

# **Thematic Analysis of the Learning Experience of Joint Honours Students: Their Perception of Teaching Quality, Value for Money and Employability**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of the research was students' perceptions of whether joint honours degrees represented a sound student learning experience and led to good academic and employability outcomes. In this minority mode of study for the United Kingdom, students study two academic subjects, rather than the more usual single subject. The qualitative methodology followed was a thematic analysis of self-administered questionnaire data, collected from joint honours students at four English universities in the United Kingdom. The principal results were that the students experienced difficulties in fitting into the two communities of learning for their respective subjects; in being adequately supported; in disparities in teaching, learning and assessment between their two subjects, and in a high workload. The major conclusion was that although the students perceived their learning experiences to have value by virtue of having studied two subjects, a number of issues stymied their achieving the best learning experience possible.

## **Keywords**

joint honours degrees; United Kingdom; higher education; employability; value for money; teaching quality

## **1. Introduction**

In England, United Kingdom (UK), university students have been charged much higher tuition fees since 2012/13, when student fees were trebled to £9000, in response to the Browne Report (2015). This transferred almost the entire cost of tuition onto the students themselves, to be paid for via loans. Furthermore in 2015, government-funded, means-tested maintenance grants, covering the students' cost of living, were also removed and replaced with loans. The outcome of this has been to leave the poorest graduates with an average debt of £57,000 (Belfield et al, 2017) and whether the system represents efficiency, effectiveness and value for money has been the subject of discussion amongst students, parents, educators and leaders of UK Higher Education (HE) institutions (Browne, 2010; Universities UK, 2015; Dowling, 2015).

Therefore, critical study and analysis of students' educational experiences has become an increasingly important area of study in educational research, particularly emphasising value for money (Cheng, 2017), teaching quality (Munteanu et al, (2010); Petruzzellis et al, (2006)) and employability outcomes (Lenton, 2015). One area that has often been overlooked and lacking in focussed critical evaluation is the study of the unique experience of joint honours degree students in UK universities. Joint honours degrees enable students to enrol in two or more subjects, with varying levels of integration between the discipline areas, and the study of which leads to either a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science joint honours degree. The overarching focus that drove this current study was whether joint honours students perceived their learning experience to be sound and to lead to good academic and employability outcomes.

Over the past five years, there has been a year on year growth in the number of joint honours degree students in English universities (Pigden & Moore, 2018), however with a slightly reducing share of the overall total of undergraduates. The reducing share may be in response to the growth in student debt, and an increasing emphasis on the earning gain required to

justify investment in a university education (Karseth and Solbrekke, 2016). There is an emerging body of literature analysing whether and how student loans affect university participation and choice of degree (e.g. Baker, Andrews, & McDaniel, 2017; Callender & Mason, 2017). We know that for example, ‘medicine, mathematics and economics graduates all typically earn at least 30% more than the average graduate, while creative arts graduates earn around 25% less on average’ (Belfield et al, 2018). Therefore the proportion of students opting to study a joint honours degree may diminish, because they are not obviously associated with high graduate earnings. Notwithstanding this, joint honours students still represent almost 9% of all undergraduates – at the end of the 2017 university admissions cycle there were 47,700 joint honours acceptances out of a total of 533,900 acceptances onto university degrees (UCAS, 2017).

Despite the substantial and growing number of joint honours students, in various quality assurance metrics and evaluations, this cohort of students is often overlooked or subsumed into single honours students’ experiences in higher education institutions. These metrics and evaluations include the National Student Survey (NSS), (OfS, 2018), the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey data, (HESA, 2018), Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO), (DfE, 2019a) and the various university league tables<sup>1</sup>. Therefore other ways to explore the experiences and outcomes for joint honours students are required, and this current study seeks to contribute by qualitatively analysing the students’ perception of teaching quality, value for money and employability. This is important since as reflected by Drucker (1954), in a competitive market with intelligent

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<sup>1</sup> Complete University Guide <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/>  
Guardian League Table <https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2018/may/29/university-league-tables-2019>  
Times Good University Guide <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/good-university-guide-in-full-tp6dzs7wn>

consumers, understanding and satisfying the needs of the customer (the student) is as important as addressing the needs of the company (the university).

Several recent studies (Pigden, 2016; Pigden & Jegede, 2016; Pigden & Moore, 2017; Pigden & Jegede, 2018; Pigden & Moore, 2018) have also sought to address the relative lack of data and analysis in the literature around joint honours students. These studies have included analysis of the graduate employability of joint honours students, views of joint honours alumni and the nature and relative attractiveness of joint honours degrees. Hodgson (2011) interviewed 24 joint honours students studying English at five diverse English universities, and themed the findings around the perceived advantages and disadvantages of joint honours, staff awareness, differing subject expectations around their learning, careers aspirations and support. The current study built upon this previous body of work, and explored current students' perceptions of their degrees.

In order to justify and evidence the quality of a university education, and also to rank universities, the government has devised various metrics including most recently the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2015). UK universities have had their teaching quality assessed by the criteria set out in the TEF, which is intended to give students more information about the standards of education they will experience at different universities, and also provide a measure of the educational outcomes with respect to employability and earnings. An individual university's TEF rating is largely based on data already in the public domain - graduate employment data drawn from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE), teaching quality, academic support and quality of assessment and feedback, drawn from the National Student Survey (NSS) and a measure of degree completion rates drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). However universities were also permitted to submit a short, targeted contextualising narrative and, for some universities, this resulted in a higher or lower TEF rating than the published data would

otherwise have suggested (Baker, 2017). At present the TEF evaluation is at the level of the individual university and it will be 2020 before TEF rates a deeper assessment of teaching quality at discipline level.

The intention behind TEF is to enable all students to have access to the information they need to make good decisions about what and where to study (BIS, 2016). However, there is a structural problem for students of joint honours degrees by the nature of the degree's design. A key issue is what does 'discipline level' mean in the context of joint honours degrees? The datasets in DLHE and the NSS collect information for the overall degree, History and English for example. So graduate employability, student satisfaction and degree completion is 'averaged' over the two subjects. This tells the prospective joint honours student nothing about joint honours subject combinations, nor the quality of the holistic experience when studied as a joint honours degree.

Therefore, other methodologies and data are required in order to scrutinise the quality of joint honours degrees. For example, in Pigden & Moore (2017) and Pigden & Moore (2018), the authors analysed previously unpublished data from the DLHE dataset, using an algorithmic approach to identify joint honours graduates from the subjects they had studied. This work devised a method for analysing the proportion of joint honours graduates in graduate destinations, and also the combinations of subjects that were most likely to lead to graduate employability.

In Pigden & Jegede (2018), primary data at the level of the individual student was captured via a self-administered questionnaire which generated 887 individual student responses. The survey questions included subjective reflections on the students' learning experiences, combined with closed questions around the students' personal, degree and university attributes. The survey provided additional context to understanding the educational

environment that best supports excellent outcomes for joint honours students, and where frustrations and weaknesses in delivery could occur. The current study is a qualitative analysis of the free-text questions included in that questionnaire, which utilises some of the TEF metrics around teaching quality, assessment and feedback and academic support in order to build a framework for the thematic analysis of the survey responses.

The political landscape in UK higher education has shifted considerably with the creation of the new government regulatory body for universities, the Office for Students (OfS). The OfS represents a significant shift in the regulatory environment for universities, one which is highly data and metric driven, and with a key focus on value for money, consumer protection, transparency and quality. A recent survey commissioned by the OfS (Dickinson & Marsh, 2018), found that only 38% of students believe their course offers good value for money. Aligning with TEF metrics, quality of teaching, fair assessment and helpful feedback, and good learning resources are factors which demonstrate value for money for students. The themes explored within the current study are therefore also cognisant of these main priorities of the OfS.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1 Questionnaire Details***

The data analysed in the current study was collected through a questionnaire distributed online. The full details of the questionnaire can be found in Pigden and Jegede (2018) however, in brief, the survey ran between June 2016 and January 2017 and was sent to students based in four English universities: University of Derby; University of Liverpool; University of Nottingham; Canterbury Christ Church University. The four universities reflected the diversity of the university sector in the UK in terms of their league table rankings, degree portfolios and student populations. The possible effect on the analysis of the

data collected from these particular institutions, was discussed in Section 5. ‘Research Limitations’.

The questionnaire link was emailed out, by the students’ respective director of studies, to joint honours students at their university, along with generic text explaining the purpose of the study, confidentiality and security of the data. 887 students, across all years of study, participated in the survey, via a self-administered the questionnaire. A financial incentive was deployed, in the form of Amazon vouchers. The questionnaire comprised forty-eight questions grouped together over seven screens. Recognising that a relatively comprehensive survey was required, since there would be no opportunity to re-contact the participants for further details, sufficient personal information about the participants, their course and their university was collected in order to create a detailed profile. The first group of questions queried basic information with which a simple profile of the student could be established:

- gender
- age
- ethnicity
- home/EU/international
- type of university accommodation
- commute to university
- registered disabilities
- caring responsibilities
- qualifications on entry
- term-time paid or unpaid work.

These questions were optional so as not to present a barrier to completing the rest of the survey. Around 50 students chose not to supply their sex and a very small number their ethnicity. The vast majority were comfortable to supply this optional information, opening up the possibility of future quantitative analysis. The second group of questions collected basic university and degree information:

- mode of study (full-time/part-time, visiting on exchange programme, online/distance learning)
- year or stage of study
- degree title and main subjects studied

The next question looked at the reasons for selecting a degree, and respondents were asked to choose from a wide range of factors that influenced their choice of degree, aimed at assessing how important such factors were in the students' decisions to study a particular degree at the university. For example, the degree title, content and design, advice available from different sources, the university's ranking and location, the admissions offer made, and the availability of bursaries or other incentives. This question group finished with a simple set of questions around the timetable and engagement with scheduled teaching, and finally some questions about sources of financial support.

The next question group started to personalise the responses and question the students' overall experience. These included free text evaluation of the 'best' and 'worst' parts of their degree, whether they had any regrets about their choice of degree, and whether they would recommend the course to a friend. The students were asked to estimate the degree classification they hope to achieve, and whether they felt prepared for graduate employment. Furthermore, respondents were asked about the academic support they had received and issues relating to assessment submission and return of feedback. Students were asked how their degree could be improved.



The students' perception of their university's learning environment was explored by asking them to rate a wide range of typical university services including academic and professional advisors, degree leaflets and online information, student wellbeing services, the library, student finance, computing support, administrative support for the degree including enrolment, careers development and, last but not least, catering.

To develop a holistic picture of the totality of the students' life experiences at university, respondents were asked what hobbies they enjoyed, whether they were members of any students' union societies or clubs, and what they liked and disliked about their university communities. The survey questions finished by asking the students 'What next?' – a free text question asking what the students' future aspirations were on completion of their degrees.

To conclude, the questions asked in the survey were able to contribute into answering the over-arching research question around the student learning experience, along with the academic and employability outcomes for the graduate. The questions were broad, and did not lead the students into directly considering either the TEF metrics or the priorities for the Office for Students, however as discussed in the next section, these factors underpinned the framework for the thematic analysis of the data.

## ***2.2 Thematic analysis of the data***

Thematic analysis involves searching across the entire set of data – be that a number of interviews, focus groups, or a range of texts, web pages, pictures etc. – to find repeated patterns of meaning (Patton, 1990). The intention is to identify important points that relate back to the overarching research question, and while there will usually be multiple instances of a particular topic identified across the data, this is not essential in order to surmise the essential significance of an issue. The subjective judgement of the researcher plays a part in identifying the key themes, and the co-authors of the current study have a depth and breadth

of professional experience in leading joint honours programmes, and also researching in the field.

In the case of the joint honours questionnaire within the current study, the framework that guided the coding and analysis of the survey data included the main criteria used within TEF, namely teaching quality, academic support, assessment and feedback, and employability.

Secondly, in light of the emphasis of the new Office for Students on value for money, coding also looked for themes arising due to the increasing emphasis on value in the minds of students. There was some overlap in that the criteria that correspond with value for money may include teaching quality, assessment and feedback, and also draw on the quality of the learning resources.

In order to achieve a rich, thematic analysis that encompassed the whole survey, the coding also focussed on the distinctive nature of studying two or more subjects, such as the effect on the student's community of learning, the course design, interdisciplinarity, communication between the subjects, and assessment and learning workload. To conclude, the coding sought to identify themes that would contribute into better understanding the main research question around the students' perceptions of their learning experience, academic and employability outcomes. Since this is an under-researched area, and the views of joint honours students are largely unpublished, a rich overall description was sought, rather than a narrow and deep analysis.

The researchers followed an inductive and realist approach to coding the survey data, in that the themes identified were strongly linked to the actual survey responses, rather than to the specific questions asked of the students in the questionnaire (Patton, 1990). Since this was an under-published area of research, there were no pre-existing coding frames directly applicable to joint honours students. The researchers were, however, experienced and

knowledgeable regarding joint honours students and their degree courses, and so the coding was not absent of epistemological preconceptions, and some themes were identified that resonated with the authors own expectations and presuppositions.

A semantic, rather than latent, analysis was adopted meaning that the data was coded at the surface level based on what the student actually said, rather than trying to identify or examine any underlying ideas or assumptions that might be behind the survey responses (Patton, 1990). For example, if a student reported that they regretted choosing their degree because they ‘would have had better marks just focusing on one subject and experiencing less stress’, then this was taken at face value, rather than digging into the underlying ideology around the meaning of success when studying a university degree. However, the analysis did progress further than the merely descriptive, and on to interpretation, and an attempt to theorise the significance of the themes and their broader meanings and implications.

Rather than a constructionist approach, whereby meaning and experience are socially produced rather than being inherent within an individual (Burr, 1995), the realist methodology adopted in the current study meant that theories around motivation, experience, and meaning were straightforward to surmise because of the simple relationship assumed between the language used by the student and its meaning (Potter, 1987). In summary, the rich thematic analysis within the current study incorporated the whole survey data, focussed on semantic themes, and with an inductive and realist approach to interpret the significance and meanings behind the themes.

### **3. Results**

#### ***3.1 Positive and negative aspects of the learning experience allied to TEF metrics***

Where students aired positive and negative thoughts or feelings towards their university experience, many comments fell strongly into themes close to the main TEF criteria of academic support, teaching quality, assessment and feedback and employability.

*i. Academic support*

In terms of academic support, 97 comments were coded positively to this theme and the key words that repeated included ‘supportive’, ‘interested’ and ‘helpful’, qualified further by their academic tutors being ‘friendly’, ‘brilliant’ and ‘amazing’. A phrase which resonated was ‘lecturers are very responsive to any communication and very conscious of the need to balance both components of my degree’. This demonstrated the importance for joint honours students of having support from both their subjects, that their academic tutors understood and acknowledged the unique pressures inherent in balancing the study of two subjects and that academics reacted quickly when help was needed.

Academic support however also attracted 102 negatively coded comments. Some of these were blunt and general in nature, ‘no student support’, ‘poor’ and ‘unhelpful’. However a substantial commentary centred on issues specific to joint honours students, namely the pros and cons of having one or two personal tutors, and a lack of understanding of joint honours issues. For example, ‘due to having separate tutors for each subject, no one person is supporting me with a satisfactory overview of my degree’. However in juxtaposition, ‘the support is unbalanced, due to the [name of school] being my ‘home school’, and ‘I don’t get a personal academic advisor for both subjects so can only receive advice and support in one subject’. Combined with typical comments such as ‘each school thinks you are the other one’s problem’, the students expressed a considerable sentiment around the struggle to feel like a holistically supported student and not two halves. This was further explored and expanded in the themes around community of learning, communication between departments and sense of belonging – many of the joint honours students felt that they were ‘falling

between two stools' and it is possible that this is damaging for student retention, success and career confidence.

*ii. Teaching quality*

Students generally responded positively about teaching quality, with 45 references, frequently using words such as 'experienced', 'knowledgeable', 'enthusiastic', 'passionate' and 'interesting' to convey the essence of what they found appealing in their lecturers' delivery. A couple of students commented that the teaching was 'challenging but extremely rewarding' and a 'challenging discourse', which showed that although students want to perform well, to be adequately supported and fairly assessed, they are also interested in being stretched cognitively at university. Without a supportive learning environment around assessment and feedback, such sentiments would be unlikely to flourish and a more mechanistic approach to academic success would likely ensue.

*iii. Assessment and feedback*

Students also commented frequently, 95 comments, and positively around assessment and feedback, with an emphasis on feedback being 'clear', 'helpful', 'detailed', 'personal' and 'concise'. However the strand that dominated this theme was around feedback being constructive and showing students explicitly how to enhance their future assessment. A typical comment was 'constructive, allowing me to know what to improve on my next assignment'. This showed the importance to students of not just learning where they went wrong, but being given advice for how to gain more marks next time. This was unsurprising given the pressure students feel to achieve 'good honours', a 2.1 or a First Class honours degree, with degree classification being the entry bar into many graduate positions. By gaining a graduate position students might justify the large debt accrued during their studies.

This was correlated in the comments students' made about their future, post-degree aspirations. These fell into three broad categories – the majority, 161 references, featured students expressing their intention to find good employment, a significant proportion, 45 references, were committing to further study and 94 coded comments related more to personal development such as travel.

Where students commented negatively about assessment feedback, many issues were the antithesis of the positive comments already noted, for example 'vague', 'unclear', 'brief' and 'we are not told how to improve, only what is wrong'. However a strong theme also centred on variability of the quality of feedback, often distinguished between the two subjects being studied, with one outshining the other. For example this was a common variant, 'it differs depending on the school. The [name of school] is very poor when it comes to giving feedback, especially if you're from a different school'. This comment also highlighted a commonly stated concern that because the student was joint honours, they were somehow less deserving of a good academic experience than the single honours students and did not feel like a full member of the school. This theme was returned to in subsequent analysis, particularly around the community of learning.

Around the mechanics of assessment submission, students were clear in their preference for an online system that was 'simple and easy to navigate'. A small number of students commented that they had previously had a dual system – online for one subject and paper-based for the other, for example noting that 'the removal of paper hand-ins for [name of school] makes the entire process easier'. It was to be expected that students preferred the ease and convenience of an online system, and a necessity that there was consistency between subjects, reducing the overhead placed on students in switching between the two. Joint honours students are well-placed to experience inconsistent practice across a university, potentially identifying issues that university administrators have not.

Where students did demonstrate their dissatisfaction was in the repeated mention of a dual hand-in system, with some students having to submit both online and in hard copy, and this was summed up pithily by one student, 'Seems quite pointless having to hand in a hard copy of each assignment when I am also submitting it on Turnitin'. The students did not perceive that the protection of a dual system outweighed the inconvenience created for the students and staff.

Further negative themes around assessment and feedback were centred on the particulars of the joint honours experience. Often cited, with 42 comments, was the issue of assessment deadline bunching or clashes, inferred by students to be as a result of a lack of communication between their subjects. This was a typical comment: 'A lack of communication between departments leading to massive pressure when important deadlines coincide', or 'The departments don't liaise with each other, so deadlines and exams usually all occur at the same time'. The students were again linking a poor aspect of their learning experience with being a joint honours student, and they felt they were suffering due to their degree not being solely owned by one subject area. Another thread of negative comments identified, certainly the preserve of joint honours students, was in having to grapple with multiple referencing systems, for example footnotes or Harvard. Illustrative of this, one student complained that it 'is annoying having to switch between different referencing styles'.

The most common sentiment expressed in 49 coded references was the impact on workload of studying two subjects, combining the effects of dual referencing systems, with assessment deadline clashes, and poor communication between the subjects. Generally students felt their workload was 'heavier than single honours', with 'work for one subject not beneficial for the other, so have to do more work overall'. An interesting take on this was expressed by 'there aren't really any 'filler' modules so I think we end up working harder than single honours

students'. This comment overlapped with the issue of joint honours course design, highlighting the concerns expressed that the course was 'content heavy' as academics strove to ensure students studied the core essentials of their subject, leaving no space for 'lighter' or more peripheral content.

#### *iv. Employability*

Only two students felt that their course 'does not seem to have as good career prospects'. The majority of comments, 38 coded, expressed confidence that their joint honours course would improve their employability, and that they would 'have an edge over single honours students with respect to finding graduate jobs'. One student thought they would be a 'more well-rounded employee', another that they were 'learning excellent time management skills while juggling deadlines for both subjects'. Other striking comments were that the course was 'more challenging and sounds more impressive', that they would be 'more appealing to employers with a wider skill-set', and that they would be 'standing out from the crowd'.

### ***3.2 Positive and negative aspects of the learning experience allied to the students learning community***

A highly repetitive theme, with 165 coded references, was identified around the students' community of learning, and how this had impacted on their learning and personal development. The dominant key words coded were 'friendly', 'diverse' and 'inclusive', and also, more specifically to joint honours, that there was an 'ability to meet a range of people from the two different courses', along with an 'ability to converse with more people than otherwise would on a single honours course'. This outgoing characteristic of joint honours students can be interpreted as a feature of their willingness to study in a pattern outside of the accepted norms, and illustrative therefore of their belief that they will benefit from a wider social network.



Unfortunately the students seemed often to be thwarted in these sociable intentions. There were 134 negatively coded references regarding the struggle to establish deep relationships in both subjects. One aspect was the tight sense of belonging established within a particular subject, meaning that 'there does tend to be cliques within schools, making it difficult for joint honours students, or forcing them to pick between socialising in one school or the other'. Many students felt that they did not fully belong to either department or school, often because of the time constraints placed by only studying half of their degree course in each subject, meaning that they 'can feel like a visitor in some departments', or that the student 'feels segregated from the single honours students'. This led to the students making fewer friends or failing to establish the depth of friendships they wanted, and believing the root of the problem to be that they are joint honours students.

### ***3.3 Positive and negative aspects of the learning experience allied to course design and interdisciplinarity***

There were also strong themes expressed around the joint honours course design, which might be expected given that this is quite different from the normal single honours course. A strong and positive sense was expressed around the variety of learning inherent in a joint honours degree, with 116 coded references to, for example, 'different perspectives', 'change of pace', 'different types of skills' and a 'broader knowledge'. One student summed up a particular benefit of switching between subjects in that 'if I am finding one topic difficult, I can often find solace in the other subject that I study'. The benefits of this stretch were expressed in the 'wide breadth of topics that provide a diverse learning experience and challenge me on things a single honours student wouldn't have to deal with'. This echoed back to the earlier comments about workload and clashing deadlines, but here presented the positive flip-side and potential for personal development.

The negatives expressed around the design of a joint honours degree often centred around the obvious limitations of only studying half the subject, namely that the students did not cover as much of each subject, that certain optional modules were not available to them, and a sense that once the core of the subject had been studied, there was no space left to explore the periphery of the subject. This led to an overarching feeling of a lack of flexibility, some frustration at being confined, and missing out on perceived opportunities that single honours students had. A typical point was ‘not many optional modules available, as I was required to study core modules in each subject’, or that ‘so many compulsory modules that I don’t find useful for my personal goals and aspirations, both with my degree and with my career’.

The opportunities for interdisciplinary learning varied depending on the subjects studied and the intention or otherwise in the course design to facilitate interdisciplinarity.

Notwithstanding that, for some students this was a key benefit of their course, and one that they actively sought out, even when it was not an overt feature of the degree. One student commented that ‘learning about different but relatable subjects gives you a wider understanding’ while another found benefit in being able to ‘approach different issues / problems from two different perspectives, often synergistically’, or simply ‘using one subject area to influence thought in another’.

### ***3.4 Positive and negative aspects of the learning experience allied to value for money aspects such as the learning environment, organisation and management and resources***

The students repeatedly expressed positive sentiments towards their campus, sports facilities, food, library, and subject buildings with comments such as a ‘beautiful campus’, ‘free bus’, ‘good catering’ and ‘student bar’ featuring strongly. The Students’ Union was mostly commended for providing a ‘wide range of different societies and sports to find like-minded people’. Where negativity arose was around low scheduled teaching and contact hours, and

one student commented that ‘I barely have many classes anyway. It’s hardly worth the £9000 I’m paying in tuition fees’. Another often mentioned gripe was in the high cost of services and goods on campus with a simple summary provided by one student, ‘everything is expensive on campus’. There were quite a few comments regarding over-crowding in the library at peak times, combined with low or minimal book stock in some areas. One student commented that ‘there is too much focus on cost and money’, which is a salutary reminder that students are probably focussed more on their education and not the financial viability of their university.

Although not a TEF metric, organisation and management does feature strongly in the National Student Survey, and dominant themes arose from the joint honours students in terms of their perception of the structure and administration of their course. The most repeated comment was around timetabling, for example ‘timetable clashes – can’t always do the modules you want’, with ‘a lack of support for specific joint honours issues such as creating a timetable from two different departments’. The students’ sense that the structure was ‘messy’ and ‘disorganised’ was blamed again on a ‘lack of communication between schools’, leading to ‘me being forgotten or missed off email lists and information updates’. One student expressed their desire for inter-departmental co-operation with great feeling, ‘for the love of all that is good in the world, actually talk to each other’.

#### **4 Discussion**

The thematic analysis reveals joint honours students to be engaged and passionate about their learning experience, and astute observers of both the strengths and weaknesses inherent in their chosen course design. Because joint honours students often study across the institution, university-level acknowledgement and pro-active intervention would be required to better understand and address the issues raised – local, school-based solutions would not be

sufficient. For example, the information and guidance provided by universities to prospective students is highly influential (Plank & Jordan, 2001). This could balance the potential benefits of studying a joint honours degree – diverse learning and the development of attractive graduate skills such as adaptability and time management, against the dis-benefits, for example reduced optional module choice, timetabling constraints and increased workload. Depending on the level of structure and management provided to support joint honours students by any particular university, since this is likely to vary greatly, it will be more or less likely that students experience the issues identified in the current study. For example, some universities might appoint a personal tutor for each subject, but if neither feels responsible for the overarching student experience, then who is guiding the student as a whole? If a ‘lead’ school is designated, then the student might be left with little or no advice in their ‘secondary’ subject, and again a sense of wholeness is lost, and students may feel they are under-valued as reported in the current study. Given that an effective personal tutor will support transition to university (Wilcox et.al., 2005), ‘guide students' development into independent learners’ (Wingate, 2007) and build ‘a relationship with the institution and a sense of belonging’ (Thomas, 2006), if this vital role is sub-optimal for joint honours students then there can be a significant impact on their university experience.

It is unsurprising that timetabling is raised as a challenging issue for joint honours students, since physical and human resource constraints mean that not every possible combination of module choice, taken from a variety of combinations of subjects, can be scheduled without some clashes. There is a significant body of research around university timetabling issues, for example Babei et. al. (2015) analyses available approaches including operational researches, metaheuristic methods and intelligent novel methods. Joint honours students might accept this point, if it can be demonstrated to them that sufficient, active and skilful efforts have been made to optimise the use of resources, to enable as much clash-free choice as possible.

Some universities might choose to facilitate a clash-free timetable by reducing available combinations of subjects and modules to a minimum, or even by removing module choice completely. This might address the difficulty of timetabling, and also reassure academics that students have studied the essential core of the subject. However it could create another issue within the students' perceptions which we see in the current study – stimulating a sense of unfairness amongst joint honours students that they are missing out and their learning is constrained and frustrated as a result.

The administration of assessment is an area where the joint honours students have a particular set of needs. It is clear in the current study that avoidance of clashes between examination and viva voce are expected by the students. However it may be a conscious decision on the part of academics to have coincidental coursework deadlines, with the expectation that students develop the requisite time management skills. If this principle is consistently applied across all subjects, and clearly communicated to students, then although probably still not a popular scenario, students are more likely to accept the strategy. The current study highlights the students' suspicions that assessment deadline bunching is due to joint honours students having been overlooked, in contrast to single honours students, for whom the assessment schedule is assumed to have been planned to be evenly spread.

Consistency is the byword for success in managing single and joint honours students' experience of good assessment. Institutional-level assessment and feedback policy should contain sufficient guidance on the mechanics of assessment submission, marking and return of marks and feedback, so that a similar experience will be had irrespective of the subjects studied. While the learning and teaching strategies, and assessment tools might vary greatly in diverse subject combinations, expectations around the timeliness, volume and quality of feedback should result in standard norms being achieved. This accords with the extensive

literature around feedback in British higher education institutions, for example Hounsell's (2003) concern for achieving greater consistency across departments.

From an employability perspective, many joint honours students will not study a directly vocational course, however that is also the case for many single honours students. Self-confidence is often a better indicator of future career success than the actual subjects studied – in the 2017 CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey (CBI, 2017), 55% of graduate recruiters rated attitude and aptitude as their single most important factor. However Pigden and Moore (2018), find that nationally there is a negative 3% point gap in highly skilled destinations between joint and single honours students, though this gap narrows for Russell Group and is reversed at Scottish universities. Therefore although the students' perception of their employability is good, they might usefully try to gain work experience, increasingly a pre-requisite for entry-level graduate positions (Heyler, 2014). An emphasis on suitable work experience or placement, combined with engagement with extra- or co-curricular activities, might help students to develop their personal and professional attributes, and stand out from the crowd in an era of higher education 'massification' (Marginson, 2016).

The concept of a community of learning is something that all universities seek to achieve for their students (Strayhorn, 2018) – a sense of belonging, inclusivity, mutual support and understanding, all of which help to foster a positive attitude to learning, retention and enhanced success. Therefore the struggles of some joint honours students to fit into both their subjects is a concern, with reports of cliques, or an inability to spend enough time in developing deep relationships with fellow students and staff. The current study highlights the vulnerability of joint honours students to feeling left out.

With respect to joint honours course design and interdisciplinarity, this necessitates skilful thinking, organisation and management in order to build a stimulating, viable and valuable 'half degree'. Interdisciplinarity might be an opportunity for joint honours students to

develop skills and excel in cross-disciplinary problem-solving, and therefore prove themselves valuable to future employers and gain satisfaction from breaking out of traditional academic silos. In undergraduate degrees in the UK, interdisciplinarity is still fairly limited and goes against conventional course design, with academics largely housed in discipline silos - as Brewer (1999) stated: 'The world has problems, but universities have departments'. However at postgraduate level and in academic research, interdisciplinarity is commonplace. It is widely accepted (e.g. Hadorn et al, 2008) that the great global challenges, such as global warming, human migration or world peace, will require complex problem-solving drawn from differing paradigms and disciplinary discourse, and so developing interdisciplinary thinking in undergraduates is certainly a positive, if largely unintentional, benefit of joint honours degrees.

The Office for Students will increasingly focus on the perceived and actual value for money afforded by a university degree. For joint honours students, this will include particular scrutiny of the effectiveness of the organisation and management of their course, as well as the more usual measures around contact hours, facilities and employability outcomes. The current study reveals students' perceptions that the two parts of the joint honours degree are not well administered from an overall study experience, with wide-ranging criticism of a lack of communication between schools. Joint honours students clearly need a holistic learning experience including high levels of communication and appropriate integration across subject areas.

## **5 Research Limitations**

Because the current study is limited to joint honours students at four English universities, it cannot provide a systematic and analytical evaluation across all English universities. The universities are geographically located outside the UK's capital, London, although they do include two of the largest metropolitan cities: Liverpool and Nottingham. However it is

possible that a London economic context might provide different perceptions from the regionally based students that participated in the current study.

Furthermore, the current study does not correlate responses against type of university studied at, or other characteristics of the students such as gender, age and ethnicity. These research limitations mean that the study cannot conclude that the observations made by the students would necessarily reflect the views of students in other universities. Secondly it may be possible that the types of comments made by the students, for example around workload or community of learning, may be more or less commonly made depending on the personal characteristics of the students, for example age, gender, ethnicity or level of study.

The perception students have of their joint honours degrees only constitutes one of several elements which would be required for a complete study or assessment of joint degree programmes. A more comprehensive study and fuller understanding would also include the perspective of university lecturers, academic leaders and employers in the labour market. Notwithstanding this, the authors' own experiences in leading and teaching in joint honours degrees do correlate with the main themes raised by the students in our survey. Confidence was therefore placed in the both the discussion points raised and the value of the thematic analysis as a starting point for university leaders and administrators to better understand the design and operational effectiveness of joint honours degrees.

## **6 Future Work**

The next study will build on the work of Pigden and Moore (2018), and re-examine the highly skilled employment of joint honours graduates. The next study will expand the analysis with the inclusion of social mobility characteristics of graduates and explore the relationship between employability and age, gender and ethnicity, along with a measure of participation of students in higher education from different geographical areas (POLAR4 quintiles). The intention is to provide guidance on the impact on employability of studying a



joint honours degree, dependent on the characteristics of the student. The study will also consider the combinations of subjects studied, type of institution (e.g. Russel Group or post-1992), and country within the UK where the student studies.

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