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Friendship as method: reflections on a new approach to understanding student experiences in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on a novel method to elicit understanding of students' journeys. At a time when universities need to know much more about their students, sector understanding runs the risk of being limited and rather shallow. Knowledge tends to rely on broad-brush descriptions of student life derived from surveys, questionnaires and student voice committees whilst conventional qualitative research methods into student experiences have has limitations. 'Harder listening' to student voices offers the opportunity to understand everyday student life better. Taking inspiration from StoryCorps in the USA and BBC Radio 4's *The Listening Project*, student friendship pairs undertake recorded, private, guided conversations without a researcher present. Conventional 'friendship' research fails to use 'friendship trust' between participantsto unlock experiences. Ten pairs of students based at a large university in the North of England participated. Analysis of the conversations suggests that happiness, confidence and a sense of belonging at university are significantly affected by the role and presence of friends and family. Through their engagement with and reflection on this method, students reveal familiarity with being 'under-heard' and over-surveyed and welcome this approach as a sign of a caring and 'listening university'.

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Introduction

Knowing how students experience university life is important in the higher education (HE) sector. The scrutiny and ranking of universities (for example, in the UK, through the Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS 2016)) has become a defining sector characteristic and relies on student experience as measured through student satisfaction, retention, progression and career destination data. Such nationally-implemented and nationally-compared surveys are complemented by local-level surveying in the form of module or course evaluations and, as such, much of how we discuss student experience is dominated by, and derived from, quantitative methods that offer 'top line' or broad-brush views. Knowing how students experience their time at university is significant if we are to move away from student experience narratives homogenising our understanding of students (Sabri 2011). Open text questions can be offered in surveys and are not without their use in analysis (Langan et al. 2017) yet open text answers tend to be short, limited and lacking in depth and meaning. More qualitative ways of 'knowing student experience' can and do act as a necessary complement to the survey culture yet have their own limitations. The voice of students via student representatives within university governance systems offers potential (Luescher-Mamashela 2013) yet almost by definition what is heard are concerns about specifics at particular times or problems in particular modules or classes; less is

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heard about wider lived experiences. Research projects that focus on students as participants offer potential for hearing more genuine and realistic experiences but can run into difficulties around participant motivation or creating a sense of expectations around particular answers.

This article summarises ways in which friendship conversations generate insights that we cannot know through more conventional means. The method builds on the idea of friendship as a useful site of inquiry and relies on guided conversations between good friends, asking them to reflect, share, probe and question topics relating to the experience of being a student. It is a method that allows students to reflect on their academic, personal and professional development, to articulate what makes them progress or what barriers get in the way of progression and to share key moments of significance. Crucially, it provides insights into issues and aspects delineated, defined and explained by the students themselves. Such conversations are regarded by the participants as an enjoyable and empowering method for sharing experiences and one that symbolises that their university is genuinely interested in their lives. For the researcher, the method provides privileged access and opens up new dimensions to what we think we know about student experience.

The article starts by outlining some of the existing ways in which the HE sector understands the idea of 'student experience', arguing that there are few particularly effective methods to hear genuine, relaxed and confident student voices. The importance and potential of conversations within research practice is then discussed, introducing the US and UK models of paired conversations as a good way of listening to experiences. The article explores how friendship in research is central to genuine sharing of experience and the breaking down of barriers in qualitative research. How friendship conversations were utilised as an innovative method in a UK university is then discussed, followed by 'listening in' to student conversations through extracts to demonstrate not only how the method enables friends to probe and share in a comfortable and private way, but also to reveal the saliency of friends and family in their reflections on their student experience. The students' own reflections on their participation are discussed, suggesting that the method is well received and holds potential for hearing authentic student voices. The article concludes by discussing the potential of this method for the HE sector as well as some of the potential drawbacks and how these may be overcome.

Existing ways of understanding the 'student experience'

Currently, ways of knowing about the student experience in the sector are derived largely from surveys. The HE landscape has become shaped and driven by an annual rhythm of survey collection, analysis, publication and institutional response. The National Student Survey and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, along with the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey in the UK, the Student Experience Survey in Australia and the National Survey of Student Engagement in the US and Canada each offer sets of data that give us insight into participants' level of agreement around fixed statements related to broad areas of teaching and learning, including their perceptions of teaching quality and levels of resources. Questions about engagement, as defined by students' views on how much they believe they have engaged in their studies, are asked in some but not all. The opportunity for open-ended qualitative comments is often optional and there is no opportunity to get behind the reasons for the answers given. In addition, this voice is often only heard in the past tense as the student has moved on before survey results are published. Yorke, Orr, and Blair (2014) suggest tension between what students know or may want to say and the restrictedness of, or fuzziness with, the wording or meaning of survey statements. What survey results in actual fact can tell us can thus be problematic. Bennett and Kane (2014) argue that what we hear through surveys may not be precisely what the students think they are saying, whilst Webber, Lynch, and Oluku (2013) argue that surveys can be problematic in terms of response rate (proven themselves by low response rates in their own survey-driven research) and in terms of providing any real avenue for voices being heard. We can tap into student voice around courses or modules through the more localised surveys and questionnaires but

again these are limited in peeling back any depth of experience and fall foul of the same limitations as large-scale surveys.

Other ways of knowing about the student experience can come via student representation systems in universities, offering a means through which the voice of the students' experiences is heard by peers and then taken 'upwards' through university governance systems for discussion and possible resolution. This is a relatively effective way of hearing what the student body has to say about immediate issues of concern (Flint and O'Hara 2013), especially when student representatives feel included in decision-making and the wider student body feels it is being listened to. Important though this voice is, Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggest barriers to effective communication within the representation system (such as haziness over role clarification, a lack of professional development for representatives and staff perceptions and expectations). Carey (2013) argues the case for greater institutional buy-in to the role and better two-way communication between the university and student representatives if the latter are to have genuine voice. The potential, therefore, is there, but it is a far from perfect system.

Qualitative projects involved with 'student voice' research are not themselves without issue. Campbell (2011) asks how, in the pursuit of authenticity, the researcher ensures that students are being given a true opportunity to enter into a dialogue rather than just reacting to questions and/or being acutely aware of the power relations in the research team. Indeed, students have been known to be nervous when participating in research about 'student experience', often with familiar staff as the researcher, feeling obligated to give the 'right' answers (Tight 2012). Lee (2000) highlights the potential problem of respondents managing impressions of themselves in order to maintain their 'standing' in the eyes of the researcher. Seale et al. (2015) describe how the power relationship between researcher and researched can often result in students feeling (and sometimes wanting) to be the unequal partner. McLeod (2011,187), in her critique on student voice projects, suggests we must not shy away from the likelihood of dissonance; rather, we should allow, embrace and respond to 'the likelihood of discordant voices and to all students not speaking as one'.

Thinking more deeply about what students experience during their time at university can result from considering what is 'missing' from the conventional methods and metrics. Temple et al. (2014, 3), for example, define student experience as 'the totality of a student's interaction with the institution', seeing it as encompassing all aspects of a journey from the application process right through to life beyond university. Wilcock (1999), and latterly Hitch et al. (2014a, 2014b), consider it crucial to understand experiences through the lenses of 'doing, being, belonging and becoming'. Neither surveys nor questionnaires nor indeed reading student representation meeting minutes can promote a meaningful feel for the lived and journeyed experience of our students.

The power of conversation in, and for, research

A space for dialogue and conversation to take place provides an opportunity to listen to students' lived experience. But researchers need to consider qualitative methods carefully in order to understand what listening might mean and reveal (Cook-Sather 2006). Whilst the conventional methods of interviews and focus groups offer much deeper qualitative understanding of experiences than surveys and questionnaires, they still have limitations for understanding real experiences. For example, the age, ethnicity and gender of the interviewer can affect what information participants are willing to divulge, whilst interviewer passivity or neutrality can come across as cold and create a gulf between interviewer and interviewee (Denscombe 2010). Focus groups may not be conducive to acquiring information about highly personal or sensitive issues given the limits of confidentiality and given the fact that discussion is with strangers. Focus groups can lead to feeling pressure to provide more stereotypical answers and to avoid expressing honest views (Acocella (2012). In both methods, there is a risk that the interviewer remains the focal point of the interaction throughout, controlling the ultimate direction of travel.

An approach that has come to celebrate everyday experiences but which avoids the presence of a researcher or the need to have conversations with strangers is BBC Radio 4's *The Listening Project* in the UK and its inspiration, StoryCorps, in the US.[1] Both projects are based on an assumption that people like to share experiences, especially with people they know well. Members of the public are invited to undertake conversations in mobile recording booths that visit towns and cities across these respective countries. In the UK, once members of the public have expressed an interest to their local BBC radio station and outlined their chosen broad topic of discussion, a radio producer contacts them if the BBC is interested and, on the day of the recording, meets the participants at the booth. In the US, participants either use the StoryCorps on-line booking system (to book themselves one of the available time slots at a booth in a particular location) and are met by a facilitator on the day or use the StoryCorps app (to record the conversation anywhere). An on-line set of prompt questions to aid conversations are provided by StoryCorps but participants are expected to come with their chosen topic, as so with *The Listening Project*. Neither project expects participants to work the recording technology; rather, they are encouraged to focus entirely on talking whilst the facilitator records the conversation. The conversations are listenable to from the respective websites as podcasts and, in the case of *The Listening Project*, snippets of conversations are broadcast during the day on BBC Radio 4. Both the BBC and StoryCorps categorise the archive of recorded conversations on their websites by region (local radio areas in the UK and by state in the US) and by broad theme (for example, 'family', 'loss', 'parenthood'). Both projects have encouraged conversations by theme (for example, StoryCorps' 'September 11th', and *The Listening Project*'s 'EU Referendum') but their main business is driven by the topics the participants bring themselves. The projects work in partnership with the British Library and the US Library of Congress, respectively, where full sets of conversations are archived.

Both projects legitimise conversations, celebrating these everyday 'slices of life' (Abelman et al., 2009, 257). During these conversations, key interviewing traits, including gentle listening, remembering and openness (Kvale 1996), can be seen yet these forms of conversation differ from the conventional form of interview notably the pair adopt (and switch over and between) 'interviewer'/'interviewee' roles with a fluidity that symbolises a 'democratic open-endedness' (Lamothe and Horowitz 2006, 174), with the participants becoming co-creators of the knowledge (Durose et al. 2012).

Conversations can be powerful tools for hearing experiences. Pozzi-Thanner (2005, 104) suggests such discussions can sometimes create uncomfortable listening, yet it is that very mix that gives authenticity and depth to our appreciation of experience. For her, conversation resembles rag-rug weaving:

> Some [memories] are colourful, some are precious, others are torn and unattractive, others are very dark and scratchy, some glitter in their lasting beauty. Some threads end up woven into each other by chance … The results are often surprising, sometimes puzzling, but never uninteresting.

Current methods of measuring student experience, for example through surveys and questionnaires, simply do not help us understand this level of detail. Cook (2011, 308) outlines the importance of genuine voice and the risk of research design 'unwittingly eclipsing' the voices of the people we are seeking to hear. Conversations heard via StoryCorps and *The Listening Project* allow raw conversations to take place, and it is this precise rawness that provides the genuine insight and the demystifying of participants' experiences. As Cook continues:

> If the purpose of method is to open up spaces for voice rather than provide a rigid box for articulation determined by those without lived experience of the practice being researched, then other ways of engagement need to be considered. (314)

Freeman (2016) warns of the potential of student voice initiatives driven too much by institutional values of organisational reputation and student satisfaction. For her, this direction of travel suggests that the HE sector has been 'sleepwalking into the current dominance of certain values around student

voice' and thus missing a trick in terms of using voice initiatives to delve deeper into the genuine connections. We can argue that conversations created through StoryCorps and *The Listening Project* enable a greater degree of equality, democracy and control. Campbell (2011, 272) suggests that, '[b]y providing the opportunity for more collegial conversation, you demonstrate to students that their views are valued and they will engage in the process thoughtfully and enthusiastically'.

The importance of friendship in research

Friendships play an important role in the opening up and sharing of experiences. Castrodale and Zingaro (2015), in their analysis of friendship between able-bodied and disabled persons, suggest that friendship offers a methodological site of, and for, inquiry, whilst Brooks (2007) argues that friendships formed at university can be characterised as being closer than school or college friendships. The 'unlocking potential' of close friends, therefore, serves as a good reason for using friends to discuss experience. Youniss (1987) suggests that friendships provide 'reciprocity of disclosure', whereby one friend opening up precipitates the other doing the same. Friends' conversations can also be characterised by depth of explanation (Berndt 1987) and, as such, utilising this dynamic to understand experience can be advantageous. Wiseman (1986) suggests that friends have a 'comfortableness' and mutuality around them, whilst Peel et al. (2006) describe 'naturalistic' interactions between family members or friends.

Yet the topic of friendship in research has focused almost entirely on the relationship between the researcher and the researched – be that a friendship that is (a) there from the start (see, for example, Brewis 2014; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014), (b) evolved and developed as a result of the research (see, for example, Tillmann-Healey 2003) or (c) both (see, for example, Perriton 2000). Whichever way, the researcher takes on a dual role of researcher and friend. Very little research draws on friendship *between* participants to extract data. Exceptions include Skelton's (2001) work with groups of young female friends:

> It is not just the talking that matters, but letting that talk happen … If I had tried to keep them to a question schedule, I would never have been able to record the enormous amount of material that emerged from their conversations and reminiscences which they shared and prompted each other to tell … it was important that they felt they were active participants in something and that they enjoyed themselves. (171)

The decision to use friends' conversations has also been taken in the field of market research. Bayley and Nancarrow (1998), in their desire to understand why customers undertake impulse buying, asked pairs of close friends to undertake a conversation with a researcher and found that, '[t]he friendship pair retains some of the spontaneity and surprising twists and turns that lead to insight' (105).

But the physical presence of the researcher in all of these examples is never far away. Gibson (2005), in her reflection on the utilisation of video diaries for understanding identity amongst men with disabilities, for example, suggests that giving participants the opportunity to create their own data on their own is positive: '[r]emoving the researcher from the encounter can yield different kinds of accounts without having to assume that the research context is not exerting influence' (41).

To date, there has been no HE research undertaken that draws on private conversations between friendship pairs to understand university experience.

Method

Study aims and research questions

The aim of the study was to understand better the realities of everyday student life as described by the very people who experience it through a new method that enabled free and confident

conversation unhindered by the usual constraints of conventional qualitative methods. The study was based on the following research questions:

- How do students really describe and explain their own experiences of higher education?
- How can we listen differently to genuine student voice?
- What don't we know about student experience through conventional measures and methods?

Process: finding participants and accommodation

Once ethical approval from the university had been received, the approach taken to create friendship conversations relied on finding students to participate and suitable accommodation to replicate listening booths. Through an invitation from willing tutors, students were approached and invited to take part once they had secured a date with a good friend on the same course and in the same year. The decision to replicate as closely as possible the listening booths of *The Listening Project* and StoryCorps was based on a need to create private and quiet yet 'controllable' space. Privacy and a lack of disturbance, be that through noise or physical interruption, were absolutely necessary to enable the friendship pairs to fully focus on the conversation and to feel able to relax and open up about their experiences. Knowing that the participants were in a particular space enabled the researcher to be in close proximity and on hand in case of any technical problems or questions. The university's two soundproofed recording rooms were used as listening booths, booked through the usual university room-booking service. These spaces were guaranteed to be quiet and uninterrupted.

Materials in the booths

The booths were kitted out with 6 cue cards, a 10-minute hour-glass egg timer, a digital voice recorder and refreshments. The topics covered on the cue cards were broad themes that contribute to understanding students' transition into, through and beyond university. They were chosen as words that would resonate with the participants and would be easy to talk about. Underneath each word were some prompt questions that participants could use if they felt this eased them in to the topic. 'Belonging' is a key concept in the HE literature (see, for example, Lefever 2012; Masika and Jones 2016; Soria and Stubblefield 2015) and its resonance with engagement and connectedness make it an interesting trigger word to ask students to discuss. 'Becoming' is an important concept in the literature around HE experience (see, for example, Barnett 2009; Holland 1999; Holmes 2015) and offers an interesting theme for students to consider in relation to their own 'travelling through' their degree. Alongside this is the notion of 'journey' and the idea that transition at all stages of the experience is important and worthy of better understanding, as well as recognising their distance travelled (see, for example, Christie 2009; Maunder 2017). Given the strong steer around graduate employment and career destinations in the HE context (see, for example, Tomlinson 2012; Williams et al. 2015), 'employability' is a lived experience both inside and beyond the curriculum and therefore worthy of discussion. In much of the discussion around experiences of university, including transition and 'graduateness', is the idea of 'confidence' and how central it is to success (see, for example, Christie et al. 2008). Finally, the idea of 'happiness' is central to lived experiences (see, for example, Flynn and MacLeod 2015) and was used as a trigger word to elicit from the students a discussion about what made for a happy (or indeed unhappy) time at university.

Sample

All students were from one large, northern, post-1992 university in England. In total, 10 friendship pairs were recruited across a range of social science and engineering degrees. Five pairs were both

female, three pairs were both male and two pairs were mixed. Out of all twenty participants, two of the students were from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds (but not in the same pair). Ages ranged from 19 to 45 years, with one pair recently graduated, two pairs in the first year, three pairs in the second year and four pairs in the final year.

Procedure

The session with each friendship pair was broken down into three sections: a briefing session immediately prior to the conversation with the researcher (approximately 15 minutes), the conversation itself with no researcher present (an hour) and a debriefing immediately after the conversation, again with the researcher (approximately 15 minutes). In the briefing session, students were asked to read an information sheet about the research, complete a consent form and read through the six cue cards. They were free to ask the researcher any question about anything they had read. The students were then taken to the soundproofed room by the researcher, who started the digital voice recorder and then left and waited in an adjacent room. The friendship conversations were based around the pair discussing each cue card. At the end of each 10-minute slot students would choose a new card and turn over the hour-glass to start the next 10 minutes. The cards could be chosen in any order the students wished. After the conversation, the pair would emerge from the room and the digital voice recorder was switched off. They were then asked to write down their thoughts about this method as a way of exploring experiences. After this, they were free to leave.

Analytical approach

The digital recordings were uploaded, transcribed by a university-approved transcription company and thematically analysed by the researcher.

Opening up the conversations

Using friendship as the method for eliciting information produces interesting analysis at two distinct levels. First, at a 'meta' level, the transcripts allow us to understand how conversations were conducted and how participants navigate their way through the cue cards and the topics. In effect, we are able to 'feel' and 'see' the method at work. This lens allows us to see that university friends hold conversations with depth, maturity, humour and feeling and are also able to gently probe each other and keep on track. Second, at a more detailed level, the researcher is given a privileged insight into what really matters, and why; in effect, to understand what is important and what everyday experiences are like as a student. This lens provides questions and answers that conventional 'student voice' mechanisms largely do not hear (nor indeed ask). The following verbatim quotations reveal the depth, flow and honesty of the conversations, demonstrate what such conversations 'sound' like and show how such a methodology enables participants to speak freely and with meaning. All names are pseudonyms.

How friends talk

The friendship conversation method allows participants to be supportive and reflective of each other's circumstances. These first two extracts, from second-year students, typify the openness and support revealed and offered:

Amy: I felt so thick in that class – and I'm not stupid.
Beth: No, no way.
Amy: But in that class!

Beth: You wouldn't be in uni if you were stupid.
Amy: You know how I am now, I love the seminar readings so I do it all but back then we would get a seminar reading and I just couldn't face it.
Beth: You are a lot more confident in the seminars now than you were.
Sarah: I think if you think back to, like, first year, like, I definitely had a few times I was so unhappy.
Vicky: Really?
Sarah: I think when I first got there, in Fresher's Week, I was so happy. Like because I was so, 'this is all new'.
Vicky: Why were you unhappy?
Sarah: Well, by the second semester, I realised that the girls in my hall were so different to me.
Vicky: Well, they could be a bit of a nightmare at times.
Sarah: And that made me unhappy, and then I put a lot of weight on and started to miss things.
Vicky: I put on weight, which made me unhappy too.

The conversation allows friends to reveal and affirm events in the past as well as provide real-time support during the hour's talking. Such support could be considered pretty normal for friends engaging in a conversation, yet these conversations reveal the importance of allowing students to talk about 'everyday things', to allow them to pause, reflect and consider how their experiences are affected. Such a methodology allows us to hear about things that we would not easily hear via other methods; issues and experiences that matter to students. One pair of first-year engineers, for example, when discussing whether they 'felt like engineers', talk about what they felt to be impenetrable information from their course: 'I'm still so clueless with everything they [tutors] talk about' (Annie), which in turn led her friend, Jane, to comment:

> And I wouldn't say I belong to the course but I automatically feel like I belong to a wider group of engineers outside of uni, especially as a woman engineer.

Conversations can be 'woven' by student reactions to the cue cards themselves. For these next two pairs, who had completed their final and second years, respectively, reflection on what was important to them at the time of the conversation determines their card order:

Dan: Is it [digital voice recorder] recording?
Jon: Yes, it's going on now.
Dan: Thank you.
Jon: Which one [cue card] do you want to start with?
Dan: I'm not bothered. Shall we start with 'Employability'? Get that one out of the way, do you think? Or, actually, 'Employability' is probably the last one, as that's the one we're thinking about now, isn't it?
Jon: Yes.
Amy: Right, we've got 'Journey', 'Becoming', 'Happiness'. I think that we should do 'Becoming' last because it's like that's like in the future, isn't it?
Beth: Yes. You pick one.
Amy: 'Happiness'?
Beth: Yes, go on.
Amy: Cool.

Even where a topic on the cue card is seen as problematic or tricky, there is a willingness to talk about it and an interest in carrying on with the research. Frank and revealing discussion can be revealed, as with this second-year pair:

Liz: I hate this one. Let's begin.
Tom: 'Employability'.What's important to me about employability? Go on, you can start.
Liz: Okay. Honestly, to that question I really want to say 'nothing'.

Tom: In my mind, employability has been tainted.
Liz: Yes, that's a good way to say it.
Tom: And now has an incredible negative connotation for me because I just feel it has been shoved down my throat as the sole aim of university.
Liz: That's it.

The absence of a researcher in the room to keep the pace going demands of the participants a level of discipline and self-regulation. It could be argued that having friends in a room undertaking a conversation on their own runs the risk of deviation and 'wandering'; however, and as demonstrated by the following conversation between final-year students about the sand in the egg-timer, participants are aware of the requirements of the method and 'self-regulate' well:

Kate: Oh, have we ran [sic] out? We are too talkative, aren't we?
Jill: I know.
Kate: Right, 'Happiness'.
Jill: Okay, this is a good one.

Indeed, the first-year pair below demonstrate an eagerness to work their way through the hour:

Eric: How many more [cards] have we got left?
Dave: It is just this one. Time has flown by.

Such extracts demonstrate how the method of friendship conversations offers the potential for relaxed, mature and self-determining conversations. As a method, therefore, it allows individuals to share and explore things that matter to them without the worry of saying the wrong thing or being concerned about a researcher's reaction. The following section details key themes emerging from the 10 pairs when asked about what affects their sense of happiness, confidence and belonging.

What matters, and why

Friends: each other

The closeness between student pairs is unsurprising given that their participation is based on their own choice of friend. However, the openness in their expression of care for each other is perhaps more surprising (and normally goes unheard) and suggests that the safe space created by this research method makes them want to express their care for each other. Not only is this touching, but it also suggests that close friendships are central to student experience. 'Happiness is being with you' (Tom, second year) and 'I am glad you came [to university] otherwise I would not have been able to cope' (Amy, second year) are typical examples. For the first-year pair below, the conversation reveals the importance of their closeness to feeling a sense of security:

Jane: You remind me of my sister. I've just always felt comfortable with you. So there's never been a sort of 'I've got to be this sort of person'. I've just been doing what I want to do because you were there.
Annie: Yes, it was so easy, wasn't it? It's been nice having that support there.

A sense of security and safety endures the test of time: 'I think it helps that we're so comfortable with our friendship; that's what makes me feel like I belong here' (Rosa, final year).

Concern for each other, and the opportunity to have the space to share reflections on each other's well-being, is evident through the conversations. The conversation between the final-year pair below demonstrates both a recognition of the level of stress one friend was under and a feeling of assuming responsibility and providing support:

Jon: Yes. I remember last year there were times when I could tell you were having a bit of a mental meltdown, as it were.
Dan: Hmm. Yes.

Jon: It's like 'I've taken on too much'. But it was all quite fulfilling as well, I think, for you. And your grades – you've still got good grades, generally.
Dan: Yes.

From these extracts, it is clear that the method allows for a genuine openness about their care for each other and it reveals the importance of having friends at university but also that friends' well-being does not go unnoticed.

Beyond the room: friends and family

A wider friendship circle as well as family are inextricably linked to the experience of happiness, confidence and belonging. Having friends is a significant aspect of feeling happy at university, and through happiness, confidence grows in a belief in an ability to learn and in a sense of belonging. When asked what makes for a happy time at university, these sentiments typify all 10 conversations: 'Friends 100%' (Mike, final year) and 'it [friendship] is literally, the main thing' (Rosa, final year). The importance of friends can over-ride other more negative experiences: 'I feel so lucky; even now I have got like the worst accommodation, the people I met just made up for it' (Amy, second year). All pairs regard friendship as central to a sense of confidence when new to university and suggest a connection between friendship and attendance at teaching sessions: 'Without your friendship group, you can turn up to all the lectures and go to library sessions every day – but you wouldn't. You probably wouldn't get through it' (Ahmed, final year). The need to develop relationships with peers in class is also important, stressing the significance of having friends and feeling comfortable around them:

> I think maybe working in small groups and stuff helps you gain confidence, and getting to know people and being familiar. (Rosa, final year)

Being able to make friends, and being given class structures that enable this to happen, is significant to whether or not everyday experiences are positive. Friends can influence a sense of belonging, a lack of which can be felt most acutely if friendships are difficult to forge. Being unhappy at university is linked inextricably to not having friends:

> A lot of people do drop out because, well obviously there's other things like the course, but I genuinely do believe that it's the people and friends you make. (Amy, second year)

Discussions about confidence, happiness and belonging were clearly also framed around the importance of family and it is never far from the minds of the pairs when in conversation. Student life is enhanced and strengthened by the role of family, be it through regular and frequent returns home or through the sense of 'home' strongly contributing to a sense of confidence and legitimacy in being a student. This final-year pair, reflecting on their increased confidence, show how the 'anchor' of home is never far away:

Jill: I think being away from home just gives you confidence. Like I didn't realise but you just become more independent and more confident in yourself.
Kate: And adult.
Jill: Like you learn to do stuff that your mum always used to do for you.
Kate: That you took for granted.
Jill: You can't rely on your parents to do this kind of stuff anymore. So, yes, I feel like I've gained those kind of skills and that has improved my confidence.

Relational experiences are prominent in student conversations and suggest that everyday experiences whilst at university are shaped by those very relationships.

Attending a 'listening university'

There was a unanimous view amongst the participants that the approach applied in this study was a worthwhile and valuable use of their time. Students were clearly open to discussing personal experiences for the purpose of research and it was important to them that 'the university' wanted to hear their voices. For some, it felt almost like a relief: 'We don't get the chance to answer "how are you doing"?' (Amy, second year) and 'I never got the chance to talk like this before' (Beth, second year). This suggests that other 'voice' mechanisms are perhaps felt to be less effective or even unwelcome. Several students reflected on their conversations as being a pleasant change from the many questionnaires and surveys they have been asked to complete. The students regarded the method as an indication that their university wanted to appreciate the complexity of their lives and that it cared: 'I feel like the uni will be able to understand it [student experience] with more depth than just the questionnaires that we would normally be asked to fill out' (Vicky, second year).

All participants felt that the research setting encouraged them to give more honest answers, reinforcing a view that research between less familiar participants can be superficial or run the risk of losing depth of detail. It also suggests that this method allows for probing on more personal topics that may be difficult to share in other ways. Students are less shy about talking in this way: 'It was really natural and I gave honest answers' (Tom, second year) and 'It felt like we could say things more openly' (Sarah, second year). The space and opportunity allowed participants' reflections on their own journeys to flow: 'a good opportunity to explore feelings of my undergraduate course' (Ahmed, final year) and 'interesting thinking about how I've felt throughout the year' (Annie, first year). Importantly, the absence of the researcher seemed to encourage openness: 'It was different and seemed more natural rather than being interviewed from [sic] someone you don't know' (Sarah, second year) and 'I found this easy as it was with someone I knew' (Eric, first year).

Despite the overwhelmingly positive response from the participants regarding the research method, concern was raised by several students who felt that the approach was a little too unrestrained: '[I was] initially anxious as it was not something I had done before, but once I started, the conversation flowed' (Eric, first year) and 'We did repeat ourselves a little and may have focused more on the present than the past. It may be better to do this once a year for four years' (Lola, recent graduate). Other participants felt frustrated by the imposed time limits: 'We wanted longer for some and less for others' (Beth, second year), 'I think the timer sometimes stopped the conversation too abruptly' (Mike, final year) and 'Maybe we should be alerted when we have a minute left so we can bring the conversation to a close' (Rosa, final year). Such observations suggest that, overwhelmingly, the positives outweighed the negatives.

Discussion

Such privileged listening allows the researcher to hear and understand the twists and turns of the everyday lives of students in HE. The method allows students to take time to reflect on their own progress and, collectively, to share their views on what matters.

More research and greater recognition of the importance of university friendships is needed. The impact of friendship breakdown and the effect it can have on students' sense of belonging, happiness and even attendance of tutorials and engagement with learning needs greater consideration at the sector level. The power of care between good friends has been revealed here to be central to a positive student experience and, whilst it is neither feasible nor correct to manufacture friendships, it does raise the question of whether universities could go about 'designing in' more opportunities for friendships to occur. Providing the opportunity for friendship groups to grow should make the sector think about how, for example, new entrants are allocated to halls of residence or returning students are grouped in classes. Maybe personal tutors need to be asking more probing questions about friendship too.

It is evident from these conversations that we can 'hear' how the method works to generate a relaxed, uninhibited and honest research space and, in so doing, reveals a method that gives students permission to explore and examine salient experiences in meaningful ways. Peel et al. (2006) suggest that a relationship between participation in research and 'self-help' is important, and that seems to be echoed here: 'This feels like I've been in therapy!' (Jill, final year). Bulpitt and Martin (2005), in their research around student perception of reflection, suggest that offering students a reflexive environment is preferable to any attempt to teach students how to reflect. Offering students a friendship conversation may well open up the possibility of developing better reflexive practitioners: 'Everything about the past three years rolled in to one hour. Excellent!' (Dan, final year). Maybe friendship conversations could be offered as a formative exercise.

Students' participation in 'student experience' research has been documented as potentially problematic, with student engagement and motivation often being low or dropping off after time. Seale et al.'s (2015) honest account of student voice research suggests that how much participants involve themselves may be affected by their suffering from 'voice fatigue'. The friendship conversation method indicates that students are not only willing to participate, but actively see it as advantageous and worthwhile: 'we both could have talked for longer because we are friends' (Kate, final year) and 'the whole experience was really good, thank you!' (Jon, final year).

Using the 'artificial' environment of the listening booth could be argued to adversely affect the flow of conversation or disrupt or even prevent more relaxed conversation. Allowing the participants to engage in conversations in their own environment and use their own recording device (e.g. a mobile phone) would certainly create a sense of familiarity (certainly to one of the pair, at least, if this takes place in one of their homes), but it would only possibly be more relaxed and not necessarily free from the risk of interruption (either from the participants themselves or from others around them). It also assumes that such private spaces exist for students. Participants did not seem to feel that the booths were not relaxed enough: 'I felt relaxed and comfortable' (Jill, final year). Physically distancing the conversation from the researcher prevents the provision of any support the participants may need (although this situation did not arise in this study) and also reduces their chance of receiving full debriefing data. Undertaking the same conversations in the students' own environment was therefore not considered an appropriate approach for this study.

Friendship conversations work well as a method for understanding the student experience. Using friendship conversations as a method provides levels of insight into the student experience that are unique. We can learn more about what student experiences mean, how they are shaped and what is of importance. StoryCorps and *The Listening Project* initiatives have created a model of listening to experiences that is designed and shaped by those in conversation. It thus creates a genuineness of voice that should not be underestimated.

Limitations of this method

There are potential drawbacks to this method of data collection. The method does not easily allow for understanding the voice of students who have no friends. There is a strong case for listening to this particular group of students as loneliness can lead to poor mental health and have adverse effects on learning (Lin and Huang 2012), which may well lead to attrition and a sense of isolation and disengagement. Listening to this group of students would require either relying on alternative methods or broadening the idea of friendship beyond the level or course, or even beyond university to include 'home friends', where conversations could still yield important insights.

For the researcher, not being present during the conversation could be seen as a drawback. There is no opportunity for her to rephrase questions or ask the participants to explain a point more clearly, as would happen in a more traditional interview. Chasin and Radtke (2013, 279) suggest that 'friend moments' can lead to the potential exclusion of the researcher; however, for this research, it is listening to these precise moments and hearing how these discussions unfold that is of interest.

This is a relatively small-scale project, hearing only 20 student voices. The ability to generalise about 'student experience' is therefore limited. However, analysis of these 10 conversations has revealed common themes that have significance for under-represented populations. Scaling-up the project is possible in order to hear more student voices across a variety of populations: choosing particular student populations could be a focus (for example, commuter, mature, Level 4, BME (black and minority ethnic)). A flexible approach could be applied to the depth of conversation on particular topics: reducing the number of cue cards to be dealt with in the same amount of time would allow for greater depth; reducing the conversation time could create an opportunity to hear more voices if resources are limited. There is the possibility of using friendship conversations at key moments in students' lives, for example pre-enrolment (and their expectations around university life) or graduation. This method has clear potential to be developed further.

The method provides us with a meaningful window into the lives of students, as defined and explained by students. There are implications for our understanding of engagement, attrition, poor attendance and low achievement and, as such, it is a method that provides, in and of itself, a vital voice. But it is also a method that can inform more standardised methods, which can allow us to reach larger numbers of students as well as provide an affirming experience for those participating.

Note

1. BBC Radio 4, *The Listening Project*: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cqx3b; StoryCorps: https://storycorps.org/.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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