment. For many, feeling ‘seen’ by lecturers or receiving encouraging feedback from academic staff helped reinforce their sense of belonging and capability (Curran, 2021). In contrast, some participants who had limited contact with staff or felt overlooked reported reduced motivation and questioned whether they belonged at university at all. Thomas (2012) emphasised that students’ relationships with academic staff are pivotal to fostering engagement and belonging, particularly for those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Some participants expressed a strong desire to feel noticed and valued within the academic community, describing a need to believe that their absence would be recognised. This ‘need to be missed’ reflects deeper themes of belonging, connection, and validation (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013). When students feel invisible or believe that their withdrawal would go unnoticed, they are more likely to disengage.

“If I’d stopped showing up, I don’t think anyone would’ve noticed....not my tutors, not my classmates.” (Participant 14)

Beyond academic relationships, participants spoke of the broader institutional culture and how this shaped their experience. Some described a strong sense of identity and shared values within their department or course, which enhanced their connection to the university. Others reported a more transactional or impersonal atmosphere, particularly in larger institutions, which they felt lacked community or emotional support (Pedler et al., 2022). This supports the concept of student–environment fit, which suggests that the psychological and cultural alignment between students and their institutions plays a crucial role in persistence (Manyanga et al., 2017).

Furthermore, participants who had developed informal or mentoring relationships with staff members described how this had supported them during times of doubt (Curran, 2021). These relationships provided both academic and emotional reassurance,

encouraging help-seeking and reflection (Roberts, 2018). In contrast, the absence of such support often exacerbated feelings of disconnection and isolation, particularly among students who were struggling academically or personally (Coates, 2005).

For some, the university's efforts to create inclusive spaces or foster a diverse student body reinforced their identification with the institution (Curran, 2021). For others, particularly those commuting or studying part-time, the campus often felt distant, with fewer opportunities for social interaction or spontaneous engagement. Hallam (2023) found that commuting students were less likely to feel integrated and more vulnerable to attrition.

5.2.6 – Expectations of Study

Expectations of academic study emerged as a central theme influencing participant's early engagement and decisions around continuation. Many participants reflected on a mismatch between their assumptions about university learning and the reality they encountered, particularly in relation to teaching methods, independent learning, and workload.

The findings suggest that student expectations of higher education, shaped by prior educational experiences, institutional messaging, cultural narratives, and personal goals, play a critical role in shaping how learners interpret and respond to their university experience (Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022). When these expectations are met or positively challenged, they can foster a sense of engagement, purpose, and belonging (Tomlinson et al., 2023). However, when students encounter a significant misalignment between expectation and reality, this can contribute to confusion, dissatisfaction, and in some cases, the contemplation of withdrawal (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

Participants would describe being disengaged with aspects of the course and how it differed from their perception of what it would be like to study at university.

“Sometimes it depended on the tutor. I feel like the setup of the course was good for people with extra responsibilities but then it made it seem easy to complete the course with a job when in fact it was really hard” (Participant 3)

First-generation students were particularly likely to express uncertainty about the academic norms and expectations of higher education, often describing feelings of confusion and exclusion.

“My parents and siblings didn’t go to university, so I had no idea what to expect. Everyone else seemed to know what they were doing, and I felt like I was faking it.” (Participant 6)

Reay (2021) suggests for those entering higher education as first-generation or non-traditional learners, expectations about the academic workload, teaching style, or the level of independence required may not align with actual university practices (Reay, 2021). These students may expect structured guidance like previous educational settings and can feel unprepared or unsupported when confronted with the more autonomous learning model common in higher education (Tomlinson et al., 2023). This mismatch often leads to a diminished sense of academic self-efficacy and contributes to the perception that they do not ‘belong’ in the university space (Yorke and Longden, 2008).

Participants also reflected on unrealistic expectations shaped by marketing materials or open day experiences, which had painted an overly optimistic picture of university life. Therefore, when these expectations were not realised, they reported feelings of disillusionment (Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022). This emotional response often contributed to a loss of motivation, where participants reflected on how they had questioned whether they had chosen the right course, institution, or even whether they were suited to higher education at all. As Tinto (1993) argued, the student’s perception of academic and social integration is central to persistence, and unmet expectations disrupt this sense of connection.

“They made it seem like it would be this amazing, supportive place. In reality, you’re just one of hundreds trying to get help.” (Participant 13)

Conversely, students who had clearer, or more realistic expectations reported greater confidence and stability in their studies.

“I knew it would be tough and that I’d need to be organised. I think that mindset helped me settle in quicker.” (Participant 10)

Furthermore, as discussed in Tomlinson et al. (2023), the emotional impact of unmet expectations was found to be exacerbated when compounded by additional challenges such as commuting, financial stress, or limited access to peer support. These intersecting difficulties increase the likelihood that academic discontent is interpreted as a broader failure or incompatibility with university life. Thomas et al. (2017) suggest that such periods of cognitive and emotional dissonance can be pivotal moments in the student journey, moments that either precipitate departure or, when appropriately supported, lead to a re-alignment of expectations and renewed engagement.

Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of early expectation management and transparent communication from institutions about the realities of university-level study (Morgan, 2016). Moreover, giving students opportunities to renegotiate their academic identity in supportive environments can reduce the negative impact of initial misalignment and promote longer-term retention (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Tight, 2020).

5.2.7 – Peer Relationships

Participants discussed the importance of peer relationships for a good student experience. While institutional and academic integration are often foregrounded in discussions of student retention, the role of peer connections offers a more socially embedded understanding of why students choose to stay (Rasco et al., 2020).

Participants repeatedly referred to friendships as a source of both emotional support and academic engagement, reinforcing the view that higher education is not only an intellectual endeavour but a deeply social experience (Maunder, 2018).

Those who had good relationships with peers would discuss how important it was that they were able to make those connections and often that support was the main factor in keeping them on the degree.

“Yeah if I didn’t like the people I was with I would have left” (Participant 12)

One participant discussed how the other students would help them with their studies as they knew they had additional responsibilities.

“Yeah they used to help me with the reading and stuff. If I hadn't had chance to read it they would tell me the key points before the tutorials” (Participant 33)

Two participants discussed how they had bonded with their peers as a result of challenging circumstances, one example being homesickness and depression. While the other discussed how a dislike for the way their degree was run had led to a camaraderie within the student body which led to them all getting each other through.

“There was one other student, who was struggling too. He was lovely and things would have been much worse without him. But, I didn't want to lean on him entirely.” (Participant 7)

“Lots of meetings at the pub with cohort members to complain and talk about how it all sucked.” (Participant 3)

Having poor relationships with peers had a negative effect on the student experience for many participants and often exacerbated the feelings around not belonging or not coping with university life.

“I'd come into class to hear them all talk about the night before and what fun they had. And I was just like....well...I've done something new in my slow cooker...wohooo!” (Participant 17)

This disconnection with peers also led to feelings of disillusion for the entire university experience. Suggesting that course enjoyment and expectations around university study are not the only aspects of university experience that students imagine. For some participants the lack of connection with peers, made them feel that they had missed out on the promise of what university was in regard to finding lifelong friendships or being the period in your life that was looked upon fondly.

“I felt I missed half the true experience of university” (Participant 28)

For many participants the importance of relationships went beyond that of solely peers, with a focus on support inside and outside university and a need to be noticed by peers to integrate into university life.

“I've always been lucky to have a good family and friends. Though I'm not always the best at putting those thoughts out there and tend to withdraw. I'd say I lean more to escapism which probably isn't healthy. Reading, music, games, film anything other than the issues I face. So it's good to have people who force me to engage” (Participant 1)

5.2.8 – External Pressures

Many of the participants discussed how they had felt pressurised to remain at university, these external pressures were often family, friends, and the university. Family obligations were prominent in the narratives, particularly among mature students and those with caring responsibilities (Webber and Dismore, 2021). These participants often experienced a role conflict between their student identity and caregiving duties, such as parenting or supporting elderly relatives (Cronshaw et al., 2021). The strain of managing household tasks, childcare, and study simultaneously led to time poverty and emotional fatigue (Reilly and Levintova, 2023). Additionally, participants referred to emotional expectations placed on them by family members, such as the need to succeed for the sake of others, or the pressure of being the first in their family to attend university (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). These findings link to the concept of goal commitment in Tinto's (1993) framework, where a student's perseverance is influenced by personal and external expectations. However, the data also suggest that such expectations can become burdensome, especially when students feel they may be failing to meet them.

Although the majority of participants were happy that they had chosen to continue studying. Regrets were mentioned by some participants who felt that leaving may have been a better option for them. In some cases, they reflected on being placed on a trajectory that they did not feel was right.

“I felt like everyone just wanted me to finish the course. They all thought once I graduated and was working for myself, I would really enjoy [redacted]. I felt they didn't listen to me. Any conversation I had with people about leaving the course

always made me feel like I would be a failure if I left. I really only stayed to make everyone else happy. I knew in my heart that I would never be happy being a [redacted], In hindsight I wish I had left at 2.5 years...” (Participant 31)

Participants also discussed that they felt pressurised to stay by family, friends and the university and it was difficult to defend their wishes to leave, as they could not explain or understand themselves why they wanted to discontinue. With most participants experiencing several reasons that led to considerations of non-continuation, it was clear that there is often not a sole reason for attrition.

“I just told them that I hated the course...I mean I wasn’t enjoying the course, but I would’ve stuck it out.....well I did stick it out lol! But that felt easier than admitting that I wasn’t happy, it’s hard to explain what’s up with you when you don’t actually know” (Participant 20)

Participants discussed the pressure from the university to continue, often being told that they should “just complete the year”, or “you’ll enjoy it once you get to the practical element”. Those who had considered leaving later in their degree suggested that they were met with disbelief at wanting to give up so close to the end of study. Much of the retention and attrition research focuses on the first year or even the first few months of study, so it was telling that a portion of those interviewed had considered leaving at a later date.

“I only stayed because when I really wanted to leave, I only had 18 months left and everyone said you would be a fool to leave now! so I finished!” (Participant 7)

“I thought I’ve come this far, and I may as well finish now. I thought I may as well just get the degree and then go back and study a subject that I really enjoy on a part time basis.” (Participant 24)

5.3 – Summary of Findings

The qualitative interviews revealed a complex, interconnected set of themes that shape students' decisions to continue or consider withdrawing from their undergraduate studies. Participants' narratives pointed to multiple, overlapping influences, with each theme interacting with others to shape the overall student experience. Several

overarching thematic domains emerged: demographic identity and lived context, sense of belonging and institutional fit, motivational and psychological factors, and engagement with academic and social aspects of university life.

i. Demographic and Personal Contexts

Participants consistently highlighted how demographic characteristics, such as age, first-generation status, caring responsibilities, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation, influenced both access to support and perceptions of fit within the university environment. Mature students, for example, often described feeling socially out of place and less connected to younger peers, yet simultaneously reported strong motivation linked to career or family responsibilities. First-generation students frequently described uncertainty around academic expectations and feelings of imposter syndrome. Students with caring roles or who commuted long distances reported limited time for engagement outside of scheduled classes, impacting their sense of belonging and increasing their vulnerability to withdrawal.

ii. Belonging and Recognition

A pervasive theme throughout interviews was the need to feel a sense of belonging and recognition within the academic and social fabric of the institution. Many students expressed a desire to feel “seen” by staff and peers, with several describing the emotional impact of believing they would not be “missed” if they left. Feelings of isolation were particularly acute for LGBTQ+ students, those from racially minoritised backgrounds, or those in non-traditional living arrangements. Where inclusive teaching practices, peer relationships, or visible support services were present, students were more likely to report feeling anchored and committed to their studies. Belonging was thus positioned not only as a social construct but also as an institutional responsibility, with implications for retention.

iii. Motivation, Tenacity, and the Will to Persist

Motivational factors were a central driver of continuation. Many participants articulated intrinsic motivations, such as personal growth or passion for their subject, while others were guided by extrinsic goals, particularly career aspirations. Some described a profound sense of tenacity, shaped by a desire to overcome adversity or prove doubters wrong, especially among first-generation and working-class students. These participants often framed continuation as a form of resistance or personal achievement. Success experiences, such as passing assessments or receiving positive feedback, were described as reinforcing commitment. Conversely, students who experienced repeated setbacks or who lacked a clear purpose were more likely to consider withdrawing.

iv. Engagement and Expectations

A key finding was the role of student engagement with learning, peers, and the broader university environment. Many participants entered university with mismatched or unclear expectations about the nature of higher education study. Several reported surprise at the volume of independent learning and the perceived distance from academic staff. When expectations were unmet, some students questioned their decision to enrol. However, those who had more realistic expectations, or who accessed early support services, reported greater ease adjusting. Course satisfaction and engagement were also critical. Students who felt intellectually stimulated and connected to their programme described higher levels of persistence. In contrast, dissatisfaction with teaching quality, feedback, or curriculum coherence emerged as demotivating factors.

v. Living Conditions and Support Networks

Living arrangements and access to support networks also significantly shaped student experience. Participants who faced incompatible housemates, poor housing quality, or social conflict in their accommodation frequently described increased stress and reduced wellbeing, which negatively impacted academic focus. In contrast, those with

strong peer support, family encouragement, or access to personal tutors were better equipped to navigate challenges. The importance of external support systems, such as emotional support from partners or financial assistance from family, was particularly pronounced for students with limited institutional connections.

vi. *Intersectionality and Complexity*

Across these themes, a clear finding was the intersectional nature of risk and resilience. Students rarely experienced single challenges in isolation. Instead, they navigated multiple, interacting pressures that compounded their risk of non-continuation. For example, a mature student with caring responsibilities and limited financial resources may simultaneously face isolation, stress, and limited access to academic support, yet persist due to strong motivation and support from family. These intersecting identities and experiences underline the need for holistic, flexible institutional responses that move beyond one-size-fits-all models.

The findings above have detailed the differing influences on the participant's higher educational journey. As can be seen in the literature and the above data the factors that impact on continuation and completion are multifaceted (Beer and Lawson, 2017) and therefore there is no single factor that contributes to a student's retention or attrition (Aljohani, 2016). As with other research (Glogowska et al., 2007; Villano et al., 2018), my findings undermine the perception that student attrition may be attributable to a single factor, such as financial problems or academic under-achievement. Rather, there is an array of interrelated contributing factors that may result in students dropping out (Villano et al., 2018) and additionally there are numerous interconnecting factors that contribute to continuation, especially following challenges.

5.4 – Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from Phase One of the study, which explored students' experiences of university life through narrative interviews. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, eight themes were identified. These

themes offer insight into how students construct meaning around their university experience and highlight the complex interplay between personal, academic, and structural factors. Participants shared narratives that revealed both affirming and alienating experiences, shaped by cultural background, social class, and life responsibilities. The findings emphasise the relational nature of student engagement and the importance of recognising diverse student voices in institutional policy and practice. The following chapter will further analyse these findings in relation to risk factors that can impact on the probability for discontinuation and those that support student continuation and completion.

Chapter Six: Discussion of Phase One Findings

This chapter presents a critical discussion of how the themes generated from the Phase One findings: resilience, motivation, demographics, personal circumstances, connection to the environment, expectations of study, peer relationships, and external pressures, were synthesised into an analytical framework composed of four overarching constructs:

1. Demographic factors that affect attrition,
2. The importance of student belonging,
3. Influences that support retention, and
4. Engagement dynamics.

This framework forms the conceptual bridge between the exploratory findings and the confirmatory Phase Two of the study. This discussion will integrate existing theoretical perspectives on retention and attrition, such as Tinto's integration model, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and more contemporary intersectional analyses, with participant experiences to develop a grounded, student-informed understanding of continuation in UK higher education.

6.1 – From Themes to Framework: Conceptual Integration

Following the inductive thematic analysis of participant interviews, which identified key themes, the next stage involved elevating these descriptive codes into more abstract analytical categories (Ward et al., 2009). This process of conceptual integration allowed for the development of a theoretically informed framework that connects individual lived experiences with broader structural and institutional considerations (Clark et al., 2019).

The transition from thematic codes to conceptual categories was informed by a realist social constructivist approach, acknowledging both the personal truths expressed by participants and the socially mediated contexts in which those experiences occurred

(Elder-Vass, 2012). Themes were not isolated but rather interrelated, often overlapping in their significance and impact. These connections necessitated a higher-order categorisation to coherently organise the findings in a manner that reflected their theoretical, as well as empirical, coherence (Clarke et al., 2019).

Four overarching framework themes emerged from this synthesis, providing a conceptual structure for understanding the multifaceted drivers of student continuation and attrition:

- Demographic factors that affect attrition,
- The importance of student belonging,
- Influences that support retention, and
- Engagement dynamics.

By applying a structured coding framework (*appendix iv*) based on known risk factors and protective elements from the literature, data could be meaningfully clustered around these core areas (Naeem et al., 2023). The deductive approach enabled the integration of participant experiences with theoretical concepts such as social integration, cultural mismatch, and institutional responsiveness (Tamene, 2016). This process supported the distillation of diverse narratives into themes that reflect both individual lived experiences and broader patterns of inequality or support. The thematic structure resulting from deductive analysis allowed for a nuanced but synthesised understanding of the multifaceted drivers of continuation and withdrawal in higher education (Pedler et al., 2022). Further discussion on the four themes is detailed below, with the intersectional properties of each theme evidenced.

6.1.1 – Supportive Influences

Support mechanisms, academic and non-academic, were found to play a pivotal role in influencing student retention in higher education. As within the data, studies have shown that students are more likely to persist when they feel academically, socially, and

emotionally supported (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). This support may come from university structures such as personal tutors, learning development staff, mental health services, or peer mentoring schemes, each contributing to a student's sense of being valued and understood (Naylor et al., 2018).

Research suggests that effective academic support enhances students' confidence and competence, particularly during the first year of study when transition challenges are heightened (Neria, 2023; Yorke and Longden, 2008). This was echoed within the research data with participants who found studies difficult and support hard to access, stating it contributed to feelings of discontinuation. Alternatively, those who had been supported, particularly following a difficult period, discussed how this had directly contributed to their retention.

Furthermore, non-academic support is of equal if not of greater value (Conrad et al., 2021). Services that address mental health, financial hardship, and housing concerns reduce external pressures that often contribute to withdrawal (Reay, 2018). More than 50% of the participants discussed how support from the university had been key to their continuation, with examples of support services, such as wellbeing, and key academic staff, for example personal tutors, supporting them throughout their studies (Pedler et al., 2022).

In addition to institutional support, many participants highlighted the critical role of family and friends in shaping their decision to remain in higher education (Reay, 2018). Emotional encouragement, practical help, and belief in their abilities provided a safety net during periods of stress or self-doubt. For some, external support networks were more reliable and affirming than institutional structures (Breeze et al., 2020). Family support also often compensated for perceived gaps in institutional care. In contrast, those who lacked understanding or encouragement from home reported greater difficulty staying motivated (Holt et al., 2018). Friends especially those on the same course or who were also studying, could be described as sources of normalisation and reassurance, helping to frame setbacks as part of the learning journey. These findings echo previous research emphasising the significance of social capital beyond campus in promoting student persistence (Sapir, 2022).

6.1.2 – Demographic Factors

Demographics, such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, disability, gender, caring roles, and first-generation status, are said to significantly shape student experiences and influence the risk of non-continuation in higher education (Pedler et al., 2022).

Research has consistently shown that students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds face greater challenges navigating academic systems not designed with their needs in mind (Reay, 2018). These structural inequalities often manifest in financial insecurity, limited social capital, and unfamiliarity with academic norms (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). First-generation students may enter university without knowledge of higher education expectations around independent learning, academic communication, or help-seeking behaviours (O'Shea, 2024). Similarly, students balancing caregiving responsibilities or part-time employment often struggle to meet institutional demands, particularly when flexibility is limited (McCulloh, 2022).

This was seen within the data with almost all the participants affected by one or more of the above factors. This is significant in a group of participants who had all struggled with the thought of leaving university, reinforcing the existing research (Burke, 2019).

Furthermore, as many of these risks are not under the universities control, as they are specific to the individual and often exist before the student joins the university.

Understanding how the institution can create interventions or support that would impact fully on student retention is a key aim of this study (Neria, 2023).

6.1.3 – Engagement Dynamics

Student engagement, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning, is a critical determinant of persistence in higher education (Tight, 2020).

Engaged students are more likely to attend classes, complete assessments, and interact meaningfully with academic content and staff (Sloan et al., 2020). Conversely,

disengagement often serves as an early warning sign of withdrawal, especially when compounded by external or emotional challenges (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Within the data participants discussed how prior to their potential withdrawal they had stopped attending the course teaching sessions feeling a disconnect with the programme of study (Sloan et al., 2020). For those who were inhibited from attendance due to external factors such as childcare, finances or illness, they described feeling isolated from the course and finding it difficult to reengage (McCulloh, 2022). Academic attainment played a role in engagement, with some participants motivated by how well they were doing academically, even if they were struggling in other areas (Mandernach, 2015).

Additionally, there appeared to be a link between engagement and support with several participants discussing how lack of attendance, non-submission or low assignment grades had resulted in university support (Oldfield et al., 2019). This is supported by existing research that reinforces the need for early indicators of student withdrawal, to support retention and prevent non-continuation (Nelson and Thomas, 2012).

6.1.4 – Student Belonging

A strong sense of belonging, feeling accepted, valued, and connected to the university community, is one of the most influential predictors of student retention (Thomas, 2012). Students who feel they ‘fit in’ are more likely to persist, while those who experience isolation or cultural mismatch often report reduced motivation, emotional distress, and higher likelihood of withdrawal (Burke, 2019).

Belonging is developed through interpersonal relationships, academic inclusion, and representation. Students described how peer friendships, inclusive classroom dynamics, and supportive staff helped them feel integrated (Pedler et al., 2022). However, many participants, particularly commuters, mature learners, or those from minoritised groups, expressed difficulties in establishing belonging, suggesting that they encountered difficulties in building friendships, connecting with lecturers, and working

with peers (Reay, 2021; Thomas and Jones, 2017). These students often encountered environments that assumed a narrow model of the 'traditional' student and failed to accommodate different identities or lived experiences (Crawford et al., 2023).

For some participants the emotional weight of not belonging was evident in their descriptions of imposter syndrome, marginalisation, or reluctance or inability to engage in university life (Fan et al., 2021). Participants discussed how they felt isolated from their peers due to the differences in their home lives and an inability to relate to their younger peers or those seemingly with little responsibilities (Reay, 2021). Additionally, those who became separated from their social or support networks also discussed how loneliness impacted upon them (Pedler et al., 2022). Without a sense of community or validation, academic challenges became harder to navigate, increasing withdrawal risk (Rotar, 2022).

6.2 – Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the findings from phase one alongside the existing literature on retention and attrition. Key themes were identified, these themes were then synthesised into four overarching framework categories: Demographic Factors That Affect Attrition, The Importance of Student Belonging, Influences That Support Retention, and Engagement Dynamics.

The next chapter will build on this foundation by detailing the creation of a model of attrition risk and protective factors. This model seeks to capture the complex, context-sensitive nature of student retention in UK higher education and offer a tool for institutions seeking to enhance support strategies through a more holistic, student-informed lens.

Chapter Seven: Creating a Model of Factors that Protect Continuation

This chapter presents the development of a conceptual model that captures the factors which protect against student attrition and promote undergraduate degree completion. Rooted in both empirical findings and established theoretical frameworks, the model aims to provide a holistic, evidence-based understanding of student retention within the contemporary UK higher education context.

This model builds directly on the findings of Phase One of the study, which explored the experiences of students who had seriously considered leaving university but ultimately persisted. Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, seven key themes were identified: resilience, motivation, personal circumstances, connection to the environment, peer relationships, external pressures, and expectations of study. These themes were later deductively synthesised into four overarching analytical categories: Demographic Factors That Affect Attrition, The Importance of Student Belonging, Influences That Support Retention, and Engagement Dynamics. This framework provided a nuanced lens through which the complex interplay of institutional, social, and individual variables shaping student continuation could be understood.

The purpose of this chapter is to translate that analytical framework into a practical model, a tool that can be used to inform institutional policy, student support strategies, and future retention-focused interventions. The model is designed to reflect the lived experiences of students, incorporating both the challenges they face and the supports they identify as vital. It is not intended to provide a universal or prescriptive solution, but rather to highlight the layered and context-sensitive nature of retention, especially for students who may be navigating multiple risk factors.

7.1 – Model Creation

The process of constructing the model was grounded in the need to synthesise the qualitative interview insights with established literature, to understand and assess student vulnerability to non-continuation. Drawing on both the interview data and theoretical frameworks, the model aimed to identify, categorise, and evaluate the relative risk associated with different domains influencing student persistence in higher education.

7.2 – Rationale

As Horn (2008) states, the process of understanding human behaviours is complex, what was clear from the data analysis and the literature was that very few individuals consider leaving their degree programme for one reason (Bradley, 2017; Villano et al., 2018). Also, the behaviour of those with similar catalyst events could be very different, as what would be a trigger for one student and lead to a struggle with retention, may not even be a factor for the other (Pedler and Nieuwoudt, 2022). For example, some participants were particularly affected by receiving a poor grade, whereas others were less impacted, as they acknowledged the grade as what they expected to receive or deserved. When considering the literature, it is suggested that resilience or academic self-concept may be a factor here (García-Martínez et al., 2022). However, some participants acknowledged that their focus on other challenges had contributed to a lack of academic engagement. The interview data also showed a difference in the impact of an illness or injury, with some participants being greatly affected by this and other participants less impacted, this was shown to be not only down to the individual but also the role of the institution and the support available.

Therefore, not one risk factor is the cause of attrition or doubts in continuation, all the factors and how they interconnect, provide a greater clue on why students may leave their degree. Moreover, the data suggests that '*what works*' to keep students at university could be very different, even within a specific group with seemingly shared

challenges. This is echoed in the literature where persistence is increasingly understood as a dynamic outcome shaped by personal attributes, social support networks, and structural conditions that either facilitate or hinder success (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

However, there were factors that supported continuation, which were discussed within the interviews. Therefore, it was deduced that if a student had more of these supportive factors in place, such as strong peer relationships and course engagement, then they would have a greater likelihood of completion. Whereas those who experienced factors that contributed to challenges or a lack of support, such as disinterested families and friends, and a low connection with the course, would be at greater risk of attrition.

Studies on student retention highlight a range of interrelated factors that contribute to continuation, with academic integration (Tinto, 1993), a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012), and clear goal orientation (Bean and Eaton, 2001) consistently cited as core influences. Furthermore, students who experience strong connections with staff and peers, align with the values of their institution, and feel academically competent are more likely to remain engaged (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Additionally, motivation, also plays a significant role, especially for students in vocational or first-in-family contexts (Reay et al., 2009). Recent studies have extended this view by incorporating intersectional factors such as race, class, disability, and caring responsibilities, which can shape students' ability to persist despite institutional challenges (Nichols and Stahl, 2019). Therefore, aligning the findings from the phase one data, with the literature can produce a holistic model of retention that shows the student experience intersectionally.

Previous attrition models looked at attrition as a process of integration and if a student does not integrate within university, then they are more likely to leave. This is often a linear process that begins at the start of the university experience, as seen in Tinto's original model. Though models by Spady (1970, 1971), Pascarella (1980) Bean (1985) looked at pre university and external factors, there was again less focus on the interplay between these factors. The phase one data seemed to suggest that for some student's retention was an ongoing process with peaks and troughs and these factors that protected or inhibited retention were not isolated.

Due to the number of participants interviewed, it was possible to quantify these shared risks of non-completion and supportive structures, to measure which type of factor had the most detrimental effect on the likelihood of retention. Fakis et al. (2014) suggests that qualitative data can be quantified to analyse the data statistically, if there is shared consensus within the data. As the sample of data gathered did allow for patterns and trends to be established, when synthesised with the preexisting literature on this topic, categories of support could be established. This was done through a deductive approach as detailed below.

7.3 – Process

Although the initial analysis had been conducted thematically and findings discussed in the previous chapters, this was done inductively to allow for the narratives of participants to emerge. However, analysing the same data set deductively, utilised pre-ordinate themes, through the application of an explicit theoretical framework developed through engagement with the literature. Hatta et al. (2020) demonstrate the value of “dynamic switching back and forth between...inductively and deductively driven analysis” (p. 104), in mixed methods research. Though this is mainly used in convergent designs (Hatta et al., 2020), to synthesise data sets and promote integration (Creamer, 2022). This hybrid approach was used to analyse the data set in relation to two research aims, one considering why people might stay at university and the other to understand further the characteristics or circumstances which pertain to departure.

i. Deductive thematic analysis

The existing literature on student retention and attrition, allowed for a deductive approach to be taken that utilised existing theory to identify the challenges faced by the participants during their university studies. By considering the models discussed in the literature review, such as:

- Tinto’s Integration Model (academic and social integration)

- Thomas's Engagement Framework (belonging and institutional culture)
- Bean's Attrition Model (external factors, satisfaction)
- Bourdieu's Habitus and Capital (social reproduction, cultural fit)

The themes that related to the risk factors associated with student attrition, for example, engagement, belonging, financial pressures, health concerns, caring responsibilities, etc and those that supported continuation, family support, peer relationships, academic engagement etc, could be derived. These factors were then transferred into a codebook with theme names, definitions, criteria and example quotes. This allowed for a consistent approach that aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of the research (Pearse, 2019). For example, the theme *financial pressure* was defined as any reference to difficulty affording housing, cost of living, relying on family support, the need to work, etc. This codebook was reviewed and piloted on a subset of transcripts to ensure relevance and clarity, with minor adjustments made to accommodate emerging contextual nuances (Proudfoot, 2023).

As this process was undertaken deductively using a theoretical framework, a detailed familiarisation process was undertaken through the reading and re-reading all transcripts (Pearse, 2019). Initial notes were made on sections of the data that aligned with the predefined factors, while remaining open to additional insights that may not have been anticipated.

Subsequently, coding was carried out using the predefined framework, using Microsoft Word and allowed an exploration of the similarities and differences of the participants (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For example, participants who described a disconnection with their course were coded under *belonging* but also under *disengagement*. Whereas those who discussed isolation were coded under *belonging* but may have also been coded under *friendship groups and/or geographical distance to home address*, based on the reasoning for those feelings.

ii. Theme Review and Refinement

After the initial coding phase, all thematic categories were reviewed. Overlaps were identified between closely related codes, prompting the creation of subthemes to capture these intersections more precisely. The coding framework remained flexible, with some themes adapted in response to data complexity while maintaining alignment with the overarching theoretical structure (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Proudfoot, 2023).

Following theme refinement, attention was paid to the relationships between themes. This allowed for the identification of patterns such as the compounding effect of financial stress on academic confidence or the interaction between lack of belonging and poor mental wellbeing. These relational insights contributed to a more nuanced understanding of attrition as a multidimensional and intersecting phenomenon. Though these themes could have been discussed as participant findings with example quotations as is the norm in qualitative research (Fife et al., 2024), due to the size of the sample I was able to make some statements about causality (Ruffa and Evangelista, 2021).

Thematic summaries were created for each theme, an example of which can be seen below. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to both areas where participant experiences aligned with existing theory and where they diverged or expanded upon it, thereby contributing to theory development.

(Table 7 – Example of Thematic Summary)

Theme	Summary	Example Supporting Quotations
Course engagement Sub – themes: motivation, enjoyment, attendance, commitment, inclusion	This theme captures how students experience and respond to the academic content, structure, and delivery of their chosen programmes. Participant narratives highlighted that engagement is not solely a matter of individual motivation but is shaped by the quality of teaching, perceived relevance of the curriculum, clarity of expectations, and opportunities for active learning. Students’ sense of connection to their course emerged as a critical factor influencing both academic persistence and broader satisfaction with university life. Several participants described high levels of engagement when they perceived their courses as intellectually stimulating and professionally relevant. For these students, the application of theory to practice and the opportunity to pursue personal interests through assignments contributed positively to their academic identity.	<i>“I just told them that I hated the course...I mean I wasn’t enjoying the course, but I would’ve stuck it out.....well I did stick it out lol! But that felt easier than admitting that I wasn’t happy, it’s hard to explain what’s up with you when you don’t actually know” (Participant 20)</i> <i>“my motivation academically has tanked. I don’t much like studying [redacted] anymore and I’m just trying to finish the degree so it’s over and done with. I think this problem is partially caused by the period in Nov-Jan of the year abroad when I did little or no academic work because I was struggling so much; even now, it’s hard to get back on track.” (Participant 7)</i>

The final process of deductive analysis, included a reflexive account, acknowledging the influence of theoretical frameworks on interpretation (Fife et al., 2024). While deductive analysis begins with a structured lens, data that challenged theoretical assumptions must be acknowledged and categories revised accordingly (Ramos-Monge et al., 2019). This balanced approach ensured analytical rigour, transparency, and theoretical grounding, consistent with good practice in qualitative research (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Therefore, the use of deductive thematic analysis allowed for participant narratives to be explored through a structured yet adaptable lens, illuminating how established attrition risk factors manifested in the lived experience of participants and how these experiences intersect and shaped their continuation decisions.

What became clear within the data was how these factors that influenced continuation had differing impacts dependant on participant experience. For example, participants could have discussed the importance of family support, but it was more complex than simply having support or lacking support. Looking at these positive and negative impacts of the different factors led to me creating a risk score for each, with most broken down into high, medium and low risk.

The table below shows each factor regarding the different risk ratings

(Table 8 – Example of Risk Ratings)

Risk factor	Descriptors		
	High risk	Medium risk	Low risk
Importance of Parent/Carer/Partner support for university study	Disinterested in the university experience/course.	Negative or unsupportive when discussing university.	Positive, interested and supportive of the university experience and/or course
Student's Financial circumstances	Low income/ No additional family support	Low income/ family support available	Moderate - High income
Distance/ geographical location of 'home' address (UK students studying in English universities)	Overseas or boarder – Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland	Living at home/ Close by Commuter students	Not local/ Same country 'home' address in England but not within the local area
Term time address (first year of study)	Living at home (commuter student)	Private accommodation near university	University Halls
First Generation Status	1 st generation (including wider family/friends)	1 st generation (immediate family)	2 nd generation or more
Local Area Participation Rates	Low rates	Average rates	High rates
Age of student at commencement of studies	Over 26	22-25	18-21
Friendship groups/ support	Friends away from University	Friends within the wider university	Friends within the course or programme of study
Career plans/ aspirations	No career goals	Some career goals/ undecided	Clear career goals
Disability	Physical disability	Learning difficulty	No disability

Caring responsibilities	Caring responsibilities for an adult/s	Caring responsibilities for children	No caring responsibilities
Physical health concerns	Serious	Moderate	Mild
Sense of belonging	Low sense of belonging at both university and course level	Belongs within the wider university	Belongs within the course of study
Course attendance Face to face	Low course engagement	Medium/average	High engagement
Course engagement Online	Low course engagement	Medium/average	High engagement
Work status	Full time job	No job	Part time work
Course satisfaction	Dislike course	Dislike or aspects of the course	Enjoying the course content
Health concerns	Serious health concerns	Moderate health concerns	Mild or no health concerns
Pastoral engagement	Low engagement with pastoral services	High engagement with pastoral services	Average engagement
Academic success (current)	Below students expectations	Meeting expectations	Above expectations
Family's socio-economic status	Low economic status	High economic status	Typical economic status

iii. Rationale for risk ratings

A system of risk ratings was developed to classify key factors according to their potential to contribute to withdrawal. This approach was grounded in both the qualitative interview data collected in this study and existing theoretical and empirical research on student retention (Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2012; Yorke and Longden, 2008). The rationale for this system was to move beyond thematic identification and towards a more structured, applied understanding of student vulnerability.

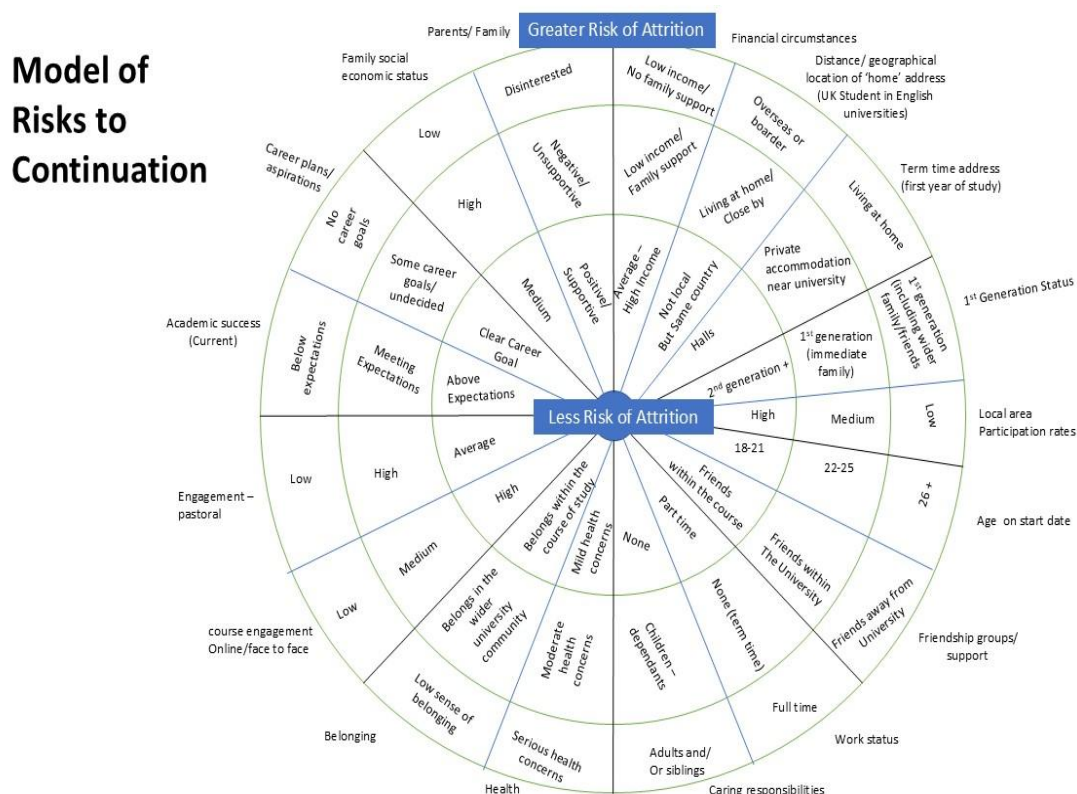
Each factor was evaluated in terms of how different types of student experiences within these areas might influence the likelihood of attrition. For example, inconsistent access to mental health support might be classified as a high-risk indicator, while strong peer integration might be associated with lower risk. By assigning risk levels (e.g. high,

medium, low) to variations within each factor, analysis was able to reflect the complex and context-sensitive nature of student retention. This system acknowledges that not all students are equally affected by a given issue, rather, the severity, persistence, and interaction of experiences determine attrition risk.

7.4 – Completed Model

The completed model can be seen below with risk categories listed on the outside of the outer circular and the categories sectioned into low-high risk. The sections closer to the centre of the model signify factors characteristics with lower risk of attrition, with moderate risk in the middle section and higher risk in the outer section.

(Figure 2 – Model of Risks to Continuation)



This structured approach allowed for a more nuanced representation of risk, moving beyond binary understandings of 'at-risk students' and instead recognising the interplay

of intersecting factors (Hlioui et al., 2021). Importantly, the model retained flexibility to accommodate contextual variation. Therefore, when interpreting an individual's risk, it can be used for a nuanced approach, where risk is not treated as universal. For example, caregiving responsibilities might pose a high risk in the absence of institutional flexibility but could be mitigated through targeted support (McCulloh, 2022). Likewise, strong peer networks or career clarity were identified as protective factors that reduced the impact of otherwise high-risk experiences. Maunder (2018) suggests the presence of a peer support network can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation. Additionally, clear career goals provide motivation, purpose, and a future-oriented focus that sustains engagement during periods of challenge (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Therefore, enhancing emotional resilience and offering practical and psychological anchors that help students remain connected to their educational journey, despite adversity (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021).

i. Category merging

Within the completed model there were a small number of categories which were combined for simplification and clarity. Course engagement intertwined, satisfaction, attendance and online engagement. The reason for this was the lower mentions of these as specific issues within the qualitative data and therefore the need for further exploration. Additionally, within the literature engagement often encompasses all of these differing aspects with course satisfaction impacting on levels of engagement and students having competing values between attendance and engagement, especially if they have high levels of online activity (Tight, 2020).

Furthermore, this was also the case for the category of health concerns, which incorporated, physical health, disability and mental health. This allowed for a risk rating for overall health in regard to students concern about their health needs, rather than assigning risk based on the fact of having a disability or diagnosis of poor mental health. This aligned with the qualitative data where unmet health needs were identified as a factor of attrition fears, whereas met needs were a sign of support and likelihood of continuation.

7.5 – Theoretical and Practical Implications of the Model

The conceptual model developed in this study offers both theoretical advancement and practical relevance for addressing student retention in UK higher education. By synthesising the findings from the qualitative interviews with the existing research, the model not only affirms existing theoretical frameworks but also extends them by incorporating a broader set of influences that reflect the complexity of student experiences.

i. Theoretical Implications

The model aligns with and builds upon several foundational theories of student retention. It reinforces Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, particularly the emphasis on academic and social integration as key predictors of persistence. However, while Tinto focused primarily on institutional fit and internal processes, the present model expands this view by incorporating external pressures (e.g., caregiving, work responsibilities) and personal histories, acknowledging that students' decisions are shaped as much by their broader life context as by the university environment.

Bean's (1980) Student Attrition Model, which emphasised student attitudes, intentions, and external environment, is also extended here through the inclusion of intersectional demographic factors, such as age, first-generation status, and commuter identity. These factors were often mediated by students' perceptions of institutional responsiveness, further supporting Bean's notion that attrition is influenced by the interaction between student and environment.

By incorporating Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital and habitus, the model also addresses how socio-cultural background influences student adaptation and continuation. Students from working-class or marginalised backgrounds may lack the institutional capital often assumed in higher education yet demonstrate high levels of resilience or motivation (Kelly et al., 2024). The model foregrounds these disparities and emphasises the importance of institutional structures in recognising and responding to them.

Furthermore, drawing on Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, the model highlights how multiple identity characteristics, such as gender, disability, socio-economic status, and caring responsibilities, intersect to create complex risk profiles. This approach challenges deficit-based views of attrition by locating vulnerability not within the student, but within the interaction of personal and structural inequalities.

ii. Practical Implications

The practical value of the model lies in its capacity to guide institutional strategy, policy development, and targeted student support. The identification of core domains, Demographic Risks, Belonging, Supportive Influences, and Engagement Dynamics, provides a clear framework for assessing student needs and designing proactive interventions. For example, recognising the importance of belonging and peer relationships can lead institutions to invest in cohort-building activities, peer mentoring schemes, and inclusive pedagogies that validate diverse student identities.

The model also supports data-informed decision-making by encouraging institutions to go beyond broad retention statistics and examine the distribution and interaction of risk factors across their student populations. This could allow for targeted interventions, such as specialist support for student carers or commuter students, and aligns with widening participation agendas and the Office for Students' emphasis on equitable outcomes.

Additionally, by identifying resilience and motivation as protective factors, the model encourages universities to adopt asset-based approaches that build on students' existing strengths while also providing scaffolding where institutional barriers exist. This could take the form of early alert systems, personalised academic support, and greater flexibility in curriculum design or attendance policies.

Ultimately, the model contributes to the ongoing shift in retention discourse, from the narrow focus on "fixing" the student, to a broader institutional responsibility to create environments where diverse learners can thrive. It provides a conceptual and practical

tool that can reframe retention not only as an outcome, but as a reflection of institutional inclusivity, relational pedagogy, and meaningful student engagement.

7.6 – Conclusion

The research data and subsequent model suggest that there are numerous factors that can contribute to the likelihood of student attrition in positive and negative ways. This risk-rating framework enables a more actionable interpretation of qualitative data, with potential application in student support services, early warning systems, and institutional policy planning. It also aligns with calls for evidence-based, targeted interventions (Thomas et al., 2017) by helping institutions prioritise students most likely to benefit from additional support. Although institutions cannot remove all the risks seen in the model, they can address the support in place for undergraduate students to boost the potential of the recognised protective factors, supportive, and engagement factors and therefore minimise the impact of the demographic factors and negative categories of influence.

7.7 – Chapter Summary

This chapter has detailed the exploration of the interview data related to factors that impact on continuation. The use of deductive thematic analysis allowed the phase one data to be scrutinised in relation to the existing theoretical perspectives on attrition and produced several risk factors that can contribute to attrition. The combination of interview data and existing research created a risk rating for these categories of risk; this was then converted into a visual representation of risk which can be utilised as a model of risk to retention. This discussion lays the groundwork for the confirmatory Phase Two of the study, which employed Q methodology to test and refine the analytical framework developed in chapter six and the model discussed in this chapter. By asking participants to sort statements derived from these findings, Phase Two aimed to assess the relative salience of risk and protective factors, validate thematic categories, and

uncover new dimensions of the student experience not fully captured through interviews alone. This methodological triangulation strengthens the study's reliability and provides a deeper understanding of the subjective priorities that influence retention.

Chapter Eight: Phase Two Findings – Part A: Q-Factor Analysis

This chapter will discuss the analysis and findings of the Q method data. The findings have been split into a part A and part B, with part A discussing the process of analysis and findings from the Q Sort factor analysis and part B detailing the thematic findings from the post sort interview data, part B will be examined in the next chapter. As with the phase one data, it is challenging to represent a cyclical process in a linear writeup. The analysis process will be presented first, followed by the resulting factor interpretations. Then the findings of the phase will be considered, including the factor arrays generated by the factor analysis. Finally, the student profiles that have been identified by examining the key statements, consensus and demographic details for each factor, will be discussed.

8.1 – Q-Factor Analysis

Statistical analysis of the 34 Q sorts resulted in a five-factor solution. The process of analysis will be discussed below, followed by the factor findings and interpretation.

The results of the Q-Sorts were entered into the KENQ software, a free resource for use with Q methodology (Banasick, 2023). Since every sort contains equivalent values on the same scale, correlations between sorts can be calculated (Brown, 1980; 1993).

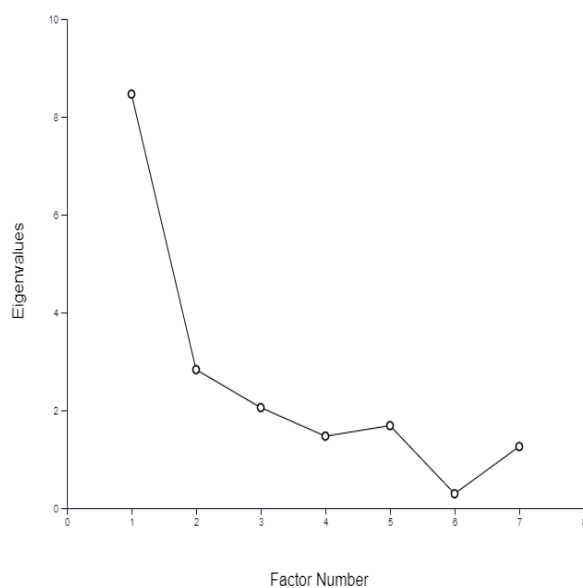
i. The Q-Factor extraction process

The factor analysis process detects a "*pattern of similarity*" (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 98), which represents an initial calculation of the commonalities among the sorts. This pattern of similarity is then labelled as Factor 1 and subsequently extracted. Extraction involves calculating the remaining variance after the variance accounted for by Factor 1 is removed, resulting in a new table of correlations. The process continues in the same

manner to detect and extract Factor 2, followed by additional factors, typically to factor 8.

Centroid Factor Analysis was used to rotate factors, as it using abductive logic, thus acknowledging the researcher's knowledge of the subject area (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Q methodology allows for the preconceived notions of the researcher and permits for a deductive analytical approach. Stephenson (1953) suggests that there was room in Q methodology, for data to be approached with 'theoretical expectancies in mind' and that researchers might, on occasion, 'know what to look for'. Furthermore, the researcher (expert), might *"be relied upon to observe facts that a routine [or purely statistical] method of analysis could miss altogether"* (Stephenson, 1953: 44).

'The magic number 7' was utilised, as the sensible number from which to start the process (Brown, 1980). Each factor represents a different viewpoint towards the statements. The initial 7 factor sort eigenvalues can be seen in the graph below.



(Figure 3 – Factor Eigenvalues)

Six factors were selected based on the Kaiser-Guttman criterion; this states that an eigenvalue of a factor needs to be above 1 for inclusion. The eigenvalue is the ratio between the variance explained by a factor and the variance explained by a single sort,

indicating that a value over 1 means the factor explains more variance than one sort (Guttman, 1954; Kaiser, 1960). The results of the extraction of 6 factors, with correlations of each sort to each factor, are shown in the Table below. Each factor represents a portion of the shared variance between the sorts, with factors extracted earlier explaining more variance.

(Table 9: Unrotated Factor Matrix)

Nm	Participant identifier	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
1	2728	0.6056	0.3151	-0.3541	0.2321	-0.3893	0.1367
2	2627	0.1227	-0.3127	0.3748	0.2209	-0.3205	0.1014
3	2526	0.002	-0.2911	0.438	0.2376	-0.1682	0.0961
4	1234	0.3159	0.307	0.1625	-0.2409	0.0903	0.0873
5	2345	0.6491	0.1487	-0.191	-0.0167	-0.1122	0.0268
6	3456	0.2985	0.2719	0.3497	-0.1739	0.2528	0.1254
7	4567	0.4911	0.0551	-0.425	-0.1473	-0.0276	0.0898
8	5678	-0.0776	0.0539	0.1571	0.3831	0.2604	-0.1002
9	6789	0.6262	0.3498	-0.1365	-0.0268	0.0675	0.0645
10	7891	0.4047	0.544	0.2539	0.1704	-0.2614	0.1498
11	9101	0.4325	0.1022	-0.3591	0.162	-0.138	0.0579
12	1012	0.254	0.2709	0.1469	-0.1676	-0.3211	0.0782
13	1213	0.4146	0.0618	0.3217	0.1383	0.3404	0.0893
14	1314	0.4314	0.3125	-0.0266	-0.0805	0.3844	0.1192
15	1415	0.3385	-0.3409	0.1596	0.3821	0.1147	0.0821
16	1617	0.5972	0.0908	0.1514	-0.1026	0.3079	0.067
17	1718	0.6056	0.3151	-0.3541	0.2321	-0.3893	0.1367
18	1819	0.6482	0.0898	0.1459	0.1301	0.2122	0.0328
19	1918	0.5155	-0.4518	-0.1372	-0.1258	0.0746	0.0938
20	1817	0.4531	-0.1107	-0.4484	0.0449	0.2354	0.1119
21	1716	0.4965	-0.5954	-0.2074	0.1111	0.2325	0.1688
22	1615	0.3669	-0.5234	0.1753	-0.2238	0.0441	0.1337
23	1514	0.311	-0.5014	0.1628	0.5001	-0.0576	0.1508
24	1413	0.754	-0.0878	-0.0327	0.0599	0.2229	0.0273
25	1312	0.6422	-0.2502	-0.1795	0.0932	0.2289	0.0592
26	1211	0.5079	-0.2025	-0.1424	-0.1034	0.159	0.0467
27	2021	0.7384	-0.2844	-0.1447	-0.2289	-0.1681	0.0691
28	2122	0.3453	0.1004	0.402	-0.1767	-0.0956	0.0765
29	2223	0.5589	0.3859	0.0399	-0.0854	0.0418	0.0692
30	2324	0.7653	0.0478	-0.2856	0.2381	-0.1977	0.0468
31	2425	0.5917	0.2278	0.0493	0.2094	0.2619	0.0614
32	8910	0.4226	-0.0843	0.0645	-0.2431	-0.2542	0.0483
33	1112	0.575	0.083	0.1189	-0.2621	-0.1122	0.0457
34	2930	0.4366	-0.0339	0.1128	-0.2097	-0.1218	0.0299
Eigenvalues		8.4632	2.8302	2.0539	1.4697	1.6854	0.2932
Explained Variance		25	8	6	4	5	1

Though the extracted factors above meet the Kaiser-Guttman criteria, Brown (1980) states that statistical measurements such as eigenvalues, total variance and objective criteria are not the whole picture. In fact, the substantive meaning and significance (or otherwise) of a factor, must always take its place alongside more statistical considerations (Watts and Stenner, 2012). For deductive factor extraction, the following criteria was included:

- Does a factor provide a viewpoint which is both meaningful and meaningfully different from other factors?
- Does keeping a factor give the reader of the research a greater appreciation of the variety of viewpoints existing among the P set and the wider student population?
- Are enough participants included in the factor array for it to be considered a shared viewpoint?
- Does the inclusion of this factor provide further clarification on the experiences of participants who may be/feel 'othered' within higher education.

Though the seventh factor (factor 6) was revisited, using this 'cut off' criteria the rotation of six factors was deemed most suitable, due to this factor containing a low eigenvalue and a low number of sorts. The remaining six factors were kept for the rotation, as they met the desired standards of criteria and accounted '*for as much of the variability in the original correlation matrix as possible*' (Brown, 1980:40).

ii. Factor rotation

Factor rotation is employed to simplify and clarify the factor structure, extracted factors are often unrotated and may not provide a clear picture of the relationships among the Q sorts (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Factor rotation effectively rotates factor axes (imagining that a factor, or viewpoint, is an axis along which people are plotted) so that participants load onto the factor which they relate to the most (Ramelo, 2017). Rotating these factors allows researchers to achieve a more meaningful pattern of loadings. Orthogonal rotation methods, such as Varimax, maintain the factors at right angles (90

degrees) to each other, preserving their independence (Brown, 1980). Varimax is widely used due to its ability to maximise the variance of squared loadings of a factor across the Q sorts, thereby simplifying the interpretation of each factor (Akhtar-Danesh, 2016).

Although keeping the six factors was supported by eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and the correlation between the factors was low, theoretical interpretation of these factors was not possible due to the lack of distinguishing statements on each factor, meaning that there was little to distinguish one factor from another. Another problem with retaining all 6 factors for rotation was that out of the 34 participants, only 22 loaded onto any of the 6 factors. This meant that the remaining 12 participants would not be included in the final analysis. Therefore, the 6-factor solution was disregarded, and 5 factors selected as this best interpreted the results and produced factors with consensus and distinguishing statements.

iii. Factor arrays

The factor array is a composite ranking of the statements as they would have been sorted by the viewpoint represented by the factor. Interpretation involves qualitatively exploring this array by examining the statements ranked highest and lowest, as well as those that distinguish one factor from another. Participant comments from post-sort interviews, provide a deeper contextual insight (Stephenson, 1953; Watts and Stenner, 2005). Factor interpretation is abductive rather than deductive: guided by empirical patterns in the data but also requires researcher reflexivity and theoretical sensitivity. The aim is to construct a holistic, coherent narrative around each factor, that reflects the underlying structure of meaning shared by those participants (Watts and Stenner, 2012). The table below details the factor loadings for a 5-factor solution. This factor solution allowed for the loading of 28 out of 34 participants, so was deemed the best fit.

(Table 10 – Factor loadings for five factors post rotation.)

Participant	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
1.	0.0926	0.0575	0.8705*	-0.0018	0.1654
2.	-0.07	0.0112	-0.0032	0.6078*	0.1743
3.	-0.0162	-0.0326	-0.1476	0.5797*	0.0476
4.	0.4414*	-0.0498	0.0688	-0.1487	0.25
5.	0.2693	0.2602	0.5351*	-0.0533	0.2517
6.	0.5884*	-0.0445	-0.0841	-0.0358	0.1515
7.	0.0772	0.365	0.4381	-0.2811	0.1927
8.	0.1835	-0.0651	-0.0492	0.1956	-0.4118*
9.	0.4685	0.1596	0.4914	-0.1722	0.1494
10.	0.4466	-0.3609	0.4779	0.1639	0.1916
11.	0.0327	0.2141	0.5662*	-0.0598	0.0263
12.	0.1675	-0.2105	0.2333	0.0193	0.4044*
13.	0.5799*	0.1768	0.0049	0.2046	-0.0696
14.	0.5654*	0.1682	0.1648	-0.2503	-0.0308
15.	0.1541	0.3656	0.0875	0.4762*	-0.1539
16.	0.5998*	0.3175	0.1098	-0.0096	0.143
17.	0.0926	0.0575	0.8705*	-0.0018	0.1654
18.	0.5683*	0.2925	0.2753	0.1576	0.0485
19.	0.0499	0.6612*	0.0915	0.0948	0.2304
20.	0.1023	0.5493*	0.3353	-0.2043	-0.098
21.	0.0171	0.8137*	0.0922	0.1951	-0.039
22.	0.0728	0.5216*	-0.1914	0.2468	0.3412
23.	-0.0253	0.3866	0.1329	0.6639*	-0.1395
24.	0.4669	0.54	0.3182	0.0981	0.1006
25.	0.2648	0.6435*	0.2793	0.0779	0.0107
26.	0.2002	0.5181*	0.1559	-0.0302	0.1466
27.	0.119	0.5827	0.3368	0.0714	0.5054
28.	0.3789	-0.0502	-0.0017	0.1853	0.3883
29.	0.5208*	0.0341	0.3712	-0.1159	0.2198
30.	0.1899	0.37	0.7459*	0.122	0.1452
31.	0.5783*	0.2143	0.3539	0.0603	-0.0874
32.	0.0946	0.1791	0.1721	0.0833	0.4858*
33.	0.3535	0.1791	0.2223	0.0128	0.4756*
34.	0.2164	0.1818	0.1332	0.0704	0.4009*

iv. Understanding the factor arrays

The asterisks in the table above indicate a defining sort, meaning that it is typical of the factor and not of any other factors. The factor array is an arrangement of the items in the Q set that demonstrates how participants who exemplify a factor responded. This array is produced by ranking the items according to how positively or negatively they were rated by the relevant participants. A weighted average is used, giving more influence on participants who correlate more strongly with a factor. Defining sorts play a significant role in constructing factor arrays. These sorts are selected because they best represent the perspectives encapsulated by a specific factor, and they do not exhibit significant

correlation with other factors. This ensures that the factor array accurately reflects the unique viewpoint of that factor, without being influenced by overlapping perspectives from other factors (Brown, 1980).

To calculate the factor array, the items in the Q set are ranked based on the ratings from participants who define the factor. Each item is assigned a score that reflects its position in the ranking. Participants who have a higher correlation with the factor are given more weight in this calculation. According to Watts and Stenner (2012), there is no strict criterion for whether a sort should be included in the factor array. However, a minimum requirement is that the correlation between the sort and the factor should have a significance level less than 0.01. This threshold indicates that only 1% of randomly generated sorts would correlate so highly with the factor, thus ensuring the robustness of the factor array. The formula for determining the 1% significance level is as follows:

Significance level = $2.58 \times 1 / \text{the square root of the number of items in the Q set}$

With 44 items this comes to 0.3889. Therefore, a sort can only be included in a factor array if it correlates at this significant level for only one factor (in a positive or negative direction).

A higher factor loading can be used as a threshold to ensure that included sorts are more typical of the factor (Watts and Stenner, 2012). As an alternative, the sort's loading on a factor must exceed a minimum threshold to be included, with loadings on other factors being below a lower threshold (Jordan et al., 2005).

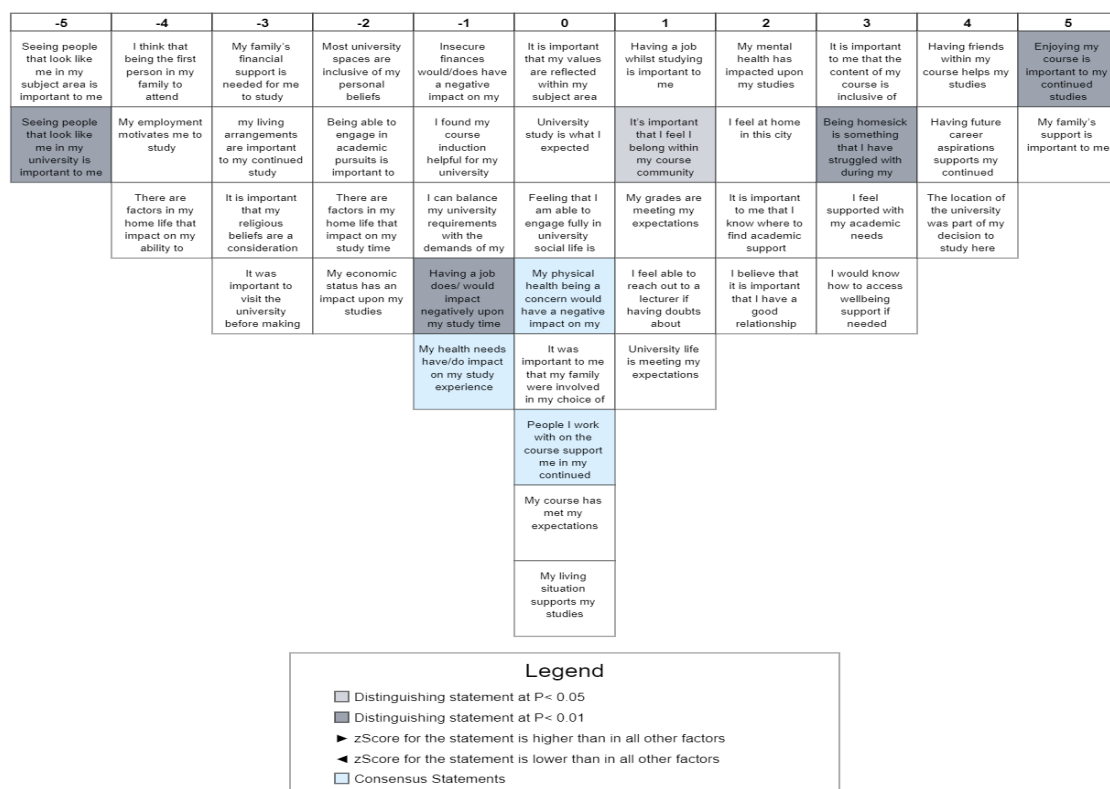
The criterion of inclusion used for analysis, was the sort having a loading of greater than 0.45, with no other factors for that sort having a loading of 0.3 or greater. Though the 0.3889 significance value could have been used as the inclusion of the sorts, this would have led to less distinct, more correlated viewpoints and so was less satisfactory. This method would have had the advantage that arrays would have been based on a weighted average of more sorts, which is the reason why Watts and Stenner (2012) recommend such a criterion. However, on balance it was more important to maximise

the distinctness of viewpoints. The thresholds of 0.45 and 0.3 led to each factor having at least three defining sorts. 28 of the sorts were included in the factor arrays, using a 5-factor solution. The remaining 6 participant sorts have more than one factor that they load onto over 0.3, meaning that their viewpoints are not distinct to one factor. Therefore, these participant sorts were utilised for consensus statements and part b interview analysis.

Participant loadings on the factor array allows for the view of a typical factor Q-sort, therefore, by viewing the factor arrays for the 5 factors it was clear that they contained both consensus statements and distinguishing statements allowing for interpretive judgements to be made. The figure below shows the factor array of factor one, with grey statements showing distinguishing statements and blue consensus statements.

(Figure 4 – Example of Q-Factor Array)

Composite Q Sort for Factor 1



As Q methodology supports both abductive and retroductive reasoning, allowing for the interpretation of underlying patterns in participant viewpoints, the availability of both demographic data and qualitative interview findings enables a more detailed analysis of the factors derived from the Q-sort process (Akhtar-Danesh, 2016). By examining their Q-sort profiles alongside demographic characteristics, it becomes possible to infer potential overlaps in perspective or experience, this can then be generalised to the wider student population who share demographic characteristics and personal circumstances with the participants who sort to that factor profile (Stenner et al., 2017). Therefore, interpretation of the factor arrays, offers a deeper understanding of how these shared viewpoints are distributed and the implications they hold for refining the conceptual model (Stephenson, 2018).

8.2 – Findings Part A

This section discusses the findings from the Q-sorts activities, including an exploration of the consensus statements, distinguishing statements and the factor interpretations. It will refer to the ‘risks to continuation model’ (chapter seven) regarding the demographic influences that have affected the factors, but full evaluation of the model will be discussed in chapter 11, which discusses the model refinement.

8.2.1 – Q-Factor Interpretation

Interpretation is achieved through comparisons and contrasts between the positioning of items, and by examining different sorting patterns to infer the accounts being told. Distinguishing statements in each factor, along with consensus statements, highlight the main differences and similarities between participants' attitudes (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Research and theory may also be used to explore the resulting model Q sorts. However, using previous research alone does not necessarily capture the rationale behind these participants' placement of the statements. Wong et al. (2004) advocates for the use of individual interviews with the participants to allow for a holistic view of the factors. Interviewing participants after they have completed the Q sort provides individuals with the opportunity to explain why they placed the statements in

the order they did. This step allows for a richer interpretation of the factor arrays based on the participants' own rationale. By incorporating participants' explanations, researchers can generate new theories that might not have been previously considered. Though the interview data was analysed separately to analyse themes in the part B discussion, the data was also used to help interpret the five factors.

8.2.2 – Q-Factor Interpretation - by Q-Factor

A five-factor solution was chosen, to best categorise the attitudes of participants regarding what is most important to them for their student experience. These factors are characterised by a set of distinguishing statements, identifying which statements were placed in a statistically significantly different position by participants on factors one, two, three, four, and five individually. In this section, the factor array is shown for each factor, there is also a written description that explains the main profile of a participant from this factor. Some explanation of the rationale for the written viewpoint is given. For each factor, the contextual information collected for the participants exemplifying that factor is shown. However, in the interests of maintaining participant confidentiality, the contextual information relating to each factor is demonstrated, rather than showing which contextual information is linked to each participant. Also shown is the participants' answer to the question from the demographic questionnaire: 'During your current studies, have you ever considered leaving your course?'. If the relevant participants had mentioned an area that has been missed in the Q-set, that has also been added to the factor information.

Composite Q Sort for Factor 1

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me	I think that being the first person in my family to attend	My family's financial support is needed for me to study	Most university spaces are inclusive of my personal beliefs	Insecure finances would/does have a negative impact on my	It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area	Having a job whilst studying is important to me	My mental health has impacted upon my studies	It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of	Having friends within my course helps my studies	Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies
Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me	My employment motivates me to study	my living arrangements are important to my continued study	Being able to engage in academic pursuits is important to	I found my course induction helpful for my university	University study is what I expected	It's important that I feel I belong within my course community	I feel at home in this city	Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my	Having future career aspirations supports my continued	My family's support is important to me
	There are factors in my home life that impact on my ability to	It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration	There are factors in my home life that impact on my study time	I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my	Feeling that I am able to engage fully in university social life is	My grades are meeting my expectations	It is important to me that I know where to find academic support	I feel supported with my academic needs	The location of the university was part of my decision to study here	
		It was important to visit the university before making	My economic status has an impact upon my studies	Having a job does/ would impact negatively upon my study time	My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my	I feel able to reach out to a lecturer if having doubts about	I believe that it is important that I have a good relationship	I would know how to access wellbeing support if needed		
				My health needs have/do impact on my study experience	It was important to me that my family were involved in my choice of	University life is meeting my expectations				
					People I work with on the course support me in my continued					
					My course has met my expectations					
					My living situation supports my studies					

Legend

- Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$
- Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$
- zScore for the statement is higher than in all other factors
- ◄ zScore for the statement is lower than in all other factors
- Consensus Statements

(Figure 5 – Q-Factor One Array)

Q-Factor 1: The engaged student

Summary

The students that exemplify this factor tended to be typical age on start date and a mixture of both commuter and non-commuter students. They are engaged with academic and social aspects of university. They feel a good sense of belonging. None of these students answered yes to the question relating to considering dropping out of university.

Statistical information

Factor 1 has an eigenvalue of 8.46 and explains 25% of the study variance. Eight participants contributed to this factor array by virtue of their Q sort having a loading above 0.5 on Factor 1 and loadings below 0.3 on all other factors.

Contextual information for participants exemplifying this factor.

- A mixture of students from L4,5&6
- 8 students aligned with this factor with 6 female students and 2 male
- A mixture of courses but predominantly social sciences
- No students on courses that lead directly to a specific career

Factor viewpoint

I enjoy my course and feel happy with the content that I am studying. My academic performance is generally good and is meeting my expectations. I have a strong sense of belonging and have made friends on my course. I am part of the majority on my course in terms of race and gender. I can understand the importance of belonging in regard to my student experience but have given little thought to fitting in as I have managed to form part of the community. I do not have any caring responsibilities. I am in good health and if I have any SEND needs, they are well supported by the institution. I have not yet used academic services but know how to access them if needed. I have engaged with pastoral services through my personal tutor and am aware of the wider student services team and how to access them. I have some clear career aspirations and feel that my course of study has helped me to refine those choices. I have a part time job that is unrelated to my chosen career area, which I enjoy and can maintain a good work study balance.

Composite Q Sort for Factor 2

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me	It was important to me that my family were involved in my choice of	Insecure finances would/does have a negative impact on my	Most university spaces are inclusive of my personal beliefs	My mental health has impacted upon my studies	University life is meeting my expectations	There are factors in my home life that impact on my study time	I feel at home in this city	My family's support is important to me	My employment motivates me to study	Having a job whilst studying is important to me
My family's financial support is needed for me to study	Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my	Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me	It's important that I feel I belong within my course community	My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my	People I work with on the course support me in my continued	It is important to me that I know where to find academic support	My course has met my expectations	Having friends within my course helps my studies	I feel supported with my academic needs	Having future career aspirations supports my continued
	It was important to visit the university before making	The location of the university was part of my decision to study here	Feeling that I am able to engage fully in university social life is	my living arrangements are important to my continued study	It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of	There are factors in my home life that impact on my ability to	Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies	I think that being the first person in my family to attend	My grades are meeting my expectations	
		It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration	My economic status has an impact upon my studies	Being able to engage in academic pursuits is important to	My living situation supports my studies	It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area	Having a job does/ would impact negatively upon my study time	I feel able to reach out to a lecturer if having doubts about		
				My health needs have/do impact on my study experience	University study is what I expected	I would know how to access wellbeing support if needed				
					I believe that it is important that I have a good relationship					
					I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my					
					I found my course induction helpful for my university					

Legend

Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$
 Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$
 zScore for the statement is higher than in all other factors
 zScore for the statement is lower than in all other factors
 Consensus Statements

(Figure 6 – Q-Factor Two Array)

Q-Factor 2: The licence to practice student

Summary

The students that loaded against this factor were all on licence to practice degree programme, meaning that the degree directly led to a professional status that allowed the student to join that profession. For example, teaching, nursing and policing. All students had placements directly in the field they were working towards.

Statistical information

Factor 2 has an eigenvalue of 2.83 and explains 8% of the study variance. Six participants contributed to this factor array by virtue of their Q sort having a loading above 0.5 on Factor 1 and loadings below 0.3 on all other factors.

Contextual information for participants exemplifying this factor

- 6 students loaded against this factor 3 male and 3 female
- All were on programmes that led to a professional status
- All had placements in that field that were a large part of their course grades
- All 6 had worked in related fields before studying

Factor viewpoint

I mainly live at home while studying. I chose the university as it was close to home and offered the relevant course. I have clear career goals and have worked in the field of my study previously. I enjoy the practical aspect of my degree but do not enjoy the taught aspects as much. I dislike some of the assignments but overall am succeeding academically. I have used academic support through my course tutors as I had been out of education for some time before returning to university. I might have caring responsibilities, but I am not the main caregiver. I have had to continue working alongside my studies, which is difficult. I do rely on my partner to support my studies as the student loan is not sufficient. I feel a sense of belonging within my cohort as they share the same goal. However, it is more important that I feel I fit in within my placement as that is where I spend more time. I do not feel that it is important that I have a good relationship with my tutors as I am here to earn a professional qualification. It is good that most of our tutors have done the role that I am training for as that makes me enjoy the taught content. I am in good physical health and do not have SEND needs, but I can recognise how this might impact on my studies. I have on occasion had mental health challenges but feel fully supported with this from both my placement provider and wider university support.

Composite Q Sort for Factor 3

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
My economic status has an impact upon my studies	Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my	There are factors in my home life that impact on my ability to	There are factors in my home life that impact on my study time	My course has met my expectations	I believe that it is important that I have a good relationship	Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me	I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my	My living situation supports my studies	I feel at home in this city	The location of the university was part of my decision to study here
Having a job does/ would impact negatively upon my study time	It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration	It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area	I think that being the first person in my family to attend	I found my course induction helpful for my university	Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me	I feel supported with my academic needs	It is important to me that I know where to find academic support	Having friends within my course helps my studies	My family's support is important to me	My grades are meeting my expectations
	My family's financial support is needed for me to study	My health needs have/do impact on my study experience	University study is what I expected	Being able to engage in academic pursuits is important to	My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my	University life is meeting my expectations	Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies	Having a job whilst studying is important to me	It was important to visit the university before making	
		My mental health has impacted upon my studies	Feeling that I am able to engage fully in university social life is	my living arrangements are important to my continued study	Most university spaces are inclusive of my personal beliefs	It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of	People I work with on the course support me in my continued	Having future career aspirations supports my continued		
				Insecure finances would/does have a negative impact on my	It was important to me that my family were involved in my choice of	My employment motivates me to study				
					I feel able to reach out to a lecturer if having doubts about					
					I would know how to access wellbeing support if needed					
					It's important that I feel I belong within my course community					

Legend

- Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$
- Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$
- zScore for the statement is higher than in all other factors
- ◄ zScore for the statement is lower than in all other factors
- Consensus Statements

(Figure 7 – Q-Factor Three Array)

Q-Factor 3: The supported student

Summary

This student tends to have used university support services and has a good level of support from course tutors, family, and friends. They feel that belonging is very important for their continuation and all, but one, student answered yes to the question asking about consideration of dropping out.

Statistical information

Factor 3 has an eigenvalue of 2.05 and explains 6% of the study variance. Five participants contributed to this factor array by virtue of their Q sort having a loading above 0.5 on Factor 1 and loadings below 0.3 on all other factors.

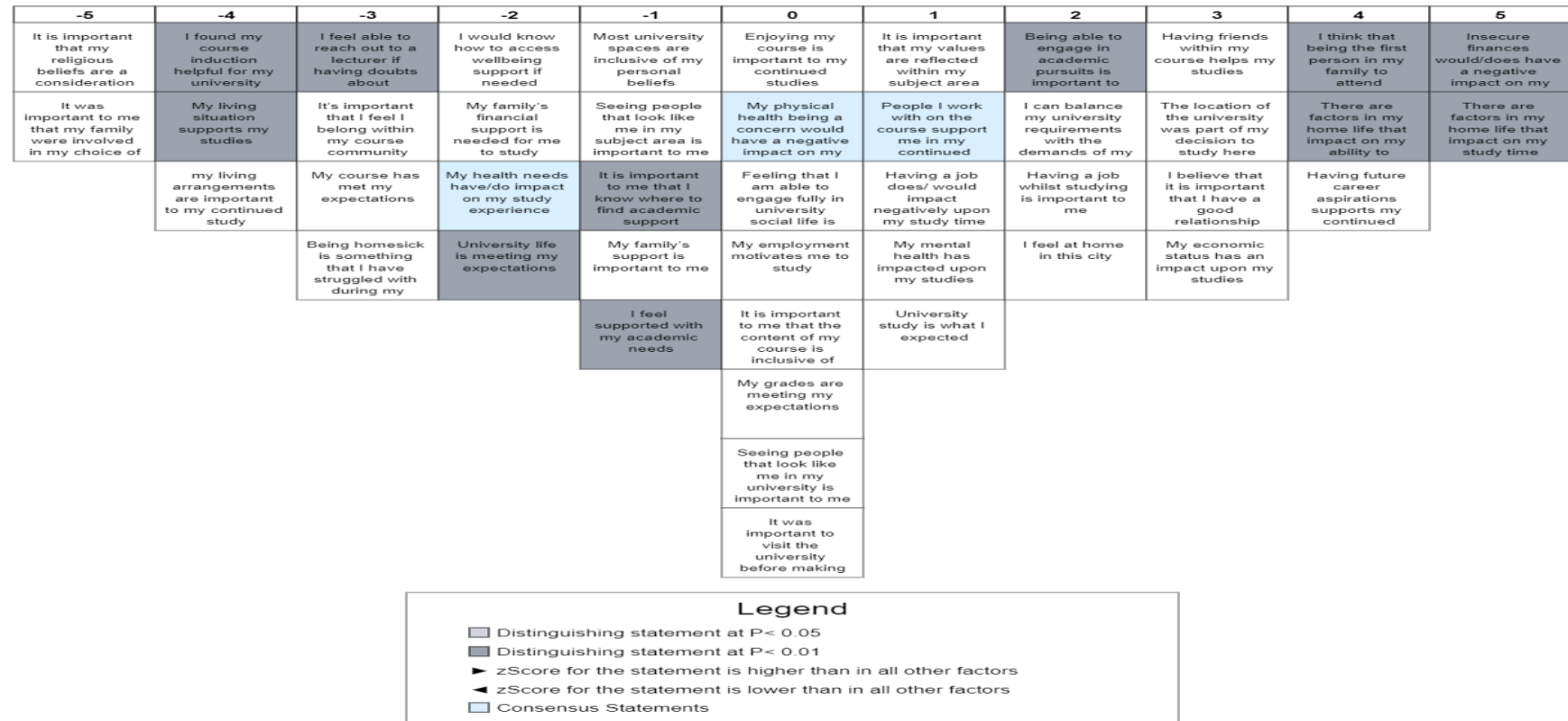
Contextual information for participants exemplifying this factor

- Five students contributed to this factor with 3 female and 2 males
- 4 out of the 5 had considered leaving their course
- All suggested that they had engaged with pastoral and academic services during their studies

Factor viewpoint

Whilst attending university I have struggled with various aspects including my mental health and academic studies. I have been supported in various ways and feel that support services are an important part of my student life. I feel that I belong on the course and have made some key friends who have supported me in my studies as a result I have settled in well. I have a good relationship with at least one of my tutors and think this is important. Belonging is important to me, as I have been helped by my support networks when struggling. Academic achievement is important to me, and I will seek help and reassurance when needed. I may have considered leaving my course but felt able to access support easily from friends' family or the university.

Composite Q Sort for Factor 4



(Figure 8 – Q-Factor Four Array)

Q-Factor 4: Students with caring responsibilities

Summary

This student has caring responsibilities for young children, which has had implications for the way in which they are able to engage with the social aspects of their degree. Although they have time pressures they are generally engaged with the academic aspects of the course and happy with their grades.

Statistical information

Factor 4 has an eigenvalue of 1.47 and explains 4% of the study variance. Four participants contributed to this factor array by virtue of their Q sort having a loading above 0.5 on Factor 1 and loadings below 0.3 on all other factors.

Contextual information for participants exemplifying this factor

- 4 participants loaded on to this factor all female
- All students have caring responsibilities for children
- All participants work and have low socioeconomic status

Factor viewpoint

I have caring responsibilities for children. I am the main caregiver and feel strongly impacted by home life balance. I feel that I belong as there are other students on my course with similar circumstances, if this had not have been the case I feel I may have struggled more. I live in my own home within traveling distance to the university which was my first choice due to having to remain in the local area. I rely on wider family for support and feel that I can balance home life and university study but do not engage in the social aspects of university life. I need to work and am from a low socioeconomic group. I have some career goals and am attending university to better my life opportunities and those for my family. I have a good relationship with the course tutors and feel that is important to my studies. I have sought pastoral support and that has helped me to manage the conflicting pressures on my time. Although I find balancing my time difficult, I have not considered leaving university and I am enjoying my course. My grades are meeting or exceeding my expectations, and I have been interested in the modules that I have been studying.

Composite Q Sort for Factor 5

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
It was important to me that my family were involved in my choice of	Having a job does/ would impact negatively upon my study time	My employment motivates me to study	There are factors in my home life that impact on my study time	I would know how to access wellbeing support if needed	My economic status has an impact upon my studies	my living arrangements are important to my continued study	It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area	Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies	Most university spaces are inclusive of my personal beliefs	I feel at home in this city
It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration	There are factors in my home life that impact on my ability to	My family's support is important to me	Being able to engage in academic pursuits is important to	My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my	Insecure finances would/does have a negative impact on my	University life is meeting my expectations	My grades are meeting my expectations	Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me	I feel supported with my academic needs	It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of
	My family's financial support is needed for me to study	I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my	Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my	The location of the university was part of my decision to study here	Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me	Having friends within my course helps my studies	It is important to me that I know where to find academic support	My course has met my expectations	I feel able to reach out to a lecturer if having doubts about	
		I think that being the first person in my family to attend	Feeling that I am able to engage fully in university social life is	It's important that I feel I belong within my course community	Having future career aspirations supports my continued	My living situation supports my studies	My mental health has impacted upon my studies	Having a job whilst studying is important to me		
				My health needs have/do impact on my study experience	University study is what I expected	I believe that it is important that I have a good relationship				
					I found my course induction helpful for my university					
					People I work with on the course support me in my continued					
					It was important to visit the university before making					

Legend	
■	Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$
■	Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$
►	zScore for the statement is higher than in all other factors
◄	zScore for the statement is lower than in all other factors
□	Consensus Statements

(Figure 9 – Q-Factor Five Array)

Q-Factor 5: The socially aware student

Summary

This student is very engaged with both the academic and social aspects of university. They tend to be first generation students but had expectations to attend university at an early age. They have a keen interest in politics and social justice and feel that having shared values with both the course and wider university are important to their continuation and completion.

Statistical information

Factor 5 has an eigenvalue of 1.69 and explains 5% of the study variance. Five participants contributed to this factor array by virtue of their Q sort having a loading above 0.5 on Factor 1 and loadings below 0.3 on all other factors.

Contextual information for participants exemplifying this factor

- 5 students loaded on to this factor with 3 males and 2 female students
- Students felt inclusion was important
- Students were interested in the developmental aspects of university outside of academics

Factor viewpoint

I am actively engaged in social aspects of university; I enjoy my course but also attended university for the social aspects such as developing my own identity. I feel that I belong within my social groups and that the university is supportive of my needs. I tend to come from groups that are othered within higher education, having experienced SEND or mental health needs. I am aware of the support available to me. I am more likely to be involved in student governance and took part in the research because I believe that student voice is important. I believe that inclusion is important and think that seeing others like me on the course supports my belonging. It is important that my course and university share my values and are inclusive of minoritised groups. I am happy with my choice of course and my grades and feel that university had exceeded my expectations. I have not considered leaving university.

8.2.3 – Implications of the Q-Factor Profiles

The Q-Factor profiles above provide a nuanced means of understanding participants' subjective attitudes towards university study and their relevance to student retention, by exploring how students perceive their engagement with higher education, including their motivations, expectations, and perceived barriers to continuation.

Each factor profile represents a distinct configuration of attitudes towards university study that may be associated with differing levels of persistence or vulnerability to withdrawal. Research on student retention consistently highlights the importance of motivational orientation, academic and social integration, and perceived value of study in influencing continuation decisions (Tinto, 1993; Yorke and Longden, 2004), this can be clearly identified in the profile viewpoints. Q-Factor profiles such as factors one and two were characterised by strong intrinsic motivation, a sense of purpose, and positive perceptions of institutional support and can therefore be interpreted as indicative of higher retention potential (Kelly et al., 2024). Conversely, profiles reflecting ambivalence, external pressure to attend university, feelings of marginalisation, or doubts about the relevance of university study such as profiles three and four may signal increased risk of attrition.

Overall, the profiles above, by capturing holistic viewpoints rather than isolated variables (Brown, 1980), illuminate how attitudes towards belonging, support, workload, and future aspirations are experienced in combination. This is consistent with theoretical models that conceptualise retention as a dynamic and relational process, shaped by the interaction between the student and the institutional environment (Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2012).

8.3 – Interpretation by Consensus

During the analysis process a set of statements placed in statistically significant similar positions by all participants also emerged. These statements are known as 'consensus'

statements, as they do not distinguish between any factors (Van Exel and de Graaf 2005). Investigation of consensus statements is important as they highlight issues upon which all participants agree, disagree or are neutral about (Watts and Stenner, 2012). This shows areas that students may agree or disagree with as a group, regardless of which overall factor they align with. It is useful to see which statements show a commonality as this will help me to better understand and interpret the different characteristics of the factors and how they can be described. There were 44 statements included in the Q set and of these 44, three were found to be of consensus. These consensus statements will be discussed, in relation to their position, within the individual factors and with examples from the interview data which suggests the reasons for their position. As there are a low number of statements that show consensus it is not possible to group them by theme, therefore their positioning on each factor is shown below.

(Table 11 - Consensus Statement Positions)

Number	Statement	Factor position				
		1	2	3	4	5
28	My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my studies.	0	-1	0	0	-1
29	My health needs have/do impact on my study experience.	-1	-1	-3	-2	-1
21	People I work with on the course support me in my continued studies	0	0	2	1	0

As can be seen by the table the consensus statements are mainly situated in the mid-section of the sorting grid suggesting that the participants did not have strong opinions about the statements. To further understand the positioning of the consensus statements, they have been examined in relation to the interview data from each participant, to look for explanatory information (Watts and Stenner, 2012). This is presented below by listing the statement and factor position, with a summary of why participants placed the statement in that position, including example comments from interviews that discussed the statement specifically.

i. Statement 28: My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my studies. (0,-1,0,0,-1)

The participants had a neutral response to this statement, with it being felt that it was hard to rate it differently as it was hypothetical. There was a suggestion in the interview data that it would have an impact on their student experience if they had poor physical health, but as it was not something that had impacted them it made sense to list it neutrally rather than try to guess at the impact.

“yeah I struggled with that one, as I’m pretty fit. I mean I can understand how breaking your arm might make it difficult, you know typing and stuff but it just didn’t feel relevant to me” (Participant H)

“I just put that one and the other one there as it not something that I have struggled with” (Participant G)

There was also the suggestion that it had been placed centrally as they did not disagree with the statement, but they also did not agree. Although the student may not have experienced difficulties with their own health, they still wanted to acknowledge that it would influence others or themselves if they had a health condition.

“There were too many other statements that I agreed with to fit it in that bit, but I don’t disagree with it. So I wanted to agree with it but had no room so I put it in the neutral bit” (Participant N)

Several participants did discuss and rank this statement higher than the consensus; this was often due to personal experience or the type of course they were on. For example, those on practical courses such as policing or nursing could see how physical health concerns could impact on their ability to continue with the course. Other participants discussed how they had witnessed another student’s experience be impacted by accessibility issues.

“we had to move rooms a couple of times this year as the lift kept breaking down in this building, there is a student that uses a wheelchair and she couldn’t access the room” (Participant L)

“I remember when (lecturer) broke her leg, she was off for ages, we had to move everything to Teams.” (Participant A)

“so as [redacted] we are on the job, so if I got hurt then I’d not be able to do the job or the course, I’m not sure what would happen” (Participant E)

However, some participants felt that they had to rank it quite low down on their sort as they did not know where else to put it. One participant who rated it as -4 on their sort described how they had a few statements left that just did not fit with their experience and had just randomly assigned them to gaps, before finally moving some statements around.

“I had that one left in a pile, no idea where to put a few of them. So I did all the rest then just added those few to the places I had left” (Participant M)

The above statement suggests a potential flaw in the Q sort exercise, being that some statements in the sort may not be of relevance to the participant. Nonetheless the impact of this on the findings can be minimised by the qualitative data and the careful interpretation of the data, alongside the analysis performed within the factor analysis process (Watts and Stenner, 2012). The participant above loads against factor one, even though their rating for this statement is so different from the factor consensus. Similarly, where participants rated it higher, they were still matched to a factor based on the distinguishing statements.

ii. Statement 29: My health needs have/do impact on my study experience. (-1,-1,-3,-2,-1)

The consensus across the factors rates this statement as a disagree. Similarly, to the statement above, participants discussed this statement not being directly relevant to them, unlike the previous statement which asks the participant to consider if poor physical health would impact their student experience. This statement asks them if their health needs do impact on their study experience. Although it could be assumed that the negative consensus rating for this statement shows that it is less relevant to the student experience, it demonstrates that less of the participants have experienced health difficulties. The qualitative interview discussion illuminates that for those who have experienced health challenges whilst studying, the impact can be significant and

impact their ability to study and participate in extracurricular activities inside and outside university.

Participant H discussed how they had been impacted by health concerns during their course, which had initially caused them some difficulties.

“my mental health was bad in first year, I’d not made many friends, and I’d stopped coming in. one of the lecturers did reach out and talked things over with me” (Participant H)

The participant said that this intervention had helped them get support and improved their experience but having the health concerns had impacted on their experience at university. However, students who felt their health needs were being met, placed this statement in disagree, as the health challenges that they had were correctly supported within the university, so they did not impact on their study experience.

“I think that is something that is done well in (subject area), I mean I should be [laughs] given the degree...also I’ve had my diagnosis since primary school, so I am good at knowing what support I need” (Participant GG)

Additionally, it was discovered within the interview data, that some participants had examples of SEN affecting their study experience but feeling that this statement did not relate to their needs, as it stated health and not SEN.

“I did not realise that also related to SEN, I don’t view my dyslexia as a health need so I wouldn’t have taken it into consideration” (Participant E)

When this participant was asked if health had been replaced with disability, they also stated that they would not have considered their SEN need as they did not view it as a disability. This perception of the statement was not recognised during the pilot stages of the Q -Sort and although it had been acknowledged in one of the earlier participants sorts, the statement could not be altered retrospectively, without having an impact on the validity of the study.

iii. Statement 21: People I work with on the course support me in my continued studies. (0,0,2,1,0)

When considering this statement, the consensus was neutral to positive with those in factor 3 and 4 rating it more positively. As can be seen from the factor discussions, those in factors 3 and 4 felt that support from other members of the cohort was important for their belonging. As an example, those in factor 3 felt that having a good relationship with other members of the cohort, encouraged them to come into sessions. They also felt that group work was an advantage to them and working with others aided them in keeping on top of their workload.

“It encourages you to come in, when you don’t feel like it.... I always text the group chat to see if people are in and meet them” (Participant C)

“You don’t want to let the rest of the group down” (Participant D)

However, group work was also found to have a negative impact on some people’s experience, with concerns that other people would not equally contribute and you would be left worrying about grades and submission. Also, there was the suggestion that dynamics during group work could have a negative effect on friendships, particularly in the early stages of the degree.

“There is too much group work in first year” (Participant F)

“I had to have a meeting with the tutor, as I was struggling to work with my group. Mainly due to their lack of attendance and little engagement. I was working with the same group across all the semester one modules, as I had known them since [redacted].... I didn’t want to isolate myself socially by confronting the lack of engagement on their part. (Participant H)

The importance of the cohort’s support also seemed to differ based on the year of study, with those in the later years of a degree programme finding it less important. This may be due to the types of assessment in some programmes, with a higher rate of group assignments often found in Level 4 (first year) and more focus on independent work as the degree progresses.

“Being in final year it’s less important...as the work is much more individualised.... I’ve probably spoken to my [dissertation] supervisor more than my friends these last few weeks” (Participant BB)

Additionally, there were some discrepancies in types of degree programme with those on placement orientated degrees, placing higher value on how they ‘fit in’ on their work-based placement, rather than their course sessions.

“that’s where I spend most of my time...doing bank shifts as well and I’d want a job at that hospital, so it’s good if I get on with the staff” (Participant Y)

Furthermore, in this sample gender played a role with those who identified as female giving this statement a higher agree rating and those identifying as male ranking it more neutrally. However, this could have been due to the year level balance of students, with a greater number of male students who participated being in their 2nd or 3rd year of study.

There were also conflicting views on the role of group work regarding student experience. Some students believed working with others was key in the development of peer groups, whereas others saw it as just another assignment to be completed. From the participant sample again, gender played a role with male students seemingly less concerned with working with friends, or potentially upsetting peer relationships by working with others.

“Now I choose the people who have the same work ethic as me, I think it did annoy mates but I just wanted people who would work hard...yeah I learnt from last year” (Participant W)

“Yeah, I just work with friends...I trust them to get it done.... I know how to contact them and would spend my time with them, anyway, so might as well work together” (Participant CC)

8.4 – Summary of Findings

This chapter presented the Part A findings from the Q methodology phase of the study, which aimed to explore how students subjectively construct the factors that influence their continuation in higher education. Through factor analysis of participants’ Q-sorts, five distinct Q-factors, or shared viewpoints, were identified, each representing a unique profile of student experience and motivation.

The first, the Engaged Student, reflected individuals with strong academic involvement, high levels of course satisfaction, and clear alignment with institutional expectations. The second, the Licence to Practice Student, was characterised by a primarily instrumental motivation to complete their degree due to professional requirements, often coupled with lower levels of course satisfaction or engagement. The third, the Supported Student, highlighted the protective role of robust academic and personal support networks, even when other risk factors such as mental health challenges or first-generation status were present. A fourth Q-factor, Students with Caring Responsibilities, revealed a complex interplay of high risk in personal domains, such as caregiving, commuting, and social isolation, offset by strong career motivation and academic commitment. Finally, the Socially Aware Student demonstrated low risk in most categories, with strong peer networks and values closely aligned to their subject of study, often linked to social justice or civic engagement. The Q-factor profiles not only confirmed the relevance of the existing risk model categories but also revealed emerging areas, such as the significance of identity, values alignment, and practical life roles, that merit further attention in models of student retention.

The chapter also examined areas of consensus across all five Q-factors, identifying shared priorities and protective influences, such as the importance of support systems, career motivation, and the ability to seek help when needed. These commonalities underscore the value of targeted, inclusive institutional practices that acknowledge the diversity of student experience while recognising shared enablers of persistence. In the following chapter the Part B findings will be discussed.

Chapter Nine: Phase Two Findings – Part B: Interview Findings

This Chapter discusses the findings from the post sort interview data. The qualitative dominant approach of the philosophical position allowed the view of the post sort interview data as additional rather than just complimentary data. Therefore, it is used as more than just a means of understanding the factor profiles and as illustrative statements (Kirschbaum et al., 2022). Moreover, it has been used to more broadly explore participant experiences (Wolf, 2014), and their “wider understanding of the issue at hand” (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 82). The possibility that interviews may be considered as a related, but separate, qualitative study has also been suggested (Watts and Stenner, 2012), thus meaning that Q methodology could be viewed as a mixed method, independent of additional quantitative or qualitative stages (Kirschbaum et al., 2022).

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008; 2021b). This led to the production of seven key themes, which will be explored in turn, these are:

- The role of the university in my studies
- My role as an independent learner
- My student values
- My future career goals
- Outside factors that affect my studies
- My life at university
- Managing my expectations

9.1 – Exploring the Themes

i. The role of the university in my studies

Within the interview data it was shown that participants felt that the university as an institution, played a key role within their studies. Participants discussed how it was the responsibility of the university to ensure that spaces were inclusive of their beliefs and values. Those that rated this highly, tended to place statements that discuss inclusion within the university and programmes of study (statements 3,2,15,35), in the agree section. Whereas those who did not view this as the university's role, or felt this role had less importance, placed these statements much lower. When looking at the interview transcripts and comments relating to this, it was shown that the university fostering inclusive learning environments, acknowledging diverse identities, and building strong staff–student relationships was of high importance to those student's continuation.

“the [redacted] get a really bad rap where I am from as they are seen to be quite corrupt or racist and I don't want to be that kind of [redacted], so I think it's good that they teach us about bias and things” (participant BB)

Some students viewed the university and staff, as key for fostering belonging. They felt it was important that the university ensured they could achieve a balance between academic and social pursuits. Additionally, they wanted programmes of study that supported making friendships and settling them into study. When discussing statement **35: I found my course induction helpful for my university experience**, many of the participants discussed how crucial this time had been for forming initial friendships, within their course. Those who had not made these connections during induction or early weeks, discussed how they had reached out to lecturers or personal tutors for help finding friends or groups for assignments.

“I felt like the cohort was quite cliquey, people only spoke with their friends..... I struggled to find people to work with, so I asked the tutor to put me in a group” (Participant S)

“in the first few weeks we were in our personal tutor groups for the sessions, this helped us to get to know each other” (Participant L)

Participants also discussed the importance of the additional services that the university provided for example the role of the student advice and wellbeing services, academic skills teams and careers advice. One participant discussed how following a placement

their career aspirations had shifted, and they were unsure how well suited their current programme was for them. They had attended a meeting with their personal tutor and were referred to the careers team who helped them to explore other options with their existing degree programme, this successfully supported their continuation.

ii. My role as an independent learner

Participants discussed how they became university learners through developing skills and engaging with the university. Participants described independence as both a core expectation of university and a source of anxiety, particularly during the early stages of their studies. While most students acknowledged that autonomy was part of the transition to higher education, their ability to embrace this role varied significantly depending on prior educational experiences, confidence levels, and access to support. Some participants embraced the notion of independent learning as a sign of maturity and academic ownership. These students described self-direction as empowering, allowing them to pursue areas of interest and develop problem-solving skills.

“I like being able to manage my time and follow what interests me, it feels like I’m learning for myself, not just being taught.” (Participant KK)

However, many others expressed discomfort and uncertainty. For these students, the expectation to learn independently came too early or with insufficient scaffolding. The lack of structured guidance led to feelings of being “thrown in at the deep end,” especially for those with limited academic experience or who were first in their family to attend university:

“They expect you to just know how to study by yourself. But no one teaches you how to do that.” (Participant DD)

The challenge was particularly acute during the first year of study, when students were adjusting to new environments, unfamiliar academic language, and assessments. Participants highlighted a need for clearer expectations and explicit instruction in how

to learn independently, echoing Wingate's (2007) argument that independent learning must be taught, not assumed.

"I found [university system] really hard to navigate to start with" (Participant E)

"sometimes the lecturers give you different advice about the assignments, which is confusing....I knew that if a different tutor had graded it, I'd have got a better grade" (Participant AA)

The findings also showed that peer support, personal tutoring, and learning development workshops helped some students transition into this role more successfully.

"Once I got some help from study skills and talked to my tutor, I started to get the hang of it...it wasn't that I couldn't do it, I just didn't know how at first."(Participant FF)

"My learning mentor showed me how to make a weekly plan and stick to it. That small thing made a big difference." (Participant W)

Whereas some participants stated that the staff needed to be approachable and supportive, ensuring that tasks were not too complex, to assist them in adapting to university study. Other participants preferred to be challenged and to feel that university was a step up from college and they were viewed as an adult.

"they did a debate and we got to vote on the winner. It was just more interesting than the usual lecture and we could see how involved the lecturers were, you want to know you are being taught by experts" (Participant BB)

"I really like [lecturer's] sessions, she's just engaging and got loads of energy...she always explains the tasks too and tells us what needs to be in the assignments" (Participant J)

"I like when the lecturers do something different, sometimes I personally feel as though I'm paying the money to be read a PowerPoint which I could do myself for free" (Participant K)

iii. My student values

This theme explored the values that students believed were important during their studies. Participants' perceptions of their university experience are shaped by a combination of factors at both the programme level and within the broader institutional environment. An example of this was the values within the university or faculty and how well they aligned with the student's own beliefs. This was a topic of discussion for participants who had rated statements 1,2,3,11,15 highly as these discussed key aspects related to student values such as, inclusion, integrity, ideology and beliefs.

Participants felt that it was important that they were taught by staff who viewed them with fairness and respect. This was particularly important to those students who were members of traditionally 'othered' groups (Reay, 2018) or those studying subjects that supported these values.

*“Yeah, that one [statement 2] is really important to me, as I wouldn't want to be at a university that had different values than me. (why is that?). well, it wouldn't feel right if they had different ideas about things like neurodiversity or gender as my identity is really important to me and I want the staff to respect my needs”
(Participant C)*

For some participants their responses were due to the courses that they were studying and the expectations they had for that course. Those on courses with a social justice focus felt that the academic staff shared similar values to themselves, with many feeling that their own values had been altered or broadened due to the course.

“my family don't talk about politics, and I'd not thought about how the policies and stuff impacted me until studying [the course]” (Participant R)

“the whole degree is about [redacted], so if the lecturers and the content is ableist then it's not really going to help me” (Participant D)

Student values were also linked to wider areas beyond personal beliefs, such as teaching and learning and student support. At the core of the academic experience, participants placed a high value on quality teaching and clear, engaging delivery. Enthusiastic lecturers who demonstrate subject expertise and a passion for teaching were mentioned as catalysts for student motivation and persistence.

“A few of our lecturers clearly love what they teach, it’s hard not to be drawn in when someone’s so invested in the subject.” (Participant K)

Participants from groups that are ethnically minoritised within the university student population, overwhelmingly rated these statements in the strongly agree categories. When asked about this many of the participants described instances when this was not their course experience and the negative feelings that were associated with this. One participant detailed how during a session on ‘gang activity’ all the images used related to young Black males and that although this had been challenged, the following year the slide images were the same. Whereas another participant discussed feeling that she had to be the voice of her community and that staff members would even look to her for confirmation that the discussion was ok.

“every slide had male Black teenagers, it felt wrong. I’m not saying have no images but every single one?...yeah I did mention it to another member of staff and they seemed to sympathise, you know understand where I was coming from. [sighs] They didn’t change it though did they” (Participant FF)

“it’s more important at course level than university level, I’m from [redacted] so I’m used to being the only Black person but when we are talking about racial issues in class, they look at me...even the lecturers [chuckles]like I’m supposed to be the voice for all Black women or Black people..I’m supposed to provide the counternarrative, that’s not my job” (Participant N)

iv. My future career goals

This theme emerged as a central factor influencing students’ motivation to persist in higher education. Across participant narratives, career aspirations were not only a source of academic drive but also a stabilising influence during periods of challenge or uncertainty. For many participants, their degree was viewed as a pathway to a specific professional end. Students articulated clear vocational trajectories, such as entering teaching, healthcare, policing, or law, which provided structure and purpose to their academic engagement.

“No matter how tough it gets, I remind myself this is the only way I’ll get into my chosen field. It keeps me going.” (Participant W)

This forward-looking perspective appeared to serve as a buffer against attrition, particularly when students experienced academic setbacks or personal stress. In several cases, participants who faced significant financial pressures or mental health concerns described how their long-term career goals provided the emotional anchor that enabled them to continue.

“There were times I thought of quitting, especially when juggling work and uni got overwhelming. But I knew I needed this degree for the life I want.” (Participant Z)

However, the motivational power of career goals was not universal. Some participants, particularly those who had entered university through clearing or felt unsure about their course choice, expressed ambivalence or confusion about how their degree related to future employment. For these individuals, a lack of perceived career relevance contributed to disengagement and doubts about continuation.

“Honestly, I picked this course because I didn’t know what else to do. I still don’t know what job I’d get at the end of it, and that makes it hard to stay motivated.” (Participant CC)

Additionally, those who had clear career aims shared the consensus that course enjoyment was less important, as they had to complete the course to reach their chosen career goal and therefore, they would have to do less enjoyable or interesting subjects to meet the requirements of professional status.

“this is the degree that I have to do to be a [redacted], I already know I like the job because I’m a [redacted], but I hate the assignments and some of the lectures can be quite dull, there is a big group of us and we just have to get it through the content’ (Participant U)

Consequently, some participants who could draw clear links between their studies and their professional goals, stated they felt invested in their degree as they could see the purpose. Conversely, those who perceived their course as disconnected from their future or unsure about how useful their degree was, discussed feeling lower commitment to the programme of study and it was other factors that were of greater importance to their student experience.

v. Outside factors that affect my studies

This theme captured the influence of non-academic circumstances, such as employment, family obligations, health, etc, on students' ability to remain engaged in their university education. These factors were described by participants as often unpredictable, stressful, and at times poorly accommodated by institutional structures.

Participants with caring responsibilities or dependent children described heightened stress when trying to meet academic deadlines, attend compulsory sessions, or manage unexpected family emergencies.

“There are times when I’m literally choosing between submitting my assignment or taking my child to the doctor, it’s constant juggling.” (Participant B)

“I have two autistic children ages 5 and 7 and they both experience school avoidance so mental health days and sick days are very common for us and necessary” (Participant W)

Similarly, many commuting students shared frustrations with travel-related fatigue, missed social opportunities, and inflexible timetabling. The emotional and logistical burden of commuting created a sense of exclusion from campus culture:

“By the time I get here, most events are already done. I’m here to study, not to socialise, because I don’t have time.” (Participant R)

“I live in [redacted] and travel in each day. Last year the trains were always late and cancelled. When transport times change I can't deal with it. To combat this, my only other option is Uber. It costs me around £60 one way to get to uni. I told [redacted] this but they told me that they cannot subsidise travel. Sometimes it's a money problem choosing between coming in and having the money to buy two nights worth of teas” (Participant T)

Financial pressures were also frequently discussed. Students working part-time and sometimes full-time to fund their studies often reported reduced capacity for revision, class attendance, or self-care.

“If I don’t work, I can’t afford rent. But when I work too much, I fall behind. Either way, I’m stressed.” (Participant O)

“I work full-time around uni, so it can be hard to keep up with assignments.....we had a placement last year and I was really worried about what to do as I can’t just take 4 weeks off work. I ended up doing it virtually, which was a bit rubbish”
(Participant BB)

These experiences support previous findings (Thomas, 2022; Reay, 2017) that external responsibilities and inequalities can undermine academic engagement, particularly for mature, first-generation, or working-class students. Students reported that while the university acknowledged these barriers rhetorically, there were few practical solutions in place.

Additionally, mental health was described not only as a personal challenge but as an issue deeply entangled with academic engagement, self-perception, and continuation decisions. While mental health was rarely the sole reason for considering withdrawal, it was frequently cited as a contributing factor, particularly when combined with academic stress, financial pressure, or a lack of support. Participants spoke openly about experiences of anxiety, depression, and burnout, often linked to overwhelming workloads, isolation, and pressure to succeed. For many, mental health difficulties began or intensified after arriving at university. These experiences had a direct impact on engagement. Students described missing classes, falling behind on assignments, and withdrawing from group activities. Some felt “ashamed” to ask for help or feared being judged for disclosing their struggles.

“I didn’t want my tutor to think I was making excuses. So, I kept quiet, but things just got worse.” (Participant S)

“I thought I could handle it, but the pressure built up. I didn’t want to get out of bed, let alone go to lectures.” (Participant W)

While some students accessed university mental health services and found them helpful, others reported long waiting times, limited follow-up, or unclear referral processes. Several participants described a gap between institutional messaging and actual accessibility of support. This disconnect left some students feeling invisible or unsupported, undermining their trust in the university and contributing to thoughts of leaving.

“The posters say ‘we’re here to help,’ but when I reached out, I was put on a waiting list for weeks.” (Participant HH)

The findings also showed that academic staff play a pivotal role in shaping how students navigate mental health challenges. Where lecturers and personal tutors were perceived as approachable and compassionate, students felt safer discussing their difficulties. Conversely, where academic staff were distant or unresponsive, students were more likely to disengage.

“My tutor noticed I’d been missing classes and checked in. That meant a lot, it made me feel like someone cared.” (Participant G)

vi. My life at university

This theme refers to students’ overall perception of the university environment, encompassing both the social and institutional dimensions of their experience. Student narratives reflected a broad spectrum of perceptions, from feelings of strong belonging and satisfaction to alienation and marginalisation. For many, participation in societies, peer mentoring, or student unions enhanced their sense of identity and emotional wellbeing.

“Being part of a society gave me something to look forward to, it’s where I met my closest friends.” (Participant EE)

However, some students, particularly commuters, mature students, or those from minoritised backgrounds, felt disconnected from ‘campus culture’. This was echoed by students who were on degrees with placements, as they often felt disjointed from the wider university community.

“Uni life feels like it’s built for 18-year-olds who live in town. That’s not me.” (Participant C)

“We spend so much time on placement, that by the time we’re next in classes it can feel like the first day all over again.....it was useful for knowing where things are and luckily, we have all our sessions in our own building. I’d have no idea how to find the other rooms” (Participant W)

“there was a lot of talk about the [redacted] building, but I don’t have any reason to go over there. So, listening to all the talk about services felt a bit pointless and I didn’t take much of it in” (Participant N)

Whereas others mentioned that institutional culture, in terms of bureaucracy, communication, or visibility of support, shaped their views of university life. When systems were inaccessible or slow to respond, students perceived the university as uncaring or indifferent.

“I emailed student support twice, no response for three weeks. It made me feel like I didn’t matter.” (Participant EE)

“If I can’t get hold of my tutor, how am I supposed to figure this out on my own?” (Participant M)

vii. Managing my expectations

Participants discussed how their initial beliefs about university matched or failed to match, the realities they encountered. This theme was prominent in discussions of university life, such as grades, course enjoyment and preconceived ideas about university study or the university, with participants noting that unmet or misaligned expectations often contributed to disengagement or disillusionment.

Several students reported arriving with overly idealised views of higher education, expecting structured support, regular contact with lecturers, or engaging course content.

“I thought it would be like school but more independent. In reality, it felt like you’re just dropped in and expected to figure it all out.” (Participant M)

When the level of autonomy, workload, or teaching quality diverged from expectations, students expressed frustration or felt underprepared. This disconnect was especially notable among first-generation and international students, who often had little prior exposure to university norms.

“No one tells you what uni is actually like. I didn’t even know what a seminar was supposed to be.” (Participant B)

At the same time, students whose expectations were realistically shaped by induction, peers, or lecturers described smoother transitions and greater resilience. One participant described how they had attended the first day of induction with limited knowledge of the city and had not yet met any of their course cohort. Due to the activities during the induction, they were able to navigate some of the key areas of the city, and they left the day with the contact details for two other students. This made them feel much more at ease, as by the third day they had found people to sit with and contact if they were lost or unsure of anything.

“Our tutor was honest from the start, it’s tough, but here’s how to manage it. That helped a lot.” (Participant V)

“we had to form a small group to do a scavenger hunt activity and it was based around key sites in the city....they told us that by the end of the first day we needed to have the phone number of one other person, in case we wanted to meet them before the lectures or got lost or were running late” (Participant P)

“I remember [redacted] saying how we wouldn’t enjoy every module and every part of the degree, but it was like her joining a gym, she wouldn’t lose 6 stone if she just signed up and never went. So we had to come in and go to lectures” (Participant C)

Among the participants, first-generation students described distinct challenges related to expectations of higher education. These students frequently entered university with unclear or mismatched expectations about academic culture, support structures, and institutional norms (Reay, 2018). Their reflections emphasised that these gaps in understanding were not due to a lack of effort or motivation, but a lack of social and cultural capital that students from university-educated families often bring with them (O’Shea, 2024). Many first-generation participants discussed how they had expected a structured, school-like environment with regular guidance, but instead encountered assumptions of academic independence and self-directed learning.

“I didn’t realise how much you’re left to work things out on your own. It’s not that I don’t want to do it, I just didn’t know how uni really worked.” (Participant A)

This reflects a lack of cultural capital, the unwritten rules of university study, which can often lead to feelings of confusion, under preparedness, and academic insecurity. Several participants reported hesitating to ask for help or clarification due to fear of “looking stupid” or being seen as out of place.

“Everyone else seemed to know what to do. I felt behind from the start, but I didn’t want to stand out more by asking.” (Participant Q)

“I felt like I was in the wrong room, so at the break I went up to the front and they said I was supposed to be there..... Luckily I managed to swap courses, as that just wasn’t for me” (Participant HH)

These experiences suggest that first-generation students often engage in a steep and emotionally fraught learning curve, during which misaligned expectations can impact self-esteem and engagement. If left unaddressed, this dissonance may contribute to withdrawal consideration, particularly in the first year (De Clercq et al., 2018; Yorke and Longden, 2008). However, where expectations were realigned early through honest dialogue, peer mentoring, or supportive staff relationships, students described more confidence and commitment to continue.

“My tutor made it clear that it’s okay not to know things, what matters is asking... That changed everything for me.” (Participant S)

Additionally, some participants suggested that they had not come to university with any real expectations. In some cases, rather than the course being specially selected they had joined through clearing, or because they wanted to study in Liverpool. Some students discussed having little option of preference, or high expectations, as they were limited by the course they wished to study and/or the distance they were able to travel.

“I don’t really have expectations of things, I didn’t think I’d go to uni, I really like sports and thought I’d do something on that. I’m dyslexic though and have ADHD so does my brother so I wanted to do something around that. I’ve been working as a carer so though social care but then I got a job as a TA in a special school and I love it, so I thought teaching.....I love the course yeah” (Participant L)

9.2 – Summary of Findings

This chapter explored the findings from the thematic analysis of the post Q-sort interviews. The findings were structured around seven interconnected themes, each revealing how personal, institutional, and contextual factors influence students' continuation journeys (Pedler et al., 2022).

The participants' expectations of the university, such as accessible academic staff, structured support, and an inclusive learning environment were highlighted. The data suggests that when the university or programme team provided clear guidance and responsive systems, students felt valued and supported; when this was lacking, disengagement increased. Participants also described varied levels of preparedness. While some embraced autonomy, many felt underprepared for the level of self-direction expected. Structured scaffolding and relational support were viewed as key to developing confidence. Exploration of the data revealed that alignment between students' personal values and their educational experiences, was crucial for motivation and retention. Participants also discussed the role of clear career plans as a strong motivator for persistence. This was emphasised by the participants who came from degree programmes which directly linked to a professional qualification, with these participants also loading onto the Q-Sort Factor of *licence to practice*.

Outside considerations often disrupted engagement and were seen to affect studies and student experience. The data suggests that these issues were sometimes compounded by inflexible university structures. Participants shared mixed experiences of inclusion and community. The data also showed that mismatches between anticipated and actual university experiences contributed to disillusionment, with students valuing transparent communication and early support in navigating institutional norms.

Overall, these themes seem to demonstrate that student retention is shaped by a complex interplay of personal motivation, structural support, and cultural belonging. These findings will be discussed further in the following discussion chapter.

Chapter 10: Phase Two – Discussion

This chapter considers the combined findings of the phase two factor analysis and post sort interview data, in line with the existing literature on retention. The themes generated in the Q method will be discussed alongside wider research and literature. The phase two Q Methodology looked to consider what may influence a students' ability for continuation and completion. This discussion will use the themes generated from the part B – post sort interviews as a framing.

As the exploratory/confirmatory drive of the research and the philosophical underpinnings of both the Q methodology and phase one interviews, allowed for 'qualitative dominant' approach to be used (Mason, 2006; Matović and Ovesni, 2023). The sequential nature of the study routed in a pragmatic stance to method selection recognised that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most research projects that seek to understand human experience (Johnson et al., 2007). Therefore, the findings can be generalised to the wider population through the integration of data or 'mixing' of findings.

10.1 – Thematic Discussion

i. The role of the university in my studies

The research findings emphasised the student's belief that the university should play a multifaceted and active role in shaping their student experience. Suggesting that institutions have a role in not only academic excellence but also on building inclusive environments, enabling holistic development, promoting equity, and embracing partnership with students (Pedler et al., 2022). Research shows that institutions that invest in these values are more likely to see improvements in student engagement, satisfaction, retention, and student success (Burke, 2019).

Research increasingly recognises the university as a principal architect of the student experience, not merely a provider of academic content (Roberts, 2018). The experience students have at university is a complex and relational outcome, shaped by institutional

culture, pedagogical practices, support structures, and relational dynamics (Thomas, 2022). This can be seen in the data where participants discussed how building strong relationships with staff is helpful for their learning and development. Universities are key in curating belonging and inclusion, two elements consistently shown to underpin successful student engagement and retention (Sithaldeen et al., 2022). Thomas (2012) argues, that fostering a sense of belonging requires inclusive pedagogies, supportive relationships, and the recognition of diverse student identities. Students who feel connected to their institution are more likely to persist, perform well, and develop a positive academic identity (Zawada, 2024). This was visible throughout the data where participants rated statements related to their course being inclusive highly.

Additionally, participants believed the university acts as an enabler of academic and personal development, through its support systems and staff. According to Zepke (2014) moving beyond the transmission of knowledge, universities are environments where students should be supported to grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Kuh (2008) identifies high-impact educational practices, such as learning communities, undergraduate research, and collaborative projects, as critical in fostering deep learning and engagement. Likewise, Koutsouris et al. (2021) stress the importance of effective personal tutoring and structured academic support in facilitating student success, particularly for those who are first-generation or from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was supported by the data, with participants stressing the importance of a key member of staff that they could approach with queries.

Moreover, the student experience is enhanced when universities position students as partners rather than consumers. Bovill (2020) advocates for co-creation in learning and teaching, where students collaborate with staff to design curricula, assessment methods, and learning environments. This relational approach challenges the marketized framing of students as passive recipients and instead builds authentic engagement, agency, and shared ownership of educational processes (O'Shea, 2024). This was seen in the data where some participants were vocal on the importance of course lecturers in their student experience. Participants discussed how they

supported their academic skills and appreciated teaching and learning environments where their knowledge and engagement was valued.

Finally, the data and wider research suggests that universities need to become reflexive institutions that critically evaluate their own practices and adapt to the evolving needs of their student populations (Wong and Chapman, 2023). The rise of hybrid learning environments, increasing mental health concerns, and greater diversity require universities to innovate in how they conceptualise and deliver the student experience (Advance HE, 2021). Participants discussed how they had needed further support with settling into university life and that for many the role of student services beyond those of the course team were invaluable to their continuation. Even participants who had rated these statements lower in their sort had discussed it was vital that these services were there for those who needed them and their awareness of them for any future challenges (Liu et al., 2022).

ii. My role as an independent learner

In UK higher education, students are increasingly expected to act as independent learners, capable of managing their own learning, constructing knowledge autonomously, and developing critical and reflective thinking skills (Liu, 2019). However, research suggests that while students often understand this expectation in theory, they interpret and experience it in varied and evolving ways, shaped by prior schooling, institutional culture, and the level of scaffolding provided by their university (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

A common view among the participants was that independent learning equates to time management and self-regulation. For example, they discussed how they had adapted to university level study and if it was how they expected. Students often describe their role as one that involves attending lectures, completing required readings, preparing for assessments, and meeting deadlines without close oversight from tutors (Thomas et al., 2017). These responsibilities are particularly prominent in the first year, when the transition from the highly structured environment of secondary education or college can cause confusion or anxiety (De Clercq et al., 2018; Morgan, 2013). Students report

uncertainty about how much initiative is expected of them, and some conflate independence with isolation, especially when guidance is limited or feedback delayed (Morgan, 2022). This is reaffirmed in the data where participants discussed how they found the transition to university study difficult and relied upon academic services or peers for support (Knapstad et al., 2021).

Students also associate independent learning with developing their own voice and critical perspective. Participants who rated statement 15 highly, discussed how their ideas being challenged by the curriculum was important for their development. For some, this expectation can be daunting, first-generation students and those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds often experience a gap between their own academic identity and the norms of the university, sometimes perceiving independence as a barrier rather than a goal (O'Shea, 2024). Those who felt that their first-generation status impacted on their studies (statement 44), suggested that their lack of knowledge of the university experience had affected their initial climatization to their studies. Therefore, universities that fail to offer sufficient academic literacy support risk reinforcing inequality, as students with prior familiarity with university culture are more likely to thrive (Reay, 2021).

Another key theme confirmed by the data, is that students do not see independence as purely individual. Many recognise the importance of relational learning, including collaborative work, constructive feedback, and mentoring. As De Clercq et al. (2018) argue, independence is often built through peer interaction and dialogue, not just solitary effort. Participants discussed how building peer relationships within their cohort and living arrangements supported their transition into university study (Kiyama and Luca, 2014). Effective academic tutoring and learning development support can help scaffold independence by providing structure and feedback, especially in the early stages of study (Holt et al., 2018). Discussion on statement 31, reinforced this as participants agreed that an awareness of academic support made them feel more secure within their learning. Importantly, students view the development of independence as a gradual process. Rather than arriving at university ready to learn independently, they expect institutions to provide structured guidance that enables

them to build the necessary academic confidence and metacognitive skills (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021).

iii. My student values

Student values, the beliefs, priorities, and motivations that individuals bring to their higher education journey, are recognised as determinants of persistence and retention (Kelly et al., 2024). While institutional structures, academic engagement, and social belonging are critical, the alignment between students' personal values and the perceived values of the university can influence whether students choose to continue or withdraw (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Research shows that when students' intrinsic values align with their educational experiences, they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of engagement, resilience, and academic success (Morris et al., 2022). Conversely, a misalignment, where institutional cultures prioritise competition, elitism, or transactional relationships, can lead to feelings of disconnection, dissatisfaction, and eventual attrition (Reay, 2018). Values also underpin students' motivational frameworks, influencing how they interpret success and failure. Eccles and Wigfield's (2002) expectancy-value theory suggests that students' decisions to persist are shaped by both their expectations of success and the value they place on educational tasks. Students who perceive their studies as meaningful and consistent with their personal aspirations are more likely to persist through difficulties, even when external challenges arise (Kelly et al., 2024). Participants who agreed with the importance of their course reflecting their personal values, discussed how they felt engaged in the teaching and learning if their lecturers' embraced values that were like their own. Therefore, the role of institutional messaging and environment is critical. According to Thomas (2012), universities that foster inclusive cultures, affirm multiple definitions of success, and recognise students as whole individuals are more likely to retain diverse cohorts. Curriculum design, teaching practices, and student services all convey messages about what and who is valued (Koutsouris et al., 2021). Where students see their own identities and aspirations mirrored and respected, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging (Wilcox et al., 2005).

However, student values are not homogenous. Students from different cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds bring varied understandings of what higher education represents (Reay, 2018). For many first-generation or working-class students, university education is primarily valued for its potential to provide economic mobility and family pride rather than purely intellectual stimulation (O'Shea, 2024). Institutions that fail to acknowledge or validate these diverse motivations may inadvertently alienate students, thereby increasing non-continuation rates (Neria, 2023). Moreover, values play a role in how students cope with adversity. Students who can frame setbacks as consistent with broader values such as resilience, perseverance, or social responsibility are less likely to interpret academic challenges as insurmountable (Tinto, 2017). Conversely, students who view negative academic experiences as contrasting with their self-concept may disengage more readily (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023).

iv. My future career goals

Clear career goals play a central role in shaping how students engage with higher education and their likelihood of persisting through to graduation (OFS, 2024). In an increasingly instrumental and market-driven educational landscape, students often enter university with a strong orientation toward achieving employment-related outcomes (Morris et al., 2022). When higher education is perceived as directly connected to career development, students are more likely to engage meaningfully with their studies and remain committed, even when facing academic or personal challenges (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Thomas, 2021).

The presence of clear and personally meaningful career goals supports intrinsic and extrinsic engagement (Kelly et al., 2024). Most participants on 'licence to practice' degree programmes, such as policing, nursing and initial teacher education, all rated statements related to future careers highly (Morris et al., 2022). Additionally, they were less focused on course enjoyment as their degree contained set benchmarks that needed to be met for professional practice and therefore, they could see the reason for course topics, even those they found less engaging. Students are more likely to invest effort in academic activities when they perceive their learning as relevant to future aspirations (Pedler et al., 2022). Therefore, those who can envision a tangible link

between coursework and their intended profession often demonstrate greater persistence, goal-setting, and proactive behaviour, including attendance, help-seeking, and skill development (Kelly et al., 2024).

Career-focused engagement also enhances academic identity, when students see themselves as future professionals, they begin to adopt the behaviours and mindsets associated with their target careers (Pedler, 2022). This identity shift reinforces commitment to academic pathways, particularly in vocational and professionally aligned courses such as healthcare, education, and engineering (HEPI, 2022). Moreover, universities that provide structured opportunities for career exploration, through placements, industry mentoring, and employability modules, contribute to a sense of purpose that anchors students to their studies (Arranz et al., 2022). As can be seen in the data, participants who had jobs that directly related to their career plans, felt motivated to continue with their studies and the job felt less of a work loading burden, than those who had other non-related jobs.

Furthermore, the role of career goals in retention is particularly pronounced for first-generation, mature, and working-class students, who often frame higher education as a route to economic stability and social mobility (Reay, 2018). For these students, disengagement may occur if academic content feels disconnected from practical outcomes. Institutions that fail to communicate career relevance or delay vocational exposure risk alienating learners whose engagement is contingent on perceived future value (Belfield et al., 2018).

v. Outside factors that affect my studies

University students' academic journeys are shaped not only by their capabilities and institutional experiences but also by a range of external factors that can significantly influence engagement, performance, and retention (Beer and Lawson, 2017). These outside influences, often beyond students' immediate control, complicate the idealised model of higher education as a purely academic endeavour (Becher and Kogan, 2025).

One major external factor is financial pressure, with many students experiencing substantial financial strain, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. According to Belfield et al. (2018), students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to engage in part-time work to cover living costs, which can lead to time poverty, fatigue, and reduced academic focus. Financial insecurity is associated with lower continuation rates, highlighting the structural inequalities that permeate the student experience (Office for Students, 2023). The data suggests that financial factors can place a high strain on some students, with increasing demands leading to them missing sessions and struggling to time manage for assignments (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021).

Family and caring responsibilities represent another critical external factor. Mature students, student parents, and carers often juggle study with complex caregiving roles. Carers Trust (2022) reports that student carers face unique challenges including scheduling conflicts, emotional strain, and limited flexibility from universities. These responsibilities can impede attendance, assignment completion, and mental wellbeing, placing students at greater risk of withdrawal unless appropriate institutional support is provided (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). A participant emphasised that they had been reliant on assignment extensions to allow them to complete their submissions, around the demands of family life. With other participants with caring responsibilities discussing how child illness and school holidays led them to miss university sessions, leaving them concerned about falling behind (Webber and Dismore, 2021).

Health and wellbeing are also prominent external influences. Mental health challenges, exacerbated by social isolation, financial concerns, or academic pressures, are increasingly common in student populations (Addison and Williams, 2023; Universities UK, 2022). Students experiencing chronic illness or acute mental health episodes may find their academic progression interrupted or delayed. Institutional responsiveness, including access to counselling services and disability accommodations, can mediate the impact of health factors but does not always eliminate the risk (Liu et al., 2021). Though participants were quick to praise the support that they had received from the university regarding mental health support, those who rated statement 29 highly, did discuss the impact poor mental health had on their studies with many of this group

declaring on the questionnaire that they had thought about leaving their degree (Abulfaraj et al., 2024).

Social and cultural obligations may further affect students' engagement with university life. Students from racially minoritised, religious, or migrant backgrounds sometimes experience a clash between institutional expectations and cultural norms (Arday, 2018). When considering the data, it was shown that participants from minoritised groups often felt that they were 'othered' within the university or programme of study. For example, students were often highlighted in lecturers that pertained to their ethnic group, with one student stating that they felt that as the only member of that racial group they were somehow expected to speak on behalf of all members of that group (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). These tensions can create a sense of alienation and marginalisation, undermining a student's sense of belonging, an essential predictor of retention and success (Addison and Williams, 2023; Thomas, 2012).

Lastly, geographical and commuting challenges disproportionately impact commuter students who must balance long travel times with academic responsibilities. Hallam (2023) highlight that commuting students often have reduced opportunities for informal learning and social integration, factors that otherwise strengthen academic persistence. Participants also discussed how their distance from campus meant missing out of additional academic and social events, this left them feeling isolated (Thomas and Jones, 2017).

vi. My life at university

Student perceptions of university life are multifaceted, reflecting both the lived realities of academic engagement and the emotional and social dimensions of the higher education experience. Contemporary research highlights that students' views are strongly influenced by institutional culture, teaching quality, peer networks, and the transition from structured schooling to the relative autonomy of university study (Kelly et al., 2024). Many students report that the university represents a space of opportunity and self-discovery (Morgan, 2022). However, they also describe experiences of uncertainty and isolation during the initial transition phase. For instance, first-year

students often articulate feelings of disorientation and a lack of familiarity with academic conventions, which may inhibit their ability to integrate fully into campus life (Yorke and Longden, 2008). The data suggests that this adjustment period is critical, as perceptions developed during the early stages of university can shape overall satisfaction and subsequent engagement (Biasi et al., 2018).

Students who report strong, supportive relationships with peers and staff tend to develop a deeper sense of belonging and are more likely to perceive the university environment as nurturing (Bowden et al., 2021). Thomas (2012;2022) argues that when students feel included and valued, they are more likely to embrace the academic challenges and develop a positive academic identity. In contrast, students who experience social isolation, whether due to commuting, cultural dissonance, or personal factors, often perceive university as an alienating and stressful environment (Bowman et al., 2019). Additionally, perceptions of teaching quality and curriculum relevance also play a pivotal role. Learners who experience innovative and engaging pedagogical approaches tend to view their academic journey more positively (Kuh, 2008). The sense of academic autonomy, where students believe they are active participants in their learning process, is frequently reported as a critical determinant of overall satisfaction (Boyd et al., 2022).

However, external factors such as financial pressures and family responsibilities can further influence a student's perceptions of university life, exclusion from academic pursuits (statement 39 and 42) can impact on how the student views university life (Bowman et al., 2019). Additionally, participants who were affected by home life challenges were more likely to feel a distance from the institution and this disconnection may contribute to feelings around attrition (Reay, 2018). These factors, when not adequately mitigated by institutional support, can lead to perceptions of the university as an overwhelming environment, reducing the overall sense of wellbeing and academic engagement (Wong and Chapman, 2018)

vii. Managing my expectations

Effective management of student expectations is recognised as vital for promoting engagement, retention, and satisfaction within UK higher education. Misaligned or unrealistic expectations, whether academic, social, or personal, are associated with attrition, dissatisfaction, and reduced attainment (Tomlinson et al., 2023).

Participants suggested that providing transparent early communication is vital for a clear transition into university study. Students should receive clear and accurate information about course content, assessment standards, workload, support services, and university life before and immediately upon enrolment (Kandiko Howson and Mawer, 2013). Induction programmes that offer realistic previews of academic requirements and institutional culture can help bridge the gap between pre-university perceptions and actual experiences (Morgan, 2025). Ensuring that marketing materials, course descriptions, and orientation activities align with the reality of the student experience is essential to avoiding early disillusionment (Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022). Participants who discussed their course meeting their expectations felt that the prearrival aspects of university study and induction had been clear and honest. One participant discussed how they had changed course after the first year as they had not found the course to be what they expected, and it did not align with their future goals (Morgan, 2024).

Personal tutoring and academic advising systems also play a pivotal role. Tutors can clarify academic expectations, monitor early signs of mismatch or dissatisfaction, and support students in adjusting to higher education's demands (Thomas et al., 2017). Well-trained personal tutors are particularly important for first-generation students and those from underrepresented backgrounds, who may arrive with less tacit knowledge about academic norms (Curran, 2021). Moreover, embedding discussions about independent learning and academic responsibility into early curriculum design can proactively address common misconceptions. Morgan (2024) argues that universities should scaffold the development of academic independence rather than assume students possess it. Some participants discussed how they felt that aspects of the course had been unclear in the first year but as they had moved through to 2nd and 3rd year, they could see the reasoning for this. Students felt that some aims of the course

work and assessments could be lost on inexperienced students and greater emphasis on transition, into university and between levels, would have increased satisfaction and course enjoyment, thus impacting on retention (Flake and Gabriel, 2023).

10.2 – Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the findings from Phase Two in relation to existing literature on student retention and engagement in UK higher education. The analysis reveals that, student support, a sense of belonging, and career alignment, remain central to persistence (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Consistent with the literature, participants emphasised the importance of inclusive pedagogies, effective personal tutoring, and access to mental health services in shaping their engagement (Pedler et al., 2022).

However, the findings also highlight tensions not widely addressed in the literature, particularly around institutional inconsistency and the gap between institutional rhetoric and student experience, which undermines trust and belonging (Reay, 2018). Furthermore, the findings suggest that personal values, cultural identity, and external responsibilities (e.g. caregiving, commuting, work) significantly influence how students engage with university life.

Finally, these findings also have practical implications for institutional retention strategies. Recognising that students cluster around distinct attitudinal profiles may enable universities to move beyond one-size-fits-all interventions and towards more targeted and responsive forms of support. For example, students associated with Q-factor profiles expressing uncertainty or disengagement may benefit from early, personalised academic advising or initiatives designed to strengthen academic and social integration.

The following chapter will discuss the confirmatory stage of the research, using a deductive thematic analysis to refine the Model of Risk's to Continuation (chapter 7).

Chapter 11: Refining the Student Continuity Factors Model

As the phase two concourse was created using the findings from phase one, specifically the **Model of Risks to Continuation**, the phase two data was used to analyse and refine the model. This chapter discusses that process of refinement, utilising two methods of analysis. Firstly, the five Q-factors were scrutinised by mapping the typical factor profiles onto the model, allowing for an understanding of how those participants within each factor loading would have identified regarding risk of attrition. Secondly the post Q-sort interviews, and individual Q-factor arrays of each participant were analysed deductively under the themes used in the original model creation (chapter 7). These processes allowed for a consensus about the placement of the risk categories and their inclusion in the final model. Refining the model also permitted the return to the categories to ensure that the finalised model contained all applicable categories.

11.1 – Model Refinement

The sequential nature of this study, where phase one informs phase two (Cameron, 2009), allowed the concourse (statements) in phase two to be generated from the findings of phase one, including those found in the model. Therefore, the phase two data can be used to assess how these viewpoints align with the risk factors shown within the model of attrition risk factors (Naeem et al., 2023). This will be done through an assessment of the position of relevant statements within the individual Q-sorts, the position within the factor profile, and through the additional data within the post sort interviews and demographic questionnaires.

Additionally, a second aim looks to establish if the current model is complete or requires any additional categories of risk. As a result, statements pertaining to course enjoyment were added to the Q-Set to allow exploration of this regarding student experience. This analysis of exhaustiveness is a method of internal validation and works

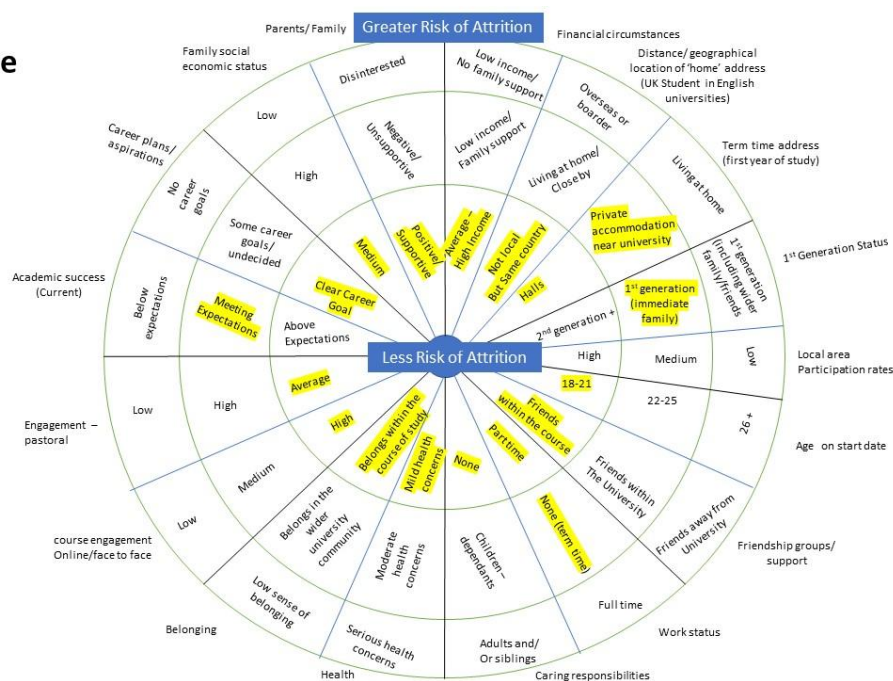
alongside methods of external validation, such as triangulation and testing to consider the overall validity of a conceptual framework (Cross, 2005).

11.2 – Summary of Q Factor Profiles and Attrition Risk Model Alignment

The five Q-factor profiles developed in phase two, provide valuable insight into the validity and applicability of the current attrition risk model. Each Q-factor, when mapped against the model, demonstrates alignment with the existing risk categories and associated risk ratings, confirming their relevance to lived student experience. These model maps can be seen below:

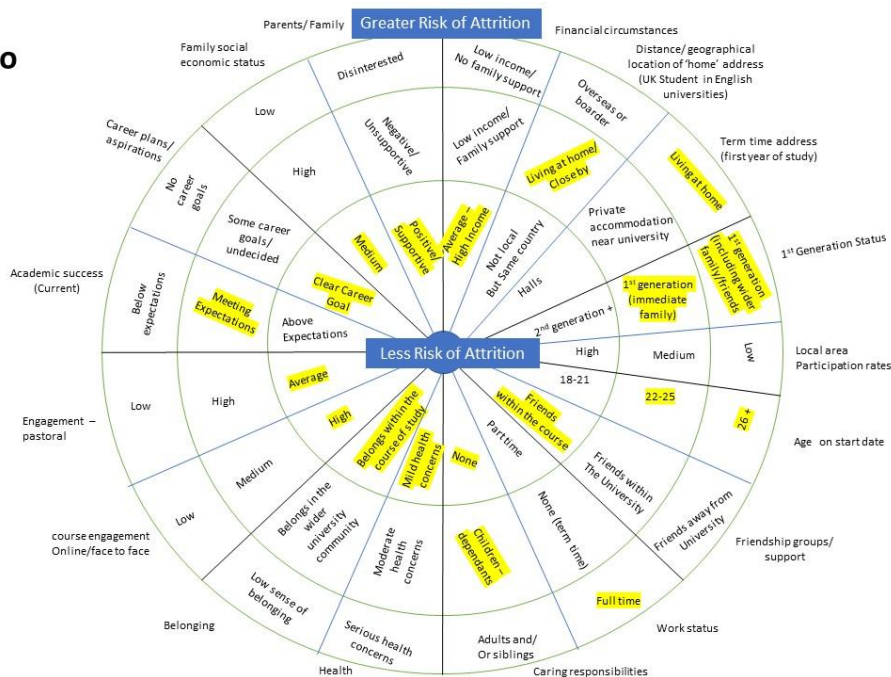
i. Q-Factor One – the ‘Typically’ Engaged Student – (Figure 10)

Factor one



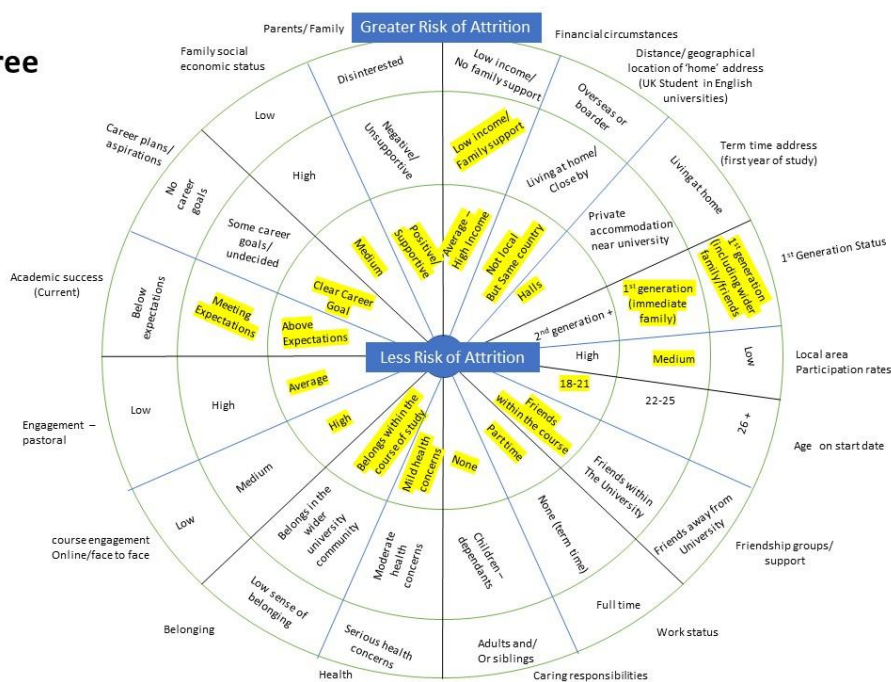
ii. **Q-Factor Two – The Licence to Practice Student – (Figure 11)**

Factor two



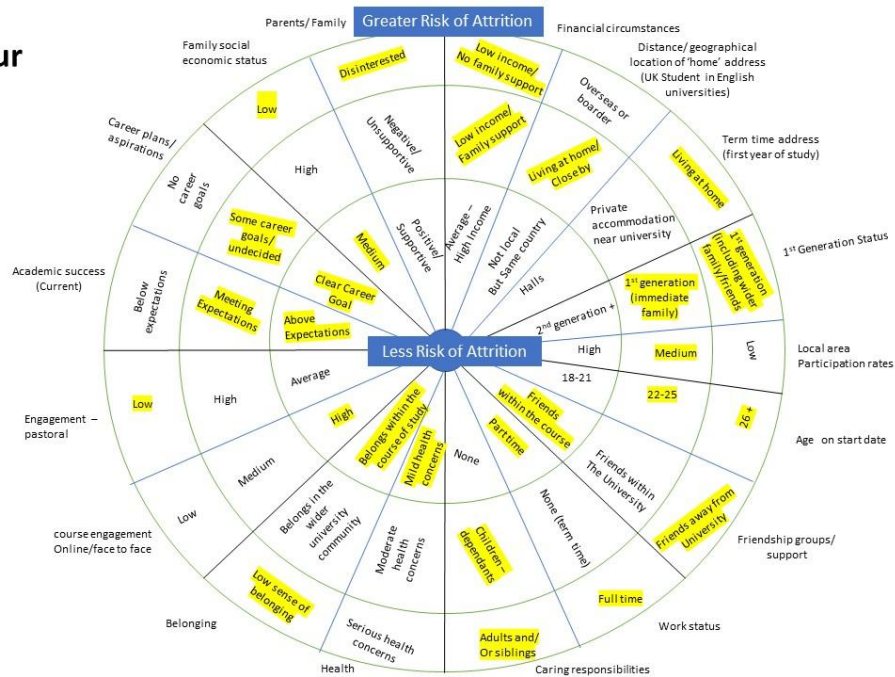
iii. **Q-Factor Three – The Supported Student – (Figure 12)**

Factor three



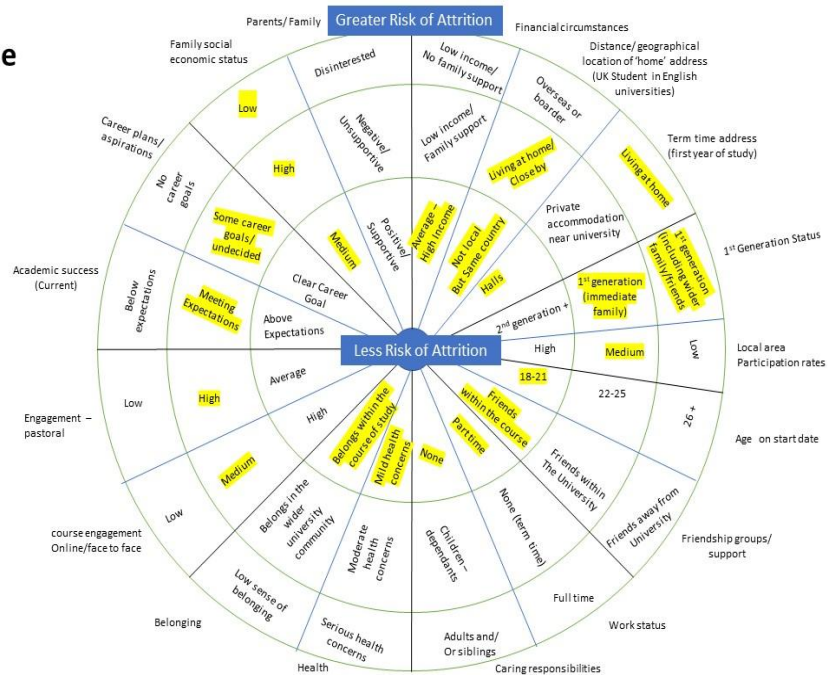
iv. **Q-Factor Four – Students with Caring Responsibilities – (Figure 13)**

Factor four



v. **Q-Factor Five – The Socially Aware Student – (Figure 14)**

Factor five



Participants with caring responsibilities, affirmed the high-risk classification of caring responsibilities, commuting, and age, within both factor four and those in factor two. While *Supported Students* illustrated how students with high support needs and poor mental health can persist when supported, placing them in low risk for other categories such as peer relationships and engagement. The *Licence to Practice* group reinforced the idea that career motivation can mitigate other demographic and structural risks. Across all profiles, categories, such as, financial strain, first-generation status, sense of belonging, engagement, and health, remained consistently meaningful, with risk ratings well-situated.

However, interrogation of the factor analysis also revealed additional areas of vulnerability and influence that were underrepresented or absent from the original model. For instance, the *Socially Aware Student* profile highlighted the motivational power of value alignment between students' personal ethics and their course content, an element not fully captured under the model's current engagement metrics. Similarly, the nuanced role of perceived institutional responsiveness and emotional labour, particularly in mature or care-giving students, suggests that academic empathy and relational pedagogy may warrant recognition as protective or risk-modifying factors.

Therefore, while the profiles substantiate the current category structure and risk classifications, they also point to the need for model refinement, ensuring it reflects the diversity of student experiences and motivations more comprehensively (Hlioui et al., 2021).

11.3 – Assessing the Phase Two Participant Agreement with the Model Categories

Analysis of individual participant Q-sorts was used in conjunction with their post Q-sort interview data to explore how they prioritise and interpret various risk factors affecting continuation and completion in undergraduate education. By requiring participants to rank statements, derived from the attrition risk model, according to their own

experience, the placement of each statement reflects their viewpoint and value system, allowing understanding of which risk factors are most relevant to each participant (Naeem et al., 2023). Whereas the previous analysis looked to confirm this agreement or viewpoint, for the typical Factor groupings. This stage wished to explore individual reasonings for the statement placements, to understand not only the relevance of the model categories but also ensure that ratings of risk were correct (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980).

Each completed Q-sort was analysed both numerically (rankings) and qualitatively, through post-sort interviews, where participants explained the reasoning behind their statement rankings (Kirschbaum et al., 2022). This combination of ranked data and narrative justification enabled an exploration of which risk factors were considered important and why they were, revealing nuanced interpretations of statements and the ways in which contextual factors influenced prioritisation (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Unlike a quantitative scale where all statements could have been ranked on importance or agree/disagree. This process allowed for a holistic interpretation, which shows why some statements may be ranked higher than others and how the intersections within those statements and participant values can contribute to student experience (Ramlo, 2015).

i. Process of analysis

The factor array for each participant was scrutinised, with the statements that were placed at the strongly agree or disagree sections of the ranking identified (Wong et al., 2004). The participant interview transcript was then analysed, to look for discussion on the placement of these statements (Gallagher and Porock, 2010). By examining these statement placements alongside interview transcripts, it was possible to identify themes and tensions in how the participants may experience the attrition risks within the model (Kirschbaum et al., 2022). Two participants who ranked statement 22. “My economic status has an impact upon my studies” highly, provided varied rationales, for one participant it related to having to work long hours to support their families’ finances, while for another it reflected their fear of accruing debt that would impact on future earnings. This demonstrates the importance of linking shared rankings with individual narratives, to allow for a full picture of the data to develop (Wong et al., 2004).

This approach also enabled testing the validity and applicability of additional risk factors derived from existing retention frameworks (e.g. Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2022), that were not included in the original model. As an example, statements 15: *“It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of Race, Religion, Gender, Disability, Sexuality, Culture”* and 18: *“Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies”*, were included in the concourse as they pertain to course satisfaction which is thought to be crucial for engagement and retention (Tight, 2020). Therefore, analysis of the placement and narratives surrounding these statements, allowed for greater reasoning for their potential inclusion in the final model.

The table below shows an example of the process for analysing one participant’s ranking of the statements and key comments pertaining to these areas of high and low ranking.

(Figure 15 – Analysis of Statement Rankings)

Ranking and statement	Summary of comments about statement placement	Ranking of related statements
+5 = 17: Having future career aspirations supports my continued studies	The participant discussed how they have a clear career plan and that their degree programme is needed as it directly links to the qualification needed for their success in this profession. They also discuss how they have a job in that field and know that they wish to continue in that field	16: Having a job whilst studying is important to me. (+3) 19: Having a job does/ would impact negatively upon my study time. (-3) 20: My employment motivates me to study (+2)
+ 5 = 2: It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area	The participant explained that the nature of the course chosen and their future career aspirations, meant that it was important that their values were reflected within the faculty and modules. Though they rated statement 15 as a (-1), this was due to their belief that it was too similar to this statement as inclusion was key to both their degree course and personal values.	40: My course has met my expectations (+3) 18: Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies (+4)
-5 = 1: It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration of the university	The participant explained how this particular statement was of little concern to them as they are not religious and therefore did not feel it was important for the university to consider their views. During the interview they did suggest that they could understand how for students who are religious, particularly non-Christian faiths it may be of greater importance.	5: Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me (-4) 4: Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me (-5)
-5 = 4: Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me	Again, with this statement the participant was white British and therefore their cohort, subject area and wider university population did look like them, therefore it was of little importance. As with the religious statement they did acknowledge within the discussion that if they	1: It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration of the university (-5) 5: Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me (-4)

ii. Comments from this process

As can be seen in the image above, this process provides a holistic view beyond that of simply looking at how statements are commonly ranked. Though there are statements that seemed to be consistently important to participants, looking at these in isolation does not provide a true picture of the data (Gallagher and Porock, 2010). These nuances within the data, can also be seen when considering statements that had a consistently low ranking for the majority, so may be viewed as unimportant to the student experience (Watts and Stenner, 2012). However, when interpreted alongside the post sort interview data, the nuance of that ranking is illustrated (Wolf, 2014).

A good example of this is statement **1 – “it is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration of the university”**. Though the statement was rated as strongly disagree for most participants (see table below), the discussion on the statements placement, within the interviews, illuminated the complexities of the sorting process and the importance of the holistic analysis approach (Kirschbaum et al., 2022).

(Figure 16 – Statement 1 Ranking Averages)

Statement 1 - It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration of the university.											
Ranking	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Number of participants	8	4	8	3	3	7	0	0	0	1*	0

****this participant described themselves as actively practicing their religion***

Most participants who had discussed this statements placement within their interview, stated that they had ranked it as disagree or neutral as they are not actively religious and therefore it was irrelevant to them regarding their own student experience. Additionally, those who specified that they are practicing Christians, stated that they had not seen a need to place this higher as it did not impact on their student experience or sense of belonging within the university. As the nature of UK customs are already supportive of this faith group (Guest et al., 2020).

“We already get Christmas and Easter off, so I can go home and celebrate. So they don’t really need to give any other considerations” (Participant FF)

Most participants from minority religious groups had placed the statement in neutral or -1. They explained that similarly to statements 4) ‘Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me’ and 5) ‘Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me’, they were used to being minoritised within education and other spaces, so they had little expectation of the university to do anything to support. This is echoed in the research where Muslim students in particular feel excluded within higher education (Allen, 2025).

“I’m used to being the odd one out [laughs], it was the same at school. We just celebrated Christmas as well, as otherwise I’d just have missed all the crafts and activities” (Participant C)

The participant who had rated in agreement with the statement, discussed how lack of consideration had led to negative implications for them, and this had encouraged them to rate it as important. Islam and Mercer-Mapstone (2021) assert the UK university experience of many Muslim students has been shown to be distinctly ‘non-Muslim’: where neither their Muslim identity nor their religious needs readily or typically sit within the ‘normal’ university experience.

“There is just no awareness of our holidays! I had exams during Ramadan, I mean they can schedule spring break around Easter and no assignments at Christmas but yet expect Muslim students to do exams while fasting....my mum told me not to fast so I didn’t on those days, but I didn’t have to make that choice if they would just look when our events happen” (Participant H)

A final observation from the interview data for this statement, was how great a response this question prompted. As with statements 4 and 5, many of the participants could acknowledge that though this statement was not of importance to their own student experience. They could understand why it, may be important to others. It also allowed them to consider some of the spaces and events that were held by the university and how they may not be/or feel inclusive of all religious groups.

iii. Overall analysis from this process

This stage of analysis allowed for further understanding of the nuances within the phase two data. After looking at each participant's responses to the Q sort and interviews, their overall agreement to the existing risk categories and risk ratings was reviewed. As Q methodology adopts a holistic lens to capture the subjective viewpoints of participants, the patterned placement of statements reflects how students construct meaning within a wider experiential framework, rather than in isolation (Wong et al, 2004). This holistic integration of qualitative and quantitative reasoning enables triangulation of the nuanced risk factors, thus illuminating the dimensions of risk that contribute to student vulnerability or resilience in higher education (Cross, 2005). This agreement on factor importance derived from the consensus of statement rankings and supportive qualitative commentary, allowed for confirmation of category inclusion and risk ratings (Kirschbaum et al., 2022).

An example of the process undertaken is shown in the image below. The current category risk ratings are detailed, followed by a comment on the consensus of the participants for that category and some illustrative supporting comments, taken from the qualitative post Q-sort interview data.

(Figure 17 – An Example of Category Risk Rating Consensus)

Category and risk ratings	General participant consensus	Supporting comments
Financial circumstances High = low income/ no family support Medium = low income /family support Low = average – high income	Generally, the participants agreed with the risk categories presented – although the source of average or higher income was a factor for those that were mature students	• Not having to worry about money would be useful as then a wouldn't have to do so many hours at work. • Accommodation is expensive so living off your loan is not possible. • It's good knowing that they can help out if I am struggling.
Distance/ geographical location of 'home' address (UK Student in English universities) High = overseas or boarder Medium = living at home/ close by Low = not local but same country (England)	Generally agreed with the placements based on the sort and also comments. Those participants who were from NI showed higher ratings for statement 25 which discussed homesickness	• It's really expensive to get home, so I tend to go for a few weeks, this can mean missing sessions before or after a break. • My best friend from home had a baby and I just wanted to be home with her and the baby and that made me really start missing people. • It's the logistics, we've had group assignments due just before or after the half term and it means that you can't go home as it's not worth the price and hassle for a few days. • I don't really socialise with uni friends outside of uni, it's really hard to get here and I'd have to leave early because of the trains. It's not worth the effort. • I will probably live at home and travel in next year but I wanted to live in halls the first
Term time address (First year of study) High = living at home Medium = private accommodation near university	Although there were no statements that directly asked about first year address. Pre-sort questionnaire did ask participants about term time address and some participants discussed this in relation to statements 42/43	

11.4 – Identifying Further Categories

Following the previous stage of analysis, where the Q -sort data was considered in relation to category risk ratings by factor profile and individual factor arrays, to verify category and risk value consensus (Wong et al., 2004). There was now a clear idea of the agreement on the relevance of the existing model categories, between the phase

one interview data and the phase two Q method data. This allowed for confirmation of the inclusion of each risk category. For example, for engagement with pastoral services, within the original model a high level of support was seen as a medium risk of attrition as although support was seen as a way of minimising attrition. Students who have a high level of interaction with these services may be indicative of a greater level of needs or a lack of resilience, which can contribute to discontinuation (Pedler et al., 2022). Therefore, looking at the views of students who placed statements related to pastoral support in agree and disagree placements, provided greater context to this category, thus confirming that risk rating within these categories was correct.

11.4.1 – Deductive Thematic Analysis

Deductive thematic analysis was used as a confirmatory stage to test and refine the theoretical themes developed in Phase One. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2008; 2021b) framework, the Phase Two analysis applied a theory-driven coding structure to a new dataset to explore how previously identified themes, manifested in a different participant group. This deductive approach enabled systematic comparison across datasets, allowing me to assess the consistency, relevance, and robustness of each theme (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). The process also maintained analytic flexibility, enabling the development of new themes or subthemes where data diverged from or expanded upon the original framework. For example, while the overarching theme of student belonging was upheld, new subthemes emerged around the role of intersectional identity and informal peer networks (Fan et al., 2021). Using deductive analysis in this confirmatory phase allowed for theoretical validation while also ensuring responsiveness to participant voices and contextual variation (Naeem et al., 2023). As such, the method served both to strengthen the credibility of the thematic framework and to deepen understanding by elaborating the complexities embedded within the original constructs of the phase one analysis (Ramos-Monge et al., 2019).

Student Continuity Factors Model – Validated Version



The final version of the model can be seen above, to reflect the focus on factors that support retention the title of *Student Continuity Factors Model* was decided upon. Whilst the confirmatory approach of the Q Method, validated the existing categories and the risk ratings within them (Kirschbaum et al., 2022). The popularity of the statement reflecting course satisfaction in the Q-sorts and interviews, alongside growing research literature, suggested that the model would benefit from its inclusion (Bell and Brooks, 2018; Wong and Chapman, 2023). While existing categories such as engagement and academic success address behavioural and performance-related factors, course enjoyment captures the intrinsic satisfaction, and personal fulfilment students derive from their studies (Kelly et al., 2024). Findings from the Q-sort analysis showed that students who reported low enjoyment, even when academically capable and well-supported, were more likely to express ambivalence or doubts about continuation. This suggests that enjoyment functions as a motivational anchor, reinforcing commitment during periods of challenge (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013), its absence, particularly when combined with other low-to-moderate risks, may contribute to disengagement and dropout (Pedler et al., 2022).

Additionally, course satisfaction is a significant predictor of student withdrawal (Yorke and Longden, 2008), with dissatisfaction, particularly around teaching quality, course organisation, and content relevance, commonly linked to disengagement and non-continuation (Nixon et al., 2018). It also interacts with factors like student expectations and belonging, making it a critical area for understanding and mitigating attrition risk (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Therefore, including this category ensures that the model reflects not just functional engagement but the affective dimensions of the student experience, enhancing its sensitivity and predictive value (Hlioui et al., 2021).

11.6 – Analysis of the Refined Continuation Model

Traditional models of student retention, while conceptually influential, often adopt a single, linear structure that aims to generalise the student experience into a unified framework (Burke, 2019). Models such as Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Bean's (1980) model of student attrition have provided valuable insights into

institutional and psychological factors associated with withdrawal. However, these models have been critiqued for their limited capacity to account for the heterogeneity of the student body, particularly in the context of widening participation and increased diversity in higher education (Burke, 2019; Hlioui et al., 2021; Neria, 2023). By assuming a one-size-fits-all trajectory, single models risk obscuring the distinct configurations of support, risk, and motivation that shape the continuation decisions of different student groups (Neria, 2023).

11.7 – Chapter Summary

The integration of Q-sorts and interviews provided both confirmatory evidence and new insights, enabling the researcher to refine or reframe predefined risk categories. This mixed-methods approach supports a richer understanding of how students perceive and navigate continuation challenges, offering implications for both theory and institutional support strategies. The existing risks to continuation model was validated by analysing the phase two data, therefore, the process allowed for the ‘mixing’ of data from both phases, to provide a nuanced view of the factors that affect student continuation. Ultimately, the refinement of the model enhances the applicability of the r model framework and that in its usage universities can develop interventions which can be more precisely targeted to the underlying factors that influence student continuation and withdrawal. To ensure that universal categories do not overshadow marginalised experiences, sub-models were developed in line with the analytical framework. These sub-models will be discussed the next chapter.

Chapter 12: Development of Four Thematic Sub-Models of Student Continuation

This chapter presents and explains the development of four thematic sub-models that emerged through the refinement of the overarching conceptual model of protective factors that support student retention and degree completion. While the primary model provided a comprehensive framework capturing the key factors influencing continuation, further analysis revealed the value of developing sub-models that account for the diverse and intersecting experiences of students in more nuanced ways (Naeem et al., 2023).

The creation of these sub-models is grounded in a synthesis of empirical insights generated across two phases of the study (Cameron, 2009). In Phase One, exploratory interviews with former students who had considered leaving university but ultimately persisted led to the development of an analytical framework composed of eight thematic findings, consolidated into four overarching conceptual domains that reflected core influences on retention (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). This was then developed into a model that considered risks to continuation and how students could be supported in completion. In Phase Two, Q methodology was used to test and refine these findings by exploring how students subjectively prioritised different risk and protective factors (Shaw, 2023). The Q-sort results, including both factor analysis and thematic analysis of interview data, confirmed the relevance of the analytical categories. Additionally, it offered further insight into which combinations of factors co-occurred in distinct student factor profiles (Naeem et al., 2023).

12.1 – Rationale for the Creation of Sub-Models

The creation of sub-models emerged as a necessary extension of the original attrition risk model, prompted by the diversity and complexity of student experiences revealed during Q-sort analysis and thematic interpretation (Naeem et al., 2023). While the core model successfully captured broad categories such as financial circumstances,

belonging, and supportive influences, the data indicated that some risk factors held more relevance for specific subgroups than for others, thus highlighting the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach (Pedler et al., 2022).

The development of sub-models offers a more granular and interpretively sensitive approach to understanding retention (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021). Rather than viewing demographic, social, academic, and psychological factors as universally applicable or equally weighted across the student population, sub-models allow for the examination of thematic clusters of influence (Hlioui et al., 2021). This approach better reflects the complex, intersectional nature of students lived experiences and accommodates the diversity of routes through which students persist in higher education (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023).

Their development was directly informed by the Q-factor analysis results from Phase Two's Q methodology, which revealed distinct patterns of shared viewpoints among participants (Wolf, 2014). Each Q-factor represented a cluster of students who prioritised certain influences, such as peer support, career goals, or institutional culture, over others. Importantly, these patterns did not merely reflect variation in individual experiences but pointed to coherent groupings of perception and meaning that warrant differentiated analytical treatment (Naeem et al., 2023). For example, one Q-Factor identified students who were highly engaged and supported, but still vulnerable due to demographic factors like first-generation status or disability. Another Q-Factor highlighted students whose persistence was driven primarily by career requirements, sometimes despite low course satisfaction or institutional integration (Neria, 2023; Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023).

12.2 – Overview of Analytical Foundations

The development of the four sub-models is grounded in the analytical framework produced during Phase One of this study, which was based on a thematic analysis of interviews with students who had considered withdrawing from university but ultimately persisted. Through an inductive yet theory-informed approach, this analysis generated key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). These themes were then synthesised into four

overarching analytical categories that captured the multidimensional nature of student continuation:

1. Demographic Factors That Affect Attrition
2. The Importance of Student Belonging
3. Influences That Support Retention
4. Engagement Dynamics

These four domains formed the conceptual pillars of the main model and provided the foundation for the development of more focused sub-models (Cameron, 2009). Each domain represented a critical arena in which student experiences, identities, and institutional responses interact to either support or undermine persistence (Hlioui et al., 2021). The decision to develop four sub-models aligned with these categories was informed by the recognition that these domains encapsulated distinct yet overlapping spheres of influence, and that students' experiences within each could be meaningfully explored in greater depth (Fan et al., 2021).

To refine these domains, and the related continuation factors, and validate their salience, Phase Two employed Q methodology. Crucially, the Q analysis confirmed the robustness of the original risk to continuation categories while also indicating that their relative importance varied by student group. These differentiated configurations provided the empirical justification for further developing the overarching model (*Figure 18 - Student Continuity Factors Model*) into four distinct sub-models, each aligned with one domain of the analytical framework.

Together, this iterative process of thematic synthesis, theoretical categorisation, and empirical testing ensured that the sub-models are both grounded in student voice and validated through methodological triangulation (Kirschbaum et al., 2022). Offering a robust and context-sensitive tool for analysing and responding to the diversity of experiences that shape student retention in higher education.

12.3 – Derivation of the Sub-Models

The source of the four thematic sub-models was the result of a deliberate and iterative process of re-examining the data collected in both Phase One (semi-structured interviews) and Phase Two (Q methodology) (Cameron, 2009). While the initial analytical framework provided a foundation by identifying broad domains and model risk factors, a more nuanced understanding emerged through revisiting the datasets with the aim of identifying finer-grained and context-specific patterns of retention (Naeem et al., 2023).

This process aligns with what Braun and Clarke (2019) describe as “*re-coding and re-collapsing*,” a technique used in thematic analysis to refine or recombine existing codes and categories in response to emergent insights or to generate new conceptual clarity. After the initial thematic synthesis, returning to both qualitative transcripts and Q-sort data allowed for the identification of latent sub-patterns. This stage of analysis sought to enhance both depth and specificity, capturing overlooked interactions and differentiated experiences across the student body. Therefore, by returning to the data and reviewing these patterns holistically, the research moved from a single model to a set of interconnected sub-models that add to the insights from the original model, by capturing further context-specific risk and protective factors (Clark et al., 2019).

The integration of data from two distinct methodological traditions, qualitative thematic analysis and Q methodology, was central to this recombination process. Greene (2007) emphasises the value of complementarity in mixed-methods research, where different types of data are combined to enhance interpretive richness. In this study, the interview narratives provided insight into students lived experiences and decision-making, while the Q methodology enabled prioritisation and pattern recognition across participant viewpoints (McKeown and Thomas, 2013).

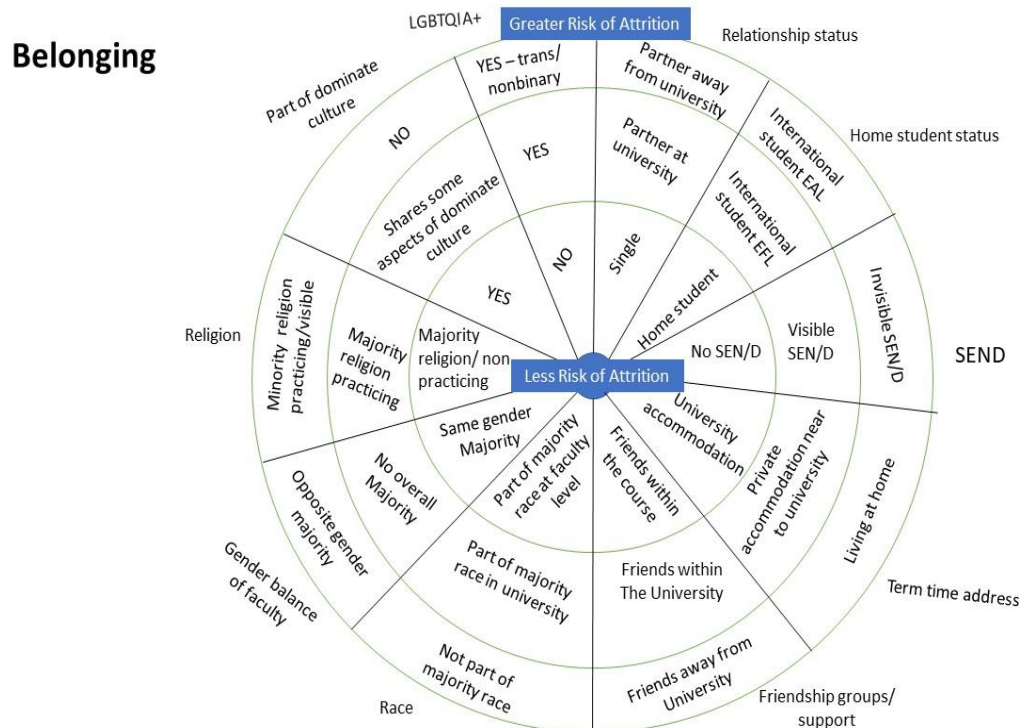
Moreover, this process reflects retroduction, a reasoning strategy that is suited to realist research and commonly used in Q methodology (Brown, 1980; Zaitseva and Law, 2023). Retroduction involves identifying the underlying mechanisms and contextual conditions that give rise to observed phenomena, in this case, the varying experiences of retention across different student profiles. Therefore, the sub-models, are not merely thematic

clusters but represent theoretically grounded, empirically supported mechanisms of persistence shaped by students' contexts, identities, and interactions with institutional systems (Millar et al., 2022).

12.4 – Sub-Models

Following the refinement of the *Student Continuity Factors Model* using the confirmatory findings of phase two, it became necessary to consider wider categories that influenced student continuation. To accommodate this, sub-models were created, expanding selected categories and introducing new ones tailored to context-specific risk pathways. This approach allowed for a more flexible, student-centred model of risk, where certain components can be activated or de-emphasised based on individual or cohort characteristics. The four sub-models are discussed below, with a focus on the additional categories of risk that they contain and how they can shape further understanding of the student experience.

12.4.1 – Sub-Model 1: Student Belonging



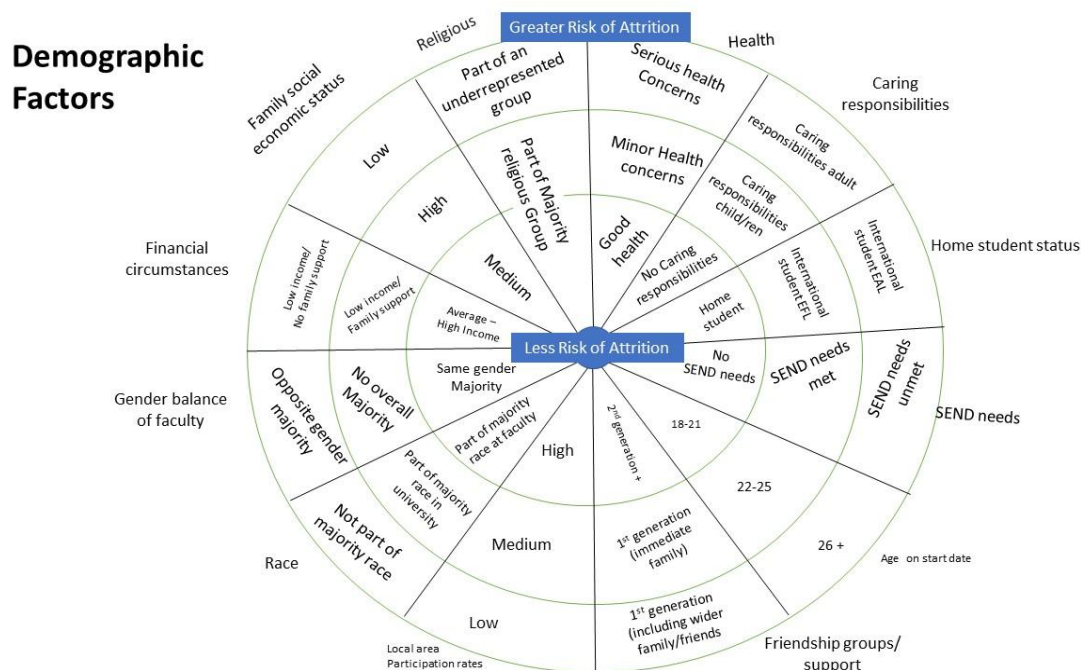
(Figure 19 – Sub-model 1 – Student Belonging)

The inclusion of a dedicated *Student Belonging* sub-model responds to the growing body of evidence that a student's sense of belonging is not only central to engagement but is also differentially shaped by social identity and personal context (Pedler et al., 2022; Tight, 2020). While general belonging is often treated as a universal experience, research shows that risk to belonging, and therefore risk of withdrawal, can be significantly heightened for students whose identity markers may marginalise or isolate them within the university environment (O’Keeffe, 2013; Zawada, 2024).

This sub-model isolates key variables influencing belonging, including *religious affiliation, gender, race/ethnicity, relationship status, SEND status, and peer relationships*. These factors often intersect to influence whether students feel seen, supported, and safe (Crawford et al., 2023). Fernández et al. (2023), suggest that LGBTQ+ students or those with visible religious identities may experience

microaggressions or cultural exclusion. Furthermore, students with SEND needs may feel overlooked in general academic settings (Shaw, 2023). This was echoed through the data with students who are societally othered having this reinforced or extended in higher education settings (Sloan et al., 2020).

12.4.2 – Sub-Model 2: Demographic Factors



(Figure 20 – Sub-model 2 – Demographic Factors)

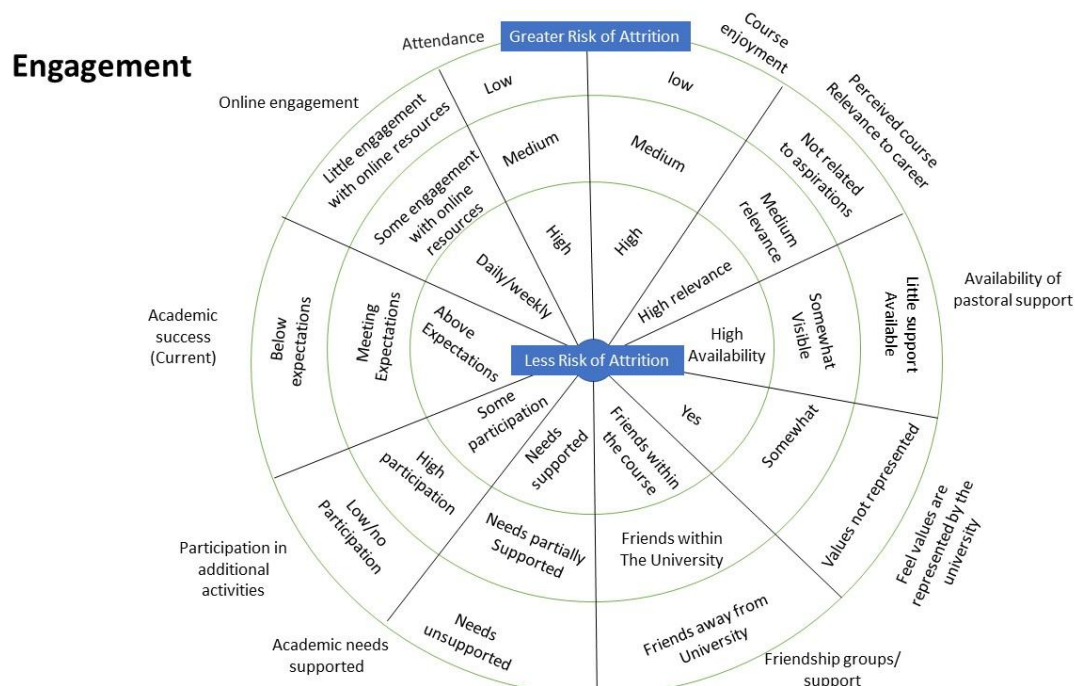
The *Demographic Sub-Model* acknowledges that student continuation is shaped not only by academic and institutional factors, but also by a range of social, structural, and personal characteristics that intersect to influence vulnerability to withdrawal (Reay, 2018). Demographic factors such as first-generation status, socio-economic background, age, race/ethnicity, disability status, and local area participation rates have been consistently linked to differential student outcomes (Thomas, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

These characteristics often reflect underlying inequities in access to capital, support, and preparation for university life, which can amplify challenges during transition and

progression (Sapir, 2022). Therefore, students from low-participation areas or first-generation backgrounds may lack familiarity with university norms (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013). Additionally, mature students may face additional pressures balancing study with external responsibilities (Webber and Dismore, 2021), while disabled and neurodivergent students many face challenges with health needs, access issues and social exclusion (Shaw, 2023).

This was reflected within the data with participants discussing the systemic barriers that they faced while at university and how access to support was required to overcome these challenges. Therefore, this sub-model enables an equity-informed approach for analysing attrition risk (Hlioui et al., 2021), by allowing these demographic variables to be assessed in relation to other model components such as belonging, engagement, and support. It ensures that structural risk factors are neither overlooked nor homogenised and supports the design of more responsive and inclusive retention strategies (Kelly et al., 2024).

12.4.3 – Sub-Model 3: Engagement Dynamics



(Figure 21 – Sub-model 3 – Engagement Dynamics)

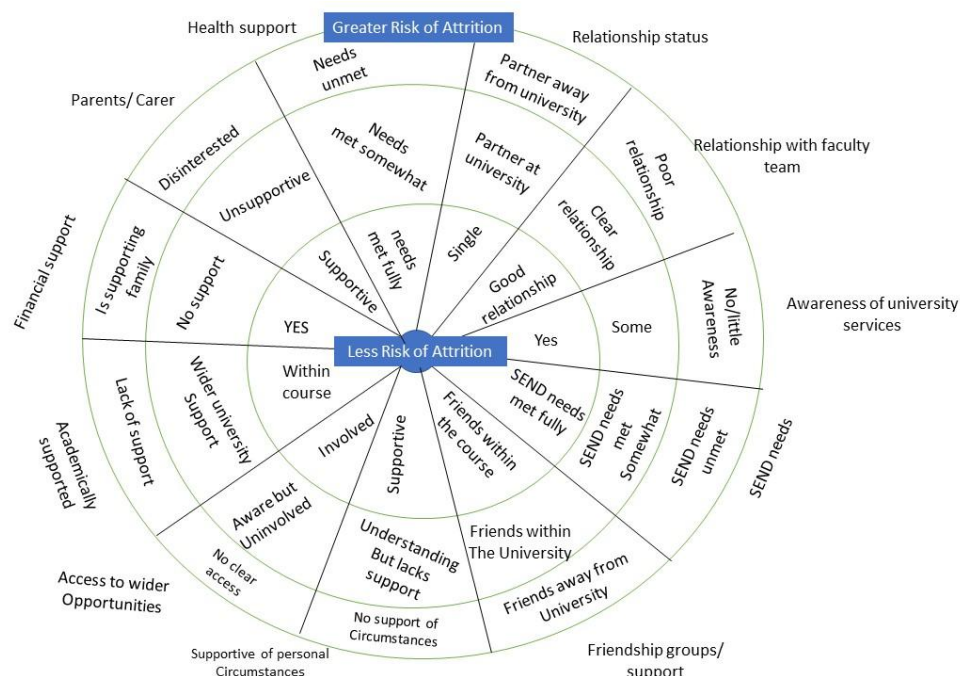
The *Engagement Factors Sub-Model* captures the complex, multidimensional ways in which students interact with their course, peers, and wider university life, elements that are strongly associated with persistence and continuation (Pedler et al., 2022). Drawing on engagement theory (Kahu and Nelson, 2018), this sub-model includes factors such as academic success, attendance, course enjoyment, peer support, shared values, and access to extracurricular opportunities, all of which contribute to students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural involvement in their studies (Tight, 2020).

The data and wider research suggest that students who perform well academically and attend consistently are generally more likely to feel confident and connected to their learning environment (Beer and Lawson, 2017). However, research shows that engagement is not solely academic. Feeling aligned with the values of the course, enjoying the subject matter, and having meaningful peer relationships significantly reinforce motivation and belonging (Tight, 2020).

Moreover, participation in extracurricular activities can enhance social capital and foster a stronger sense of university identity, especially for commuter or marginalised students (Ani et al., 2025). By including these variables, the sub-model recognises that engagement is both relational and experiential, and that its absence can be an early indicator of attrition risk (Fan et al., 2021). An awareness of this allows for HE institutions to better monitor, support, and re-engage students before withdrawal becomes inevitable (Sá, 2023).

12.4.4 – Sub-Model 4: Supportive Influences

Supportive Influences



(Figure 22 – Sub-model 4 – Supportive Influences)

This model recognises that access to and perception of support, both within and beyond the university, are central to students' ability to persist in higher education (Flake and Gabriel, 2023). Support operates across multiple domains, including academic guidance, pastoral care, mental health services, disability support, peer mentoring, and external emotional or practical assistance from family and friends. Its inclusion reflects extensive evidence that supportive relationships and structures serve as key protective factors against withdrawal (Thomas et al., 2017).

Students facing stressors such as academic difficulty, mental health issues, or life transitions often rely on timely, empathetic support to remain engaged (Pedler et al., 2022). However, even high-achieving students may experience attrition risk if they feel unsupported or alienated when challenges arise (Liu et al., 2021). The sub-model also accounts for the importance of perceived accessibility; students must not only have services available but also believe that help is non-judgemental and responsive and know how to access them (Morgan, 2025).

By integrating this sub-model, the overall retention framework acknowledges that continuation is relational (Naylor et al., 2018). It reinforces the need for institutions to offer visible, responsive, and inclusive support networks, and to foster a culture where seeking help is normalised (Salimi et al., 2023). It also highlights that external support systems, such as family encouragement, can complement institutional efforts and buffer against disengagement (Abulfaraj et al., 2024).

12.5 – Findings from Sub-Model Creation

The findings from the process of sub-model development continue to demonstrate that students do not engage with higher education in uniform ways and that retention strategies must be informed by a nuanced understanding of the multiple, overlapping domains that influence persistence. Sub-models thus serve both an analytical and applied function, they offer a more refined conceptualisation of student retention and can provide institutions with targeted frameworks for designing inclusive, context-sensitive interventions.

12.6 – Implications of the Sub-Model Approach

The development of four thematic sub-models has the potential to offer significant implications for how universities understand and respond to the challenge of student retention (Bond et al., 2020). Extending the overarching model into sub-models which target areas of the analytical framework, provides a flexible, nuanced tool that institutions could use to tailor interventions, design inclusive programmes, and develop data-informed strategies for supporting diverse student populations (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021).

Each sub-model highlights a specific domain that influences student persistence, which may enable universities to prioritise support according to distinct need profiles (Neria, 2023). For example, the *Demographic Factors Sub-Model* draws attention to students who may be at elevated risk due to factors such as first-generation status, disability, commuting distance, or caring responsibilities (Reay, 2018). Recognising

these intersecting vulnerabilities allows institutions to move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions and instead implement targeted outreach, financial aid, and flexible academic arrangements that address structural disadvantage (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021).

Similarly, the *Belonging Sub-Model* can guide programme-level design to enhance social integration and identity inclusion, such as through peer mentoring schemes (Kiyama and Luca, 2014), inclusive pedagogy (O’Leary and Cui, 2018), and the cultivation of supportive cohort cultures (Kelly et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in light of growing evidence that a lack of social belonging is a key contributor to withdrawal, especially among underrepresented groups (Sithaldeen et al., 2022).

The *Supportive Influences Sub-Model* reinforces the importance of both internal and external support systems (Breeze et al., 2020), highlighting how staff relationships, access to mental health services, and family encouragement function as protective factors (Chaudhry et al., 2024). This model supports the development of integrated student services that embed pastoral care into the academic experience and reduce barriers to accessing help (Morgan, 2022).

Finally, the *Engagement Dynamics Sub-Model* offers valuable insights for improving curriculum design, assessment feedback, academic advising, and co-curricular learning opportunities (Sá, 2023; Tight, 2020; Zepke, 2014). It allows universities to recognise how academic motivation, shared values, and course satisfaction shape the student experience, and where disengagement may signal early risk (Ani et al., 2025; Bond et al., 2020; Trowler, 2010).

Beyond intervention design, these sub-models also have the potential to inform data dashboards and early warning systems (Fan et al., 2021). By aligning key risk indicators with the themes of each sub-model, institutions can monitor trends across different student groups and identify individuals who may be approaching a tipping point in their engagement or wellbeing (Bowden et al., 2021). Integrating this framework into existing institutional analytics enhances predictive capabilities while grounding data insights in student-centred theory (Sá, 2023; Villano et al., 2018).

Moreover, the modular nature of the model and sub-models makes them particularly adaptable for policy development at the institutional and sector levels, supporting widening participation, mental health strategy, and inclusive curriculum initiatives (Wakelin, 2023). In doing so, the sub-model approach not only advances retention theory but offers a practical toolkit for creating equitable, responsive higher education environments that are better equipped to support students in completing their degrees.

12.7 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the use of sub-models can address the key limitations of singular, linear retention models (Aljohani, 2016). Rather than seeking a universal explanation for persistence, the model and sub-model framework acknowledges the diversity and intersectionality of student experiences, allowing institutions to engage with retention in a more flexible, targeted, and student-centred manner (Pedler et al., 2022). It reflects a shift away from deficit narratives of attrition and towards a holistic understanding that considers the structural, relational, and individual factors that contribute to continuation (Burke, 2019).

By disaggregating the overarching model into more focused analytic categories, this approach offers both theoretical precision and practical applicability. Each sub-model captures a distinct but interrelated dimension of the student experience, enabling deeper insight into how risk and resilience manifest across different contexts and identities. Moreover, these sub-models are grounded in robust empirical evidence, having been derived from the thematic findings of Phase One interviews and refined through the confirmatory lens of Q methodology in Phase Two. Their design enables application in institutional policymaking, programme design, student services, and predictive analytics, ensuring their relevance beyond academic theory and into strategic practice.

The following chapter draws together the research findings from across both phases of the study and presents a synthesis using a ‘What’ technique (Driscoll, 2007), to understand the findings in relation to each of the research aims.

Chapter 13: Overall Findings and Discussion

This chapter will be considering the overall findings of the study, in relation to the research specific questions:

Research aims:

- *To explore the experiences and perceptions of students who have expressed a serious intention to leave university.*
- *To analyse the existing theoretical perspectives regarding students' reasons for leaving university.*
- *To explore how student's construct their university experience.*
- *To gain greater insight into the motivations of students to remain in university.*
- *To develop a holistic understanding of student retention in UK higher education.*

This research project aimed to understand the complexities of student retention and explore the data using a theoretical position of holism. Therefore, this section of the thesis will provide an overview of triangulation and explore the overall research message. Additionally, considering each of the research aims regarding the study outcomes, incorporating analysis of all phases; this will allow for triangulation or integration of the data (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2007). To allow a reflection of how the study has addressed the research aims, the 'What?' model, which follows on from the work of Borton (1970), adapted by Driscoll (2007), will be utilised. Driscoll (2007) proposes seven stages, four action stages (data gathering) and three reflective stages: 'What?', 'So What?', and 'Now what?'; it is these reflective stages that will be used to integrate the findings. Stage 1 of the model is 'What?', this is where the key findings are discussed. This is followed by Stage 2, 'So what?' which aims to understand the implications of the findings. In Stage 3, 'Now what?' recommendations are outlined. This approach provides a structured and thematic summary of the evidence generated, laying the foundation for the final theoretical conclusions, contributions to knowledge, and recommendations for policy and practice.

13.1 – Overall Research Message - A Holistic View of Retention in Higher Education

The overarching message of this research is that student retention in higher education must be understood through a holistic, student-centred lens that recognises the diverse, intersecting, and evolving factors shaping the student experience (Morgan, 2013). Rather than viewing continuation as a simple outcome of academic integration or individual resilience (Pedler et al., 2022), this study demonstrates that students' decisions to stay at university are influenced by the dynamic interaction of demographic realities, institutional structures, personal motivations, and emotional wellbeing.

The findings challenge linear, deficit-focused models of attrition that assume withdrawal results from a failure to adapt or integrate (Burke, 2019). Instead, they highlight how structural barriers can intensify feelings of exclusion, even among highly motivated students. A holistic perspective allows for these complexities to be acknowledged and addressed through more equitable and responsive approaches.

Using a realist social constructivist philosophy allowed for critical realism and pragmatic constructivism to align (Elder-Vass, 2012). Creating a framework that sought to place an intersectional underpinning to the research process. By engaging students who had seriously contemplated leaving, the research provides insight into the critical moments of uncertainty that often remain hidden from institutional data (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). It also emphasises the importance of protective factors, which can support students to remain even in the face of significant challenges (Bradley, 2017; Neria, 2023). The development of the main model of student continuation and its four sub-models, focused on demographic factors, student belonging, supportive influences, and engagement dynamics, illustrates the value of disaggregated frameworks that reflect the diverse pathways through which students succeed (Reay, 2018;2021).

Ultimately, this research argues for a shift in how retention is conceptualised: from a focus on 'fixing' students to a broader commitment to designing inclusive systems that support their success (Neria, 2023). A holistic model not only provides a more accurate

understanding of why students stay but also offers a practical foundation for institutions to develop targeted, meaningful, and compassionate retention strategies (Rotar, 2022).

13.2 – ‘Answering’ the Research Aims: What, So what and Now what?

This section will use the ‘What’ model of critical reflection (Driscoll, 2007), to understand the individual research aims used to frame this study. Data from each study phase will be incorporated, to give an interconnected view of the findings and what that means for the research topic.

13.2.1 – Research Aim One

1) To explore the experiences and perceptions of students who have expressed a serious intention to leave university.

For this research aim the objective was to explore an area of student experience and retention that is often ignored or forgotten (Bradley, 2017). Students who have completed their degrees (within traditional trajectories) are seen as a success by the markers of continuation, completion, and progression set out by the OfS (2025). If their journey to that stage has been complex and complicated that is often not documented or rightly viewed as an area of triumph. However, if these students have overcome the challenges documented in attrition data, then what could their experience tell us about how we can retain students.

i. What?

This question was deeply rooted in the researcher positionality of this study. Taking the position that leaving is not the mirror image of staying (Tinto, 2006) and therefore to understand retention, there is a necessity to consider why people remain at university

rather than why people leave. To add a further layer to this, it was also decided that to understand the complexities of retention it would be beneficial to speak to participants who had considered leaving their degree but ultimately remained as this would provide data on how students might overcome challenges, rather than solely consider students positive experiences of higher education (Kerby, 2015). The insider status and review of the literature confirmed that for a proportion of students, completion is not a linear process, with students using extensions, deferrals, leave of absences and other methods to extend their studies (Hillman, 2021). These students may have complex profiles and not fit the expected pattern of degree progression. However, students who do progress within the expected time frames may also experience difficulties and considerations of leaving (Knapstad et al, 2021), these groups are often hidden from the university within the standard metrics and gaining insight into this 'silent' group could provide the sector with additional knowledge on how to combat student challenges that contribute to attrition (Hlioui et al, 2021).

The data from the interviews confirmed the assertion by Yorke and Longden (2008) that the decision to leave university is long and often fraught with anguish. Most participants stated that they had continual doubts throughout the degree process (Villano, 2018), even after an initial catalyst had been removed. In many cases there was a change to their self-perception, participants stated that the doubts had changed how they viewed themselves, many had not struggled previously within education and having these doubts had made them question if they were 'fit to study' at this level.

It was clear that demographic factors played a role in retention with a higher proportion of those who participated having come from lower socioeconomic groups and lower participation areas (Reay, 2018). However, this was not a prerequisite for students to consider leaving, though there were a larger proportion of participants who had entered university from widening participation backgrounds interviewed, there were participants from traditional backgrounds who had also struggled with similar doubts. As in the literature there was something to be said for resilience (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023), with those who had overcome challenges in education or life events better equipped to overcome the significant challenges that they faced during their studies.

ii. So what?

This study revealed that students who have seriously contemplated leaving university articulate their experiences through a lens of cumulative challenge, emotional dissonance, and complex identity negotiation. Furthermore, the decision to stay or leave was rarely based on a single event; rather, it stemmed from a build-up of pressures including academic difficulties, mental health struggles, financial insecurity, and a lack of connection to peers or institutional structures. These findings are supported by research such as Tight (2020) and Bradley (2017) who suggest that student continuation is down to multifaceted factors including engagement, personal circumstances, and resilience. The data shows that these experiences often remained invisible to staff and support systems, as students frequently internalised their struggles or felt reluctant to seek help due to fear of judgement or institutional mistrust, as echoed in Shah et al. (2021).

As found in research by Pedler et al. (2022), many of my participants described feeling like ‘outsiders’ in academic spaces, with their sense of belonging undermined by imposter syndrome, unmet expectations, or misalignment with institutional values. For some, being a commuter, first-generation student, or student with caring responsibilities compounded feelings of alienation, this agrees with the wider research (Kelly et al., 2024; Webber and Dismore, 2021). However, despite reaching critical points of disengagement, these students found key turning points, such as receiving academic encouragement, accessing timely support, or experiencing a renewed sense of purpose through career aspirations, that contributed to their decision to remain.

Additionally, the research found that those who remained in higher education often demonstrated high levels of resilience, but this resilience was typically shaped by prior adversity and facilitated by relational or structural support (Reay, 2018). The findings challenge deficit-based assumptions that students who consider leaving are less committed or capable. Instead, they underscore research that suggests that many ‘at-risk’ students possess the motivation to succeed but require environments and support that acknowledges and responds to the complexity of their experiences (Wilcox et al., 2005).

By foregrounding the phase one data in the voices of participants who were at the margins of withdrawal, this research makes visible the often-overlooked emotional and institutional dimensions of student continuation (Bradley, 2017). It suggests that serious consideration of leaving is not necessarily a failure, but a moment of critical reflection that, if recognised and supported, can lead to renewed commitment and long-term success.

Furthermore, the data suggests that student experience is intersectional, throughout the findings there were no continuation risk factors that were deciding or that worked in singularity. Therefore, if the student experience is considered holistically then universities can have a clearer view on what might work regarding student support services or other interventions (Wong and Chapman, 2023). The development of the model and sub models allows for an understanding of how these factors can intersect and contribute to continuation. By identifying areas of risk to continuation, universities can develop effective policies and interventions that can be adequately targeted at those who need support (Hlioui et al., 2021; Lizzio and Wilson, 2013).

iii. What now?

The findings from this research aim offer a strong foundation for expanding understanding of the critical, often hidden, decision-making processes that occur when students consider leaving university. However, they also highlight several key areas where further research is needed to develop more effective, inclusive, and timely interventions.

There is a need for longitudinal research that follows students over time after they have experienced a period of serious disengagement. Such work could explore how their perceptions evolve, what institutional responses have the most impact, and whether initial resilience translates into long-term success, as discussed by Hlioui et al. (2021). This would help clarify how temporary crises relate to overall progression and degree completion, and whether moments of doubt might also be opportunities for positive transformation if appropriate support is accessed. However, many students do not disclose their difficulties or ask for help, making them effectively invisible to retention

strategies. Further studies could examine this phenomenon of silent disengagement. Qualitative exploration of these quiet trajectories would support the development of early detection frameworks that are less reliant on student self-reporting.

Moreover, given the strong influence of overlapping identity factors, discovered in the research findings and displayed within the model and sub-models. Future research should focus on further developing the use of the model's intersectionality-informed risk profiling (Addison and Williams, 2023). By identifying which combinations of demographic and experiential characteristics create specific vulnerabilities, and how institutions might tailor their interventions accordingly (Hlioui et al., 2021). Building on this study's commitment to student voice, future research could use co-design methodologies, inviting students who have experienced near-withdrawal to help shape institutional policies and practices. Such participatory work will ensure that interventions are not only theoretically sound, but also practically and culturally relevant to those they aim to support.

13.2.2 - Research Aim Two

2) To analyse the existing theoretical perspectives regarding students' reasons for leaving university.

The purpose of this research aim was to critically examine the conceptual foundations that underpin the understanding of student attrition. Despite decades of scholarship on retention and withdrawal, universities continue to face challenges in reducing non-continuation rates, particularly among certain student groups, such as those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. This question sought to interrogate the dominant models and frameworks used to explain why students disengage or leave, with the aim of assessing their relevance, applicability, and limitations in contemporary higher education contexts.

i. What?

Analysing the theoretical perspectives on retention and attrition, provided insight into how student behaviour has been framed, what assumptions are embedded in these models, and how well they reflect the complex, diverse, and evolving realities of today's student populations. Many traditional models, such as those by Tinto (1993), Bean (1980), and Spady (1970), offer valuable foundational knowledge but have been criticised for oversimplifying student experiences or assuming a normative, full-time, residential student identity. Furthermore, these models, often present student withdrawal as a deficit of integration, engagement, or personal commitment, without fully accounting for structural inequalities or diverse educational trajectories (Burke, 2019).

Secondly, the study evaluated how more recent theoretical developments have expanded on or challenged these views. For example, Thomas's (2012) emphasis on belonging and institutional responsibility, and Kahu and Nelson's (2018) student engagement interface model, shift the focus from individual student attributes to relational, emotional, and contextual dynamics. These contemporary perspectives highlight the interplay between personal identity, institutional culture, and external pressures, factors increasingly recognised in research on retention (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). This research aim therefore supports a deeper critique of such models, alongside an evaluation of newer frameworks that account for intersectionality, institutional responsibility, emotional engagement, and external pressures (Nichols and Stahl, 2019).

Ultimately, the purpose was to not only critique but to inform future practice by identifying theoretical gaps and highlighting areas that can be refined or reconceptualised. Systematic reviews by Aljohani (2016) and Rotar (2022), suggest that by better understanding the strengths and shortcomings of existing models, higher education institutions can develop more inclusive, responsive, and evidence-informed strategies to support student success and continuation. Therefore, analysing the theoretical models in line with the data collected in phase one and two supports a more holistic, student-centred approach to understanding attrition.

ii. So what?

The findings from this research reveal that existing theoretical models of student withdrawal remain broadly relevant but require expansion and refinement to reflect the complexity and diversity of modern student experiences. Drawing on interview data and Q methodology, the study affirms key insights from foundational models such as Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model, Bean's (1980) Attrition Model, and Thomas's (2012) Student Engagement Framework, while also identifying areas where current theory fails to account for emerging and context-specific risks.

The data supports Tinto's emphasis on academic and social integration as central to persistence. Students who lacked a sense of belonging, whether due to cultural isolation, poor peer relationships, or perceived disconnect from university values, frequently described disengagement and doubts about continuation. However, participants also revealed how belonging is shaped not just by peer integration, but by intersectional identity factors such as race, gender, disability, and family background. Suggesting that traditional models understate the role of systemic exclusion and cultural marginalisation. Therefore, Bean's (1980) focus on student background variables such as age, employment, and external commitments remains salient. Participants managing caring responsibilities, commuting from long distances, or working part-time described higher stress levels and greater vulnerability to withdrawal.

However, the findings also highlight how some high-risk demographic indicators (e.g. first-generation status or low socio-economic background) were moderated by strong support systems, motivation, or career clarity, indicating the importance of recognising protective as well as risk factors. This builds on research that looks at how student support is paramount for continuation (Wilcox et al., 2005), especially in those who struggle with mental health or other catalyst events such as a bereavement or financial difficulties (Pedler et al., 2022).

Additionally, research on engagement and belonging was particularly reinforced (Zawada, 2024), with students repeatedly citing the importance of relational teaching, visible support, and value alignment with their subject area (Thomas, 2012; Wakelin, 2023). Course satisfaction and enjoyment, while not traditionally central in early

theoretical models, emerged as crucial emotional drivers for persistence within the phase two data. Supporting the view that students who described their course as “uninspiring” or disconnected from their goals expressed higher levels of detachment, even when performing well academically (Sá, 2023).

The findings also pointed to areas less developed in current theoretical frameworks. For example, students’ personal values and their alignment with the social purpose of their degree (e.g. in social work, nursing, or education) were powerful motivators for continuation, supporting the inclusion of value-based engagement in future models. Likewise, the role of external support, particularly from family and partners, was widely cited as influential, though often overlooked in institution-focused theories.

iii. What now?

The application of Q methodology enabled a nuanced, confirmatory lens, revealing distinct profiles of risk and resilience among students. These profiles confirmed the validity of core theoretical constructs, while also demonstrating that students’ reasons for leaving are shaped by a multi-layered interplay of personal, academic, and contextual factors. While existing models provide a strong foundation, this study suggests that a more holistic, intersectional, and student-centred approach is required to fully understand contemporary withdrawal behaviour (Pedler et al., 2022). Future theoretical development should account for structural inequalities, emotional drivers, and diverse student identities as central to the persistence equation (Reay, 2021).

Future research should revisit and refine existing retention models (e.g. Tinto, Bean, Thomas) to account for contemporary student realities, including post-pandemic digital learning environments, increasing financial strain, and a more diverse student population (Burke, 2019). Comparative studies could examine how these models function across disciplines and institutional types, while further theoretical development could integrate intersectional risk factors and emotional dimensions such as course enjoyment and value alignment.

13.2.3 - Research Aim Three

3) To explore how student's construct their university experience.

This research aim explored how students construct their university experience and what aspects of university are most important to them and assist with continuation. Though there were insights gathered on this question from the phase one interviews, the phase two findings provided the most context for this discussion. This was due to the status of phase two participants as current students, enabling them to reflect on what they found important in a real time context, rather than through retrospective contemplations.

i. What?

The research literature suggests that students construct their higher education (HE) experiences through a complex interplay of personal identity, social relationships, academic engagement, and structural conditions. This construction is not passive but rather an active process of meaning-making, shaped by students' background, expectations, and interactions with the university environment. Tinto (1993) emphasised that integration into the academic and social fabric of the institution is central to how students perceive and navigate their educational journey. More recent literature extends this by showing how peer relationships, staff engagement, and feelings of inclusion or marginalisation profoundly shape how students interpret their place within the university (Thomas, 2012; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Students often experience university as a space where identity is negotiated, belonging is constructed, and support, or its absence, alters their sense of direction.

Furthermore, the way students construct their HE experiences are closely tied to their social identities. First-generation students, for example, may enter HE with different expectations or understandings of academic culture, which can shape their perceptions of success, confidence, and engagement (Reay et al., 2009). Similarly, Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality has been used to show how gender, race, class, and disability intersect to influence how students make sense of their place

within HE (Stevenson, 2020). While students are shaped by their environment, they also exercise agency in constructing their HE experiences. They negotiate competing demands, seek out or avoid support, and make strategic decisions about engagement. However, their capacity to do so is often conditioned by institutional structures, such as timetabling, access to services, or the inclusivity of curriculum, which can enable or constrain these meaning-making processes (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). The phase two research sought to investigate these structures and areas of support to ascertain what was important for student experience and support continuation and completion.

Research also discusses the temporal and emotional nature of the student experience. Kahu (2013) conceptualises engagement as a “psycho-social process” involving emotional investment, identity development, and fluctuating connections with the institution over time. Students’ sense-making often shifts across the academic lifecycle, with turning points triggered by feedback, assessment, transitions, or personal crises. Emotional responses such as imposter syndrome, pride, or alienation are central to how experiences are constructed and interpreted (Hughes, 2018). Morgan (2022) suggests that intervention is needed at each stage of the HE journey for students to effectively transition, not only into university, but also successfully negotiate different stages of that journey.

ii. So what?

The findings of this study reveal that students construct their university experience through a dynamic, personal, and socially situated process that is shaped by individual expectations, academic engagement, peer relationships, and wider life circumstances. Rather than being a linear or universal journey, students' perceptions of university evolve over time and are deeply influenced by both structural conditions and subjective interpretations.

A key theme in how students constructed their experience was the role of expectations and their (mis)alignment with reality. Some participants expressed how they entered first year of university with idealised notions of independence, structured support, or

campus life. When confronted with the autonomy and ambiguity of academic expectations, some described feelings of confusion and vulnerability. Those who were first-generation and/or mature students in particular expressed uncertainty around academic norms, reporting that it took time to “learn the rules” of university study. This is echoed in the literature, where first generation students or those from low socio-economic groups may lack the cultural capital for transition into HE (Reay, 2018; 2021).

According to the data, students also constructed their experience through the lens of relationality, with the people around them significantly shaped their sense of belonging, motivation, and meaning. Peer groups, friendship circles, and course-related communities provided important emotional anchors. Where these were absent or difficult to access, especially for those who were commuters, carers, or had disabilities, participants described feeling peripheral to university life (Thomas and Jones, 2017). Belonging, therefore, was not just about fitting in socially, but also about feeling acknowledged and valued within the institutional culture (Pedler et al., 2022).

Another significant component of student experience construction was engagement with the academic environment. Students who formed strong relationships with academic staff, received timely and constructive feedback, and were intellectually stimulated reported more positive and confident constructions of their place in university. Conversely, poor communication, lack of support, and inaccessible teaching diminished students' sense of value and efficacy. For some, enjoyment of the subject matter played a central role in shaping motivation and connection to their studies, suggesting that emotional engagement with learning is a powerful factor in how the experience is interpreted.

Furthermore, the data also described how students construct their experience in relation to their broader life context. Employment, caring responsibilities, and physical or mental health issues often constrained participation and shaped students' sense of what was possible. For these students, university was not a contained or protected space, but part of a wider balancing act. Despite these challenges, many participants remained committed, viewing university as a strategic investment in their future, particularly when career aspirations were clear and meaningful.

Overall, the findings suggest that students do not passively receive their experience, actively navigating and negotiating, drawing on personal values, social cues, and institutional signals. This meaning-making process was ongoing and iterative, influenced by moments of achievement, connection, frustration, or marginalisation (Wong and Chapman, 2023). Therefore, students construct their university experience through a multifaceted interplay of academic, social, emotional, and contextual factors.

iii. What now?

Further qualitative inquiry is needed into how students from underrepresented groups, such as first-generation, disabled, mature, or commuting students, construct their experiences of higher education. Particular attention should be given to the ways that belonging, visibility, and identity shape engagement and decisions to stay or withdraw (Pedler et al., 2022).

Research should also explore how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations evolve over time, and how they are affected by personal values, perceived subject relevance, and institutional messaging. Longitudinal studies looking at the pre-entry through to outduction, would provide valuable insight into the development of academic identity and career commitment throughout the student journey. This would build on the SET model by Morgan (2013;2022), which looks at key transitional points within the HE journey. Intertwining asset-based awareness building opportunities, through directed interventions, throughout this study would create additional retention and engagement models.

13.2.4 - Research Aim Four

- 4) To gain greater insight into the motivations of students to remain in university.**

The purpose of this research aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective, layered, and socially embedded ways in which students make sense of their experiences in higher education, particularly in relation to their decision to remain. Grounded in the epistemological perspective, this question recognises that while there are structural and institutional conditions that shape student experience, these are interpreted and given meaning through individual and socially situated processes. In contrast to metrics-driven approaches that prioritise satisfaction scores or continuation rates, this question was centred on the student voice, foregrounding how experiences are constructed, negotiated, and valued within specific contexts. By exploring the motivations underpinning students' decisions to stay, the research sought to understand not only which factors support continuation, but how these factors are experienced and made meaningful by students. This enabled a more complex understanding of retention as a dynamic, interpretive process shaped through the interaction between structural conditions and individual meaning-making, rather than as a purely measurable outcome.

*i. **What***

This inquiry was particularly important in the context of a diverse student population in the UK, where the traditional, full-time residential student is no longer the dominant norm (Reay, 2018). Students now arrive at university with a wide range of expectations, responsibilities, and identities, including those who commute, care for others, work part-time, or are the first in their families to attend higher education. As such, the university experience is not monolithic but is constructed through the interaction between students' personal backgrounds, institutional environments, and academic encounters (Burke, 2019; Thompson et al., 2021).

The research is grounded in realist social constructivist theory (Elder-Vass, 2012), which posits that individuals actively create meaning through dialogue, context, and interpretation (Bogna et al., 2020). Through this lens, student experience is not simply what is delivered by the institution, but what is constructed through students' sense-

making practices, including their relationships with peers and staff, their engagement with subject matter, and their navigation of academic and emotional challenges.

Exploring this construction provides critical insight into what matters to students, how they position themselves within academic spaces, and how institutional structures either support or hinder their identity development and sense of belonging. It also allowed potential dissonances between institutional assumptions about student needs and the lived experiences of those in the system, to be identified. Therefore, to move beyond generalised models of student engagement and satisfaction to a more individualised, reflective, and inclusive understanding of the university journey. As such the findings can inform pedagogical practices, support structures, and retention strategies, that are responsive to the real and varied ways students live, study, and experience higher education.

ii. So what?

The findings of this study highlight that students' motivations to remain in university are multifaceted, evolving, and deeply contextual, shaped by a combination of personal goals, identity, relationships, and perceived future outcomes. Rather than being driven by a single reason, students articulated complex narratives that combined internal commitment with external support and structural opportunity.

One of the most consistently cited motivators was the perceived value of the degree for future career aspirations. Students in vocational or licensure-linked programmes, such as nursing, social work, or education, often referred to university as a necessary route to achieving their goals. These participants described a strong sense of purpose, which allowed them to persevere through difficult periods. Another core motivation was a sense of personal development and self-investment. Many described remaining in university as an act of resilience and self-belief, particularly among first-generation and mature student participants. It was discovered that for some completing a degree is not just an academic achievement but a symbolic milestone in identity transformation and long-term self-belief, this is supported with the literature where HE is discussed as a

transformative stage for students that shapes their long-term outcomes (Gravett and Winstone, 2019).

Additionally, supportive relationships played a significant motivational role. Peer networks, friendship groups, and encouraging relationships with academic staff reinforced persistence by providing emotional reassurance and a sense of accountability (Pedler et al., 2022). Students who felt seen, valued, and supported, especially through regular contact with (personal) tutors or mentors, described higher levels of motivation and belonging (Wakelin, 2023). Conversely, participants that described having limited support structures often relied more heavily on internal motivation or long-term goals to sustain engagement.

Furthermore, course satisfaction and enjoyment also emerged as important. Students who found their subject intellectually stimulating and emotionally meaningful were more likely to remain engaged. In phase two, those who saw clear connections between their values and the course content, especially in socially oriented disciplines, described higher motivation and persistence. This aligns with broader evidence that emotional engagement and value alignment enhance academic commitment (Villano et al., 2018). Some participants also spoke about external expectations and responsibility, from family members, children, or communities, as key motivators (Webber and Dismore, 2021). While these expectations could create pressure, they also instilled a strong sense of determination and purpose. In several cases, students expressed a desire to be role models or to break generational cycles, highlighting the social significance of educational continuation.

Finally, it was found that access to practical and psychological support systems was crucial in sustaining motivation. Students who were able to draw on accessible academic support, mental health services, or financial guidance reported feeling more equipped to stay the course, even when difficulties arose. These findings align with the literature which discusses how societal pressures, such as cost of living, mental health challenges and neurodiverse needs, are impacting on students and universities (Liu et al., 2019; 2022).

iii. What now?

The findings demonstrate that motivation to remain in university is not solely an individual trait, but a complex construct built on future-oriented goals, social and emotional supports, and the meaning students derive from their studies. Understanding these layered motivations can inform more targeted retention strategies that speak to both personal ambition and institutional responsibility (Morris et al., 2022).

There remains a relative scarcity of inquiry into the motivational factors that encourage students to remain, particularly during times of difficulty (Bradley, 2017). The findings from this study suggest that motivations such as career aspirations, personal growth, the desire to prove others wrong, and family pride play a pivotal role in shaping decisions to persist (Haktanir et al., 2021). These motivations often serve as internal anchors that help students navigate uncertainty, disengagement, or crisis. Future research should examine these motivations in greater depth, ideally through longitudinal and participatory methods, to understand how they develop over time and interact with external support structures. Specific attention could be given to how different student groups define success, and how motivational narratives shift in relation to academic performance, social belonging, and life transitions.

Such research could directly inform the design of interventions that intentionally harness and reinforce these motivations. For example, retention strategies might include strengths-based advising, reflective goal-setting workshops, or mentoring schemes that validate and amplify students' intrinsic reasons for continuing (Gravett and Winstone, 2019). Interventions that acknowledge and build upon student purpose, not just academic performance, have the potential to enhance resilience, belonging, and long-term engagement (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013), thereby supporting a more holistic and sustainable approach to retention.

13.2.5 - Research Aim Five

5) To develop a holistic understanding of student retention in UK higher education

The purpose of this research aim was to move beyond fragmented or narrowly focused explanations of student withdrawal and instead produce a comprehensive, multi-dimensional perspective that captures the complexity of the student experience. In contrast to traditional models that often prioritise academic integration or institutional metrics (Bradley, 2017), this research aim seeks to account for the structural, emotional, social, and institutional factors that collectively influence students' decisions to continue or leave higher education (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023). Though existing theories, such as Tinto's (1993) or Bean's (1985), have significantly contributed to our understanding of withdrawal, but they have also been criticised for privileging normative, often residential student experiences and underestimating the role of social inequality and identity in shaping continuation (Thomas, 2012; Reay, 2017).

i. What?

A holistic understanding recognises that students' retention is influenced not only by academic success or engagement, but also by their sense of belonging, financial security, health and wellbeing, external responsibilities, and identity alignment with the institution (Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). This research aim therefore encouraged an intersectional approach that accounts for how overlapping factors such as race, gender, disability, socio-economic background, and caring roles intersect to shape the conditions for persistence (Nieuwoudt and Pedler, 2023).

The aim was not simply to document multiple factors, but to understand how these factors interact within the institutional ecosystem of higher education. This includes examining how institutional cultures, pedagogies, and support systems respond, or fail to respond, to diverse student needs. By addressing this research aim, the findings of the study support the development of responsive, equity-driven policies and practices that reflect the real challenges and strengths of the UK's student population.

ii. So what?

The findings of this study support a holistic, multidimensional understanding of student retention in UK higher education, revealing that no single factor determines a student's decision to persist or withdraw. Instead, retention is shaped by a complex interplay of academic, social, emotional, demographic, and structural influences, which vary across individuals and institutional contexts. By drawing on qualitative interviews and Q methodology, the study confirms the relevance of established retention theories, particularly those by Tinto (1993), Thomas (2012), and Bean (1980), but also extends them by highlighting how intersectional identities, lived realities, and institutional responsiveness shape students' experiences of continuation.

A key finding is that student retention is deeply relational and contextual. Students construct their experience not only through academic performance or course satisfaction, but through social connection, institutional care, and personal meaning-making. A strong sense of belonging, fostered through peer networks, inclusive teaching, and visible support, was shown to be a consistent protective factor, particularly for students from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds (Pedler et al., 2022). The importance of student motivation, especially when grounded in career goals, personal values, or the pursuit of long-term transformation (e.g. for mature or first-generation students) was highlighted (Haktanir et al., 2021). While some students are driven by intrinsic interest or value alignment with their subject, others are sustained by extrinsic motivations such as employment prospects or fulfilling family expectations (Chaudhry et al., 2024).

Additionally, the findings discovered that structural factors such as financial strain, commuting distance, caring responsibilities, and health issues increasingly impact retention. These challenges are often compounded for students with protected characteristics or those from low-participation backgrounds, underscoring the importance of recognising the cumulative nature of disadvantage (Breeze et al., 2020). However, the findings also emphasised that risk does not equate to inevitability: students with high-risk profiles often demonstrate resilience, especially when they have access to timely, targeted, and compassionate support.

Furthermore, the research identified that some key influences on continuation are underrepresented in traditional models, such as the emotional impact of course enjoyment, the motivational role of value alignment, and the moderating effect of family or partner support. The creation of sub-models, focused on demographics, engagement, support, and belonging, allowed for a more granular analysis and reflected the diversity of UK student journeys.

iii. What now?

As a holistic understanding of student retention requires institutions to move beyond generic interventions and adopt flexible, student-centred approaches that account for both common trends and individual variation. Future research should assess the impact of student-centred interventions that address the specific needs of different typologies (e.g. supported students, socially driven learners, caring students). Furthermore, retention is not just an outcome of academic performance, but a reflection of students lived realities, institutional practices, and the alignment between expectations, experiences, and identities. Therefore, evaluations need to explore which combinations of academic, pastoral, and peer-based strategies are most effective in promoting continuation, especially when grounded in relational pedagogy and inclusive design.

Further investigation is warranted into the role of external factors, such as family responsibilities, caregiving roles, employment, and partner support, in shaping continuation decisions. Understanding how these intersect with institutional structures can inform the design of more responsive support systems. Alongside this, there needs to be further focus on strategies that promote awareness for students on their support systems, using an asset-based awareness method could provide students with a foundational knowledge of existing and potential support systems (Thompson et al., 2021).

Additionally, research is needed into how universities respond when students' express intentions to leave. A focused exploration of institutional interventions, their

effectiveness, and how they are perceived by students would provide actionable insights. This includes evaluating the quality and accessibility of academic advising, mental health support, re-engagement pathways, and appeals procedures for students in academic or personal distress.

13.3 - Chapter Summary

This chapter has brought together the findings from both phases of the research to address each of the study's core research aims. It has explored the lived experiences and perceptions of students who seriously considered leaving university, revealing a complex interplay of emotional, academic, structural, and identity-based influences. By examining these questions using the 'What' model (Driscoll, 2007), the discussion has highlighted the relational and contextual dynamics that shape engagement and belonging, moving beyond linear or deficit-based explanations of attrition.

By synthesising these insights, this chapter contributes to a more inclusive, student-centred view of retention and identifies practical and theoretical implications for institutions and policymakers. It lays the foundation for the final chapter, which will summarise the overarching conclusions of the study, outline its limitations, and present actionable recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 14: Conclusion and Recommendations

This final chapter presents the overarching conclusions drawn from the research, which examined the factors that shape student continuation and attrition in UK higher education. The study explored the lived experiences of students who had seriously considered leaving university yet ultimately persisted, combining this exploratory phase with a confirmatory Q methodology to develop and refine a holistic model of student retention. The chapter synthesises how the findings contribute to theoretical understanding, institutional practice, and the broader discourse on equity and belonging in higher education. It also provides recommendations for future research and development.

14.1 – Thesis Overview

i. Back to the start: rationale, research aims and methodology

The aim of this research was to develop a holistic understanding of student retention by understanding the multifaceted reasons why some students may consider leaving their degree programme (Pedler et al., 2022) and what ultimately kept them on track for completion. Understanding the experiences of this group of students can help explain why some students are able to persevere despite challenges, while others leave university before completing their course (Bradley, 2017). Understanding the factors that students saw as important for their continued engagement with higher education (Ani et al., 2025) may provide institutions with the additional means to support their students with their studies and align with the sector directives on continuation, completion, and progression (OfS, 2024).

The five research aims were:

1. To explore the experiences and perceptions of students who have expressed a serious intention to leave university.
2. To analyse the existing theoretical perspectives regarding students' reasons for leaving university.
3. To explore how student's construct their university experience.
4. To gain greater insight into the motivations of students to remain in university.
5. To develop a holistic understanding of student retention in UK higher education

The combination of a realist constructivist epistemology (Elder-Vass, 2012) and a focus on the underrepresented population of students who seriously considered leaving but ultimately persisted (Bradley, 2017) constitutes a distinctive and original contribution to the field of higher education research. Much of the existing literature on student retention has been shaped by either positivist paradigms that seek to quantify causal factors of withdrawal or interpretivist studies that focus on the individual meaning-making of specific student groups. By adopting a realist constructivist stance, this research bridges these epistemological divides, acknowledging that while retention is shaped by real structural conditions, such as socio-economic status, institutional culture, and policy context, it is also understood and navigated through subjective student experience and perception (Bogna et al., 2020; Maxwell, 2012). This philosophical foundation enabled the study to contribute theoretically, methodologically, and practically to the field. Theoretically, it offers a holistic and intersectional framework that integrates established models of attrition (e.g., Tinto, 1993; Bean, 1980) with sociological perspectives from Bourdieu (1986) and Crenshaw (1991), situating retention as both a social process and an individual negotiation.

The inclusion of “almost dropouts” as a focal group introduced a critical missing perspective in the retention discourse, those who inhabit the threshold between departure and continuation. These participants provided insights into critical moments of decision-making, revealing how protective factors such as belonging, purpose, and support interact with risk factors like financial hardship or self-doubt. This population

effectively illuminated the mechanisms of persistence that are often invisible in both completion and withdrawal datasets.

Methodologically, the integration of qualitative interviews and Q methodology within a deductive yet interpretive framework represents an innovative approach for triangulating complex social phenomena. Due to the desire to research with an underutilised population, those who had considered leaving but persevered (Bradley, 2017), there was a necessity to employ alternative research methods. The use of online interviews through instant messenger allowed for an examination of the use of text-based interviews to reach a wider and often hidden population. This also provide a sense of anonymity (Gibson, 2020), which is viewed to be useful for engaging with a sometimes stigmatised and reluctant participant group. As such, the research has contributed further to the debate on online interview methods, though there was an increase on their use during the pandemic, they are often still viewed as a secondary solution used out of necessity rather than preference (Gibson, 2020). The data collected during the phase one interviews shows both the depth of data gathered and the scope that instant messaging provides (Gibson, 2020). As text and short voice notes continue to develop as common means of communication, it is important that there is continued discussion about the value of alternative methods of data collection, particularly with underrepresented groups and hard to reach demographics (Maeng et al., 2016; Sadler et al., 2010).

The Q-sort process allowed for the confirmation and refinement of theoretical constructs, ensuring that the *Student Continuity Factors Model* was grounded in both lived experience and empirical patterning. This design extends the methodological repertoire for higher education research by demonstrating how Q methodology can be used as a confirmatory interpretive tool, enabling the validation of conceptual frameworks through participant subjectivity (Watts and Stenner, 2012; Cross, 2005). Furthermore, the development of an adapted Q-methodology that utilised the quantitative and qualitative aspects of Q-method both separately and combined, provided an additional layer of analysis beyond a standard Q-method approach. This is due to the equal weighting granted to the post Q-sort interview data and Q-factor

analysis, rather than the conventional supplementary position that the post Q-sort interview data is typically afforded (Kirschbaum et al., 2022; Wolf, 2014).

14.2 – Key Findings

The findings of this research affirm that student retention is a multifaceted and relational process, influenced by the interplay between demographic, psychological, social, and institutional factors. This builds on previous work on retention, aiming to move beyond linear or deficit-based interpretations of withdrawal (Burke, 2019). By drawing on both theoretical models and student-centred qualitative insights, the study has developed a holistic understanding of retention: one that accounts for individual, structural, and institutional dimensions (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Across both phases of the study, it was clear that the decision to persist or withdraw is rarely determined by a single cause. Instead, it emerges from a complex negotiation between students' internal motivations, emotional resilience, and their interaction with the HE institution, alongside their external factors, social environment, and personal circumstances.

These findings reaffirm established models (Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2012) that highlight academic integration, social belonging, and institutional support as core elements of student persistence. Moreover, this study builds on these by further demonstrating that retention emerges from a dynamic interaction between personal motivations, identity-based experiences, structural risk factors, and emotional connections to learning (Pedler et al., 2022).

Four overarching themes were identified through the analytical framework and confirmed in the Q methodology phase: demographic factors, belonging, supportive influences, and engagement dynamics. These interrelated domains collectively underpin the holistic model of continuation factors developed through this research. Each demonstrates that retention is not just a matter of personal determination or institutional design, but a product of the dynamic relationship between the individual and the structures that support or constrain them.

The findings also reaffirm that experiences of attrition and persistence are shaped by intersectional identities. Factors such as, students' age, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, caring responsibilities, financial status etc intersect to influence not only their likelihood of facing barriers but also the nature of their engagement with university life. Understanding these intersections is critical to designing responsive, inclusive, and equitable retention strategies. These factors and the levels of risk to continuation associated within them, form the basis of the *Student Continuity Factors Model* (Figure 18) and sub-models (Figures 19-22) and can be utilised by universities to create effective policy and support systems.

The Student Continuity Factors Model offers higher education institutions a practical, evidence-based framework for understanding and responding to the complex interplay of factors influencing student continuation. Unlike linear or deficit-oriented models, this framework recognises that risk is multidimensional and dynamic, shaped by an interaction of demographic characteristics, psychological factors, environmental influences, and institutional culture. The model allows universities to move beyond simplistic metrics toward a nuanced understanding of individual contexts, capturing both vulnerabilities and protective assets.

The development of sub-models focused on engagement, demographic risk, support, and belonging has demonstrated the value of disaggregating broad categories into more nuanced, student focused frameworks (Rotar, 2022). These models can offer institutions practical tools for understanding student diversity, identifying specific points of vulnerability, and tailoring interventions accordingly, so that supportive factors that protect continuation can be accessed by students (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013; Fan et al., 2021). This use of early or tailored intervention based on specific student characteristics can develop student's support network and awareness of personal, social and institutional support systems (Conefrey, 2021; Yearsley, 2025).

Furthermore, the findings strongly support the adoption of an asset-based awareness approach, shifting the focus towards recognition of the strengths, resources, and capacities that students bring to their higher education experience. The research highlights how students can draw upon existing assets, such as resilience, motivation, peer relationships, career aspirations, and help-seeking behaviours, to navigate

challenges and persist in their studies, supporting emerging research in this area (Allen-McCombs, 2022; Kellogg, 2021). Across both the interview and Q methodology phases, participants demonstrated significant agency in responding to adversity. Even where students experienced high levels of structural or personal risk, continuation was often supported by protective assets including strong purpose, adaptive coping strategies, and supportive social networks. These findings align with asset-based frameworks that emphasise capability, potential, and community cultural wealth rather than perceived lack (Delgado and Stefaniak, 2019; Hands, 2020). Importantly, the study illustrates that assets are contextual and relational rather than fixed traits. Institutional recognition and validation of student strengths, for example, valuing lived experience, fostering belonging, and encouraging self-efficacy, were shown to amplify students' capacity to persist (Krutkowski, 2017). This supports a holistic understanding of retention, where positive outcomes emerge from the interaction between student agency and enabling environments.

Conclusively, the study shows that a holistic approach to student retention requires a continued paradigm shift, from viewing continuation as an outcome of student preparedness alone to recognising it as a shared institutional responsibility (Hallam, 2023). Continuation, completion and progression is shown to be shaped through relationships, structures, and individual and collective meaning making (Kelly et al., 2024). Therefore, by foregrounding what supports continuation rather than solely why students leave, this research contributes to a more empowering narrative of retention and offers a foundation for developing interventions that build awareness of, and invest in, students' existing strengths. Furthermore, by embracing this complexity higher education institutions create policy which aims to genuinely support students to persist, succeed, and thrive, through an asset-based approach to student support that utilises these factors of continuation (Krutkowski, 2017; Neria, 2023).

14.3 – Towards an Asset-Based Awareness approach to Retention

An asset-based awareness approach shifts the focus of educational research and practice from identifying student deficits to recognising and leveraging the strengths,

experiences, and forms of capital that individuals bring to their studies (Yosso, 2005). Rather than framing students from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds as inherently 'at risk' of attrition, this perspective positions them as holders of valuable resources, social, cultural, emotional, and experiential, that can be mobilised to support persistence and success in higher education (Almond, 2023). Asset-based awareness is grounded in the broader asset-based pedagogical movement, which emphasises empowerment, belonging, and resilience through recognition of existing capacities rather than remediation of perceived shortcomings (Garcia and Chun, 2016).

In the context of higher education retention, this approach contrasts with some traditional models that interpret withdrawal as a failure of individual motivation, preparation, or cultural fit (Tinto, 1993; Yorke and Longden, 2008). Instead, asset-based awareness aligns with a holistic and intersectional understanding of continuation, recognising that students' success is shaped by the interplay of personal agency and structural context (Soria and Stubblefield, 2015). As seen in the findings and wider research, first-generation students may draw upon familial expectations, community commitment, or a strong work ethic as motivational assets, even when lacking traditional forms of academic capital (Reay, 2018; O'Shea, 2018). Similarly, mature students, carers, or those balancing employment with study often exhibit significant organisational skills and emotional resilience, qualities that protect against attrition when institutions recognise and cultivate them (Daily et al., 2025).

The findings of this research affirm the relevance of asset-based awareness in understanding and promoting retention, students who persisted despite significant demographic or personal challenges often attributed their continuation to internal and relational strengths, such as self-efficacy, resilience, peer belonging, and a clear sense of purpose or career aspiration. These protective factors correspond with the principles of asset-based thinking, which seek to identify and amplify existing competencies rather than treat students as passive recipients of support (Daily et al., 2025; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). In this way, the findings demonstrate that retention is reinforced when institutions and educators create environments that recognise, validate, and build upon students' existing assets, rather than attempting to fix perceived deficits.

Developing asset-based awareness within both institutional culture and student identity can therefore act as a mechanism of empowerment and continuity (Daily et al., 2025; Yearsley, 2025). Therefore, for students, recognising their own strengths contributes to academic self-efficacy and a sense of belonging, key predictors of persistence identified in this study. For institutions, embedding asset-based principles within policy and practice would encourage a shift from reactive, problem-oriented interventions toward proactive and inclusive support frameworks that honour the diversity of the student population. Ultimately, an asset-based understanding of student retention moves beyond narrow metrics of success to embrace a richer, more equitable conception of higher education as a partnership between students and the institution that serves them.

14.3.1 – How the Models Support an Asset-Based Approach

The integration of asset-based awareness within the holistic model of student retention, provides a unifying framework for understanding how individual strengths interact with structural and environmental conditions to shape continuation (Conefrey, 2021; Hands, 2020). The model recognises that while demographic and circumstantial factors can present challenges to persistence, they coexist with personal and collective assets, such as resilience, motivation, and social networks, that can mitigate attrition risk when appropriately acknowledged and supported by the institution (Hands, 2020). By situating these insights within the four overarching themes of the analytical framework the model operationalises a relational and intersectional understanding of student success.

i. Belonging as a Site of Asset Activation

Belonging emerged across both phases of the research as a central determinant of retention, particularly in shaping students' emotional connection to their institution and peers. Within an asset-based lens, belonging is not merely about integration into

existing institutional cultures but about recognition and validation of diverse identities and experiences (Hirsch et al., 2021). When universities affirm students' cultural and experiential assets, such as lived experiences, they transform belonging into an active process of mutual contribution (Daily et al., 2025). This shift allows students to see themselves not as outsiders adapting to academic norms but as co-constructors of the learning community. The study findings suggest that such recognition strengthens emotional resilience and reduces the alienation that often precedes withdrawal.

ii. Engagement Dynamics and Self-Efficacy

The model also positions engagement dynamics, including academic involvement, motivation, and course satisfaction, as domains where asset-based awareness can reinforce self-efficacy and agency. Students in this study who articulated clear personal or professional goals demonstrated a strong sense of purpose that sustained engagement even during periods of academic difficulty. This aligns with Astin's (1984) involvement theory and Kuh's (2008) concept of high-impact practices, both of which emphasise active participation and meaning-making as precursors to persistence. By helping students to identify how their prior experiences and competencies contribute to their academic work, institutions can foster academic buoyancy (Rafsanjani et al., 2024) and reframe challenge as an opportunity for growth (Almond, 2023).

iii. Supportive Influences and Relational Capital

Supportive influences, including peer networks, family encouragement, and staff-student relationships, function as conduits for activating assets within the student experience (Rasco et al., 2020). The research found that students who identified strong relational anchors, were more likely to continue their studies despite external pressures. This finding reinforces Tinto's (2017) assertion that persistence is strengthened through valued membership within both academic and social communities. Asset-based awareness enhances these dynamics by encouraging institutions to view support not as a unidirectional service but as a collaborative and

empowering relationship, wherein students' knowledge, experiences, and agency are integral to the support process (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

iv. Demographic Factors and Intersectional Understanding

The model reframes demographic factors, such as class, gender, race, disability, or caring responsibilities, not as static indicators of risk but as dimensions of identity that intersect to create unique pathways of opportunity and challenge. Drawing from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Reay, 2018), this study found that when institutions acknowledge and build upon the specific assets associated with these identities, such as cultural wealth, maturity, or empathy, students are more likely to perceive their background as a strength rather than a deficit. This reframing aligns with Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, which situates diverse forms of capital, aspirational, familial, social, and navigational, as vital resources in educational persistence.

14.3.2 – Usage of Asset-Based Awareness in Higher Education

Embedding asset-based awareness into higher education practice requires institutions to move beyond traditional remedial interventions and adopt proactive, strengths-oriented approaches that cultivate belonging, confidence, and agency among all students (Hands, 2020). This study's findings, which highlight how persistence was often underpinned by internal strengths (such as resilience and self-efficacy) and external supports (such as peer relationships and purposeful engagement), demonstrate that when students' assets are recognised and harnessed, their likelihood of continuation increases significantly. This is supported by research into first generation students' persistence in College (USA) where the asset-based approach reframes non-traditional students as contributors who bring valuable strengths from their families, communities, and prior educational experiences (Daily et al., 2025; Hirsch et al, 2021).

i. Institutional Culture and Policy

At a structural level, universities can promote asset-based awareness by reorienting retention policies from risk monitoring toward strength recognition (Couture et al., 2021). This involves identifying not only potential vulnerabilities but also the existing competencies that students possess, such as adaptability, independence, and community ties (Almond, 2023). According to Thomas (2012) and Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2015), inclusive institutional cultures that recognise diversity as a resource rather than a challenge enhance students' sense of belonging and emotional connection to the university. Training staff to adopt strengths-based advising and inclusive communication practices can ensure that support interactions reinforce capability rather than deficit (Daily et al., 2025). For example, student success frameworks could integrate reflective activities that help learners articulate personal skills developed through work, caregiving, or overcoming adversity, thereby validating their lived experience as academic capital (Almond, 2023; O'Shea, 2016).

Furthermore, asset-based approaches support the OfS commitment to closing gaps in continuation and completion for underrepresented groups by reframing equity as a matter of institutional responsibility rather than individual deficit (OfS, 2020; 2022). Embedding strengths-focused support analytics alongside traditional continuation data would enable universities to evidence their inclusive practice, enhance student experience, and demonstrate impact in access and participation plans. An asset-based awareness approach complements these regulatory priorities by broadening the understanding of what supports continuation, rather than focusing solely on predictors of withdrawal (Hirsch et al, 2021). By recognising protective factors such as belonging, motivation, resilience, and social capital, institutions can develop more preventative and developmental interventions that align with OfS expectations for improving outcomes without viewing students in deficit (Daily et al., 2025).

ii. Student Transition and Support

The research findings show that there are key times within the student journey that can amplify likelihood of attrition. Using the Student Continuity Factors Model in line with other student support models would help to develop strategies that could be implemented across institutions. The Student Experience Transitions (SET) model (Morgan, 2012; 2022) conceptualises student persistence as a series of critical transition points, emphasising that successful continuation depends on how students navigate academic, social, and personal changes over time. Rather than viewing attrition as a single decision point, the SET model frames withdrawal risk as cumulative and transitional, shaped by students' preparedness, expectations, and evolving engagement. When applied alongside the Student Continuity Factors Model, the SET model provides a developmental lens through which preventative interventions can be designed.

The holistic model's identifies key categories of risk and protection, while the SET model indicates when these factors are most salient. For example, demographic and cultural capital-related risks may be particularly influential during pre-entry and early transition stages, while belonging and peer integration become critical during mid-programme consolidation. By mapping the categories onto SET transition phases, institutions could implement anticipatory interventions rather than reactive responses once disengagement has already occurred. In practice, this alignment could support preventative, strengths-based interventions such as early conversations that identify both risk and protective assets, transition-focused mentoring at known pressure points, and curriculum-embedded reflection aligned with students' career narratives.

iii. Pedagogical Practice and Curriculum Design

Asset-based pedagogy translates these values into classroom practice. Educators can design curricula that recognise the funds of knowledge (Couture et al., 2021) students bring to learning environments and use these as starting points for engagement and critical reflection (Hands, 2020). In this study, participants who reported positive interactions with tutors and inclusive learning environments described a greater sense of competence and belonging. Creating opportunities for co-creation of learning, where

students shape content or assessment methods, not only supports autonomy and relevance but strengthens their identification with the institution (Daily et al., 2025). Embedding reflective activities that acknowledge personal and cultural assets can also enhance academic self-efficacy, particularly for first-generation or mature students who may initially question their legitimacy within academic spaces (Reay, 2018).

An asset-based curriculum aligns closely with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) through a shared commitment to valuing learner diversity and removing structural barriers to engagement and success. UDL provides a flexible pedagogical framework that proactively designs learning environments to accommodate variability in learners' needs, preferences, and abilities through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2018). When integrated, asset-based curriculum design and UDL could enable institutions to create inclusive learning experiences that validate diverse identities and ways of knowing, fostering belonging and self-efficacy. By embedding flexibility and choice within curricula, educators would empower students to draw upon their cultural, social, and experiential assets, supporting sustained engagement and persistence across heterogeneous student populations.

iv. Peer Support and Community Building

Peer networks emerged as a key protective factor for continuation, underscoring the importance of community-led retention initiatives. Programmes such as peer mentoring, student ambassador schemes, and collaborative learning groups embody asset-based awareness by positioning students as sources of expertise and mutual support rather than passive recipients of institutional care (Hirsch et al., 2021).

Research by Tinto (2017) and Kahu and Nelson (2018) demonstrates that belonging and engagement are strengthened when students perceive themselves as contributors to, rather than dependents of, the university community. Facilitating diverse student networks, particularly those that connect across disciplines, age groups, and cultural backgrounds, can extend these benefits, helping students identify shared strengths and develop cross-cultural resilience (Daily et al., 2025).

Research suggests that peer mentoring is particularly effective when mentors normalise challenge while affirming competence, thereby strengthening self-efficacy and belonging (Hirsch et al., 2021; Maunder, 2018). Rather than positioning mentors as problem-solvers, mentors are trained to help mentees recognise existing capabilities such as adaptability, perseverance, prior learning experiences, or community responsibilities (Kiyama and Luca, 2014; Rasco et al., 2020). Furthermore, peer-led transition groups, can build collective asset awareness by creating spaces where students share strategies, values, and lived experience (Hirsch et al., 2021). These initiatives reframe diversity of background as a shared resource rather than a risk factor (O'Shea, 2016). Muraki et al. (2024) suggests that when facilitated through peer dialogue rather than instruction, students begin to recognise relational assets such as peer solidarity, emotional intelligence, and mutual problem-solving, which act as protective factors for continuation.

v. Personal Development and Self-Recognition

At the individual level, fostering asset awareness among students can enhance self-efficacy, motivation, and persistence. Encouraging students to recognise their own strengths can counteract the effects of imposter syndrome and deficit-based self-perceptions (Holden et al., 2024). This aligns with research showing that self-awareness of resilience and capability is a critical mediator between engagement and continuation (Hartley, 2011). As this study found, students who reframed their challenges as evidence of strength, rather than weakness, were more likely to remain in higher education even when facing external pressures or low academic confidence.

Personal tutoring models that incorporate strengths-based reflection can support students in recognising their existing capabilities rather than focusing solely on academic deficits. Structured conversations that encourage students to reflect on prior successes, transferable skills, and coping strategies help develop academic self-efficacy and agency. Yearsley (2025) discusses the use of personal support diagrams with first year students to develop their awareness of existing and developing support networks. This approach can form part of an institutional personal tutoring policy and

allow for students to develop knowledge of their avenues for support and tutors an awareness of their tutees existing support networks and any potential shortfalls in support that can be developed.

Additionally, targeted workshops focusing on academic self-efficacy, imposter feelings, and confidence building can normalise self-doubt while highlighting personal strengths (Ramos and Wright-Mair, 2021). When framed through an asset-based lens, these initiatives can validate perseverance, emotional intelligence, and adaptive learning strategies as legitimate academic assets (Holden et al., 2024). Likewise, Tuero et al. (2024) suggest that wellbeing initiatives that frame resilience as a developable strength, rather than a personal deficit, can enhance emotional regulation and help-seeking behaviours. Programmes that integrate mindfulness, self-reflection, and peer discussion support students in recognising coping strategies they already employ, strengthening their capacity to remain engaged during periods of stress (Abulfaraj et al., 2024).

14.4 – Recommendations for Further Study – ‘okay, what comes next’?

As acknowledged, the discussion around retention in HE is not new, neither is the belief that student experience is important (Burke, 2019). The findings from this research have strengthened the conviction that causes of attrition are complex and the process of leaving university is a journey (Bradley, 2017). What has also been illuminated by the research, is the different avenues of support that individuals have that they are often unaware of (Breeze et al., 2020). Thus, there is a recommendation that further research is done into understanding and building asset-based awareness in students (Agdal et al., 2019). Which considers how early identification can be utilised to support interventions which support continuation (Almond, 2023; Lizzio and Wilson, 2013). There is also the need to consider how greater knowledge of transitions can support students when faced with catalyst events (Morgan, 2022). Additionally, there is a need to understand how the model and sub-models can be effectively utilised in university policy and practice, with perhaps further exploration of the models within other

institutions (Naeem et al., 2023). A further recommendation emerging from this research is that the Student Continuity Factors Model should remain adaptive and responsive to the evolving nature of higher education and student experience. While the current model captures a range of factors influencing continuation, the post-pandemic landscape has highlighted emerging factors, such as the increasing importance of digital engagement and digital accessibility in shaping student participation and retention (Gulzar et al., 2024). The flexibility of the model allows for the incorporation of emerging factors and changing student realities, supporting its continued relevance over time. Therefore, future iterations of the model could integrate further factors, including digital inclusion, as a more explicit dimensions within the framework. In doing so, the model can continue to evolve alongside contemporary research and student experiences, ensuring that it remains capable of capturing the dynamic and intersectional nature of continuation in changing educational contexts.

14.4.1 – How can the Student Continuity Factors Model be used by Institutions.

The Model can be utilised by institutions to support continuation by shifting the focus from why students leave to how they can be supported to stay. It bridges theory and practice by offering a structure that is both analytical and actionable, enabling higher education providers to recognise diversity, foster belonging, and design support systems that sustain students through the academic journey. Institutions can use the model as a diagnostic and developmental tool in several keyways.

- i. First, by mapping student experiences across the identified domains, demographic factors, belonging, engagement dynamics, and supportive influences, universities can identify potential sources of disengagement and tailor interventions that are proactive rather than reactive (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 2017). For example, students with caring responsibilities or commuter patterns may exhibit higher withdrawal risk, but the model highlights how targeted support, such as flexible learning options, peer networks, or

recognition of prior learning, can strengthen their sense of belonging and academic commitment. If this support is provided in advance rather than after struggles arise, this can develop resilience that could support students at times of need.

- ii. Second, the model facilitates cross-departmental collaboration by offering a shared conceptual language for staff in academic, pastoral, and administrative roles. This integration supports holistic case management approaches, ensuring that emotional, social, and academic needs are addressed cohesively rather than in isolation (Daily et al., 2025). The framework's asset-based orientation also encourages staff to identify and amplify students' strengths, such as motivation, resilience, or course engagement, thereby reframing institutional support from remediation to empowerment (O'Shea, 2016).
- iii. Third, the model can inform data-driven retention strategies and policy development. By embedding its categories within student analytics and wellbeing dashboards, universities can visualise patterns of engagement and disengagement across demographic groups, aligning intervention efforts with real-time insight. Importantly, this does not reduce students to data points; instead, it contextualises quantitative indicators within the qualitative complexity of student lives, promoting ethically responsible and person-centred practice (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

14.4.2 – Specific Recommendations

- The creation of an asset-based awareness tool that allows students to understand their own support systems and how they can develop and access these during their studies.

- To complete further research with the intention to understand how the models can be used alongside learner analytics to create targeted support and strategies that would allow for proactive interventions and early warning systems.
- To further understand the experiences of minority students or those who are ‘othered’ within universities by exploring their experiences in greater depth through qualitative research.
- To use existing technologies (such as Canvas) to integrate check points at times of identified transition, to gather useful data on potential at risk students, to allow for targeted support from student support services.
- To embed the model alongside other existing models such as the SET model to further inform pre arrival, induction, transition, continuous development and progression.
- To work with other institutions to discover the model’s suitability for wider policy initiatives within the UK and globally.
- To continually develop and refine the Student Continuity Factors Model and associated sub-models, by incorporating contemporary issues and emerging research on student experience to ensure the framework remains responsive to evolving higher education contexts.

14.5 – Final Synthesis: Toward a Holistic Understanding of Student Retention

This thesis concludes by reaffirming the importance of adopting a holistic, intersectional, and asset-based understanding of student retention in higher education. Through a realist constructivist lens, the study has shown that the factors influencing continuation are not simply structural, psychological, or institutional in isolation, but are co-constructed through the dynamic interaction of individual agency and contextual constraint. The focus on students who seriously considered withdrawal but ultimately

persisted has revealed the nuanced and often fragile processes of decision-making that underlie persistence. These students embody the tensions between vulnerability and resilience, disengagement and determination, and their experiences illuminate the *continuum of retention* that lies between persistence and departure.

By integrating insights from both the exploratory qualitative interviews and the confirmatory Q methodology phase, this study developed a Student Continuity Factors Model that recognises the multidimensional nature of student continuation. The model, and the four sub-models derived from it, can provide institutions with a nuanced tool for understanding how different configurations of risk and protection interact. Importantly, these findings move beyond the deficit discourses that have long dominated retention studies, replacing them with an asset-based awareness framework that highlights the strengths, experiences, and forms of capital that students bring to their studies (Reay, 2018). This framework invites institutions to view persistence not as a simple outcome of student effort, but as a relational and developmental process shaped through inclusive pedagogy, supportive environments, and meaningful engagement.

The realist constructivist positioning of this research has enabled the bridging of theory and lived experience, grounding conceptual insight within authentic student narratives (Bogna et al., 2020). This epistemological stance has produced findings that are both empirically grounded and theoretically generative, reaffirming that knowledge of retention must capture both *what is* and *how it is experienced*. By situating the perspective of students who persisted despite considering leaving within the broader retention discourse, the study offers an original contribution to knowledge, as it identifies the transitional spaces where intervention can be most effective, and where belonging, resilience, and purpose are formed or lost.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the reframing of retention as a shared responsibility between students and institutions, where success is sustained through understanding, flexibility, and empowerment. The holistic model developed through this research provides both a conceptual framework and a practical tool to inform institutional policy, student support design, and future research. In advancing an asset-based and intersectional vision of higher education, this study advocates for systems that not only prevent attrition but actively cultivate student flourishing affirming that

every learner possesses the capacity, capital, and resilience to succeed when supported within an environment that recognises and values their whole identity.

Chapter 15: References

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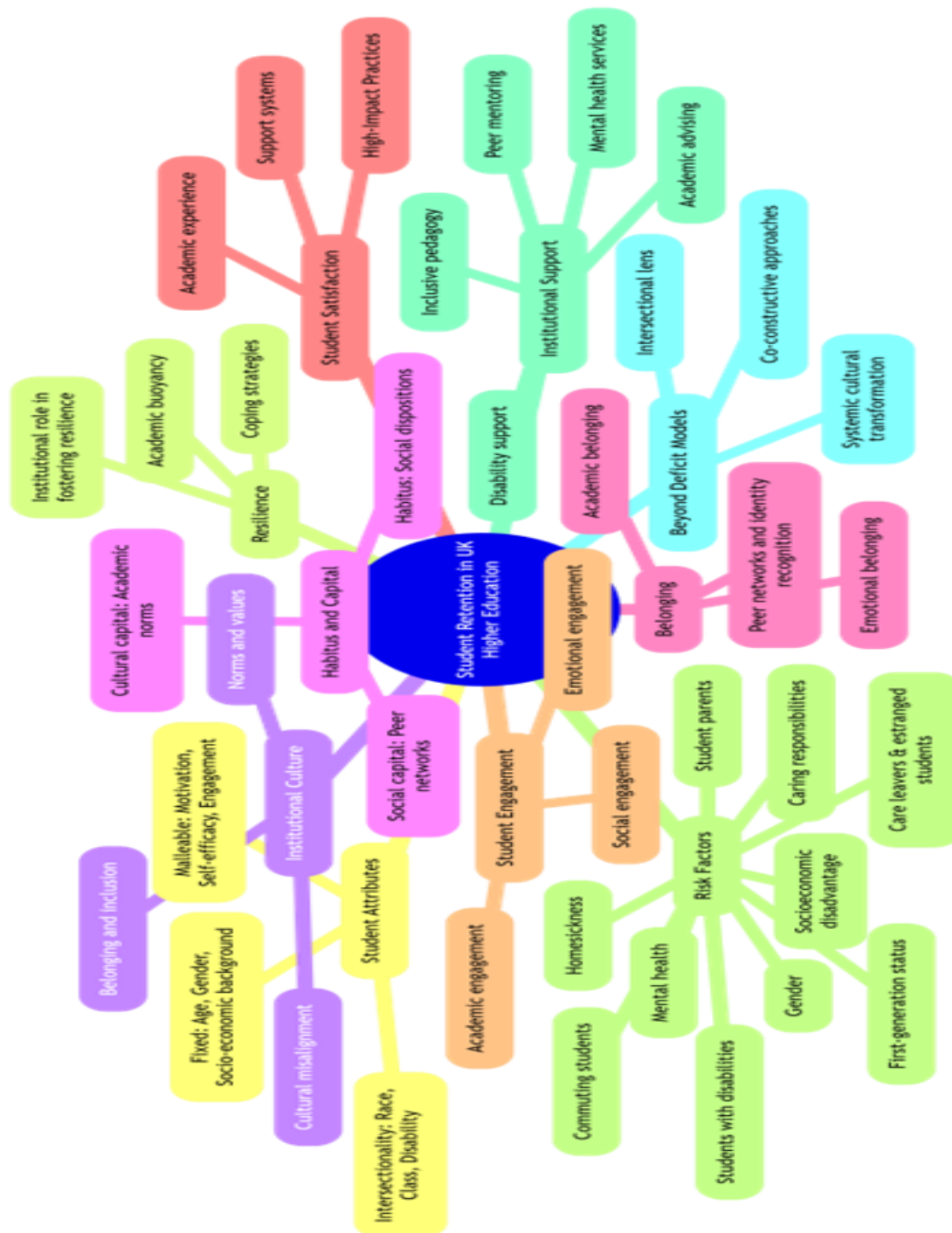
Appendix i – Opening Paragraph for Phase One Interviews

“This interview is focused on your experiences of being a university student at a time when you seriously considered leaving your course but ultimately chose to continue. Many students experience moments of doubt, challenge, or uncertainty during their studies, and this research aims to better understand those experiences from the perspective of those who thought about leaving themselves. Although I am focused on why you wanted to leave and what ultimately led to you remaining, I would also like to hear about previous experiences with education which may have shaped your university experience.

I’d like you to tell your story in your own way and in your own words. You don’t need to structure your answer or focus on particular events unless you want to. I’m interested in what stands out as important to you, how you made sense of that period, and what helped you to keep going. I may ask some follow-up questions to help me understand your experiences more fully, but there is no expectation to share anything you are uncomfortable discussing.

To start, if could you tell me about your journey into university, including previous education, taking me to the point where you first began to think about whether you wanted to continue or leave your studies. I may interject with a question but feel free to return back to it if you are involved in the narrative.”

Appendix ii – Interview Themes



Appendix iii – Example of Reflexive Interview Narrative

The extract below is taken from one of the interview transcripts alongside the concurrent voice-recorded reflexive notes captured during the interview process. These notes were recorded to document my immediate reflections regarding the interaction, the developing narrative, and the decisions I made in relation to questioning and prompting. The process formed part of an ongoing reflexive approach intended to increase transparency regarding my role within the interview process and to critically consider how my assumptions, interpretations, and responses may have influenced the developing discussion. As demonstrated within the extract, the conversation remained primarily participant-led, with the participant's experiences, emotions, and priorities shaping the direction and depth of discussion. Rather than rigidly adhering to predetermined questions, I used the interview themes flexibly, allowing participant narratives to guide the prompts and follow-up questions that were introduced. This approach aligned with the narrative interviewing principles underpinning phase one, where preserving the participant's meaning-making and storytelling was prioritised over imposing a fixed interview structure.

There were occasions during the interviews where I initially began formulating questions linked to themes that had emerged strongly within previous interviews or within the wider literature. However, the use of instant messenger interviewing created a space in which I was able to pause, reflect, and reconsider whether introducing those questions at that moment would support or potentially disrupt the participant's narrative. In the example below, although I recognised links to broader themes relating to motivation and persistence, my reflective notes demonstrate an awareness that the participant appeared emotionally focused on their experiences of feeling unsupported and negatively treated within the course environment. Consequently, rather than redirecting the conversation towards previously identified thematic interests, I chose to allow the participant additional space to continue exploring these experiences before revisiting wider themes later in the discussion. This process highlights the reflexive and iterative nature of the interviewing approach adopted within the study. It also demonstrates how the asynchronous and text-based nature of instant messenger interviewing supported more deliberate consideration of prompts and responses than may have been possible within more immediate verbal interviewing contexts. The voice-recorded reflections therefore formed part of an active strategy to reduce the risk of prematurely imposing researcher assumptions or overly steering participant narratives, whilst still ensuring that areas relevant to the research aims were explored across the interview process.

Interview data	Reflective dialogue
Participant: Haha yeah it was during more than one. All of them at some point I thought of leaving.	
Sarah: So were your reasons for wanting to leave different each time or similar?	See if it was differing factors – ideas for exploring themes
Participant: There was some differences but lots of similarity. The biggest thing I struggle with is the elitism that instructors hold over students. The "I'm better than you because you're just the student and I'm the teacher."	Staff relationships
Participant: I also struggle to stay engaged if I don't see the value in what is being taught or if they do not explain why we need to know certain things. The "you need to know it because it's on the test" doesn't work for me. I am definitely the problem student that always challenges the instructor to explain why.	
Participant: yeah this last bit of schooling was very frustrating for me. I am a [redacted] and I wanted to become a teacher because I love to share my passion with [subject] to the next generation. But all I got from my professors was a feeling that I needed them more than they needed me, and without them I am nothing and will not get a job and make money. Trust me if I was in it for the money I would stay in [current role] and make double that of a teacher.	
Sarah: Yeah makes lots of sense, how do you think you have managed that your expectations have not been matched by the tutors teaching?	Prompt on expectations
Participant: I think in the end I had a goal in sight and I just had to jump through the hoops to get a piece of paper. I raised a lot of issues with the programme leader in my first semester about the programme but when I saw there was not going to be any change I just resolved myself with I just had 2 more semesters and then I am done.	
Sarah: So it was by focusing on the ends that you kept going? Did you have any support with the decision to carry on?	
Participant: Yeah massive support from my family. Without them I would probably have left this last semester. The course is a complete joke, most of my cohort agree on that. But they	Still seems angry at the circumstances of the course – allow them to explore this as seem to have been shut down by course tutors.

just kept saying, just a bit more and you will never have to go back to university again!	
Participant: I stayed in and finished it up. Which I am thankful that I did for sure.	
Sarah: So you are happy that you stuck it out?	
Participant: Haha yeah for sure. Lots of meetings at the pub with cohort members to complain and talk about how it all sucked.	
But Definitely happy I stuck it out.	
Sarah: Do you think it's impacted how you are as a teacher? For example, has it made you more aware of engagement?	Validate their feelings
Participant: Yes for sure. I always ensure to make sure my students know the value in what they are learning and I try to treat them as equals. Even if they are only 13-14 years old that goes a long way. Some of these kids come from very harsh and unstable households so treating them with respect and value is huge.	
Sarah: That sounds like your personal struggles with the course may have had a positive effect in an unexpected way	Try to bring it back to what kept them going
Participant: Haha isn't that the truth. That's what me and peers always talked about. The level of instruction we should be getting should be higher then anywhere else.	
Participant: Yes for sure. It has taught me how I do not want to be a teacher.	
Sarah: Could we maybe touch on how you felt when you were thinking about leaving?	Go back to exploring feelings
Sarah: Did it affect how you saw yourself?	
Participant: Yeah I felt very frustrated and angry. Mad at the university for not taking action when a lot of us students spoke up to the quality of instruction, or lack there of.	
Participant: Yeah it made me think I was not good enough for the program or not as smart as my peers.	
Sarah: So you felt that university support was practically non-existent in terms of complaints procedure?	Talk about support
Sarah: So was finishing also perhaps a way of proving that you were good enough?	Go back to validate feelings – don't jump in to fast
Participant: Yes for sure. There was no support from the chair or Dean. One of our lecturers sent out a survey on his course to us and we all tore him and his course apart because it was a joke and he got very defensive and basically said it was us not him.	

Yeah I one of the other reasons I wanted to finish was to prove to others, specifically my parents, and myself that I can and did do it.	
Sarah: Now that you are finished how to feel about the whole experience?	
Participant: Glad I'm done and never want to go back. I hate interacting with that group of people. The elitism is just too much for me. I would rather see my son become a [redacted] then go to university. But that is up to him!	
Sarah: Do you think there are ways that you could have been better supported?	
Participant: Yeah I think if the program would have been more open to constructive criticism it would have been better and better for future students. It wasn't just me, I may have been the most vocal but lots of people in my program were not happy with it.	
Sarah: When you were thinking of leaving did you discuss it with anyone at the university?	
Participant: No not really. There was one prof who was good that I expressed some of my frustrations with but there was nothing he could do	
Sarah: So your thoughts about leaving were mainly discussed with your partner?	
Participant: Yeah and my peers	

Appendix iv – Deductive Coding Framework

Code	Definition	Includes	Excludes	Theoretical Basis
Academic Integration	Connection to academic study and learning	Teaching, tutors, confidence	Peer belonging	Tinto
Social Integration	Social connection within university	Friendships, peer groups	Academic engagement	Tinto
Belonging	Feeling accepted and included	Sense of fit, inclusion	Surface interaction	Thomas
Institutional Support	Formal university support	Pastoral, academic, financial support	Peer support	Bean
Engagement	Active participation	Attendance, involvement	Passive presence	Kuh
External Influences	Outside pressures affecting study	Finance, work, caring	Academic factors	Bean
Personal Motivation	Internal drive to continue	Goals, aspirations	External pressure	Persistence literature
Resilience	Capacity to navigate challenge	Coping, adaptation	Institution-only factors	Resilience literature
Continuation Decision-Making	Processes of staying	Near withdrawal decisions	General experience	Retention theory

Appendix v – Initial Q-Set Statements

1. It is important that my beliefs are reflected by the university
2. My values are reflected by my faculty
3. Seeing people that represent me in my school is important to me
4. Seeing people that represent me in my university is important to me
5. My parent's support is important to me
6. My parents were involved in my choice of university
7. My living situation supports my studies
8. Having friends within my course helps my studies
9. The location of the university was part of my decision to study here
10. It was important to visit the university before making my choice to study here
11. I feel at home in this city
12. My grades are meeting my expectations
13. University life is meeting my expectations
14. Having a job is important to me
15. I have clear career aspirations
16. My future career is linked to my studies
17. My job impacts upon my study time
18. My employment motivates me to study
19. People I work with support me in my studies
20. My economic status has an impact upon my studies
21. My parents/carers financial support is needed for me to study

22. I have thought about leaving university
23. Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my studies
24. My mental health has impacted upon my studies
25. I feel supported with my academic needs
26. My physical health is a concern
27. My health needs impact on my study experience
28. Having friends on the course supports my study
29. I have used student advice and wellbeing services when I have been struggling
30. I have doubts on my ability to study at this level
31. I have reached out to my personal tutor when having doubts about university
32. I have a good relationship with at least one of my lecturers
33. I have sort out support from academic services
34. I feel as though I belong at university
35. I am happy with my living arrangements
36. I feel that I am able to engage fully in university life
37. My course has met my expectations
38. The university is what I expected
39. My course of study was my first choice
40. This university was my first choice
41. Being a carer for children has a negative impact on my study time
42. Being a carer for other adults has a negative impact on my study time
43. Being the first person in my family to attend university impacts on my study
44. I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my life

Appendix vi – Final Q-Set Statements

1. It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration of the university
2. It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area
3. Most university spaces are inclusive of my personal beliefs
4. Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me
5. Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me
6. My family's support is important to me
7. It was important to me that my family were involved in my choice of university
8. My living situation supports my studies
9. Having friends within my course helps my studies
10. The location of the university was part of my decision to study here
11. It was important to visit the university before making my choice to study here
12. I feel at home in this city
13. My grades are meeting my expectations
14. University life is meeting my expectations
15. It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of Race, Religion, Gender, Disability, Sexuality, Culture.
16. Having a job whilst studying is important to me
17. Having future career aspirations supports my continued studies
18. Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies
19. Having a job does/ would impact negatively upon my study time
20. My employment motivates me to study
21. People I work with on the course support me in my continued studies
22. My economic status has an impact upon my studies
23. My family's financial support is needed for me to study

24. University study is what I expected
25. Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my studies
26. My mental health has impacted upon my studies
27. I feel supported with my academic needs
28. My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my studies
29. My health needs have/do impact on my study experience
30. I would know how to access wellbeing support if needed
31. It is important to me that I know where to find academic support
32. I feel able to reach out to my personal tutor if having doubts about university
33. I believe that it is important that I have a good relationship with at least one of my lecturers/tutors
34. It's important that I feel I belong within my course community
35. I found my course induction helpful for my university experience
36. Insecure finances would/does have a negative impact on my continued studies
37. my living arrangements are important to my continued study
38. Feeling that I am able to engage fully in university social life is important to me
39. Being able to engage in academic pursuits is important to me?
40. My course has met my expectations
41. The university experience is what I expected
42. There are factors in my home life that impact on my study time
43. There are factors in my home life that impact on my ability to engage in social aspects of university life.
44. I think that being the first person in my family to attend university does/would affect my studies
45. I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my life.

Appendix vii – Example of Completed Q-Sort (Paper)

	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
	Being homesick is something that I have struggled with during my studies	My employment is linked to my course and motivates me to study	My future career studies	My course has met my expectations	This university was my first choice	I have reached out to my personal tutor when I was about university	I feel supported with my academic needs	I have a good relationship with at least one of my lecturers	Having friends on the course supports my study	My parent's support is important to me	I feel at home in this city
	I have doubts on my ability to study at this level	People I work with support me in my studies	Being a career for children has a negative impact on my study time	My values are reflected by my faculty	I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my life	My health needs impact on my study experience	I feel as though I belong at university	Having friends within my course helps my studies	I have clear career aspirations	My living situation supports my studies	The location of the university was part of my decision to study here
		University life is meeting my expectations	Being the first person in my family to attend university impacts on my study	I have sort out support from academic services	Seeing people that represent me in my university is important to me	The university is what I expected	Seeing people that represent me in my school is important to me	Having a job is important to me	My parents/careers financial support is needed for me to study	My grades are meeting my expectations	
			My physical health is a concern and impacts on my studies	It is important that my beliefs are reflected by the university	My economic status has an impact upon my studies	My parents were involved in my choice of university	I feel that I am able to engage fully in university life	I am happy with my living arrangements	My course of study was my first choice		
					My job impacts upon my study time	I have thought about leaving university	It was important to visit the university before making my choice to study here				
						Being a career for other adults has a negative impact on my study time					
						I have used student advice and wellbeing services when I have been struggling					
						My mental health has impacted upon my studies					

Least like how I think

Most like how I think

Appendix viii – Example of Completed Q-Sort (Online)

	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
1. It is important that my religious beliefs are a consideration of the university	20. My employment motivates me to study	37. My living arrangements are important to my continued study	21. People I work with on the course support me in my continued studies	23. My family's financial support is needed for me to study	22. My economic status has an impact upon my studies	12. I feel at home in this city	11. It was important to visit the university before making my choice to study here	16. Having a job while studying is important to me	18. Enjoying my course is important to my continued studies	17. Having future career aspirations supports my continued studies
4. Seeing people that look like me in my subject area is important to me	5. Seeing people that look like me in my university is important to me	38. Feeling that I am able to engage fully in university social life is important to me	42. There are factors in my home life that impact on my study time	44. I think that being the first person in my family to attend university does/would affect my studies	25. Being home sick is something that I have struggled with during my studies	9. Having friends within my course helps my studies	14. University life is meaning to my expectations	31. It is important to me that I know where to find academic support	6. My family's support is important to me	2. It is important that my values are reflected within my subject area
	8. My living situation supports my studies	3. Most university spaces are inclusive of my personal beliefs	29. My health needs have/do impact on my study experience	15. It is important to me that the content of my course is inclusive of Race, Religion, Gender, Disability, Sexuality, Culture.	7. It was important to me that my family were involved in my choice of university	35. I found my course induction helpful for my university experience	10. The location of the university was part of my decision to study here	40. My course has met my expectations	27. I feel supported with my academic needs	
		19. Having a job does/would impact negatively upon my study time	43. There are factors in my home life that impact on my ability to engage in social aspects of university life.	24. University study is what I expected	34. It's important that I feel I belong within my course community	32. I feel able to reach out to a lecturer if having doubts about university	30. I would know how to access wellbeing support if needed	13. My grades are meeting my expectations		
				28. My physical health being a concern would have a negative impact on my studies	26. My mental health has impacted upon my studies	33. I believe that it is important that I have a good relationship with at least one of my lecturers/tutors				
					36. Insecure finances would/does have a negative impact on my continued studies					
					39. Being able to engage in academic pursuits is important to me?					
					41. I can balance my university requirements with the demands of my life?					
Least like how I think										
Most like how I think										

Appendix ix – Ethical Approval – Phase One

Dear Sarah

With reference to your application for Ethical Approval

Sarah Yearsley, PGR - ‘Redemption and retention: exploring the experiences of the ‘saved students’ those who have chosen to remain in university despite seriously considering leaving.’ (Philip Carey)

UREC decision: Approved

UREC reference: 19/NAH/037

The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) has considered the above application by proportionate review. I am pleased to inform you that ethical approval has been granted and the study can now commence.

Approval is given on the understanding that:

- any adverse reactions/events which take place during the course of the project are reported to the Committee immediately by emailing researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk;
- any unforeseen ethical issues arising during the course of the project will be reported to the Committee immediately emailing researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk;
- the LJMU logo is used for all documentation relating to participant recruitment and participation e.g. poster, information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires. The LJMU logo can be accessed at <http://www2.ljmu.ac.uk/corporatecommunications/60486.htm>;
- The study consent forms, data, information etc. will be accessible on request to a student’s supervisory team and/or to responsible members of Liverpool John Moores University for monitoring, auditing and data authenticity purposes.

Where any substantive amendments are proposed to the protocol or study procedures further ethical approval must be sought [REDACTED]

Applicants should note that where relevant appropriate gatekeeper / management permission must be obtained prior to the study commencing at the study site concerned.

Please note that ethical approval is given for a period of five years from the date granted (24/09/2019) and therefore the expiry date for this project will be 5 years from the approval date. An application for extension of approval must be submitted if the project continues after this date.

Yours sincerely



[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix x - Approved Proposed Amendment to Ethics Clearance

Subject: Approved Proposed Amendment to ethics clearance- Yearsley 19NAH037

Dear [REDACTED]

Can you please email the notification of ethical approval for study amendments to Sarah Yearlsey.

Sarah – thank you for notifying UREC.

Best wishes

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Research Governance Manager & Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Appendix xi – Ethical Approval – Phase Two

Dear Sarah

Thank you for registering your study as minimal risk.

Exploring students' perceptions of attrition risk factors: a student-staff collaborative research project on developing a holistic model of undergraduate retention

UREC opinion: Favourable ethical opinion

UREC reference: 23/EDN/016

Research Governance Assessment: Approved – the study may commence.

Approval is given on the understanding that:

- The study is conducted in accordance with the Minimal Ethical Risk Guiding Principles
- Any adverse reactions/events which take place during the course of the project are reported to the Committee immediately by emailing
■
- Any unforeseen ethical issues arising during the course of the project will be reported to the Committee immediately ■
- The LJMU logo is used for all documentation relating to participant recruitment and participation e.g. poster, information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires. The study consent forms, data, information etc. will be accessible on request to a student's supervisory team and/or to responsible members of Liverpool John Moores University for monitoring, auditing and data authenticity purposes.
- Where any substantive amendments are proposed to the protocol or study procedures that change the associated risk from minimal to low risk (use the decision tool to establish the associated risk), the investigators must complete an ethics application form describing all aspects of the study and submit for ethical review and approval as required.

- Where relevant appropriate gatekeeper / management permission must be obtained prior to the study commencing at the study site concerned.

Please note that approval is given for a period of five years from the date granted and therefore the expiry date for this project will be 5 years from the approval date. An application for extension of approval must be submitted if the project continues after this date.

Best wishes

UREC

Appendix xii – Publications Developed Through the Study Outputs

Yearsley, S. (2025). The Use of Personal Support Diagrams to Develop Asset-Based Awareness in First-Year Undergraduate Students. In *Creative Approaches to Personal Tutoring and Academic Advising: A Practical Guide of Methods, Activities, and Curriculum Design*. (Eds.) Beckingham, S., & Garnham, W. (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003651659>

Yearsley, S., and Carey, P. (2023). Understanding attrition risk factors: using Q methodology to evaluate student perceptions of their university experience. [Final report]. 2023 Explorance Faculty Research Grants. Available at:
<https://www.bluenotesgroup.com/recipients-of-2023-explorance-faculty-research-grants-for-bluenotes-community/>

Yearsley, S., and Carey, P. (2023, July 31st). Understanding attrition risk factors: using Q methodology to evaluate student perceptions of their university experience. [Conference presentation]. Bluenotes GLOBAL 2023 Conference, Louisville, KY, July 30 - August 2, 2023. Video Available: [Exploring Students' Perceptions of Attrition Risk Factors: A Research Project on Developing a Model of Undergraduate Retention on Vimeo](#). Slides Available: [Exploring-Students-Perceptions-of-Attrition-Risk-Factors-A-Student-Staff-Collaborative-Research-Project-on-Developing-a-Holistic-Model-of-Undergraduate-Retention.pdf](#)