

Tracking Transition: Issues in Asynchronous E-Mail Interviewing

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Abstract: The purpose and focus of this paper is twofold. The first concerns the methodological issues involved with tracking a mobile population, namely students graduating from university; whose patterns of residence may for some time be transitory in nature. The second is to provide some details from a small sample of graduates on the issues raised in the transition from undergraduate study.

The paper will tackle the two issues in order. First, an examination of recent methods of qualitative data collection which the development of information technology, in the form of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), has allowed is undertaken. Second, the results of using one of these techniques (asynchronous e-mail) to gather information on the transition from undergraduate study are reported. In addition, advantages and disadvantages that can arise in the use of these new techniques are reported.

This paper engages with the overall theme of transition in a number of ways. First, the students are in a process of transition in status; from undergraduate to graduate. Second, in many cases, they may well be in transition in terms of location; from the university location either back home, or away to a new location. Third, they are in transition in terms of activity; either seeking or into employment or engaging in further study at a higher level. Finally, they may be in transition in relation to developing new social networks.

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1. Introduction

This paper draws upon data collected for the ESRC/TLRP project: What is Learned at University: The Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning, hereafter the SOMUL project (BRENNAN & JARY, 2005). [1]

Table 1 provides a summary of the overall focus of the project, while Table 2 outlines the 3 main phases of the project.

| Three subject areas | Three ways in which learning is mediated | Three conceptions of learning outcomes |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • biosciences • business studies • sociology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by formal educational curricula and assessment • by the principles of curriculum organisation • by the social context of study | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as cognitive development • as academic and professional development • as personal identity and conception of self |

Table 1: A summary of the SOMUL project

| |
|---|
| <p>Phase 1 (January 2004 to December 2004)</p> <p>Literature review, contextualising subject cultures and contexts (including benchmark statements), selection of cases, negotiating access and development of research instruments.</p> <p>Phase 2 (October 2004 to May 2007)</p> <p>Empirical investigation of learning outcomes and their social and organisational mediation involving: 5 case studies in each of 3 subjects using surveys, focus groups and individual interviews to follow up "entering" and "exiting" cohorts over a period of approximately two years, plus interviews with teaching staff</p> <p>Phase 3 (April 2007 to December 2007)</p> <p>Assessment of the implications for policy and practice at national institutional and departmental levels.</p> |
|---|

Table 2: The main phases of the SOMUL project [2]

The project could be considered as a quasi-longitudinal design in that two cohorts were tracked. The first cohort (Entering) comprised students in the first year of their undergraduate studies in 2004; and a second cohort (Exiting) comprised students who were in their third and final year of their undergraduate studies in 2004. Both cohorts were subject to two waves of data collection: the Entering cohort first wave of data collection (Entering 1) was carried out four to six months after entry and the second wave (Entering 2) approximately four to six months after the transition to their final year of graduate study. For the Exiting cohort the first wave of data collection (Exiting 1) was carried out four to six months into their final year, and the second wave (Exiting 2) approximately 12 to 18 months after the transition from undergraduate to graduate status. [3]

Table 3 provides details of data collection from the student cohorts. In addition to the student data, a number of staff interviews were also undertaken at each site.

| | Exiting 1 | Entering 1 | Exiting 2 | Entering 2 |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Student Interviews | X | X | X | X |
| Questionnaires | X | X | X | X |
| Student Focus Groups | X | X | | |

Table 3: Data collection in the SOMUL project [4]

In terms of the fieldwork undertaken, Table 4 provides details of the total number of interviews at each of the Bioscience sites. Data collection, as noted in Table 3, included both qualitative and quantitative elements. In this paper, qualitative data will be presented which was gathered from the Bioscience Exiting cohort between 12 and 18 months after graduation (Exiting 2). Data collection will be examined in more detail below.

| Case | Entering 1 | Entering 2 | Exiting 1 | Exiting 2 | Focus groups | Staff |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Ulleskelf | 5 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Warthill | 8 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| Langtoft | 4 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Fridaythorpe | 5 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Givendale | 6 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 5 |

Table 4: Total number of interviews at each site for the Biosciences [5]

However, before looking in detail at data collection and methodological issues it is perhaps useful to define more fully the concept of transition as applied in this study. A dictionary defines the noun "transition" as either "a passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another (or) ... a movement, development, or evolution from one form, stage, or style to another" (MERRIAM-WEBSTER, 2008). When this is applied to individuals entering, experiencing and leaving university it can be seen that a number of transitions may be taking place. SHILDRICK and MACDONALD (2007) provide an overview of recent sociological use of the concept of transition, while BUCHMANN (1989) and MODELL (1989) look more specifically at the transition to adulthood. [6]

In the entry phase, there may be an academic transition from one style or form of learning at school or college (which may have been highly directed); to another at university where the emphasis is much more on independent or self-directed learning. There may also be a measure of social transition in terms of movement from existing peer and social networks towards the development of new or expanded peer and social networks. This may also include a transition in terms of location, accommodation and/or living arrangements. The transitions into university are often studied under the umbrella title of the "first year experience"

which covers research into the academic and social transitions faced upon entry to university (for overviews for the US see KOCH, 2001; FELDMAN, 2005; for Australia see KRAUSE, HARTLEY, JAMES & MCINNIS, 2005; and for the UK see WALLACE, 2003; YORKE & LONGDEN, 2007). Drawing on the work of TINTO (1993) it could be argued that successful academic and social transitions lead to successful academic and social integration. While the transitions that a student experiences during the course of their studies have been the subject of a number of studies, with perhaps the best known those of BECKER, GEER, and HUGHES (1968, 1995); ASTIN (1977, 1993) and PASCARELLA and TEREZINI (1991, 2005). [7]

There is also an extensive literature on the transitions individuals experience on leaving university (the main focus of this paper), much of which focuses on the transition to employment. A recent paper by MOREAU and LEATHWOOD (2006) suggested that the transition to graduate employment in the form of opportunities available in the UK could be influenced by a range of factors which included: social class, gender (see also PURCELL & PITCHER, 1996), age, ethnicity, disability and university attended. The influence of social background on the transition from education to work was also reported by OPHEIM (2007). The interaction between the transition to employment and the transition to independent living and family formation are linked in a paper which compares graduate labour market entry in a number of European countries (WOLBERS, 2007). WOLBERS suggests that transitions to independent living through leaving the parental home are influenced by the degree of security in relation to employment status at the time of labour market entry.

"The transition rates into independence, marriage and parenthood are highest for graduates who are working full-time in a permanent job, followed by those working full-time in a temporary job and those working part-time. Graduates, whose employment status just after graduation is unemployment, are least likely to experience events in the transition from youth to adulthood." (WOLBERS, 2007, p.490) [8]

However, as noted the transition to employment is only one of a number of possible transitions which the individual may experience upon leaving university and as noted above these are not necessarily mutually exclusive events, but often exhibit a degree of interaction between the various transitions. [9]

2. Data Collection

In the SOMUL project (BRENNAN & JARY, 2005; BRENNAN & OSBORNE, 2005; HOUSTON & LEBEAU, 2006; RICHARDSON & EDMUNDS, 2007) the semi-structured personal interview, carried out face to face (F2F) was a major component as is common for much qualitative social research (HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1997). For all three subjects, individual F2F interviews were conducted with the Entering cohort in their first year and then again in their final

year; and, the Exiting cohort in their final year.¹ In the case of the Exiting 2 interviews, those for Sociology and for Business Studies were conducted via the telephone; while those for the Biosciences were conducted by e-mail. More details will be provided below on the rationale for the adoption of different methodologies. [10]

Overall, conducting F2F interviews and the problems of organisation raised a number of logistical issues. Calls for participants, initial and follow up contacts plus the organisation of the time and place of the interviews all took considerable time and involved negotiations carried out by phone and by e-mail. In most cases this was initially through an intermediary in the form of the "case contact". The case contact was also invaluable in providing a private room at the institution to conduct the F2F interviews. The actual date in the academic calendar, and even the specific days in the week were all significant in scheduling the limited number of days in which interviews could take place. Given similarities in academic timetabling in terms of the timing of assessments and the semester or term beginning and end; the fact that all of this had to be coordinated across five sites meant that this was an arduous task which could only be accomplished with a considerable degree of support from the case contact and other "gatekeepers" at case study institutions. [11]

In the case of the interviews which were planned to be conducted with students from the Exiting 2 cohort, the personal face to face interview as utilised at all other stages in the project was deemed to be unsuitable. There were two main reasons for this decision: the interviews were scheduled to take place around 12 to 18 months after the participants had graduated from university and there was no way of predicting where the participants would be located; and, the costs involved would have made the process prohibitive and extremely time consuming. After discussions amongst the SOMUL research team, it was felt that if possible telephone interviews would be preferable as a medium to conduct the Exiting 2 interviews. This was the method adopted by the Sociology and Business Studies researchers. However, for the Biosciences stream, tentative and informal discussions between the researcher and some students at each of the case sites indicated that the possibility of telephone interviews received a lukewarm response. One reason given was that contact by mobile phone was seen as infringing on privacy and personal space in a way that an e-mail exchange would not. And as will be noted below, the use of e-mail could empower respondents by allowing them to choose when to respond. [12]

The selection process for the Bioscience Exiting 2 interviews was as follows: first, all those who had participated in earlier interviews and focus groups at each of the case sites were contacted at the e-mail address they had supplied to the researcher as a result of their previous participation and asked if they would be willing to continue their engagement with project. An outline of the areas of interest and topics to be covered was provided. Given the ambivalent response noted above, Bioscience respondents were asked for their preference in terms of

¹ As noted in Table 3, focus groups were also utilised as a method of data collection for each cohort in the first wave.

contact medium: telephone or mobile, text, paper-based or e-mail. It was hoped that this would maximise responses. However, the response was somewhat disappointing with only nine positive responses, and of those, seven requested e-mail, while two requested a paper based medium.² As noted in Table 4, no responses for Exiting 2 were received from one institution (Langtoft). In an attempt to increase participation, all those who had provided contact details for the Exiting 1 survey were then contacted by e-mail. This did not result in positive responses. A further call was included in the Exiting 2 survey which was posted out to the home address of all graduates from programmes of interest at each case site. While responses to the survey were low, the call for interview participants again received no positive responses.³ [13]

In one respect, and as noted, the responses rate from previous interviewees was low and from the additional survey respondents non-existent. However, it is worth noting that a response rate of around 35 per cent was obtained from those who had previously taken part in an interview as part of the project and the fact that this contact was both possible and positive between 12 to 18 months after graduation was encouraging. In terms of a schedule for the Exiting 2 interviews, consultation amongst the research team produced a semi-structured interview schedule and this was then adapted slightly to produce a schedule to be applied by e-mail and also by paper for the nine Bioscience respondents. However, before looking in detail at the structure and process of conducting the e-mail interview, it is instructive to examine some existing research on the method. [14]

3. A Review of Relevant Methodological Issues

A useful starting point is provided by MEHO (2006) who summarises a range of research, both methodological and empirical, on the use of e-mail as a data collection technique and also provides a number of recommendations for conducting e-mail interviews. For MEHO, the "online asynchronous in-depth interview is, ... semi-structured in nature and involves multiple e-mail exchanges between the interviewer and interviewee over an extended period of time" (2006, p.1284). [15]

In reviewing the literature, MEHO makes a distinction between methodological and non-methodological studies. In the case of the former, MEHO suggests that FOSTER (1994) was the first to examine the use of e-mail as a method of social inquiry. Other studies which sought to provide methodological guidance in the technique include PERSICHITTE, YOUNG and THARP (1997) and MURRAY and SIXSMITH (1998). In the case of the latter (non-methodological), MEHO provides references to a number of studies (for example: KENNEDY, 2000; KARCHMER, 2001; LEHU, 2004; MURRAY & HARRISON, 2004) which utilised e-mail interviewing as a data collection method in a variety of contexts. Indeed, she suggest that such was the increase in e-mail interviewing that the citations in 2003 and

2 With the exception of Table 6, responses will be reported for the seven e-mail respondents, however, differences between paper and e-mail responses will be noted where appropriate.

3 The total number of telephone interviews conducted in the Sociology stream was 11, while for the Business Studies stream it was 12.

2004 equal the numbers for all previous citations back to 1994. In addition, MEHO suggests that while many of the studies before 2003 were methodological in nature; most conducted since 2003 have not addressed methodological issues suggesting that the e-mail interview is seen as a viable tool for qualitative research (2006, p.1285). [16]

A number of researchers outline the benefits of asynchronous e-mail interviews: e-mail can be extremely cost effective (MANN & STEWART, 2000; O'CONNOR & MADGE, 2001); it can reach large or geographically dispersed samples; it keeps transcribing costs to a minimum; and, perhaps most importantly, due to the asynchronous nature it eliminates the need for interview times and allows a number of interviews to be ongoing at the one time (SELWYN & ROBSON, 1998; BAMPTON & COWTON, 2002; MEHO, 2006). In relation to challenges, MEHO recognises that variation in response times can be an issue and that the time for exchanges between researcher and participant can fluctuate widely. In addition, follow ups may take a number of exchanges to resolve. However, according to MANN and STEWART (2000) researchers are divided about the success of asynchronous non-standard interviews. HODKINSON (2000) found the medium to be excessively structured and formal and never felt he had achieved the interaction experienced when conducting F2F interviews. While MANN (cited in MANN & STEWART, 2000, p.77) was convinced that semi-structured interviews conducted sequentially had allowed both the participants and herself to explore their own agendas. For an overview of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in the research process see CHEN and HINTON (1999). [17]

Specifically in relation to the overall time period of the process, the effect on participants appears contradictory (MEHO, 2006). Some researchers suggest that when communication stretched over a long period of time, participants experienced a degree of positive affirmation (BOWKER & TUFFIN, 2004; WALTHER, 1996); while other suggest that the longer it takes to complete the process the higher the likelihood of frustration or eventual drop-out on behalf of participants (HODGSON, 2004). [18]

In terms of the quality of the data obtained, DENSCOMBE (2003); MEHO and TIBBO (2003) and MURRAY (2004) concluded that the quality of responses were much the same as that gathered by face to face interviews. In a comparison of a mixed mode of delivery (all e-mail, and e-mail with varying aspects sent by paper against a control group of all paper) for a survey of university faculty; SCHAEFER and DILLMAN (1998) found that while no significant difference in response rates was noted, e-mail responses were returned significantly faster. In addition, e-mail responses were more complete particularly in response to open-ended questions and also the responses were longer than those provided by paper.⁴ As noted by MANN and STEWART (2000) these are qualities that are surely to be valued by qualitative researchers. [19]

4 The better quality in terms of detail and length of response for e-mail in comparison with paper was confirmed in this study.

However, using a different subject group (staff of five US government agencies), COUPER, BLAIR and TRIPLETT (1999) obtained a 71 per cent response rate by mail, but only a 43 per cent response rate by e-mail. Further, different patterns of response were received from different agencies. A number of explanations were suggested for the differences in response rates including: the degree of familiarity with the technology; the degree to which participants actually used e-mail to communicate on a day to day basis; and, technical issues with the size and use of attachments. Despite these difficulties, COUPER et al. remained optimistic about the potential of e-mail as an alternative to paper based surveys. [20]

Moreover, CURASI (2001) cautions that as in other mediums, quality often depends on who is doing the interview; and who the interviewee is. Finally, MEHO (2006) suggests that e-mail interviewing can be empowering to the participant in that it allows them to maintain control over the flow of the interview (BOWKER & TUFFIN, 2004) and answer at their convenience (KENNEDY, 2000). In addition, for MEHO and others (LEVINSON, 1990; McAULIFFE, 2003) the use of asynchronous electronic communications provides opportunities for reflection and editing of messages before responding and can contribute to "a closer fit between ideas, intentions and their expression in writing" (MEHO, 2006, p.1291). [21]

According to MANN and STEWART (2000), the use of visual and aural clues in F2F interviews allows the researcher to assess how others interpret what they say, an indication of the genuineness of intent in a query or response. In the course of the interaction, the interviewee may come to trust the sincerity and motivation of the researcher and thus be prepared to share in-depth insights into their private and social worlds (MANN & STEWART, 2000, p.126). [22]

MANN and STEWART cite researchers with opposing views on whether it is possible to develop a similar rapport online as can be obtained F2F (op. cit., p.127). On one hand, it was seen as impersonal and distancing (SHORT, WILLIAMS & CHRISTIE, 1976; KIESLER, SIEGEL & McGUIRE, 1984; HEWSON, LAURENT & VOGEL, 1996) On the other, it was suggested that warm relationships can and do develop online (WALTHER, 1992; see also WALTHER, ANDERSON & PARK, 1994 and WALTHER, 1996); while GALEGHER, SPROULL and KIESLER (1998) report that personalities and points of view can be conveyed through a range of technological environments. Specifically, in relation to the method utilised in this study, MANN and STEWART (2000) suggest that asynchronous e-mail while considered less immediate than other forms of CMC can be a more personal and thoughtful form of interaction between researcher and participants; and, HENSON, KOIVU-RYBICKI, MADIGAN and MUCHMORE (2000), BUSHER (2001) and JAMES (2003) all reported rich reflective accounts of recent experiences and the impact of these experiences on participants personal and professional identities. [23]

In relation to the purpose and focus of the interview, SMITH-STONER and WEBER (2000) suggest that a shared research agenda and/or being given an opportunity to express themselves can allow more personal relationships to

develop. In addition, DUNNE (1999) found that participants often noted the value of the dialogues in reflecting on aspects of their lives, and as such they took time in considering their responses. Further, in the case of SMITH-STONER and WEBER (2000), the participants wanted to tell their story, and appreciated the ability to do it online at a time that suited their busy lives. [24]

In relation to the SOMUL study, as in the case of O'CONNOR and MADGE (2000, 2001) and ILLINGWORTH (2006), it is suggested that relatively high levels of interaction and participation were observed, and a number of participants specifically mentioned that the process had allowed them to reflect on their experiences in a way they had not previously.

"You've reminded me of some things I think I'd forgotten!" (Ulleskelf: 1) [25]

Again, and as noted by O'CONNOR and MADGE it may well have been that the nature of the interviewees (students familiar with both research issues and medium of communication and self-selecting) or their interest and knowledge in the project itself rather than the method may have led to the amount and depth of data collected. Using similar populations to the one in this study, MANN found recent graduates to be a rich source of data in asynchronous interactions (MANN & STEWART, 2000, pp.131-2); while BUSHER (2001) and JAMES (2003) found the method useful in obtaining a rich reflective account of the student experience. [26]

Other important issues identified are those of openness and the establishment of trust between researcher and participants in respect of the time frame and the main issues to be investigated. Related to this is the issue of mutual self-disclosure in establishing trust and rapport. This can be done by sharing something about yourself with the participants. In this study, one element of this was apologising for a delay in sending a section of the interview by explaining that I had suffered a catastrophic computer failure and almost lost the final version of my PhD thesis which was nearing completion at this time. It is suggested that equal degrees of self-disclosure between researcher and participants allow the participants to see the researcher as someone who was both open and genuinely interested in their views (BENNETT, 1998; ILLINGWORTH, 2001; JAMES & BUSHER, 2006). [27]

The development of a relationship over time is often quoted by those using sequential one-to-one e-mail interviews (BENNETT, 1998; DUNNE, 1999; ANDERS, 2000; ILLINGWORTH, 2006; JAMES & BUSHER, 2006). In the SOMUL study, it is suggested that this was facilitated through prior contact via the initial face-to-face interview and subsequent e-mail exchanges as part of the recruitment process for the e-mail interviews (WICKSTEED, 2000; JAMES & BUSHER, 2006). This also overcame any issues regarding the lack of visual and aural social cues in the form of gender, language, ethnicity and class in CMC that can arise in situations where no prior relationship is present (THACH, 1995; MANN & STEWART, 2000; ILLINGWORTH, 2006). [28]

A further, issue raised in this work and also by JAMES and BUSHER (2006) is the importance of prior contact in facilitating rapport, and whether without this prior contact the same level of rapport can be developed.

"It raises questions, and prompts us to undertake further research to explore how participants who do not have prior knowledge of the researchers would react if invited to partake in similar web-based qualitative research projects. Problematic, then, is the extent to which it is possible to build collaborative conversations and trust, allowing participants to feel able to explore topics in depth, when many of the normal social signal systems are absent from the conversations." (p.417) [29]

In addition, and as noted by MANN and STEWART (2000) participants sometimes required reassurance that their responses were useful and that they were not drifting off topic. This was often accompanied by an offer to expand on any issues if they had not made them clear enough.

"I hope my answers were in keeping with the type that you were looking for and that they all make sense! Feel free to ask any further questions if you need anything clarifying!" (Givendale: 9) [30]

In terms of explaining absences, participants would apologise if they had not kept to the agreed schedule and as mentioned above, on one occasion I had to apologise for the delay of one of the sequential questions—but this often allowed further comment on issues impacting on both participants and researcher. It is suggested that this further helped to develop rapport. In addition, this altered the power dynamic noted by JAMES and BUSHER (2006) and by allowing participants relative control over the frequency and timing of responses it gave a degree of power to the participants.

"Sorry for the late reply, I have been caught up in house hunting in London, but we finally appear to have got somewhere." (Warthill: 3) [31]

A further benefit of allowing participants to respond when it suited is that as noted by JAMES and BUSHER (2006) it can lead to a more reflective response from participants.

"The shift in power, from researcher-driven semi-structured interview schedules to a more collaboratively constructed one that was more responsive to participants' need for using time, also turned out to be fruitful in improving the quality of participants reflection." (p.414) [32]

However, JAMES and BUSHER (2006) also introduce a note of caution and suggest that while encouraging reflective responses it is important to gently reinforce and reintroduce the main themes of interest to ensure responses do not stray too far from these themes. [33]

4. Operationalising the E-mail Interview

Having provided a review of methodological issues, it is now time to report specifically how the e-mail interview was operationalised in the SOMUL project. As noted above, participants had already taken part in an individual interview or focus group with the researcher prior to agreeing to take part in the e-mail process. Approximately a year after graduating the participants were sent an e-mail with an embedded message which outlined the issues and topics to be covered and details of how the process would be structured.⁵ According to MEHO (2006) embedded messages are preferred to attachments due to issues of security, software compatibility and technical competence. [34]

In relation to the topics, participants were informed that they would be sent a series of five short e-mails based around the following themes:

1. Degree results and activity since graduating
2. What was learned at university
3. Have you changed as a person
4. Lifestyle
5. Reflections on your time at university [35]

Participants were also advised of expected behaviours and other related issues. This follows recommendations by MEHO (2006); FERGUSON (2006); and, KIVITS (2006) who suggest setting out clearly some of the main "rules of engagement". For example:

"The format of the response (one or two words or a few sentences) to each email would be up to you. Obviously the more detail you can provide, the better, as our research results will be more accurate ... The process would allow you to respond when time permits rather than expecting an instant reply ... due to the possibility of technical problems (e-mails disappearing, computer crashes etc.) could we agree that if a response has not been received after seven days a reminder will be sent ... you have the right to terminate your participation at any time but we hope that you feel able to continue to contribute to this research." (Researcher's e-mail) [36]

In practice, it did not go quite as smoothly as outlined above. Delays in responses were commonplace, and often the researcher received an apology and a promise to respond as soon as circumstances allowed:

"I would be delighted to participate in the next stage of the SOMUL project. I am travelling at the moment, currently in Chicago, but I am back on the 5th August. Its probably better to wait until I get back to start the project emails as I don't know what my access to emails will be like." (Warthill: 3)

"Muir, apologies with my delay in replying ... Life has been a bit hectic these past few months, I have just returned from a 2 week trip to Italy—my first proper break since

⁵ The paper version for the two respondents who requested that medium was mailed out at the same time as the first section of the e-mail interview.

graduating, and now have a few days to catch up with everything before it is back to work after the Bank Holiday!" (Givendale: 9) [37]

In the introduction to the first e-mail in the series, the researcher was able to consult the previous F2F interview for the participant in order to personalise the exchange. So where they had mentioned future plans or expected circumstances in relation to employment or travel for example, the researcher was able to use this information to provide an informal context within which to situate the themes of interest. An electronic ice-breaker if you like that also served in some cases to allow probing of earlier responses.

"Now, from your earlier interview and the details you sent me by email, I know that you had developed an interest in Neuroscience while studying your degree (as a result of doing a Wellcome Trust summer scholarship) and you are now studying for a PhD in this area at the University of Xxxxx." (Researcher to Warhill: 5)

"Now I see from your earlier email that you were awarded a first class degree in Biological Sciences. Was this what you expected, and do you think it is a reflection of the effort you put in? I recall from our talk in final year that you were hoping for at least a II:I." (Researcher to Ulleskelf: 1) [38]

It soon became apparent reading over the first responses from each of the participants that most appeared to be writing in almost narrative style and tended not to be simply responding "yes" or "no".

"I opted for the 'story' format and tried to answer each of your questions with as much transparency and detail as possible." (Warhill: 5) [39]

5. Results

The first response contained details of their immediate transition after graduation. For some, plans made in final year were put into action; whether these plans concerned travel, employment or future study. In order to provide some context Table 5 reports data from the HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) First Destination Survey carried out around six months after graduation.⁶

⁶ The data was drawn from a custom dataset specified by the SOMUL team and supplied by HESA.

| | Warthill | Langtoft | Ulleskelf | Fridaythorpe | Givendale |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Full-time paid work | 40.93 | 67.52 | 76.01 | 49.36 | 41.11 |
| Part-time paid work | 5.14 | 7.69 | 5.83 | 9.39 | 4.74 |
| Voluntary/unpaid work only | 1.75 | 2.56 | 0.16 | 1.28 | 1.98 |
| Work & further study | 8.85 | 12.82 | 2.92 | 5.97 | 7.91 |
| Further study only | 29.13 | 2.56 | 3.40 | 27.17 | 34.78 |
| Assumed to be unemployed | 5.68 | 4.27 | 9.24 | 2.56 | 3.56 |
| Not available for employment | 6.56 | 2.56 | 0.97 | 3.84 | 5.53 |
| Other | 1.97 | | 1.46 | 0.43 | 0.40 |

Table 5: First destinations: adapted from HESA data [40]

What is immediately apparent are the institutional differences in relation to the percentage entering employment and those entering full-time post-graduate study. Three institutions have around a third of their graduates entering full-time study whereas for the other two only around 3 per cent continue to further study full-time. As would be expected, when examining those entering full-time employment, the situation is reversed. It should also be remembered, that the three institutions with high rates of further full-time study are also more research intensive, have a lesser degree of social diversity, and, in terms of entry qualifications may be seen as selecting rather than recruiting institutions. [41]

The following table provides some details of the Bioscience respondents' activity since their graduation. As can be seen a range of options were explored by the graduates. In one case (ID 9), the respondent had worked for a multi-national clothing chain prior to university; while at university; and, had entered the trainee management programme upon finishing their studies. For three others (ID 1, 2, 4), the industrial placement taken after their second year influenced their future choices.

| Institution | ID | Activity |
|---------------------|-----------|--|
| Ulleskelf | 1 | Graduated with first-class degree, placement in related area helped get position as Trainee Clinical Scientist with NHS Trust in London. Also comprises part-time MSc study and nervous about studying while working full-time. Started work soon after graduation. Applied for posts in final year. Enjoying work. |
| Warthill | 2 | Graduated with a lower-second class degree and disappointed with it given the work put in - had hoped to do PhD but no longer possible. Did placement year in industry. Started with pharmaceutical company soon after graduation on graduate trainee scheme. However, made redundant after six months and had to apply elsewhere. Now working as Senior Associate Scientist for another pharmaceutical company. |
| Warthill | 3 | Graduated with first-class degree. Worked teaching English to foreign children and then in a bank after graduation to help pay for subsequent round the world travel. Starting with large accountancy firm and extra curricular activities helped at interview. Still thinking off it as short term at present and perhaps moving into charity field. |
| Warthill | 4 | Graduated with first-class degree which believes reflects work put in. Applied for job while in final year. Industrial placement helped. Working as Development Chemist (Research and Development Graduate Scheme) for multi-national household product company. Started in August following graduation. |
| Warthill | 5 | Graduated with an upper second-class degree. Had already applied for PhD while in final year and related to interest developed as part of dissertation project. Started PhD after the summer of graduation. |
| Fridaythorpe | 6 | Graduated with a lower second-class degree. Had already decided to enter secondary science teaching PGCE while in final year. Started in September following graduation at same institution. Worked over summer to reduce overdraft and working part-time while a student. Waiting to start full-time teaching post after successfully completing PGCE. |
| Fridaythorpe | 7 | Graduated with first-class degree and seen as a reflection of hard work in final year. Was offered PhD but was not keen on research team but was put in touch with lecturer by Director of Studies and was accepted for funded PhD at same institution. Enjoying academic challenge. Still unsure about career in academia or industry with financial considerations playing a part. |

| | | |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Fridaythorpe | 8 | Graduated with first-class degree and saw it as reflection of hard work. Took a year out after graduation to visit family in India and to work in temporary jobs to earn some money. Worked for charity and for recruitment group. Applied for, was interviewed and accepted onto a PG Diploma course in Dietetics starting Sept 2006. Future plans include travel to London for work once study complete before returning to home area. |
| Givendale | 9 | Graduated with an upper second-class degree. Planned to enter management trainee scheme with multi-national clothing retailer with whom the respondent had worked prior to university and part-time when at university. However, scheme was ended and opted for internal promotion route—now an Associate Manager. Started full-time work immediately after graduation. Enjoys the choice he has made. |

Table 6: Activity since graduation (Bioscience) [42]

A second major transition which the graduates may have had to face is in terms of accommodation and may involve either changes in location or household composition or both. Much of the transition relating to accommodation was linked to the activity since graduation. For those who stayed in the same location, and went on to further study, the transition tended to involve fewer changes.

"I'm still living in the flat I had as an undergraduate. It's in Xxxxx (a reasonably nice, reasonably cheap, student area) and I share with my boyfriend. It's a nice arrangement that means I have a lot more privacy than some of my colleagues who are still in flat-shares of up to 7 people." (Fridaythorpe: 7) [43]

For those who entered employment, this normally meant a change in location and raised the issue of whether to buy or to rent accommodation.

"I am still renting ... I rented all the time whilst I was still in Xxxxx as I knew that I would eventually be moving. Before I moved to London I visited several websites where people were advertising room shares, and after consulting with friends narrowed down my search to a few areas which they recommended. I finally settled on moving in with one other person who owns their own 2 bed flat ... However they travel abroad a lot with their job so it is almost like I have my own flat two thirds of the time! Right now my salary only allows a small amount of disposable income, so in the short to medium term I really don't see any other option but to rent!" (Givendale: 9) [44]

And for others still, it was both complicated and slightly traumatic as the following quote from someone who had to return to the family home after graduation suggests.

"My boyfriend and I did buy a place but it is just a weekend home for me as it is in Hartlepool. So he lives there and I visit when I can. We hope to move in either direction at some point. But there are more jobs for me in London than anywhere else

so it might be that we end up down here. I haven't really thought too much in the future but am keen to have a place of my own as I have found it hard to move back with my Mum!" (Ulleskelf: 1) [45]

And finally in relation to this aspect of transition, things may not work out as planned.

"The 90 day consultation period that the site was going through was due to end late March, and they said that they would give us paid leave until this date. I lost the house (which came with the job) before the job however, and had to move out in the middle of February. Meanwhile, I was applying frantically for jobs and was offered an interview at Yyyyy. When I lost the house with Xxxxx , I knew that I had the job with Yyyyy, however I was not due to start for another month. I moved to Zzzzz and settled in and took a break from everything. I was given relocation money from Xxxxx which really helped. I am moving from Zzzzz to a little village called Aaaa (near Ddddd) which is a lot nicer and closer to work. The house I am currently in was a rushed decision as I basically had to find somewhere in 2 weeks and took the best thing at the time. The 6 month contract is up and I have decided to go somewhere a little quieter, with adequate parking." (Warhill: 2) [46]

The final transition of interest here is social in nature and involves building new networks or maintaining existing networks while mediating other transitions. In general, most participants were still in touch with friends from university and often from before university and had also made or developed new social networks with new work colleagues or fellow post-graduate students. There was some indication that contact was not as regular as it had been; but that was put down to everyone going through some form of transition and coming to terms with their changing circumstances.

"From my undergrad degree I am still in contact with people I lived with and spent time with socially. I live with one. There are others I email and see every couple of months, and a few more who I don't really see but keep in touch via email ... I speak to friends from home everyday either by email or text or speaking on the phone, and I see one of them at least every month ... I definitely made some friends on my PGCE course who I will stay in contact with, we will be able to share stories. I also spend time with people from my part time job. I am looking forward to spending time with my new colleagues when the time comes." (Fridaythorpe: 6)

"I am still very much in contact with my friends from university, I travelled with one of them, and met up with quite a few of them around the world. We bumped into three by chance in Australia, two in Chile and one in San Francisco. The network that Xxxxx has given me is very strong. I will now be living with five of my close female friends, with friends living in the streets near to us and all over London ... With my closest friends its almost once a day and with others its about once a week, but it depends sometimes its a lot more. There are now networking sites like Bebo and now Facebook that allows easy access to friends you may not have a primary phone number or email address to ... I do think my social networks will change when I start work, with new work mates and I hope to join a choir and maybe even do Dragon

Boat racing. I hope the core of it we still be friends from Xxxxx especially as most of our year and the years above and below are moving to London." (Warhill: 3) [47]

6. Discussion

As has been shown, graduates face a number of transitions on leaving university. This paper has looked at three aspects although these do not seem to be mutually exclusive and often interact (WOLBERS, 2007). While the sample was small, it is suggested that a range of student "types" can be identified which would also feature in students from other disciplines and other institutions. Although only a small part of the data has been revealed, much of it had both richness and a depth which supported the use of the e-mail interview method. Most would recommend their experience as students and most were able to reflect on how the experience may have changed them. In many cases the change was more to do with personal maturity and growth than with academic factors. [48]

Of particular interest was the fact that respondents seemed willing to share personal information. For example, the researcher would have been uncomfortable either in person or on the telephone when interviewing the respondent who suffered early redundancy in their chosen career; or when asking another if they were still with the partner they had throughout university. Somehow raising issues like these seemed easier in the e-mail format. Another respondent was willing to share their travel-blog with the researcher and yet another contributed to a total transcript of 34 pages of in-depth reflection. These and other examples not reported here support the use of e-mail with a computer literate sample as a useful way of gaining rich information. [49]

However, attention is drawn to the importance of the initial F2F interview with each respondent in building a rapport which allowed the e-mail interviews to be conducted with a degree of familiarity between research and participants. In addition, the F2F interview provided a useful source of probes and background information about the respondent and their future plans which undoubtedly eased communication. [50]

While still very much a work in progress, this paper has attempted to address transition, through reference to one particular methodology using results obtained from one small scale study to illustrate the process and structure as adopted by the researcher and present some preliminary findings. As mentioned, a number of transitions may simultaneously be in operation: that of status (undergraduate to graduate); in terms of accommodation, living arrangements and even location of domicile; and, in terms of activity (undergraduate to post-graduate or from part-time to full-time work or from student to employee). In the case of some of the respondents as noted by comments above, the transitions were not always unproblematic. Moreover, for some of the respondents, the transition especially in relation to independent living was conditioned by a lack of financial resources and this could impact on relationships with partners and parents. [51]

While the numbers in this study were small, in terms of the data collected the e-mail interview method can be said to have been successful in relation to the quality of the responses obtained. The number of respondents is of importance. In this study, although numbers may be considered low, it would seem sensible to suggest that there are limits to the number of respondents a single researcher could engage with. From the author's experience, for an in-depth study which hoped to obtain rich data over an extended period of time the maximum possible number may be around 12 to 15 respondents. [52]

It could be that the quality of the data and the willingness to stick with the project over the period of perhaps 3 months was in part due to the sample. Students are generally highly computer literate by the time they reach the end of their undergraduate degree. The increasing utilisation of electronic communication in the learning environment and between peers results in a population that is at ease in using e-mail as a medium of communication. In addition, and for some, the process of reflecting on their experience through the exchange with the researcher was a welcome and unexpected benefit of participation. [53]

Finally, it is perhaps useful to set out some of the methods which were found to be successful in applying the asynchronous e-mail interview method in this study:

- initial contact in the form of a previous F2F interview;
- clear description of the aims and themes of the research;
- clear instructions on how the interviews would proceed;
- elements of mutual self-disclosure; and
- a manageable number of respondents. [54]

The next stage of the analysis will be to analyse the telephone transcripts from Business Studies and Sociology graduates to compare the transitional process with that of graduates in the Biosciences; and, whether there any differences in terms of the quality of the data gathered by telephone and by e-mail. [55]

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