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**Dimensions of Belonging: Rethinking Retention  
for Mature Part-time Undergraduates  
in English Higher Education**

**Kate Thomas**

**Birkbeck, University of London**

**2016**



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Sheffield, April 2016

### **Doreen Massey, 3 January 1944 – 11 March 2016**

When you heard Doreen speak, it was like looking at cut crystal: precise, clear and often dazzling. She made complex ideas accessible and unknotted the complexities of the age.

(Little, B 2016)

## ABSTRACT

This thesis critiques and re-imagines a dominant narrative of contemporary English higher education: that belonging is critical to student retention and success (Thomas 2012). It does so through a qualitative multiple case study of four English higher education institutions, and in relation to mature part-time undergraduates, peripherally positioned in the sector. Institution-centric definitions and measurements of retention are incompatible with the complex lives of a diverse part-time student cohort, as are uniform concepts of belonging which rely on a common understanding of what belonging is (Mee and Wright 2009), and which are modelled on a 'typical' young, full-time undergraduate. Drawing on spatial, psychosocial and psychogeographical ideas, the thesis maps a wider and more nuanced territory of retention and belonging in English higher education, rethinking retention and belonging as contested and dimensional. Belonging in higher education is theorised through concepts of space and power, and within the framework of a borderland analysis (Abes, 2009) which thrives on complexity, and which values both synergies and productive tensions in the interdisciplinary spaces between distinct theoretical approaches. Bourdieu's 'thinking tools': habitus, capital and field; Brah's concepts of diaspora and diaspora space and Massey's spatial concepts are combined to conceptualise each case study institution as a site of power and knowledge in which dominant identities are constructed and construct 'the other, resulting in different experiences of belonging in the space of HE. Bespoke research methods enable the researcher to practise spatiality in a highly active manner (Massey, 2005) and the findings disrupt the dominant narrative of belonging and retention, emphasising instead a rich territory of the in between: of persistence and shared ownership, and of belonging for mature part-time undergraduates as a complex, negotiated process in the contested space of higher education.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
BME	Black and Minority Ethnicity
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DLHE	Destination of Leavers from HE survey
ELQ	Equivalent or Lower Qualification
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistical Agency
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
PVC	Pro Vice Chancellor
REF	Research Excellence Framework
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UUK	Universities UK
WP	Widening Participation



## **MAPPING RESEARCH TERRAIN**

### **CHAPTER ONE: CARTOGRAPHY AND OTHER CHALLENGES**

#### **Map as metaphor**

I began with a map, of sorts. A suggested title and a timescale for a qualitative multiple case study investigating the impact of university retention strategies on mature part-time undergraduates in English higher education (HE). The project was the result of a successful bid for external research funding justified by a dearth of literature on the impact of institutional retention strategies on mature part-time undergraduate students and a continuing and significant disparity between full and part-time student retention rates.

In the early stages of the project, this map gave order to the task ahead. It helped me to orientate myself, to select and engage with the literature, to plan fieldwork. When I struggled, at times, to inhabit a new doctoral identity, the map suggested both a tested route through and the boundaries of the research terrain. 'A map tells of an order in things. With the map we can locate ourselves and find our way ... we map things out to get a feeling for their structure' (Massey 2005, p.106). The map is an appealing and versatile metaphor, transferable to a variety of contexts, processes and experiences.

Yet the metaphor is also problematic:

because of the double-sided characteristic of all maps ... their surfaces are directly analogous to actual ground conditions ... because of this directness, maps are taken to be 'true' and 'objective' measures of the world, and are accorded a kind of benign neutrality. By contrast, the other side of this analogous characteristic is the inevitable abstractness of maps, the result of selection, omission, isolation, distance and codification.

(Corner 1999, pp.214-215)

The dominant form of mapping provides a view from above, conveying neutrality and reducing complexity to an abstraction; representing space 'as something to be crossed and conquered ... surface and continuous' (Massey 2005, p.4). In this way, maps operate as a 'technology of power' (Harley 1988), giving authority to simplified, selective and bounded representations of space, and so 'position the observer, themselves unobserved, outside and above the object of the gaze' (Massey 2005, p.107). If the process of research is

compared to the dominant form of mapping, then this implies an objective, neutral activity, unaffected by the positioning and actions of the researcher. Yet maps are the expressions of powerful views of the world, 'a serious fiction that represents a particular intellectual landscape from a particular point of view' (Gregory 1994, p.6); and therefore it is 'important to acknowledge the maker's own participation and engagement with the cartographic process' (Corner 1999, p.229). Acknowledging the power relationships involved in both mapping and research opens up opportunities to understand what or who is represented, how and by whom. Using map as metaphor in this way emphasises the constructed and selective process of academic research, codified in accordance with academic and disciplinary conventions, its nature and claims shaped by the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodological position:

the gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis).

(Denzin and Lincoln 2008, p.28)

I still have that original map – or scraps of it. I completed a multiple case study within the pre-determined timescale, drawing on primarily qualitative data. However, my route diverged from the one originally envisaged, away from a conventional impact study of retention strategies towards an interdisciplinary enquiry into an influential narrative of retention and belonging in HE. My investigation centred on territory between two statements I encountered during the literature review. One articulates a dominant narrative of student belonging and retention in HE: ubiquitous, largely uncontested and embedded in the lexicon of institutional strategy, literature and national student agendas. The other acknowledges the relational complexity of belonging as a phenomenon.

The first statement is contained in an influential meta-analysis (Thomas, 2012) of findings from *What Works* (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2012), a two-phase student retention and success programme. Between 2008-2011, this programme involved twenty-two English higher education institutions (HEIs) in seven research projects and a further fifteen thereafter, in an extended change management programme. The final report includes a compendium of effective practice in HEI for improving student engagement, belonging, retention and success. *What Works'* findings and recommendations are widely referenced

across the UK HE sector and in institutional retention strategy. In her analysis, Thomas considers the relationship between belonging in HE and student retention through a primarily sociological lens, stating: 'in higher education, belonging is critical to student retention and success' (2012, p.10).

The second statement is contained in an article considering 'Geographies of Belonging' (Mee and Wright, 2009). Mee and Wright state: 'belonging ... is often used in a way that implies a common understanding of what belonging is and why belonging is important. Needless to say, no such common understanding exists' (*ibid*, p.772). These authors conceptualise belonging as inherently geographical, connecting 'matter to place through various practices of boundary making and inhabitation' (*ibid*). They argue for 'a thorough theorisation of belonging and ... the differences between a sense of belonging, practices of belonging and formal structures of belonging' (*ibid*, p.774). Key to their analysis is the notion of a sense of place: 'the local structure of subjective feeling associated with an area ... meanings given to a place ... embedded in wider sets of social relations' (Agnew 1987). Practices of belonging within a place not only mark the claims of particular groups to particular territories, but in doing so, inevitably identify and exclude 'the other'. Difference is defined and articulated through relationships of power.

This enquiry into belonging, retention and mature part-time undergraduates explores territory between these positions. Is a common understanding of belonging implied in the 'critical' relationship of belonging to retention in English HE? If so, what does that common understanding involve; and, if 'belonging in a group depends on which of all the possible characteristics are chosen as "defining" membership' (Crang 1998, p.60), what are the implications for mature part-time undergraduates in English HE? In the following sections of this chapter, *The research territory* provides an introduction to the project's contexts and drivers, which Chapter Two will extend; *Into the borderlands* sets out the enquiry's interdisciplinary character and analytical approach; and *Mapping the thesis* outlines the structure of the thesis in greater detail.

## **The research territory**

### *Part-time student retention*

In the summer of 2015, the English HE sector entered the final phase of one of the most competitive recruitment rounds of recent years, a period marked by strong demand for full-time degree places from young applicants and the abolition of student number controls. However, university applications and acceptances from part-time students and those in older age groups were down again on 2014, continuing a dramatic downwards trajectory in part-time undergraduate numbers.

Between 2010/11 and 2014/15, the number of UK and EU part-time undergraduate entrants at HEFCE-funded English higher education providers plummeted by 143,000, a decrease of 55 per cent. Last year alone, the numbers dropped by 10 per cent. Consequently, by 2014/15 part-timers made up only 23 per cent of all undergraduate entrants compared to 40 per cent in 2010/11.

(Callender 2015, p.17)

A combination of the impact of the introduction of the Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) policy in 2008, deep economic recession and the 2012/13 funding reforms to HE has led to 'a collapse in part-time study ... arguably the single biggest problem facing higher education at the moment' (Hillman 2015, p.4).

In response, and in an increasingly challenging financial environment, many institutions have significantly reduced or ceased part-time provision, 'driven by a need to be efficient and to maximise a declining resource base as the central funding contribution was removed' (Layer 2015, p.73). Between 2010-2015, the largest UK provider of part-time (distance learning) HE, the Open University, lost more than 28 per cent of its total student numbers, a situation described by its vice-chancellor as 'a tragedy for individual lives ... also a tragedy for our wider society and economy' (Parr 2015). In September 2015, the Open University announced it would be closing seven of its nine regional centres and centralising student support services at the two remaining regional centres in Manchester and Nottingham and its Milton Keynes headquarters (Times Higher Education 2015). As part-time enrolments fell and the scale of the issue became clear, stakeholders in part-time higher education launched a campaign, *Part Time Now*, and published reports (HEPI 2015; HEFCE 2014; UUK 2013). These have not, to date, resulted in any specific policy initiatives to stem the decline.

Another consequence of the 2012/2013 funding reforms is the substantial increase in economic significance of both full- and part-time student retention to individual HEIs. While non-standard definitions and variations in data collection practices make accurate international comparisons of retention data difficult (van Stolk *et al* 2007), overall retention rates for full-time students in the UK are considered better than for many European countries and the US. However, this masks a complex picture across institutions and modes of study, and rates between English HEIs vary considerably. HEIs report retention rates annually against benchmarks set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and these appear in sector league tables and multiple databases of higher education in the public domain, e.g. *The Good University* and *Which University*. Such public exposure increases retention's reputational significance.

Predating the most recent drop in part-time undergraduate recruitment in English HE is a significant and stubbornly wide disparity between full- and part-time retention rates. Non-continuation rates for full-time first degree students in 2011/12 ranged between 1.5 per cent and 17.7 per cent, an average of 7 per cent, while comparable rates for part-time first degree students ranged between 4.3 per cent and 56.8 per cent, an average of 34.1 per cent (HESA 2015). While a body of literature addresses the reasons for student withdrawal, as Chapter Two will show, part-time learners are poorly represented within it; causes of withdrawal are often individualised and weighted towards deficit. The institutions in which part-time undergraduates are most numerous tend to be those classified as Low Tariff i.e. those institutions whose applicants' average UCAS Tariff score is between 0-280 (Rose-Adams 2013, p. 104-5) and to have lower retention rates. This implies that there are significant structural factors related to lower retention rates of *all* students, but that these are successfully negotiated by those who do complete their courses. This dimension of retention: persistence, is also under-represented in the literature.

### *Why belonging?*

In this difficult climate for part-time HE, and because Thomas (2012) and *What Works* (2012) are so widely referenced across the sector, it seems critical to understand not only what Thomas means by 'belonging' in HE but whether belonging is available to all students, equally. Thomas draws on individualistic and sociological explanations to situate belonging in academic and social spheres of HE, both connected to interpersonal relationships and to

a sense of being accepted and supported, but also mediated by institutional cultures and social background (Thomas 2012). This definition is influenced by a longstanding US model of student persistence (Tinto 1975) developed in the context of the US HE system. Tinto suggests individuals' ability 'to become competent members of academic and social communities of the college' (1988, p.452) relies on a raft of variables, including student congruency (institutional 'fit') and integration in academic and social spheres of the HEI, as well as social and demographic characteristics. Tinto's model and the emergence in the UK of belonging in HE as a powerful narrative will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

Learning occurs in a social context 'overlaid with different groups' process of identification, access to power and ... taken-for granted elements of society that define where different identities are located within the broader social structure' (Stuart, Lido and Morgan 2011, p.491). As this thesis will demonstrate, part-time undergraduates are increasingly precariously positioned on the map of English HE. Research into the experiences of current part-time learners in HE (HEA, 2015) found that

Generally part-time learners felt they were unacknowledged as a student group by institutions, regarded as "an inconvenience", as "shoehorned" and "side-lined" into one size fits all systems aimed at full-time students.

(Butcher 2015, p.52)

Belonging is not straightforward on the margins. 'If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside' (Probyn 1996, p.8). As an HE practitioner, I have been employed in post-1992 universities and on fixed term rather than permanent contracts, in the fields of widening participation, lifelong learning and gender equality, in a professional 'third space between professional and academic domains ... colonised primarily by *unbounded and blended professionals*, as well as by academic staff undertaking project-oriented activities' (Whitchurch 2008, pp.385-6, original italics). Belonging in HE has not been straightforward for the students and potential applicants I have worked with, but it has not been straightforward for me either.

People who work on the margins will have a different focus to those who work solely within the centre of an organisation ... It is also the case that being marginal to the mainstream of institutions allows greater flexibility to develop new ways of working. It provides examples of contrasting and complementary approaches to engaging new learners and agencies.

(Stuart 2002, pp. 40-41)

Yet I experience a certain freedom in 'not belonging' and have little desire to move from a marginal professional position towards a more mainstream role in the recognised centre. Perhaps this is because belonging is complex in a personal sense for me too. While certain attributes position me in a privileged social position in contemporary Britain – first-world, White, British, first-generation middle-class, highly educated – other attributes – female, gay, childfree – position me more awkwardly in a heteronormative, patriarchal culture:

Identity can be defined as much by what we are *not* as by who we *are* ... it is impossible ... to think through how people can have an identity, that is, be defined by shared characteristics, without working out who is thus excluded – how identity is founded on differentiation.

(Crang 1998, p.61)

However, I know, viscerally and intellectually, that it is possible to negotiate versions of belonging on these peripheries which do not conform to social norms, but which are entirely fulfilling and which place me at the centre of my own life. My professional, personal and intellectual interest in negotiated dimensions of belonging have directed me towards a critical engagement with a uniform and universalised idea of belonging in HE.

### **Into the borderlands**

Map making involves active processes, decisions based consciously or not, on philosophical beliefs:

Like a nomadic grazer, the exploratory mapper detours around the obvious so as to engage what remains hidden ... at each stage ... choices and judgements are made, with the construing and constructing of the map alternating between processes of accumulation, disassembly and reassembly.

(Corner 1999, pp.225-31)

The map of this thesis is shaped by an ontological and epistemological position allied with a post-structuralist framework which rejects absolute truths and 'systematic accounts of the world which aspire to exactness ... the totality of social life as stories that add up' (Hubbard *et al* 2002, p.74). The map I have constructed disrupts and reimagines a dominant narrative of belonging and retention from multiple viewpoints. It relocates attention to voices, narratives and experiences, some of which occupy a periphery constructed by relations of power. This is what Richardson describes as a 'feminist speaking position, to move to the centre that which has been excluded and marginalised' (1997, p.59).

This is an intentionally interdisciplinary enquiry, breaking out of ‘the typical paradigmatic categories into which studies are generally categorized’ and uncovering ‘the potential of using interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives in research’ (Abes 2009, p.142). It employs a strategy of borderland analysis (*ibid*) through which Abes adapts the concept of a *mestiza* or borderland identity, ‘a third space between two others ... a new space that is a both/and location ... where individuals participate in both but do not wholly belong’ (Anzaldua 1999, p.528). Abes’ model requires the researcher to ‘straddle multiple theories using ideas from each to portray a more complete picture of identity ... a new theoretical space’ (2012, p.190). The project of a borderland analysis is not to synthesise different theoretical positions and concepts, rather to value both synergies and productive tensions in the interdisciplinary spaces between distinct approaches. It is an analytical strategy which thrives on complexity and multiplicity.

This thesis establishes a new theoretical and methodological space in the borderlands between different theoretical approaches to belonging: between geographical and sociological; psychosocial and post-colonial. I draw on these different ways of seeing and filter them through the lens of my own interpretation. My enquiry focuses attention on how the socio-spatial arrangements of HE structure relations with and experiences of mature part-time undergraduates within it, foregrounding an analysis of power relations in space and problematising an apparent naturalness of spatial relations. The HE sector and individual HEIs are conceptualised as sites of power and knowledge in which narratives are articulated and identities constructed, resulting in different experiences of space – and belonging – within them.

I am choosing to travel these currents of geographical and sociological thought with three individual theorists, each of whom contributes distinct perspectives to this borderland analysis of belonging in HE. Each has something to say to the other about relations of power in space, and I will argue that together, they enrich a theorising of belonging for contemporary contexts of peripherality and diversity in HE. The theorists are Pierre Bourdieu, Avtar Brah and Doreen Massey. Bourdieu’s sociological framework of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) is frequently employed by those investigating unequal chances, constrained choices and differential experiences within HE. A Bourdieusian field analysis of HE defines belonging as a relational concept in structured social space. Brah’s sociology encompasses race, gender and identity from post-colonial



and feminist post-structural perspectives. She combines the spatial and psychosocial in her concept of 'diaspora' (1996) and its interpretation of power and difference. Historically synonymous with post-colonial experience, Brah's concept of diaspora brings a relational positioning of power in space and a rich psychosocial dimension of lived experience to the enquiry. Massey admits that while she loves maps as material objects, conceptually she rejects the idea of space as 'something to be mapped ... a surface continuous and given with places, peoples and culture as phenomena on this surface, without their own trajectories' (2005, p.4). Instead she conceptualises space as a confluence and product of histories, relationships: 'the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist' (*ibid*, p.9), and places as 'part of a relational process that integrates local and global' (Hubbard *et al* 2002, p.24). Massey's devices of activity space and geographies of power (1993, 1994, 2005) frame my empirical engagement with each of the case study institutions.

It is in the borderlands between Bourdieu, Brah and Massey that this thesis interrogates 'belonging' through ideas of space and power. In doing so, it makes an original contribution to knowledge, going beyond critique into new territory, rethinking and reimagining alternative possibilities of belonging and retention. This territory is provisional and partial, but new nonetheless. As later chapters will demonstrate, the thesis also makes an original contribution to methodological knowledge in its interdisciplinary approach and in developing two bespoke research methods: campus *dérive* and the *Mapping Belonging* exercise. Campus *dérive* draws on 'psychogeographical, site-specific studies of particular places' (Bridger 2015). It considers campus geographies in the context of my connection as a researcher and a subject with spatial questions of power, belonging and peripherality. *Mapping Belonging* adapts participatory diagramming, an established technique of geographical research, to an educational research context, representing participants' sense of belonging on two-dimensional campus maps.

### **Mapping the thesis**

The thesis comprises nine chapters across three parts: *Mapping Research Terrain*, *A Simultaneity of Stories-so-Far* and *Alternative Cartographies*.

### *Mapping Research Terrain*

Following this chapter, Chapters Two, Three and Four establish the historical and contemporary contexts of part-time undergraduate study in English HE and the analytical and methodological frameworks which underpin this investigation of belonging and retention. The literature review is presented across Chapter Two: *Mapping the Field* and Chapter Three: *Mapping Belonging*. Together, they problematise the relationship between student retention and the discourse of belonging, arguing for a relational understanding of the English HE sector and of belonging within it. The opening narrative of *Mapping the Field* centres on five points or moments in a chronological account of the massification of English HE, beginning with the Robbins Report (1963) and concluding in the present day. This narrative highlights the increasingly peripheral and precarious position of part-time study in the English HE system. The chapter goes on to expand on the contemporary landscape of part-time study and the defining characteristics of part-time students. It explores definitions and measures of retention, and Tinto's influence on the discourse of belonging in UK retention literature and practice. I argue that institution-centric definitions of retention are incompatible with the complex lives of mature part-time undergraduates, as are uniform and narrow concepts of belonging.

Chapter Three: *Mapping Belonging* continues the literature review and introduces the analytical framework of the thesis. The chapter theorises belonging in HE through concepts of space and power and within the framework of a borderland analysis (Abes 2009, p.190), the principle of which is to link multiple theories and map new interdisciplinary theoretical space in the borderlands between them. This borderland analysis of belonging partners Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' – habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) – with Brah's concepts of diaspora and diaspora space (1996) and Massey's spatial concepts, including activity space and a progressive sense of place (1993, 1994, 2005).

Chapter Four: *Methods of Mapping* describes my route across methodological territory, from the starting point of a pre-determined methodological framework to my engagement with data through analysis and authorship. The methodological framework maintains the principle of a borderland analysis, i.e. seeking new territory in the productive tensions between multiple approaches. The chapter describes my interpretation and enactment of the role of researcher: how I selected and developed my research tools and integrated a sense of spatiality into data collection, analysis and authorship. Chapter Four's discursive

approach is complemented by a Methods Annex, providing a detailed outline of case selection, data collection procedures and responses.

### *A Simultaneity of Stories-so-Far*

In the second part of the thesis, Chapters Five to Eight present the research findings in four case study accounts: *New Ecclesiastical*, *Metropolitan Elite*, *Northern City* and *Modern Eastern*. The title of this part of the thesis, *A Simultaneity of Stories-so-Far*, highlights the co-existence of multiple trajectories and moments in networks of social relations (Massey 2005) in the case study institutions. Each account considers the interplay of institutional strategy and individual experience, of retention strategies and discourses of belonging in and around campus spaces. Each features multiple voices and multiple versions of the institution.

### *Rethinking Retention*

The third part of the thesis occupies the space conventionally inhabited by a cross case analysis and conclusion. Chapter 9: *Alternative Cartographies* experiments with mapping and spatial storytelling in an extended discussion of the data. Textual and visual 'maps' explore spaces between institutional rhetoric and individual experience, retention and persistence, centre and periphery. In imagining a wider territory for the 'complex social process of student-institution negotiation' (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998, p.316) and belonging as a contested, dimensional process, the chapter loosens the hold of binary positions, imagining spaces between as a multiplicity of relationships, of co-existing heterogeneity, negotiation and complexity. To close, the thesis presents recommendations for practice and further research.

My own project is but one point of exchange, one example of multiple criss-crossing, but I hope that my observations come to the surface, leaving traces on the outside that may encourage other movements, hopes of becoming and alternative belongings.

(Probyn 1996, p.15)

## **MAPPING THE RESEARCH TERRAIN**

### **CHAPTER TWO: MAPPING THE FIELD**

*A basic decision has to be made about the study area and the subject matter ...*

(Canadian Cartographic Association 2015)

#### **A provisional map**

This chapter constructs a provisional map of the research context, sketching a temporary portrait of a complicated and constantly shifting field. It considers part-time study and students within the bigger picture of English HE and in historical and contemporary contexts. *Changing Spaces of Higher Education*, conceptualises the sector as one of ‘a network of specialised places of knowledge production (elite; historically largely male) which gained (and continues to gain) at least a part of its prestige from the cachet and exclusivity of its spatiality’ (Massey 2005, p.75). I begin by mapping five points or moments on a chronological trajectory of English HE from 1961 to 2012: from the Robbins Report and the beginning of massification of English HE up to what represents ‘the present’, ie: the point at which I started work on this project. Authoritative accounts of this period are contained in a body of literature which presents the space of English HE as a gender-neutral phenomenon. The map-makers – predominantly White, middle-class men, themselves products of a socially-privileged HE system – have collectively created a tacitly masculine account, despite the fact that the period in question is one in which the participation of women in HE substantially increased (Cotterill, Jackson and Letherby 2007). Similarly, the space of HE has been mapped and analysed as if it were a ‘naturally’ full-time phenomenon. I disrupt this full-time bias by showing the impact of massification and marketisation on part-time study and part-time students and exploring the tensions arising from the stretching and protection of borders in the spaces of HE.

Having established the bigger picture, the following section, *The Contemporary Landscape of Part-time HE*, focuses on the period 2010-2015 and the skewed, uneven geography of part-time HE in a ‘crowded, traditional system’ (Watson and Taylor 1998, p.3). ‘In England there is no clear definition of part-time study or students ... the most common ... definition of part-time undergraduate students is negative – it is those who do not fit the definition of

full-time students' (Callender 2013, p.131). I therefore draw on grey literature and quantitative data from multiple sources to summarise the attributes which characterise part-time students. As already highlighted, there is a significant continuing disparity between full and part-time student retention rates. *The Problem of Retention* thus explores dominant definitions and problematises retention as a linear measurement of student success in the context of complex lives. Structural factors of age, class and gender shape student engagement with HE, and can complicate linear progress between specified start and finish points. Finally, *Integration and Belonging* steps into the territory of retention and belonging. It traces Tinto's key influence on a discourse of belonging now embedded in thinking about retention in English HE.

### **The changing spaces of higher education**

#### *Expanding elite places*

When the Committee on Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins first convened in 1961, the territory of English HE was limited and tightly guarded. 8 per cent of school leavers went on to HE, attending one of twenty-four universities. Three out of twenty attended Oxford or Cambridge; 'academic leaders and political and administrative leaders were all members of the same national elite. They shared the same silent allegiance to the same unarticulated values' (Scott 1988, p.45). The implementation of what became known as the Robbins Principle, that 'courses of higher education should be available for all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so' (HMSO 1963), was certainly to extend the territory of HE to a wider social membership, but in ways which had significant implications for the nature of the expansion to come. Carswell argues that the Robbins Report was based on two key but tacit assumptions, the first being the idea of a 'degree earned through full-time study over three years' (1988, p.23):

the Robbins Committee ... saw full-time studentship as having primacy and considered it was qualitatively superior to, and distinguishable from, part-time studentship. It ... underlay many of the costings and the whole presentation of the proposals which made such a deep impression on the public mind in terms of 'student places'.

*(ibid.)*

This was despite the fact that the Report was published at a time when, encouraged by a complex system of advanced further education and evening provision funded by local government, levels of part-time participation in HE closely matched full-time. By awarding

grants to residential students, Carswell argues, the Robbins Report assumed the desirability of 'delocation', i.e. leaving home to study at university. This increased substantially in the middle of the twentieth century:

In 1935 half the full-time students in Great Britain outside Oxford and Cambridge worked from home, in 1962 the picture was wholly different: four fifths of university students were delocated either to halls of residence or lodgings.

(Carswell 1988, p.25)

Robbins' successful proposals for increased state funding and an expansion of university education to include thirteen Colleges of Advanced Technology promoted the benefits of a public higher education system, and began a process of widening HE's social base which continued until the early 2000s. Scott argues that Robbins

created a new category "higher education" and wrote the constitution for the modern HE system ... twenty-five years after Robbins, reasonable access to higher education has been woven into the fabric of expectations in many parts of British society

(Scott 1988, pp.34-37).

This view has not gone unchallenged. Trow critiques 'the Robbins Trap', a plan for growth limited by the existing elite model, 'affirming values and assumptions that define the English "idea of a university" ... incompatible with the provision of mass higher education' (1989, p.56). Evidence of this is in the conception and design of seven new 'plate glass' universities built between 1961 and 1965: East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York. Despite the new universities' 'aspirations to redraw the maps of knowledge' (Scott 2009, p.404), all were built on greenfield sites, at a distance from towns and cities, appearing modern but replicating the self-contained world of the college model. They were built to accommodate expanding demand from full-time residential undergraduates; if you were not residential, the campuses were, at best, hard to reach.

### *Separate places*

But if the 'new' universities of the 60s offered a continuation of full-time, delocated studentship, the open admissions policy and distance learning model of the Open University offered the direct opposite. Conceptualised in the 1966 Labour Party Manifesto

as a 'University of the Air' and launched in 1969, it opened to its first 24,000 students in January 1971 (Open University, 2014), utilising the cutting edge technology of the day: broadcasting. Financial subsidies for studying full-time and away from home disadvantaged older students with family or employment commitments at traditional universities. In contrast, the Open University offered a learning environment where part-time was the norm; students learned in their own home, alongside their regular lives. Trow (1989) argues that the Open University 'drained off' demand for part-time study in traditional, face-to-face HE, and certainly it would have played a significant part in making part-time students less visible.

It took the creation of the polytechnics under local government control to situate HE more visibly in local places, inviting a more heterogeneous cohort into higher education and normalising undergraduate part-time, face-to-face study at advanced and degree level. The 'binary divide' initiated by Antony Crosland's White Paper (1966) involved the transformation of over fifty existing technical and large regional colleges into thirty polytechnics between 1969 and 1972. Polytechnics were purposely accessible; 'most were in conurbations ... nearly all were on city-centre sites' (Scott 1995, p.58). Crosland wanted to challenge the elitist obsession with university status, and argued that polytechnics met the demand for vocational, industrial and professional courses that could not be accommodated by the university sector. Opinions differ as to whether the creation of polytechnics was truly aligned with Robbins pluralistic vision or whether it 'simply allowed the HE system to grow without diluting the social and academic distinctions of the universities' (Trow 1989, p.66).

Their development not only 'challenged the "classical" curriculum ... and increased the numbers of individual participants in HE' (Stuart 2002, p.13), but significantly diversified the student body. Polytechnics offered varied pathways into HE, including vocational qualifications and access courses designed primarily for mature students without standard entry qualifications (Leathwood and Hutchings 2003). However, although polytechnics were successful in increasing access to HE to students from a wider social base, their introduction led to the establishment of a two-tier system that 'allowed the middle class "standard entrants" to maintain their dominance in the elite institutions' (Ainley 2003, p.352). The HE system had expanded, but not without fragmenting into distinctive spaces.

'The polytechnics were expected to offer access to a different form of higher education, and to offer it to different kinds of students' (Ross 2003, p.49).

### *Local places*

Fragmentation within the system continued even when the 1988 Education Reform Act removed polytechnics from local authority control and granted them membership of the university 'club'. The Conservative government of the day anticipated that this development would 'remove the barriers between the academic and vocational streams ... and lead to open competition on price, quality and access that would open up universities' (Sanders 2002). Instead, the HE system became 'increasingly differentiated and stratified ... one within which institutions and individuals work at defining their place within higher education' (Bathmaker and Thomas 2009, p.119). The general characteristics of this stratification can be described thus: 'one layer consisting of a high qualification on entry, limited low participation neighbourhoods' students and long standing university charter group ... the second layer with the obverse attributes' (Longden 2013, p.142). The post-1992 universities, as they came to be called, were the primary engines for growth in the system. By 1992, the year this wave of new universities came into existence, student numbers had expanded by 41 per cent since 1980 to 1.2 million, and English HE had become a mass system, i.e. participation of between 15-40 per cent of those of school leaving age (Trow 1973). They were also the catalyst for a diversification of the student population in English HE, bringing 'students with a wider range of backgrounds, achievements and experiences into English higher education especially adults holding non-traditional qualifications' (Parry 2006, p.397).

The incorporation of the polytechnics into the university system located HE in familiar local places, but essentially the binary divide had been replaced with a newly badged line of division running between pre- and post-1992 universities. There were implications for those who studied either side. The pre-1992 universities retained their selective nature, in contrast to the active recruitment practiced by the post-1992 institutions. This, combined with the more vocational and applied nature of the programmes offered by the latter, maintained the pre-1992 institutions as the territory of the traditional middle-class full-time student and corralled the majority of non-traditional students, including mature part-time undergraduates, into post-1992 universities. The creation of the new universities 'led



to uncertainty over the nature and purpose of higher education' (Scott 2009, p.411), and pre-1992 universities moved to protect their territory by forming two mission groups, the Russell Group and the 1994 Group, to represent their members' interests to government.

### *Market places*

The sharp expansion in total student numbers between 1989-1994 also resulted in a funding crisis, addressed by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997), chaired by Sir Ron Dearing. The Dearing Inquiry was significant because it appeared to mark a recognition by Britain's main political parties that the massification of HE required a rethink of funding and mission. Dearing advocated an increased integration of higher education with wider society and the economy and recognised 'globalisation as the major influence upon the United Kingdom's economy and labour market with strong implications for higher education' (Peters 2010, p.156). The emphasis on the global economy foreshadowed the Leitch Review of Skills (2006), which would set goals for 2020 aimed at maximising economic prosperity and productivity, but Dearing also supported widening participation in higher education, including at sub-degree levels, among lower socio-economic groups and mature students.

A 'complex text speaking to multiple audiences and carrying multiple agendas' (Barnett 1999, p.293), the outcome of the Dearing Inquiry, was a contradictory mix of widening participation rhetoric and increasing marketisation of the HE system. The New Labour government 'promoted the expansion and diversification of HE on the grounds of economic competitiveness and social inclusion with a growing role for English Further Education Colleges' (Bathmaker 2015, p.63). In 2000 it announced a target of a 50 per cent participation rate for 18-30 year olds, the promotion of institutional partnerships and alliances, and support for greater diversity in higher education. These measures included a funding premium for HEIs based on their success in recruiting students from lower socio-economic groups. In the same year, Labour launched the e-university and the Foundation degree, a two-year sub-degree and vocationally oriented qualification to be delivered in partnership between higher and further education and employers. However, Labour rejected Dearing's recommendation for the introduction of a graduate contribution to tuition costs as a way of addressing the funding issues facing a mass higher education system. The Blair government introduced top up fees, 'tipping higher education towards

the market and private sources of funding while retaining state oversight' (Tight 2006, p.25). It also abolished maintenance grants, 'thus seeming to undercut both the Dearing recommendations and the aim of widening access to higher education' (Shattock 1999, p.15).

### *Endangered places*

From 2004/5, part-time students were eligible to apply for means-tested grants towards tuition fees and course costs as long as they did not already have a first degree, were studying 50 per cent or more of a full-time course, and had a very low household income. These eligibility criteria automatically disqualified the majority of part-time students from receipt of government-funded support. The introduction of the Equivalent and Lower Qualifications (ELQ) ruling in 2008 removed HEFCE funding to institutions teaching students studying for a qualification equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification they already held, meaning that HEIs required Home and European Union (EU) students studying for an ELQ to pay the full cost of their tuition. The rationale was to redistribute funding to first-time degree students, in line with Leitch's aim to increase the numbers of adults with HE qualifications to 40 per cent by 2020 and to encourage alternative funding for second degrees from employers.

The ELQ policy was not specifically targeted at continuing education, lifelong learning or part-time students. Nevertheless the effect was most harshly felt by these constituencies because the greatest numbers of student already holding University qualifications were those studying in later life, often part-time, while working, for career development or diversification.

(Lingwood 2015, p.78)

Specialist part-time HE providers argued that the ruling unfairly targeted the part-time sector and 'the experience of all part-time students will be impoverished as choice is reduced when courses become financially unviable and vulnerable to closure' (Birkbeck 2013). From the date of its introduction, the ELQ ruling was blamed for a dramatic scaling back and closure of public and continuing education programmes across the university sector (Atwood 2009). As specialist part-time providers in England, the Open University and Birkbeck were given a two-year grace period, but the ELQ ruling came into force and affected those HEIs in 2010. The rapid acceleration in the marketisation of English HE 2000-2010 trapped part-time HE between opposing discourses of widening participation and marketisation.

From 2006, the funding climate for all students became bleaker. The cap on top-up (variable) tuition fees increased to £3000 per year, with loan payments (for full-time students) deferred until students had graduated and were earning a minimum of £15,000 per annum. Concern that the new fees regime would deter potential students from low-income and under-represented groups from participating in HE led to the setting up of a new independent public body, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), to 'promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for lower income and other under-represented groups following the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006-07' (OFFA 2014). OFFA's role was extended following the Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Funding (IRHEFSF 2010), also known as the Browne Review. Browne's intention was to create a market system where institutions competed on price, and the review recommended removing the cap on tuition fees, proposing that 'universities should ... be funded primarily through fees paid by students, with the Government providing loans to students in order to enable them to pay these fees' (*ibid*). The recommendation was rejected by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government; instead, it introduced a £9000 cap on tuition fees for full-time students and £6500 for part-time from 2012, accompanied by an 80 per cent cut in the universities' teaching grant. Any HEI that wished to charge a tuition fee above £6000 was required to submit an annual Access Agreement, including measurable targets for access and retention, for OFFA approval. In practice, the introduction of the cap meant that the majority of HEIs charged the maximum annual tuition fee of £9000.

Applications for both full- and part-time undergraduate applications dipped when higher fees were introduced, but full-time applications have since enjoyed a robust recovery, aided in part by the uncapping of student numbers. The Coalition government did take up Browne's recommendation that, for the first time, student loans be extended to part-time students, agreeing with the argument that eliminating upfront costs would widen access to HE, even among the most debt averse. Callender disputes that the measures eliminated upfront costs for part-time students; moreover, she points out that part-time students' loan eligibility remains restricted: 'as before, access to financial support is not driven by financial need, but is determined initially by a student's existing qualifications and how many hours they study' (2013, p.143). Pollard *et al* confirm that the extent of these restrictions exclude '54% of all part-time undergraduate students and only those studying more than 25% of a full-time course, excluding a further 15%' (2012, p.135). Even with

loans available in principle to part-time students, restricted eligibility means 'systems of financial support for full-time and part-time students are 'separate but unequal ... by comparison, full-time students' financial support was, and continues to be, far more comprehensive and generous' (Callender 2013, p.137). In practice, 'loans seem to have become less rather than more popular, while some who are eligible decide not to take advantage of them: they either pay up front or do not start their course' (Callender 2015, p.20).

In 2008/9, part-time students comprised approximately one third of all UK HE students (Callender *et al* 2010, p.16). By '2014/15 part-timers made up only 23 per cent of all undergraduate entrants. Numbers have fallen by 55 per cent between 2010-2015, equivalent to 143,000 fewer students (Callender 2015, p.17) and since 2010 there has been a 15.4 per cent drop in applicants aged over twenty-five (Independent Fees Commission 2015). The new fee regime is considered 'a major contributory factor' (*ibid*). The decline in England

has dominated the wider UK trend. Entrant numbers in Scotland (-21 per cent) and Wales (-12 per cent) also declined significantly between 2008 and 2012, but by much less than England. By contrast, since 2008, Northern Ireland has bucked wider UK trends and has shown considerable growth in part-time entrants, with growth of 16 per cent between 2008 and 2012.

(Oxford Economics 2014, III)

Yet, in a recent high-profile article on trends in university admissions (Dorling 2015), the significant decline in part-time study is notable only by its omission. 'We are talking about a crisis but one that is masked by the popularity of full-time study and its resilience to fee increases.' (Layer 2015, p.73).

The territory of HE has expanded; overall, numbers of students have dramatically increased, but the grip of full-time studentship as the 'authentic' mode of participation in HE has not loosened. Even prior to the 2012 HE reforms, part-time students were confined to particular spaces within what has been described as a 'crowded traditional system' (Watson and Taylor 1998, p.3). Full-time studentship continues to characterise elite spaces of HE and 'there has been a growing trend since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came to power in 2010 to focus on university education, particularly at 'top' universities' (Bathmaker 2015, p.63). The story of English HE is not only one of

massification; it is one of mature part-time undergraduates becoming endangered in contested territory, in the market place and, as later chapters will show, in local and vocational spaces too: the post-1992 institutions.

### **The contemporary landscape of part-time higher education**

#### *Part-time provision*

The geography of part-time study in England is profoundly uneven. Provision is skewed across the UK HE sector as a whole, with significant part-time student populations being concentrated in a relatively small number of institutions (Table 1). Concentrations of part-time students tend to be located in large cities, or found in more deprived and coastal areas. They are more likely than full-time students to come from areas where there is generally less of a tradition of participation in HE (Pollard *et al* 2012, p.115). Despite a significant drop in its student numbers – more than a quarter between 2010-2015 (Parr 2015) – the Open University remains ‘the largest single provider of part-time undergraduate studies and the largest specialist provider of part-time study’ (Pollard *et al* 2012, p.53). The largest provider of face-to-face part-time HE in England is Birkbeck, University of London, although it has also experienced a decline: 13,445 part-time undergraduate students in 2011/12 down to 9145 in 2013/14 (HESA 2014).

**Table 1: Typology of part-time provider**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>% of UK PT PROVIDERS</b>
large-scale	provision in more than 10 major subject groups; part-time students representing more than 40per cent of total undergraduate student body. Majority are post-1992 HEIs	15
small-scale	relatively low numbers of part-time rates across a number of subject areas	29
specialist	high shares of part-time students across relatively few subject areas	6
limited	part-time studies in limited subject areas and relatively few part-time students. Majority are pre-1992 HEIs	50

Source: Pollard *et al* 2012, p.61

Other than the Open University and Birkbeck, part-time provision in England is clustered primarily, although not exclusively, in post-1992 universities. The HE choices of part-time mature students, primarily shaped by the need to remain 'local' and to an extent, access HE without standard qualifications, contribute to the geographical character of part-time mature study in those institutions which, 'most often accessed by "non-traditional" students, carry the least status' (Read *et al* 2003, p.268). These choices both arise from and perpetuate the stratification of the HE sector or 'hierarchies of more/less valuable HE' (Bathmaker *et al* 2008, p.122). In the uneven distribution of students between institutions and subjects and the tendency of widening participation policy to place emphasis on factors influencing individual students rather than institutional or structural issues (Kimura 2013), there are parallels between part-time, mature and Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME) undergraduates.

#### *Part-time students*

The part-time higher education population in the UK is 'a heterogeneous group, with a very different set of characteristics, motivations and needs, as compared to their full-time counterparts' (Oxford Economics 2014, III). They are frequently categorised under the generic labels 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard', i.e. 'students who differ significantly from the traditional student body' (McGivney 1996, p.11), but there is no 'typical' part-time student. In broad terms, part-time undergraduates are more likely to be female and White, studying in a post-1992 HEI and for a sub-degree level qualification, have family responsibilities and to be employed. In comparison with their full-time peers, part-time undergraduates are more likely to be over twenty-one years old, thus meeting the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) definition of 'mature'. In the academic year 2013/14, 91.7 per cent of UK-domiciled, first year, first degree, part-time students were twenty-one years old or over, and 58 per cent of these were aged 30 and over (Table 6b, HESA 2015). It is possible, therefore, with few exceptions, to imply 'mature' when referring to 'part-time' students. This age profile means that the diversity of the part-time cohort is overlaid with the complexity of mature studentship.

In 2013/14, 61 per cent of all part-time students were female, compared to 54.7 per cent of full-time students (Tables 6a and 6b, HESA 2015). The gender bias is magnified in certain

subject areas that are both popular among part-time students and are more likely to be studied by women; for example, subjects allied to medicine and education:

HESA student data shows that part-time HE students are most likely to be studying subjects allied to medicine (18 per cent in 2009/10); the vast majority of these are studying nursing. ... Other popular subject areas among part-time students include: education (11 per cent), business and administrative studies (9 per cent) and social studies (8 per cent).

(*ibid* 2012, p.129)

The overall gender profile of part-time students, combined with their maturity, means that this cohort is more likely to have parental/caring responsibilities, in marked contrast to their full-time peers: 'around two-thirds have family responsibilities and two in five have children (Callender *et al* 2010), compared to 8 per cent of full-time students. They are concentrated in cities and metropolitan areas, which are more ethnically diverse than rural areas, but 'a smaller proportion of students studying part-time are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (14 per cent in 2013/14 compared to 23 per cent for full-time students)' (Tables 6a/6b, HESA 2015). The greatest difference between full and part-time students in relation to ethnicity is for Asian students – 5 per cent of part-time UK students compared to 10 per cent of full-time UK students in 2013/14 (*ibid*), proportions which haven't changed in the last five years.

Part-time students have a distinctive employment profile in comparison with their full-time peers. Part-time students tend to have full-time jobs in higher level occupations, with a definite bias towards the public sector; they fit their studies around their jobs, and see themselves as workers who study (Callender and Wilkinson 2011). The purpose of part-time study is often to re- or up-skill, potentially to change or enhance career prospects. Part-time undergraduates are therefore motivated by generally different factors from those of young full-time students, who are more likely to fit lower occupational level part-time or seasonal work around their studies.

The entry qualifications of mature part-time undergraduates are characterised by 'an interesting bimodal distribution' (Pollard *et al* 2012, p.121), a markedly different profile from that of full-time undergraduates. Whereas 79 per cent of full-time students have GCE A Levels as their highest qualification on entry, this is the case for only 23 per cent of part-

time students (*ibid*). There is also a higher proportion (8.4 per cent) of part-time entrants with 'other or no formal qualifications' than the corresponding share (4.9 per cent) among full-time entrants (Pollard *et al* 2012, p.122). However, 53 per cent of part-time entrants hold qualifications at Level 4 and above as their highest qualification on entry, including 7.9 per cent with postgraduate qualifications (HESA 2015d).

Outside the Open University, a minority of part-time students (37 per cent) are studying for a first degree; the majority (63 per cent) are working towards other undergraduate qualifications: Foundation degrees, Higher National Diploma, Higher National Certificate, and modules at Level 4 and above (Pollard *et al* 2012, p.54), including continuing professional development qualifications. These proportions are reversed at the OU, with over half of part-time students studying for a first degree. In contrast, the majority of full-time undergraduates are studying for first degrees, with only 10 per cent studying for other undergraduate qualifications. The variation in qualification aim for part-time students in general results in wide variations in length of study. Short-cycle, sub-degree qualifications can last between five weeks to two years and Foundation degrees for two to four years; and, depending on the intensity of study, a first degree can take up to six years or more. 21 per cent of part-time students are on programmes expected to last less than one year, whereas for 20 per cent of part-time students studying for first degrees, their programmes of study are expected to last more than four years (*ibid*, p.133). The length of time spent studying has implications for retention, not only because the longer the programme of study, the greater the commitment and motivation required for the individual to complete, assuming that external conditions remain stable to enable them to do so, but also in terms of the longer-term relationship required between the institution and the individual.

### **The problem of retention**

As the socio-economic space of HE expanded, so anxiety was expressed about the suitability of new student constituencies to occupy it. While officially sanctioned as desirable through Robbins, then Dearing, the expansion of the sector in the 1980s and 1990s, including the diversity of institutions and individuals participating in HE, also intensified concerns about resourcing and value for public money. In the wake of Dearing, attempts to increase and widen participation in UK HE resulted in tension with an emerging retention agenda. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment articulated this in



his annual letter to HEFCE: 'widening access to higher education must not lead to an increase in the number of people who fail to complete their courses' (Blunkett 2000). It remains the case that those students structurally more vulnerable to withdrawal occupy post-1992 institutions, classified as Lower Tariff HEIs (HECSU, 2012); i.e. such institutions are more likely to accept non-traditional learners with low or no UCAS tariff scores and who therefore enter HE without recent A Levels. Pre-1992 institutions, almost without exception Highest and High Tariff HEIs, have retention rates at the higher end of the spectrum.

Blunkett's letter pointed out the role of the institution in student 'drop-out': that 'there are unacceptable variations in the rate of 'drop-out' which appear to be linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than to the background or nature of the students recruited' (Blunkett 2000); and Longden identifies the period at the turn of the century as 'a watershed for the higher education sector's perception on student retention ... a shift towards a research-based institutional practice to improve retention' (2013, p.127). Thomas pursues the theme of institutional responsibility with a Bourdieusian analysis of 'institutional habitus', arguing that if student habitus is compatible or congruent with that of the institution they are more likely to persist, whereas the feeling of not 'fitting' or belonging can lead to withdrawal (Thomas 2002). The National Audit Office articulated the challenge of widening participation and the importance of 'bearing down on non-completion' (NAO 2002), but subsequent reports appear to have shifted the reasons for 'drop out' back onto individuals in deficit: one stated that 'there is a balance to be achieved between these priorities as ... widening participation brings in more students from under-represented groups who may need more support to complete their courses' (2007, p.7).

### *Definitions and measurements*

Jones defines retention as 'the extent to which learners remain within a higher education institution, and complete a programme of study in a pre-determined time-period' (2008, p.1). It is a term 'generally conceived ... with a focus on the 'economic' variables of time and measurable outcomes' (Hewitt and Rose-Adams 2013, p.147), 'managerially-oriented, signalling a focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of an institution or a system' (Yorke and Longden 2004, p.5). The term reflects the interests of the institution and, by implication, the sector and the state. Prior to the changes in the funding of HE in England,

'interests in government circles has been directed towards the cost of student non-completion ... students failing to complete their course were a financial waste to the system and that such profligate wastage should be removed' (Longden 2013, p.127). Since the changes, the increasing exposure of HE to market forces and the switch to a funding system relying primarily on fees paid by students (through loans provided by government) have markedly increased retention's significance to an institution's economic health. Any student who leaves before completing their course not only 'wastes the resources that were committed to recruiting and enrolling them' (Yorke and Longden 2004, p.9), but now also represents lost institutional income in the form of tuition fees, and associated costs such as residential fees.

Two measures of retention are used within the UK: the 'completion rate', which records the proportion of students who continue their study until they have gained their qualification, and the 'continuation' rate, which indicates the proportion of entrants who remain on their course of study in the academic year following entry to HE (NAO 2007). Both terms can be reversed ('non-completion' and 'non-continuation') in institutional and national reports to highlight proportions of students who leave their courses of study rather than those who stay. High – or low – retention rates reported in the HEFCE's publication of institutional performance, against benchmarks, in university league tables, institutional literature, and university guides, are seen as indicators of institutional health and reputation.

According to current norms and policies, 'students can and should complete their HE in three (or four) years with no interruptions ... any deviation from this model is perceived to be a reflection of either student or institutional failure' (McGivney 1996, p.54). It is, notably, a model premised on full-time study. A successful engagement with HE is defined as a linear, measurable phenomenon occurring between two fixed points and within the bounded space of a single institution. In terms of Massey's geographical imagination, retention imagines HE as a 'space to be crossed and conquered' (Massey 2005, p.4). These definitions impose selective borders and mute complex relations of power operating within institutions and the sector. Linear measurement is problematic for complex lives; 'loose ends and ongoing stories are real challenges to cartography' (Massey 2005, p.107). The narrow parameters of 'non-continuation' and 'non-completion' are problematic in the

context of an increasingly diverse student population whose changing engagement with HE – for example, combining or interrupting degree study with periods of employment or caring responsibilities – leads to the lengthening of the total period of study. A more student-centric perspective is represented in the terms ‘persistence’ and ‘withdrawal’, both of which imply agency on the part of the student. There is growing recognition that ‘leaving early can be a reluctant response to difficult and complex situations’ (*ibid*, p.2), and the term ‘drop-out’ is increasingly criticised for its associations with failure (Rose-Adams 2012).

A study of Open University students with characteristics often associated with non-traditional engagement in higher education and lower retention rates, e.g. low or no previous educational qualifications, low income, and/or originating from areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage, concluded that ‘institution-centric definitions of retention and progression are insufficient to create truly meaningful understanding of successful individual learning journeys and experiences’ (Hewitt and Rose-Adams 2013, p.146). However, if students leave before the end of their course, this tends to be perceived unproblematically as ‘negative both for the institution and for the (former) student’ (*ibid*, p.62) even if, as in a proportion of cases, it is not the end of the individual’s engagement with HE. Hewitt and Rose-Adams found that ‘large proportions of the interview participants who were not ‘retained’ by the institution reported successful progression to and in other learning institutions and environments, both formal and informal’ (*ibid*).

#### *Why withdraw?*

Research findings in the UK over the past fifteen years reflect a broadly similar set of ‘interacting personal and social attributes, as well as institutional practices, which impact on both retention rates and performance’ (Thomas 2002, p.426; see also Yorke 1999; Davies and Elias 2002; Rose-Adams 2013). Responding to concerns in the late 1980s and early 1990s about the impact of widening participation on retention rates, two large scale surveys, or ‘autopsy studies’ (Yorke 1999; Davies and Elias 2002), sought to understand reasons for withdrawal from programmes in UK institutions. Both concluded that flawed decision-making about programme choice, students’ experience of the programme and the institution, failure to cope with demands of the programme, and events that impacted on students’ lives outside the institution were responsible (Yorke and Longden 2004, p.141).

These findings continue to be reflected in more recent studies. Research into gendered difference in the student experience and what influences 'doubters' to stay in HE highlights institutional and course match, academic experience, and social integration (Foster and Lefever 2012). Rose-Adams (2012) makes the point that there are often multiple reasons for leaving HE, and that the reason given tends to be the one dominant for the student at that point in time.

The literature also reflects a concern with 'establishing a level of social and academic "fit"' (Quinn *et al* 2005, p.27) and a recognition that this is challenging in the context of 'widening participation' or non-traditional students:

the literature tends to pathologise new constituencies of learners for being poorly prepared/not up to it ... class and poverty does matter in drop out because it constructs the material inequalities that make it more difficult to survive and prosper as a student – lack of both cultural and economic capital, and their likely disadvantage in school education.

*(ibid, p.4)*

Interpretations of part-time withdrawal and retention are considerably less well-documented, for several reasons. HEFCE admits that 'the diversity of and flexibility found in part-time provision make the data notoriously difficult to capture accurately and interpret' (2009, p.2). Yorke and Longden note that 'there is much less empirical evidence regarding the withdrawal of part-time students from ... higher education, not least because withdrawal is more difficult to index when there is no necessary expectation that students will be continuously engaged in study' (2004, p.118). Diverse part-time provision and qualification aims, as well as difficulty accessing part-time students as research participants, presents obstacles to collecting data. Yorke (1999) included a brief end section on a 'limited and probably biased sample' (n=328) of part-time students, warning that 'data need to be treated as suggestive rather than indicative' (*ibid*).

What is known statistically is that, overall, older students are at a higher risk of early withdrawal than younger, and degree completion rates decrease as the age of students on commencement increases. The '45 and over' age group is the least known about, and also has the lowest degree completion rate (HEFCE 2009, p.42). Yorke (1999), Davies and Elias (2002) and Rose-Adams (2012) agree that external circumstances are more likely to disrupt the learning of part-time mature learners. The multiple responsibilities which accrue with

age, including employment and family/caring commitments, mean that learning careers are more vulnerable to disruption by redundancy, relocation, family break-up, or illness. Hewitt and Rose-Adams found participants 'all faced "terminal" barriers, ranging from caring responsibilities and longstanding learning difficulties, to pressure on finances to prioritise work over study at that particular point in time' (2013, p.160). The fact that family and caring responsibilities tend to be carried by women increases the impact of these factors on female part-time undergraduates.

### **Integration and belonging**

In the fourth and final section of this chapter, I step into the territory of 'belonging in HE' to develop an understanding of a term now embedded in UK HE culture and strategy. What does 'belonging' mean in this context? Is 'belonging' being 'used in a way that implies a common understanding of what belonging is and why belonging is important'? (Mee and Wright 2009, p. 772). Where has the powerful idea of 'belonging' in HE come from?

#### *Tinto's model of student integration*

The UK narrative of belonging in HE is underpinned by Tinto's 'paradigmatic' model of student integration (1975). Influential for four decades, and far beyond the US, the model and its modifications have made Tinto an authority with near-cult status, even in semi-retirement. Giving the keynote address at a recent European conference on the First-Year Experience (EFYE 2015) he was greeted like a hero, gracefully accepting the audience's tumultuous applause like a silver-haired popstar giving a tribute performance.

Tinto's model emerged in the US in the decade following student protests against class and race inequalities, protests in which Tinto himself participated. It builds on a broader understanding of withdrawal or departure as an absence of integration in a community:

The process of educational departure is not substantially different from the other processes of leaving which occur among human communities generally. In both instances, departure mirrors the absence of social and intellectual integration into the mainstream of community life and the social support such integration provides.

(1987, p.180)

Groundbreaking in its time, Tinto's model argues that psychological theories of student departure which emphasise individual abilities offer only 'a partial truth' and 'ignore the fact that individual departure is a function of the environment in which individuals find themselves' (*ibid*, p.87). Tinto draws on both the Dutch anthropologist van Gennep's study of rites of membership of tribal societies (1960) and the sociologist Emile Durkheim's study of suicide (1961). Van Gennep's description of the three stages of 'the movement of individuals from membership in one group to that of another ... separation, transition, incorporation' (Tinto 1987, p.92) offers a framework for thinking about 'the longitudinal process of student persistence and by extension, the time-dependent process of student departure' (*ibid*, p.94). At the start of their university course (separation), the individual moves from 'the position of a known member of one group, to that of a stranger in the new setting' (1989, p.441) and, unless transition and incorporation are successfully achieved, this can lead to a state of 'temporary normlessness' (*ibid*) and potential withdrawal, which Tinto compares to Durkheim's definition of 'egotistical' suicide. Tinto conceives student persistence as a linear, sequential process in which interruption has a negative impact on the status of the individual and their relationship with other members of the community.

The model, and later modifications of it (1987, 1989), describes 'how difficulty, incongruence and isolation influence different forms of student departure' (1987, p.112). For persistence to occur, Tinto argues, new students need to 'become competent members of academic and social communities of the college' (1989, p.452), although, while academic performance is a 'minimal formal condition for persistence ... integration in the social system is not' (1987, p.107). Tinto combines factors of difficulty, incongruence and isolation with notions of individual disposition, describing the latter as 'the roots of individual departure' (*ibid*, p.35). These include background characteristics (socio-economic status, educational background, gender, ethnicity, age) as well as attributes which can affect an individual's potential or ability to integrate with the intellectual and social life of the institution. He categorises these as: a) the dispositions of individuals (intention, commitment) and b) the nature of the individual's interactional experiences with the institution (adjustment, difficulty, congruence and isolation). Tinto's model also recognises that the 'institution ... in its behavioural and normative manifestations has as much to do with the failure of students as do the students themselves, if not more' (1987, p.90). Tinto stresses the need for an understanding of 'how an institution comes to determine the

leaving of its own students' (*ibid*, p.35), and seeks to formulate 'a theoretical model that explains the processes of interaction between the individual and the institution that leads differing individuals to drop out from institutions of higher education' (1975, p.90).

Herzog questions the adequacy of a model 'steeped in, or derived from, the interactionist theories of student departure ... developed over 20 years ago based on academically and socio-economically more homogenous, full-time cohorts' (2005, p.886). The comment reflects a wider criticism of the US retention literature, including Bean's (1980), which 'has relied on causal modelling research most frequently centred on white, middle-class, young American freshers in private residential institutions' (Yorke and Longden 2004, p.75). Tinto argues that his model emerged in a decade characterised by a relatively homogenous student demographic in the US, but acknowledges the limitations of a model based on studies of young full-time students, resident in four year colleges, as well as

a lack of sufficient emphasis to the role of finances ... a failure to highlight differential educational careers that mark the experience of students of different gender, race and social status ... (and) those forms of disengagement occurring within the two-year college.

(1982, p.689)

He also notes older learners' 'qualitatively different experiences of separation, transition and incorporation from young, traditional students' (1988, p.454). Bean and Metzner (1985) further acknowledge that external factors play a greater role in non-traditional student attrition than social integration variables, while Sandler (2000), building on both Tinto and Bean, introduces a new variable relating to career decision-making to evaluate the issue of adult student attrition. In later work (Tinto 1997; Engstrom and Tinto 2008), Tinto focuses on the experiences of commuting, and 'under-prepared' students in the sector. He concludes that participation in collaborative learning activity 'helps bond students to the broader social communities of the college while also engaging them more fully in the academic life of the institution' (Tinto 1997, p.613), promoting the feelings that they 'belonged in college' (Engstrom and Tinto 2008, p.4).

### *The UK model*

Tinto's model is a touchstone for UK retention literature, strategy and practice, even though common themes are partially disguised by different terminology and emphasis. The concept of 'belonging' in HE bears comparison with Tinto's 'integration'; it encompasses both academic and social spheres, and the mutual relationship between individual and institution is central. It has not had an entirely free ride, however. Some UK critics argue that 'assumptions about student conformity and adaptation to the institution' may be 'culturally specific to the US and not transferable to UK systems' (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1988, p.318), and thus may limit the model's relevance for use in the British context. 'Belonging', in HE, is also a concept which has been energetically scrutinised through a Bourdieusian lens, employing the concept of habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) both individual and institutional (Reay, David and Ball 2001; Thomas 2002). Individual habitus permeates students' choice of HEI and experiences of HE, while institutional habitus 'shapes organisational behaviours, including gatekeeping through entry requirements and procedures, 'resulting in the shaping of...narrow boundaries around choice for different students as to where they will be welcome/fit in/be suited' (Reay, David and Ball 2001, para.1.3). Research exploring the ways in which social, cultural and educational experiences shape student engagement with HE, further proposes 'class and educational attainment alone cannot explain differences in HE outcomes, but rather that feelings of belonging and entitlement are important indicators of success' (Stuart, Lido and Morgan 2011, p.501).

The enduring authority of Tinto's model in the UK may be partially explained by the compatibility of its structured approach – separation, transition, incorporation – with a developing audit climate in English HE and a tendency for institutions to implement frontloaded transition packages and targeted interventions to support their retention rates. As a result, it could be argued that the UK model of 'belonging' has become tacitly associated with positioning in deficit, those students who might *not* feel integrated in the institution, or might have difficulty becoming so. These are generally assumed to be individuals from non-traditional backgrounds for whom, Thomas argued in 2002 'access is more of a struggle and less of a 'right' than for other students' (p.424) and who in particular could feel alienated by the habitus of elite institutions. In 2012 she asked UK institutions to consider the extent to which 'institutional policies, documents and publications promote the idea that all students belong' (*ibid*, p.70):



At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in ... our definition of 'belonging' is closely aligned with the concept of student engagement, encompassing both academic and social ...

(Thomas 2012, p.6)

Even amidst this bewildering array of national student agendas, the links between integration and belonging and between belonging and retention are unmistakable. Moreover, an emphasis on mainstream activities implies a level of student conformity which recalls Tinto's congruence with institutional norms. *What Works* identifies living at home, combining study with employment, and entering HE later, as ways of engaging which 'make it more difficult for student to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE, which can impact on their retention and success' (*ibid*). Those who find it most difficult to develop social bonds within the space of HE, Thomas argues, are those who do not participate in clubs, societies, the students' union and shared living arrangements, i.e. 'students who live at home, are part-time, older and/or are on courses with extended contact/workplace hours' (*ibid*). Belonging in HE, it is inferred, is determined by particular kinds of 'student' behaviour or practices of belonging enacted within campus boundaries and/or outside contact hours.

If retention is understood as a 'complex social process of student-institution negotiation' (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998, p.316), the institution has a role to play. *What Works* addresses this in common with Tinto and with Yorke (1999), Thomas *et al* (2001), Thomas (2002) and Yorke and Thomas (2003). The report offers HEIs a comprehensive set of recommendations for 'nurturing a culture of belonging', with three proposals. Firstly, that it is crucial to address student retention within institutional strategy and policy. Secondly, that an institution has an ethical obligation towards the student: 'given the student was admitted because the institution thought they had the potential to succeed, there is an obligation to take reasonable steps to enable them to be successful' (Thomas 2012, p.4). Thirdly, that institutional retention strategy should be mainstreamed, not aimed at specific groups. As 'statements of commitment' (Kimura 2013, p.527) strategies construct and reinforce discourses and dominant practices. In the case of a uniform and universal discourse of belonging, this has the potential to be problematic in relation to mature part-time undergraduates and 'belonging' in HE.

## **Peripheral and precarious**

Chapter Two has situated this enquiry in the context of historical and contemporary developments of English HE and highlighted the sector's complexity: massification, stratification, differentials between full- and part-time modes of study and the rapid changes to funding in the last two decades. The chapter has detailed the diversity of the mature part-time undergraduate population in English HE in terms of age, gender, socio-economic group, ethnicity, educational background and qualification aim. It has outlined the complexity of retention – a contested term measured in multiple ways and varying widely across institution and attendance mode. Finally, it has traced the origins of the influential narrative of belonging and retention narrative in Tinto's model of student integration. In the UK context the narrative has been adapted to include an institutional obligation to 'nurture a sense of belonging' in order to maximise student retention and success.

Part-time students are peripherally and precariously positioned in English HE. Despite their diversity, as a cohort they are problematised by linear, bounded, institution-centric definitions of retention incompatible with their complex lives should their learning journeys fall outside the parameters of time-limited completion and continuation. Structural factors of age and gender (in particular) position mature part-time undergraduates as problematic in relation to the dominant narrative of belonging and retention, restricting their access to the means of belonging recognised and validated in dominant institutional discourses. Uniform statements of belonging as a retention solution are incompatible with the diversity and complexity of the mature part-time undergraduate population.

There is another incompatibility. The conventional sociological map has too many blank spaces where mature part-time undergraduates could be. On maps, blank spaces are 'a cause of epistemological anxiety soothed by filling them with keys and legends and thus making them active' (Cosgrove 1999, p.9). I have a choice. I could continue to map this issue from the perspective of a recognised centre, the grand narratives. I could 'fill in' the blank spaces that way. Alternatively, I could take up the role of the exploratory mapper who 'detours around the obvious so as to engage what remains hidden' (Corner 1999, p.225). I could view the so-called periphery from a different perspective, from multiple perspectives, bring it into focus, make this the central territory of my investigation. I could

bring the sociological into dialogue with other ways of seeing and seek new theoretical territory in the borders, in the spaces between.

Chapter Three: *Mapping Belonging*, begins this process, theorising belonging through concepts of space and power and considering the implications for practices and experiences of 'belonging' in the spaces of HE.

## **MAPPING RESEARCH TERRAIN**

### **CHAPTER THREE: MAPPING BELONGING**

*A scale has to be chosen, and possibly a map projection (a mathematical transformation that flattens out the curved surface of the earth, necessary for maps of high accuracy or of large areas).*

(Canadian Cartographic Association 2015)

#### **Borderlands and belonging**

Chapter Two outlined the way in which the powerful discourse of belonging within UK retention literature assumes a typical model of HE student that is full-time, young and resident on or close to campus. It argued that the discourse is problematic in relation to mature part-time undergraduates, a diverse and complex cohort peripherally positioned in the sector. Associating retention with belonging in HE juxtaposes a linear, statistical measurement with a phenomenon far less tangible, within a highly stratified and complex space. Pursuing Mee and Wright's proposal for a 'thorough theorising of belonging' (2009, p.774), Chapter Three seeks to theorise belonging in HE through concepts of space and power. It does so through a borderland analysis, the principle of which is to link multiple theories 'to portray a more complete picture of student identity' (Abes 2012, p.190). My borderland analysis juxtaposes the sociological and geographical perspectives of Bourdieu, Brah and Massey, mapping new interdisciplinary theoretical space in the borderlands between their work.

Abes developed the strategy of a borderland analysis to address the marginalisation of non-normative identities of US college students (2009). Concerned that conventional analyses failed to address unequal underlying power structures impacting lesbian students, she drew on Lather (1991 and 2006) and Tierney (1993) in justifying 'partnering multiple and contradictory theoretical perspectives' (Abes 2009, p.142). Lather's post-modernist position argues for a freeing rather than a containment of difference, and that 'a multiplicity of paradigms is necessary given the multiplicity of reality' (*ibid*). Tierney blends critical theory and postmodernism in a form of bricolage, i.e.:

methodological practices explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality ... approaches that examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives.

(Rogers 2012, p.1)

Abes also employs multiple perspectives – in this case, constructivism and queer theory, to analyse the complexity of lesbian student identity – but her work is distinctive in foregrounding Anzaldua’s argument for a non-dualistic, ‘both/and’ identity, a new *mestiza* (1999) to support the idea of creating multiple paradigms and working in borderlands between them:

Both constructivism and queer theory provide a rich, yet incomplete perspective ... together, they tell a richer story than either alone. ... The queer/constructivist borderland brings to life students’ lived experiences through constructivism while simultaneously deconstructing them through queer theory.

(Abes 2009, p.148)

In a borderland analysis, tensions which arise from encounters on such theoretical borderlands are as welcome as synergies; they energise the researcher into ‘letting go of ‘monolithic beliefs ... and acknowledging contradictory perspectives that speak to the multiplicity of students’ experiences’ (*ibid*, p.150).

My enquiry adopts Abes’ principle of partnering different and potentially contradictory perspectives in order to capture the complexity of mature part-time undergraduate studentship and so develop an enriched understanding of belonging. However, I adapt her practice by bringing together the work of three individual theorists, rather than broader theoretical paradigms. Bourdieu’s, Brah’s and Massey’s work influenced my perspective on the research question at different stages in the literature review. Differences of emphasis, as well as unanticipated synergies between them, opened up my enquiry to greater analytical complexity. Firstly, a Bourdieusian analysis of individual (and institutional) habitus in or out of alignment with the structured social space of the academy contextualises belonging as a relational concept. Secondly, Brah’s concept of diaspora (1996) contributes a dynamic psychosocial dimension and a nuanced articulation of mature part-time undergraduates’ lived experiences. Thirdly, Massey’s concept of space, emphasising plurality and temporality, further enriches Brah’s diasporic dynamic, and offers underpinning structural devices of ‘activity space’ and ‘geography of power’ through

which to interpret the case studies. Massey's description of space as a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' (Massey 2005, p.9) recalls Abes' argument for working with contradictory perspectives; 'all are viable perspectives that simultaneously describe the complexities of development' (Abes 2009, p.150).

### **A Bourdieusian analysis of belonging**

#### *Habitus, capital and field*

Pierre Bourdieu's thinking tools' of habitus, capital and field dominated my early mapping of this enquiry. A Bourdieusian analysis seemed well-aligned with my research, having been deployed in investigations of educational choice (Reay *et al* 2001a; Fenge 2011), student retention (Thomas 2002; Yorke and Thomas 2003), and stratification of the HE sector (Bathmaker and Thomas 2009). Bourdieu claims that his theoretical framework has the capacity to 'uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds ... as well as the "mechanisms" that tend to ensure their reproduction' (Bourdieu 1996, p.1). His work on the French education and HE systems in the mid-late twentieth century (1988a, 1988b; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) demonstrated his interest in the ways education reproduced material advantage and disadvantage, which, he argued, 'fulfils its social function of conservation and its ideological function of legitimation' (Bourdieu 1977, p.102). His conceptual tools are now widely used 'to understand and theorise changing policies and practices in education, including tertiary and higher education' (Bathmaker 2015, p.65).

Bourdieu uses a spatial metaphor – the 'field' – to 'uncover the workings of power and inequality in particular social spaces' (*ibid*). Social agents – individuals, groups or institutions – employ strategies to hold or enhance their position, i.e. 'the field of power ... structurally determined by the state of the relations of power among forms or power, or different forms of capital' (Bourdieu 1998, p.264). The social world contains multiple sub-fields, such as education, art, and industry, each of these containing sub-fields, such as that of English HE, which 'even in its present mass configuration ... has retained many attributes more characteristic of an elite system' (Scott 2009, p.419). Position in the field of education is determined by cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), a concept fundamental to Bourdieu's project of demonstrating how social inequality is reproduced in both economic and symbolic spheres. He distinguishes between economic capital, or

financial wealth, and symbolic capital, which exists in three forms: embodied (within the person as predispositions and lifestyle choices); objectified (in artefacts and books); and institutionalised (formal education). Individuals acquire cultural capital over time. It enables an individual to navigate a field by knowing the 'rules of the game'. 'Positions in the field then produce in agents and institutions particular ways of thinking, being and doing' (Bathmaker 2015, p.66), i.e. developing what is termed 'habitus'.

Bourdieu defines habitus as 'the social inscribed in the body of the biological individual' (1985, p.113), meaning the systems of dispositions of individuals, groups and institutions structured by past and present circumstances and which structure present and future practices. Habitus is internalised and cemented during early life within family and educational structures:

The habitus acquired within the family forms the basis of the reception and assimilation of the classroom message, and the habitus acquired at school conditions the level of reception and degree of assimilation of the messages produced and diffused by the culture industry.

*(ibid, p.43)*

Habitus implies that individuals instinctively understand and feel 'at home' in the environment in which they are born and brought up; they experience an 'unproblematic alignment between the dispositions of the habitus and the demands of the field' (Reay *et al* 2009, p.1112). 'When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1990, p.127). This metaphor powerfully expresses not only the effortlessness of belonging, but the uncomfortable experience of unbelonging – of being a fish *out* of water.

Habitus sets 'a potentially infinite number of patterns of behaviour, thought and expression that are both relatively unpredictable but also limited in their diversity' (Bourdieu 1990, p.55). One manifestation of this limitation is self-exclusion: 'a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places where one is excluded' (1988a, p.471). Reay, David and Ball (2001) and Reay *et al* (2001) exemplify this in their work on higher education choices. However, Bourdieu also stresses the generative nature of the 'unconscious relationship between a habitus and a field' (1993, p.76) and the adaptive power of habitus:

habitus, within as well between social groups, differs to the extent that the details of individuals' social trajectories diverge from one another; just as no two individual histories are identical so no two individual habituses are identical.

(*ibid*, p.46)

### *Belonging as relational*

A Bourdieusian theorising of belonging is rooted in social structures and worlds, with habitus, capital and field as 'an inter-dependent and co-constructed trio' (Thomson 2008, p.69) at its heart. A field analysis of HE theorises belonging as a relational concept, i.e. as a practice and a product of the relations of power embedded in a stratified sector, constructed around the privileged identities of the 'typical' or 'authentic' student: young, full-time and, initially, resident on campus. Considering HE as a structured social space captures the sense of an arena in which institutions and individuals interact in ways determined by inherent conventions and principles of disciplinary tradition and the academic hierarchy. Bourdieu reinforces the contested nature and spatial dimensions of 'field' through three distinctive metaphors: a field of play, a force field, and a self-contained world. Considering HE as field of play imagines it as 'a bounded site where a ... competitive game is played' (Thomson 2008, p.68), but the playing field is not level; 'players who begin with particular forms of capital are advantaged at the outset because the field depends on or produces more of that capital' (*ibid*, p.69). The idea of a force field reflects inherent internal conflicts between economic and symbolic capitals in HE, meaning

... a hierarchy of privilege, with unequal funding, and with a stigma of blame attached to institutions lower in a pecking order determined by historical criteria, leading to tensions and fragmentations in the system.

(McNay 2006, p.9)

As 'a separate universe governed by its own laws' (Bourdieu 2005, p.5), with its own conventions, language, discourses and hierarchies, HE is connected to fields of power – government, industry, science, the arts, culture and media – and to the economic and cultural lives of the regions and communities in which individual HEIs are located. However, whereas autonomy was a hallmark of the elite field of HE in Bourdieu's work in the 1960s and '70s, 'increasing heteronomy, increasing control of the field from forces outside the field ... associated with expansion and diversification' (Bathmaker 2015, p.67) is characteristic of contemporary UK HE, and heteronomy itself leads to power struggles



within the field. The semi-autonomous nature of the field nevertheless allows HE to enact its own gatekeeping through the services of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and determine the terms of entry that are key to its reproduction.

A field analysis of HE defines belonging as a practice of structure and agency within a social context shaped by the character and operations of the field. As outlined in Chapter Two, English HE is a stratified landscape; in addition to the division between pre- and post-1992 institutions, the sector is split between five mission groups (UUK, 2015) and skewed by prestigious groupings such as the 'golden triangle' of elite universities (Paton 2013). Stratification of the field undermines any idea that belonging in HE can be universal and uniform, yet the habitus of young middle-class people predisposes them to experience a sense of belonging in a traditional or elite HE environment:

the practices and beliefs they had developed enabled them to fit into the HE environment as if it was "natural", where they hold a cultural and educational "entitlement", true "citizens" of the UK HE system.

(Stuart *et al* 2011, p.506)

Those whose habitus is not aligned with traditional practices of HE – mature, working class and minority ethnic students for example – are perceived and perceive themselves as 'others' in an elite HE environment. Read *et al*, in their study (2003) of conceptions of 'belonging' and 'isolation' among non-traditional students at a post-1992 university, argue that mature, working class and minority ethnic students often choose to apply to post-1992 universities in order to increase their chances of belonging in academic culture. They perceive these institutions as those in which students from a range of ethnic backgrounds, ages or classes can feel they 'belong'; where their 'specific needs are catered for without them being reduced to 'special cases'; which can reduce their feelings of 'otherness' – often through the mere presence of significant numbers of students 'like me' (p.266). Thus students act

within the field, as more or less 'knowing agents', viewing HE as: a privilege, a right or a necessity, depending on a variety of structural factors such as social class, race, gender and disability, which position them differently in relation to expectations about participation in HE.

(Bathmaker and Thomas 2009, p.119)

### *Institutional habitus*

McDonough (1996), Reay, David and Ball (2001) and Thomas (2002) extend Bourdieu's concept of habitus to organisations in the form of institutional habitus, i.e.:

the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it mediated through an organization ... an intervening variable, providing a 'semi-autonomous' means by which class, raced and gendered processes are played out in the lives of students and their HE choices.

(Reay, David and Ball 2001, para.1.3)

The latter claim that institutional habitus 'permeates the decision-making process' (in relation to choice of HEI), resulting in the shaping of ... narrow boundaries around choice for different students as to where they will be welcome/fit in/be suited' (*ibid*, para 5.3). Where there is a mismatch between habitus and field, 'individuals experience 'a sense of uncertainty and feelings of anxiety' (Reay *et al* 2010, p.117). Research on nine working-class students at an 'elite' university found that the students' schooling 'did not provide easy access to forms of dominant cultural capital sanctioned and recognized by the educational system' (*ibid*, p.1105), and, on arrival at the university, the students experienced 'the shock of the elite' (*ibid*, p.1111). Even in a system of mass HE, academic culture sustains a dominant discourse of the authentic student as white, middle-class and male, and the first year entrant 'as a school-leaver with little or no familial responsibilities' (Read *et al* 2003, pp.261-5). This discourse has survived a decade of widening participation policy and continues to be reflected in the narrative of retention and belonging.

Thomas associates institutional habitus with 'belonging', arguing that an HEI's institutional habitus is the reason why students, particularly the 'new constituencies' (Quinn *et al* 2005), experience a lack of congruency in the UK HE sector: 'educational institutions favour knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups ... to the detriment of other groups' (Thomas 2002, p.431). If students find their habitus compatible or congruent with that of the institution, they are 'more likely to persist' (*ibid*, p.439); conversely, the feeling of not 'fitting' or belonging can lead to withdrawal:

to operationalize the term it is useful to identify the characteristics of an institutional habitus that promotes access and retention of students from lower socio-economic groups ... if an institution is accepting and celebratory of difference, students from diverse backgrounds will see themselves better reflected in the institution and be more likely to persist.

(*ibid*)

Thomas acknowledges that changing institutional habitus is a slow process and that 'efforts to improve the retention and success of students from non-traditional backgrounds require substantial and thorough commitment on the part of institutions' (*ibid*, p.440). However,

even in an institution where there are significant numbers of students of the same age, class and/or ethnicity ... the dominant culture of academia meant that many students continue to experience isolation and alienation once inside the institution ... the choice of a new university has not enabled them to fully "belong" in the environment of academia.

(Read *et al* 2003, p.272)

In the wider debate about Bourdieu's work 'some critics have argued that Bourdieu presents an overly deterministic view of social reproduction ... others have used his concepts to counteract an overly agentic understanding of social practice' (Bathmaker 2015, p.64). In the context of this enquiry, the strengths of a Bourdieusian analysis lie in its emphasis on individual and group interactions with social structure and its theorising of belonging as a relational concept, a practice and a product of the relations of power embedded in a stratified sector, constructed around the privileged identities of the 'typical' or 'authentic' student: young and full-time. I would argue that these strengths are limited by an overly schematised framework which inadequately reflects the diversity of the mature part-time undergraduate population and in the 'cold and mechanical classificatory manner' which fails to communicate 'the pleasures and pain associated with gender, class and sexuality – the affective aspects of inequality' (Skeggs 1997, p.9). Reay counters this, arguing

what Bourdieu does write about ... is being exposed to the world ... that we develop dispositions in response to that exposure ... the confrontation between the habitus and the field is always marked by affectivity, by affective transactions between habitus and the field'

(2015, pp.10-12).

She proposes that 'the mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations within which they are enmeshed ... deepen and enrich notions of habitus ...' (*ibid*). However, I was to locate a more explicit and convincing articulation of the psychosocial dimension in Brah's concept of 'diaspora' (1996).

## **Brah's concept of 'diaspora'**

### *The diasporic dynamic*

Bourdieu uses a spatial metaphor – the 'field' – to conceptualise social space; Brah's concept of diaspora enables me to further articulate spatial dimensions of belonging in reference to the psychosocial: the mutual interaction of individuals with their social environment. In diaspora, Brah interweaves complex notions of power, identity and place within an analysis of social contexts. Representing the complexity of the lived experience, of inequality, of belonging and of not belonging in a differentiated social space, diaspora provides a bridge between Bourdieu's schematic social framework and an understanding of the lived experience of diverse and complex student cohorts precariously positioned in HE.

Diaspora is commonly associated with a descriptive category of historical experience and within contexts of race and post-colonial theory. I acknowledge the problematic nature of appropriating the metaphor outside of these contexts, but argue that Brah frees the concept from 'particular maps and histories' (Clifford 1994, p.303). Brah uses diaspora as 'an interpretive frame for analysing the economic, political and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy' (1996, p.15), questioning 'not simply who travels, but when, how and under what circumstances?' (*ibid*, p.189). Diaspora maps contested territories and trajectories of privilege and disadvantage in social contexts, and is enriched by nuanced and dynamic subtexts of journey, displacement and home. It evokes 'a modern condition where belonging is not fixed according to territorial possession ... a sense of exile and homelessness that echoes experience in the more mobile modern societies' (Crang 1998, p.189). The psychosocial dimension of 'diaspora' therefore succeeds not only in describing the uneven distribution of power in contested spaces, but also the complexity of lived experience in those spaces:

When does a location become home? What is the difference between feeling at home and staking a claim to a place as one's own? It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home.

(Brah 1996, p.190)

A particular strength of diaspora in the context of this enquiry is the resonance of the diasporic dynamic with the positioning of mature part-time undergraduates in English HE. It opens up relationships of power to deconstruction, in alignment with a post-structuralist

concern to understand identity as 'constructed through its relations with others and with systems of power/knowledge' (Lather 2007, p.39). In historical contexts of diaspora, 'hitherto sharply differentiated cultures and people ... are forced to interact, often in profoundly asymmetrical ways in terms of their relative power' (Massey and Jess 1995, p.193). In Brah's diasporic model of relational positioning, 'regimes of power differentiate one group from another; to represent them as similar or different; to include or exclude them from constructions of the "nation" and the body politic' (Brah 1996, p.180). Relational positioning shapes the 'lived experience of a locality ... the same geographical space comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that "home" can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror' (*ibid*, pp.189-204).

This aspect of the diasporic dynamic emphasises the exclusionary nature of belonging and its relationship with identity. Identification with a group 'is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics ... or with an ideal and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation' (Hall 2000, p.16). To identify what is shared with some, inevitably involves identification of 'the other' and 'difference'.

Difference itself as a term has connotations of fixity and difference from the One: that singular bourgeois masculinity against which all the other 'Others' are defined and measured as lacking in different ways.

(McDowell 1999, p.215)

Diaspora captures the tension between essentialist and non-essentialist theories of identity; between 'the traditional assertion of essential group difference and hierarchical social orders' (Carter *et al* 1993, p.ix) and identity as 'multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions ... constantly in the process of change and transformation' (Hall 2000, p.17).

The idea of identity as 'always plural and in process, even when it might be construed or represented as fixed' (Brah 1996, p.191) resonates with the complex identities of mature part-time undergraduates. They are 'marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute a subject' (*ibid*, p.123) and negotiate a learner identity alongside multiple and prioritised identities (Jackson 2008) as employee, parent, carer, adult citizen. Schuller *et al* (1999) report that part-time students working full-time are more likely to identify themselves as workers who study, while Fuller describes the experiences of working

undergraduates as ‘hybrid forms of participation ... a two-way navigation between studentship and employment “spaces” as well as along often interrelated studentship and employment trajectories’ (2007, p.224). Viewed through the lens of diaspora, regimes of power within HE construct the ‘identity’ of the mature part-time undergraduate as different from the norm: a minority population, engaging differently with HE, differently eligible for financial support. Ignored or sidelined in national and media reports and in institutional literature, they are ‘ultimately constrained by a set of discourses that perpetuate inequalities’ (Read *et al* 2003, p.274).

### *Diasporic journeys*

Diasporic journeys are not casual or temporary, they are ‘essentially about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere’; and ‘diasporas are potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings’ (Brah 1996, p.190). In diasporas, whether transformation is realised can depend on the way in which the ‘traveller’ is situated by the regimes of power at their destination: ‘how and in what ways is a group inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates’ (*ibid*, p.179). In *What Works*, Thomas links belonging and retention with the development of a learner identity: ‘student belonging is achieved through ... developing knowledge, confidence and identity as HE learners’ (2012, p.15). The metaphor of ‘a journey’ is a familiar one in relation to learners and learning and is closely interwoven with ideas of identity as ‘becoming’. As the previous chapter showed, part-time learners’ ‘journeys’ are more vulnerable to disruption by events outside the educational context than those of their younger peers.

The diasporic journey also incorporates the idea of ‘displacement’, i.e. ‘the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks and learns to negotiate new ... realities’ (*ibid*). The process of displacement can be applied to the experiences of all new HE students. In reorienting themselves within a new environment, all learners invest spaces of HE with meaning through interaction with departmental buildings, libraries and social spaces. Investing meaning in space which transforms it into ‘place’ requires commitment and anticipates a return; it is an affective process closely associated with belonging, ‘the desire for more than what is ... for some sort of attachment’ (Probyn 1996, p.6). For some students however, negotiating a version of belonging counter to the institutional model is key to their persistence. Research with

working-class students in HE found that learners' differential positions in relation to access, achievement and belonging may in fact result in a choice not to belong to the institution, but to maintain a sense of belonging to an existing identity (even while that identity is being modified by their participation in HE):

those resistant (to changing class identity) drew clear boundaries between themselves and the middle-class institution, positioning themselves as able to benefit from participation while not belonging to, or feeling ownership of, the institution.

(Archer and Leathwood 2003, p.177)

### *Diaspora space*

Diaspora's companion concept, diaspora space, is defined as the 'intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location' (Brah 1996, p.178), allowing opportunities for transformation and reconstitution 'via a multitude of border crossings ... territorial, political, economic, cultural and psychological' (*ibid*, p.206). The concept of diaspora space engages with 'the lines of affiliation and association which take the idea of diaspora beyond its symbolic status as the fragmentary opposite of some imputed racial essence' (Gilroy 1993, p.93). Brah argues that diaspora space is inhabited

not only by those who have migrated ... but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous ... and who occupy the indigene subject position as the privileged space of legitimate claims of belonging.

(1996, p.178)

Imagining HE as a diaspora space positions the 'typical' HE student, full-time and young, as the 'indigenous' occupant, and non-traditional students, including part-time (and) mature undergraduates, as diasporic populations with contested claims to belonging. This interaction has the capacity to 'thoroughly re-inscribe space ... it is continually reconstituted' (*ibid*) with the potential for new negotiated forms of identity and alternative practices of belonging. So diasporic themes of journey, displacement and home interact in a dynamic engagement between physical, political and emotional space to creates possibility as well as inequality. Investigating belonging using the concept of diaspora as an analytical frame shows it to be a complex and continually renegotiated process shaped by the power relationships inherent in social structures. This dynamic enables this analysis to go beyond critique and to rethink belonging. The psychosocial dimension of Brah's concept

of diaspora brings nuance and complexity to the analysis of belonging in HE for mature part-time undergraduates, and complements a Bourdieusian field analysis in capturing the diversity of their experiences.

### **Massey: space-time, place and power**

#### *Space, time, place*

While power is at the centre of Brahm's concept of diaspora, for Massey, space itself is the product of social relations shaped by power, and is inherently temporal. Massey's spatial concepts frame a sector in flux, a complex territory. They form the third element of this borderland analysis, complementing the a Bourdieusian analysis of structured social space and the potential of diaspora space and furthering the analysis beyond critique towards a rethinking of retention and belonging.

Massey is a key figure in the diverse project of feminist geography, which aims 'to investigate, make visible and challenge the relationships between gender divisions and spatial divisions, to uncover their mutual constitution to problematise their apparent naturalness' (McDowell 1999, p.12). Studies of gendered working practices in the City of London (McDowell 1997), geographies of sexualities (Bell and Valentine 1995), and comparisons between the gendered spatiality of organised religions and contemporary high-tech workplaces (Massey 1997) all explore ways in which

specific spaces ... are produced and stabilised by the dominant groups who occupy them, such that they develop hegemonic cultures through which power operates to systematically define ways of being and to mark out those who are in place or out of place.

(Valentine 2008, p.18)

Massey argues that philosophical positions which reinforce 'the imagination of the spatial as petrification ... a safe haven from the temporal ... make self-evident the notion of space as surface. All these imaginaries diminish our understanding of spatiality' (*ibid*, p.28).

Massey's approach to space is based on three propositions: that space is the product of interrelations on multiple scales; that distinct and heterogeneous trajectories coexist in space; and that space is always under construction. She encapsulates these attributes in one phrase: space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far (2005, p.11).



If time is the dimension in which things happen one after the other, it's the dimension of succession, then space is the dimension of things being, existing at the same time: of simultaneity ... that means space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of the other ... it is space that presents us with the question of the social.

(Massey 2013, p.2)

A plural conception of space positions the HE sector as the product of social relations shaped by power: academic and disciplinary discourses, tradition, patriarchy, economics, government. This notion of space problematises linear, time-bound definitions of retention and ideas of belonging as bounded to and within an institutional space; 'conceiving space as a static slice through time, as representation, as a closed system ... are all ways of taming it' (*ibid*, p.59). Multiplicity also characterises Massey's definition of place, not as a fixed entity, but as something much more fluid: 'a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings' (Massey 1994, p.5). So, if space is understood as a simultaneity of stories-so-far, 'then places are collections of those stories' (Massey 2005, p.130).

Massey also describes places as 'extroverted', in that 'a large proportion of ... relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself' (*ibid*, p.141). For example, describing the area in which she lives, she emphasises its multiple identities and connections beyond its geographical boundaries, suggesting that

while Kilburn may have a character of its own, it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares. It could hardly be less so. People's routes through the place, their favourite haunts within it, the connections they make ... between here and the rest of the world vary enormously.

(*ibid*, p.321)

Ongoing developments in a globalised world – technology, geopolitical conflict, diaspora – disrupt ideas of place as stable, somewhere to return to; of culture and identity as bounded and closed. A plural, temporal understanding of space is reflected in Massey's descriptions of colonialism, where 'the centre was installed at the heart of the periphery', and migration as 'the arrival of the margins at the centre ... distance was suddenly eradicated both spatially and temporally. Migration was an assertion of coevalness' (Massey and Jess 1995, p.69).

If place is unfixed and in process, our relationships with place are in flux too. Massey traces the geological development of the rocks of Skiddaw in the English Lake District: 'a massive block of a mountain, over 3000 foot high ... not pretty but impressive; immovable, timeless. Through all that history, it seemed, it had presided' (2005, p.131). Yet she locates the rocks' formation in a sea in the southern hemisphere over a period of hundreds of millions of years, before they rose above the ocean and moved northwards, a movement that is continuing, however infinitesimally. Massey concludes: 'The rocks of Skiddaw are immigrant rocks, just passing through here and changing all the while ... we can't, on a weekend in the country, go back to nature. It too is moving on' (*ibid*, p. 137). Massey (1994) argues for a progressive sense of place, one open to negotiation and change, acknowledging connections beyond itself.

### *Activity space*

Massey brings space-time and place together in the device of activity space, which challenges the idea of place as stable and coherent and captures 'the spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations, within which a particular agent operates ... within each activity space there is a geography of power' (Massey 2005, p.55). Activity space is a significant theoretical tool in this enquiry, framing universities as diverse, unfixed spaces/places, and uncovering power dynamics and complexity without and within. As a methodological strategy, it complements both a Bourdieusian analysis of HE as a relational, stratified field and a diasporic dynamic of relational positioning in which particular groups are identified as 'different' or 'other'. Viewing the case study institutions as activity spaces frames my enquiry into how institutional spaces are inhabited, and by whom. What geographies of power construct certain groups as indigenous, as 'belonging', and others as 'the other', whose claim to belonging is contested?

Relating Massey's progressive sense of place to Brah's concept of diaspora space opens this borderland analysis to the possibility of moving beyond critique towards a rethinking of retention and belonging. The interaction between the two in new theoretical territory offers potential for reinscription and negotiated dimensions of belonging. There are synergies, too, between Massey's concepts of space and place and Bourdieu's field analysis. Bourdieu theorises HE as a structured social space characterised by internal conflict and an uneven distribution of advantage based on the accumulation and reproduction of capital. Massey conceptualises 'an emerging, violently unequal, twenty-

first-century geography of, a particular form of, knowledge' (2005, p.143). Individual HEIs are points of articulation of social relations, nodes in that geography, and each is an extroverted place, constructed through the wider social relations of the sector.

### **From complexity to simultaneity**

Chapters One to Three have highlighted three areas of complexity. Firstly, the complexity of the research context: the history of the HE sector in England, including the massification of HE; the stratification of the sector; the differentials between full- and part-time modes of study; and the rapid changes to funding in the last two decades. Secondly, the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation – retention – a contested term, measured in multiple ways and widely varied across institutions and attendance modes. Thirdly, the diversity of the mature part-time undergraduate population in English HE in terms of age, gender, socio-economic group, ethnicity, educational background and qualification aim. This problematises the relationship between retention and the discourse of belonging, and suggests that a relational understanding of the HE sector, and of belonging within it, is more appropriate for a diverse student population.

Chapter Three has outlined a theoretical framework which draws on Bourdieu, Brah and Massey in a borderland analysis. Each theorist in this borderland analysis brings spatiality to the table. Complex and rich in themselves, their spatial models of power relations become even richer in dialogue with one another. Differences in context and emphasis create productive borderland territory for this investigation of belonging for mature part-time undergraduates in the social space of HE. Drawing these theorists into dialogue enriches a theorising of belonging through themes of space and power. The synergies of field analysis, relational positioning and geographies of power foreground the lived experiences of relationships of power in space, 'using ideas from each to portray a more complete picture of identity ... a new theoretical space' (Abes 2012, p.190).

Bourdieu's metaphorical field sets a template for the structured social space of HE: habitus for the social relationship of the individual with their environment. Brah's diasporic dynamic, a theoretical perspective grounded in conditions of post-colonial migration, maps contested territories and trajectories of privilege and disadvantage in the context of HE. A Bourdieusian field analysis unpicks the relationships of power which operate within

Massey's space-time, constituted through multiple interactions, 'always under construction ... never finished, never closed' (2005, p.9). Massey's temporal emphasis frames a sector in flux, a volatile territory in which Brah's diaspora space opens up potential for border crossing, reinscribing and transforming identity – and for moving beyond critique.

A borderland analysis presents methodological challenges. How can the project methodology accommodate this dialogue between theorists? How can a multiple case study best present a simultaneity of stories-so-far? What are the implications for research methods and for the role of the researcher practicing 'spatiality in a highly active manner'? Meeting the methodological challenges of borderland analysis involves seeking new territory in productive tensions between multiple approaches. Chapter Four, *Methods of Mapping*, outlines how this enquiry has addressed these challenges.

## **MAPPING THE RESEARCH TERRAIN**

### **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS OF MAPPING**

*Data have to be obtained and evaluated, and if necessary processed ... Decisions have to be made about generalization, the process whereby unnecessary detail ... is omitted in order to keep the map clear and uncluttered.*

(Canadian Cartographic Association 2015)

#### **Finding a route**

Chapters One, Two and Three mapped out the research terrain. Chapter Four now describes my route across the methodological territory. This methodology is shaped by a borderland analysis of belonging in HE, and is sensitised to ‘the social as inexorably also spatial’ (Massey 1993, p.80). The research methods capture the ways in which the complexities of Massey’s power geometry are experienced in Brah’s contested diaspora spaces, and reflect the thread of socio-spatial relations running through Bourdieu’s work. My approach also reflects my ontological uncertainty about the world, and my understanding of knowledge as socially situated and associated with power.

This chapter provides a discursive account of the rationale for my chosen methodology and methods, and the ways in which those methods evolved through the pilot study and subsequent fieldwork. It leads the reader on a thematic rather than a chronological tour, beginning with *Strategies of Subversion*, which sets out the spatial character of the methodology and how this is exemplified in three research strategies: activity space, campus *dérive* and the exercise of *Mapping Belonging*. *Multiple Case Study* reminds the reader of the project’s pre-determined methodological framework; summarises the case selection process, which utilised quantitative as well as qualitative data; and provides a pen portrait of the four case study institutions. *Methods: From Pilot to Fieldwork* describes the development and modification of my research methods as a result of conditions in the field. The final section, *Making Maps of Data*, addresses the demands of engaging with data through analysis and authorship.

The discursive character of this chapter is complemented by a Methods Annex which provides the reader with an audit trail of case selection, data collection processes, questionnaire responses and students' 'maps' of belonging. These are referenced within the chapter where relevant. Not every move and obstacle is delineated; the chapter and its annex edit what were lengthy and sometimes challenging procedures of designing and conducting fieldwork with multiple participants on five geographically disparate sites and analysing the data collected. Chapter Four condenses multiple stages of methodological exploration into a tidy series of themed sections, in practice, it was not so tidy:

It was a messy business ... when researchers communicate with each other ... little of this messiness emerges ... I had written about the research process in such a way that it implied there were no false starts, no compromises and no mistakes ... the text suggested a logical, seamless progression.

(Longden 2005, pp.105-6)

I include the early stages of my methodological exploration. They were not false starts or mistakes. They were part of a journey across methodological territory which became more complex than initially anticipated.

### **Strategies of subversion**

One of my first methodological challenges was to clarify my role in the research process. As a researcher on campus, I enjoyed both outsider and insider status. Although I was a stranger, a visitor, my educational and professional background meant I could anticipate and recognise generic features of the campus template: library, lecture theatres, Students' Union. As a university graduate and employee in the sector, I brought my own understanding of 'the game' played by students – and staff. I was already an insider, a Bourdieusian fish in water, my habitus in alignment with the campus environment. I was both in and of it, 'the locus of class reproduction ... and the embodied construction of sociospatial order' (Bridge 2004, p.63). Therefore, I required methodological strategies which took account of this dual status and enabled me to gain distance from the taken-for-granted:

In situations strongly familiar to us, strangeness is not a given but something researchers can only achieve by finding the proper strategies to uncover what is not-so-normal ... in that sense researchers are like fish trying to discover the water that surrounds them.

(de Jong *et al* 2013, p.168)

Throughout the early stages of the fieldwork, I developed three methodological strategies to subvert the seemingly 'normal' spaces of case study institutions: activity space, campus *dérive* and the exercise *Mapping Belonging*. Each strategy played a distinctive role in the methodological framework; together they exemplified an active approach to thinking about space (Massey, 2005).

### *Activity space*

Viewing the four case study sites through Massey's device of activity space meant that each HEI could be considered within the context of the HE sector as a whole, without detracting from an idiographic emphasis on the particularity of each institution. Activity space, 'the spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations, within which a particular agent operates' (2005, p.55), was a means of interrogating the range of spatial scales within which all HEIs must operate; and in practice this required considering each one from three spatial perspectives.

Firstly, I considered each institution within the context of the extended networks of the HE sector, as well as within the local, community and regional economy. This emphasised the porosity of institutional borders, the way the policy 'centre' of the sector reaches in to the workings of the institution, the growing financial significance of retention, international students and the impact of higher tuition fees on part-time student numbers.

Secondly, I focused more closely on the institution as a single entity, identifying its 'institutional stories', corporate identity, populations, organisational structure and strategic messages. These elements are representative of an institutional habitus which communicates 'who belongs'. I was particularly interested in how this was reflected – or contradicted – in retention strategy and campus spaces. I paid attention to the positioning of part-time students, strategically and physically, in the activity space of each institution. Where were they visible - and invisible? What spaces did they occupy? I focused on the production, consumption and use of retention strategy documents within each case study institution; how retention strategy was positioned and how it functioned. Document analysis and staff interviews offered methods of tracking strategy pathways through institutional structures and uncovering geographies of power operating within the HEI.

The third 'view' of the activity space was at 'ground level' in relation to the estate and spatial arrangements of the campus: 'the specific spaces ... produced and stabilised by ... the dominant groups who occupy them' (Valentine 2008, p.18), and in relation to psychosocial dimensions of that environment. The methodological strategies of campus *dérive* and *Mapping Belonging* were essential contributors to this third level view.

### *Campus dérive*

I developed the research method of campus *dérive* following completion of the pilot study, and alongside my evolving interest in thinking spatially, theoretically and methodologically. Campus *dérive* emerged from the literature and practices of psychogeography, a term which first appeared in print in connection with a Parisian avant garde group, the Situationist International (1957-1972), led by Guy Debord. Situationists were particularly concerned with a loss of emotional engagement with urban surroundings: 'psychogeography becomes for Debord the point where psychology and geography collide. ... The emotional and behavioural impact of urban space upon individual consciousness' (Coverley 2010). Debord's psychogeographical map of Paris divides the city into multiple sections randomly rearranged; object and territory for individual interpretation and navigation. Debord is considered a twentieth century heir of Baudelaire's flâneur, the Parisian 'urban spectator, an amateur detective and investigator of the city' (Benjamin 1983) who spectated in a leisurely manner on the accelerating pace of modern life (Crang 1998). Debord considered psychogeography 'a pure science and like the skilled chemist the psychogeographer is able both to identify and to distil the varied ambiances of the urban environment' (Coverley 2010).

Baudelaire has successors in London too. Iain Sinclair (1997, 2003, 2009) records his way 'of thinking and dealing with how the city emerges' (Self and Sinclair 2008) in a style simultaneously political, gothic and lyrical. Sinclair continues an English literary tradition of urban exploration exemplified by Defoe, Black and de Quincey; the 'visionary tradition that takes London as its centre' (Coverley 2010, p.111). He is part of a contemporary British revival of London-themed psychogeography (Ackroyd 2000, 2002, 2007, 2011; Self 2007; Papdimitriou 2013). Self extended psychogeography's popular appeal through radio broadcasts and a regular column *Psychogeography*, in the *Independent* magazine. Sinclair's film collaboration with Andrew Köttling, *Swan down* (2011) was a protest against the 2012 London Olympics, a narrative of a month-long river trip in a swan-shaped pedalo along the



Lea Valley to the Olympic site.

The foundation stone of psychogeographical practice, the activity that connects urban wandering, flâneury, gothic form and 'local history with attitude' (Self 2007, p.12), is the Situationist practice of *dérive* (to drift). *Dérive* is 'a particular way of walking for the purpose of exploring the impact of urbanisation ... intended to disrupt the habitual ways in which individuals normally experience environments' (Bridger 2013, p.3). *Dérive* requires the walker to abandon conventional motives for movement, e.g. travelling to or from work, and to allow themselves to be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find in the city. In the canon of psychogeography there are almost as many 'brands' of *dérive* as renowned psychogeographers, including Sinclair's 'dogged, shamanic attempts to storm ... concrete bastions ... laying siege with the trebuchet of his prose-poetry' (Self 2007, p.25) and Solnit's atlases 'of the imagination' (2010, 2013) in which she 'roams political terrain ... invites us to search out the layers ... expand our ideas of how any city is imagined and experienced' (Solnit 2015).

For Self, walking itself is 'the act of narrative' (Self and Sinclair 2008) and, in common with *dérive*'s disruptive quality, an act of subversion: 'walking in urban environments is a destructive ability to destroy the way we are meant to live in cities and the way we're meant to perceive them and the way they're meant to be for us' (*ibid*). Sinclair is passionately interested in unreported and 'empty places' as well as the liminal spaces of urban development; for example, hidden London in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997) and the outer reaches of the M25 in *London Orbital* (2002). Despite its multiple stylistic and political manifestations, the acknowledged canon of psychogeography is almost exclusively urban (London, Paris) and its celebrated authors, past and present, are almost exclusively male: 'dispiritingly we are a fraternity of middle-aged men in Gore-Tex, armed with notebooks and cameras, stamping our boots on suburban station platforms' (Self 2007, p.12). Bridger is a notable exception to the literature's largely uncritical male gaze:

the gendered body is a vehicle through which a person experiences and makes sense of their relation both to others and place. ... A feminist critique of space should ... involve a reflection of one's role in the research and what sort of knowledge can be produced ... taking on the role of both participant and researcher.

(Bridger 2013, pp.4-5)

Celebrated female psychogeographers are rare. In all the definitions of a flâneur 'one thing remains constant: the image of an observant and solitary man strolling about Paris' (Solnit 2001, p.199). Having the leisure and security to stroll or wander alone in an urban environment has been and still is a social and gendered privilege which translates into the dominant gaze; 'white, bourgeois, heterosexual masculinity has structured the way in which geography as a discipline claims to know space, place and landscape' (Rose 1993, p.137). Solnit (2013, 2011, 2006, 2001), Maitland (2012) and Jamie (2012, 2005, 2002), among others, disrupt the male gaze of the psychogeographical canon by extending psychogeographical practice beyond the urban hothouses of London and Paris. Solnit (2007) interprets 'place' in the widest sense, writing political readings of geography, land and environment as diverse as Silicon Valley, rural New Mexico and the site of an anti-capitalist protest in Miami. Maitland (2012) conducts twelve walks in twelve British forests, one a month over the course of a year, drawing on and rewriting fairy tales 'as a way of understanding the mysterious space forests occupy within our psyches' (Laing 2012). Jamie records a year in her life engaging with the conservation efforts of the endangered corncrake in her native Scotland (2005), and scrutinises northern land and seascapes in 'a conversation with the natural world' (2012).

Solnit (2006) disrupts the genre further, moving psychogeography onto a profoundly intimate level, exploring issues of wandering, getting lost and the unknown in a narration of the experiences and relationships of her own life. 'Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing ... in order to make discoveries, we must get lost, go into terra incognita' (Ch. 1). The act of making discoveries resonates with the research process, but it is a willingness to get lost, to walk in terra incognita, which most clearly characterises a female psychogeographic gaze. Solnit, Maitland and Jamie do not claim to 'know' their territories, nor to encapsulate final versions of them in their texts. The emphasis is on the nature of their engagement in enquiry; on the tenor, texture and variability of their relationship to landscape, place, space. 'To be lost is to be fully present and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty' (*ibid*).

Jamie travels through both the wildest parts of this country and the most genteel, from Scottish glens to the streets of Edinburgh, and treats all of them as human landscapes. Nothing exists in isolation ... as an observer, she never allows herself to forget her own place in the landscape.

(Lacey 2005)

My own enquiry adapted the practice of *dérive* to disrupt the spaces and places of the campus, utilising psychogeography as a strategy for making the familiar strange and for pursuing psychosocial dimensions of space and place. I created a bespoke psychogeographical practice which I called 'campus *dérive*', one which owes less to the randomised transit of the Situationists and more to what Bridger describes as 'site-specific studies of particular places' (2015). Campus *dérive* considers campus rather than urban or rural geography; acknowledges campus boundaries but is not bounded by them; and considers liminal spaces between campus boundaries and their host towns or cities, attempting to imagine universities and their campuses as extroverted places and diaspora spaces. It maintains the significance of context while simultaneously foregrounding my connection as a researcher and a subject with spatial questions of power, belonging and peripherality on the university campus.

In campus *dérive* I used the act of walking to establish connection with each case study institution. Through walking, I mapped not only the physical spaces of the case study institutions, the sights and sounds of them, but also the psychosocial dimensions of those spaces, the sense I made of them. I noticed who was present in campus spaces, who or what was on display, how places were labelled and named. I noted my responses to this occupation of space, and wondered how others might respond. I took an interest in the spatial relationships of the campus, the spaces between and beyond, and what was not there. I listened, too, to language, to regional accents, to 'opportunistic conversations which take on a life of their own' (Holliday 2004, p.278). In these ways, campus *dérive* rendered generic elements of each site temporarily 'strange'. I served my time on suburban rail platforms, and I, too, carried a notebook. While I walked, I allowed myself to experience a spontaneous and unedited flow of impressions, observations and thoughts. When I had completed the campus *dérive*, I transcribed this experience of landscape in my notebook, and these notes become a Research Journal.

'The freedom to move, to write, to map is a situated freedom' (hooks 1992, p.343). My ability to utilise *dérive* was facilitated by certain kinds of privilege. 'There are three pre-requisites to taking a walk – that is, to walk for pleasure. One must have free time, a place to go and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints' (Solnit, 2001, p.234). That I was able to 'drift' freely around a university campus without ID, without being stopped, questioned or ejected, says something about the liberal social values of 'the university' as a

public space but was also dependent on geographies of ethnicity, gender, age and disability. Who is it normal to see in the campus environment? Was I seen as a student or a member of staff? Was I, a middle-aged, White woman, 'seen' at all? How might I have experienced campus derive as a young Black man, a Muslim woman in full hijab, a wheelchair user or visually-impaired person in the corridors, halls, cafés and green spaces of the campus? For James Baldwin, the Black gay writer: 'Manhattan was not a deliciously liberatory place where he could lose himself ... it threatened instead never to let him forget himself' (2001, p.242).

During my fieldwork, I visited eight campus sites in total, some several times, over a period of approximately nine months. On each visit, I practiced *dérive* alongside a developing relationship with the emerging themes of the enquiry and my role as observer and interpreter. I made notes in my Research Journal. The following (unedited) excerpts demonstrate my perceptions and engagements with the physical spaces of the campus.

*Travelled from the station on a grey drizzly morning. A large urban campus, edged by busy road and arteries into the city centre and out into beyond. Of the city but not in the city.*

*On the train journey here, three stations have 'International' after the place name. Sense of entering an [sic] liminal, outward-facing zone with global connection. On arrival, I encounter trilingual street signs and flocks of international students.*

*Proximity to the river means this is historically a centre of naval history and trade, people and things on the move, going in, coming out, a port for immigration and migration. A place of tensions possibly? You can just about make out the 'old' town in the grand architecture swamped by the clatter of contemporary life.*

Campus *dérive* provided an opportunity to consider the nature and significance of spatial relationships:

*The campus is sleek, landscaped - and deserted. Where are the students?*

*The campus is close to the city walls. I enter through an ancient stone arch leading on to a leafy path. The buildings are low rise, a series of interconnecting courtyards and small enclosed green spaces. Cloistered, contained.*

Repetition of the practice on the same site at different times offered potential insights into the experience of new students while highlighting my positioning as a researcher:

*First visit – all is strange, finding my way around is challenging. Second visit, familiarity is increased, you may return to somewhere which felt comfortable. Third visit you're less conscious of 'finding your way' you have what feels like established routes you follow. Fourth visit you have the confidence to explore, you recognise how places fit*

*together, you can take your place within certain boundaries. But I'm someone who 'knows the game', the layout, the template of a university – head start?*

Notes from my Research Journal, including excerpts of the opportunistic conversations overheard, form the opening and closing sections of each case study account.

### *Mapping Belonging*

In campus *dérive*, I engaged with the campus environment and transcribed that engagement in my own words. I was not seeking to discover whether I belonged there. I was attempting to capture a socio-spatial sense of place and the psychosocial dimension of being in it, in an attempt to understand how relationships of power in that space might impact on belonging. In *Mapping Belonging*, I approached those relationships of power from another angle. Dominant ideas of student culture are embedded in the campus, in

a geography of places – the bars and “student-friendly” pubs where students can meet new people, the halls of residence, the canteens and faculties around which networks of acquaintances can be formed. The student community is stitched together out of these places; it relies on this geography.

(Crang 1998, p.5)

The *Mapping Belonging* exercise drew on participatory diagramming, a technique widely used in social geography and development studies which is ‘wide open to context- and topic-specific innovations by researchers and participants alike’ (Kesby 2000, p.425). I provided mature part-time undergraduate participants with a photocopy of their campus map and asked them to use different coloured pens to mark the places on campus where they felt they ‘belonged’ and places where they ‘did not’, alternatively referred to as ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ spots. By asking participants to represent an intangible and potentially emotive phenomenon in a visual format, the exercise disrupted and subverted the familiarity of campus spaces.

Participant-generated visual materials are particularly helpful in exploring the taken-for-granted things in their research participants’ lives ... [it] involves the participants reflecting on their activities in a way that is not usually done; it gives them distance from what they are usually immersed in and allows them to articulate thoughts and feelings that usually remain implicit.

(Rose 2014, p.27)

As part of the exercise, participants were given the opportunity to share the results with one another. The value of the exercise was therefore not only in the visual product but in the discussion and reflection resulting from the task. The visual/tactile nature also

facilitated the contribution of less dominant personalities. When the exercise was done in small groups, rather than individually, it encouraged a wider discussion among peers. Examples of maps created are included in the Methods Annex (Figures 2-4). Detail has been edited to ensure anonymity.

The theme of mapping and the representation of intangible experience in visual form are carried through the thesis into the final chapter, where I use diagrams to distil and capture relationships between institution and individual and as part of mapping a wider territory for retention.

### **Multiple case study**

#### *Contemporary complexity*

Three common characteristics underpin the 'complex and interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p.1) that co-exist within the field of qualitative research. Firstly, 'systematic inquiry in a natural setting' (Marshall and Rossman 1995, p.4) foregrounds context and context-specific knowledge. Secondly, a wide range of research methods in data collection allows for and captures complexity. Thirdly, qualitative research positions the researcher not as a detached observer generating generalised theoretical propositions and/or causal relationships, but as an actively interpretive researcher seeking an understanding of subjective experience. Indeed, Erickson (1986) argues that interpretation is the primary characteristic of qualitative research.

Case study fulfils all three criteria. At its most generic, it is 'an empirical enquiry that ... investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' (Yin 1994, p.13) through one or more cases 'within a bounded system' (Creswell 2007, p.73), e.g. an organisation, event or individual. An attention to 'thick description', i.e. the interconnectedness of diverse aspects of social life to show the full context of what is going on (Geertz 1993, p.6), and which situates participants' experience and behaviour in the context in which it occurs, weights the significance of context in case study as a research design or method. Case study also typically employs multiple sources of information and detailed data collection; it is the range of evidence available to a case study which, Yin states, gives it 'its unique strength' (1994, p.8). The role of the researcher is as 'an

interpreter in the field, to observe the workings of the case' (Stake 1995, p.8).

Case study literature is crowded with typologies (Merriam 1991; Stake 1994; Yin 1994), broadly differentiated by research objective, use of context and mode of theorising. This project corresponds to Stake's definition of an 'instrumental' case study; i.e. cases are studied to provide insight into an issue, the case itself is of secondary interest. In a multiple case study of this type, 'understanding each case requires an understanding of other cases ... but also an understanding of each one's uniqueness' (Stake 1994, p.44). It therefore draws most closely on an idiographic approach, 'literally a writing of the particular local circumstances' (Crang 1998, p.192) and described by Stake as 'the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case' ... in which 'understanding the case is prioritised over generalising beyond it' (1995, p.xii). This multiple case study practices an 'interpretive sensemaking method of theorising' (*ibid*, p.747) placing emphasis on particularity and contextual detail and on a subjective search for meaning and understanding of human experience. It contrasts with the quantitative emphasis of a nomothetic approach exemplified by Yin (1994), which aims to generalise and detect patterns, treats context as if it provides a laboratory environment and works towards 'a context-free proposition' (Welch *et al* 2011, p.746).

Despite the breadth of its typology, conventional case study format is remarkably uniform: a detailed description of each case and themes within it (within-case analysis), followed by a thematic analysis across the cases (cross-case analysis), and a final interpretative phase in which the researcher reports assertions or 'lessons learned' (Yin 1994; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Stake's approach avoids this rigidity to an extent; he recommends opening and closing vignettes, 'reminding the reader that the report is just one person's encounter with a complex case' (1995, p.123). His is, nevertheless, a linear template which includes 'incontestable data' and ends in 'assertions about the case' (Stake 1995). Stake also argues in favour of triangulation:

we deal with many complex phenomena and issues for which no consensus can be found as to what really exists – yet we have ethical obligations to minimise misrepresentation and misunderstanding ... we need discipline, we need protocols which do not depend on mere intuition and good intention to 'get it right'.

(1995, pp.107-8)

Triangulation assumes a defined arena in which a fixed point– a single truth – is to be found, and Stake’s template as a whole implies that the research territory can be ‘crossed and conquered, mapped – like a surface, continuous and given’ (Massey 2005, p.4). In contrast, this enquiry imagines each case as a ‘meeting up of histories and co-existing trajectories’ (*ibid*), a view of case studies more aligned with an intention to ‘investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance’ (Cohen *et al* 2007, p.253). Massey’s concept of space-time – ‘always under construction, never finished, closed’ (2005, p.11) – troubles triangulation as a conventional measure of validity. An alternative central imaginary, crystallisation – which ‘combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities and angles of approach’ (Richardson, 1997, p.92) – is far better suited to a study of a simultaneity of stories-so-far. A commitment to multiplicity is sustained throughout the thesis, culminating in an ‘atlas of belongings’ re-imagining retention and belonging in HE and reframing the discourse which connects them.

*... and four cases*

Stake emphasises that ‘case study research is not sampling research ... a sample of a few is unlikely to be a strong representation of others’ (Stake 1995, p.4). Chapter Two highlighted the diversity of the HE sector, part-time providers and part-time undergraduates, and my selection of four case study institutions (Methods Annex, Tables 2, 3 and 4) in the context of such diversity aims to identify ‘exemplifying cases ... not chosen because they are extreme or unusual in some way but because they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered’ (Bryman 2004, p.51). All institutions in the initial sample offer face-to-face, part-time provision. A longlist was selected from those with a critical mass of part-time undergraduates (>150 part-time entrants to first degrees) and part-time retention rates in the top quartile relative to the sector in the most recent academic year for which data is available. A shortlist was then drawn up from those institutions with continuously rising retention rates overall for part-time entrants between 2006/7 and 2009/10. I subsequently selected institutions of varying overall size and part-time population to achieve the balance and variety recommended by Stake (1995). As the Annex makes clear, it was not possible to secure the participation of four cases which exactly met the criteria, but steps were taken to ensure that the substitutes still provided ‘a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered’ (Bryman 2004, p.51).



The selected case study institutions are listed below under their pseudonyms, a convention to ensure confidentiality for participating institutions and to guarantee that data provided could not be traced back to them in reports, presentations or other forms of dissemination (Wiles *et al* 2008). In the pen portraits, note the striking decline in part-time student numbers at each institution between 2010 and 2015 reflecting the ‘collapse in part-time study’ (Hillman 2015); evidence of a sector in flux, ‘always under construction, never finished, closed’ (Massey 2005, p.11).

**New Ecclesiastical University** gained university status in the last decade and has three campuses in the South of England. A growing institution, it describes itself as ‘a non-traditional university ... in a historic setting’. At the date of selection (2013) over 40 per cent of New Ecclesiastical’s students were part-time and 60 per cent mature. At the time of writing, the proportion of part-time students was 24 per cent (HESA 2015).

**Modern Eastern University** is an ex-polytechnic which gained university status nearly twenty years ago. It has three campuses and is one of the largest institutions in its region. It describes itself as ‘non-traditional, inclusive and entrepreneurial’. At the date of selection, like New Ecclesiastical over 40 per cent of Modern Eastern’s students were part-time and over 60 per cent were mature. At the time of writing, the proportion of part-time students was 22 per cent (HESA 2015).

**Northern City University** is an ex-polytechnic which gained university status over twenty years ago. It describes itself as a modern university with a long history which celebrates diversity and offers a vibrant learning experience. Northern City has two city-based campuses. At the date of selection, just over 30 per cent of Northern City’s students were part-time and over 40 per cent were mature. At the time of writing, the proportion of part-time students was 17.5 per cent (HESA 2015).

**Metropolitan Elite University** is a member of the Russell Group of UK research-intensive universities. It describes itself as a multicultural, international institution, accessible to all who have the potential. It has one city-based campus and employs a bespoke model for part-time provision. At the date of selection, 12 per cent of Metropolitan Elite’s students

were part-time and 25 per cent were mature. At the time of writing, the proportion of part-time students was 4 per cent (HESA 2015).

### **Methods: from pilot to fieldwork**

A pilot study offers a methodological space for a formative dialogue between theory and practice to begin, although as the example of campus *dérive* demonstrates, this dialogue continues throughout the enquiry. I used the pilot study to test four methods of data collection: document analysis of institutional retention strategies; individual staff interviews; student focus groups; and the *Mapping Belonging* exercise. During the pilot, I also collected secondary data in the form of institutional literature, including website and printed material. Stake argues that in addition to more conventional forms, data will include 'the earliest of observations', and that 'a considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case' (Stake 2005, p.49).

I conducted a pilot study between October and December 2012, at an institution not subsequently included in the case selection sample. In the interests of confidentiality, this institution is not identified, other than to note that its nature meant that my findings were likely to be weighted towards specialist rather than mainstream provision. This was taken into account when considering which substantive and methodological issues arising from the pilot could usefully inform later case studies. Fieldwork at the four selected case study sites was subsequently conducted between January 2013 and March 2014.

### *Document analysis*

My approach to document analysis was influenced by Prior (2003), whose work prioritises the function of a document over content and places equal importance on the production and consumption of documents in social settings. This requires the investigator to 'follow the document in use' to identify 'fields, frames and networks of action which engage and involve creators, users and settings' (*ibid*, p.2). It is an approach congruent with an investigation foregrounding relations of power in space. For example, Prior asks how documentation 'is enrolled into routine activity; who enrolls it and who opposes it; what key assumptions does it contain and how it is manipulated in situ?' (2003, p.51). Drawing on Prior's model, I articulated retention strategy as a situated product of institutional processes actively structuring the conception and nature of retention within the HEI.

Prior's model also informed the development of a document analysis protocol (Methods Annex, Figure 1). As a desk-based paper exercise, the protocol provided a comprehensive framework for initial familiarisation with the strategy documentation, but my ability to complete it was limited without a greater understanding of the workings of the institution. I subsequently modified the protocol structure to reflect this. Sections A-D could usually be completed prior to site visits; staff interviews were more likely to provide data for completing Sections E and F. In this way, the document analysis process became an interactive process in the institutional environment, contributing to tracking pathways of retention strategy through the organisational structure.

### *Individual interview*

Conducting individual semi-structured interviews with staff in each case study institution shifted the balance of my role away from the relative autonomy and solitude experienced in desk research. The interview method embodied intense, structured and temporary relationships with a stranger. 'Interviewing is a standard sociological technique for acquiring knowledge, for "knowing"' (Richardson 1997, p.165), but interviews are also 'co-created through the intersection of two subjectivities, the interviewee and the interviewer' (*ibid*). My purpose in interviewing staff was to collect data on participants' 'interpretations of the world in which they live' (Cohen *et al* 2007, p.349), an emic perspective on the phenomenon of retention in general, and, specifically in relation to mature part-time undergraduates. I wanted to discover what impact, for example, seniority in the institutional hierarchy or proximity to student learning might have on staff members' views of retention and belonging for mature part-time undergraduates. I was also interested to discover the extent to which the institution's strategic approach to retention was reflected beyond the point of its production.

I conducted four interviews in the pilot study, having utilised institutional data and my professional knowledge to identify potential interviewees drawn from a cross-section of job roles with remits related to retention. Following the pilot, I formulated four staff categories: senior strategic (pro-vice chancellor or similar); senior implementation (faculty or service head, lead or similar); teaching academic (lecturer or senior lecturer or similar); and student support (student services, engagement or similar). At least one member of staff from each category was interviewed in each of the case study institutions (Methods

Annex, Table 5). Staff interviews were based on common but flexible interview schedules (Schedules 1 and 2) corresponding most closely to that defined as 'interview guide approaches' (Patton 1980, p.206). Schedule 1 contained thirteen questions addressed from an etic or outsider perspective, i.e. issues I had identified from the literature, and Schedule 2 an additional nine questions for senior strategic interviewees based on strategic themes. As interviewer, I presented an informed 'outsider' identity, but the more interviews I completed, the more I had to assess how much comprehension to reveal in order to keep a balance between an evolving understanding and the wish to be able to explore the extent of the interviewee's knowledge and lifeworld (Stake 1995).

The use of a schedule enabled data collection to be 'somewhat systematic for each respondent ... while interviews remain fairly conversational and situational' (Patton 1980, p.206). I adapted the sequence and emphasis of interview topics and issues during the course of the interview, depending on the institutional context of the interviewee. A flexible approach reduced the risk of my questions dominating my enquiry and potentially

culminating in the "reporting" of the responses to each question as "results". This inhibits the *emergence* of independent realities which may be counter to or hidden by the dominant preoccupations of the researcher.

(Holliday 2004, p.278, original italics)

Interviews with staff also provided an opportunity to observe the interaction between subjectivity, institutional discourse and power. The experience of conducting interviews and subsequent analysis of transcripts was enhanced by an appreciation of a Foucauldian perspective on the role of discourse:

Subject positions, made available through the circulation of discourses, provide identity categories and when people identify with and take up subject positions they take up an identity related to that subject position.

(Harman 2011, p.278)

The clearest data on institutional mission, rhetoric and identity emerged in interviews with staff in senior strategic and senior implementation categories. These were exchanges in which I sensed individuals felt a responsibility to offer a coherent, abstracted institutional picture: literally a view from above. However, Harman also acknowledges that subjectivity, precarious and contradictory ... interacting with the circulation of multiple discourses at

work, makes it possible for individuals to take up multiple subject positions, including “positions of resistance”. (2011, p.281). Several interviewees in senior categories revealed such positions in relation to particular discourses, including belonging and retention. In fact, the majority of interviewees in all categories appeared relatively comfortable when communicating frank opinions and concerns to me in contradiction of corporate messages. Perhaps they were consciously or unconsciously reassured by my ‘dual’ status: a knowing outsider, a detached insider? Several senior interviewees also indicated they welcomed the opportunity in a busy schedule to sit, discuss and reflect in some depth on one of the very many aspects of their role. In these cases, it is

by trying reflexively to understand what happens when, as an inevitable consequence of being there, she disturbs the surface of the culture she is investigating, that the researcher is in a position to dig deeper and reveal the hidden and the counter.

(Holliday 2004, p.278)

Interviews with staff interacted with and enriched the document analysis process by revealing differences in awareness, perception and engagement with retention strategy at different points across the institutional hierarchy. While interviews with senior strategic and senior implementation staff provided significant insights into elements of the document analysis process, in particular a strategy’s background ‘story’, those with teaching academic and student support staff revealed significantly less awareness of strategy detail, and tendency to either confuse retention with other corporate agendas (student satisfaction, recruitment) or selectively emphasise particular features. In the subsequent fieldwork individual interviews with staff became an essential tool in tracking strategy pathways through the institution.

#### *Focus group/student workshop*

I chose a group rather than individual setting in which to engage with student participants primarily because this offered a greater chance of accessing mature part-time students, who spend minimal time on campus and often juggle multiple commitments in addition to study. I piloted two focus groups: ‘contrived settings bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where the

interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes' (Cohen *et al* 2007, p.376). By using a focus group rather than a group interview,

the facilitator seeks group interaction ... the objective is to stimulate discussion and understand the meanings and norms which underlie ... group answers. In a group interview, the researcher is seeking answers, individual differences in viewpoint within the group will be blurred and underreported.

(Bloor *et al* 2001, p.42)

The pilot institution facilitated the recruitment of twelve mature part-time undergraduate participants through an online newsletter and offered a gift voucher for participation, as per institutional practice. I ran two focus groups comprising six participants each. The format was as follows:

- a pre-group self-completion questionnaire gathering course-related and socio-demographic information;
- an exploratory group discussion triggered by a factual statement concerning differential retention rates between full and part-time students;
- a structured focusing exercise (*Mapping Belonging*).

Discussions focused on students' experiences and on topics of withdrawal, persistence and sense of belonging. Focus group data can seem 'chaotic, because the aim of a focus group is to initiate discussion between group members which can involve people talking at once, sentences remaining unfinished, contradictory statements' (Bloor *et al* 2001, p.58). As these groups were relatively small, transcribing the sessions was relatively straightforward; however, I made a note to review the process if future groups consisted of more than six participants.

I planned to run two focus groups in a similar way at each case study institution. However, while the self-selecting recruitment strategy used in the pilot study was successful at Metropolitan Elite, which had an established departmental practice of engaging part-time mature students in a similar way, it was markedly less successful in the other three HEIs. This was an insight into the difficulties involved in accessing and engaging part-time mature students in activities outside contact hours. To overcome this, I asked individual teaching academic staff at three of the case study institutions if they would assist me in setting up groups of part-time mature students within the constraints of their programme timetable. This led to several changes in the way in which I engaged with student participants.

Firstly, the size of participant groups varied widely: the largest n=30, the smallest n=5. To ensure interactivity among larger participant groups, I re-designed the sessions as Student Workshops and adapted the programme to include pair work, small group work, and plenary feedback sessions. Secondly, larger groups created new challenges in terms of transcription. In groups larger than six, I recorded the plenary sessions and circulated the digital recorder around the smaller groups during activity and discussion, producing multiple 'impressions' of discussions taking place. The largest Student Workshop was held during contact hours and participants were 'captive' rather than self-selecting. On this occasion I felt I occupied an authoritative identity space of 'guest' and/or substitute 'teacher' rather than a more 'neutral' facilitator, but that this power dynamic was mediated by the established social and spatial arrangements of their classroom.

Concerted efforts to organise Student Workshops in one of the case study institutions were unsuccessful and in this case, I conducted three semi-structured individual interviews with self-selecting mature part-time undergraduates. I devised an interview schedule loosely based on the content covered in the Student Workshops (Methods Annex, Schedule 3).

#### *The Mapping Belonging exercise*

On piloting the *Mapping Belonging* exercise with Student Focus Groups, two issues arose. Firstly, some participants expressed puzzlement at my request to map 'belonging'. They appeared uncomfortable or lacking in confidence about mapping a psychosocial dimension of their experience in a two dimensional way. In one case, a participant completely resisted the request. However, all participants were willing to participate in the wider discussion about belonging following the mapping element of the exercise. Secondly, the campus map was too small in scale to allow participants to convey much detail of their experience. What did emerge, however, was a lack of familiarity in general with the wider campus, and in both groups participants began to share information with one another about cafés, libraries and other buildings and facilities.

Following the pilot, I decided to introduce a short Likert-scale questionnaire entitled *Sense of Belonging* to the Student Workshop which would support the mapping exercise (Methods Annex, Table 8). I scheduled this immediately before the *Mapping Belonging*, exercise primarily as a way of introducing the theme of 'belonging' and to build in time for

questions and discussion before moving on to a less familiar mapping exercise. The questionnaire asked participants to rate their 'sense of belonging' to nine different aspects of their learning experience: institution; campus; department; programme; year group; subject/discipline; people met through the course; profession /job role; and workplace. The disadvantages of the Likert scale are its limited response choice and inadequacy in measuring nuanced attitudes, but these are balanced by its familiarity as a survey method, accessibility for participants, and the option of indicating neutral or undecided feelings about a topic or question.

The questionnaire and the mapping exercise complemented each other, and at times compensated for the shortfalls of the other. In two Student Workshops, participants' teaching rooms or buildings were not featured on the campus map. In these instances, the questionnaire provided the primary trigger for discussions, including an exchange of views about how it felt to be 'off the map'.

### **Making maps with data**

#### *Data analysis*

Just as acknowledging multiple perspectives challenges the authority of the map to tell a single story and stress the importance of 'the maker's own participation and engagement with the cartographic process' (Corner 1999, p.229), so it troubles academic conventions which lionise a neutral, rational production of reliable knowledge. A borderland analysis challenges the capacity of a singular paradigm or viewpoint to encompass multiple stories, and modelling data analysis on this principle creates a theoretical and methodological space for dialogue between data which acknowledges tensions as well as synergies.

My data included interview and workshop transcripts, survey responses, document analysis notes, visual materials (maps and photographs), my research journal, and grey literature. It also included informal, impressionistic data, as noted by Stake (2005, p.49). Such a range of data inevitably produces contrasting and contradictory perspectives, but a borderland analysis enables the researcher to 'say yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories' (Lather 2006, p.52) rather than 'being paralyzed by



theoretical limitations or confined by rigid ideological allegiances' (Abes 2009, p.142).

'Great caution and self-awareness must be exercised by the researcher in conducting qualitative data analysis' warn Cohen *et al*, 'for the analysis and findings may say more about the researcher than the data' (2007, p.469). Indeed! I wanted to be as present as possible in the analysis of my data, in the rigorous process of condensing, summarising and interpreting. "Representation is always partial, local and situational and ... our self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it' (Richardson 2007, p.91). I decided against using data analysis software such as NVivo, not simply because I was a novice user, but because while using paper copies and coloured highlighter pens was time, labour and paper-intensive, the tactile and visual process of working through each transcript, map and document, making marks on it and becoming familiar with how it looked on the page maintained and deepened my connection *with* the data, enhancing my ability to make connections *across* the data.

Rather than a purely grounded theory approach, which 'develops ideas through a series of carefully planned steps in a process of inductive theory building based on observation of the data and not on other sources' (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the data analysis process began with the two structuring themes underpinning the borderland analysis: space and power. I trawled systematically through the data generated by each case study to identify illustrations and examples of these themes in multiple contexts. These were grouped into sub-themes with examples from each case study. For example, I highlighted four sub-themes in the overarching theme of space: field, centre, periphery and temporality. Examples were summarised and cross-referenced across staff interview and student workshop transcripts, the questionnaire, mapping, and document analysis data. Further trawls of the data focused on five contextualising themes: the HE sector; the institution and its habitus; part-time study; part-time student identity; and diaspora. I followed the same process as above for each theme. I then considered how retention, retention strategy and belonging were implicated in relationship to the key themes. Throughout this lengthy process, I was continually attempting 'to make sense of my interaction with the data and the politics of creating meaning' (Lather 1991, p.79).

The process of analysis also incorporated memories of my experiences gathering the data at the case study sites. For example, interviews with senior staff generally took place in

pleasant offices in central locations, often with a gatekeeper in the form of a member of the secretarial staff positioned in an outer office. Interviews with academic teaching and support staff generally took place in temporary shared spaces: communal rooms, classrooms, cafés and in hotdesking offices. Several Student Workshops took place in satellite buildings or campuses, and two student interviews were conducted in an otherwise empty building on a Saturday morning. Experiencing individuals' working and learning environments contributed to the analytical process and further enhanced my sense of the spatial.

### *Authorship*

As part of our research agenda, we fashion these accounts into a prose piece; we transform biographical interview and field notes into a sociological text. This stage of the research process requires complex decision-making.

(Richardson 1997, p.26)

The first four chapters of this thesis trod a relatively conventional path through historical and contemporary contexts. They prepared the ground in theoretical and methodological terms. But writing the four case studies involved much more than ordering data into a coherent report. These case study accounts distil multiple experiences, perspectives and voices acquired over time into a continuous narrative framed by concepts of space and power. My own and participants' sense of place and belonging were central to each narrative. In this sense, the thesis reflects tensions between more conventional social science research (and examination requirements) and my own developing identity as researcher/author, strongly drawn to a more literary, narrative style. The result is a series of 'serious fictions' (Gregory 1994) interrogating belonging and integrating the theoretical, methodological and experiential within a narrative dynamic. Each case study account is 'a space of loose ends and missing links' (Richardson 1997, p.12). They appear in the thesis in the order in which they were completed, but the reader is free to choose the sequence in which they read them, to devise their own route through.

My fashioning of each case study account began with the development of a common template to give a broad narrative structure to each account. I initially modelled this on Stake's proposed case study trajectory, which begins with an entry vignette and progresses through issue identification, extensive narrative, issue development, triangulation, and assertions to a closing vignette (1995, p.123). Here was a map, something to help me find

‘an order in things ... get a feeling for their structure’ (Massey 2005, p.106). However, I soon acknowledged that the way I was engaging with my data didn’t fit Stake’s template. The template was too linear and depended too heavily on conventional assumptions of validity. It presented too much of a ‘view from above’, whereas I was concerned to portray the co-existence of multiple trajectories, moments in networks of social relations, a simultaneity of stories-so-far.

I forged a different template, replacing Stake’s experiential entry and closing vignettes with my opening accounts of campus *dérive* and short reflective closing pieces. I substituted a more circular thematic structure for Stake’s linear progression toward assertions. This featured institutional identity; rhetoric and geographies of power; retention strategies and practice; and the lived experiences of mature part-time undergraduates and those who work with them. In my authorial practice, however, I retained Stake’s focus on the particularity of each case, working separately and sequentially on each case study account to reach a final draft stage. Each narrative focuses on ‘the particularity and complexity of a single case in which understanding the case is prioritised over generalising beyond it’ (Stake 1995, p.xii).

Care has been taken to preserve the anonymity of participating institutions and individuals through pseudonyms and generic job titles. The pseudonyms are also a simple narrative device, mimicking the naming conventions of English universities and pinpointing characteristics of each institution as an activity space: their positioning in the English HE sector (New, Elite, Modern); their location (Northern, Eastern); and distinctive aspects of their identity (Ecclesiastical, Metropolitan, City). Particularity in the account is further enhanced by the use of descriptive titles for report sub-sections which prefigure the content of a section or emphasise significant overarching themes. This later became a device I used throughout the thesis.

Richardson writes, ‘I could no longer write in science’s omniscient “voice from nowhere”. I was mute but I knew I was “somewhere”’ (1997, p.3). Writing the case study accounts meant developing an authorial voice congruent with the social, spatial and psychosocial dimensions of my enquiry, one which foregrounded not only my connection as researcher and subject but which articulated multiple perspectives. I drew, to an extent, on Stake’s narrative style – conversational, empathetic and accessible – but Stake strays all too

frequently into a benign paternalism, not an option open or attractive to me. Using campus *dérive* to locate myself within the case study site, I present myself as a newcomer, a visitor, describing impressions and affective connections to the reader, inviting them to interpret the institution through my eyes. I play the role of eavesdropper. I show myself wandering, loitering and sitting in cafés, as well as asking questions, following trails and actively seeking out information. I present myself as an observer, albeit one who is able to demonstrate some authority. Sometimes I note things I think but do not say in interview settings. Sometimes I describe individuals' facial expressions if these enhance or contradict their words, occasionally I remark on perceived personality traits.

As each written case study progresses beyond the *dérive*, it becomes clear to the reader that I am not a casual visitor, but one with privileged access to buildings, information and people. As my understanding of each case study grows I do make tentative judgements and statements. Even so, the case studies depict the provisionality and partiality of my experience as researcher. I allow myself to be unsure, intrigued, surprised – to wonder. I am open about my need to find out more, to ask what's involved. I reflect on questions that occur to me after the interviews and visits are completed. In these ways my authorship reflects a female psychogeographic gaze and allows the territory of this map of data to remain unfixed.

## METHODS ANNEX

Chapter Four, *Methods of Mapping*, focused on the development of a methodological approach which meets the challenges of supporting a borderland analysis of belonging. In common with the other chapters in the first part of the thesis, *Methods of Mapping* adopted a discursive approach, highlighting the evolution of methodology and methods in practice. In the interests of providing an audit trail of my enquiry, this Annex provides case selection and data collection processes and detail. Its positioning between the first and second parts of the thesis enable the reader to refer easily to the detail, without interrupting the thematic and narrative flow of either the opening chapters or the case study accounts.

### 1. Case study selection

The selection process employed a mixed-methods approach, making use of publicly available national and institutional quantitative and qualitative data.

- a) Drawing on Stake's advice (1995) to achieve balance and variety in a multiple case study I asked the following question:

**What can I learn about the impact of retention strategies on mature part-time undergraduates from four English higher education institutions of *varying types* which offer *face-to-face teaching to part-time undergraduate populations of varying size* and which have a '*good*' track record in relation to the retention of that cohort?**

#### Notes

- Face-to-face teaching is the dominant method of part-time delivery in English HE, meaning the findings of a case study focusing on institutions offering this type of provision would apply widely within the sector. It also means the study would exclude the largest part-time provider in England, the Open University.
- To identify a 'good track record' in part-time undergraduate retention, I used the most recently available HESA data on continuation rates and also took into account increases in continuation rates over time (2006/7-2009/10).

- b) Excluding the pilot institution from a total sample of 129 English HEIs offering face-to-face part-time provision, I followed the shortlisting process described in Table 2.

### Table 2 Shortlisting

Establish which of 129 English HEIs offering face-to-face part-time provision have **>150 part-time entrants<sup>1</sup>** to first degrees in the most recent academic year for which data is available:

- 38 (30 per cent) had >150 part-time/mature first degree entrants in the academic year 2009/10 (HESA, 2013) with an overall range of 150-710 including five pre-1992 HEIs.
- I classified the relative size of the part-time undergraduate population into four bands: Small, Medium, Large and Very Large (Table 3).

Establish the parameters of a **'high' retention rate<sup>2</sup>** for part-time entrants in the most recent academic year for which data is available:

In those 38 institutions, overall retention rates for part-time students ranged from 54.4 per cent-87.4 per cent

- Of the 38 HEIs, 16 had retention rates within the upper quartile (79 per cent-87.4 per cent). This included one pre-1992 HEI.
- While a majority of part-time students in English HE are located in post-1992 HEIs, a proportion of pre-1992 HEIs offer part-time first degree provision, and some have a long tradition of doing so. I wanted to include at least one pre-1992 HEI in the four case studies.

Identify those HEIs with **continuously rising retention rates** overall for part-time entrants between 2006/7 and 2009/10:

- 15 of the 16 HEIs had retention rates which had risen overall between academic year 2006/7 and 2009/10.

### Table 3: Classification of part-time student population as percentage of total student population

<sup>1</sup> 90.9 per cent of UK-domiciled, first year, part-time first degree students are 21 years old or over. UCAS defines 'mature' as 'any student aged 21 or over at the start of their studies' (UCAS 2013). Data from HESA non-continuation rates relating to academic years 2006/7-2009/10 (HESA 2013) categorise part-time students into 'under 30', 'over 30' and 'all'. The selection process for this study used the percentage given in HESA Table 3e for 'all' part-time students.

<sup>2</sup> HESA data use continuation as a measure of retention, i.e. number/per cent of part-time students who continue or qualify at the same HEI two years following year of entry. In 2009/10 the sector average for all undergraduates in English HEIs was 61.8 per cent (HESA 2013).

<b>PT Students as per cent Total Student Population</b>	<b>Classification</b>
<b>20 per cent or below</b>	Small
<b>21-35 per cent</b>	Medium
<b>36-50 per cent</b>	Large
<b>50 per cent or above</b>	Very Large

Source: *Which University Guide 2013* and institutional websites

c) The shortlist comprised 15 English HEIs with between n=155 and n=510 part-time first degree entrants. The selection of case study institutions is as described in Table 4.

**Table 4: Final case study selection**

I selected the HEI with the **highest** retention rate for part-time students (87.45 per cent). Its retention rate increased by 14.3 per cent between 2006/7 and 2009/10. This institution fell into the lowest quartile for part-time entrants to first degrees in 2009/10 (190). This HEI was given the pseudonym **New Ecclesiastical**.

I next selected an HEI in the **highest quartile for part-time entrants** to first degrees in 2009/10 and with the **highest retention rate** in this quartile: 80.4 per cent. Its retention rate increased by 4 per cent between 2006/7 and 2009/10. However, this HEI declined to participate in the research. I then approached the institution ranking one below it in terms of numbers of part-time entrants to first degrees in 2009/10 and with a retention rate within the upper quartile. This HEI agreed to participate. This HEI was given the pseudonym **Modern Eastern**.

I then considered the six HEIs falling in the **middle quartiles** in terms of numbers of part-time first degree entrants in 2009/10 and selected an HEI with 360 part-time first degree entrants in 2009/10, the **highest retention rate** (83.9 per cent), with an increase in retention of 10 per cent since 2006/7. This HEI was given the pseudonym **Northern City**.

Finally, I selected the only **pre-1992 HEI** meeting the selection criteria. This HEI had the second highest retention rate, 87.3 per cent, and had seen an increase in retention of 7 per cent since 2006/7. However, this HEI declined to participate in the research. I approached a further two pre-1992 HEIs with retention rates just below the upper quartile whose retention rates had risen overall between the academic years 2006/7 and 2009/10. These HEIs also declined to participate. Finally, I approached a fourth pre-1992 HEI, with retention rates just below the upper quartile, which was also distinct from the other three case study institutions in employing a **bespoke model** for part-time provision. This HEI agreed to participate. This HEI was given the pseudonym **Metropolitan Elite**.



## **2. Gaining access**

Having made the final selection of case study institutions, I made initial contact with a 'gatekeeper' in each case study institution and ascertained that they had the authority to grant me access to the institution, to relevant documentation, and to staff and student participants. I then emailed a formal introduction and request, introducing the research project and outlining the rationale for case selection, confirming that I had received ethical approval, identifying key research methods, and setting out anticipated timings for the fieldwork. I invited my contact to forward the email or recommend contacting an alternative member of staff at the institution, if that was more appropriate. I also offered them the opportunity to discuss the project in more detail in person, by phone or online.

Following permission to proceed, the key contact then identified a secondary contact with whom I liaised throughout the fieldwork process to facilitate site visits, identify interviewees and arrange Student Workshops. An element of snowball sampling (May 2007) also occurred in which 'critical or key informants ... identify or put the researcher in touch with, others who qualify for inclusion and these, in turn, identify yet others' (*ibid.* p.116). This was a useful method in a large, diverse institutional environment and particularly helpful as a means of contacting teaching academic staff for assistance in setting up Student Workshops.

## **3. Document Analysis Protocol**

A document analysis protocol drawing on Prior (2003) was developed and tested through the pilot study. The protocol provided a framework for familiarisation with strategy documentation, but while Sections A-D could be completed as a desk-based, paper exercise, completion of Sections E and F were only possible following site visits and interviews with staff.

**Figure 1: Document analysis protocol**

<b>A. Identification Details</b>	
Document reference	
Title of document	
Document owner	
Date document produced	
Document type	
Number of pages	
<b>B. Background and Context</b>	
What is the history of the document?	
Can I guarantee its authenticity?	
Is it complete/as originally constructed?	
Has it been edited?	
Under what circumstances was it produced?	
Who was/were the author(s)?	
What were they trying to accomplish?	
For whom was the document intended?	
What were the maker's sources of info?	
What was/is the maker's bias?	
Do other documents exist that might shed additional light on this document?	
Are they available/accessible?	

<b>C. Content Analysis I</b>	
<b>Categories</b>	<b>Number of References</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• activity</li> <li>• strategy</li> <li>• student/learner</li> <li>• staff</li> <li>• retention</li> <li>• belonging</li> <li>• institution</li> </ul>	
<b>D. Content Analysis II</b>	
Which groups (subjects/agents) are referenced/represented by these words etc?	
How is this content referenced within the document?	
How do the words/phrases/terms express a particular discourse?	
<b>E. Document Function and Use</b>	
In what context does the document function?	
Where does the document fit into the organisation?	
Who uses the document?	
How is the document used? (practice)	
Is the document used in the way it was intended?	
Who opposes the document?	
<b>F. Further Analysis</b>	
What are the limitations/boundaries of the document?	
What are the key assumptions? How visible (V) or tacit (T)?	
How does it link to other 'fields'?	
How does it structure/categorise the identities of its subjects?	
Is any specialised script used in the document?	
How is the organisation 'performed' through the written document?	
What are the assumptions/aspirations of impact of the document: on PTM students? On staff? On the institution?	

#### 4. Individual interviews with staff

Potential interviewees were classified in four categories:

- senior strategic (pro-vice chancellor or similar)
- senior implementation (faculty or service head, lead or similar)
- teaching academic (lecturer or senior lecturer or similar)
- student support (student services, engagement or similar)

Interviewees were either identified in consultation with my key contact at each case study institution, or through snowball sampling, and individually contacted to arrange a convenient time for the interview to take place. I conducted at least one interview with a member of staff in each category at each case study institution. In total, I conducted 25 interviews, six in three of the case study institutions and seven in the fourth. These were distributed across categories as shown in Table 4.

**Table 5: Staff interviews conducted at each case study institution**

	senior strategic	senior implementation	teaching academic	student support
<b>New Ecclesiastical</b>	1	2	2	2
<b>Metropolitan Elite</b>	2	1	2	1
<b>Modern Eastern</b>	1	2	2	1
<b>Northern City</b>	2	1	2	1

#### *Interview Schedule*

Interviews with staff were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Each interview was taped with a digital recorder and transcribed using Express Scribe software. I developed a generic interview schedule for all staff interviews (see Schedule 1); following the pilot I developed an additional set of questions for interviews with staff participants in the Senior Strategic category (see Schedule 2).

#### **Schedule A: Interview (all staff)**

1. Could you describe your role at (the University) and how it relates to retention?
2. What are the key/unique issues for (the University)/your department in relation to retention of part-time/mature undergraduates?
3. Is there a formal Retention Strategy?
4. If so, how effectively would you say retention strategy is communicated across (the University)/different staff groups?
5. Are there particular groups of students who are harder to retain? Why? Do you think these factors are appropriately addressed within (the University)'s retention work?
6. What do you think makes mature part-time undergraduate students continue with their studies/more vulnerable to withdrawal?
7. If you were able to immediately implement one intervention or change in relation to retention at (the University), what would it be?
8. If I were a student at (the University)/student in your department, how would I experience the Retention Strategy in practice?
9. In your opinion, what interventions are particularly successful? Why?
10. In your opinion, what interventions tend to be less successful at (the University)/in your department?
11. How is success measured?

#### **Schedule B Interview (senior strategic staff)**

1. Could you describe how (the University) is currently positioned in the HE sector?
2. What is the 'story' of retention at (the University)? (If strong retention, why?)
3. What is the relationship of retention with other student agendas at (the University)?
4. Where does responsibility lie for retention within (the University)?
5. What is the role/status of (the University) as a part-time provider?
6. Have part-time enrolments 2012-2013 gone up/down/remained the same?
7. How does (the University) see its role as a part-time provider in the future?
8. Would you say there are parts of (the University) where mature part-time undergraduates are more comfortable than others?
9. Could you tell me something about the different campuses of (the University) – location, characteristics, student/programme profiles?

## 5. Student participation

I ran a total of five Student Workshops and conducted three individual face-to-face interviews with students. Four of the five Workshops took place within a classroom/programme context, either at break/lunchtime or in a designated hour within the teaching schedule; one was scheduled over a lunch hour in a central location and was open to all mature part-time undergraduates across the university. Participants in one Workshop were captive recruits, i.e. the session was attended by all in the cohort. Participants in all other Workshops were self-selecting.

**Table 6: Student participation at each case study institution**

	Workshop	Interview	Total No. participants
New Ecclesiastical	2	0	25
Metropolitan Elite	2	0	55
Northern City	0	3	3
Modern Eastern	1	0	10

### *Student Workshops*

Student Workshops ran for approximately 45 minutes. The programme consisted of:

- completion of a pre-group questionnaire which gathered basic socio-demographic information
- group discussion triggered by a factual statement (differential retention rates between full and part-time students)
- completion of the **Sense of Belonging** questionnaire asking participants to rate their 'sense of belonging' to different aspects of their learning experience (institution/programme/year group/workplace)
- focusing exercise **Mapping Belonging**, either completed individually, in pairs or in small groups
- feedback in plenary

### *Student Interviews*

Individual interviews lasted between 40-50 minutes. Schedule 3 provided a framework of questions, which were adapted to the interviewee's programme, stage of study, personal or professional circumstances, and experiences as a student. Although the interviews with students were conducted with a very limited sample (n=3), they had the advantage of providing a snapshot that would reveal the student perspective in greater detail than in the Workshops.

#### **Schedule C: Interview (student)**

1. Could you tell me something about your experience of studying at (the University) as a part-time student?
2. What motivates you to study here?
3. What are your teaching contact hours? How much time do you spend at (the University) outside those hours? Would you like to spend more?
4. Before coming to study here, when was the last time you were involved in formal education?
5. If circumstances were different, how likely is it that you would have preferred to study full-time? Earlier in life?
6. How do you identify yourself? As a student? Employee? Parent? Etc.
7. To what extent do you use campus facilities/services/other campuses?
8. Can you describe your experiences of using any of the campus facilities/services? (E.g. Learning Centre, cafes, social learning spaces, bars, student advice services).
9. Could you describe any particular times when it has felt difficult to continue with your study and you may have felt like withdrawing or taking a break?
10. Could you tell me about any individuals or services that are particularly supportive/unhelpful?

*Student Data*

**Table 7: Participant data (all cases)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Prefer Not to Say</b>			
	53	5	0			
<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 5</b>		
	36	1	19	2		
<b>Age</b>	<b>18-21</b>	<b>22-30</b>	<b>31-40</b>	<b>41-50</b>	<b>50+</b>	<b>prefer not to say</b>
	1	18	21	11	5	2

**NOTES**

91% of student participants were female, 9% were male.

62% of student participants were in their first year of study (but participating after the noted 'pinch points' for student withdrawal ie: end of first term/semester and end of first year. 32% were in their third year of study.

31% of student participants were aged between 22-30; 36% between 31-40; 18% between 41-50.



**Table 8: Sense of Belonging Questionnaire Responses**

Please rate your sense of belonging to the following, from (0-5) :

RATING	University	Campus	Degree Course	Department	Year Group	Subject/ Discipline	People Met through Course	Profession/ Job Role	Workplace
0	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
1	5	4	4	4	3	2	0	1	1
2	11	3	2	3	2	5	0	2	3
3	17	15	8	17	7	15	8	8	7
4	17	20	28	23	25	20	25	22	21
5	7	14	16	11	22	15	23	22	22

**KEY**

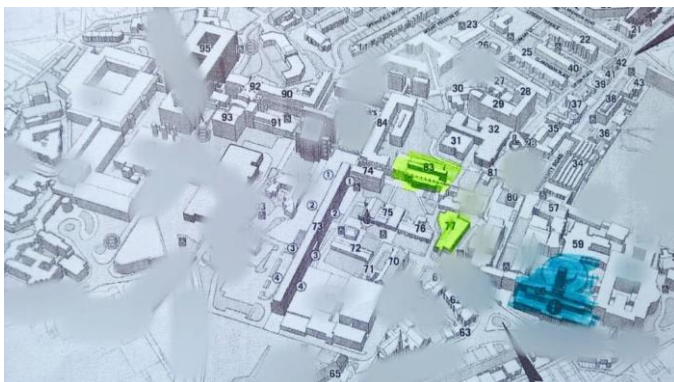
0: No sense of belonging at all/out of place; 1: Very weak (awkward/uncomfortable); 2: Weak (less than comfortable); 3: Neither weak nor strong (comfortable enough/neutral); 4: Strong (comfortable); 5: Very strong (very comfortable/at ease).

**NOTES**

‘People Met Through Course’ were rated most highly, followed by ‘Year Group’, ‘Profession/Job Role’ and ‘Degree Course’.

‘University’ was rated lowest, followed by ‘Campus’ and ‘Department’.

**Figure 2: Mapping Belonging: limited use of campus space**



Yellow areas indicate 'belonging', blue 'uncomfortable'. This participant was not familiar with the rest of the campus

**Figure 3: Mapping Belonging: Mixed feelings**



Pink areas indicate 'belonging', green 'not belonging'. The Learning Centre is striped, indicating mixed feelings depending on when this participant used the facility.

**Figure 4: Mapping Belonging: Off the map**



Participant's contact time took place 'off the map' (see arrow), they had never visited the campus.

## ***A SIMULTANEITY OF STORIES-SO-FAR***

### **CHAPTER FIVE: NEW ECCLESIASTICAL**

#### **Starting Points**

On my train journey to New Ecclesiastical's City campus, I pass through three stations with 'International' after their place name. On my arrival, trilingual street signs and flocks of international students sustain an impression of a liminal, outward-facing zone, quite in contrast to the ancient architectural character of the city. As I walk from the station into the city centre, young people stream towards me, infusing the place with an incongruously chaotic, eclectic energy. Street signs and tourist markers promote the city's authentic 'heritage' identity, but global capitalism is gleefully at play among the relics. The retail is relentless: pound shops jostling with fast food and charity shops near the station; national chains, more upmarket boutiques and restaurants crowding the narrow streets nearer the centre. As I near my destination, I pass a group of homeless men drinking coffee outside McDonald's in the last of the sunshine.

\*

On a bright sunny morning in early spring, I enter the main site of City campus through an ancient stone arch. It's not yet ten o'clock and the campus is quiet; the city centre feels a world, rather than five minutes, away. Low-rise buildings are arranged in a series of interconnecting courtyards with small green spaces, cloistered and contained. A contemporary chapel spire dominates the modest campus skyline. I come upon a cafe, buy a coffee and take a seat, looking out towards a grassy rectangle and an ornamental water feature. Two men are chatting at the next table, one a chaplain in dog collar, jeans, earstud, with an iPad. I can't help but overhear. The chaplain says, 'For me this is my parish, thousands of students. We worship every day, sometimes it's just me, but every day we shroud this place in prayer. That is my job'.

Just after ten o'clock, people begin moving across the courtyards and past the water feature, thronging the café. Noise levels rise. It's difficult to tell which of the older people in the café are now students and which might be staff. I wonder how many of the students in this now busy café are part-time. Young White females with local accents predominate.

Two young Black men wearing tracksuits walk by outside, deep in conversation, marked out by their gender and ethnicity.

\*

Another sunny, sharp day. From my vantage point in the library, I look out across staircases and walkways beneath a soaring atrium to glass-walled staff offices, several stories deep. People are moving about on the stairs; conversations are taking place on the landings between and in the lobby below. I'm suddenly reminded of the seven stairways of Escher's *Relativity* (1953), his depiction of an idyllic community ... in which the laws of gravity do not apply. Here in the library it's airy, light and open-plan, with small clusters of PCs, group working spaces, sofas and stools in pink, orange, purple, red. Students move the furniture around to suit their needs, creating bespoke study habitats, taking control of the space. If IKEA designed a library, it would be like this.

### **The Story of ...**

The starting point of *this* story is New Ecclesiastical's strong performance in retention. The university regularly scores above benchmark, and bucks the national trend in that its retention of part-time students is higher than for full-time. The university also scores highly for student satisfaction in the National Student Survey (NSS). 'We're a middle-sized university with a caring community feel – and a vocational focus', a member of the Senior Executive tells me. 'On the whole, we feel that our part-time students are doing rather well. We always like to do better but ... they seem to be able to stay'. Community is important to New Ecclesiastical. It is an essential element of its Christian identity and distinctiveness; and the university still articulates a collegiate story in its mission and values. The evolution of New Ecclesiastical from a small teacher-training college to a mid-sized, multi-campus, modern university is part of a wider story of massification and widening participation in English HE. New Ecclesiastical occupies the edges of the field, a newcomer to the university club, not just in relation to England's ancient and red brick institutions, but also in comparison with the first post-1992 universities. With a professional/vocational programme offered alongside a modular scheme and an average UCAS entry tariff in the lower echelons, the institution currently ranks in the lower quartile of a basket of national league tables.

I interview a senior executive in her spacious office, high in the glass-walled building. Her assistant protects us from casual visitors, on guard in the buffer zone of her own office.

The university is proud both of its origins and of its journey to university title, she tells me, and of its public service ethos, underpinned by Church Foundation status. I recall the chaplain's words, the view of the chapel spire from my seat in the café, and the students who had flooded in. A modern, accessible university with a distinct female gender bias in a traditional, patriarchal space. Distinct trajectories; a co-existing heterogeneity. In a later interview, a senior faculty staff member says of City campus's main site, 'It's a lovely feel. This is very cosy. When people come for open days they immediately feel it would be easy to belong here. It doesn't get much nicer than this'. Is that the reason for the trend-busting statistics for part-time retention at New Ecclesiastical?

'It's in the lifeblood of this institution to recruit mature and part-time [students], and therefore it has become second nature to us to make sure that we're set up for them', says the senior executive. 'In 2000 over 50 per cent of our students were part-time'. But partnerships with the education and health sectors, among others, have made New Ecclesiastical vulnerable in a climate of higher fees and declining employer sponsorship. In 2014, part-time students account for less than 30 per cent of its substantially increased student population. 'Yes, our part-time population has gone down in numbers, even though we are much bigger as an institution. ... We're not out of line with the sector, in fact we're slightly better than the sector, but it's extremely hard in the part-time market'.

As New Ecclesiastical's institutional identity has evolved, its student cohorts have diversified and its campus network has grown. It currently operates on four campus sites: City, Urban, Coastal and Country, City being the largest of the four and acknowledged as the 'main' campus. City campus is definitively *of* the city; it has a dispersed estate located around the edges of the historic central precinct. The functions – of teaching and learning, administration, the library, and student services and student social life – are located on three separate sites, a ten- to fifteen-minute walk apart, meaning that New Ecclesiastical's students and staff constantly cross the city's spaces to learn, work, eat, drink, play and sleep. In contrast, its nearest pre-1992 neighbour, on which it used to depend for degree awarding powers, sits self-contained, outside the city boundary.

The activity space of New Ecclesiastical is intimately bound to its host city. It plays the role of friendly occupier, energetically publicising the financial benefits and opportunities it

brings both to city and region, not least to disadvantaged communities, as well as to its graduates, whose employment rates six months after graduation are over 90 per cent. It is networked to its locality through social and economic relationships operating across spatial scales; it is an extroverted place. As student numbers continue to grow, the university is incrementally and opportunistically extending its reach within the limited space, acquiring land and property in the city centre and building new student residences and facilities in order to meet the demands not only of a growing student population, but also those students' expectations of 'the traditional, expected, undergraduate experience'. Indicating her office in the glassy new build, the senior executive says, 'We wanted an iconic space here in the city. This building gives us that presence; it's got the wow factor'.

The Vice-Chancellor's office is located on the main site of City campus, not far from the water feature and the chapel. But over the course of my visits, I come to think of the building with the wow factor as the real centre of power: New Ecclesiastical's command and control centre. Although multi-functional and used by students, the higher floors of the building are closed off to them, and it is here that the policies, regulations, targets and monitoring performed by external bodies, including the government and its proxies, are absorbed and interpreted, implemented and devolved. An intricate geometry of power lines, pulses and currents reach from the outside in, and drive internal priorities, strategy and practice, including those in relation to retention.

What happens next? In theory, strategy is disseminated from the centre through a hierarchical network extending across the City campus and to the three satellite campuses, from the executive into faculties and services, from faculty and service executives to departments, and from departments to programmes. Senior staff are keen to stress the consultative nature of strategy development at New Ecclesiastical. 'We make sure that when we agree a strategy, it's agreed with the faculties, [which are] able to bring a bottom up perspective as well as a top down perspective', one says. I follow the trail deeper into the institution, interviewing a faculty executive whose role it is to mediate between the university's administrative centre and the faculties. We sit in her office in one of the modest low-rise buildings near the back of the main City campus site. 'Whatever the university does at university level, at the moment there's no way of it filtering down into all the faculties'. It appears that horizontal communication across faculties, departments and services is equally problematic. 'In this institution, we're not good at shouting loud about

good practice. It goes on in little pockets; it doesn't necessarily come out. Not just our own practice: there's lots of other things going on'. A member of the academic staff in a different faculty articulates the challenge of implementing wider departmental responsibilities beyond his programme role: 'It's partly my job to disseminate these things, but it's difficult to disseminate stuff and get strategies going if everyone's so busy'.

### **What works?**

New Ecclesiastical's retention strategy is closely aligned with a raft of other university initiatives, and, in placing 'student-centred learning and teaching at the heart of retention and success' (*ibid*), it conforms with generic student experience, engagement and satisfaction agendas dominating the HE sector. It also adopts, wholesale, the discourse of belonging articulated in *What Works* (2012), to the extent of prefacing its strategy objectives and action plan with direct quotes from the report: 'a sense of belonging in HE significantly informs a student's subsequent decisions to stay and then to succeed. The first year of a programme needs to be designed to promote this'. The strategy document sets objectives and a timeframe within which measurements can be taken and reported on internally and externally. A detailed action plan underpins an ambitious approach, but the changing external environment can work against it. Massey's space-time, always in flux. The senior executive tells me, 'We've set ourselves an incredibly stretching target figure ... most of the students you lose, you lose in the first year, so if you grow your first year, as happened for us in 11-12, you're not going to hit that target'.

I interview the institutional lead for retention. He says, 'We should be having a consistent performance. ... We do have groups that we know we have to do better with'. The strategy document identifies a number of 'target groups' at whom specific activities should be targeted. When I ask who these target groups are, he lists students of BME origin (lower rates of retention) and male students in Education (under-represented). Mature part-time undergraduates are not a target group. New Ecclesiastical's retention rate for mature part-time undergraduates is good. The senior executive nods: 'There's not a lot specifically targeted on that group at a central level. ... We haven't had particular issues around mature students or ... part-time students with retention'. In fact, their presence in the strategy document is negligible: the phrase 'part-time' occurs once, the word 'mature' not at all.

Of the retention strategy, he says, 'There was a broad consultation that went through delivery groups, working groups, committees, boards ... it had the full range'. But then he tells a story of disrupted power lines. 'Once you've got a strategy, then the question you're really asking is, how does it find its way out? If it isn't put in front of people in some forum where it's given some gravitas or incentive, then nobody chooses to go browsing around our strategies'. In the past, New Ecclesiastical has used Faculty Widening Participation and Retention committees to facilitate strategy dissemination and implementation. 'Those have fallen away and the emphasis on a formal response has been lost'. My visits coincide with a corporate rethink, including the prospect of re-operationalising those committees and putting resources into a role which will 'take retention and success agendas backwards and forwards between the centre and the faculty. Because that's always the divide'.

I ask a faculty senior executive: 'If I were to ask a lecturer in this department about the retention strategy, what would they say?' She smiles. 'They'd probably be aware there was one, but they wouldn't know where to find it and they wouldn't know how what they do relates into it. They'd just think the top line figures: how many students have they lost?' 'Are you aware of an institutional retention strategy?' I ask a programme tutor. He makes a face. 'I probably should be. If I'm brutally honest, no. We do talk a lot about recruitment though, because we have to get bums on seats'. So, in his opinion, does the retention strategy as it stands address the issues of retention? 'No, I don't think so. I think that's top level'. Institutional strategy is predicated on retention as a shared responsibility; its implementation is devolved to faculties and services, but the paper document all but disappears once it drops below the executive parapet to programme level. Its contents transmute into fuzzy corporate imperatives, an intangible management tool demanding top-line figures.

The retention strategy proposes a university-wide implementation of a personal tutoring system intended to support induction, progression and success. The institutional lead for retention explains: 'What we want is the personal academic tutors to be picking up on those agendas, aware of the tutor group that they've got in front of them. Understanding their situation ... if we can get the personal tutoring system in place with that sense of belonging paramount in their minds and the attendant interventions that we've put in place ... it would go a long way towards meeting a broad set of needs. I think it would tick a lot of the boxes for target groups, including part-time'.



However, the system presents significant logistical challenges. I interview two programme directors in different faculties. One tells me, 'I've got a list of personal tutees – I haven't seen any of them. I'm just too busy. The first year was maybe twenty-five students, now it's more than doubled, so you've got a large student body. And in the past, when it was smaller, I did set up things, and half of them didn't turn up anyway'. The other says, 'For my programme, I looked at this and thought, now how are we going to manage this? Do we give a group of students' names to a member of staff who they might not actually ever meet? Are there hours attached to it in workload planning? No'. Both interviewees express dissatisfaction with the imposition of a universal policy in a context where local arrangements had already evolved to meet particular programme needs. One says, 'I think we've always dealt with issues, and students have always felt that they could talk to the people who were in front of them. It seems that the policy is pushing this notion of support of academic work. Which, ok, that's fine, but it tends to be, for our students, personal issues that need the support. ... What I would say, certainly the evaluations I get back, the one thing that keeps coming up is that they are very happy with the level of support that they get, they feel that there is support there'.

The other says, 'I have to kind of nod and agree to it [the personal tutoring system], but I don't think it works. And really, effectively, if a student has a problem, they'll come and see me'. He's also concerned that his skills don't match the requirements of the role: 'Most of the time, the reason students come to see me or contact me, is for academic reasons. The problem with personal tutorials is that it's forcing on us a counselling role and we're not counsellors. When the programme was smaller and I would try and see students, you'd say, is everything ok with your home life, are you getting on with your friends? And I'd think – this is not my job! I'm not trained to do this. I've had students come in and say, "I miss my boyfriend". What am I supposed to say?'

In his story, the cascading of strategy via a neat, hierarchical network has become instead a battle between two combatants, academic and administrative. 'My cynical side will say that these non-academic centres are very distant from what actually happens at the chalk face ... they're all saying you need to do this and you need to do that. ... I think they make proposals without realising what's really going on. There's an enormous amount of bureaucracy which we have to be part of'. Even in this newest of new universities there is a nostalgia for Bourdieu's elite, separate universe and a resistance to heteronomy. This

interviewee suspects a tacit agenda: 'We've been told we must adhere to the policy! I think everything now revolves around the student satisfaction survey, it's the mantra by which we, you know ...' His sentence remains unfinished.

One department has integrated the personal tutor system into a unilateral approach to improving retention figures. 'One of the things we've introduced in the department in the last three years, because we didn't have good retention, is a ten credit Orientation to Higher Education module which runs in the first term up until Christmas ... students in groups of no more than 10 with their personal tutor sit for an hour and do all the 'what is it you're scared about at university, what do you expect? As well as all the study skills type things'. I ask about the outcome. 'Our retention rate has increased incredibly. Our current third years, they've been in that small group, they've got to know a tutor very well over a concentrated period of time. Just that sort of contact ... has helped with retention. It's been very successful, and other programmes are starting to think they might do that as well. Logistically it's a nightmare ... luckily the timetabling people are fantastic. What it comes down to is the amount of time you can allocate to looking where the problems are, talking to the students, pinning it down really early on. It's all about time, more time with students'.

### **The odd programmes**

I ask a programme director to describe the typical student profile on the modular Humanities degree programme. 'Young, 19, 20, British. We've got what we call young mature students, in mid-to-late 20s, 30s, we get a few of those, but they're not a generation apart. We're very dominated by full-time'. Another Social Sciences academic says, 'Part-time students in this department are a very, very small percentage, probably less than two per cent. They basically do each year in half a year. It's not very friendly. But the ones we have tend to be mature, to be very dedicated and do very well'. This is a familiar tale: mature part-time undergraduates on the margins of the majority, studying at a different pace, exceeding expectations.

In contrast, mature part-time undergraduates are the majority on Nursing, Allied Health and some Education programmes. 'Predominantly more mature women, between 30 and 50 with families ... relatively few men ... and relatively few youngsters but we're seeing that gently increase', says a programme manager in Education. 'A lot of them are what I'd

called women returners', the senior executive explains. 'They want to be a nurse, they want to be a radiographer, they want to be an occupational therapist, they want to be a social worker. They've got a particular identity as largely vocational. They are primarily our population at Urban campus'.

There are widely differential funding arrangements between part-time students. I discover that it's quite common to have fully supported students who are being paid by their employer for the day, sitting next to somebody who is funding themselves and losing a day's pay. 'I think mature and part-time students find it very difficult', says a manager in the Students' Union. 'They have so many other things going on in their lives, I'm not sure we fully support them. Counselling and support services are quite tailored towards young full-time students; there aren't many resources focused on children and the hidden costs of a course. In the first few weeks we probably should do more as a university, to listen to them, to advise them. Target our resources at that point in time'. The retention lead says, 'Arrival and orientation is a problematic area for them. Very often they tend to miss out. I'm sure they're invited but we don't make anything special for them and I think very many of them don't really engage in these sorts of events. I think for part-time students the whole business of getting going is really quite problematic and it's a bit hit and miss. I would guess that they're almost always on the back foot in a way, and that's made up for by the care and attention from the programme staff'.

The professional motivation and efforts of programme staff to support part-time mature students have served New Ecclesiastical well to date. A programme director agrees: 'Tutors are very good, Skyping and phone calls and Facetime or whatever. Increasing use of that sort of technology which can help our students'. But if peripherality is an integral element of part-time mature student identity, it also characterises the work of programme staff. Teaching twilights and weekends 'raises a whole load of other issues for staff, and sustainability of staff', he says. 'Where does that stop? Are we all going to be nocturnal creatures, moles scurrying around...?' He's laughing, but emphasises his point with an anecdote. 'We seem to be lone voices; I've been invited onto a couple of review panels and, as somebody described it, "Oh you're here to talk about the odd programmes"'. This attitude seems incongruous in a young university like New Ecclesiastical, with its ethos of inclusion. It's as if the newer models of the academy cannot escape a traditional institutional habitus. 'The battles I have as programme director with the university through

central services are still trying to explain that our students don't follow a traditional academic year or an official university day ... we do feel we're banging our head against a brick wall. Why are we still doing that?'

'If one team of people would talk to part-time mature students ... they could identify patterns and all sorts', the Students' Union manager tells me. 'Then they would be able to think strategically. The university says that the student experience is everyone's responsibility. But no one collates the data'. She says the Students' Union lobbied for increased flexibility in university policies on matters such as assessments, implementing Turnitin (an online plagiarism checking service). 'They were very full-time specific, but I think we made them a bit more flexible. Now it's about whether the academics are putting them into practice. That's another matter'. In general, she feels the emphasis in the Students' Union is on activities which appeal to young full-time home students. 'The sort of services and events we offer seem to drift towards young people who only have their degree to do at this moment in time. Those things don't appeal to mature students, and part-time students are very likely to miss them. We do want them to have a New Ecclesiastical identity, but ... we do tend to forget a bit about them. The sabbatical officers tend to be young full-time students, so it's difficult for them to understand the issues. When you get a part-time or mature student to run for any leadership position, you definitely put them on the map. Then that thinking starts getting implemented. The difficulty is to make them run to begin with'.

### **Cold blue line**

New Ecclesiastical campuses are distinguished not only by size and location, but by the nature of their provision and the student demographic they attract. 'City is definitely seen as the main hub. City students probably think of it as the only campus. It's very unlikely they've visited the other campuses', the Student Union manager tells me. 'Coastal is tailored towards younger students, and is very difficult to cater for because they're asking for the same experience as in City, which is impossible'. The senior executive agrees. 'Satisfaction levels in the NSS are not as high at Coastal. The students are much more vociferous about wanting a comparable experience to what they've got here at City. At the moment we haven't got a differentiated fee but we're looking at that. There's a real difference between our students at Urban campus and our Coastal students wanting to be

a New Ecclesiastical student and wear the sweatshirt'. She's referring to the university-branded sweatshirts, on sale in campus shops in every English university. A visible trigger of belonging.

'Urban is quite different. It's quite successful', the Students' Union manager says. 'The courses attract a majority of part-time and mature students and the services are better tailored. But what the students there want – no one can put a finger on, ever! We try hard to engage hard with them and quite a lot of the time they tell us they don't want what we're offering. What they seem to want most is a social space where they can bring their children and dependents and identify with other people who are going through the same things. You'd have to jump through a lot of hoops to make that happen. But for some mature students, the fact we've communicated with them is engagement enough. So I think defining 'engagement' is key. People want different things'.

An inconsistency emerges between the single story of retention and belonging in the New Ecclesiastical Retention strategy and staff members' perceptions of belonging as it applies to mature part-time students. The senior executive team member says, 'It's been shown its got the greatest impact on retention if students get this sense of belonging, but ... it may not be something that particularly applies to part-time mature students who don't have so much of that sense of *I need to feel I am part of this* and so on...'. She feels continued motivation is more important than belonging for these students. 'With part-time, it's how do you keep the motivation for their wanting to continue to engage in this level of study when they've got their domestic arrangements, their family arrangements, if they're working full-time at the same time? There's a massive incentive, that their employers expect it and therefore for their employment reasons they're going to stay with it. I would have thought that was hugely part of why they would continue. Probably more so than other things we're doing, although I wouldn't want to underestimate those'. One of the programme staff I interview is dismissive: 'We're just something they do, like doing a yoga class on Thursday night ... belonging doesn't really work for them. For me the issues with them would be more to do with how they can fit their professional lives into what we do, how they can find space and time'.

I go to see Urban campus for myself. I board a bus from the train station and travel through traffic-choked streets lined with buildings hinting at ruined grandeur. The bus is crowded with school children of multiple ethnicities; even their noisy, energetic chatter is swamped by the metal clatter of contemporary life. This area was once a vital hub of movement and trade, a centre of migration. New Ecclesiastical's Urban campus is concealed behind an imposing gateway, on a redeveloped military site. Another heritage setting, it is surprisingly leafy and peaceful despite being surrounded by a busy trunk road.

I give out campus maps and coloured pens to a group of first year mature part-time undergraduates. I ask them to indicate with different colours the places on campus where they feel they 'belong' and those places where they don't. We use the terms 'hot spots' and 'cold spots' as a shorthand. One stares at the map, then exclaims, 'Is it that big? I've only ever been in two buildings on this campus. Are we allowed in that sports hall?' The 'hot spots' are limited to the classroom and the library. A student with an hour-long commute to campus comments, 'The only thing I've seen is the train station and my walk here from the bus stop'. Another shrugs, 'I've got so much stuff needs doing at home, why would I want to spend any more time here than I need to?' Multiple professional and personal commitments shape students' interaction with the campus. 'Placement rips people out for vast swathes of time', observes a senior manager. 'And at Urban, we know even if they're full time, let's say on the Health programmes, they only hit the campus when they have to, and then they're off. Part-time students can't just drift in. They tend to be based off-site and not hang around'. He is complimentary about staff teaching mature part-time undergraduates on vocational programmes. 'There's a very strong understanding of the context and environment in which those people are working. In the programmes where they have that particular demographic, I think we're fortunate in that they have very dedicated, very experienced, talented teachers who really make it work for those people'.

I run another Student Workshop at City campus. The students are taught in a satellite building some miles away from the main campus. It takes ten minutes by car on a fast road to reach the building, a pleasant, detached, multipurpose centre, badged with the university logo. I give the students a City campus map, but their building doesn't feature on it. Some students draw it on the edge of the sheet of paper; some use arrows to indicate its location. One student rings the entire main campus site in blue. 'I've just said

'cold' for the whole thing because I don't even know where it is'.

In both workshops, the majority of students indicate that the places where they feel they belong are their classroom buildings and the library, although in the discussion triggered by the exercise one student says, 'I've been to the library a few times but I think people look at me and think, "Who's that old person over there?"!' A female student of a similar age complains, 'I studied for two years at Coastal campus before coming here. I felt so detached; we were just off to the side rather than in the hub and the hustle and bustle. Out here we're kind of on the side as well'. A male student in his twenties says, 'We're only here one day a week; it's difficult to make those bonds. I don't think they've necessarily done anything wrong, but it's just somewhere I come to once a week. We do get emails, like about sports, but you wouldn't go. Imagine turning up and not being part of it!'. It's a pragmatic position, but one lacking a sense of entitlement to the extra-curricular facilities of the university.

The amount of time part-time students has to spend *on* campus limits the spaces they occupy *in* it. That ten- to fifteen-minute walk between buildings at City campus suddenly seems a real inconvenience in an inflexible schedule. This is acknowledged by a programme director: 'When part-time students come in they're probably only here for actual contact, and there's that thing, parking, and there isn't time to go to the library and back again. That's why the use of e-journals and e-books has overtaken hard copy. Easily'. A member of staff responsible for enrichment activities at the university comments, 'Engaging in the extra-curricular stuff is quite hard for students with childcare, or a job, or who don't live close to the university. But if you've got an established life and established identity, maybe it's not so upsetting if you don't feel that involved?' One student sums up her 'student experience' thus: 'It's every Monday, five sessions per module, six modules, thirty Mondays'.

Asked to rate their 'sense of belonging' on a scale of 0-5, the university and the campus are rated lowest overall; students rate their year group and people they have met through their course the highest. I ask a programme director for his response. He nods. 'If you talk about being part of this university – not so much. But there's a strong cohort identity. Usually, the constant is the group and whatever's happening in the group and the variable is the tutor, possibly six different tutors in the year. We tend to see that the cohorts are

very supportive of each other, and that fosters that 'belonging' within that group. They want to graduate with their cohort'.

Does a strong cohort identity replace or perhaps compensate for the mismatch with the institutional story of 'belonging'? The programme director who oversees cohorts in five separate locations replies, 'We have gone where the demand is, but it's always subject to viable cohorts. Next year, for the first time, there'll be quite a lot of moving about because we've had to combine groups'. I am reminded of the fragile economic stability of part-time programmes in the current climate. I have a sense of people moving about on the margins, rarely seen. 'But where groups have come together, most of the groups are very supportive and welcoming to new people', he adds. Teaching often takes place in twilight and Saturday sessions. 'The timetabling is led by non-traditional – whatever that is any more – non-traditional students requesting it or not being able to be released from work for a day. So we've reacted in that way and they've been very popular'. Such flexibility is effective in satisfying demand, but at what cost to cohort identity?

The Student Workshop at the City campus satellite building involves a group of ten students who are part of one of those newly reconstituted cohorts. During the Workshop it emerges that there are two distinct sub-groups here, that they are sitting on opposite sides of the classroom, have different professional specialisms and do not know each other's names. 'There were nine of us who'd been together for two years; we're now split; four of us have come here', a student from one side tells me. 'The other four have gone to Urban because they couldn't do this day of the week'. 'Because we're part-time, they tend to move us about', says a representative from the other side. Another individual, not historically part of either sub-group, announces, 'I've been studying here four years; this is my fourth group'. I close the workshop by suggesting they introduce themselves to one another, which they do, amiably enough...

'Their alignment is really with their professional group, their Nursing cohort and so on', the senior executive member says. 'And when they go into hospitals they'll be very proud to be wearing their university uniform as trainee health professionals; from that point of view they would see themselves as part of this university'. She argues that for those on vocational degree programmes, alignment with a professional identity compensates for limited temporal and physical engagement with the campus. 'They know why they're



there. They're not doing this just for HE ... they have a very definite target'. Those involved in teaching the students recognise the tenacity required in the workplace itself. 'There is perhaps a notion that some of them are fighting against some of their workplace colleagues' views of them – that they're not students, that because of the work-based element they're not doing a proper degree', a programme manager says. 'I think they put up with quite a lot of that'. Professional identities require negotiation too.

### **Binaries and border crossings**

After the Student Workshop at Urban Campus, I sit in a café looking out to a grassy verge and a line of parked cars. I sip coffee and mentally list binaries. Mature part-time students are historically significant to the university but are currently shrinking in number, occupying a significant space in the institution's sense of itself, but only a small percentage of its campus. Successfully retained, but invisible within institutional retention strategy. Strong cohort identities, but fragmentation of part-time cohorts. Belonging as critical to retention, but not for mature part-time students. The uniform statement of belonging in the retention strategy and the 'cold' blue line around the campus map.

The mature part-time undergraduates I meet at New Ecclesiastical study beyond conventional institutional boundaries, both temporal and geographical. Some of them are literally off the map. Many, if not all, occupy liminal spaces, crossing borders between professional, personal and academic identities on a daily basis. The work of 'retention', of 'making it work' for mature part-time students, takes place in these borderlands, at the interface between institution and individual, between universalising strategy and unique lived experiences.

**CHAPTER SIX: METROPOLITAN ELITE**

**You are here**

Metropolitan Elite sits adjacent to the grey hulk of the city hospital, two pillars of a civilised society occupying a vantage point above the considerable grandeur of this city's centre. Of the city but not in the city. The university campus is vast, largely pedestrianised, and bounded by car parks and grid-referenced campus maps announcing: YOU ARE HERE. Its buildings tell stories of patronage and influence, of architectural history: Art Deco Portland stone cheek by jowl with red brick elegance and blocky modern structures. Almost all are more instantly appealing than the Brutalist concrete monolith in the centre of the campus, which reminds me of the condemned deck access flats I lived in as a university student thirty years ago in a different city. I have never been here before, but the bleak, grey concrete and the insistent drizzle make the campus feel instantly familiar.

At nine-thirty on a Monday morning, the rain adds purpose to people's stride. I have an appointment in a contemporary addition to the university estate: an airy, angular building near the campus's eastern edge and its iconic entrance building. It's a few minutes' walk from a busy street along which buses run, and where a line of shops and cafes service a constant appetite for coffee, crisps and sandwiches. Some, though by no means all, of Metropolitan Elite's part-time mature students are based in the airy, angular building, close enough to the edge of campus to find without getting lost in the maze; close enough to get out again, quick. The street remains visible from windows to the north, while to the south, higher floors offer a view of another of the city's universities, a post-1992. These institutions may co-exist in the urban landscape, but they're neighbours, not competitors. Metropolitan Elite is a research-intensive Russell Group university.

Later that day, after my meetings, I wander inside the Students' Union building. The exterior is low-rise, forties red brick – again a throwback to my own 'student experience', but I'm startled by the interior, which has been gutted to create an open plan, double height, flexible space with a colourful contemporary décor. Most of the occupants appear to be in their late teens

or early twenties, and I'm suddenly conscious of my own (middle) age. I recall a conversation I had earlier that day with a member of staff. She told me that some part-time and mature undergraduates, most living locally, start their university studies a week ahead of Freshers Week, with a gentle introduction to the campus. The students are encouraged to find their feet, to explore; but, having tentatively begun to do so, Freshers' Week arrives and 'their' campus is suddenly invaded by 'hordes of young, triple-A students'. Feeling outnumbered and displaced, the part-timers retreat to the safety of *their* building. It's a diasporic dynamic with a reverse twist: the minority of locals positioned by majority 'migrants' who effortlessly claim a better cultural fit with the spaces of the university.

Not having anywhere to retreat to, I sit for a while and people-watch. My self-consciousness dissipates as I realise I need not worry about feeling out of place. I am not noteworthy in this environment, I am invisible.

### **A centre on the edge**

In the arena of English HE, Metropolitan Elite is an elite athlete, performing well against national and global competition, attracting investment: a valuable brand. Rooted in the wealth of the city fathers, Metropolitan Elite has no shortage of applications for its degree programmes, despite entry requirements in the upper echelons of the UCAS tariff. It performs strongly in the league tables that matter: student satisfaction, degree outcomes, graduate employment. Not untypically for a Russell Group institution, Metropolitan Elite has high retention rates. 'Retention is not seen as an issue here. I don't mean that it's a matter of carelessness', a senior manager in the Hub explains. 'The university strategies are more articulated in terms of the excellence of the student experience than about the avoidance of people leaving'.

The reason I've come to Metropolitan Elite is to investigate an endangered species of part-time provision, which I'll call the Hub. The Hub's creation was one of the first acts of a new Vice-Chancellor. I learn that it grew out of a restructuring driven by twin forces: the shape-shifting of continuing education and part-time HE within the sector and OFFA's requirement for those universities charging over £6000 a year in tuition fees to spell out their provision for under-represented groups. One of the Hub's senior managers tells me that 'the deal for the Hub within this research intensive university is to support the

university's diversification of its student body. One of the ways the university chooses to do that for mature and part-time learners is to have a unit like ours, which has them at its heart'. The Hub's teaching provision includes bespoke part-time degrees and Foundation year programmes (full and part-time) from which students progress to conventional degrees elsewhere in the university. One Foundation programme is specifically aimed at mature learners who fulfil widening participation (WP) criteria: 'the first people in the family to go to university, in low-income employment or non-employment ... they've maybe started their GCSEs very late in life', a programme leader informs me.

The Hub's co-location with the Vice-Chancellor's office in a new build was no coincidence. 'When we were first set up, we were in a series of old buildings further down the campus ... you could easily miss it and we shared it with another service', says the director. 'It was a political and strategic decision to recognise the importance of this area of work ... we were included within the discussions about what the building would look like and where we would be located within it'. Who occupies this universe? Not the majority of Metropolitan Elite's student population: young and full-time, with a fistful of starry A-levels, wealthy in educational and social capital. Nearly 60 per cent of the Hub's students are from WP background; 28 per cent are from BME backgrounds; and 19 per cent have a recorded disability.<sup>3</sup> 'Our students are those who don't naturally see this as their home', the senior manager says. Fish out of water, then? 'We'll be typically working not only with mature learners but often ... those with low participation backgrounds, returners of one kind or another ... people without formal qualifications', he tells me. 'Some of our learners have wrestled and continue to wrestle with lives that are quite challenging; they may not be in very straightforward circumstances ... and it might be bound up with their mental well-being'.

Staff in the Hub stress that, in fact, part-time and mature undergraduates are dispersed unevenly across the university as a whole and in significant numbers, considering the elite character of the institution. They are present in faculties on standard degree programmes and clustered on health and social care programmes. 'It's widely acknowledged that we don't even have the most mature students in a school here; mature students are spread out across the university. It's just that we're the specialist providers', says a student support officer. The Hub's remit is to offer information, advice and guidance (IAG), as well

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<sup>3</sup> Strategy Update, 2014.

as pastoral and social support services to all the university's mature and part-time students, throughout their student career, wherever they begin their undergraduate studies. 'I think at this institution it's the right model', the Hub's director tells me. 'Part-time students would very easily get lost within the faculties if they didn't have some way of being championed or having a centre like this to advocate their needs. The university as a whole is very big, big enough to be a city in its own right ... we try to be a village within it', the senior manager says.

Outwardly, the Hub is unremarkable, occupying an upper floor of that new building; it comprises a large, open plan office, a suite of small private offices and a kitchen surrounding a modest windowless space. One wall of the central space is taken up with a bank of pcs, another with noticeboards and bookshelves. There are some tables and chairs, a few sofas, and in one corner a small children's play area with a bulging toy box. Throughout the interviews I regularly hear the Hub referred to as 'a welcoming space', 'a nurturing space', 'a safe haven', 'a home'.

The Hub's director doesn't think it exists quite this way anywhere else in the sector. 'We were designed ... to be quite an unusual centre, a hybrid of a school and a service. ... Outside of the faculties ...most of the part-time service, programme delivery and all of the outreach work are focused here. We have a really integrated model'. So the Hub is both separate *and* integrated? 'We determine our own terms of entry ... we make our own internal decisions as long as we're in line with university strategy'. The Hub is Bourdieu's semi-autonomous separate universe within another one: Metropolitan Elite. The student support officer thinks that within Metropolitan Elite, the Hub is seen as the place for students who apply to the university but don't quite fit the entry criteria. 'I think we're seen as the place where maybe they could progress, so they're referred to us'. And until they do, they're corralled, kept separate less they detract from the all-important academic indicators of success? 'I think just being a centre where students have that second chance is a lot better than that student being told, well, no, you can't study here'. He acknowledges that a specialised remit can create problems. 'People (in faculties) are not intentionally bad at supporting mature students ... but there's work to do on educating people how they *can* support them rather than palming them off on us'.

## Retention is personal

As Metropolitan Elite raises its entry requirements to compete and excel in a high-fees, performance-monitored HE system, the gap between performance levels of target WP students and mainstream entrants widens. Nevertheless, the Hub's retention rates compare favourably with national HESA data for full-time and part-time mature students. 'We're well above our benchmarks ... although benchmarks don't tell you everything', the Hub's director tells me. 'It does go up and down, and it isn't always possible to see why. But we'd like to keep ourselves under the 10 per cent if we can, and that's quite ambitious for our sort of student'. 'Retention is a greater challenge for us', a senior manager tells me. 'It's to do with the whole mix of circumstances within which our learners are working ... the whole business of juggling lives that are already much more committed than those of younger learners typically. That also unites with a fairly frequent phenomenon, which is that adult returners typically are not always confident about their capabilities in relation to HE'.

In response, the Hub has developed its own detailed Retention Strategy and Action Plan, which imagines retention as a longitudinal, multi-faceted project. Its wraparound support services – finance, welfare and careers development – are available to all mature and part-time students across the university throughout their student journey. 'Retention begins long before students are on course', reads the preamble to one of the strategy documents<sup>4</sup>. 'Our support for learners begins at the very first point of their contact with us' (*ibid*). For some this may begin two or more years before they join the Hub. 'We go out to places where people have already had a bit of inspiration: they might be doing a GCSE; they might be involved in a parenting group; they might be doing some initiative in their local community', a Foundation programme leader tells me. 'Some people will come to me and I'll go, OK, first job is that you've got to sign up for GCSE classes, and that's going to take you two years because you haven't got any. Then while you're doing all that, I want you to spend some time getting relevant experience. Keep in contact with me and come back to me when you've done that'. Recruitment and selection are now regarded as integral elements of retention. 'We went from being a very low fees programme where it was "come and give it a whirl" ... to being more focused ... the intention now is to get people here ... who have got a WP profile. It's much more selective. It's about that person coming here informed, knowing where they're going to be after the year ... lowering the

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<sup>4</sup> Strategy to support student retention 2013.

risk of people dropping out’.

The Hub’s strategy also emphasises building capability and resilience prior to students’ arrival, through information advice and guidance (IAG), and academic skills development through summer schools. ‘Our activities need to build a realistic sense of what HE might represent in terms of challenge as well as possibility. All of that is designed to ... make sure that at the point where people are beginning with us, they are as ready as they can be’, says the senior manager. The Hub has recently adopted online diagnostic testing packages for English and maths as a ‘hard-nosed’ strategic intervention. ‘Gaps in skills around verbal articulation in writing and in some programmes, particularly around mathematical skill, are real obstacles to people ... achieving to their full potential’. In addition, the Hub provides a range of social and pastoral activities to assist with transition to the university, including Facebook groups and welcome events – ‘before the main kind of craziness of Freshers’ Week happens’, the student support officer says wryly. ‘We try and make sure we’re building support around people’s need to belong somewhere in the institution’, the senior manager tells me. There is also a strategic recognition of the intensive interaction required with students with diverse needs. ‘We’ve got some outstandingly good teachers here. We appoint people who want to teach, not because they’re academics. The students get very intense support in terms of the way in which we teach ... in terms of pastoral support, of academic skills’.

If the Hub’s managerial staff articulate retention in terms of strategic intent and multiple mechanisms, for student-facing staff it seems that retention is personal. ‘My job is to make sure that, not only do they meet the criteria, but they have everything else that they need to progress’, the Foundation programme leader informs me. ‘We always have a Plan B ... one of three of my students didn’t get onto Midwifery this year ... so for her it’s, let’s soothe her ... then tell her right now we’re going start the application for next year and ... we can scrub up on your maths’. She tells the story of a student who had progressed from the Foundation programme onto a degree in one of the university faculties and found herself isolated, being the only mature student in her year. ‘She said to me, “I’m off to the Open University”. I said, “No you’re not! Let’s have a meeting!” So I have to scurry over there ... and we’re working very closely and just offering her as much support as possible. She’s struggled, really struggled, but she’s sticking it’. One of her colleagues tells me, ‘There’s absolutely no way I want to lose any student. I’ve lost one this year – very

annoyed about that! There's a culture which sees students as central, we do what we need to do to keep people on board ... there's nothing I can't get around'.

This surely places big demands on individual staff? 'I tend to individually target at-risk students ... and work with them in a way which means I'm seeing them weekly', says the Foundation programme leader. But that's about me having the time to do that and being able to ring people up and say, "I'm coming to get you up!" A colleague agrees. 'It can be draining. It can be very demanding. I've come in this morning to a very large number of emails which will require me to take cases to our Mitigating Circumstances Board, requesting extensions because of life events. At this time of year, that meeting can be quite lengthy'. But, he reflects, a holistic approach is the key to the Hub's success. 'I think retention is high, achievement is higher because I and my colleagues see them as an individual, you need to think about their whole life situation'. The student support officer echoes this. 'I see the Hub as being really good at bespoke support. I think we do that really well but it's a challenge as well ... time-intensive. Every time the phone rings, every time the email goes, every time the door knocks, you know instinctively it's something. ... We just have to bend over backwards really, do anything to get that student through. He smiles. 'I often wish my role was one where students knocked on your door and said – everything's fine, I just thought I would tell you, everything's wonderful! But if we just go that extra mile ... and they succeed, then we've done something really good'.

I'm struck by the sense of collective and individual responsibility for student progression and retention amongst staff here. I'm curious to compare it with the Health faculty, where although not at the heart of operations as they are in the Hub, mature part-time undergraduates make up a significant proportion of students. I cross campus to interview a senior faculty executive. The reception area is lined with posters promoting its programmes, most of them featuring young women. In Health there are disciplinary spaces where mature part-time undergraduates predominate – and some from where they are absent. Approximately 25 per cent of students on health and social care programmes are over 21 on commencement of study, but professional statutory and regulatory body time limits constrain part-time possibilities for some programmes. 'A Nursing programme, a Midwifery programme, has an absolute guillotine at five years ... they don't pause for maternity, they don't pause for anything. But where we can deliver a part-time route, we do', I'm told. 'Part-time students are unevenly clustered in Counselling and Psychotherapy'



and 'a large proportion of Social Work students are mature. They're largely absent in Audiology, Cardiac Physiology, Pharmacy, where there seems to be ... a straightforward pipeline: A Levels, then university'.

The challenge of a collective approach to retention is arguably greater in a unit far larger than the Hub. First-year placements present particular challenges. 'The students are trying to become two things at the same time, having to navigate two difficult worlds ... so there are scheduled theory/practice discussions throughout the year that make people come in and talk to a tutor about how that's going ... we're not just saying: we'll let you knit the links between them yourself'. The faculty shares attrition data on a monthly basis and runs good-practice sharing events. 'We've also introduced a risk score questionnaire which personal tutors run very early on, to identify those students at risk of attrition', the executive tells me. 'Then it's really working with the personal tutors to say, what are you going to do to help this person feel connected? It's the people you don't hear from that are the worrying cohort, so by doing that it helps you see which ones you have to make the first move on'.

The structure and demands of the degree programmes can inhibit students' engagement in wider and extra-curricular university activities. 'On only one of our programmes have we got a free Wednesday afternoon', the Health faculty senior executive tells me. 'So students who want to represent the university at, say, hockey have to really negotiate at almost Kofi Annan-like levels ... to do all their placements and get all their work in and keep those Wednesday afternoons for hockey. That's a structural limitation on feeling like you're part of the university'.

In her opinion, firm gatekeeping has been the key to creating conditions in which students stay on course. Application to Social Work and Midwifery programmes, both very popular with mature applicants, is highly competitive; Midwifery has the highest applicant per student ratio in the whole of the university, other than Medicine. Appropriately, my interviewee describes the undergraduate selection process as 'triage'. 'Triaging down in terms of paper qualifications in order to invite people for interview ... from 1000 to 50 ... is challenging'. In common with the Hub, the school realises that literacy and numeracy can be stumbling blocks to progression and retention, but also that students will need to rely on those skills immediately in order to progress. 'We want to make sure that people really

are able to cope with the numeracy required ... the relentless essay writing and turning around pieces of work ... that they don't come in and then flounder'. All undergraduate health programmes at Metropolitan Elite ask for a B instead of the usual C at GCSE in preferred subjects. A significant proportion of students coming into the school without A Levels are doing so with Access to HE Diplomas and BTEC qualifications. Even with Bs at GCSE, those applicants are required to have a higher number of UCAS tariff point equivalents than those with A Levels. 'We don't look as if we're doing quite the right thing because we've set a higher entry bar. But ... people who come in with Access to HE and BTEC have a higher attrition rate. ... If we reduce that bar, we're concerned about the impact overall on attrition'.

### **Full membership**

I walk back towards the Hub, past a building site. A new university building is rising from its foundations behind a row of hoardings decorated with glossy photographs of young students talking, laughing, studying. I think of the maps dotted around the campus, the arrow confirming: YOU ARE HERE. Young full-time students can be in no doubt that they 'belong' at Metropolitan Elite. Can mature part-time undergraduates 'belong' at Metropolitan Elite? What can they belong to? The Hub's senior director says, 'For our part-time students especially, we've had to acknowledge that their primary place of belonging is their course and, perhaps secondarily, the Hub, although you can't have one without the other. And within all that, a sort of sense of the university'. Cohort, departmental, institutional. Three dimensions of belonging, intersected by multiple identities: mature, part-time, professional, non-traditional ...

'They belong to the mature cohort and the Hub – although they don't often say that; it's more Foundation, it's a very strong identity', says the leader of the Hub's Foundation programme. 'They see themselves as Foundation students without a doubt and they see themselves as being different in the university. And this gives them a sense of belonging'. So the Hub's Foundation learners negotiate a sense of belonging from a position of difference; a diasporic minority creating a home in new territory. The programme leader describes the way a group identity is engendered at programme level. 'I have them all on an evening, mixing and matching them and we do a lot of interaction ... and people bond and they go off for a drink ... we have a bit of that going on. It's about nurturing the group. I think that supports retention because people start going – where's so and so? I'll just give

her a text and see where she is'. Cohesion is also encouraged through the use of social media. 'There is a lot of belonging that goes on that Facebook site. I think they need that because they might wake up in the morning and think, "Right, I've had enough" ... and then somebody will pop up and go, "Oh hang in there, have you tried doing blah, blah, blah?". That's a really good tool, used appropriately in a sort of social, semi-academic and very supportive way'.

Some programmes delivered through the Hub try to engender a wider disciplinary or departmental identification by deliberately situating their teaching in the relevant school building. The tutor tells me, 'We say, you're on the same kind of programme as any full-time student. We deliver the modules in the same surroundings. We try and make sure that students feel they're equal to full-time students'. Unfortunately, the objective is hampered by the perennial disadvantage of evening teaching. 'The canteen does not stay open. There are only very basic refreshments – coffee and snack machines. Students complain about it after a hard day's work. We've tried to work on that and it's not proved successful'. I try to envisage how arriving for evening classes in a quiet, darkened building might impact on a sense of belonging beyond your cohort.

The Hub's director says, 'We're not just bringing students into the university ... our mission is that they have an excellent experience and will flourish ... and for those who are more limited in the ways they think they want to engage, to be pro-active in trying to broaden their aspirations about being a full member of the university'. I'm intrigued by the idea of 'full membership' and its relationship to belonging. She continues: 'We try to think creatively of ways our students can have an experience that is commensurate with university strategies around internationalism and ... enrichment ... but maybe in a slightly different way and linking into students elsewhere'. She mentions working with the international office to set up joint events and create curriculum on understanding cultural differences. 'It just helps broaden the mind and [to help them] understand things', she says. Increasing students' cultural capital is certainly part of the Hub's strategic agenda. 'One of the things we're looking at ... is the issue around cultural capital, strengthening that. We've got a lot of dance and opera in this city but people wouldn't necessarily think that's something that could be part of their life'.

I ask the student support officer about this strand of his work. 'In the first semester I asked students, "Do you want to come to the art gallery?" Well, they live in the city, they could do that anyway, so "No" was the answer. People just didn't want to engage with it ... attendance was really low'. In practice, I learn, the Hub's support team has had more success with 'in-house' activities involving experimental trips to the unfamiliar environment of the Students' Union. 'People hold fears that ... it'll be full of young people ... everyone will stare at me. In the second semester we ... handpicked a selection of events at the Students' Union, met up beforehand and went along as a collective. When we took that tack we found people would say, "Yeah, I always wanted to try ballroom dancing or learn about first aid. I'd love to come along and feel supported that way". What we've now found is that by breaking down those initial barriers a lot of the mature students now regularly attend those events. So that's fantastic'.

A sense of disciplinary or departmental identity is more firmly felt by two male undergraduates taking part in one of the two Student Workshops I run at Metropolitan Elite. Both participants study part-time within university schools. The first says thoughtfully, 'I feel I belong to my school but not necessarily the university. One reason I like my school is that it gives me a sense of being part of a disciplinary community which is wider than the university. It's an introduction into that academic world, if you know what I mean'. The second insists, 'I passionately disagree with the fact we're secluded (*sic*) from anywhere in the university. I think the infrastructure and the opportunities are there. I've got an internship through my school. It's about ease of access to information. It can create the impression that people are excluded, but you can change that, I think'. Several other participants students mutter rather resentfully in response to this, implying he's fortunate in his school, his tutors, his situation, in being able to take on an internship. As if he is somehow in possession of a key that unlocks the university to him. These experiences were unusual in students' accounts of a sense of belonging, but seem to me to reflect the Hub's aspirations for its students.

The Hub's senior manager says, 'For many of our students their initial assumptions would be that the university is a relatively hostile place or one that isn't likely to regard them very highly ... I think they come to realise that that picture of the university is ... a bit simplistic ... I think they come to feel they belong in it because they know they belong somewhere in it'.

## **My university**

The other Student Workshop involves thirty mature part-time undergraduates studying a vocational degree programme. All the students are employed locally and attend Metropolitan Elite one afternoon a week. I ask them to complete the *Sense of Belonging* questionnaire. The year group scores highest overall, with fours and fives. 'Studying as a group of mature students is easier, definitely', says one. 'I never see any other mature students here apart from this group', says another. The university scores lowest overall.

The Hub's student support officer thinks part-time study presents structural obstacles to belonging beyond the cohort. 'Certainly the part-time students treat university as a part-time evening class. They have their jobs and then, for example on a Wednesday night ... they come here for three hours, they study and then they return to their lives until next week'. This can be a matter of preference. A participant in the Student Workshop involving fifteen self-selecting mature students drawn from the Hub and from schools across the university explains, 'I've hardly used the university at all because I live very close. I tend to come in for lectures then go home via the library. I prefer the quiet working environment at home'.

During the workshop's mapping exercise, the talk turns to participants' experiences and opinions of the Hub, including issues arising from its role of institutional 'parent' for part-time and mature students across the university. 'Belonging to the Hub and to the school has been problematic. There have been breakdowns in communication. I'm not being critical of individual staff, though; they've all been very helpful'. Some participants are eager to negotiate a sense of identity beyond the version of part-time and mature that the Hub represents. 'I don't feel comfortable in the Hub; it can be quite defining'. Staff in the Hub acknowledge variations in students' attitudes towards the services it provides. 'Some will bite and some just want to come in, get the qualification and go', the director tells me. 'We're here as a service for mature and part-time students across the university who don't maybe see the Hub as their place', says the student support officer. 'We still need to try and scoop up those that are struggling ... ideally you want them to feel this is a place for them. And whereas an 18-year-old student might be supported by their parents and other family, these students are often coming to us very alone in their aspiration to study here'. I wonder whether the cohort profile and the programme design shelter or exclude these

students from the wider university. Excursions into university territory are problematic for some: 'When I go into the big computer clusters, I feel a bit apprehensive that they'll think, what's the old lady doing here?'

All the Workshop participants relate to the awkwardness of being older in a youthful environment. One, the only mature student in a year group of over four hundred, recounts her experiences, to sympathetic laughter. 'The first week of term I could have done with a badge saying, I AM A MATURE STUDENT because every time I walked into a classroom they expected you to start lecturing! Now I just barge in and go, "I'm just an old student. Sit down!"' She warns a male participant who admits to feeling apprehensive about studying alongside much younger students when he moves from the Hub into a school. 'Wait for the looks on their faces when they get paired with you. With me, I can see them thinking oh my god, I'm with someone my mum's age; then they realise you aren't their mum and you're normal!' Other students are more sanguine. 'There isn't much to share because your lifestyle is so different', says one. Another, who readily admits she's nearly seventy, says, 'I don't think I expected to fit in. But the young students are always polite, and each year there's always a couple who've been really friendly. And I've made some wonderful friends with other mature students'.

Asked to map out the places on campus where they feel a sense of belonging, and those where they don't, the Students' Union building and what it represents inspires a range of responses, mainly indifferent or negative. One student based in the Hub complains, 'Even though I've got disabilities and I'm old and all that, I'm still a bit of a party animal and one thing I've definitely realised is that this is our bit and we don't belong in that bit. We're not accepted anywhere else. You can walk through the Students' Union and they don't even look at you'. A fellow participant nods. 'Yes, they ignore us'. Another says, 'I really dislike the refectory. The food is horrible *and* expensive'. Others are more enthusiastic. 'I come in every Saturday morning for my breakfast before I go to the library', says one female participant. 'I know mature students who avoid it altogether but I like it'. 'I know quite a few of the bar staff, they're on my course', says a male. He adds, 'I came along to Freshers' Week even though realistically I've got no interest in those sorts of things. It amused my dentist no end!' A mature student studying in one of the university schools seems to be mitigating a sense of difference in her school through engaging in extra-curricular activities based in the Union. 'I've really thrown myself into things, I've joined societies and there

are a lot of mature students engaged with those societies'. A fellow participant says, 'I've no time to join societies, I'm working'.

Participants exchange experiences of structural factors which make engagement with the university and with HE difficult: timetabling, family and work commitments, illness, and financial insecurity. One younger male participant describes his first year as like playing Russian roulette. 'I've spent most of the semesters juggling two part-time jobs and trying to find work for the holidays. Even without kids, it can be very difficult'. A female participant says, 'In our lives we're tied down with so many issues. You're studying for five years and if you have a manager at work that's not supportive ... sometimes I've gone home and thought, with my age, what am I doing this for?' Another reflects: 'Sometimes as women you tend to give up something that's for you rather than your other commitments. If you're doing a degree and it's for your own self-worth you would give that up instead of giving another responsibility up'.

One of the Hub's tutors who studied as a mature student recalls: 'I wanted the degree when I did it, but I had a family and financial commitments which were significantly more important and I can see how that applies to my students. We ask them, "Do you feel part of the university?" and they say, "No, we're just the people that come in and go home and that's it". But I don't know whether any of the students have left because that has been a significant issue to them. I would say every student has got more important things than the degree on their mind'. He's concerned that part-time students aren't getting value for their money – especially considering that the cost of tuition fees is so steep. 'I'm keen to stress to students what they are in terms of a fully paid-up member of the university ... that they should be aware of and feel that they can access as much as any other student on any other programme'. He mentions the gym, the libraries – and sighs. 'It amazes me how you can get to the end of the second year and they'll say, "I've never been to the library ... I bought some books for each of the modules and I access the journals online". So they do literally come in and go home'.

In the Student Workshops we discuss the statement that 60 per cent of part-time students consider dropping out<sup>5</sup>. 'I'm surprised it's not 100 per cent', one participant says, and

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<sup>5</sup> National Union of Students 2010.

everyone laughs. 'We're mature people. It's good that we reflect on whether we're doing the right thing', he adds. 'It's a common feeling', another agrees, 'but it doesn't mean you're going to do it'. For those who stay on course, despite a sense of isolation, retention seems to be more about imagination – what they have imagined academia might be; what they might become academically or professionally. 'I've waited all my life to study. I've made sacrifices to get here. Why would I drop out?' says one. 'I'm looking at my hat and gown', says another. The longer learners remain the more tantalising is the desired end point: 'You think – you can actually do this. You think, it's within your reach'. Belonging 'somewhere' may be something altogether intangible. 'I brought my grandson in and played snooker on the tables they've got in the Union. It was lovely. I thought, this is my university, I can do what I want!' Full membership? A sense of belonging? Her words describe an experience of belonging in a way that rarely appears in strategy papers or action plans. They reveal a connection with higher education, with the institution and with herself as a student – an emotional investment.

### **Remarkable**

I leave the Hub not at all sure what to think. From an institutional perspective its distinct and distinctive provision for mature part-time undergraduates without traditional entry qualifications is a strategic solution to the conflicting imperatives of equality of access and a punishing HE market. For now, at least, the value of the students in enhancing the university's diversity indicators compensates for the risk of detracting from academic indicators of success. Less positively, the Hub is a space where those considered peripheral to the university's academic project are corralled, kept separate, lest they detract from academic indicators, and until they fulfil their potential to become part of the elite body politic. I'm not sure it can be both; whether having the Hub challenges or reinforces mature part-time undergraduates' peripherality within Metropolitan Elite in particular, and HE as a whole? Does such an explicit widening participation remit risk a damaging identification of 'part-time' and 'mature' with disadvantage and deficit?

At the start of this account I described the Hub as outwardly unremarkable. On reflection, I think there are two remarkable things about it. Firstly, the model of bespoke part-time provision in an elite institution has become highly unusual in the sector. Secondly, the collective commitment of its staff to part-time students both as individuals and as a student



constituency with particular ways of engaging in HE is admirable. Staff working with part-time undergraduates in post-1992 HEIs might covet the Hub's ethos, which places part-time centre-stage – as the norm.

## **A SIMULTANEITY OF STORIES-SO-FAR**

### **CHAPTER SEVEN: NORTHERN CITY**

#### **Arrivals**

It's impossible to miss Northern City's Central campus, a complex of oversized Lego blocks looming above the railway station, badged with a distinctive two-tone logo. I join a ragged column of rail commuters climbing the hill through the university precinct. Once my eyes are attuned to the logo, I can see the university's buildings stretching out along the busy city street in both directions, spilling into the long, narrow streets of the old industrial centre and, less visibly, occupying whole blocks of the sloping grid between the city centre and the railway line. Cranes signal new builds in progress; the hoardings hail *Contemporary Research, Professional Futures!*

Anyone, it seems, can enter Northern City's main building and be startled by the open space within. Here, the Lego blocks meet in a five storey, glass-roofed atrium, the ceiling framed with tubular steel. I stand and stare – out, up, down – from a vantage point on the curving stairwell. People are meeting and eating in the cafes, sitting alone with their laptops in the informal seating areas, traversing the space. Three sides are lined with glass-walled offices: Student Services, Learning Services... There is an exhibition of student artwork on one of the upper levels. Fancifully, I imagine the interior of a super cruise liner might be like this – busy, buzzy, multi-functional.

Emboldened, I wander in another time. A Saturday afternoon. Unexpected winter sunshine streams through the roof panes. It is deserted, eerily silent. Now it's the Marie Celeste.

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I travel to Northern City's Garden campus, entering a modern brick building situated among a network of leafy streets and period houses. In reception, lights flash frenetically on a tall Christmas tree; beyond is the canteen, a space not dissimilar to an airport lounge or a hospital waiting area – bland, functional. There's a disproportionately small copy of the Student

Charter on one wall; another is lined with large posters of smiling tutors that Northern City students have voted *Outstanding* and *Inspirational*. All these tutors are White; all but one is female. A banner nearby encourages students to acquire the university loyalty card and benefit from special offers. A television screen near the service area advertises the staples of student life on a loop: software, print credits, student surveys, global/international student groups, entrepreneurship events, careers fairs, the university app. These are interspersed with contact numbers for student support facilities 'for those struggling to settle in or returning and feeling unsure'.

The canteen is sparsely populated. There are a couple of what could be informal staff meetings going on, and a few tables occupied by small groups of young people, one or two wearing Northern City branded hoodies. As the minutes pass, one group's number is swelled by new arrivals, gathering for something – a lecture perhaps? A seminar? Women are in the majority; most of the young men sport beards. Local accents predominate. A core of students, seated, talk and laugh loudly, as if they are performing for the crowd. Others hover awkwardly on the periphery, less comfortable members of the group. On the hour, there is an exodus from the café, the students spilling out and downstairs.

### **Institutional stories**

Northern City's history reflects the shifting geometry of social and power relations in the city in which it is located, and in the evolving HE sector of which it is a part. Like many 'new' universities, Northern City is an ex-polytechnic, its current incarnation the result of multiple mergers and acquisitions which brought together individual institutions of art and design, education, health, and technical training to form one of the largest universities in England, in numbers if not in physical estate. The institution's technical and professional past shapes its contemporary identity. 'We have a proud heritage around practical education ... there's a real emphasis on academic challenge but proximity to practice', says a senior executive. The articulation of past and present versions of Northern City attempts to 'tame' Massey's space-time, 'always under construction ... never finished, never closed' (2005, p.9), but is an oversimplified representation of the complex positioning of Northern City in the stratified landscape of English HE. 'We do have research and we have some outstanding research but it's in clearly defined areas', says the senior executive. 'We are

an institution with teaching at its heart and that's what defines who we are and what we do', he says.

As a teaching-led institution, Northern City will always hit the glass ceiling that the UK's elite model of HE imposed on its own mass system. The university must find another way to assert its distinctiveness – from other post-1992 institutions and from the city's 'old' university, sited less than a mile away. The 'real world practical application of theory' still characterises what the university does – the university website describes its research as 'innovative', 'cutting edge', 'commercially promising'. A part-time Northern City undergraduate tells me, 'my reward for studying five years part-time has been my professional development and the impact it's had on my practice and my business'.

Another contrast between Northern City and its research-intensive Russell Group neighbour is the profile of its student population. Northern City is the 'local' university of the city region, working in partnership with schools and colleges to maintain its localised recruitment. A faculty head says, '85 per cent of our natural body of applicants come from within a fifty-mile geographical area and the vast majority ... are first generation, quite a lot of working class, quite a lot of free school meals, you know, non-standard schools and colleges. I mean that is our natural set of students; it isn't a challenge for us to do that'. The senior executive says, 'We are a very proud widening participation institution. Lots of part-time students, lots of mature students, quite a high proportion of students with disabilities'. Yet there are no university statements any more around widening participation. The rhetoric has changed to reflect changes to regulatory mechanisms – and funding sources. 'The discussion is fair access, but fair access is not a problem here', says the faculty head. A partnerships executive explains: 'We've moved away from a discrete widening participation agenda towards inclusion ... as an organisation we put emphasis on having an inclusive approach to students, to learning and support ... rather than focusing on a particular target audience and supporting them in a particular way'. He adds, 'It's not that there aren't differences between all kinds of students in different groups in different ways, but our philosophy extends across the entire student population. If we adopt an inclusive approach to students, you are trying to create a sense in which they belong'.

Northern City is growing. 'We're very popular in terms of application, and what's happened is that we've grown quite rapidly in terms of numbers in a relatively short period of time ... even with those funding changes, and I think students are coming here because of the practical, vocational nature of the education', says the senior executive. What are the impacts of such rapid growth? Popularity is clearly an advantage in a competitive sector, but it presents its own challenges. High demand for places, plus pressures to conform and perform in league tables, have resulted in higher entry requirements at Northern City. A member of staff with a brief for engagement and inclusion is dubious. 'We're very proud when our entry requirements go up', she says. 'But are we being fair? As a university we've always been open to different groups. Are we setting qualifications that some people are unlikely to reach, because of where they're from?'

Staff are noticing the difference. 'Over time, the kind of students we're getting in is changing because our tariffs have gone up massively', says the faculty head. 'These are much more able students that we're getting in compared to the past'. I ask whether those higher tariff students are likely to be part-time or mature. 'They almost never are. So the challenge is how you manage that locally; there's no central directive', says the faculty head. She explains that her department attempts to mitigate the situation by interviewing students with non-standard qualifications 'for potential'. The engagement officer tells me, 'So much is about markets and money now ... I don't think universities generally think about part-time provision because they don't think it's where the money is'. The senior executive is more circumspect. 'Part-time is contracting slightly for us now. In terms of the future of the university, we haven't put enough attention on part-time; I think we've lost some of that. But I think there's a realisation that we can't always rely on that traditional full-time undergraduate ... I think we will come round to how we can make sure we promote part-time study. And of course we're going to be looking to attract more international students'.

Of course. This university and this city, like any other, are extroverted places in which social and economic relationships of HE interconnect on a global scale. It is evident here in the numbers of international students, particularly from China, Malaysia and Singapore; diasporic, transient populations resulting in a growing infrastructure of specialist food shops, restaurants and cafes. The students' presence is impacting the city in other, more

permanent ways. Overseas investment is funding the regeneration of a dilapidated district, turning it into a student 'city' precisely for these markets. The impact is also experienced in the classroom. 'Sometimes you can end up with the challenge of two very different cultures in the same room', the senior executive tells me, 'a group of international students who have come over, say, from China, to do a top-up award in a cohort dominated by students who've travelled in from a town fifteen miles away. In terms of employability, the mobility of the local students, in terms of preparedness to travel, is probably their biggest limiting factor. They ... do seem to want to stay within the confines of the region. That's a challenge for us'.

All institutions continue to be challenged by the shifting policy ground in the HE sector. 'We can't always expect to be flooded with applicants. I think we're at a point of change: trying to anticipate what it might mean for us once the cap's been removed is difficult. But we feel we're well-placed', says the senior executive. 'We give a very campus-based experience'. He considers Northern City's good record of progression and retention to be a contributory factor in its consistent performance through choppy policy waters, although he does have a concern. 'We're heavily managed, very modular and ... by focusing on managing numbers, we've lost something about identity around courses and quality of interaction'.

### **A crowded field**

Five years ago, retention rates at Northern City were a cause for concern, triggering an internal working party report and the preparation of a framework document containing core requirements and recommendations.<sup>6</sup> Today, the senior executive tells me, 'We easily meet sector norms. We have a very good record'. It sounds like a success story. 'It was a practical measure to address issues that were seen to impact on retention', says the partnerships executive. 'A framework for good practice ... examples of things that everybody should be doing at this level or that level, with all students'. I interview its architect, a senior faculty manager who was seconded to develop the strategy. 'It was really learning from others, seeing what we're doing, what's working internally and what's working nationally. I went round all the faculty Learning and Teaching committees, presented it to the university Academic Board'. The framework drew directly on *What*

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<sup>6</sup> Northern City Framework document (2010).

*Works.*<sup>7</sup> 'There was a bit of an overlap there. As they were progressing with their thoughts, my work progressed in parallel.

He's happy for me to see the document for myself. Core requirements include the usual suspects: extended induction, attendance monitoring, formative assessment, peer mentoring, improved access, and engagement with institutional data, as well as a couple that are less predictable: early diagnostics, and a system whereby students can revisit learning and assessment within the timeframe of a single module. Its recommendations include an emphasis on early student engagement through group projects, revision support for summer referrals, staff development support, and the setting up of a cross-university forum for monitoring and sharing of effective retention interventions. The framework document took a year to complete and approve. Institutional cogs take time to turn, whereas external priorities and agendas can change very quickly. The recommended forum was superseded by faculty Student Experience Boards. 'I suppose they act as that forum', the faculty manager says. 'But we could do better sharing of practice on retention and success. It's complex because we're doing all this work on trying to improve our National Student Survey results, the student experience ... it's all in that mix ... we look at it holistically. It's difficult to point to one thing and say – that's why it's good'.

My interviewee notes that some requirements were relatively straightforward to implement. 'Most faculties were doing extended induction anyway, but we've made it formal. We have definitely improved the data ... when staff are doing their module reviews, they'll look at the module performance at the end of the module and the end of the year ... if they click on the link ... they can easily put their module number in and get the data. And I managed to get the module retrieval system as a regulation. I thought that was quite successful'. Other core requirements have taken longer to put in place or encountered resistance. 'There's still work ongoing on a formal attendance policy ... the early diagnostics has not really happened; there is something to be done there still'. He acknowledges the conflicting geographies of power between academic disciplines – geographies rooted in profoundly different ideas of what constitutes knowledge and the ways they are embedded in academic practice. 'There are split views, even at the highest

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas, L., 2012. *What Works? Student Retention & Success*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation

levels of the university, as to whether students will do formative work without a mark. See, in Engineering, you have to give them a mark or they 'ain't gonna do it! In Art and Design you might be ok, or some of the Social Sciences. But not in Engineering and not in Computing. It's been a battle'. He smiles. 'It's all very well writing all these things in, but they work in pockets'.

He means disciplinary pockets, but the way the framework requirements filter through the organisation is also uneven. The senior executive concedes that teaching and support staff are unlikely to be familiar with the framework document. 'Staff wouldn't necessarily be able to articulate policy, or necessarily say how that policy's been implemented in their area. We're good at developing policy and strategy, but it doesn't always reach all the areas it should reach. We have a bit of an implementation gap ... I think maybe it's simply scale'. Perhaps staff in this very large, split-site institution are struggling to navigate a crowded field of competing and overlapping agendas: student engagement, satisfaction, retention, success. In which case, clicking a link to produce statistical data might seem like the route of least resistance?

Does the framework document – or the institution as a whole – distinguish between retention of full-time and part-time students? 'I would say not', says the partnerships executive. 'But if you talk to academic colleagues on the ground in a particular faculty or department, they may well be implementing their own more localised things if retention is an issue for mature students or part-time mature students on their course. I wouldn't necessarily be privy to that'. The faculty head supplies an example. 'We revalidated our programme because there was a problem with retention ... we produced essentially a transitioning year because the students were not coming in with the appropriate skills. That had a massive impact'.

I attempt to follow the document in use throughout the institution. Is the Framework still a live document, part of routine activity, within the institution? 'We made sure, at least in the first year, that the faculties were monitored and there was follow up', the faculty manager tells me. 'My recommendation was to review it every year and ... see how it's going, make changes. In fact, we haven't reviewed it recently and we probably are due for a review'. I explore this with the partnerships executive. 'It was run for a couple of years ...



then we stopped monitoring it because we were seeing retention figures picking up. Retention is one of a small number of KPIs that sit within the corporate performance framework ... so there is a mechanism for continuing to measure it more broadly. We're conscious that we need to keep on top of what's going on'. So, did the Framework outlive its usefulness? Or did other agendas come to the fore? Certainly, the senior executive prefers to talk about progression, attainment and engagement rather than retention. 'How we engage with our students and the engagement of students with their learning ... those are key factors in retention and success. We're doing the more traditional things like induction and regulations, but I think that engagement of students with their learning may have more influence than some of those other things we're doing'.

I ask how that influence can be measured, if at all. 'The departments receive their statistics about NSS,<sup>8</sup> DLHE<sup>9</sup> and progression, good honours and so on ... that's linked into our quality review cycle and I think that's getting more robust, although I would like to see more criticality'. He has genuine concerns about the emphasis on scores and surveys. 'Maybe we have to capture what it is that students are saying about their experience, as well as looking at the performance numbers, and I don't think we do that as effectively as we might. ... The NSS is quite a crude instrument, but as a senior manager I have to say it's what matters. It's defining for our league table position'.

In my interview with a lecturer I ask whether they are aware of any faculty or university strategy for retention. 'All I hear about is the NSS', they say. 'That's what I hear at our level. I suppose it's part of the strategy for retention? The NSS seems to be the main barometer of how the university's doing, and there's a big push towards getting Year 3 to respond to the questionnaire – you know, to give us a good rating on the league table of universities'. A colleague in the same faculty says, 'I'm aware of it. I couldn't tell you what was in it. I'm more aware of the University Corporate Plan'. Her view is that staff engage with those elements of university strategy which will have a positive impact on the NSS. 'That sounds cynical but that's the way it is. If there are issues with the NSS, if there's been a dip or a low mark, there is discussion'. I ask a faculty head whether they're aware of any specific interventions to increase or promote student retention. They reply, 'Not

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<sup>8</sup> National Student Survey.

<sup>9</sup> Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey.

particularly around retention. The discourse all the time is around student experience and student engagement. Those are the terms they will use here. Which are then supposed to have impact on retention. Actually, I think it's because retention is not a big issue here. Responsibility for retention is devolved down at course level now. The course leaders look overall at their own retention ... departmental operating plans keep an overview and identify problems'. As focus has shifted from central strategy to local responsibility, so improved access to data comes with increased accountability.

### **The campus experience**

Northern City's four faculties occupy two campuses: Central, the larger, located on prime land in the city centre, and Garden, situated in a leafy district a short distance to the west. 'We've grown in number ... without necessarily growing the infrastructure', the senior executive tells me. 'The limitation of being a large, complex institution that's squashed between the bus station and the city centre is that there's only so much space we can grow into. How can we foster interaction without always having to build big spaces to do it?' The faculty manager acknowledges that development options are also limited at Garden campus. 'That's a mix of old and some new buildings ... it's more difficult there, but our estates people are really working on it. We've just got to get it right'. The two campuses operate according to different rhythms. 'At Garden, a lot of the students tend to be going out on placements or whatever, so they're in and out, working and studying, even if they're full time', a lecturer based there says.

What are the experiences of staff of working in this very large, multi-faculty, split-site institution? 'If you look at how we locate staff ... they're very squashed', says the senior executive. 'You wouldn't know you'd walked from one department to another here sometimes. What does that say about who you are, given that you're often defined in academic terms by your subject discipline? ... It's that staff aspect of belonging as much as students that I'm interested in'. It's notable that most of my interviews with senior staff at Northern City take place in private offices somewhere within the over-sized Lego blocks of Central campus – impossible to say exactly where without leaving a trail of crumbs – while my interviews with teaching and support staff involved with part-time and mature undergraduates take place at an anonymous 'hot desk' in a satellite building, at a café table in a prefab block and in a lecturer's home.

What role does organisational structure and culture play in supporting or inhibiting a sense of staff belonging within the wider institution? One staff interviewee talks of the awkward cultural fit of different departments within her faculty. 'There is sense in us being together, but they are very different groups. The gender mix is different, the mix of ethnicity. I've always found it difficult to engage with colleagues from X department ... they do their own thing'. A lecturer in a small, sub-faculty academic unit delivering a part-time undergraduate professional programme tells me, 'We're an oddity, really, in the university, and to an extent in the faculty. The students aren't traditional and full-time, and a lot of the university is set up for that type of learner, and academics teaching that type of learner. So you're having to work round systems that aren't quite right; invitations to various meetings can occasionally be missed, or representation on different forums'. Her words convey a sense of dislocation from the wider institution, which belies the broad statement of inclusion I heard earlier.

The use of campus space, including classrooms and informal learning spaces, is a thread in Northern City's corporate strategy development, and the senior executive discusses this with considerable energy. 'When they come on campus, what do students spend their time doing? What is that experience like in the classroom, and what do they do out of the classroom? What's come through our strategy development is the importance of belonging, identity, or a sense of affiliation for students with their course of study. It seems to be that when students feel a strong sense of affiliation with their course, not only do they experience higher levels of satisfaction ... but they seem to do better, they progress, they attain better'.

I ask him what he thinks is involved in developing that sense of affiliation or belonging. He enthuses about the development of spaces in which staff and students can work together on their subject. 'It's about that proximity ... about students almost becoming part of that community of practice, from day one'. Such spaces need not be physical, nor high-premium new builds. 'They have been on an interesting journey here with Art and Design. Graphics has a very distinct character about it ... you can walk into that space and get that sense of identity from it straightaway. Fashion too. Those courses are performing extremely well now in terms of student satisfaction and student performance and they

weren't before'. He stresses, however, that courses do not need to be studio-based to create meaningful space for student-staff interaction, but that it is an overall emphasis on supporting participation in the academic sphere which can nurture 'participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging' (Thomas 2012, p.6). 'One area that does really well here is Maths', he says. 'They don't have a wonderful space ... they've put tables in the corridor and that's where they meet their students'. The faculty manager agrees. 'They invite students to drop in and have a chat at any time ... they make the best of what they've got and they've got a supportive community. It's the academics getting it right, then supporting the students in an open door, friendly way ... that's the model we're trying to get all courses to replicate'. However, the senior executive also acknowledges the shortage of available space, an issue for another interviewee: the faculty head. 'We don't have our own defined teaching space here ... we have to use pool classrooms ... somewhere like Architecture, which has its own studios [and] has a much better sense of student identity'. She notes the strategic emphasis on curriculum design as a means of enhancing cohort identity. 'There is a spiralling away from modularity towards course identity, more prescriptive courses with more mandatory modules'.

Northern City has also developed a set of learning hubs: common, informal, multi-purpose spaces in departmental buildings. 'In most departments they're big spaces ... cafes, leisure areas'. The faculty manager enthuses about the Glasshouse, the five-storey communal space I discovered early on. 'It's great, great!' the faculty manager says. 'Social, formal and informal space. Social space that students can use as learning space. It's the way forward'. The partnerships executive is equally enthusiastic. 'The Glasshouse not only links what were quite disparate buildings on the campus ... it's created a heart, as it were to the campus; it's created a genuinely democratic space. It's a real buzz space. An extension of the office, the classroom, the lab; an extension of the learning and working space. A feeling that I belong there as much as you do, as much as you do...'. He tells me that when the Glasshouse was first opened, it was thought that the students would occupy the lower floor, where the food outlets were cheaper, and staff the upper floor, where the café was more upmarket. 'Originally there was a bit of a binary divide, if you like, between staff and students ... but very quickly that broke down. ... If you go in any day, time of the week, you'll see a really eclectic mix of students and staff. Having meetings, talking, chatting'. I nod, remembering my own initial impressions.

Then I remember my visit to the Glasshouse on a Saturday afternoon: the empty spaces, the empty air. The senior executive says, 'No matter what we do with that space so that our full-time students can really have that sense of belonging, how does that translate for those students who come on to the campus at different times? I think that's a real challenge. If you're on campus in the evening most of the catering outlets, if not all, are closed after 6pm and there is very little going on, although the Learning Centre is open. So places feel dark and empty'. The partnership executive agrees. 'I'm absolutely sure there's stuff that could be done ... to create, enhance or strengthen that sense of 'belonging' for part-time and mature students, but if you're geared predominantly to full-time undergraduate students, then your estate is geared up for that. ... As an institution, you may want to shift to accommodate the needs and issues of other groups of students, but the logistics and costs are quite difficult'. That statement of inclusion is ringing rather hollow again.

The faculty head suggests that cohort identity can be negotiated outside or beyond the physical space. 'Our Writing BA attracts a lot of mature students, non-standard students, and they cluster themselves together, find their own support network without too much difficulty'. Although the institution offers course-focused IT and social media mechanisms, part-time students seem to prefer self-generated, informal solutions. A lecturer on a part-time programme says her students have developed their own Facebook group. 'They need quick sources of information and support. Facebook is more synchronous than Blackboard; they don't really engage with Blackboard'. A final year part-time student who created a Facebook page for her year group tells me, 'It's probably used as the go-to support over other streams of support. Facebook is so instantaneous. It's well used. No tutors allowed, because we use it as a sounding board as well'. It's not a universal solution, though. 'Providing a community for our part-time students can be quite hard, even a virtual community', says the faculty head. 'For some of our older students who are not part of the social media generation, it's not even a comfortable environment for them to be in'. The 'local' character of Northern City, combined with high accommodation fees, means increasing numbers of students are living at home. 'If you're going home every night, and obviously part-time students are, you're not part of the crowd', says the engagement officer.

## Fitting in

As in other case-study institutions, part-time and/or mature students are clustered unevenly across the university's programmes and its campuses. 'One of the issues for part-time is the diversity of courses', says the faculty head. 'A very small number of part-time students are just taking a module or two, so they're not really an identifiable cohort. Another kind of cohort would be the eight-week residential courses for employees – quantity surveyors, for example. They count as part-time'. Students' backgrounds and motivations differ widely. 'The reason why those working in health and health-related areas, or in teaching and teaching-related professional areas, are coming to university would be quite different from the drivers and demands of other part-time students', the partnerships executive says. 'If you go to the Business School, you'll find a reasonable population there, but they're coming from a different type of route'. 'Part-time mature students are the ones with the biggest pressures on their time ... they want to come and do their studies and then they're off', says the faculty head. Timetabling is a particularly fraught issue. 'Timetable, timetable, timetable!' she says. 'Mature students complain bitterly if there are any changes because of the knock-on effects, particularly for caring responsibilities'. It isn't just part-time undergraduates who combine study with employment. The faculty head notes: 'Nearly all of our students work ... many of them over 30 hours a week, in part-time jobs. They're to all intents and purposes part-time students and full-time workers, actually. Timetabling is a difficult area for all undergraduates'.

Indeed, my efforts to arrange Student Workshops with self-selecting mature part-time students at Northern City prove unproductive, largely due to their complex and crowded schedules. Two attempts to set up sessions with 'captive' participants in subject groups also fall through. Instead, I conduct three individual interviews with mature part-time undergraduates, and even these are snatched half hours in café or lobby spaces as they're on their way to or from lectures and tutorials. Student A, a White male first year student in his early fifties, combines undergraduate study with caring for his disabled wife. 'When I'm not here, I'm caring for her, and when I'm here, my daughters take turns'. He is satisfied with the arrangement. 'It's convenient, it fits well in my family life'. The professional status of many part-time students can exacerbate time pressures. 'My students are operating as leaders or managers; they've got a lot going on at work that encroaches on home life, as this study would do', says a lecturer who runs a part-time degree for health

service professionals. 'For some it's just not possible to balance it, and I think the support they get from their organisation varies. Some have protected time, some don't; some are using holidays or days off to work round it. And there's always lots of restructuring and job changes, promotions – a lot of variables that play for them. I think the thing is they need to be able to plan, almost to the minute'.

This presents challenges for students and the university's support infrastructure. Student B, a White female student in her early thirties who studies alongside running her own business, is critical of the inaccessibility of student services. 'They don't make allowances for the family or business aspects of our lives', she says. 'They close at 5pm and I work until 6pm. ... It's those kind of things where you have to take time off work to come into uni to sort things out. When I started, I used to have to come in with a double pram and three kids! And at one point you couldn't pay library fines online so you had to bring the books back and pay ... sometimes you couldn't get in to do it'. All three interviewees applaud the fact that Northern City Learning Centres are now open 24 hours. Student C, a White female in her late twenties, says, 'That's a whole lot better ... I can come whenever I need to come rather than thinking – I finish work at 6pm and I've got to get here before 7pm'. All three also appreciate their tutors' flexibility. 'They'll do Skype, they'll do email, they'll do late-night tutorials if that's what we need', Student C says. 'There are other ways of getting around it which work a lot better for some people than being able to get in'.

Those teaching part-time undergraduates acknowledge the importance of that flexibility. 'They need to access support and resources twenty-four-seven, and it's just inevitable that the point when they need support is a weekend', says one lecturer. 'We're looking at how we provide support and almost an on-call rota'. There are clearly demands on staff to work beyond standard hours. 'Some students email you on a Saturday or a Sunday and they think you're there', says another lecturer. 'It's because they are so used to instant technology. I always have an out of office reply which says when I'm going to be next able to answer the email – and I do stick to that'. 'The tutors are really supportive; it's just the wider university system is not geared up for part-time students, Saturday students, mature students', says Student B.

Time, and the lack of it, shapes both the students' spatial relationship with the campus and, inevitably, their practices of belonging. They have limited time to use campus facilities, and being on campus outside 'standard' hours means limited spaces are available for them to use. Student B says, 'This is somewhere you come every couple of weeks, then go. We come on a Saturday so everything's shut. It's like a ghost town. You're lucky if you can get a cup of coffee or a warm drink'. Student C is also a Saturday student. 'In terms of the university I've not had a great deal to do with it to be honest', she says. 'I don't think I've got time as a part-time student. I work 45 hours a week, plus weekends sometimes, plus coming to university at weekends'. A lecturer says, 'I'm not aware that my part-time students participate in anything other than what has to be done on that day. And I've not heard any speak about social events or social life within the university'.

Asked to map hot and cold spots of belonging on campus maps, the female students highlight the primary building in which they are taught and the Learning Centre. Nothing more. Student C says, 'There's loads of buildings but I don't find a need to go to them. I know you can get support for accommodation but I don't need it; I've come to university having got my career. I know what I want to do in the future as well'. Nevertheless, in the *Sense of Belonging* questionnaire she rates her sense of belonging to Northern City Central campus and her course at a high 4. In contrast, Student B rates her sense of belonging to the university and the campus at a low 1. Other than her departmental building and the Learning Centre, her map consists almost entirely of 'cold spots', which she colours in with a green pen. 'I don't feel comfortable in this building. No idea what that is, no idea what's there. Don't know my way around there. I only feel partially comfortable in the Learning Centre. If you come in the week it's very busy and it feels a bit scary. It's better when it's quiet at weekends. When you don't use the library on a day to day basis, finding texts can be a nightmare, and then trying to navigate double prams down narrow aisles only made for one person ...!' She raises her eyebrows. What about the Glasshouse? I ask her. Would you hang out there? 'No, no, no. No belonging in the Glasshouse! I'm not sure it's even open on a Saturday, unless there's an event on? If we hang out anywhere in between sessions we stay in the department; we generally walk to Sainsbury's then we come back here. Sorry, there's a lot of green on this map!'



Student C has paid only one visit to the Students' Union building. 'Once, to buy a hoodie. I didn't go for any other purpose. I'd finished a course somewhere else; called in because I knew it was open and then I left again'. I ask her, 'Do you like wearing a hoodie that says Northern City on it?'. 'Yes', she replies. 'It does give you a sense of belonging: you know, I'm a Northern City student sort of thing ... it's the excitement that I'm part of the university'. I observe that she's not wearing it today. 'I've had it that long, it's all bobbly and I wear it at home when I do my uni work. I need to get another one before I finish!' What had it felt like to go in to the Students' Union on that occasion? 'Busy! You're not used to it when you're a Saturday student'. Does Student B own a Northern City hoodie? 'I do', she says. 'I own several and I've had my business name printed on the back! I thought it would help me feel like I belong, but does it really? You see students wearing Northern City stuff and you think – yeah, I'm a student, I deserve one of those. But really ... it's just making you feel like you blend in that little bit. Because you do look out of place'.

In comparison, Student A gives the impression of being at ease in the campus environment. He tells me he has become course rep for his seminar group. 'I was never short of coming forward, and I've carried that on here', he says. 'I think that's just something I got from my time in the Services. I'm a listener and a doer'. The role has, he feels, 'definitely cemented my links to the university. I get a chance to talk to people I wouldn't usually talk to in a normal day's learning. It's nice to be able to sit down and talk to tutors as an adult. And now people external to my course say, "hello, how are you?" and that gives you a nice sense of belonging'. In the *Sense of Belonging* questionnaire, Student A rates his sense of belonging to Northern City Garden campus and his course at four. 'On the whole I feel pretty comfortable around the campus. The only place I don't is the place we have our lecture on a Monday. I feel we're intruding because it's a completely different discipline. It feels very unwelcoming ... they're all walking around in tracksuits and shorts!'

I discover that taking on a representative role is something he's done before, most recently as course rep on his Access course and, prior to that, as president of the Students' Union at his college – the first part-time student ever to hold the role. Student A is one of six males and one of three students over 50 years old in a year group of 90. He rates his sense of connection to his year group at 3, which, while by no means low, is the lowest he gives in the questionnaire. I wonder whether taking on the role of course rep is a strategy –

conscious or unconscious – to connect more widely to the university in compensation for his sense of ‘difference’ from his cohort. I also wonder whether it’s a gendered strategy in some part enabled by fact that his caring responsibilities are shared with his two daughters.

In contrast, Students B and C rate their sense of belonging to their year group and the people they’ve met through their course at 5. ‘You have your own little community within your classroom and, to quote from Bruner’s Ecological Systems theory, you’ve got your little microsystem and your mesosystem’, Student B tells me. ‘I feel part of my course; I very much feel part of my year group’. This may be more straightforward in a cohort like hers, which is relatively homogeneous in terms of age, profession and circumstances. ‘We’re the only people here on a Saturday’, says Student C. ‘We all give up our weekends to be able to study. Everybody’s sort of in the same boat’. Teaching staff I interview comment on the way more mixed classes maintain sub-groups within classroom spaces. One says, ‘The young ones stick with the young ones and the mature ones tend to sit together ... you do get distinctive groups’. Another says, ‘I find all my part-time students sit together. I mix them up with full-time students in group work and they don’t like it’.

Does Student B feel like a student? ‘No. I feel like a wife and a mother and a businesswoman’. Each of these aspects of her identity motivate her study. ‘I want to provide a better life for my family. We live in a very deprived area of the city ... we know ultimately we’re going to have to move house to make sure our daughter has the best possible chance in life’. She reflects on her student identity further. ‘You don’t feel you’re part of a student community here. In terms of wider support from the university and the SU we’re not involved. At all. It’s nice to get on the bus for £1 rather than the full fare, but that’s the extent my student card gets used’. Student C also appreciates the benefit of student discounts, but considers her primary identity to be that of a full-time worker. ‘That’s what I do; the fact I’m a student is just on top’.

## **How to be**

'Across the student population, certain groups of people are more likely to live at home and to be the people who don't have a family background in university', says the engagement officer. 'All the time, for certain groups of people, there are things making them feel they're outsiders. Anybody who's come through a different qualification route, they lecturers aren't used to that. It's incredibly difficult to step through that door, to understand the game you have to play'. It's important, she feels, that the university does more work around letting students know 'how to be'.

Student C seems to have worked that out already, but his role as course rep is giving him an insight into the experiences of those who do not feel as comfortable. 'I've come across people who've left, and it's usually due to external pressures or commitments at home. That would probably be the only thing that would make me leave', he says. 'There have been times I've thought about withdrawing, but I've invested too much to do it'. Student B tells me, 'I started this course when my little girl was two; my little girl is now seven, so quite a lot of her baby time and starting-school time has been "mummy being at university"'. You just kind of swing from module to module and think, I'll just get through this module; and then the next one comes up and you think, I'll just get through this module...'

Although retention is no longer problematic for Northern City's institutional reputation, retention reporting remains part of its complex institutional rhythm, itself subject to the ebb and flow of sectoral and institutional priorities and agendas. But straining against the rigid schedules of institution and academy are processes requiring a slower tempo: potential which takes time to realise, the extended induction, the transitional year. Student C shrugs. 'Yes, of course. It's hard work, but that's what studying as a part-time student gets you. When I graduated after my Foundation degree it made it all worthwhile. I got the graduation, I got the certificate. Now we've got twelve weeks left and that's it! Nearly five years of hard work and it'll be finished'. Persistence is a gritty combination of aspiration, effort and pragmatism.

## ***A SIMULTANEITY OF STORIES-SO-FAR***

### **CHAPTER EIGHT: MODERN EASTERN**

#### **Routes in**

The brick building which fronts Modern Eastern's Central campus is located on a side street close to the city centre. A large glass awning adorns the entrance, an impression of modernity and spaciousness at odds with the interior, which feels slightly dated and definitely cramped. The university bookshop has outgrown its modest floor space; textbooks are piled on the floor like boxes of washing powder in a cut price supermarket. The thoroughfare between the entrance and the other campus buildings is busy, and above the general hubbub I can hear the ubiquitous soundtrack of university communal spaces – the sound of milk being frothed for coffee. I head towards the Costa coffee outlet for my own fix, past a display advertising the refurbishment of the university sports facility. On the opposite wall are eight glossy photos of Modern Eastern alumni – three female, five male, six White, two of Black and Minority Ethnicity – who have 'made it' in their chosen professions: publishing, law, finance, technology and the media. Each photo is accompanied by a testimonial to the significance of Modern Eastern in bringing them success.

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A few weeks later, I'm trying to get to an appointment at Modern Eastern's River campus. I'm circling a vast roundabout, searching for the entrance to a public car park which I can see quite clearly in the middle. Each slow circuit requires me to negotiate multiple sets of traffic lights and a bewildering choice of traffic lanes. After four tries, I locate the correct exit lane and find the car park entrance. Relieved, I park and pay and display, and hurry towards the campus boundary, a short distance away. I cross it without realising, thinking at first I'm in a technology park or the grounds of a corporate headquarters. The campus is sleek, shiny, landscaped and traffic controlled; peaceful in the sunshine. Too peaceful. Where are the students?

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I head to North campus by train on a bright sunny day in early spring, and walk through the concrete corridor which links the station to the city centre. Scenes from the city's history,

painted in officially sanctioned graffiti, decorate the grey walls, in an attempt to soften their bleak appearance. In the city centre there is ample evidence of past wealth in the stature of the buildings and the breadth of the market square. These days, commerce is alive and well, but the wealth is harder to detect. Recruitment agencies are flourishing; I hear multiple languages spoken.

To get to the campus I cross the river and the railway tracks and keep walking. On a winding suburban road I come upon the university, a modest concrete block set back from the road, opaque windows giving it an inscrutable air. The car park is full, but the benches and tables on the manicured grass apron remain unoccupied, and from the outside the 'campus' is completely silent. I'm admitted through a small reception area, and climb stairs with featureless walls and a view of the car park. In the open plan offices, accessed by staff swipe card, the atmosphere is lively and warm, desks strewn with the usual detritus of people at work. The staff tell me they prefer this building to the old campus site, but that the students dislike not being able to just to 'walk in' on tutors.

### **Not in the Russell Group**

'This place is bursting at the seams', says the senior executive. 'Central campus is growing but we can't really take on many more students here'. 'Yes, we're full to the brim', a faculty dean agrees. 'In the last few years, numbers at Central campus have increased in size, whereas numbers at River campus have slowly decreased, for a variety of reasons'. Modern Eastern's dispersed activity space extends beyond the physical constraints of its three campuses: Central, River and North. The university operates a number of franchises elsewhere in the UK and overseas; delivers online distance learning; and serves the training requirements of multiple agencies through its health, social care and education programmes, among others. It is constantly adapting to its changing environment.

Capturing the essence of Modern Eastern involves navigating a host of competing identities. 'We're certainly not in the Russell Group', the senior executive says. 'We're not aspiring to become an elite sports university', a student services executive tells me. 'Our students get a lot more nurturing than they do at other places, where it's just assumed you'll sink or swim', says a lecturer. In common with many urban, 'new' universities,

Modern Eastern co-exists with an 'old' university nearby. 'We're completely different', says a faculty dean. 'They're research-intensive, world-leading ... we're an inclusive, teaching-first university ... we make much more effort to take care of you and ... certainly for undergraduates it's our bread and butter so we make sure we do it very well'.

'We're a modern university', states the senior executive. 'Somewhere towards the group of universities that embrace more of a widening access agenda. We have students coming from a variety of backgrounds, and we perhaps take more students than we'd like through Clearing. Health, Social Care and Education ... and to an extent Business ... have the biggest recruitment locally ... and we have a markedly larger percentage of females studying here. Could be to do with the mix of disciplines?' Modern Eastern's intake is primarily regional, although the cost of degree study and efficient transport links mean regional boundaries are stretching. An increasing number of students commute from ever greater distances. The university also has a number of what the senior executive refers to as 'star performing' degree programmes, which attract applicants from an even wider catchment area, and a growing international cohort, the latter primarily based at Central campus.

Modern Eastern has won accolades for Customer Service Excellence (CSE) since the arrival of a senior services executive, purposely appointed to 'refresh' Student Services. 'The support that's offered to students is immense; there's so much there for them', says a student adviser. 'We have the mentality not quite of student as customer, but we're proud of the CSE kitemark', says the faculty dean. My impression is of a zeal for customer service which extends beyond the administrative centre of the university. 'The values of our place are that we're straight-talking, we're a community, we work together and we value working in partnership', the services executive explains. 'Our Student Charter sets out a range of expectations that we have', she says, 'especially in expecting that students take some responsibility for their own learning and for their own support. And we're willing to be held to account for our promises'. This sounds more like a form of shared ownership than the usual rhetoric of belonging.

The services executive again: 'We're very transparent. We talk to each other. There's a down side to that: we spend a lot of time in meetings but we don't do things without a consensus'. She cites the development of a new corporate plan. 'About 120 people worked at it together, trapped in a room with each other for two days'. Here, then, is a key

node of the geography of power at Modern Eastern, no doubt with its own hierarchies among that large group of senior staff. 'Now the VC is having roadshows, the Students' Union is involved, the draft plan will go to all the committees, working groups; faculties will be asked to bring it up with staff, people'll be sick of it by the time we agree it. That's the kind of approach we take'. And implementation? 'This is quite a management-driven university', says the faculty dean. 'This is the style of how we work ... it's: we'll consult with you when we write the strategy, but once we've agreed it, this is what we'll do. Some of the targets are almost ridiculously stretching, some colleagues would say. But everyone knows them ... everyone sees them, they're in no doubt as to what we're trying to achieve'.

Like a missile locked onto a target, Modern Eastern's internal geographies of power are driven by sector agendas and power plays; by Massey's 'slices of time' concretised in statistical reports, audits and rankings. 'We're not as far up the league tables as we want to be, although we've been making progress', says senior executive. 'I have to say, every living hour is devoted in some way or other, not to the National Student Survey *per se*, but to the factors that seem to cause difficulties. One worries that it frames too much of what everybody's thinking. It is taking up a lot of energy'. This is apparent in my interviews across the institutional hierarchy. 'In my faculty we make a very great effort to reach or exceed every single milestone that's under control of the faculty. We take it very seriously indeed', says the faculty dean. A lecturer says, 'When things don't look good then it's brought home to roost, and we have significant meetings with senior people where those figures are brought out and printed for you on slides, in colour! And you dream in red, yellow and green!'

Modern Eastern's Access Agreement and its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy emphasise availability and use of data. 'We use data a great deal to crunch statistics on a whole variety of issues', says the senior executive. 'We're moving away from using qualitative data to drive processes ... to looking at overall achievement rates, numbers of firsts, 2:1s, 2:2s, and students that start and drop out'. 'The strategies we have here are uniquely data rich', says the faculty dean, 'in the sense that this year 85 per cent will ... and the next year 90 per cent will. ... In one sense they're easy to follow because the milestones are so clear'. But there are pitfalls in this numerical framing of success and failure.

The sheer range of active strategies can result in an overwhelming and potentially contradictory set of targets, as the faculty dean describes. 'We have a learning and teaching strategy which I think has 51 different milestones ... we have a corporate plan with another – I don't know – 45 or so goals? We have a student charter which says we will do 101 things – literally 101, although we expect the students to do 83 things. One of the lessons we've learned is that we can't put in milestones we can't easily monitor'.

It can lead to an oversimplification of 'success' and 'failure'. 'Let's take retention', says the services executive. 'Inevitably it's absolutely right for some people to withdraw; it's a good decision for them. The problem we have as a sector is that HEFCE sets us a benchmark for different groups of students. If we don't meet that, not only have we failed, but in the past we might have lost funding as a consequence'. This is one way in which the field of HE is inextricably bound to the wider field of power, to political government through its proxy funding body. She gives a wry smile. 'It will be interesting to see what stick they have to beat us with in the future'. Student advisors walk a tightrope between the pressures of institutional performance dictated by the linear and limited timeframe that retention measures impose and the needs of the student. 'Intermission ... is a difficult one because intermission is both a retention tool but in itself doesn't reap very good results', one tells me. 'For that reason ... we don't want to encourage students to intermit. But sometimes ... it seems like the right thing to offer them an intermission. I've devised an intermission management programme where we keep in regular contact with students, remind them they're still entitled to use our support services, timely reminders ... it just helps them feel they're part of something while they're intermitting'.

The third pitfall of a focus on statistics, according to a senior lecturer, is that it can formalise and restrict responses to problems. 'If things are going badly, being told you can't continue like that isn't helpful in trying to turn it round. What you need is resources and support ... it's sort of there but in a formal way ... a lot of action plans. They take time, and we have a lot of meetings discussing them – I often say I'd like that time to go and talk to students informally'.

As a major part-time provider, Modern Eastern has felt the drop in the part-time student market keenly. Mature part-time undergraduates are occupying increasingly peripheral



spaces in the institution both numerically and strategically. 'Both Central and River campuses have experienced quite a significant fall-off of part-time student numbers', says the senior executive. 'Some of it is to do with NHS cutbacks on CPD courses for nurses, midwives etcetera. But there is still a significant fall in the wider range of part-time HEFCE courses'. 'We've now got a double whammy for part-time provision', says the services executive. 'There was a bit of motivation for institutions to try and up their part-time provision when it was uncapped; now everything's uncapping it's taken away another economic argument'. Meanwhile, 'we've been lucky enough to be able to replace a lot of the part-time numbers with continuing growth in full-time students', the senior executive informs me. 'The dilemma is, where does it go next?'

The university has channelled new part-time provision through online distance learning and employer-linked programmes, and is further reviewing its strategy – with an eye, always, on viability. 'We are putting a lot of energy in continuing to try and recruit part-time students, but I think the question is: what return will we get on that investment?' The sums have to add up somehow. 'Whereas the fee income is definitely higher, we no longer get HEFCE grants for capital funding', the services executive tells me. 'We want to build a new Sciences building, which is definitely needed ... so we have to make sure we've put money aside from our fee income to be able to fund it. Substantial millions over several years. If you're an old institution you've probably got plenty of money in the bank'. She sighs. 'The question for me is: how is this competition for funding going to benefit students from under-represented groups? They seem to be the ones that are going to be hit by this'.

### **Fractured spaces**

Each of Modern Eastern's three campus sites reflect the character and tensions of part-time and mature study in a particular way. 'Probably two thirds of our students at River Campus commute', says the faculty dean'. 'We don't have so many traditional students there', says the services executive. 'As a result, mature students tend to feel quite at home. It's the transient nature ... they're either part-time or they're on programmes which include placements'. These attendance patterns present knotty challenges for those charged with engaging students and enriching their experiences. 'At River campus we get the *I'm only on campus for four hours because I've got children to collect, or, I've got a part-*

*time job ... I couldn't get to what you were doing* type of feedback', says the services executive. I comment on the serenity of River campus on the morning of my visit. 'It ebbs and flows', says the faculty dean. 'The days that aren't placement days, it's full. The days that are placement days, it's empty'. Although that's not the whole story. 'We need to think about the strategy to use River campus much more', says the senior executive. 'We've got a great campus at River, but it's less well-known. It's proving easier to recruit to Central'. Modern Eastern's Central campus occupies a valuable plot of land in a prosperous city. 'We're on a landlocked site', the senior executive tells me. 'There's very little room to expand. We've had offers to move out ... but the students like being in the city; they don't want to be in a field somewhere outside'. The university's popularity – and its appeal to international students – is bound up with the pull of the city as a diaspora space; its adept and profitable fusion of heritage and tech, green space and retail; its energetic pursuit of new forms of global capital. The limited spaces of the campus must accommodate not only physical bodies but multiple social and ethnic identities too. 'We have lots of students who come here from another country and ... so that creates a really rich mix', says the student advisor.

The emphasis of mature and part-time student feedback on the experience of Central campus differs from feedback on River. 'We get mature students saying: *they're all young*', says the services executive. The student advisor tells me, 'The social space is really the cafés, the canteen and a bar at the back ... that transforms into a clubby type place at weekends ... but that really only appeals to a section of the university population'. 'One of the in-house surveys we did this year included feedback on the whole Welcome experience', says the services executive. 'We got plenty of mature students feeling somehow it wasn't for them. We do all sorts of things ... but we're obviously not doing enough'. The student advisor agrees. 'We need to ... ensure we offer a full range of activities that suit everybody'. She gives an example. 'I sat in on a Freshers' session ... it was for a Masters programme. The Students' Union came in and did a presentation about a vodka bar in town and it was like you can get jelly shots, blah, blah. It was really cringeworthy. I came away from that session thinking that the very early experience of those students was – this isn't an environment that is suited to us. If I'd been one of those students my attitude would have been – I just need to get my head down and get the work done. I don't think I would have felt a part of anything'.

The senior executive tells me that the university is considering focusing part-time delivery onto two twilight sessions per week in designated areas of the campus 'to ensure there is some vibrancy, make sure the support services are geared up for them when they're here'. The services executive confirms this. 'If we can make the campus feel a bit more exciting, then if you were part-time, you'd come in and you'd feel a much greater sense of belonging, and the experience would be better. If you're here in the evening, Costa closes at 4pm in term-time and that's such a hub, it's like it's dead'.

Modern Eastern's third site, North campus, is considerably smaller in scale than Central or River and specialises in health and social care provision. I interview the course leader of a bespoke part-time programme delivered there. 'The library is not as big as [those of] the other campuses; the students moan there aren't enough books. We can't offer the students a *let's stay on campus have a riot life*. You come in, you do your one day in the week, you've got to ... be prepared to work'. She smiles. 'I think sometimes the students here think everything is based on River and Central campuses – which it is. It's easy to feel isolated and that all the decision-making is made there'. The Student Workshop I run at North campus offers insight into the experience of a stratified HE system, not only between institutions but intra-institutionally. One participant observes: 'I think we're the poorer relation. People think this place is a college not a university. It's got better since we've been here, but Central campus is much better equipped. We have to pay the same as they do, but we're never going to be the same'. Another participant interrupts her, saying pragmatically, 'But the great thing about being here is that although we have to pay for parking, it's on the doorstep'.

I ask the course leader what it's like, from a staff perspective, to be sited at North Campus. 'It's taken a lot of time for us to feel part of the wider picture, but one has to be persistent. ... I think we do get isolated; we are slightly the forgotten outpost. It's always, *oh – and North campus*. At least we've got our name on things now. That's taken a few years to change!' For this member of staff, campus geography, distance from decision-making centres and the relatively smaller size of both campus and cohort are compounded by the part-time nature of her programme. 'I'm always in there with elbows, fighting for part-time. We're not a big cohort here, and a lot of the decisions are made on the full-time and the Masters and I have to say – have you thought about part-time? You have to be quite assertive!' She comes over to me as a natural optimist, but looks suddenly rueful. 'It's

extraordinary that I've been saying it for over a decade and certain people still don't hear it; and it's not necessarily the people at the top, it's other people that just don't seem to want to think beyond the box'.

Exactly how part-time study should be accommodated at Modern Eastern has been a subject of debate for some time. 'We've spent a lot of time thinking about part-time ... we knew some of our part-time students were not as happy as we wanted them to be and that was because sometimes part-time had been used as infill', says the services executive. Infill is the practice of teaching part-time students within full-time programmes. The senior executive concurs. 'It was not a particularly happy experience for part-time students ... they felt they were not accorded the same attention as full-time students. ... Just being slotted in doesn't work very well ... they felt they were missing out'. The infill structure can inhibit cohort cohesion. A lecturer comments, 'I've seen students who just come and go and don't get involved in the group at all because their cohort changes every year'. A few years ago, infill was officially dropped in favour of distinctive part-time pathways. 'It may have lost us some part-time students but was also a deliberate strategy around driving up student satisfaction', says the senior executive, referring openly to the elephant in every interview room. However, Modern Eastern's new policy was not implemented wholesale. 'The Business School made a case that they had a couple of courses where infill worked really well because it wasn't seen as infill ... this was different sorts of students bringing different strengths'. Since the decline in part-time numbers the rule on infill has been relaxed again.

### **An inexact science**

The faculty dean is critical of studies investigating the reasons for student withdrawal. 'So many will leave without telling us why, or will cover up by saying *personal reasons*. When we do see the statistics, the biggest reason for leaving is "other". Trying to find out why ... is such an inexact science'. His own analysis is more pragmatic – and institution-centric. 'We can fail to retain a student because their mother fell sick, so completely outside of our control. Or because they failed a course, which is maybe half and half responsibility, ours and theirs. Or because we haven't made them feel as welcome as we could have, so we can certainly do something about that. My opinion is that if we provide a very good teaching and learning environment, retention will take care of itself. Retention is a result

of everything else we do’.

Modern Eastern does not have a stand-alone retention strategy. ‘Our view is that retention sits alongside student engagement’, says the senior executive. ‘All of our strategies will have a role; the Corporate Plan for example, which is the overarching strategic document from which the other strategies come, is quite clear about expectations about improvements to retention’. In addition to the Corporate Plan, references to retention are embedded in the university’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The senior executive adds, ‘I would say virtually every member of the corporate management team will have a contributing role to play’.

Modern Eastern’s retention rates are strong but this hasn’t always been the case. ‘We haven’t always performed well ... about five or six years ago there were some quite poor rates ... things had been slipping’. The institution addressed the issue in a number of ways. ‘Some of the problems were to do with the way some courses were constructed ... we had what we referred to as Grim Reaper modules; they were designed in such a way that they were clearly causing problems for too many students. So we looked at course structures. We also introduced a monitoring scheme, so that if a student is trailing a large amount of credit for whatever reason, we don’t allow them to proceed to the next level. It’s new to us but not new to lots of universities. She thinks attendance monitoring has also had an important role to play ... particularly in the large modules. ‘That seemed to have quite a positive impact. Before, perhaps, I think students felt – does anyone care that I’m here or not?’

The faculty dean stresses the importance of students’ early experiences on retention. ‘If they’re still here after six weeks, they’re probably here for good. Especially if they’re still here after the first set of assessments. But if they haven’t found a space for themselves in the first six weeks, they’re likely to go’. It’s an unintentionally resonant phrase, setting me wondering about the way space is made available and occupied by different students in that crucial transition time. He tells me that his faculty phases induction and enrichment activities across an extended period. ‘We make a lot of effort to have a good induction week ... and to carry on with lots of events. We have ‘Meet the Dean’ for student reps, we have a quiz night, an events calendar. We repeat events after four weeks for late joiners ...

and we have a welcome, and some events at the start of the second semester for our January start students'. Simply getting to grips with the infrastructure of student life can take longer for part-time students. 'We'd really invested in the wifi ... but we had quite a lot of bad student feedback', the services executive tells me. 'Then we discovered it wasn't the wifi, it was that a lot of students didn't know how to access the wifi, and it was a particular problem for students who were around on campus less, less likely to chat to their peers. So we ran a load of sessions and now we're trying to build it in at the start of every intake'.

Modern Eastern's 'reinvigorated' personal tutoring programme aims to establish a sense of connection for students with an individual member of staff in their department. 'They'll hopefully see that their tutor is a friendly, approachable person who actually wants them to come and see them', says the student advisor. But limited part-time student hours combined with lecturers delivering programmes across more than one of Modern Eastern's campuses can cause problems with the system. A Student Workshop participant explains: 'We're only in one day a week, we have lectures nine to four. So if our lecturers are only in on that day, we're supposed to get extra support when?' Another tells me, 'We do have a personal tutor, we just don't have a lot of contact with them. It comes down to time, and when we're in the university and when they're in the university. Time isn't built into our programme for appointments. We have to sacrifice time. And that's not practical, because we're already asking a lot of our employers'. A third says, 'One week I had to come here for a tutorial at seven in the morning because it was the only time we could both get here'.

'For our students', says the course leader, 'university life is that day when they're in. They want tutorials on that day, so the days are manic because you've got them queueing up'. All the staff I interview recognise the challenges of combining degree-level study with employment and/or family commitments. 'I think a lot of students anticipate a more bespoke programme that fits their circumstances', the student advisor replies. 'What surprises them is that they're a part-time or mature student within a programme that's designed for a range of people and not specifically for them. I think the flexibility part-time students might expect isn't necessarily the flexibility we offer'. 'What's the solution?' I ask her. 'It's tough one. I can understand ... that to create degrees for mature students is a difficult task. Equally, I wouldn't like to see that separation anyway. So I think as a university what we need to do is make our position clear in terms of what students can

expect. We have to be very clear what we mean by flexibility and how we're going to be flexible'.

Class sizes on many courses present structural barriers to such flexibility. 'Massification, to use that horrible nominalisation, is making increasingly difficult to put that little bit extra in', says the lecturer. 'Timetabling is quite centralised and quite tight. It has to be. I understand the reasons. So if you've got a room booked for two hours ... you'll have another class in immediately after you. It's very difficult to talk to students afterwards. Everyone is rushing off and rushing in. I think that deprives students of that little bit of 'me' time that some adult students really need. They find it harder to get, and as staff, you know they want it but you haven't done it because the alternative is going off and joining them for lunch every day'. She tries to compensate in the classroom. 'I do put in help with them. I squeeze some of the teaching where the work-related content is more easily accessible to them, and put more time into "how are you going to structure an essay?" "How are you going to do this referencing?"' But how flexible is it reasonable to be? 'If our timetabling is up against the various increases ... any nurturing you do on top of that timetabled two hours is actually extra teaching and I think that's an issue too ... I know some lecturers with good NSS scores were making their mobile phones available 24/7. But having lived through seventy students with my home phone number, if you ask me to do that again, it's not going to happen! And it shouldn't happen. That can't be what the experience of being an undergraduate is'.

Flexibility remains an issue on bespoke programmes for part-time students. Most of the students agree that full-time study may have been a better option. 'Everybody here works; half the group have young children as well. Actually, in lots of ways, full-time fits better with being a single working mum. I understand that this course is trying to bring in mums to change career, but the core of it is over the summer holidays; reading week is nowhere near half term. Plus, as a full-time student you get the financial assistance which we can't get'.

I ask staff interviewees for their views on the primary reasons for part-time and mature student intermission and withdrawal. 'It's hard. I've been a mature student myself. You've got the rest of your life going on ... university's just a bit of what you do', says the

services executive. 'I don't want to paint too negative a picture of the mature student experience', says the student advisor, 'but just in terms of the struggle, juggling all the things they have to juggle and not being able to participate fully, I think they feel that their experience of university is not as rich as it could be'. The services executive sees the new HE funding arrangements working both ways in terms of retention. 'Generally speaking, mature students are more debt averse. So the fee system is going to be an issue for them ... insofar as it would be easy to think – god, this is going to cost me a shedload of money! Is it worth it? Although of course they might think – gosh I've put a lot of money into this, I'm going to make it work'.

The course leader at North campus believes funding changes have exacerbated existing structural tensions. 'One issue that has really hit us on retention is the government's change to benefits. I get quite a lot of single parents that are trying to make a better life. Part-time students can apply for student loans but they can't get the top up full-time students get ... so financially they're in real difficulty. And the Access to Education Fund has been severely cut. I've got one student who has worked so hard to get to Year 4 and now she's in debt; her Access fund has been cut by 75 per cent; she's got 25 days of her placement to go and she's at breaking point. I had another who had to go full-time because she can get more financial support to pay for nursery and after school fees. It becomes political'. Sometimes employers renege on day-release agreements, and the course leader also cites relationship break ups as increasing student vulnerability to withdrawal. 'I always say to new students: being on this course will change you. Don't think it won't. It might actually challenge your relationship. If a relationship breaks up that can hit them financially as well emotionally'.

I ask a senior lecturer about retention strategy within the institution. 'It's part of the student satisfaction element, isn't it?' they reply. 'I'm aware of it at the level of principle, and at unfortunate moments I'm aware at the level of detail! I think there's a high-level decision to drill down into these things, but I do have misgivings about how successful that can be because it's about nurturing people in order for them to be able to nurture'. They are uncomfortable with labelling withdrawal as a failure. 'I think a lot of students do make a planned decision to go. Quite often they had unsurmountable family problems or they weren't achieving at the level and they realised it was a lot of hassle and sacrifice for not very much. Often they don't drop out at the first sign of trouble but they carry on for a bit



to see how it goes. They used to have my home number, and if they rang me up and said, “I’ve given up but I’m just letting you know why”, I learned to respect that was a decision that was genuine and they didn’t want to leave on unpleasant terms. Quite often those students come back at a later date in a different way’.

Asked about retention strategy, the course leader says, ‘I wouldn’t know it in depth if I’m honest. I do know the idea is that we have to pull out all the stops to retain students. We spot the problem early; we communicate effectively ... we’ve got good systems for support. We’ve got good counselling systems’. ‘Do the top-level strategies address the needs and issues of part-time students?’ I ask. ‘No. No. Because we’re a very small cohort, so most things are based on the full-time programmes. And the problem with retention is, because this is such a difficult profession, sometimes we need to say: you’re on the wrong course. Which goes against our retention policy ... but it’s the best thing we can do for them and the profession’.

### **Fully committing**

During my interview with the faculty dean, he leans forward and points to a small badge on his lapel. ‘You’ll see I’m wearing an *I ‘heart’ Modern Eastern* badge. This is a campaign ... to try and increase the sense of community here. On certain days, if you’re wearing something that’s university-badged or branded clothing, you’ll get a free tea or coffee. It’s to try and increase the visible triggers of belonging’. Modern Eastern borrowed the idea from North American universities. ‘They’re much more advanced ... they do it very unselfconsciously ... the branding is very big’, he says, admitting: ‘It’s a cultural difference too. Americans are very happy to accept it. Other than Oxbridge you don’t see it much in the UK’. All new students at Modern Eastern receive a branded T-shirt free of charge. ‘It’s organic cotton’, the services executive tells me. ‘What we really want is people wearing their pride and to go off campus with their stuff on and ideally to wear it on other days’. She suggests the free drink scheme can benefit coffee drinkers and part-time mature students alike. ‘If when you come onto campus you’re wearing branded stuff and you see others doing the same ... you could feel you were taking part ... it’s a small thing about belonging’. Modern Eastern’s determination to build a sense of community may well be augmented by its location alongside the city’s ‘old’ university. ‘That other university down the road is a particular challenge ... always at Modern Eastern we wrestle with that’. says

the faculty dean. 'When our students mix with their students ... it's anecdotal, but there's a sense of inferiority.

He identifies a general trend away from what he describes as 'fully committing'. 'All universities try and socialise their students into becoming "university students", but if they're not on campus, how can we do it? The vast majority of our students are full-time, but they're full-time in name only. The vast majority work up to the limit of what is allowed, and I dare say some exceed it. Every student's part-time now, yet we are continuing to treat them like full-time students. All our students have that traditional part-time attitude ... I'm not saying it's a bad attitude, it's just a life attitude, when you're doing something part-time that means the other part of your life is just as important'. Advances in technology, better remote access to course content and resources, significant numbers of commuting and employed students, and a city centre location – he cites these as factors working against student attendance and engagement in what he terms 'university life'. Does he think this is peculiar to Modern Eastern? To post-1992 institutions in general? 'Put it this way, the same thing is not happening in universities ... where the great majority of students come from a higher socio-economic background', he says. 'We produce timetables for students and send them out in early August ... so they can plan their entire year ... child collection, part-time job. Any changes to courses, they're fine as long as all of the students have been consulted. You can imagine it places a great burden on faculties and department heads who do that scheduling'.

I try to establish what he means by 'fully committing', and in his answer I sense a hint of nostalgia for his own university days, even though he knows circumstances have changed. 'Engaging with clubs and societies. One of our biggest challenges is to keep students on campus. If they just pop in and out all we have is the formal teaching time, which gives them some idea of their subject but not what it's like to be a university student'. It would be more straightforward, he thinks, in an out of town, campus university. 'One where you live on campus and you can't do anything else because there is nothing else to do. It's hard to inculcate that sense of belonging if students aren't on campus, if there are many other attractions in the city centre'. He is heartened, though, by the lack of success in forming a Mature Students Society in his faculty. 'There wasn't enough commonality ... they had more in common with their subject matter than they did with other mature students. To me that was a very healthy sign ... it showed they were integrated with their courses'. The

student advisor points out that 'there are particular clubs and societies here ... Law is one ... which are commonly populated by mature students. ... I think it gives them a sense of ownership about their experience here and what they can achieve'.

The faculty dean is, I suspect, fully in favour of the university's move to support student engagement through Sports and Wellbeing. 'We have a number of elite athletes here ... and a lot of people who were very good and wanted to play competitively in the university sports leagues', the student services manager tells me. 'But quite a lot of people who wanted to do things like Legs, Bums and Tums as well as lots of people who aren't competitive but quite keen to support'. Following a consultative process, the university developed a strategy encompassing and promoting a range of sports at all levels of expertise. 'We're trying to see it as an end in itself but also an end to help with other means. The more engaged students are ... if they have difficulties, they're more likely to get help, even informally from their friends'. When I suggest this is a type of engagement primarily accessible to full-time students with the time and interest to compete in, play, or cheer on university teams and societies, she stresses the strategy's holistic nature. 'We wanted to involve staff as well and ... we've got a whole range of campus sports, seated sports ... activities that anyone could get involved in at any age'.

### **The camaraderie of the bunker**

I run a workshop with mature part-time students on a bespoke part-time programme at North campus. The workshop is squeezed into their lunch hour; participants come and go, munch sandwiches and crisps. I am acutely aware that they are giving up the one time in the day they might be getting fresh air or chatting with friends. I ask Student Workshop participants whether any of them have considered withdrawing. Most of them nod and shrug. 'I'm sure we've all probably been through that barrier of "what am I doing here?"' says one. 'But that's more when we're having to balance placement, assignments, work, children'. 'I feel I'm so close to the end now, I've made that investment', says another.

Most of the workshop is taken up with discussing their experiences and completing the sense of belonging questionnaire. We don't do the *Mapping Belonging* exercise because there is no map of North campus and they never visit the other campuses. The participants do know about the free coffee for branded clothing scheme, but are less than enthusiastic.

'I did wear a university sweatshirt once, to get a free coffee, but I wore it under a jumper!' one says. They rate their sense of belonging to Modern Eastern as an institution and to their campus in the low 1s and 2s. I ask whether they identify as students. 'No. Because we're here so infrequently, it's just a minor part of what we're doing. Unless I'm in Frankie and Benny's [restaurant] of course! That's probably the only benefit, an NUS card!' Both schemes reward belonging, but it seems one is more palatable than the other.

In the questionnaire, the student participants rate their sense of belonging to their year group at high 4s and 5s on the Likert scale. 'The only reason I'm still here is these people', says one, indicating those around her. When I ask them what they value most about their experience, another says, to general agreement, 'Meeting these guys, the group. It's like camaraderie in the bunker!' The lecturer smiles resignedly when she says, 'I think, in a funny way, students get a sense of belonging because they have a shared gripe ... there's nothing like something going wrong to make a group feel happy!' The group admit they have not had 'the easiest of journeys. We've had some issues from the start'. Contact with other students, including other year groups on their programme, is almost non-existent, inhibited by timetabling and external commitments. There is no mention of engaging with university societies.

Modern Eastern student identity is clearly complex. Worker students, student parents, part-time students – and student as customer. 'With students paying money direct ... what it's done is given them a real sense of being clients and consumers, so they are encouraged to complain, to demand continually', says the lecturer. 'I'm sure the government thinks it's using the student body to push up standards and control academics'. 'But', she reflects, 'the students may be the most powerful, fee-paying people here, but they're still the needy ones. It's very difficult for those staff who are squeezed in terms of domination but stretched in terms of capacity to be able to nurture the people at the bottom of the chain'. Among the Student Workshop participants there is certainly an acute awareness of value for money, and particularly in comparison to full-time students. 'I came from the Open University', one tells me, 'and thought a brick university would be far better because you'd get all this face to face – but no. There's a strong sense we don't get value for our money, and it's a lot of money!'. Another says, 'We get financially penalised for being part-time'; and the others nod in agreement. A third says, 'I'm self-funding, and when you go home and you're sacrificing things to pay ... it seems such a huge amount and I don't feel happy

about it'. She reassures me, 'We've told them, it's nothing new to them'.

The senior executive is clearly aware of this type of dissatisfaction. 'As the fees have increased ... their view is that they should have as good an experience, albeit a proportionate one, in terms of the number of credits that they're studying, as anyone else, and I think I probably agree with them'. Her statement speaks volumes – about the problematic status of part-time HE, as well as an intensified value-for-money culture. 'I think it's not just part-time mature students. I think full-time mature students find it difficult. What kids who've come straight from school to university expect from their university is very different, and they'll tolerate a lot more in terms of things not working smoothly. ... Our experience is that mature female students tend to be more critical and less tolerant of things not running smoothly. I probably have some empathy with that – but I think it requires a very skilled academic to lead a module'.

Academic staff on the frontline. It's becoming a familiar theme. 'Those of us who choose to teach adult classes ... do set up a kind of protective enclave for them', says the lecturer. 'We try to make the hours better; we try to get them in a decent room and keep the room; we try to nurture; we try to plan the sessions around their needs'. The course leader says, 'As well as emotional support, what we offer is that much more intensive support because we've got smaller groups and we reach them quicker. This year I make sure I go into the café on the days they're in and go round and say hello and have a chat. It normally means I don't end up actually eating if I'm teaching afterwards ... but at least it's communication'. Their efforts do not go unrecognised by students. One Student Workshop participant says, 'It must be an uphill struggle for the tutors who are trying to do the best for everybody. In our experience, our best tutors were both part-time students before they were tutors, so they've lived this journey. But they're also victims of their own success, because they're really good and everybody wants their time because they're the most helpful people. Our tutor last year knew all of us, all of our names, all of our grades ... if your marks went down she would keep an eye on it and be straight on it'. Another adds, 'They're also really good from the lecturing point of view, so they've nicked one of our tutors over to City campus now. She's gone'. They clearly feel bereft at her loss and a resigned sense of lesser status within the institutional context is obvious.

## Postscript

The workshop I ran with students at North Campus was memorable for a number of reasons. Firstly, was the fact that it had taken almost a year to arrange, with numerous emails exchanged between myself, two course leaders and the students themselves. We had negotiated a forty-five minute workshop in the face of constraints of placements, assignments, staff changes and students' commitments. Secondly, because it was the only Student Workshop I was able to run at Modern Eastern. Despite a great deal of willingness on the part of administrative and academic staff to find self-selecting participants, they were not able to do so – very much to their surprise. Thirdly, because I received an email after the workshop from one of the participants. 'I hope we didn't whinge too much?' she wrote. 'We all felt a bit bad afterwards'.

I assured her that hadn't been my impression, and that I was extremely appreciative of their time and participation in my research. The email bothered me, and not only because I regretted their sense of guilt. Then, writing up the case study, two statements struck me in particular. One was by the senior executive that 'mature, female students tend to be more critical and less tolerant of things not working smoothly'. The other was by the senior lecturer: 'students get a sense of belonging because they have a shared gripe'.

I reflected that mature (female) students may well appear less tolerant of things not working smoothly because they have many conflicting calls on their time and energies. When things don't work smoothly they get a sense of belonging (to one another) because they have a shared gripe – the 'camaraderie of the bunker', the Student Workshop participants had called it. But when they gripe, they feel bad. Belonging is complex.

## **RETHINKING RETENTION**

### **CHAPTER NINE: ALTERNATIVE CARTOGRAPHIES**

*Some mappings ... disrupt the sense of coherence and of totality ...  
even maps do not have to pretend to entail coherent synchronies.*

(Massey 2005, p.109)

*A static map cannot describe change and every place is in constant change.*

(Solnit 2010, p.2)

#### **Spaces between**

The route of this thesis was determined by a single statement, a line of text in many thousand, an encounter 'with the apparently familiar, but where something continues to trouble and unexpected lines of thought slowly unwind' (Massey 2005, p.6). What troubled me about Thomas' statement that 'a sense of belonging is critical to retention and success' (Thomas 2012) was the assumption that there is a common understanding of what belonging means and that it has an unproblematic relationship with retention. It is easy to become dazzled by the bright lights of the binary, by neat 'either/or' explanations, and I sensed that the 'trouble' lay in the substance and significance of spaces between. In the final chapter of the thesis I borrow from certain critical and nuanced explanatory frameworks – feminism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism among them – which see in between and beyond grand narratives to map co-existing differences and 'open up the imagination of the single narrative to give space (literally) for a multiplicity of trajectories' (Massey 2005, p.5).

In Chapter One, I compared the research process to cartography, and the role of the researcher to that of a map maker. Perceptions of objectivity and neutrality are problematised by maps' 'inevitable abstractness ... the result of selection, omission, isolation, distance and codification' (Corner 1999, pp.214-215). Every map, conventional or otherwise, is the result of the map maker's judgement: how to represent space; what to include and what to exclude. It is not so much that 'all views from above are problematical – they are just another way of seeing the world. The problem only comes if you fall into thinking that that vertical distance lends you truth' (Massey 2005, p.107).

The four case studies created maps of belonging reflecting my own judgements and decisions, my own geographical imagination. Now, this final chapter of the thesis invites the reader to travel back across that territory via different routes, taking in multiple viewpoints. It is an approach which honours the complexity emerging from a borderland analysis of belonging in HE, and is inspired by the central imaginary of the crystal, which 'combines an infinite variety of shapes ... multidimensionalities and angles of approach' (Richardson 1997, p.92). Each route, each viewpoint, contributes towards a rethinking of retention and belonging in HE and to a reframing of the discourse which connects them. I say 'towards' deliberately. 'Any effort at definition ... analytically fixes and mobilises pro and contra positions' (Lather 1991, p.5). The purpose of the chapter is not to impart lessons learned, but to 'leave openings for something new' (Massey 2005, p.107).

In its search for a final reckoning, a conventional approach to cross-case analysis maps and preserves a bounded territory, its complexity reduced to an abstraction. 'Maps seek to mark the world and fix its flux, but in doing so they also loosen it from its moorings' (MacFarlane 2010). Yet, 'you can explore territory in any number of ways. It continues to change and you can continue to explore it – space is open to discussion and infinite' (Solnit 2010, p.2). In a psychogeographical experiment with spatial storytelling, Solnit reinterprets the atlas as a visual, textual and literary form created by multiple authors and artists, 'a collection of versions of a place, a compendium of perspectives, a snatching out of the infinite ether of potential versions a few that will be made concrete and visible' (*ibid*, p.vii). Solnit's desire is to represent complexity; *Invisible City* (2010) and *Unfathomable City* (2013) present atlases of San Francisco and New Orleans respectively in a way which 'unsettles "the classic Western map" ... disputes the internal coherence, the singular uniformity to which the classical map lays claim' (Massey 2005, p.109). *Invisible Cities* maps aspects of San Francisco in pairs and layers: butterfly habitats and queer spaces; shipyards and sounds; the comings and goings of the city's tribes. 'I chose pairs to use the space more effectively, to play up arbitrariness and because this city is ... a compilation of co-existing differences' (Solnit 2010, p.2).

Underpinned by the theoretical and methodological forces of the thesis – the spatial, the social, the psychosocial and the psychogeographical – this chapter experiments with a set of alternative cartographies to capture the characteristics of a wider, more complex territory. In an adaptation of Solnit's spatial storytelling, I now present nine entries in an



atlas of belongings in which textual and visual mapping imagines territory between constructed binaries. How is an institutional rhetoric of inclusion and diversity experienced by those whom it claims to include? What is happening between retention on the page and the lived, longitudinal experience of persistence? How do power relationships shape the territories between centre and periphery in the institution? In structure and content, the textual 'maps' reflect the method and mood of campus *dérive*; as the map maker, I am that nomadic grazer pursuing multiple paths through the territory, pausing to explore and reflect on the spaces within and beyond porous boundaries. As the map maker, I also create a series of diagrams or visual 'maps' (Figures 5-8) which reflect my developing interest in spatial expression. These echo the process of the *Mapping Belonging* exercise, which asked students to engage with their campus maps in order to capture intangible experiences in two-dimensional form. Here, two-dimensional abstractions distil the intangible: institution-centric retention, multiple engagement, persistence, shared ownership.

### **An atlas of belongings**

#### *One: Institutional stories*

'We're an inclusive, teaching-first university ... we have students coming from a variety of backgrounds' (Executives, Modern Eastern). 'Lots of part-time students, lots of mature students, quite a high proportion of students with disabilities' (Executive, Northern City). Diverse student constituencies are part of the history of post-1992 universities, a continuation of Robbins' widening of HE's social base and successive governments' desire to open up the university system. It's a collective mission that even the newest of the new universities still draw on to establish their space in a stratified sector. The case study institutions tell stories about themselves as part of a positioning process through which they map and protect distinct locations in a 'hierarchy of more/less valued HE' (Bathmaker *et al* 2008). Institutional stories 'stabilise meaning of particular envelopes of space-time' (Massey 1994, p.5) securing the institution as 'a site of authenticity ... singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity' (*ibid*). They are shortcuts to institutional identity, indications of mission and ideals – of who 'belongs' within their boundaries. Elements of institutional stories become formalised and embedded in strategies and corporate plans; dominant groups stabilise the spaces of HE.

But institutional stories strain against changes wrought in the sector by successive strategic and policy shifts. They lose currency as wider geographies of power in the activity spaces of sector and institution determine criteria for viability and competitiveness. A perfect storm of ELQs, high fees, limited eligibility to funding support, economic recession and greater debt aversion among older learners have carved a bleak contemporary landscape for mature part-time undergraduates. Increasingly stringent border controls in the form of higher UCAS tariffs required on entry are changing the 'natural body' of Northern City applicants, making the 'inclusive' university less accessible to mature students with non-standard qualifications. At Metropolitan Elite, border controls, already stringently applied to protect elite territory, are tightening further. Even in the Hub, where many mature part-time undergraduates enter degree study through the transitional space of Foundation programmes, the open access culture of 'have a go' has been replaced by careful selection procedures and rigorous monitoring.

In this volatile environment, too often 'institutional speech acts ... do not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and are non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised' (Ahmed 2006, p.764). Spaces between rhetoric and experience open up, their breadth and perceived significance determined by geographies of power operating within the activity space of the institution. For example, in the following version of Northern City there is room for everyone:

Rather than focusing on a particular target audience and supporting them in a particular way ... our philosophy extends across the entire student population. If we adopt an inclusive approach to students you are trying to create a sense in which they belong.

(Executive, Northern City)

Inclusion is a matter of institutional pride. Everyone matters, equally. Yet the same executive later confirms that the estate is managed in a way which accommodates full-time undergraduates' needs rather than those of other groups: 'I'm absolutely sure there's stuff that could be done ... to create, enhance or strengthen that sense of 'belonging' for part-time and mature students ... you may want to shift to accommodate the needs and issues of other groups of students but the logistics and costs are quite difficult'. Mature part-time undergraduates' accounts reflect these priorities. 'The tutors are really supportive, it's just the wider university system is not geared up for part-time students, Saturday students, mature students' (Student, Northern City).

'It's in the lifeblood of this institution to recruit mature and part-time, and therefore it has become second nature to us to make sure that we're set up for them' (Executive, New Ecclesiastical). It is a striking analogy, depicting mature part-time undergraduates as an essential part of the institutional corpus. This growing, thriving university still invokes its collegiate origins to demonstrate the continuing relevance of mature part-time undergraduates to its mission. Like all English HEIs, overall numbers of part-time undergraduates at New Ecclesiastical have declined sharply in recent years. The institution has outgrown its own rhetoric. I discover mature part-time undergraduates in distinct and limited spaces at New Ecclesiastical, clustered on vocational programmes, on satellite buildings, in fractured cohorts. 'I felt so detached, we were just off to the side rather than in the ... hustle and bustle. Out here we're kind of on the side as well' (Student, New Ecclesiastical).

I also discovered spaces between a universal rhetoric of belonging and the experiences of staff in relation to mature part-time undergraduates. At New Ecclesiastical, for example, several members of staff demonstrated positions of resistance to the narrative of belonging and retention articulated in the retention strategy.

It's been shown its got the greatest impact on retention if students get this sense of belonging but ... it may not be something that particularly applies to part-time, mature students who don't have so much of that sense of I need to feel I am part of this – and so on...

(Executive, New Ecclesiastical)

Other members of staff at the university agree: 'If you've got an established life and established identity, maybe it's not so upsetting if you don't feel that involved?' (Engagement Officer). 'We're just something they do, like doing a yoga class on Thursday night ... belonging doesn't really work for them' (Programme Leader). These statements are noteworthy because they appear to accept instrumentalism and 'not needing to belong' as a valid rather than deficient way of engaging with higher level study. They acknowledge a gap between the rhetoric of the institutional retention strategy and the experiences of mature part-time students. Such pragmatism is not reflected in the institutional retention strategy, in which part-time students remain invisible beneath the blanket rhetoric of belonging and forms of co-existing heterogeneity are recognised in the form of problematic 'target groups'.

## *Two: Student geographies*

Buildings tell stories too. I encounter glossy new builds and funky social learning spaces: the building with the wow factor at New Ecclesiastical, the sleek River Campus at Modern Eastern, the Hub's contemporary setting at Metropolitan Elite, Northern City's spacious Glasshouse. Practicing campus *dérive* on eight different campuses, I witness work in progress on new infrastructure at six of them and hear of plans for more. 'The cranes are going up all over universities', Scott observes; 'the boom days of high public spending under New Labour ... have been succeeded by the bonanza of state-provided loans to pay high student fees' (2015). Growth and improvement are legitimate motivations for capital investment, but these may not be the only motivators:

Universities, ever more on edge about their performance in the National Student Survey and league tables, have responded by investing heavily in "student friendly" facilities. This helps explain the proliferation of glitzy student centres that mix banks of computer terminals with social facilities, often in so-called learning cafés, on the pattern of high street coffee shops.

*(ibid)*

'The student community is stitched together out of these places; it relies on this geography' (Crang 1998, p.5), but HEIs also depend on other visible demonstrations of engagement and belonging. The popularised version of the striped Oxbridge scarf – the hoodie – is only one of a proliferation of branded goods on sale in campus shops. Modern Eastern's '*I heart Modern Eastern*' badge is a visible trigger of 'community'; wearing it on branded clothing on a Friday is rewarded with free tea and coffee. Modern Eastern has also introduced a comprehensive strategy for student engagement through Sport and Wellbeing in which actively and visibly supporting the university teams is considered as worthwhile as playing in them.

Our relationship to particular places is developed through an 'everyday ritualised use of space ... which transforms space to place, creates 'an "everyday" sense of belonging ... and helps us to draw our 'private city' (Fenster 2005, p.253). Yet, ritualised use of space is mediated by difference and lifestage; the multiple commitments and complex lives of mature part-time undergraduates impact the ways in which they engage with HE. These structure not only the ways in which they use the space and places of the institution, but also the extent to which they feel powerful enough to claim those spaces. An idea of belonging as universal, uniform or straightforward is problematised by 'practices of

boundary making and inhabitation which signal that a particular collection of people, practices, performances, ideas are meant to be in a place' (Mee and Wright 2009, p.772). Undergraduates report a high degree of sense of belonging to a particular place within the university, most usually a departmental building or a small campus (Cashmore et al 2012). While social demographics of class, ethnicity and gender across HEIs vary, the majority presence of young full-time undergraduates in the system leads to institutional practices which stabilise an exclusive hegemonic student culture, a shared map of meaning which creates a sense of identification with others. Social spaces emphasising alcohol and music and an emphasis on a digital communications culture are both potentially alien and alienating for older, part-time undergraduates.

Across all four case studies, mature part-time undergraduates' maps of belonging reveal limited engagement with the campus beyond their classrooms. Experiences of libraries and learning centres are mixed: library staff get a largely good press but students' enthusiasm and appreciation are overlaid with discomfort about age differences and lack of confidence in searching for resources. Engagement with the familiars of contemporary 'student life' – the Students' Union building, the bar, the gym – is negligible. For many mature part-time undergraduates, quiet buildings, distant satellites, closed cafés and empty vending machines are more familiar experiences of institutional spaces. 'Relational positioning shapes the lived experience of a locality' (Brah 1996, p.189), and it can undermine the institutional rhetoric of inclusion. 'I think we're the poorer relation ... City campus is much better equipped. We have to pay the same as they do, but we're never going to be the same' (Student, Modern Eastern).

In the problematic territory between difference and belonging, different diasporic populations interact among themselves, as well as with their host environment, through 'a multitude of border crossings – territorial, political, economic, cultural and psychological' (Brah 1996, p.178). These create new forms of identity and belonging in diaspora space, an 'intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location' (*ibid*). In the case study institutions, I learned to look beyond physical boundaries and into the interstices of contested activity spaces for these interactions. I discovered diaspora spaces in Northern City's self-generated Facebook groups (no tutors allowed) and Saturday student cohort solidarity forged in echoing, depopulated university buildings; in shared sandwich lunches from Sainsbury's (the Glasshouse café empty and echoing nearby); in pioneering group outings

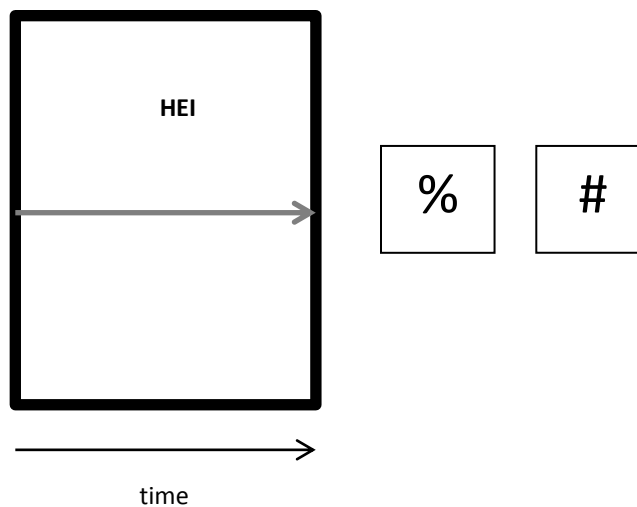
to Metropolitan Elite's Students' Union to learn foxtrot and first aid.

I found diaspora spaces in public and private places and indications of a gendered dimension in the way individuals negotiated them. A male student at Metropolitan Elite liked to sit up at the Students' Union bar, chatting to his much younger fellow students as they pulled pints; another had established new professional networks through an internship. At Northern City, a third male student had taken on the role of course rep for his year group. 'Now people external to my course say, "Hello, how are you?" and that gives you a nice sense of belonging'. 'The borders of home, work and places of learning are differently negotiated for men and women as well as borders of identity: gay and lesbian, classed, raced' (Burke and Jackson 2007, p.124). Female student participants in all case study institutions appeared more likely to negotiate dimensions of belonging with their cohort in the classroom, café or through social media, and through developing professional identities. I also found diaspora space in the imaginary, momentary and private: the New Ecclesiastical student visualising her graduation 'hat and gown'; the Northern City student who wears a branded hoodie when studying at home; at Metropolitan Elite, the delight of a grandmother playing snooker with her grandson in 'her' university's Students' Union building.

These are border crossings into institutional territory for part-time students temporarily dislocated from their full-time lives. A temporary swap of centre for periphery. Instrumental and imaginary. Pragmatic and passionate. These examples, many of which remain below institutional and strategic radar, indicate multiple student geographies and the complexity of belonging in contested space.

### *Three: Thinking retention*

'The way we imagine space has effects' (Massey 2005, p.4). Figure 5 imagines an institution-centric version of retention, representing quantifiable learning taking place within institutional boundaries. It is a map characterised by linearity, boundedness and homogeneity.



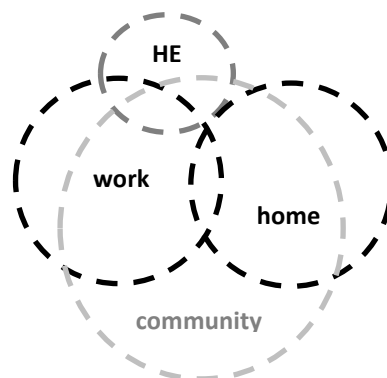
**Figure 5: Institution-centric retention**

Retention matters. It is a proxy for reputation and efficiency, an external measure by which institutions are audited and ranked. Good retention rates have become increasingly critical to institutional economic health in the English HE sector since the funding reforms announced in 2010. But, like the ‘map’ in Figure 5, the institution-centric definition of retention simplifies and abstracts. It selects out diversity – of background, starting point, qualification aim and course duration – in the interests of a standard measure. It imagines a direct, unbroken route from A to B completed in a specific period of time, HE as a ‘space to be crossed and conquered’ (Massey 2005, p.4).

The uniform, linear nature of this map is problematic in the context of the sector as a whole. Massification has resulted in hierarchies of more/less valuable HE (Bathmaker *et al* 2008, p.122) in England and an uneven geography of status, student profile – and retention rates. High Tariff institutions, a group with ‘high qualification on entry, limited low participation neighbourhoods’ students and long-standing university charter’ (Longden 2013, p.142) tend to enjoy high retention rates. As the Hub’s senior manager told me: ‘Retention is not seen as an issue here at Metropolitan Elite ... university strategies are more articulated in terms of the excellence of the student experience than about the avoidance of people leaving’. Hence the Hub’s localised retention strategy for a student population whose profile more closely resembles that of a Low Tariff institution, i.e. ‘the

second layer with the obverse attributes' (*ibid*) with lower rates of retention overall.

'Loose ends and ongoing stories are real challenges to cartography' (Massey 2005, p.107). The version of retention represented in Figure 5 is also problematic in the context of mature part-time undergraduates' complex lives and necessarily differential engagement in HE; 'The institution-centric perspective focuses on the homogenising idea of University X's students 'rather than a heterogeneous notion of individuals' (Hewitt and Rose-Adams 2012, p.162). Retention rates translate varied, complex lived experiences into percentages, degree classifications, and league table rankings. High tuition fees and loans rather than grants mean there is an increasing trend away from delocation and towards employment alongside study for a significant proportion of students, most intensively among 'non-traditional' students. 'Nearly all of our students work ... many of them over thirty hours a week, in part-time jobs' (Faculty Head, Northern City). These undergraduates make a significant financial commitment to HE, but it is only one of multiple spaces in which they are simultaneously engaged. For mature part-time undergraduates, employment commitments are overlaid with the complexity of maturity. They navigate complex territories of employment, home and caring commitments alongside their study, occupying multiple spaces between. Figure 6 attempts to capture this multiplicity and includes the broad, overlapping dimension of lives lived at large in the world, which I have labelled 'community': friendships, local connections, personal interests and pursuits, faith communities, citizenship commitments.



**Figure 6: Mature part-time undergraduate multiple engagement**



In Figure 6, the relative sizes of the HE, work, home and community circles reflect temporal demands and constraints impacting on mature part-time engagement in HE. This, as the case studies have shown, can result in exclusion from dominant institutional practices of belonging. The dotted rather than solid lines represent mature part-time engagement with HE not as bounded and separate but as relational, a sense of individuals at large in the world with higher level study just one aspect of their world. The plurality of mature part-time undergraduates' roles and identities, combined with structural factors of age, class, ethnicity and gender, complicates linear progress between specified start and finish points and increases students' vulnerability to withdrawal. There is significant potential for third party interruption in the trajectory of study. 'The thing we hear most of all is keeping everything going ... keeping the school going, keeping us going, keeping the family going, juggling. Lots of family issues. Relatively few about themselves, it's about who they care for and who they're responsible for' (Programme Director, New Ecclesiastical).

I think of Student C at Northern City, twelve weeks away from graduation after five years of part-time study. By now, I hope she is a positive 'completion' statistic on the university's books. I hope she achieved the First she was so determined to achieve. 'If I've committed all this time to it I want a First, and to get a First you need to give it absolutely everything. ... But it is a huge strain on my family. I started this course when my little girl was two; my little girl is now seven ... she finds it enormously difficult'. At any point during Student C's extended relationship with the university, family, employment or personal factors could have made higher level study incompatible with her life at large in the world. She could have become a negative statistic, no matter how many modules she had completed successfully, however significant her personal, professional and intellectual development. Mapping retention as a linear, measurable phenomenon reinforces a binary way of thinking: in defining a measure of institutional success it simultaneously defines individual failure – to become 'competent members of academic and social communities of the college' (Tinto 1988, p.452). An institution-centric understanding of retention defines a successful engagement with HE by students' ability to follow a designated path through HE, even though other paths may be available.

#### *Four: Different paths*

Recently, two friends, experienced walkers, recounted an experience they'd had in the English Lake District. They'd been following a route described by Alfred Wainwright in one

of his personally illustrated guide books, carrying an Ordnance Survey map for back up. Having successfully navigated the route to their destination, a high crag summit, they spent a short time taking photographs of the panoramic view before beginning their descent via an alternative route, suggested by Wainwright. Identifying the path, they followed it for some time, crossing a wide plain. The path was so clearly marked that my friends didn't feel the need to refer to Wainwright's guide or their map. Then the path ran out.

They found themselves among a mass of heather and moss, criss-crossed by multiple intermittent sheep tracks. Disorientated, they then repeatedly consulted Wainwright's guide and the Ordnance Survey map, but were unable to locate their position with any certainty. The Lake District fells are majestic from ground level; but being up amongst them is to be minute in a vast landscape of high crags and peaks interspersed with boggy plains and wide tarns. Reaching the edge of a steep crag and looking down onto unfamiliar terrain, they admitted to one another they were lost. Wainwright's detailed notes and acclaimed sketches were irrelevant when they literally did not know where they stood. It was mid-afternoon, and luckily the skies were clear, but they had limited supplies of food and water left. As on their ascent, they had only sheep for company; they had not seen another human being for four hours.

They decided their only option was to head downhill by any means. This entailed scrambling down steep slopes, painstakingly making their way through stretches of high vegetation, stopping frequently to scan the landscape, searching for landmarks, finding none. Eventually they came to water, a fast-flowing stream they could reliably follow downhill. At the confluence of that stream with another, they were rewarded with the sight of a stone wall far below, and were able to locate themselves on the Ordnance Survey map. Thirty minutes later, they were further rewarded with a glimpse of the road which ran the length of the valley floor. They were back en route to the designated end of their hike.

Wainwright's route had specified directions, distance and gradient. My friends had estimated the time they expected it to take them. The unplanned detour added two miles and two hours to an already challenging walk. The path they had initially followed on the descent, a narrow but clear track stretching into the distance, had seemed obvious. But, as they later discovered, they had missed an early bifurcation which would have led them

downhill by a more gradual route. Motivated by necessity, comforted by companionship, and equipped with perhaps more courage than they were prepared to admit to, they persisted, and arrived safely, with a story to tell.

#### *Five: Persistence*

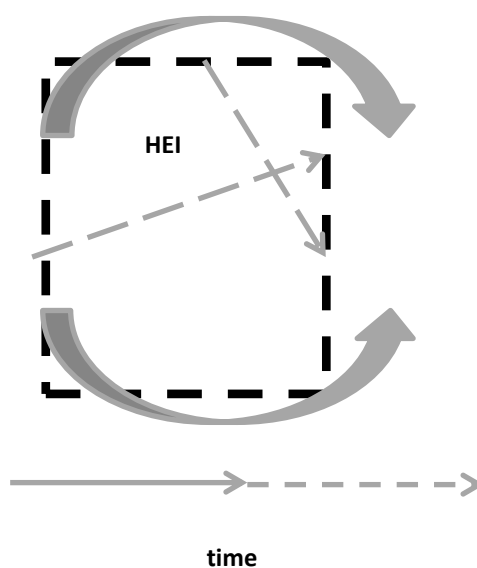
What happens when, as my friends experienced, the seemingly obvious path to the destination runs out? What happens when students' learning journeys are interrupted or difficult to navigate for any number of reasons: workload, academic difficulties, health problems, family circumstances, changes in employment? Perhaps a vital crossroads – an assignment or pass mark – is missed? Suddenly they're in unfamiliar territory with no designated path.

In getting lost, 'the familiar falls away ... somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery' (Solnit 2006). Navigation through terra incognita requires persistence: a gritty amalgam of motivation, companionship and courage. The case studies provide no shortage of examples. 'Most of the reasons for attrition are health-related. We're very lucky in getting most of them back within the five years. They're very tenacious. ... The vast majority of them have got their sights on getting this and making the sacrifices that are needed to' (Programme Director, New Ecclesiastical). Many mature part-time undergraduates study to develop or change their career; the vocational nature of their programmes increases the influence of employers on students' motivation to complete their courses. 'There's a massive incentive, that their employers expect it and therefore for their employment reasons they're going to stay with it' (Executive, New Ecclesiastical). When employer expectations do not equate with funding, and when the going gets tough, the depth of personal motivation is critical. 'I want to provide a better life for my family (Student, Northern City). 'I've wanted to do this all my life' (Student, Metropolitan Elite). 'Yes of course. It's hard work but that's what studying as a part-time student gets you. When I graduated after my Foundation degree it made it all worthwhile' (Student, Northern City).

Students and staff acknowledge the supportive role played by companionship. Shared circumstances and experiences contribute to a sense of cohort identity, even if that camaraderie is also based on a sense of shared disadvantage. 'We've not had the easiest of

journeys. We've had some issues from the start (Student, Modern Eastern). And courage? Courage comes in different guises but always constitutes a step forward. 'When I go into the big computer clusters, I feel a bit apprehensive that they'll think, what's the old lady doing here?' (Student, Metropolitan Elite). 'Wait for the looks on their faces when they get paired with you ... I can see them thinking oh my god, I'm with someone's my mum's age!' (Student, Metropolitan Elite). 'You just kind of swing from module to module and think, I'll just get through this module and then the next one comes up and you think, I'll just get through this module...' (Student, Northern City).

Persistence goes on behind the scenes; it is mundane and repetitive as well as remarkable. It underpins the successful retention of all students, but goes largely unrecognised in the institutional flurry of frontloaded packages and interventions. A totemic preoccupation with belonging in UK HE has obscured Tinto's emphasis on the longitudinal process of student persistence. 'If they haven't found a space for themselves in the first six weeks, they're likely to go', says the Faculty Dean at Modern Eastern – but Tinto recognises that older learners have 'qualitatively different experiences of separation, transition and incorporation from young, traditional students' (1988, p.454). Figure 7 attempts to capture this longitudinal character, the possibility of multiple and interrupted routes to the same destination, and the interaction of external and internal factors in both inhibiting and supporting course completion. Dotted rather than solid institutional borders represent the HEI not as bounded and separate but as relational, part of an individual's wider life.



**Figure 7: Persistence**

Staff persist too – as teachers, as advocates, as problem solvers – and from a position also characterised by peripherality. ‘It’s taken a long time for us to feel part of the wider picture, but one has to be persistent’ (Course Leader, Modern Eastern). ‘We do what we need to do to keep people on board ... there’s nothing I can’t get around’ (Programme Leader, Metropolitan Elite).

*Six: Notes from two wheels*

On a recent cycling trip, I arrived at a small town in Northumberland which declared itself ‘the Centre of Britain’. Had I wished to, I could have stayed at the Centre of Britain Hotel and washed my clothes at the Centre of Britain Laundrette. The town itself was pleasant enough but unremarkable, a service hub for the small rural communities in its vicinity and for tourists visiting Hadrian’s Wall nearby. Once an important supply point for the construction and operation of the wall, and much later a busy market town and railway stopping point between two major industrial cities, the town is now largely denuded of industrial, economic and human capital. To compensate, it has unilaterally reinvented its significance by claiming a new identity based on its central geographical position in the context of the four nations of Great Britain. It is a claim regarded with scepticism by some. When I remarked on the town’s notable geographical status, the owner of my bed and breakfast in a nearby village looked dubious. ‘Allegedly!’ he said. I later discovered that another small town, seventy miles south, makes an identical claim, also based on equidistance from the sea as measured along the principal points of the compass, but defining a different northernmost point of Britain. The centre, it seems, depends how you define the periphery.

The following day, I left my bicycle at the bed and breakfast and walked up to and along a section of Hadrian’s Wall that snakes along the dark cliff of the Whin Sill. Tourist literature bills the wall as the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, a fixed line of defence which separated civilisation from the barbarian tribes to the North. Other sources argue that the wall was far more porous a border than this suggests, and that its purpose was to raise taxes through policing customs, smuggling and immigration. The wall and its supporting system of ditches, forts and military roads is a quite astonishing feat of Roman civil engineering, but its political and symbolic significance were, for me, just as fascinating.

Touching stones which had been in place for two thousand years, I noted that the landscape on one side of the wall looked identical to that on 'the other'. I thought of the Berlin Wall, British Army checkpoints in Northern Ireland, the Israeli West Bank barrier ... contemporary examples of territory, identity and political power expressed in material form, each of them defining an edge, an outside. With the power to control the 'centre' comes the power to define the periphery.

*Seven: Running dry*

Tracking the path of retention strategy through each case study institution illustrated the interplay of tensions between centre and periphery. Prior's active strategy for document analysis emphasises the importance of moving away 'from a consideration of (documents) as stable, static and pre-defined artefacts. Instead we must consider them in terms of fields, frames and networks of action' (2003, p.2). I tried to follow institutional retention strategies from point of production in executive centres to points of consumption in faculties and classrooms.

Imagine reading a page of text written with a pen running out of ink. At the top of the page, the ink is plentiful; the text is bold and fully legible. A little further down the page and the flow begins to stutter. Further still and the ink is fading. Before the bottom of the page is reached, the ink runs dry. In the executive centres of the post-1992 case study institutions, statements about retention, framed by institutional missions and agendas, were bold, purposeful, assured, corporate. New Ecclesiastical's strategy draws on national literature, sets objectives, timeframes and targets, and details an ambitious action plan. Faced with falling retention rates, Northern City implemented a framework for good practice, 'examples of things that everybody should be doing at this level or that level, with all students', which included core requirements, recommendations and a timetable for review. At Modern Eastern, retention is integrated with student engagement and learning and teaching strategies. The corporate plan 'is quite clear about expectations about improvements to retention'. All three strategy propositions passed through extensive consultative mechanisms and were approved at the highest level of the institution.

Once I stepped away from the executive centre, however, the ink flow began to stutter. 'Once you've got a strategy, then the question you're really asking is, how does it find its

way out? Nobody chooses to go browsing around our strategies' (Retention Lead, New Ecclesiastical). New Ecclesiastical plans to put resources into specific role, to transport retention and success agendas moved 'backwards and forwards between the centre and the faculty. Because that's always the divide'. The divide, it became clear, is difficult to bridge.

The ink faded further in the face of scarce resources and disciplinary differences. Devolution of responsibility is an inexact science. 'In Engineering, you have to give them a mark or they 'ain't gonna do it! In Art and Design you might be ok, or some of the Social Sciences. But not in Engineering and not in Computing' (Faculty Manager, Northern City). It fades for want of time: 'It's difficult to disseminate stuff and get strategies going if everyone's so busy' (Programme Director, New Ecclesiastical). Strategies, too, run out of time, get taken over. Retention rates at Northern City improved and the framework document dropped below the executive parapet. The review timetable was set aside as other agendas – student satisfaction, student engagement – took centre ground. It became the responsibility of faculties to find local solutions to local retention 'problems' – and to be accountable for their success.

I had to turn detective to find traces of retention strategy in the spaces furthest from the executive centre. It was in interviews with academic teaching and support staff that the strategic ink of retention really ran dry. Interviewees looked apprehensive when I asked them if they were aware of their institution's strategy, but their responses were frank. 'If I'm brutally honest, no. We do talk a lot about recruitment, though, because we have to get bums on seats' (Programme Leader, New Ecclesiastical). 'All I hear about is the NSS ... I suppose it's part of the strategy for retention?' (Engagement Officer, Northern City). 'It's part of the student satisfaction element isn't it? I'm aware of it at the level of principle' (Lecturer, Modern Eastern). Here, a dedicated retention agenda has been absorbed by headline texts of student satisfaction and recruitment, writ large in teaching spaces. Yet it is at this human interface where much of the 'complex social process of student-institution negotiation' (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998, p.316) takes place.

The Hub's model differed from the others, not least because executive, teaching and support staff shared a common and supportive ethos in working with mature part-time

undergraduates. Here, the bespoke retention strategy was localised but longitudinal, holistic but specific, and aimed at preparing and supporting all mature and part-time students across the university throughout their student career. While in the wider context of Metropolitan Elite the Hub is peripheral, within the Hub itself, centre and periphery are so close as to be indistinguishable. There is a sense of staff walking alongside mature part-time undergraduates.

#### *Eight: Shared ownership*

The case studies highlighted two ways in which HEIs formalise their interaction with students as individuals: the student charter and personal tutoring systems. Student charters could be interpreted as non-binding contracts of understanding between institution and individual student. 'Our Student Charter sets out a range of expectations that we have. Especially in expecting that students take some responsibility for their own learning and for their own support. And we're willing to be held to account for our promises' (Services Executive, Modern Eastern). The ambition of Modern Eastern's Student Charter, 'We will do 101 things – literally 101, although we expect the students to do 83 things' (Faculty Dean, Modern Eastern), compares awkwardly with the disproportionately small copy of the Student Charter on the wall of the café at Northern City's Garden Campus. How meaningful, how practical is either one?

'If we can get the personal tutoring system in place ... it would go a long way towards meeting a broad set of needs. I think it would tick a lot of the boxes' (Retention Lead, New Ecclesiastical). Senior interviewees talked enthusiastically about personal tutoring systems, regarding their implementation as a key plank of retention and engagement activity, a crucial way of connecting individual students to a large, often impersonal institution. 'They'll hopefully see that their tutor is a friendly, approachable person who actually wants them to come and see them' (Student Advisor, Modern Eastern). Academic teaching staff are anything but enthusiastic about these centrally imposed frameworks of connection. 'For my programme, I looked at this and thought, now how are we going to manage this? Do we give a group of students' names to a member of staff who they might not actually ever meet?' (Programme leader, New Ecclesiastical).

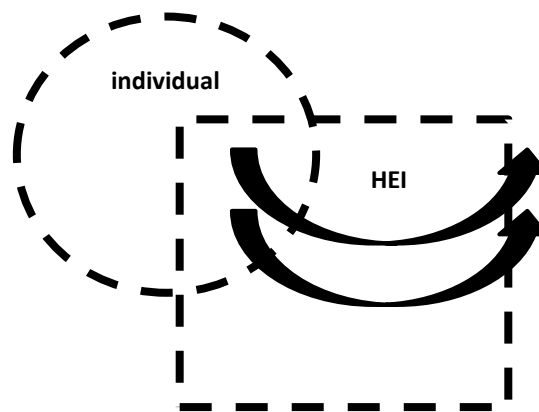


Students, too, struggled with the logistics of the system. 'We do have a personal tutor we just don't have a lot of contact with them. It comes down to time and when we're in the university and when they're in the university' (Student, Modern Eastern). The systems prove ineffective in comparison with the localised, intensive relationships some part-time students develop with individual tutors. 'Our best tutors were both part-time students before they were tutors, so they've lived this journey. But they're also victims of their own success because they're really good and everybody wants their time because they're the most helpful people. Our tutor last year knew all of us, all of our names, all of our grades ... if your marks went down she would keep an eye on it and be straight on it' (Student, Modern Eastern). 'They'll do Skype, they'll do email, they'll do late night tutorials if that's what we need. ... The tutors are really supportive, it's just the wider university system is not geared up for part-time students' (Student, Northern City). 'I would guess that part-time students are almost always on the back foot in a way, and that's made up for by the care and attention from the programme staff ... 'There's a very strong understanding of the context and environment in which those people are working' (Retention Lead, New Ecclesiastical).

What seems most practical and meaningful for part-time students *and* individual staff is a version of shared ownership on a localised level. Shared ownership develops at the human interface between institution and individual. Whether in isolated pockets of the institution or in a departmental framework such as the Hub, all the case studies reveal examples of compensatory behaviour by staff to bridge gaps between rhetoric and experience, between difference and belonging. It is hard to measure and it doesn't figure in institutional rankings, but this is critical work. It takes root in part-time students' learning, and encourages persistence and the development of an evolving sense of a place for themselves in the context of higher level study. Staff in all case study institutions regularly refer to creating nurturing spaces: protective enclaves, a village within the big city of the university. 'I think retention is high, achievement is higher because I and my colleagues see the student as an individual, you need to think about their whole life situation' (Lecturer, Metropolitan Elite). This places demands on individual staff to work beyond core hours and to make lengthy preparations for mitigating circumstances and board meetings. Professional and temporal boundaries become stretched and porous. 'The idea is that we have to pull out all the stops to retain students' (Course Leader, Modern Eastern). 'We just have to bend over backwards, really; do anything to get that student through ...but if we

just go that extra mile ... and they succeed, then we've done something really good' (Student Support Officer, Metropolitan Elite).

In Figure 8, shared ownership is characterised by a distinction between individual and institution – the individual at large in the world, the institution an extroverted activity space, but connected by porous borders, overlapping but not restrictive. The individual is not owned by the university, their interests coincide. The arrows represent common effort in joint enterprise, leading through and beyond the university. A dynamic of progression beyond the borders of both participants indicates the potential for transformation. This is often seen as a one-way process, higher level study as transformative for the individual, but Figure 8 implies that the institution, too, is in process, in flux, not only in relation to changing political regimes and central policies, but in relationship with its students.



**Figure 8: Shared ownership**

The institution-centric version of retention perpetuates a linear trajectory and bounded space of learning, despite the fact that, as this thesis has shown, 'retention' is a contested term, measured in multiple ways, and variable across institution and attendance mode. In the dominant narrative of belonging and retention, belonging is also bounded within campus space and by dominant practices. Imagining a wider territory for the 'complex social process of student-institution negotiation' (Ozga and Sukhmandan 1998, p.316) involves challenging the predominance of reductive quantitative measurements of completion and non-completion and recognising the significance of persistence and shared ownership

### *Nine: Contested territory*

Full-time study now not only holds the centre ground of English HE, it crowds the whole territory, pushing different ways of engaging with higher level study to a strategically precarious periphery. The cultural capital of young, full-time students fuels the engine with which the model reproduces itself, over and over. The rules, rhythms and traditions of the traditional university model continue to dominate the field of English HE, shaping and governing play, a bias reinforced by governmental policy. The Hub temporarily realigns centre and periphery, making mature part-time undergraduates, many of whom are socially disadvantaged, the centre of its efforts in Metropolitan Elite's Russell Group, research-intensive environment but the essential topography of the territory holds firm and power relationships still define the periphery.

The centre shifts, resets. There are incursions into elite HE territory, into the spaces between 'old' and 'new'. Modern Eastern has its 'star performing' degree programmes which attract applicants from across the country; Northern City talks proudly of its REF performance 'in certain areas'; New Ecclesiastical is investing in infrastructure for a growing young, full-time student population who have expectations of a 'traditional undergraduate experience'. How might we re-imagine the relationship between centre and periphery? Richardson proposes 'bringing into the centre that which has been marginalised ... telling stories of the silenced, the textually disenfranchised' (1997, p.58). Her 'feminist speaking position' increases the visibility of the periphery, brings it into sharper focus. Hooks argues for a different strategy, for a different 'mode of seeing' which draws on her experiences of growing up poor, Black and female in the United States. It is embedded in her writing on gender, race and class from a postmodern and post-colonial perspective:

Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body main up of both margin and center.

(hooks 1984, p.xviii)

Hooks recasts the margins as ‘critical locations from which the relatively powerless can challenge dominant knowledges’ (McDowell 1999, p.94). Is this what I discern in the accounts of staff in case study institutions working on part-time programmes? They know that full-time study is not the only reality. Sometimes they know it from their own experience as part-time undergraduates. ‘I’m always in there with elbows, fighting for part-time ... a lot of the decisions are made on the full-time and the Masters and I have to say – have you thought about part-time?’ (Course Leader, Modern Eastern). ‘You’re having to work round systems that aren’t quite right’ (Lecturer, Northern City). ‘The battles I have as programme director, with the university through central services are still trying to explain that our students don’t follow a traditional academic year or an official university day’ (Programme Director, New Ecclesiastical). They feel they have been fruitlessly articulating this mode of seeing for a long time. Their distance and their difference from the ‘centre’ mean it is difficult to get their voices heard.

Both Richardson and hooks disturb the dominant binary of centre and periphery, but their critical perspectives remain framed by it. They do not dissolve it, nor substantially challenge the association of periphery with deficit. How can we re-imagine the relationship between centre and periphery in a way that acknowledges spaces between? The borderland analysis of this thesis leads to an understanding of belonging as a relational, contested, negotiated process and reconfigures spaces between inclusion and exclusion. Abes’ strategy of borderland analysis is influenced by and adapts Anzaldua’s challenge to dualism:

To live in the Borderlands means to  
put *chile* in the borscht,  
eat whole wheat tortillas  
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accents;  
to be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints

(Anzaldua, *La Frontera*, 1999)

Anzaldua argues against fixed positions of binary thought and states of being. In her prose and poetry she gives shape to a third space, a new location ‘where individuals fluctuate between two discrete worlds, participating in both and wholly belonging to neither’ (Abes 2009, p.528). The ‘third space is not itself a marginal location, but replaces the two that construct the hybridity’ (McDowell 1999, p.212). This is encapsulated in the notion of an individual aware of conflicting and meshing identities:

you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat  
forerunner of a new race,  
half and half – both woman and man, neither  
a new gender; ...

To survive the Borderland  
You must live *sin fronteras*  
Be a crossroads.

(Anzaldua, *La Frontera*, 1999)

In emphasising the rich territory of 'space between' and the capacity of individuals to occupy it, Anzaldua problematises the power relationships which define it.

This chapter too, has attempted to map a wider more complex territory for retention. In this atlas of belongings, each map suggests a route towards rethinking the dominant narrative and reframing it in a multiple, complex way. Centre and periphery are common spaces intersected by multiple networks of social relations: multiple centres experienced in multiple ways. In the spaces between, individuals negotiate dimensions of belonging.

## **RETHINKING RETENTION**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE?**

What does this research mean for the HE sector? The original project proposal intended that it would result in a set of recommendations *for* practice in relation to mature part-time undergraduates. *In* practice, I have found myself unable to provide such a neat conclusion.

This thesis has argued that understanding belonging through a single discipline of social science results in a reductive narrative. Borrowing from other disciplinary traditions has resulted in a rich analysis of belonging as contested and dimensional. Bringing spatial, psychosocial and geographical ideas to bear upon belonging in HE enables thinking to move beyond that reductive narrative and to yield an enriched understanding of a highly complex phenomenon.

My critical interrogation of 'belonging' in institutional literature, strategy and practice demonstrates that assumed or common understandings of what belonging in HE is (or should be) tend, unconsciously or otherwise, to exclude particular groups of students and/or to position them in deficit. Dominant definitions and measures of retention are linear and uniform measures of success which fail to accommodate the 'complex social process of student-institution negotiation' (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998). More mature part-time undergraduates complete their courses, than withdraw. They do so despite significant structural disadvantages, exhibiting remarkable persistence often in conjunction with significant efforts from teaching and support staff.

Instead of a set of recommendations for practice therefore, this thesis recommends an institutional and sectoral rethink on belonging, a move from the universalised narrative which dominates policy and practice, towards an opening up to complexity, to the potential of a diverse student body. Approaches to strategy and practice which acknowledge and encompass multiple and complex versions of 'belonging in HE' can only increase institutional capacity to engage with all student constituencies more meaningfully within this wider territory.

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# APPENDICES

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## **APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**

### **STAFF: SENIOR STRATEGIC**

#### **Example A (New Ecclesiastical)**

- R First of all I wondered whether you could just describe your role here?
- I Hmm. I'm PVC (Academic) here and have been since 2005 and before that I was PVC overall. We were then pre-university title. Before that I was a Dean of Students, so I've had a role in student retention issues here since 1998 and before that I was Principal Lecturer in X (field). So I've come from a teaching background. So my role currently would be to look after admissions, so making sure that we recruit to target. So I'm responsible for the planning office, so the setting of all of our targets, then making sure that we admit the right number of students to meet the targets. I'm responsible for our HESA return information and looking at the performance indicators, making the various reports to the governing body. Responsible for all the administration as in the registry. Responsible for all the learning and teaching strategies and within that is where I've located our focus on student retention and learning and teaching here also includes the Library. I'm also responsible for student health and wellbeing, which of course has got our counselling, financial support services in there, and also our one stop shop where students can come for information and advice. I'm also the interface with the Students' Union, so I've got the university role for ensuring the positive student experience. I think those are ... oh and of course I'm responsible for quality and standards, I'm a QAA Institutional Reviewer myself.
- R Are there enough hours in the day?!
- I I'm retiring I should say this year. So I've been working at New Ecclesiastical for 30 years, part-time at one point, then full-time from 1988. So, it's the right time for me.
- R Congratulations! I wonder if you could talk about the positioning of New Ecclesiastical in the broad HE market, if you like, or the spectrum?
- I Yeah. Well we started life as a teacher training institution and then we've been on a journey of diversifying the student cohorts here. You'll see how this links to your question in a minute. So that by 1995 we were quite diverse, we've got a third teacher training, a third basically nursing and the allied health professions, a third doing general subjects. In 1998 we get degree awarding powers. 2005 we get university title, that's why I'm mentioning it because we're one of the newer university titles from that point of view, so that's 2005. Then at that time there was a split between getting university title and having research degree awarding powers. We get research degree awarding powers here in 2009. Prior to that, anyone who got a PhD from this institution would have had a University of X PhD, even if it was in X (discipline), which the University of Kent doesn't do. So we then get research degree awarding powers in 2009 and our PhDs are now New Ecclesiastical PhDs. So the reason for mentioning that is that it positions us as one of the newer universities to get university title. I would call us a middle-size university, we've got about 20,000 students. We were founded by the church ... we've been considering whether we bring something distinctive as a result of our that. Les Ebdon would say, well if you're that caring where is it manifesting itself in

your retention figures. You know, where are you adding value because of your that distinctiveness? We're also part of the Million+ group. Is that ok for positioning.

R The primary reason that I've selected this university, in the shortlist is because of its really strong retention rates, particularly for PT which is unusual.

I Yes.

R Because it's normally the other way round. So I wondered whether you felt that was to do with the ethos or whether there were other reasons why you felt New Ecclesiastical might be doing well?

I Well you only have to go back to the year 2000 here where we had the majority of our students were part-time and mature So it's in the lifeblood of the institution that we have part-time cohorts and in 2000 over 50% were part-time students here. And the reason the proportions are so high is because we would have a very large number of students doing teacher training, part-time, so for what we call it Diploma of Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector - what was the Cert Ed in the old days. We would have very large numbers of teachers that are doing CPD qualifications. We would have large numbers of people that are doing CPD in health and social care, you know, people who are now nursing but they need Advanced Nurse Prescribing or whatever as part of their work. We would have a lot of police students here and therefore a number of our students would be students continuing with CPD. But of course, a lot of those would be post-registration or postgraduate which is not really your focus. But I mention them to make the point that it is in the lifeblood of this institution to recruit mature and part-time and therefore, it would become second nature to us to have to make sure that we're set up for part-time and mature. Do they stay here because we're more caring? Because we have got very good retention rates, you're right, and that's why they're not a target group in our Access Agreement. The only part-time students we've made a target group in our Access Agreement are disabled students, we don't have quite so many with disability support funding, so there the part-time figure is slightly below benchmark. But otherwise, the retention rates, the continuation rates are better than benchmark, they're excellent. So they haven't been a target group. So is it because we're caring? Well I'm sure people like the feeling of being here, they say. Even though we're 20,000 students, we've got a caring community feel. People like that rather than a very dispersed, alienating type environment. So that will have helped but my guess is that the main reason why we're better isn't so much the caring ethos as the vocational focus. People come here to do a part-time award for particular purpose. They're usually sponsored by their employer. I think they need that award, it's mandatory in many cases to have that award. There's a massive incentive, that their employers expect it and therefore for their employment reasons they're going to stay with it, I would have thought that was hugely part of why they would continue with that. Probably more so than other things we're doing, although I wouldn't want to underestimate those of course.

R Yes. And a lot of things that you're doing or planning to do are set out in the retention strategy aren't they.

I Yes, which is now approved by Academic Board. And you've met X (member of staff with responsibility for retention)?

R Yes.

- I X has been leading on that and it is getting, as he will have explained, a far more precise focus now on things like - can we track the students at risk and put in early interventions? Can we flag that maybe part-time attrition isn't an issue for this university across the board, but might it be if we were to drill down on the data and therefore we're starting to flag to our Faculties and Departments - these are your key retention issues and can you look at it and report back what you're doing about it. So getting the ownership.
- R That was one of the things I wanted to ask you, how you felt, what your perspective was on how that retention strategy functioned, across, within, up and down the university? Obviously these things are approved at a very high level within an organisation.
- I Yes. And I chair the University's Widening Access Participation and Student Retention Sub-Committee which reports to Learning and Teaching Committee and that has representation on it from all of the Faculties, so this is one way that we make sure that when we agree a strategy, it's agreed with the Faculties being able to bring a bottom up perspective, as well as a top-down perspective, so we agree it with them. And it also gives us the opportunity at the meeting to share best practice across from one institute, one Faculty to another. So things will come up and I will say, X, as the university lead for student retention, would you go and look at models of best practice in the Faculty X because if they're doing things we could share with Faculty Y, then we want to understand why they're doing so well. So that's how we kind of make sure that we've got that. And the other thing we do is to - having set, drilled down on the data the E&D data as well as our HESA data more generally, we can say to Faculties, these are the issues for you and what are you doing about them in the Faculties and the Faculties can then report back to the committee.
- R It's a loop?
- I Yeah, yeah.
- R. You mentioned the history of the institution in terms of part-time provision. Obviously there have been significant changes and events within the HE sector, including that massive drop in part-time numbers. Without revealing any figures that you're uncomfortable to reveal I wondered how that might have changed, if it has, New Ecclesiastical's provision or vision of its provision?
- I Yeah. Well it has hit us significantly as it has in the sector. Our undergraduate part-time has reduced as I said from being over 50% in 2000. It was already starting to go into decline. You've got the trebling of tuition fees in September 2006, so there was already some decline coming in. Partly because we were growing the full-time numbers so as a proportion, they were reducing. But undergraduate part-time, rather no, sorry, the part-time population is now more like 36%, when it used to be 50%. But what's significant is that the part-time population has also gone down in numbers, even though we are much, much bigger as an institution. So say it was roundabout, let's say 6500 of the students then were part-time when they made up 50%, now there's only about 6300, but given we're now 20,000, do you see how now as a proportion they really have declined. And the undergraduate reduction, part-time has gone down I think the figure is 30% in the last two years since the coming in of the new fees regime and we've seen a drop of 28% of part-time undergraduate. So we're just beneath what the national average is. And the main reason for that has been the Diploma of Teaching in the lifelong learning sector, if you could imagine that at one point you

were getting HEFCE funding, for Band D and Band C, so you had an institutional contribution to bring for people studying 60 credits in the FE College to get PT Diploma Teaching in the LLL Sector. Well, suddenly there is no institutional resource to bring and we are charging £8500 with no HEFCE contribution to bring. The fee really for a Diploma of Teaching in the LLL sector should be £4250, if it's going to be pro rata. We didn't go pro rata, we said it's an FE College environment, we'll go pro rata on £6000, not pro rata on the £8500 which our FT students pay. And even then, £3000 fees, if the students are having to find it themselves, has been too much. And so you're seeing this massive decline and then the FE Colleges can say, well, it's a mandatory teaching award but we could get that through City and Guilds much cheaper for what we need. So that's been the really big decline and then you've got exactly the same going on with something like Fd in X where they might have to pay those comparable amounts. So those that come, we're doing very well at retaining. But we're losing the market. Yeah. Which as I say, we're not out of line with the sector, in fact we're slightly better than the sector but it's extremely hard in the part-time market and you're losing your employer sponsors as well. If the NHS has got to put its money into funding the hospitals, there's not going to be the same amount of money for people that need to be doing um various CPD awards. Now they might be post-registration but some of them might have been at the equivalent of BSc Hons, the Level 6, so you know, the funding is always there either.

R You just don't know how that's going to resolve do you? If it will resolve?

I Well we've got in our strategic plan we would be looking to be innovative to make sure that we can develop niche markets that will be people, people will have particular requirements, maybe in the area of chartered marketing or you know, financial qualifications or whatever. How can you be niche, how can you be innovative, responsive, flexible? We are looking at, we're investing £18 million in Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching (TELT) and it includes blended learning. So the very things we also need to recruit the students are also the very things we hope will help to retain the students. So making better use of technology for e-submission, so they don't have to come to the university to hand that in, face-to-face. Number one, they're thinking, oh this is the kind of institution that would fit alongside my work, so we can hope to buck the trend on recruiting. But also to make sure that we can you know, make sure that our arrangements are flexible, that we don't say well unless you can e-submit between 9-5 we won't have anything outside of those times, because we haven't got our technology department supporting if anything goes wrong. The view here is no, we've got to become increasingly 24/7 and if there are technological difficulties, well who's on standby to sort that out, not say to the students, no our doors are open 9-5. So that's how we're trying to reverse that.

R Which also looks towards a different model, or a changing, developing model of engagement with an institution, if a lot of it is taking place at a distance. Even if it's essentially face-to-face provision. And that challenges the whole concept of belonging that's set out in *What Works*. Are you familiar with *What Works*?

I Yes. And I do agree that that is absolutely critical for new young, full-time undergraduates and I say to them at Open Days and when I first meet them, try to get a role in the Union, try and join a club, a society, you'll get like-minded friends. And that makes a massive difference to their retention. With part-time, it's how do you keep the motivation for their wanting to continue to engage in this level of study when they've got their domestic arrangements, their family arrangements, if



they're working full-time at the same time? How can you help them juggle all of those other distractions sometimes, on their time. And the biggest problem for them is that whilst they might have got sponsorship to come and do the course in the first place, it only takes a change in fortune that well, three of the people in my hospital, in my section are now off sick and I can't be released any more. So we then encourage them to interrupt not to withdraw, but there's all of that going on which I think is far more relevant to part-time retention, than sense of belonging.

R Those external factors.

I Yes. You try to get them in here for a sense of belonging at a cheese and wine evening or a pub type quiz or something. Very few are looking for that as part-time. They're much more instrumental in their focus.

R As I said I've been looking at the spaces and different places within institutions and I'm interested in two particular things at New Ecclesiastical. One is the split nature of City Campus – with three key student-focused sites, separate from one another with very distinct functions. I wondered whether that was purely a logistics thing, this is where the spaces, this is where the land was, that kind of thing, or whether it's felt that there's some kind of advantage in having those distinct identities?

I I think it's mostly been pragmatic in one sense but as the university's grown, if you think it's only 50 years since we were only 70 students and they started life adjacent to the main campus here and that served our purposes very well. We're now 20,000 students and we've needed to have services and facilities which reflect what university students willing to spend £9000 - what they're looking for. Now when we compared ourselves, even with somewhere like the University of X you could actually, around our City campus, you could actually say, well we're a city centre campus (interviewee is drawing a diagram) and anything that falls within here, whether it's our student residences, you're within roughly 10-15 minute walk. If you go X or Y (other campus universities), you're going to have 10-15 minute walks between your buildings and your car parks anyway. So then it was opportunist when, for example, the building that now houses our Student Union, opened last September. We felt we wanted an iconic space, here in the city for our library and learning facilities that would be suitable for 20,000 students, not the little more FE College-looking library that we had then. So this one was built and opened four years ago at £35million and it so happened that the old concrete building that was here, was for sale and that was demolished and this one was put up and it gives us that presence as well, it's got that wow factor. So it has really been, it's not been in that sense, we've intended to become quite a linear type thing. We have said, we're a city centre campus and everything is about a 10-15 minute walk using the buildings that have become available and that suit the needs of modern part-time or full-time, postgraduate and undergraduate students.

R Another question I want to ask is about the different campuses. I haven't been to Urban or Coastal yet. I'm hoping to.

I Yes, Urban would be a good one for you to go to.

R My understanding is that it has a very different student profile from City campus?

I Oh yes.

R What issues does that throw up, for example in terms of where students belong, what your identity is as a student, whether you wear the New Ecclesiastical sweatshirt or not? Does that throw up any challenges for the university?

I It does and it doesn't. I think it does more for Coastal campus so I'll come back to that. The Urban campus has got about 2500 students and they are virtually all of them doing Nursing and the Allied Health professions. So there's a large population in that area, several urban populations coming together. And a lot of them are going to be what I'd call women returners. So they've perhaps got their families in their local schools, got their mortgages and they want to be a nurse, they want to be a radiographer, they want to be an occupational therapist, they want to be a social worker. They are primarily our population at Urban campus. So they're coming in because that's where you can study to become a midwife or all of those things. Alongside it yes, we have got some X, some Y (degree programmes) students and again, very similar. So from your mature student point of view they've got a particular identity as largely vocational again, which goes back to our point and looking for these particular registrations with the professional statutory regulatory bodies. The X programme is slightly different and we have had Z programme for our students there. But you can tell it's all around the public services really. We've also got people who are training to work in Careers, as Careers Advisers and so on. So their identity is that when they'll go into hospitals they'll be very proud for example to be wearing their New Ecclesiastical uniform as trainee health professionals, so from that point of view, they would see themselves absolutely as part of this university. A few of them play for the sports teams but there wouldn't be masses. And we do make sure that we've got a Students' Union presence there and they run most of the sports and one person particularly wanted to play for New Ecclesiastical sports and we said we'll pay your travel so you can come and play your hockey with the New Ecclesiastical team because you're so wanting to play it and so on. So we're doing that. But I hope from the Urban thing you'll get that sense that their alignment is really I think, with their professional group, they are part of New Ecclesiastical Nursing cohort and so on. Why it's different at Coastal is because Coastal is recruiting far more young undergraduate, full-time students and they are much more vociferous, outspoken with saying we want a comparable experience to what they've got at City campus. So their satisfaction levels in the NSS are not as high at Coastal. Some of them love it, absolutely love that because there's only 1000 students at Coastal and they've got that much more personal feel. They put on their gigs and things because there's quite a lot of creative programmes going on. But they haven't got a library like this for example and they haven't easily got sports facilities. We've got a big £5million sports centre here that we opened. So there is that feel you'll get about the space and place will reflect that they're looking for the traditional, expected, undergraduate experience. At the moment we haven't got a differentiator on fee but we are currently looking at that and I think there's every possibility the Coastal, they're full-time so not so much in line with what you're looking at - but I think there's every possibility they'll end up with a standard fee more like the FE College, has £6000 not the £9000 which our fees will be next year. So there is a real difference in the extent to which the wanting the 'I'm a New Ecclesiastical student, with the New Ecclesiastical sweatshirt on is really different from Urban campus.

R Is there anything else you wanted throw in.

I I think you've picked up that we would be about 40% mature. I mentioned our figures have gone down to about 36% part-time so that might be quite helpful. The very same things that we're looking to do to try and enhance the recruitment of part-time, mature undergraduates in this new fees regime will be the very same things that they need to continue to assist their retention. So I've got there the things that we've talked about, the flexible delivery, the 24/7 services, the use of

TELT, those blended learning and so on. But generally you're right to have picked up, we're very strong here on student retention and we haven't had to target it because of noticing that we've got particular issues around mature students or particular issues around part-time students with retention. We are better than benchmark so it's not emerged. And we've set ourselves generally a target figure that from our Access Agreement, we're trying to maintain withdrawals at being 4% or less per annum. Which is incredibly stretching but we were 3.6% when I wrote the Access Agreement. You couldn't say allow us to charge more and we'll get worse! So all I could say was, allow to charge more and we'll try and keep it at 4% or lower. And we've found that an enormous challenge because as you know, most of the students you lose, you lose in the first year, so if you grow your first year as happened for us immediately in 11-12, then you're going to - almost just by the numbers coming in in the first year, you're not going to hit that target. But I think we got better between this coming year, the HESA figures showed that we'd got better for 12-13 year. It did get fractionally better because you've got that massive growth in the 11-12 year. I think we're sitting at something like 5.6% withdrawals which is still very very good. I think the average is more around 9 - 10, so I've just put that in for you. And keeping that is our strategic target so I think those are the keys things.

R Thank you. Very interesting. Thank you very much.

**(end 35.55)**

## STAFF: SENIOR STRATEGIC

### Example B (Northern City)

I My substantial role has responsibility for four key areas: academic quality and standards, technology enhanced learning, innovation and professional development and the team that we call Student Experience but is probably closer to an institutional research type function, so it's like an educational research/student engagement team.

R And, how would you say your role links to retention?

I It's in terms of policy, so we have a Learning and Teaching Policy which identifies key priorities for particularly, supporting student engagement, which I would directly link to progression and retention. And I would probably talk about progression and attainment rather than retention but I suspect that's my educational developer coming out in me. So I am responsible for those types of policies. We have a Retention and Student Success Policy and Framework which was written by my colleague who you'll meet but probably sits now in my area of responsibility in terms of reviewing and ensuring that it's in place and I have a feeling we will have to come back and look at retention next year and I'll explain that context in a minute. I then have colleagues in my team who do particular areas of activity to support particularly student attainment for progression or retention however you want to frame it, so can I give you one or two examples of the kind of work my team are doing?

R Absolutely.

I So I have a colleague who's doing a lot of work around Inclusive Practice at the moment. We are, as you know, a very proud widening participation institution. Lots of part-time students, lots of mature students, quite a high proportion of students with disabilities. We are developing further the guidance we provide to staff about how they design their modules, how particularly, the work we're doing at the moment is how they design their assessment to be more inclusive. So there's quite a lot of work around how we can do that at the moment. I've got another colleague who's doing quite a bit of work around academic writing and the research that we're doing another group of students, BME students, clearly indicates that its academic literacy and particularly writing is one of the key issues about building their confidence in their studies and that seems to be quite a significant factor in their success - or maybe not quite so successful as they should be or could be. And we are below the sector norm in terms of that group of students so that's really something we're trying to explore, so there's a HEA project looking into that. What's coming out is around academic writing, I have a colleague who's doing some work around again, developing resources and support around academic writing. We're also using that to try and support our international students particularly those who come from overseas to top up and do, say, a year's study in the UK and again it seems to be the defining factor for academic study, particularly at the higher levels. So academic literacy might be the description they use. There's a third piece of work, I'm just trying to think ... I've just started a little piece of work with our Students' Union. What's come through our strategy development - we're in the process of developing a new strategy and so by this summer we should have a new Learning and Teaching Strategy, is the importance of belonging, identity or a sense of affiliation for students with their course of study. It seems to be about the course of study that's key. We're a large, complex institution and so we end up with an experience which seems to be more about

managing and delivering modules, rather than coherent programmes. That's something we're trying to look at how we can address that and it seems to be that it's when students feel a strong sense of affiliation with their course, not only do they experience higher levels of satisfaction which of course might be of great interest to managers like me! But they seem to do better, they progress, they attain better, if you like. And so I'm just starting to do a little piece of work with the Students' Union around what influences that sense of belonging and affiliation and at the moment it's looking at the physical spaces that we have on campus. And so they're doing a very simple project where they're going out and taking pictures of places where they feel that sense of belonging, both in their personal life and then in their study. And let's see what happens.

R That's extremely interesting to me because the two themes that I've developed in my research are belonging and space.

I I think they're fundamental and I think it's an area that we have a difficulty with here.

R I also see them as problematic in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates.

I Yes.

R Because the universal model is very much based on a young, full-time, residential essentially, student.

I I would say that's exactly where we are because if you think about - you're right, our part-time students largely come on campus for face-to-face, not entirely but a large chunk do. That is often more flexible in terms of hours so they're often on campus when others aren't but of course, if you're on campus in the evening, most of the catering outlets, if not all, are closed after 6pm in the evening and there is very little going on other than the library or the learning centre is open or available. So the places feel often dark and empty. So no matter what we do with that space and so that our full-time students who are on campus during the day can really have that sense of belonging and there are things we could do, simple things we could do, how does that translate for those students who don't come on to the campus as often or at different times and I think that's a real challenge. I want to start with the full-time students first but I think you're right and there was some work in one of our faculties faculty because there were real concerns for part-time students who were studying in the evening and the lack of access to simple facilities. Could they get a cup of tea? And the answer was - no. That's not great. That is pretty awful really. Even down to a machine, was there a machine available for them to get a cup of tea? And so we have tried to timetable them into places where there's more likely to be resources and maybe Jill referred to that. But I think it's a defining factor. For all students, but I think you're right, I'd not really translated into part-time because I've been trying to focus on full-time undergraduate. But you're exactly right. It's a really interesting piece of work. It's a very light touch at the moment but it seems to really caught the imagination so there's a real thread in our strategy now about how we use space, learning spaces, formal, informal. I've got a particular focus on our classroom, they determine the pedagogy by the way they've been designed, because you can only teach in one way, all looking in one direction. But there's definitely something about the informal spaces where students do that study out of the classroom. At the moment, when you walk around the campus that tends to be the Learning Centre which is heavily subscribed, very busy at almost all times of the day and we've now got 24/7 and it's busy throughout the day but when you look at the alternative

spaces, I'm not sure there are those alternative spaces so that might be why the Learning Centres are so busy. And it's about that proximity in terms of space, for students and staff to work together on their subject and it's that element of space I'm really interested in. And to give you an example of how simple this can be, this comes partly from Graham Gibbs work about students almost becoming part of the academy, the dimensions of quality, almost of becoming part of that community of practice around that subject, from day one, feeling like they're part of ... some people might describe them as junior researchers or whatever, but they're starting their journey and engaging with their subject. And there's clear evidence that where there are opportunities where staff and students are working together closely, around their subject, their identity, you get again, demonstrable learning gains. One of the really areas that does really well here, doesn't have very many part-time students though, is Mathematics. Students really express a real sense of affiliation to the subject and to the staff but the reality is they don't have this wonderful space, they're located round an L shaped part of a corridor and because it's a wide corridor they've put three tables in the corridor and that's where they meet their students. And it's as simple as that. There's nothing grand, it's as wonderful as this room in terms of its decor, in fact it's slightly worse! But it doesn't matter, there's a space where they can interact and talk about Maths basically. That's what we miss. Now if you translate this into part-time students coming on to campus out of hours, it's very difficult to become part of that community. That's why I suggest you might want to talk to Health and I know this translates into an online environment so perhaps it's not what you're interested in that sense, but it is possible to generate that sense of affiliation by using technology as well. So the way in which they engage their learners, whether they are learners who come on campus and also study at distance, they might have that combination, that blended approach, what you do in that online environment, can, to some degree, alleviate that sense of disconnect, so you can build those peer groups, those communities depending on how you use those environments and I think that's something I'm really interested in using as well. You can foster belonging without it always having to be within a physical environment. Does that help? It gives you context.

R Yes definitely. And I want to come back to retention and part-time in a minute. But I wondered if you could give me a picture of how you see Northern City positioned in the HE sector at the moment?

I Just generally as an institution or in terms of retention and progression?

R Generally as an institution – initially at least.

I That's very interesting because we're reflecting on that with our new strategy. My focus is teaching and learning, so I would say this but of course I still feel we are an institution with teaching at its heart and that's what defines who we are and what we do. We have a really proud heritage around practical education. It used to be about placements and sandwich degrees and that's still here. There's a real emphasis on academic challenge but proximity to practice, so real world practical application of theory if you like and close proximity to employers and professional bodies and so on. At the same time we do have research and we have some outstanding research but it's in clearly defined areas if you like and I think where we are is I think we're trying to confirm our position, to strengthen those bits of research that we have and making stronger connections into the curriculum and strengthening those practical applications with employers and professional bodies. But the emphasis is very much it's about an academically rigorous experience but

located next to, or relevant to practice and there's a wonderful phrase that I've forgotten but is in the new strategy which says that more eloquently and essentially that's what it is. We are still a very large institution, I think we've slightly shrunk but we're still very large as an institution. We're very popular in terms of student application. We predominantly teach students on campus, both full-time and part-time. Part-time is a challenge for us in terms of numbers and that's contracting slightly. Mature and our diverse population, we still recruit incredibly well. We easily exceed any targets around widening participation, almost without trying in terms of students turning up at the university. And we do largely, always have a great record in terms of how well they do, their progression, their retention whatever. With the one exception, round BME, which I mentioned earlier. Which is something which we do need to do some deeper work into. What's happened as an institution I think in some ways and some of the other metropolitans are similar, is that we've grown quite rapidly in many senses. If anything, we've probably grown more than others. We're an incredibly popular institution and it's true that we have grown rapidly in terms of numbers so we've gone almost up not quite by 10,000 in number but not far off, in a relatively short period of time. Without necessarily growing the infrastructure, the physical buildings. That means you end up having to manage the experience which I think we do exceedingly well but what you then see in terms of student feedback and what you might see in terms of the NSS is that something's got lost in that managing effectively a growth in numbers and it's something about the - how can I put it? The challenge for us is about that quality of interaction, quality of the time we spend with our students, both in and out of the classroom, that student engagement and I think by focusing on managing number we've lost something around identity about courses and quality of interaction. Because we're into managing numbers and classes and timetabling and that's been quite a lot of the language over the last 2 or 3 years, how we manage the student experience. And I wonder whether we've lost something by doing that? That would be my concern in terms of Learning and Teaching. In terms of progression and retention, we again, easily meet sector norms. We have a very good record around progression and retention. But the pressures coming from changes to student funding will mean that we will, I think, have to focus on progression and retention more than we have recently. And I think that's probably code for we can't always expect to always be flooded with applicants. I mean we may need to make sure that we also support those students who we have. And I don't think we've had to worry about that, as much, of late. So I think we're at a point of change and we're trying to anticipate what that change might mean for us, that's quite difficult, once the cap's been removed. But we feel we're well placed, we're a very popular institution, very teaching-0dominated, we give a very campus- based experience.

- R So you're not - suffering - in the way that some of the squeezed middle institutions are since the AAB?
- I No, no, recently we've managed to maintain our numbers well recently. Whether we can continue is a real challenge now that the cap's gone. And that's going to be really interesting for us. Like I say, we have had a period of rapid growth, even with those funding changes and I think it is because students are coming here because of the practical, vocational nature of the education.
- R Would you say you have quite a significant local, or regional intake?
- I Yes. We draw strongly from the region. Yes. And then certain other geographical regions. But we do have a very high population of students from this region and

interestingly, the usual flippant remark which outsiders like me might make is that sometimes you can end up with the challenge of two very different cultures in the classroom with the student body and that might be typified by - I apologise for this but - it might be a group of students who've come across from China, they're doing the top up award and they're in with our normal cohort and that cohort is dominated by students who've travelled in from X (nearby town). That's an interesting cultural mix and that's probably a crude version of it but there is an element of that. In terms of employability, the mobility of those students in terms of preparedness to travel, is probably their biggest limiting factor. And that's something we're trying to look at more. So it's not those students who come here either from overseas or other parts of the country, but those who've come from this region do seem want to stay within the confines of the region and I think that's a real challenge for us. In terms of their prospects. Because it's not a region with high levels of employment for graduates, as my children are finding out as well.

R And in terms of part-time, you've mentioned part-time numbers contracting and obviously they've significantly contracted across the sector, and you've also mentioned you know that you're a proud widening participation university...

I Very.

R So taking those two things together, how important is part-time provision here and how important do you see that in the future?

I In strategy terms and planning terms when we're looking at plans for the growth of the university or the future of the university, we haven't put enough attention on part-time, I think we've lost some of that and you can see that in just the way we promote our courses and support our part-time students. But I think now there's a realisation that we can't always rely on that traditional full-time undergraduate, therefore I think we will come round to how we can make sure that we promote both part-time study but also of course, we're going to be looking to attract more international students and that will become again, the... ideally in my view because I'm responsible for quality issues and quality is more secure when they travel here rather than franchising our awards overseas where it's much harder to manage the quality of the provision - but nevertheless I think we will start to look again at those other groups of students. We haven't needed to over the last few years because of the strength of our recruitment. So I think we've probably just been a bit more relaxed than we might have been, if I'm honest.

R You mentioned how it's difficult to disentangle retention from student engagement, other initiatives ... ?

I Maybe in my head, but yes (grinning) ...

R But it is something I'm finding. I'm not saying that's the case here necessarily, but in some case study institutions I'm having to hunt for retention within institutional strategy. There are many definitions of student engagement but I wonder how you would describe the relationship of student engagement and retention? Within the context of student agendas at Northern City.

I You'll see that our Retention and Student Success Framework sets out explicitly the things that we do to support retention and progression. And so they might be more traditional things like induction and this idea of extending induction beyond that first week and how we might foster a sense of belonging within that induction is you might guess, what my next project might become. And there's a strong focus in there on transition and support for students through key transition points. And



like every other university it's really the transition from levels 4 to 5, rather than for first year students coming in, where we need to put our attention and I don't think we have. And that tries to express that. Equally, it also talks about how we design assessment and support progression and retention through our assessment regulations and we're looking again actually at this current moment, at one of our regulations where we think actually, we may need actually to adjust because we think it may be having a negative impact on student retention. Because of the requirement to step back and complete levels of study before progressing and I think that's something we need to review, what's currently in our regulations. And we have introduced in our regulations, in terms of assessments, a mechanism which gives the students a chance to remedy early deficiency. So if, for example, they're studying on a module and they have, let's say, two assessments and one is an early assessment and they don't achieve 40%, even though they might not have to pass that assessment to pass the module because they can obviously make up for it with the second, they have the opportunity to go back with feedback and achieve a basic pass mark, so to reflect on the feedback and revisit the assessment and so on. And that policy is about, where possible, that should be in all modules at level 4. Wherever possible. And when we design our courses and when modules are approved, they would be asked why it would not apply, so they have to say why it would be exempt from applying In Module Retrieval. Typically that would be on programmes linked to professional body requirements where they have to pass. So we force people to ask the question: why wouldn't you use it, rather than the other way round. And I think that has become ingrained in the culture. And that does alleviate some of the things that we have in terms of our regulations, although as said we need to look again at the balance in our regulations to support progression. And certainly last year, we introduced - or we are introducing compensation by level so that we have more of an emphasis on students passing the overall outcomes of the level with the ability to have a small deficiency, say in one module where they're just a near miss if you like - 35-40% but not at 40%. So therefore actually you've achieved the Level learning outcomes, so you can progress. So we've tried to design that into our formal regulations. I think we have an anomaly at the moment which maybe we need to revisit, and we're doing some modelling at the moment to make sure that we don't negatively impact on progression. So we're doing - in terms of policy and regulation - quite a lot around those. For me there is a separate issue though, and I think it is about this - it's linked to what I was saying earlier about belonging and identity. It is how we engage with our students, either engage them with their learning or indeed, they are involved in the process of developing, enhancing their course, that they're engaged in a wider process are key factors in retention and success. That what I'm more interested in because I feel like we're doing the more traditional things like induction and regulation and so on and so forth and assessment design within the confines of our regulations. I'd like us to put some more focus on formative feedback, I think that's got a bit lost in our regulations. That would be the one area. But for me I would like us to think about that engagement of students with their learning. I think that may have more influence than some of those other things we're doing.

R And do you have ideas or strong views about how that can be measured, or how the impact of that is measured?

I (laughs). Well, impact measures will always be those performance indicators won't they, when we do regularly reported performance indicators so every year, it's November when we have something called performance review, so departments

receive their statistics about NSS, DELI and progression, good honours and so on and so forth, so we can use all of those measures quite happily. Happily? Not happily, it's the wrong word, but I think that's now an accepted way of doing it and we've linked in our quality review cycle so the action plans reflect on that core data and so I think that's getting more and more robust although I would like to see more criticality. I don't think teams are always honest when they're looking at things and writing their plans. That's a separate issue but that's about them being very honest about where they are and what they need to do next. But that's certainly ingrained in the culture because that's something we've done over the last 2 or 3 years. I'm more interested in, and I know we haven't developed these yet, on what might be other indicators. Because those simple bold numbers don't always tell a story and if you believe Louis Elton, whose view of KPIs is that they tend to drive behaviours, so that the effect of a KPI on waiting lists in hospitals resulted in dirty hospitals because they were driven by one KPI, put all of their energy into achieving the KPI. And what you want there of course is more of a balanced scorecard of indicators and some of those may be more qualitative. So maybe we have to capture what it is that students are saying about their experience as well as looking at the performance numbers and I don't think we do that as effectively as we might.

R Does the NSS give you any of that?

I It does a bit but I would say it's quite a crude instrument. Now if we move to an Engagement Survey, it will. So if we can incorporate engagement style questions in the NSS, it should give us a better indication.

R And do you have the flexibility to do that?

I We used to run our own Engagement Survey here and we stopped it because of the change in senior leadership at that time. They decided that was not the way they wanted to go so we went down a different route. Now that the HEA are promoting, through the review of the NSS that we create more engagement-style questions about particularly, how students engage with their studies, rather than simply expressing satisfaction with their experience, it gives us more insight into their engagement with their learning. Now we're piloting at Level 5 this year, the HEA survey to see if that will give us some insight. And now, if I'm being a senior manager I'll say I'm going to use it as a predictor for the NSS, because the NSS is what matters (laughs) in those terms and of course it is, it's defining for our league table. But nevertheless those engagement questions should give us real insights into the student engagement with their studies. And I think if we go full circle for a minute, the way I was describing us being a large institution, therefore very heavily managed and very modular, that might give us some real insights into how we can make changes there. We might see that in those responses. So it might give us a better handle on the impact of changes, we think. And so if you like, the projects that I'm looking to promote at the moment, there's a strong drive around teaching and teaching excellence and the importance of teaching. That will have some impact, certainly if you believe the work of Graham Gibbs - he will say there is a clear link where staff are qualified to teach in higher education and the learning attainment of their students. Um, although it's not a strong factor, it's a definite factor. But also we want to look at - particularly for me - the campus experience. When they come on campus, what do students spend their time doing? What is that experience like in the classroom and what it is they do out of that classroom. So what are they doing and where are the spaces where they do that learning and the interaction with the staff around their subject, and that identity and belonging -

and they're all related factors. The angle I might want to take I think, is to try and use technology as a way of levering different ways of doing. So we can expand and change the classroom, not by expanding and changing it but just by using the technology available and that's what I'm trying to put a focus on and that lends itself to interacting with students in different ways. Just by the limitations of being a large complex institution that's squashed between the bus station and the city centre, therefore there's only so much space we can grow into! So how can we foster that interaction without always having to build big spaces to do it. Then that becomes quite interesting and that's where I think we will go next.

R Part of my investigation is concerned with the ways in which retention strategies function within institutions ... Looking at what strategies are and what pieces of paper represent and then actually how they function within institutions.

I Ah, that's a really interesting point. That's a really interesting point for someone who used to be responsible for most of the university's academic committees in terms of secretaring them and ensuring the business through...It still sits within my area but other colleagues do that work now. I think we're very good here at developing policy and strategy. I think we have a bit of an implementation gap and we have I think, two problems and I think maybe it's simply scale. We will often have a policy that sits there and if you went out and talked to some of our staff and asked them about retention policy, I doubt they would point - unless you happened to pick on a particular person in a particular role - to the framework document that was approved by academic board two or three years ago. Or would even be able to express the things in it. They would probably describe some of the things I've described, the module mechanisms and regulation and induction and transition but they wouldn't necessarily be able to articulate policy, nor necessarily say how that policy's been implemented in their area. So I think we have a bit of a gap here. So I think we're very good at developing and reviewing but it doesn't always reach all the areas it should reach. So there's something about the staff engagement which is difficult here. And I suspect it's true everywhere.

R I don't think you're alone, as an institution, in that.

I No, I don't think we're unique at all, but there's definitely a gap there.

R They seem to get to certain point, so - Academic Board and then some Committee below and then heads...

I Yes, approval stuff is fine it's never a problem and you can reach...

R Departments or faculties?

I Faculties I would say. Departments are harder to reach. So it tends to touch the people like you'll meet, faculty heads of teaching and learning. They will be acutely aware, they may have played a role in developing strategy with us. So that works. But going beyond that into the departments in the faculty and then beyond that into the courses in those departments, in some cases yes, in some cases, no. And how you ensure that happens is very difficult. Some would say that we need to use annual review processes and require copious reports on every aspect of University policy. That isn't going to work and it's not going to promote engagement or ownership from staff, it's just going to give us an audit trail. Mostly narrative reports on what they do. Doesn't actually tell you about the impact at all. I think we have a real difficulty with engagement and I don't have an answer at the moment and I'm trying to reflect on how we can do that here at Northern City. And I think part of my answer, and I think because you've probably gathered

there's a bit of a theme growing, it's about again that community across the university and I think bringing those people together into a closer community so they feel part of that policy development, so they have some ownership of it, would be I think probably the way to do it. I think they probably feel disenfranchised from what the university's doing. They'll often articulate the university in terms of its policy being imposed on them and their practice, when often it's been designed with some of their colleagues to actually support them and to emphasise certain positive aspects of practice, which often when they look at it, they think often, yes of course. But...so there's a disconnect, that's really difficult to do in a place like this.

R Yeah.

I I think the answer might be better, stronger, communities of practice around learning and teaching. Of which retention is a part.

R Ok. I'd just like to finish by coming back to belonging.

I I read Liz Thomas's report and we invited her here and now we've started to explore where it worked here and what that might mean. And then just walking around and looking at what that, thinking about belonging and identity as you walk around the campus and watching what people do, talking to people. And it came out of the consultation around learning and teaching. So I did a consultation in the autumn with staff around key themes around learning and teaching because I wanted us to not just look at the old strategy and continue things through, but to take a step back and to think about what really matters here and where are we as an institution and what matters. And the theme that came out was about interaction and engagement in and out of the classroom and that's the theme that's got lost or one of the aspects. And the other one was this thing about identity and course, or as other universities would describe, programme, but we seem to use different language here. So we tend to talk about courses um and that connection with the course and then looking at NSS data and there is some clear indication that where students have that strong affiliation - which is Maths and their three tables in the corridor - or where some areas there's a space where students and staff interact, often studio-based courses can do very well because it's about that space where staff and students interact around their subject. Which is really interesting.

R Other interviewees here at Northern City have mentioned Creative Writing as a programme with a very strong course identity and Architecture because they have the studio.

I Studio-based. It was Architecture I had in mind. It doesn't always translate but it does appear to be translating into the design courses. They have been on an interesting journey here with Art and Design and they have developed their spaces and you can almost feel the different identities within the design area as you walk around the space. Or the spaces that they have. So Graphics has a very distinct character about it but it's a space where they work or the Fashion students work and you can walk into that space and you get that sense of identity from it straight away and those courses are performing extremely well now in terms of student satisfaction and student performance, and they weren't before. So I think there's something here and it's something as much for the staff - and we often think about students and what we forget is that staff also have that need to affiliate, not with

their university but with their subject. I'm unusual. I would describe my affiliation with the university, but equally I would describe myself as a physicist. But I've not taught physics for a very long time! But I would still describe myself as a physicist. And I probably do, three or four times a week when I'm talking to people. And introducing myself.

R That's your tribe?

I It's really interesting isn't it, it's that staff aspect of belonging as much as students that I'm really interested in. And if you start to look at how we locate staff, we don't have grand buildings for each department. They're very squashed. You wouldn't know you'd walked from one department to another here sometimes. From a member of staff's point of view what does that say about who you are, given that you're often defined in academic terms by your subject discipline. That's what often defines you as a person because we're so passionate about what we do. And that's got a bit lost and I think that is problematic. Maybe I'm wrong? It's really interesting. I think it has a real influence on students' engagement with their subject and therefore with their attainment and how they express their experiences.

R Your focus on the classroom, you know, what's going on in there, what's the experience in there...?

I That's come explicitly from what students are saying to us, from their feedback in the NSS. And I think um there's something there that we can do. If it's about academic challenge and it's about engaging our learners then we do need to look really differently at what we do in that very very precious time we have. And it's partly driven by, partly coming from actually, the Key Information Set and we've done some very simple competitor analysis of how contact hours compare with other institutions and we are either in the middle or slightly below the middle. Now some institutions are investing in increasing contact hours and we could do that here although I think that would be quite challenging. The question in my head is what would be the purpose of simply increasing the hours, the contact. Because there is an argument that simply increasing poor or mediocre contact wouldn't have any great difference on student learning. It's not what they do in the classroom, it's what they do out of the classroom before they come back. Time on task - is what you describe it as, that really matters. That's what makes the defining difference. So it may not be about increasing the amount of contact which is the issue for us. We just need to make sure that we're not well below where other people are but maybe what we should be focusing on what we actually do in those precious moments with our students and how we frame what happens outside that classroom. And that might be about designing and delivering much better, vibrant, challenging, stimulating experiences and that might have more impact on student attainment, student progression, student satisfaction. In fact I'm convinced it will. So it's trying to get us to think about that and that's partly the spaces we use and it's partly about what we do in those spaces.

R When I did the pilot study for this research, one interviewee said - our role is to enable, help, facilitate, assist students to become comfortable in an academic environment. So students who are not previously engaged to become comfortable in an academic environment.

I Absolutely. What would appear - and this is very very simple work that we're doing - is that one of the factors is staff feeling comfortable and confident in that environment, in their discipline. And if you have an institution where we do have a

challenge on staff/student ratio, you may find you're teaching outside of your normal subject discipline. Students want to know that that person is authentic. They want to know that they're professionally qualified, they're up to date with modern technology, that's become a real thread too, recently. But they want to know that they're authentic. So if I'm a paramedic practitioner, they'll want to know that you're close to practice, that you could still go out on the ambulance and do the job. Really important. Or if you're in a science course, they'll want to know that you're a researcher, that you're engaged in research or scholarship in that discipline. You've got to really think about the design of that learning experience and your role in it. And I think it's something that's not quite in the literature at the minute. Fascinating isn't it?

R Yes. Thank you very much.

**(end 53.10)**

## STAFF: SENIOR IMPLEMENTATION

### Example A (Metropolitan Elite)

- I So my role in the Hub is as the Deputy Director but specifically within that role I have a kind of overarching responsibility for the delivery of our programmes, so the Programme team kinda work to me and within that then, issues around student support, retention and so on. And I also then have an accounting, accountability route through Faculty, as well as the kind of management one that the Director has. Does that give you enough of a kind of picture of how it kind of works out. So I don't have a direct teaching role, I'm a kind of manager person these days!
- R I wonder if you could also perhaps give me a picture of the Hub in the context of the university.
- I Right, ok. In the context of the university we have a focus - well there are several focal points to our work. One of the focal points to our work is working with mature learners and typically those who are studying part-time and for that we make available a range of bespoke part-time programmes and the expectation is that those will also not just be working with mature learners but often typically be working with those with low participation backgrounds, so returners of one kind or another. So the provision that we've got there, as I say, it's bespoke part-time and it mostly relates to people's studying what they're already doing in relation to workplace. So for example, it's provision like our X programme which is working with people who are working in Children's Centres and other kinds of settings of that sort. Where often what happens is that people without formal qualifications become involved in that kind of work, they develop significant expertise and aren't able to progress at all within a career structure without recognition of that through some form of university award. And we design the pedagogy in order to be picking up that mix of people who bring expertise but not necessarily formal structured education in terms of academic skills. So there's that kind of typical mix and that would also be true of our Learning and Teaching provision and of our Business Studies provision, where again it's people who, for one kind of reason or another, find that they've hit a kind of ceiling because they're not graduates. We keep a quite strong widening participation focus. More recently we've begun to develop a bespoke degree programme for mature learners, which is also available part-time and um the idea there is to design something in which mature learners will feel comfortable because of the learning environment. So that's saying one area of our work - working with mature, part-time learners. It's not to say that there aren't mature students around the university because there are and it's not to say that there aren't a significant body of part-time students, particularly in Health but it is to recognise that with perhaps Health as the exception, the experience of students who are mature and part-time is that they will be a minority within a big institution which has a large flow through of school leavers and that sometimes, in order to be able to work with those learners, it's right that the university has bespoke provision for them as well as potential for infill across the Faculties. The second area of work that we've developed more recently, or acquired and then developed, is work on Foundation programmes which exist at HE Level 0 and from which students then progress to degrees elsewhere in the university. We've for a long time had a part-time programme of that sort which has grown from being a bit like a university-based Access to HE programme - to being something which is now structured as the first year of a 4 year degree. The learners on that are again widening participation, mature learners. The other programmes we use widening participation criteria to select, to prioritise students as well as selection criteria and

academic, and typically those are full-time programmes and typically there's a mix of learners between those who are school leavers who are widening participation and those who are kind of fairly, not that long out of education, but not necessarily college leavers, so people in their early 20s and so on. So from that you can begin to see the deal for the Hub within a research intensive university, is to work on, to support the university's diversification of its student body. So it's a bit like the way in which Equality and Diversity work as kind of tensions really. There's a principle that says that Education should be there and open and available to all, which the University would own and acknowledge. But there's recognition that diversity means that just simply saying, well here it is, you can all equally apply, doesn't actually enable the diversity that you're looking for and that you need to do something more strategic to work with those who don't naturally see this as their home. And one of the ways the university chooses to do that then, for mature learners and part-time learners is to have a unit like ours which has that at its heart, as its operation. And knowing that, I think rightly, that it would kind of get too lost were it to become embedded and dispersed in such a large institution, where folks' minds are often elsewhere.

R And do you think that's particularly necessary because this university is Russell Group, elite, traditional etc?

I I think it is partly to do with that, I think it would be the culture within academic Schools to have a very strong focus on research excellence as being one of their defining performance indicators. Then I think they would tend to see themselves as wanting to recruit students who are already very high achieving and that's part and parcel of how they understand themselves and it also relates to league tables and all that kind of thing. So I think widening participation is recognised and owned more broadly by the institution but thinking further about that and relating it to non-standard age students, I think often is a bit of a stretch too far. And it's something that individuals will perhaps do but that's not the same as actually having a strategy that's going to work, going to work with those learners. I think too, having - before I came here I worked in another Russell Group university in a kind of lifelong learning set of activities, because they're quite diverse now. But it was telling that in all of the reorganisations that have happened around the place that when work from that Centre was dispersed to Schools, in practice, the work then closed.

R Yeah.

I And that wasn't because, to take some examples of programmes that are a bit like ones we've got here that are working with non-graduate practitioners within a field, it wasn't because those hadn't been viable programmes, nor indeed that they remain so, it was that they weren't sufficiently high priority in the choices that needed to be made by Schools. So I think actually, in practice, that work can be vulnerable unless there's an institutional commitment that's somehow structured in an institutional way.

R Ok, thank you. How long has the Hub been in existence?

I Here? We've been going a bit more than 8 years, so it will be 9 years this coming summer.

R Right. And part-time in the rest of the university, has that, as across the country, has that kind of suffered recently?



I Yeah. Whether that's as across the country is a different thing really. I've used the word 'bespoke' to define what we do and that's because programmes that we provide are built in order to work for part-time learners, in other words the timetabling is an afternoon a week or something that is negotiable with an employer. Within the rest of the university, as I say with the exception of Health who do also have some bespoke part-time programmes, the deal is that the delivery of the programme is ours for the full-time undergraduates. So that in practice means that if you were to study part-time at, say, 50% intensity, the time tabling of your attendance at university, can vary from semester to semester and be dispersed across the week. That actually is a difficult deal to agree with an employer. So in practice, although it's open, actually it's not open unless people have very particular employment circumstances, are very close to the university so that travelling in and out isn't a problem for them. Or whatever it is about that person, or that circumstance that makes it impossible. So what we've found, primarily for that reason, is that over the 9 years there has been a steady decline in the number of students engaging with those kind of programmes. So that rather pre-dates the more recent set of changes that have happened for whatever reasons, perhaps funding or whatever seems to be driving it the last 2/3 years.

R You said your role covers retention as part its student support aspect and I wondered whether there were any specific issues around retention within the Hub?

I Right, ok. I mean comparatively, given the student bodies we're working with, then actually our retention is good compared with data around mature and part-time learners. It has to be said that it wouldn't compare with those leaving school and college and coming to study with the university. So retention is a greater challenge for us, I think. And I think it's to do - unless this is another of your questions - I think it's to do with the whole mix of circumstances with which our learners are working. That's partly going to be context, so it's going to be the whole business of juggling lives that are already much more committed than those of younger learners typically, in whatever ways that amounts to, and that would be true for mature full-time students as much as for part-time ones actually, all that juggling has got to happen. And getting buy in from rather more stakeholders actually, if that's the right word? Employers and family and all of those things, caring responsibilities. So all of that goes on. But I think that also then unites with a fairly frequent phenomenon which is that adult returners typically are not necessarily always very confident about their capabilities in relation to higher education. And we work hard to enable them to build skills and to feel confident in those skills but nonetheless, everybody can have their moments when they're thinking - is this the right thing for me to be doing, am I up to do, is all this time and effort worth it? And that - for our learners - is combining with the additional amount of juggling that has to be done. That would be true for the younger ones too, because they also, for whatever reasons, wouldn't have shone in their earlier studies, otherwise they wouldn't be doing a Foundation programme. So there's something about having the nerve to think 'I'm going to carry on with this'. I think that's the second element. And the third element which I'd throw in, is that some of our learners have wrestled and continued to wrestle, with lives that are quite kind of challenging. I don't know how else to put it really. But their learning at school and their childhood wasn't necessarily easy going, they may not be in very straightforward circumstances where they currently are and that might also impact on how they see themselves. And it might impact on their - or be bound up with - their kind of mental well-being. And I think it's not uncommon for us to be working

with students that have actually quite a lot of personal challenges to be wrestling with, irrespective of context and irrespective of studies and I think that's a third strand really. I mean resilience is much talked about, how resilient a person feels. We have one of our approaches around retention, amongst many, is to be very assiduous about looking at mitigating circumstances that students may present us with and we do that via a weekly get together with staff, to ensure that decisions are made in a timely way. In practice, that also lands up functioning a bit like a kind of case meeting around learners because there are learners that will come to us recurrently and we have to work out the right way to encourage and try and provide enough flexibility in most if not all of those decisions. And I would say in terms of our recurrent people with mit circs, mental health is a common set of issues for people and depression, anxieties and so on. And the second and sometimes related will be kind of quite turbulent home lives, one way or another.

R So kind of external and personal factors that they're bringing...?

I And with how confident they're feeling about their study. I don't think they're separable, such that we could say - ah if we can crack that then the other kind of sorts itself out. I think they inter-react, as I suppose they would do for all of us really. It's so that a sense of a student continuing or not continuing is often to with a configuration of those factors, rather than a single thing.

R So if I were a student here what kind of retention practices might I experience?

I OK, it would for us, start right at the beginning before you were a student. So what we try and do is to make sure that - some of our students, many of them are recruited through outreach activity, and we try and make sure there is that what we're building is a realistic sense of what higher education might represent in terms of challenge as well as possibility. And we're working in that outreach work to build capability as we're doing it. And that would also be true of those who have a rather shorter trajectory with us before they start. So for example, on our Foundation programmes, once we've kind of shortlisted applicants, they will all come to a Selection Day which is more than just an Open Day, where we get a feel for, and we get a feel for them too, working within groups and in a learning context and that sort of thing. And that's all about trying to make sure that we're making good decisions but also that the learners, or the prospective learners are themselves making decisions through that process about whether this is going to work for them. We have IAG threaded through all of that and typically now, we are making conditional offers onto Programmes of people doing our Summer Skills course so that not only again, reinforces their skills development, but also tests for us and for them whether actually commitment to a systematic piece of study is going to work out for them. Now, all of that is designed to try and make sure that at the point where people are beginning with us, they are as ready as they can be in terms of their own mind set about what it is they're going to be doing and that we feel as confident as we can be that we're making a positive decision that a learner's going to work with us as opposed for it being better for them to be deferring. We want to be as open as possible that we know it can be very damaging for a learner to begin something they can't complete, it were better if that were not to have been the case than for people to begin and then feel they've reinforced a self-perception that they can't do it. So we think that is actually important about retention because it's building capability, it's building realism, it gives people a strong sense of the programme they're going to be coming to and to check in their own minds, whether in the cool light of day, when they've been to an Induction or whatever, do they feel comfortable that this is something they're

going to give a lot of time to. We think that helps. What we then do is to make sure that at the point of Induction that we're as thorough as we can be to help learners make the transition into the University. With any luck we've been able to work with them before that point anyway, so it's much less of a big leap into the institution. So that we're minding that kind of transition point. Within that, we then make sure that the first semester at least and actually much further in as well, is treated as a kind of extended Induction and that on all of our programmes students in their first semester, typically also running into the second and beyond, will have systematic development of academic skills as they're going on. And an approach to assessment design and feedback which is designed to give people pathways to development and lots of feedback and support in the doing of that, for example, students able to have drafts looked at so they can check out whether it's going to be ok, and that kind of thing. So that for us is an important part of the regime really, that we're not, we're not doing a kind of - and now it's over to you, now get over it, we're trying to do something that's trying to build incrementally with support and lots of feedback and chances to develop further, the student's capability and the sense of themselves, that actually they can do this. And that they know who to go to if they're finding things difficult. So there's a crucial thing there about pedagogic design, which is about the way in which our staff build a sense of relationship with our students and I think actually I can say that we do that really well because it's not me doing it! I think we've got some outstandingly good teachers here. We appoint people who want to teach, not because they're academics. And that shows really. There's a very strong ethos about trying to think as a staff about how do we do the right thing by our learners. I think they pick that up, that we're interested in them genuinely, that we know them. They're relatively small learning groups, staff are relatively small teams so they get to know the 3 or 4 people that will be teaching them, from semester to semester and they will know that those staff kind of look after them and are available to them, genuinely, to be talked to informally by email and by a formal system of tutorials as well. And that will be true across the board, whether it's a Foundation programme or a programme for younger learners, or one working with mature or part-time learners. So there's something very important about kind of ethos really there. Alongside of all that then, we also have sort of wraparound support services to support those staff and students in more particular kind of ways. So we have an academic skills team with particular expertise there. We have continuing availability of IAG so that people can stand back a bit and reflect if they're not sure this is a pathway that's working for them. And through other members of the team we try and make sure that we're building support around people's social needs and the sense of belonging somewhere in the institution and all sorts of other things around financial support and the kinds of issues that might crop up within the course of study. So we're not thinking only of the academic. The skills work that we provide, wherever possible, is embedded within the programme, so people aren't seeing it as a bolt on, but they can do more specific things if they want. One thing we do in that, we introduced a year or so ago, the implementation of diagnostic testing through online resources. Several of us were not sure how that would play out. It's testing in English and Maths as to whether learners would feel that was somehow an intrusion or something to be frightened of. And what we found out was that if staff play it constructively, then actually the learners don't see it in that way and that actually, it worked really well because it identifies - we've deliberately chosen packages that give friendly feedback - it identifies very specific areas around a person's use of language or mathematics, particularly in

some programmes that's important, where a learner may have gaps. And what it then does is to provide online resources and ways of doing work on those gaps and then you get more testing and the machine tells you - oh now you're doing really well at it. And rather than that demeaning people, which is one of the things we'd feared, it's actually become quite, it's been experienced as quite empowering because people who had a kind of learning sense that their English wasn't quite as good as it might be, feel that their education's let them down, but they don't actually now want to say much about that, quite understandably. To be dealing with the machine on those issues actually is a safe space. So a machine saying, your spelling isn't great, now we're going to have a go at these words where you get your vowels the wrong way round, have a practice, now let's see how you're getting on...feels to a person like they're achieving something that they've been a bit worried about, without other people watching them do it. So it was slightly counter to what some of us thought might happen, but it has proved to be quite helpful. So that's been interesting and something that we're trying to roll out further into programmes because certainly, gaps in skills around verbal articulation in writing and in some programmes, particularly around mathematical skill, are real obstacles to people doing well. Or perhaps achieving to their full potential. So all of that rather big spread, is to try and say that I suppose, to draw back, is that we try and approach retention strategically, in other words, by thinking about the biggest range of appropriate things that we can be doing, um to ensure that a learner has the best kind of support and in the hope that with that support they have the best chance of holding on to a programme and actually really achieving well. And we deliberately see it as multi-faceted and we deliberately want to see that multi-facetedness as kind of meaningfully connected together, rather than sort of haphazard. And I suppose in the end we also acknowledge that there will be learners that venture something that at this point in their lives, they're not going to be able to do. And we also try and manage that as constructively as we can. I've nearly done with this answer, but the one bit else that it just occurs to me to throw in, is that we try and use - mit circs is another bit that we use. We deal with that not as a disciplinary issue in the university but as part of our strategy to support retention. And within that we also use temporary leave as constructively as we can and I've got a figure but not in my head, hence the maths thing, that actually a very high proportion of our temporary leavers do return because we keep contact with them and also at the points where they're due to return, we up the contact to say, you know, we're expecting you to come back, let's have a chat about how it's going, so that they know that this wasn't a kind of departure via another name, but genuinely temporary leave. We would use temporary leave if, as happens in our Foundation Years especially but in other programmes too, where what happens is over the course of usually an initial year, the kind of cumulative weight of the things a student is trying to manage becomes too much and they're not actually able to study but nevertheless, they and us have seen huge glimpses of what could be, on those occasions when it's been got together. And so what we say is that - look, you haven't passed semester one yet, we're into semester two and it's still not working out but we can see and you can see how this could be got together. It's actually going to be better at this point to cut your losses and start again rather than keep making up that deficit and that can be a very constructive thing to do and it means in effect that although it's not a great thing, people have kind of had a dry run and can come back without penalty, to learn from that dry run to do it better next time round. We try and avoid that but there are things that crop up for people that they just don't anticipate.

R So by temporary leave would you mean something like, stopping at this point in the year and then starting again in a year's time?

I Or if a person has got a series of circumstances that justify it, we would allow them to begin the year again with teaching and first attempts, so they could carry the marks. So typically, what drives that kind of thing is issues around ... no order of priority ... issues around disability which can take a very long time to sort out within an academic year. We do try and provide supplementary support before all the statementing stuff comes through, so that people aren't waiting for support, but nonetheless that can take people a while. The systems can take a while, but it can also take them a while to adjust if this is something they weren't anticipating. So that can be something. The other one that would come up is people knowing that they're having to do a lot of juggling to study successfully and kind of miscalculating until it actually happens, what that really is going to involve and how practical it would be. And taking a while then to get it all sorted out and by that point, quite a lot of damage is done. And I suppose the third one would be that actually, the move into study or within study happens to coincide with some major issue, or indeed precipitate it or be somehow linked in, who knows. But on the whole if we've got people with partnership break ups, say, violence going on which isn't uncommon, issues about who's going to have custody of children, therefore all that going on. Homelessness ... it's actually not a great time to also try and study while that's going on. And yet, here's a person with great capabilities, who can see that in themselves and the last thing they want is to throw that away, but just for now, they're not going to flourish.

R Are all of those measures and practices, are they articulated in a strategy, or ... they're just part of what the Hub does?

I They're articulated overall in the way we approach the learning and teaching of our students and if it's any help to you, we've just been through an internal process, our five year audit review and for that we produce a self-assessment as to what we're doing and if you want to access that self-assessment, you're welcome to have it. And that has tried to cover, as it were, fairly holistically, what we think we're doing. Some things would be moving into assessment and curriculum design and so on, but actually I think we don't think there's a boundary that says at this point we're talking about skills and retention and at that point we're suddenly turning into academic purists. It's actually the whole thing really. So it's definitely a continuum. That said, we do also have a strategy around retention which looks in a much more hard-nosed way at some of the things like, for example, the diagnostics and the skills support, which on the face of it might look more like specific interventions around retention.

R Yeah, yeah.

I Although I would argue that they all are. Actually. Yes. Yes.

R And certainly the latter, are they related, do they relate to a university-wide retention strategy or does the university not have one?

I No. As far as I know, the university doesn't have a retention strategy. It's not seen as an issue. I don't mean that that's a matter of carelessness but it's not seen, the retention rates of the university are not untypical of this type of institution and they are actually very high for Russell Group institutions on the whole. So yes, the university hasn't felt the need to develop a very extensive strategy. It does have support structures of course, for learners, both in terms of personal well-being and

academic skills and there's a brilliant Students Union here which is a great resource for learners too. So all that's around but the strategies are more articulated in terms of the excellence of the student experience than about the avoidance of people leaving.

R You mentioned a sense of belonging, the work in particular that members of your team are doing around social engagement. That's an area that I've become interested in because quite a big idea in a lot of the retention literature.

I Yes, yes, yes it is.

R And has in fact, been equated with retention, as critical to retention. I wondered what you thought about belonging in relation to the Hub and to the university, or particular departments.

I I would concur that belonging is really, really important and I think that's about students feeling that they have a sense of belonging with the staff with whom they engage and with the other learners on their programme and then perhaps secondarily, with the place in which they're doing it, the physical environment, with the university as a place. I think for our part-time students, especially, we've had to acknowledge that their primary place of belonging is their course and perhaps secondarily, the Hub, although you can't have one without the other. And within all of that, a sort of sense of the university. But the reality is that if you're here on a Thursday night to do X (programme), then you will meet the X students on your course but you probably won't meet many others and you'll meet the cluster of staff that are teaching you and that's where your sense of belonging is most likely to reside and we run with that, we're fine with that and one of our variants from the rest of the university is that the university quite rightly wants structures in which students and staff engage with each other but they see those as always being at Departmental level. And we have a Departmental one but we regard that as a sort of umbrella body for sort of the real stuff which is actually happening at programme level. Partly, as I say, because of people's contacts, that's their time slot but also because with such diverse programmes, there's not necessarily common ground or common interest between the learners. So I think our students would have a sense of belonging to their programme, in fact they do, we hear that from them. And that's critically important and I think it's something which staff initially have to enable but which should happen as students support each other. And we do have mentoring and other kinds of ways in which learners can, in more structured ways, help each other to settle into the institution. I think out of that there is a sense that this is the Hub and people feel a sense of belonging to this and we've worked hard to make sure that the space, if people happen to be here, although the evening students typically wouldn't, then it feels it is a place you can belong. That it doesn't feel too much like you're sitting on someone else's chair and it's somewhere you can sit down and feel welcome. And people inevitably make varied choices about how much they use that and how much they're just in and out, that's up to them, but it's there. And I think belonging to the university is something that grows as the programmes go on, so I think for many of our students, there would be a sense of ... their initial assumptions would be that the university is a relatively hostile place or one that isn't likely to regard them very highly, for good or ill, because it's the more kind of prestigious institutions in the area. People therefore associate that with a certain kind of snobbishness, or a certain kind of academic excellence which they don't see themselves as fitting. And I think they see the Hub as a surprise therefore because we don't do that and they don't see us doing that. I think they come to realise that that picture of the

university is itself a bit too simplistic and actually they are valid members of the institution and become very proud of being so. So I think it's a big ask to have students feel that they belong in the university but I think they come to feel they belong in it because they know they belong somewhere in it, ie: here and within their programme group and as they become more confident and aware of the place ...

R And I guess also, once they've moved from their Year 0...?

I Yes if they're doing that. And if they are doing that, we work very hard on transition for students that are moving from us to a particular place and we are still around for them and make that really clear. So that if they want to link back with us and with other learners they were working with on their Foundation, that's fine. It is a huge place.

R Yeah, how many students?

I Oh god, it's a lot. The university just is very big, big enough to be a town in its own right, in terms of people's feelings about it. So we try and do a village within it, I think. Yes.

R Thank you very much.

**(end 41.13)**

## STAFF: SENIOR IMPLEMENTATION

### Example B (Northern City)

- I I'm responsible for the student experience in this Faculty and under me is Learning and Teaching and Quality and the relationship to all the courses in the Faculty as well. So it's basically the student experience that I'm responsible for. It's a diverse faculty with four departments spanning Arts, Media, Computing and Engineering
- R People I have already interviewed here have described you as the architect of the framework for retention in the university. Could you tell me the story of the framework?
- I Yeah. Well, I was asked to - I was sort of Project Manager for the Working Group that was improving the student experience and it was all about retention and student success. So we had a Pro Vice Chancellor chairing it initially and then I was the Project Manager and we had a small working group from across the university, as a group looking at the work that I ended up doing basically. So I ended up really doing a review of data and talking to all the four faculties about what they were doing about retention and supporting students to make them successful. And what I did was, I went to several conferences and fed back to the Working Group as I went along, about the data, what's happening nationally in the sector, what all the four faculties are doing. And over about a year I wrote the Framework and presented that to the group and they accepted it and we put some sort of core requirements in there and some recommended areas of work to do with students to improve the success. So over about a year or so I managed to pull it all together and get agreement. And it was really learning from others, seeing what we're doing, what's working internally and seeing what's working nationally. And then from that point, the HEA were doing their retention work and they got this £x million project which you're probably aware of?
- R The Paul Hamlyn Foundation funding? *What Works?*
- I Yes. So I went, I looked at some of that but that was ongoing but it had not long started when I had done this work. So really there was a bit of an overlap there. And they've since finished that project and got their evidence, that's after I'd done this Framework. But I built the Framework based on the work of the HEA and as they were progressing with their thoughts, my work progressed as well, in parallel. But their Paul Hamlyn work carried on beyond. So some of the diagrams in my Framework were from the HEA one.
- R Right, ok.
- I I've linked to that in the Framework (shows me a copy) - there's the link, which is the HEA and the Paul Hamlyn stuff. In fact they refined it beyond that and they've used a different diagram in a later version with students being at the heart of it and then institutional matters, student support being there. I've used that in various presentations. So they've refined it but this was their thinking at the time.
- R And at that time, was retention a particular issue for Northern City?
- I No. We'd been meeting our national benchmarks and surpassing them really and continually improving. But we have made other changes. I don't think it's purely what we've done on retention and student success. There's been lots of things happening at Northern City like changes in student assessment, changes in regulations - so I think it's been a mixture of factors that have kept us on the up to improve the retention and progression. Obviously doing this work's helped, but I



think it's complex. Because if you change your regulations you can get better student success by changing the amount of assessment, less volume but more quality feedback. Changing the regs such that you take the best 100 credits rather than 120 for the final year, which we've done. So those things affect success as well. But I think, you know, I think it was good work that we did and it's you know, best not to rest on your laurels and think everything's going to be fine. But we did this work because we thought we should be doing something to make it even better.

R I was going to say, it's interesting that there was the motivation to devote that time and effort to doing the work when it's not seen as a big issue.

I Yes, because X University had got an issue which is why they went to the conference that I presented at, saw what I was doing, thought oh that would help us. But they'd got a problem because they weren't meeting their benchmarks. But since then they've improved as well, so I think they're ok now. But we happened to be ok at the time.

R Would you say you were consistently ok across all students or were there particular groups...?

I There were particular groups of students that were having problems. I think Level 3, Foundation years, prep years and distance learning students, there were issues. So there were areas within each faculty where there were problems. I think the school of X had problems with one of their HND courses which they did quite a lot of work on and put more student support in. But that wasn't part of this project but they - so each faculty did have areas where they'd got some issues and where they'd done something. To be honest it's a while since I read this. But you'll find that probably in the write up that I've done - it's really Appendix 2 - I think if you look through Appendix 2.... I met with quite a few staff in each department, each faculty and we went through where they'd got problems. Where the retention issues were. So there's quite a few in here. I'd forgotten about the detail that's in here! So you'll find quite a lot in there. I asked them about what interventions had been successful.

R My project specifically concerns part-time, mature undergraduates. Part-time isn't particularly mentioned in your framework document.

I No, our part-timers tend to do quite well actually. Part-time students tend to be more mature, obviously they're working so they're fairly well grounded and they tend to time manage better, they tend to turn up - because they're part-time, they tend to turn up every week and they actually tend to do better than the full-time students. So I think what you'll find from Northern City's point of view, obviously you'll be looking at the data probably, they do tend to do quite well.

R Which in retention terms, I mean the national picture is quite different. It's generally much higher rate of drop out or withdrawal for part-time students, so that's interesting.

I Yeah, I think it would be interesting to see the data here but I don't think I'm aware of any big issue about part-time students. They do tend to do quite well. I mean they'll drop out because of work pressures, because the company may make them redundant so therefore they're not funded to come here anymore. So we do all have students that have dropped out because of those reasons but it's not usually the academic demand I find, from personal experience. I've taught part-time

students for 20-odd years and they've always been really good, committed, with pretty good retention.

R Even students coming in with non-traditional qualifications, or older qualifications if you know what I mean?

I Yeah, I think they come from a mixture of backgrounds, whether it's A Level, Edexcel, part-time HNCs that they've done, HNDs. But they're fairly well grounded so it's not really been a big issue. You might not find that across the whole university but that would be something if you're getting the data.

R And in terms of this Framework, it was approved in 2011, so how well would you think, or how effectively would you think this is communicated across faculties and down through faculties?

I Well, there were core requirements in the Framework. We put the core requirements in which did affect some of the regulations, things like - and we took this to all the faculties, I went round all the faculty Learning and Teaching Committees, I presented this to the University Academic Board and we have reviewed it a couple of times since on an annual basis. In fact we haven't reviewed it recently and we probably are due to for a review. In fact, I've ended up being the person for the university. I was seconded for this for the university but then I ended up doing the reviewing even though I wasn't seconded any more, I'd gone back to my day job. And I ended up being the person for it. I must admit, I've not pushed for it to be reviewed this last year. It is due to go back to the university boards again. Because my recommendation for this was to review it every year and make changes and see how it's going. But all the faculties have had to key in to the core requirements, there were requirements for each Faculty. So I went round all the faculty boards and said, you've got to do this, there's this and this, what's been agreed. And of course there were staff on the Working Group from each faculty, they were the champions back in the faculties anyway. Whether it was their head of learning and teaching, or student experience or someone who's looking after retention. So the attendance monitoring for all first years in the first semester, that's still something we've been following up even this last year, because it wasn't been consistently done. And now we've just developed an attendance statement and we're further developing the policy on attendance. So there's still work ongoing. Because the only policy we'd got was what was in my framework for the university. So we're only just now following that up with more work. But we've made sure that in each of the faculties, at least in the first year, the first semester, they're being monitored and there's follow up. Because it's all about the follow up and the support. Rather than saying - you've got to attend. And we have been doing, but we've had to work at that a little bit to get the consistency. Extended Induction - most faculties were doing that anyway, but we've made it formal and said you must do Extended Induction, whether it's academic or support staff doing that. So all faculties have had something in place.

R How extended is Extended Induction?

I Usually semester one, where you know, they'll have a Student Support Officer or there's something built into the programme where an academic will support them for several weeks. It's not just the first week of induction it's several weeks, they do study skills, time management, student support. And now we've got academic tutors talking to students about their progress, so things have actually moved on a little bit since this and the university's now looking at small group tutorials which

I'm going to pilot next year in our faculty. So we are, when we come to review this, we are changing the academic tutor support for students.

R Yeah. Would that be the equivalent of what other places might call personal tutoring?

I Yeah, personal tutoring. But it's more about academic progress support rather than personal, pastoral care. So there is that difference. Although they end up doing a bit of the pastoral stuff, we point them in the right direction for that type of support, whether it's student support, professional services staff or central. So our academic tutors are really there to support their academic progress. So that's something that's come in since this. So there is a bit of updating to do on this. It's good to talk it through actually, I'll see what there is to do when I recommend what we need to do.

R Would you say there are any other core requirements that perhaps actually in practice are more difficult?

I Yeah, the early diagnostics during induction. Core requirement. That has not really happened. At the time of doing this, we do diagnostics in Maths, where Maths is important. But the whole idea here was to do some self-efficacy type testing and there were one or two pilot projects in the university that should have come to fruition but I don't think did. But really that's something we've not really properly followed up. The school of X did a bit of work with their programmes, staff were doing some research on self-efficacy and I was hoping that that would roll out. And there's some work that HEA have done on all this sort of stuff as well. So I think there are some things we could do. But that's not worked particularly well as a core requirement, so there is something to be done there still. It's all very well writing all these things in, but it doesn't always...they work in pockets even when it's a core requirement.

R But like you say there are some subjects where the need is more well known. Like Maths for example in Engineering and Accountancy.

I The other thing – the module mechanism that became a regulation because of this - where students do some coursework or an in-class test and they don't pass it. It's within the twelve teaching weeks. They get a chance to redo it within that timeframe, before it goes to any exam board, and get a capped mark of 40 for that particular task. So they get feedback, use the feedback then to improve, do the same piece of work again but just get 40. So it's not counting towards their degree classification but they're getting a chance to get feedback, act on the feedback at the time, rather than wait until the end of the module, they fail the coursework, get a refer. Do it after the module's over. So it's about supporting them through the transition. So I managed to get that as a regulation, which went into the regs. So I thought that was quite successful actually because up until this point, because I helped to introduce that across the university anyway, it's something else I'd done beforehand, it was an option, the mechanism could be used at any level, it's optional for staff to decide when they're writing the courses and programmes. But I said, for first years, it's key to support the students, to give them feedback, use the feedback to improve. It gives the confidence and they get a chance to catch up. Especially in that first semester.

R And engage with the tutor as well?

I That's right. The tutor's got to engage in giving them feedback so they can improve. Tutors didn't like it at first because it's extra work, extra marking. But

setting the same task means they don't have to rewrite it, they're marking it to a threshold pass, because it's 40% pass. And in fact, in the end when we did a bit of a review of that, before this Framework, staff were quite happy because they'd got less referrals to mark in the summer. So in fact it's frontloading some of their work and students were being more successful. So it was a good thing. So getting that in the Framework was a good thing and that's been successful. What else? I think I talk about the data somewhere, as a recommendation. Let's have a look, what else? Early Assessment and Feedback by Week 6. So we put that in so staff - some were doing it as more formative feedback so that was a good thing. But then we've changed the regs on assessment, we've limited the amount of assessment staff can set per module and like a 10 credit module, you can only do one assessment. And for a 10 credit module you'd do that probably at the end, as an exam, more as coursework at the end. You can't have two bits of assessment. So in a way that went against this pedagogy of doing something early and giving them feedback. So that early assessment has to be formative. There's split views on this, even at highest levels in the university, in that some students won't do formative work unless there's a mark. Some senior staff at the university think that students will do formative work if there isn't a mark, but not in all subject areas. See in Engineering, you have to give them a mark or they ain't gonna do it. In Art and Design you might be ok, or some of the Social Sciences. But yeah, not in Engineering and not in Computing, so it's been a battle. And we've actually had exemptions to regs so they can do more formative marked work with small amounts of marks. So we've had to go against it a little bit. So that's been a problem, as a core requirement then it becomes a problem.

R That's interesting isn't it because I think people often say - you know, formative before summative and it's presented as a general solution and actually like you say, it doesn't work with every subject.

I Not with every subject, no. So I've been having discussions with our new Deputy Vice Chancellor who said - oh they'll all do formative work. I said (quietly) I don't think they will! We didn't agree on that! What else...?

R Institutional data?

I Yes. We have definitely improved the data. We've got now a central source of data. Massive improvements in data now available on progression, retention, pass rates, very easy to access for staff when they're doing their module reviews, they'll look at the module performance at the end of the module and the end of the year. So that's definitely been great. We're still trying to improve data all the time, so I think that's been a great success. I think we were doing that anyway but I put it in here and I'm not sure, just because I put it in here it happened, but I think it was starting to happen anyway.

R So that data is part of the module review process?

I Yes, so now we can give staff a pro forma for module review. If they click on the link it takes them to the information on the intranet where they can easily put their module number in and get the data. So it's really become very easy to get, which is really important to use the data and get easy access. Because it used to be really difficult to find and to navigate, put the right codes in and now it's much much simpler. So I think that's been good. So I think that's worked.

R It mentions a Forum here ... Is that operational?

- I No, not really. We have an annual learning and teaching conference where things like this are discussed, but the Forum - I recommended that we had the Forum, it meets regularly, it reviews this Framework, it reviews sort of data analysis and where we're going. But I think it's probably because we haven't really got a retention problem, there's not been a big need for the Forum. But each faculty has got a Student Experience Board which really I suppose acts as that Forum. So it's done in the four faculties. And we do reviews at the end of the year, we look at progression, retention. So I suppose in a way we don't need the university forum, we've got it in - I chair our Student Experience Board and we have quarterly departmental reviews and yearly reviews where we look at retention, achievement, good honours rates. So we do it on a regular basis anyway.
- R That was going to be one of my areas of questioning, how retention fits with the other big agendas like student experience, student engagement, student satisfaction? Is it a result of good work in those agendas or is it a partner agenda?
- I It's a partner. It's complex isn't it because we're doing all this work on trying to improve the National Student Survey, the student experience. We're doing lots of work on assessment, changing the regs, trying to get better feedback and more timely feedback and it's all in that mix of improving the student experience. So when we look at the annual review for each department on all of their courses, we're looking at all the data, we're looking at the NSS data, retention data, achievement data. And looking at the picture of where good things are happening and where there are areas that there are issues. So we look at it holistically, all these things. But it's difficult to point to one thing and say - that's why it's good. Where things are usually good is where you've got course coherency, a good staff team, where the staff and the students actually engage together in the practice and there's a community.
- R How would you describe that?
- I It's the course identity and the community. And that's where the NSS results are good, usually where student progression and achievement are good and it all comes with course identity.
- R And do you think there are either particular disciplines or subjects that are more likely to have that, or are there particular examples here?
- I Yes, there are examples. There are at least three I can think of that are really good examples. There's Maths. Maths have got a great rapport with their students. They're very supportive. There's a Maths group, they meet every Friday at 4 o'clock in the pub and they have their meeting in the pub and then some carry on afterwards and go home about 5.30. And they've got that community, they've got Level 2 downstairs in this building, they've got like a corner where the staff offices are and they've got a few meeting tables and they go, just come and drop in and have a chat at any time. So even though they've not got a fantastic facility, they make the best of what they've got and they've got that community. And very supportive. What we're going to do it, we're going to have a floor purpose built for them, with a common seating area, with an IT area, staff offices and a student area where they can have that community. So that's a model, a model for Maths that we're piloting, as a university. Saying you'll be together and this is your area. So that works. Journalism, they get the best NSS results in the country. Again very good rapport with their students. And the other area is Business and Technology. Again, excellent NSS, good rapport with the students. But in these areas you've got a good course focus, course team, a team work well together, they talk to each

other. So it's the academics getting it right and then supporting the students in an open door, friendly way. And that's the model we're trying to get all courses to replicate. And in fact there's something in here about course identity. Because that came up in the research that I was doing, that you've got to have the course identity and I think I possibly put that somewhere.

R One of my interviewees here at Northern City mentioned Creative Writing as a course which you know, where there was quite a diverse group but cohesive.

I I think it's the staff actually talking to one another, they're not delivering their modules in isolation, they all know what each other's doing. They're teaching it in a way that they know what's happening on other modules, because the staff are talking to each other on a regular basis. Whether it's in the pub or wherever, they've got a community and that's what we're trying to do. What we're trying to do now is co-locate staff and students in the same area. The trouble we've got as a university, we're a bit short of space, we're bulging at the seams, it's difficult to move people around. But we are slowly but surely, trying to move staff around into the right area and then the students are having their lectures nearby if we can and getting that course identity. And we're looking at streamlining the number of courses to have less courses and hopefully more students on each course. I mean Maths, we'd love to increase the numbers but they say they have about 100 a year coming in and that's about right for a good community. If you had 200, the NSS might go down. But at one point, I'm not sure we could still do this, we could increase the numbers even further. I think their numbers may have dropped off this year a little bit. The applications. Yeah, it's getting that community spirit, that identity.

R This is interesting because two of the themes I've been pursuing in my literature review, one of them is a sense of belonging which is very much kind of promoted in *What Works*. And the other one is space, different spaces and how spaces are used, you know, places are created within universities.

I I think getting the space and the community and the staff talking to each other and getting on with each other...that's it! If you get that right, students are very forgiving, but they'll also achieve more because they're on a coherent course where everyone's working together. So I think it's simple stuff, it really is. And we are getting there. And I think it's just making sure that the students are adequately supported as best we can do.

R In the *What Works* report, it states that a sense of belonging was essential - or critical - for retention. I've been wondering whether there are some issues around that in relation to part-time, mature students. Because they're engaging with the institution in a different way, they're in and they're out...?

I I don't think they probably get the sense of community and identity as well as the other students that are here.

R Do you think they need it in the same way? Is it as critical for them?

I I'm not sure they do because they've got their sense of community through their workplace and the other part-time students. Because I find that all my part-time students sit together. I mix them up with full-time students in group work and they don't like it. But it's good for the full-time students to learn from the people from industry but when we're sort of setting them assignments to do together, it's difficult because they can't all work at the same time. But I like to mix them if I can. But sometimes they kick back and say - no I don't want to do that! I can't work with

a full-time student because they're meeting in a week and we can't meet the same days. It does lead to issues.

R And just coming back to space for a minute, on this campus you have the Glasshouse.

I Yes, it's great, great. Social space, formal and informal space. And it's the way forward, it's got to be. And where I think the university has got it right is in the way they've merged them together. And there's more sort of social space that students can use as learning space. Which we have started to do and the Glasshouse is an example of it and part of the Learning Centre, there's some good learning spaces and group working spaces there.

R What about the other campus, Collegiate?

I Yeah, that's a mix of old buildings and some new buildings and there's some development they're doing at the moment. I think the Learning Centre's improved a lot, but I suppose the social space there is more grassy areas and squirrels running round! But yeah, it's probably more difficult there but they are developing that campus and I think our Estates people are really working on this. I've been on one or two groups where we've looked at spaces and I think I'm going to be in a meeting soon about it, they've invited me to. It's an area I'm really interested in and we've just got to get it right. And some universities have done a lot of work on it. X University have got a new Engineering and Computing building and they've got lecture rooms without a front. So they've got round tables, or oval ones with computers that come up and they've got screens around the room but the academic stands in the middle but they don't stand at the front, there's no front. And you come out those rooms, a glass sided room and there's a social area with a cafe and so you can send them out for group work in the more social area. So they can do their group work in or outside. And they've got big lecture theatres, tiered ones that you can split in half. They've done quite a lot of work and I think they've done quite well, been successful there. I think they've gone up the league tables at that University and I think it's partly that philosophy and that investment that's helped.

R There's an ongoing project at Y University around learning spaces. I know they're having whole days where they were looking at different developments in learning spaces. It's a very interesting area.

I It is and I think I'm a firm believer in active learning, activity based and enquiry based learning in groups with academics facilitating the learning and I think that leads to better student success. With students learning real skills, dealing with real problems related to the real world but working as a team as well as individually within the team, obviously. And getting the space right is key to that. I'm a firm believer in all that.

R Obviously there's a whole range of requirements, recommendations and interventions here in the Framework. Is there anything that isn't there that you think is missing or needed at the moment?

I I think the only thing that's missing since I've done this, is the better sharing of practice on retention and success. We try and do it at the annual learning and teaching conference, so it's done to some extent but not as focused as like X University do with their Retention and Success Day. And they have workshops, they have presentations, then they have workshops in the afternoon. I think maybe we could do a bit more on that. No, I think the course identity and there's

something about it in here, is the latest thing for us and it's sort of built in anyway. So I don't think there's anything particular missing.

R And from what you said at the beginning, you don't think there are any particular issues for part-time students? In results or ... ?

I Not really, so it's quite good for us really. But I think you'd have to analyse the data and if it's different you better come and tell me! I've not seen anything that stands out.

R One of the reasons that Northern City is a case study is that I decided to concentrate on institutions that had strong retention rates for students, the most recently publicly available data, which actually is 2009-10 I think. So that was what it was when I was - that was the HESA data that I could get hold of. But obviously there's been this significant drop in part-time enrolments as a result of fees largely, the new fees regime. So what the situation was in terms of numbers in 2009-10 is very different. One of my case studies, the intake has halved.

I I think, just from our part-time X (programme) students, I don't think I've seen a big drop in our part-time in this last couple of years.

R Are they funded?

I They're funded by their employers.

R Perhaps that's been a cushion against the fee increases?

I Certainly on X (programmes), our part-time students are funded so therefore they're not paying. But if they're not funded and they're doing it part-time, they'd probably drop off because it's a big chunk of money.

R It's been shown that older students tend not to think about debt in the same way.

I Yeah. Youngsters these days, it's the norm to have it.

R Ok, I've completed my questions, but is there anything else you wanted to say?

I No, I don't think so. Can't think of anything else really, but if you want to come back to me when you've read the Framework and clarify anything, feel free?

R Thank you

**(end 39:36)**



## STAFF: ACADEMIC TEACHING

### Example A (New Ecclesiastical)

I I'm Programme Director for a top up, so I'm Programme Director for a one year top up, that tops up the Foundation degree in X. So I have another colleague, another set of colleagues who have a Foundation Degree in Y with a Y top up. X basically encompasses X but up to and including, we've had post-compulsory type people on the programme and we've also had social work background people. Predominantly, our students are Teaching Assistants in school and most of the staff who teach on the programme were in school, so there is quite a heavy education emphasis. So my role as Programme Director, I run the programme for the third year, which is the BA Honours year and we have about - I should know exactly but it does fluctuate a little bit, about 120 students across multi campuses.

R In that top up year?

I Yep.

R When you say multi campuses, where does the programme run?

I Right, the programme at the moment runs from Urban, City – but in a building a couple of miles outside of (location), it has run and it's always subject to viable cohorts, in Coastal. And we have had on the Foundation degree students running from X House, which is a special school down on the coast near (location) and there's a group at - and because I'm not the Programme Director I don't know exactly where the programme is but they will be coming onto the BA Honours, they're running at X School in (location). So that is six. We have gone where the demand is for students. I'm sure - when I first came 12 years ago, it was about us taking higher education out to people who wouldn't normally access higher education. So in terms of widening participation it was a big thing. As the years have gone on and this is my 12th year here - I've started my 13th year here... it's unlucky for somebody but I'm not sure who...(laughs) I don't think I would have stayed that long if it was horrible. No. What I think we've seen is a chance and predominantly down to economic circumstances where we have taken that and refocused our provision at campuses of the university. We sadly finished last year, teaching in (location), so I think we for 13, 14 years, had a very good relationship with that borough. So that's as far north as it went, we were teaching in (location) which is as far west as it went and then obviously the (region)...so quite a big spread. Perhaps not as much as some universities, because X region has X university sort of dipping their toes into Initial Teacher Training and things like that! So quite a broad range and reasonably successful in keeping recruitment up, even after fees changed. And again, whither that comes out more in what we're going to discuss ... Because they're part-time students but they complete the degree in 3 years. Because it's a Foundation degree and the Foundation degree was borne out of the old Diploma in Higher Education, their work-based practice contributes hours to the degree. So whither successful recruitment and retention is around the notion that they get a full degree in half the time and half the fee? And whither that encourages them? In fact, you know, it does. Because of the way that they work and who they are and the other responsibilities they have in their lives, it suits them very well. And I've always been interested in where they're coming from and why they're staying because some of their own stories are quite horrendous, but that they will say to me - what other options do I have. So apart from Open University, which never particularly suited me to be honest in terms of being out there predominantly on my own. And one of the things they talk about

quite a lot is the fact that they come together as a group for one day, or as we're starting in the BA year, the Foundation group have been doing it for a couple of years, we're starting twilights in reaction to them and their patterns of work and not being able to do day-release. So we're having to do - that doesn't sound quite right - we're happy to ...

R Respond to?

I Respond to! Although, I think for staff and sustainability of staff, where does that stop? That raises a whole load of other issues, because of twilights, because of getting the hours in, even though it's a part-time degree, you have to conform to validation and a certain number of hours. So it does include Saturdays as well, so it's Saturdays and twilights and whether we're all going to be nocturnal creatures, moles scurrying around while everyone else is here?! But that's led by non-traditional - whatever that is any more - non-traditional students demanding or requesting or not being able to be released from school for a day. So we've reacted in that way and they've been very popular. They've recruited well.

R Can you give me an idea of the sort of student profile, profiles on the programmes?

I Again, it's changed. I mean predominantly women, predominantly between 30-50, although - and without having the actual figures, and we have a very strange system - again in higher education I've only ever worked here so I don't know how it is elsewhere - we get asked for returns which ask whether students are young or mature. There's no age banding, so I couldn't press a button necessarily and tell you how old they are. But what we have seen, beginning to see an influx of younger students, but I would say traditionally, predominantly, more mature women, with families, who have been in education in some way shape or form, an adult rather than teacher, predominantly teaching assistants who have been encouraged or have looked at what their options are and seen that this is available and have come onto the programme. So relatively few men but you know, we have a few. And relatively few youngsters but we are seeing that gently increase.

R What about ethnicity?

I When we were in (x borough), it helped our figures, but very very few. I'm just - because I teach most of Year 3 and again it's difficult because I don't teach on the Foundation degree and I'm not sure whether you want to look at this from the perspective of a three year degree, or the one year top up? I mean I can talk in general terms. But not a lot. If you wanted figures, we could probably get - if you wanted more - we could probably get hold of those for you. We have to do these Annual Reviews each year, the problem is that the central university systems aren't always that reliable in necessarily capturing key data (laughs)...They're not and what we end up doing, for programmes that can manage it, we do it via what we know and also it relies on their - because when they register they can choose to opt out of ethnicity. But in (x borough) when we were teaching, they were predominantly Asian.

R I was interested because of Urban campus which I haven't been to yet, but I had understood that, certainly on some courses there, there was a higher percentage of BME students at Urban?

I Nursing for example, Health seem to attract a lot. I don't know why we don't. It's not that we don't have any students from ethnic backgrounds other than White British but we don't have a lot. Now whether they are not in post in schools - because our programmes are linked very much to - they have to be working, so

they can't just come and turn up and do it. They have to be in employment for 10 hours. That used to be 20, we cut it down to keep people coming onto the programme really. And we found that other HEIs had released that, because basically when the Foundation degree first started it was for students who were in full-time employment and gradually less and less schools and educational establishments have demanded full-time and don't want full-time people, they want part-time people. So they have to be working in a voluntary or paid capacity for 10 hours a week. Now whether that's not attractive to certain people, I don't know.

R OK, would you say that in terms of your experience here, your 12, 13 years' experience here and in relation to this course, what would you say are the key issues around retention of part-time, mature undergraduates? And that could be part-time and/or mature.

I Yeah, I mean as they're predominantly mature students, it tends to be one and the same. When I was thinking about it today, the ones that we've lost have interestingly, been the youngsters and we don't lose many. Our attrition rate is incredibly low. The reasons for attrition that I reported on last year for example, I think there were three in the top up year and most of those were for health. Either pregnancy or, very sadly, students get illnesses and choose to interrupt. We're very lucky in getting most of them back within the five years. They're very tenacious. I mean we often talk amongst ourselves - whether we could do what they're doing? I mean most of us did a postgraduate but most of us had the support of our school and we were teachers in school. They're not, they're quite I think - you listen to their stories, they're quite put upon sometimes and the school gets their money's worth out of them and they are considering this as a way out of that rut and they are being given a chance to get a degree. You know they can come onto the programme with nothing. They can do an orientation course, presentation and portfolio and come on and end up possibly with a first class Honours degree. Which a few do. Sorry I've drifted a bit from your question but I think the retention is workload. The thing they will keep talking about is workload, juggling all of this. Interesting conversation just yesterday - I was having to bite my tongue a little bit, because 'Could I have an extension on my assignment, you know, I went on holiday at Easter and then I had family to stay and I'm a bit behind?' No you can't! The policy says quite clearly that they aren't valid reasons and although I can sympathise a bit with you, where are we on your list of priorities, but that's quite a rare request because the vast majority of them have got their sights on getting this and making the sacrifices that are needed to. But the thing we hear most of all is keeping everything going, including stuff that life throws at them, so if we do have extenuating circumstances and we're very happy to support in that way, it tends to be things like 'my mother/father have become very ill, terminally ill, have died - you know, those sort of issues, or my children have issues. Lots of family issues. Relatively few about themselves, it's about who they care for and who they're responsible for, probably. So keeping the school going, keeping us going, keeping the family going and keeping it all, juggling.

R Financial concerns?

I Interestingly doesn't really - they just seem to grin and bear it. And have we done anything to help? We are obviously very limited. The university has a hardship fund which I know quite a few of our students do apply and access and because they're on such a low wage anyway, they get a lot of support through - or they have until now - get a lot of support through the PGT1 finance stuff and so Student Finance UK have paid the fees. As part-time students they can't get the

maintenance grant. They haven't until now been able to get the maintenance grant. And that's been a big issue this year in that we had a potential group of students, 18 students from the University of X who wanted to come and join us because they weren't particularly happy with what the University of X were offering them. But they would only come to us if it was a full-time programme so although they were going to be paying the £9k per year, they could also access the maintenance grant. So we had this interesting to-in and fro-ing and I tried to put through a validation. Bit cheeky! To turn the part-time into a full-time. Which passed the Faculty panel, got as far as the University Faculty Quality, sat there and asked 'What's the difference between that and that?' And ultimately really, there isn't a lot of difference, it's just that they wanted a full-time to access, to open up the other funding. Our students - and the conversations I was having with the students from University of X were interesting in that they were saying 'Look we can't do it on that, we can't do it without this'. And I said, well our students have been doing this for 12 years. Now admittedly, things have changed. Twelve years ago they were fully funded by the Local Authority, they had a ring-fenced postgraduate place for them and over the years that's gradually disappeared to where we've now got very interesting, I was going to say tensions but I don't think they are tensions because people don't really know, but in a room like this you would have two or three who were fully supported by the school, so they would be being paid for the day while they were here, they were having fees paid for by the school, sitting next to somebody who was losing a day's pay, who was having to fund themselves. But very few moans about that, in fact I can't remember - I mean the conversations I have are with students who say how useless Student Finance UK are, they've lost my form, they've told me to fill in the wrong form and that sort of issue, not that we've got to pay. I think some of them access the bank of Mum and Dad, some of them have taken out loans and I know that to complete their course, some of them have taken up interest free credit cards. Because it's, it's sort of manageable up until now with HEFCE funding they would be roughly paying £1500, £1600. Those that have, since HEFCE went, are paying £4500 and in the couple of conversations I've had with students, they've said that even that, because their husband or partner might be reasonably well paid they're not able to access any other funding, then they can get hold of a bit of plastic that will get them through to pay the fees. So they've been quite ingenious in a way in the ways that they've funded it. So it doesn't appear to have been a huge issue. I think we potentially knew that we had an issue with turning - and there's quite a push from the university - to turn the part-time Foundation degrees into full-time. They're quite keen for student numbers to do that. The issue that we've discussed at our departmental management teams, for those teams affected, is how we persuade students who are very reluctant to take out loans, even if they could access them, is to educate them and say 'look, we know you don't want to, but the rest of the world is quite happy to do this, you could do this as well and it means that you would have a bit of extra money, because you'd be able to access maintenance grants and so forth. But there is a huge reluctance. They seem to have accepted - and my programme will get the £4500 students for the first time next year, but they've done that since two years ago and they've paid it, probably slightly begrudgingly but -

R It's become normal hasn't it?

I Absolutely. And again it comes back to these conversations we have with the students - 'If we want to get there, we've got to do that.'

- R I don't know what the OU charge now? I know it's gone up significantly from what it used to be, but I'm not sure what it is. Yeah interesting. Ok. So, within the university, I know there's a formal Retention Strategy, are you aware of it?
- I I probably should be! If I'm brutally honest: NO!
- R I'll explain why I'm asking the question. Because one of the things I've become interested in is, because institutions make a big deal about their retention strategy and, literally in a hard copy form, where does it go, what does it do? What is its impact actually? And often you know it's hanging around up here and it comes down through the ranks if you like in ways that probably aren't quite the ones that were expected.
- I We do talk a lot about recruitment. We talk a lot about recruitment because we have to get bums on seats. You know, we've all got mortgages to pay. We know what the situation is now if we don't get the students. Retention, we discuss but I think we've perhaps fallen into a bit of a habit of saying that because we have such low attrition rates, whatever we're doing is working. Do we need to do any more? As a Programme Director and I know my colleague who's the Programme Director of the two year FD, if anybody says look, I think I'm going to have to interrupt, we get them in, we sit them down, we talk to them, we think, right what can we do? And you know, we've shifted students around, we've changed orders of modules, you know, anything we can do we react to those individuals. They - but they almost, it almost just seems to happen. Do we need to do any more? I suspect if we our attrition rates were higher, we would be looking at what we could do and incorporating external agencies within the university that could help us. But our relationship with those, with Study Support for example, is very good. With Employability and Careers is very good, you know we do those things as a matter of course. Now all those things are probably sat in the policy somewhere. We're doing that and I would say and I hope my colleagues would say that we don't have an issue with retention. How much of that is down to what we do and perhaps - I'm told frequently I sell myself short in terms of how we manage the programme and what we do but whatever we do do, works and students know where they are, they know where to go for help, all of those sort of issues.
- R Would you say it was quite a strong course identity?
- I There's a strong cohort identity. Because they're broken down into cohorts. What I would say - and I've spoken to a few students about this - because we felt that students perhaps weren't accessing central services such as Students Study Support - we can recommend they'll go but they don't always go and they'll say - but we're only here for one day a week. They feel very strong about their cohort and they want to graduate with their cohort. You know, they see that, putting on the funny clothes and walking down the aisle in the cathedral with their cohort, that's where they're aiming, to show everybody else who said they couldn't do it and all the rest of it, that they can do it. If you talk about being part of New Ecclesiastical University - not so much. And we're continually having to remind them that as somebody who pays their fees, yes, it pays for me or my colleagues to stand in a room like this, but it also pays for the library, student support, employability and careers. Come on! Access these, you can do it. That's a bit of an uphill struggle. So identity of cohort? Yes. Any wider than that, not completely sure.
- R And I suppose that as you say, you've got different cohorts at different places and then you've got your top up year and that takes place at different places as well?

- I Yes, it's almost the same. They would do the first two years and then they would stay. Interestingly, next year for the first time, there's been quite a lot of moving about because we couldn't sustain smaller groups, so we've had to combine groups, those students are going to be combining into bigger groups to make them slightly more viable, financially more viable. So that will be quite interesting, to see how that works. Where it's happened before in the past, you've got a room of people, the old group sits there, the other group sits on the other side. You try to get them to interact - you know, you say right, we're going to mix it up today! They say - yeah....
- R Sit next to someone you don't know....
- I Yeah, I'm out of my comfort zone...
- R And will that also require people to travel further?
- I Potentially. Potentially. On the whole not though. What is quite interesting is where we look down and say right well we're coming to the end of two years and - I've got an extremely good administrator who almost keeps it all up here (points to head) and says, well, I know that that person travels from there to there and quite a distance, so go back to that person and say well actually we're running at Urban. Would you...? No! I want to stay with my cohort. And you hear that an awful lot. I'm prepared to put up with the getting up earlier and paying the petrol....you hear quite a lot about petrol prices nowadays. More than we certainly used to. But that notion which is why I think I can say to you, there is a cohort identity. They really do want to keep that and are prepared to put up with the other stuff to stay... Because what we tend to see - not entirely obviously, but we tend to see that the cohorts are very supportive of each other and that's why that fosters that 'belonging' with that group.
- R And do you notice any particular difference between cohorts, say who are at Urban and at Coastal and here?
- I No, I mean what I could have said to you and I will give it as an example - what we did tend to find is that (x borough) students, when I looked at grades and achievement across the year for my annual report, they didn't do quite as well and we think that is down to not being part of a university campus and not having access. Now when we were based in that borough, the local authority tried to set up a little library and it was run from the Professional Development Centre and the reason we stopped is that they closed it all down and they disappeared and they were in - and I think they still are - in dire financial straits. But that sense of being 'at University' perhaps wasn't there and then access to things like the library, to Student Study Support should they have chosen to go and that sense of being in that environment was never there. Got no hard evidence for that.
- R What about language issues?
- I Not so much. I think English wasn't first language for some but it was very good. And certainly, it never really came up as an issue in saying - look, this person obviously can't communicate in written English, what are we going to do? And Newham were quite supportive in terms of - if the student were doing some research stuff and needed stuff translated, it all went through the Translation Service. So they were quite prepared to support. And should students have needed that support, I suspect that would have been there as well. But I'm not aware that that was ever really an issue.

R In my experience of researching transition from Foundation degree to Honours top up, you commonly got a mixture of students coming from quite rural colleges, coming onto this quite big, rather ugly campus and a large existing group of students who had been studying on that campus for two years. So there were a lot of issues around that.

I Difficult.

R So it was a bespoke top up year, but it didn't feel like a bespoke top up year. I did some research work with those students and there were a lot of issues there.

I Yeah. I think we have seen issues in the past where groups have come together. You know, you can offer feel the atmosphere, somebody's speaking and then the eyes roll...! You can feel it. The issue is that obviously they don't have the same tutor all the time so as a Programme Director, unless I suppose I do teach a lot of them... But certainly on the Fd they could have five modules in the top up, six modules in the first two years and they could have six different tutors in the year. So the constant is the group and whatever's happening in the group and the variable is the tutor comes in and walks into whatever they walk into. And either very quickly or slowly discovers where the tensions are (laughs) and as I say, certainly where groups have come together - and interestingly it has tended to happen at Urban, because there happen to be a number of smaller groups that have come together - um...but I mean most of the groups are very supportive and very welcoming, I think, to new people. But it's a teacher/pupil thing isn't it, you're not always sure what goes on and if you could read their Facebook page you might! (laughs loudly). But you can't and you don't!

R I suppose that's another question actually. There's obviously stuff that you do, embedded within the course that is probably doing all the interventions, retention-related or engagement-related interventions are probably already embedded. Do you use social media at all?

I We don't. No, we don't. I mean some of the programmes in the Department of X Studies do and the X students have Facebook pages and tweet and do all this sort of stuff. We used the virtual learning environment for a long time and up until the advent of Facebook it was actually - some groups used it a lot and it was used as a discussion board and that sort of stuff. But since Facebook we might as well not have it to be honest. I don't know of any cohort that uses it, that aspect of the learning environment. But we know that they talk on Facebook. There isn't anything set up. Whither we should or not...? I mean nobody has ever said to us - oh it would be great to have that. But I mean it's obviously friendship groups within the cohorts that are communicating that way rather than the cohort being totally inclusive in that way. But the short answer is no and whither we could or should - don't know. Interesting question. Social media comes up quite a lot, I mean it's certainly ... perhaps it's our age I don't know! The youngsters obviously use it - the youngsters! (laughs). The youngsters use it and the staff - we're not particularly heavy users ourselves I don't think. I think there's a certain amount of distrust. When I first started teaching I was heavily involved in IT and everything and as the years have gone by I've (groans)...!

R It keeps proliferating!

I Well, Facebook's now apparently old hat and it's something else but I don't know what it is.

R You have older students as well.

- I Well possibly. I mean they're all on their blinkin' mobiles and you hear the conversations you know - you're not deliberately eavesdropping but you know - they Facebooked me and ne ne ne.... But the fact that you might actually be able to use that in an academic way - I think they're quite good at compartmentalising - that's that and that's that and never the twain shall meet. Some of the stories - they put up with this - prejudice is too strong a word but there is perhaps a notion that they're fighting against people's views of them that they're not students, that they're not doing a proper degree - that's something that comes up, not regularly but does come up. You know - my teacher's said that my degree isn't a proper degree because I'm not at university full time and I only spend one day there and the fact that I have to do all these work-based related tasks in school, blah blah blah. You know I think they put up with quite a lot of that and there's a notion that perhaps family are not always supportive. We've never asked it but we know that relationships have broken down because of the students accessing higher education.
- R There's a whole PhD in that!
- I Absolutely! And they made the sacrifice of their relationship to do what they want to do and they've changed. You know I always remember one tutorial I sat down with a student and she said - I'm not the person I was when I came in a year, two years ago. I'm different but they're all the same. It's Shirley Valentine and Educating Rita! You know, I've gone and done this and half my family won't talk to me because they think I think I'm better than them and of course, I don't think I am but...
- R Do you think there's a gendered aspect to that experience?
- I The instances that I can think of - there aren't huge numbers of instances and of course there may be others that I don't know about as Programme Director or as personal tutor - yes. But I think that's down to the number of men that we don't have - or have. There are identity issues with men who come on to the programme because they're obviously not the principal breadwinner or they have a role which is a very minority role within their work setting? I think sometimes that's come out when you have a discussion that's about work-based practice. Certainly in this day and age, with men being around children, that does rear its head occasionally. But in terms of that notion of being in a relationship and it not working, I can't think of any examples. It tends to be the women that have had that experience.
- R It just struck me then because you quoted Shirley Valentine and Educating Rita and I was trying to think about whether there was a male equivalent? I can't think of one at the moment. A different question: do you think that a sense of belonging is critical to retention?
- I From the experience of seeing how they work as a cohort, yes. Whither it's the sense of belonging for this university, I don't know. But the cohort belonging, it seems to be an important factor and seems to have been the route that they have chosen. Whither they've understood that when they've come in, because in the past I've said - why didn't you do OU? You could have done an equivalent. And I think they perhaps have not even thought about it. I think a lot of our recruitment comes from word of mouth. We've tried advertising, we've tried having stalls in shopping centres, and we've tried attending the big university open days. Predominantly - how did you get to hear about the programme? 'Somebody knew somebody who'd done it or the school has supported people going through it'. Which is great, I mean it's not a limitless supply so we are always looking. 'And it



worked for them so I thought it would work for me'. And then, when they are here, I think they are realising they're not on their own and always on the first day of Year 3 when I get them, I say 'Right, wavy lines, mists of time - first day of Year 1' And they all laugh. And I say 'Look around you. You've got friends now, blah blah blah.' And all of that's happened because they are in a group. We've tried and we've suggested that we run sort of distance learning, blended learning stuff and I think they find that appealing because they could do a lot of it at home, but they keep talking about 'but I would miss...coming together as the group' and I think they get a lot of that and for all the IT in the world, you know, being in proximity with other people seems to be something that they - I don't know if they definitely look forward to it - I dunno, it's an interesting question! But could they have done it without and I think - it might be a question to put on the End of Year review, 'Could you have done this on your own?' and I would guess - but it is only a guess - that they would say 'Probably not'. That's not about their lack of strength of character in anyway, but the notion that - when you hear conversations and sometimes you engage in the conversation, sometimes you don't but you're picking this stuff up, they're sharing not only the academic stuff, which they do but it's the problems with home and the problems with their children and the problems with schools - whatever the issue is at that moment. And a lot of them have got children who are going through it at the same time and it's another support network. And they're the sort of issues that, if you're in with a group (and I very rarely get the opportunity to go in with a group of younger, more traditional undergraduates) they're not 'oh he chucked her, did you go...(laughs)...you sort of scurry back and go 'Oh, back to sanity' (laughs). It is quite strange when you have to go in - saying you 'have' to go sounds quite strange doesn't it, but when you go in you go 'Oh blimey, could I put up with this? It's not far removed from teaching the Upper Sixth, you know! (laughs). No, it's not.

R And that face-to-face, that contact they have, that cohort contact, as far as you know, does that take place literally in the classroom and - I don't know whether there are coffee bars or whatever...is it there?

I I think so. I think friendships have been formed. You do hear conversations you know 'What are you doing on Saturday?' But interestingly, since we've had fantastic new library - it's two or three years old now, it's not new, but I still think of it as being new, you hear of them meeting there, perhaps in the morning, working and then going into town. I've certainly heard that from students we have at X and I'm sure friendship groups have developed, but mainly I think, they're meeting up on that day. Other than that I don't know, again, interesting question.

R What is X?

I It's a village but we have a centre there. Other organisations hire rooms there too but we use it for teaching. But it's about two miles out. Before we started the twilights we took nothing on main campus - all teaching was off campus. Now the Foundation degree for the twilights for the last two years have been teaching on campus and obviously my programme, the top up, from September next year, will be teaching on campus here. So it's very much going back to that notion of sort of taking the HE out. But for some reason and I don't know - well I don't know why and it possibly is a retention issue - you can park! Now there are a lot of Masters programmes run up there and I think the Education Doctorate is run up there and there are various other bits and bobs, the research guys are up there. But for a long time we were doing predominantly most of the teaching up there, it was where we were doing most of the teaching was done. And then two or three years

ago, X Faculty went 'hang on a minute, our students could park up there' and it sounds daft it being the principle reason but you can talk to students who are dropping the kids off at school, they're then travelling to university and you say here - well, you can't park. Well no, how am I going to manage everything. So then they can apply for a parking permit and they start moaning about it and then I tell them I pay £209 per year for mine to drive here and that shuts them up! But it is an issue, it is an issue for them.

R And when you do the twilights, will the cafes be open?

I Yes. Interesting. At Coastal they weren't and the students brought this issue up and they're open now and I think open later at the Urban campus. They seem to be open here until quite late. But again, it was an issue. As I say, this is my 13th year, the battles that I have as a Programme Director, with the university through central services, are still trying to explain that our students don't follow a traditional academic year, 9 till you know, the official university day is 9-7 but most people still think of it within traditional core teaching hours and all this stuff for non-traditional undergraduates, not just for Masters and postgraduates, happens outside these times. And I think we all, as Programme Directors, departmental management team, we do feel we're banging our head against a brick wall and why are we still doing that, 12, 13 years into what is perceived to be a very successful programme for the university? And it's little things like that which will...

R And it's interesting to me to hear that in a university which does a lot of professional courses and kind of promotes that side of itself. I mean it's not alone in doing that but it's like the right hand isn't quite sure - or doesn't take any notice - of what the left hand is doing?

I No, no. And I've got friends who teach in other HEIs and they've got similar sorts of stories. And it's very strange! We seem to be lone voices and I've been invited onto a couple of Review Panels. I mean, everything seems to be being reviewed, and I'm there to represent these 'odd' programmes. Somebody described it like that - said 'Oh you're here to talk about the odd programmes'. I said 'What are you talking about, the 'odd' programmes. I mean we were having a bit of a laugh about it but you know, to have a voice, to say 'Well hang on a minute, no. That IS going to impact on our students and that's not fair or....Anything from handing in assignments... 'All assignments will be handed in on such and such a day at such and such a time'. Somebody had made this...this was a decision that was made. Hang on a minute! Ours'll be at work. How are they supposed to do that? And bring in physical copy if that's what's demanded. They can't do it! You can't make that decision! 'Oh, can't we?!' So in terms of what we're doing, the students would never see that side and what goes on, but hopefully, those things are helping them ultimately, which means that they're not completely frustrated by ... I mean I think they're frustrated by enough stuff, like IT systems not working and things, and Turnitin issues - like this week for example. You know, it must be in by...Oh God! (laughs). I'm going 'All right! Don't panic, calm down!' It's not the end of the world but...

R It's that time of year isn't it? People getting twitchy. Just one more question if that's ok? About personal tutors.

I Right.

R You mentioned a personal tutoring system...

I It's a policy!

R Right.

I I know it's a policy! We've been told it's a policy! We've been told we must adhere to the policy! Which is probably an interesting point because the policy has been made ... Evidently ... We didn't have, our students didn't have a personal tutor and the university has - I think everything now revolves around the student satisfaction survey, it's the mantra by which we you know ... And it's obviously come up somewhere. What I would say is that we, because the cohorts sort of - they were together as a cohort, they came in for one day a week and they had different tutors. It was very difficult to manage that. Certainly on the BA top up, being one year, being a relatively small programme, where there were issues, they came to me, or they went to the tutor. They might have met the tutor once, they might have met the tutor a couple of times, they might have met the tutor on the Fd. If they had an affinity with that person...certainly we never seemed to have an issue with a student not seeking assistance and help and probably it was predominantly me. On the slightly bigger Foundation degree I know that Janice was very keen that the tutors do that. The policy then came in for Professional and Academic? Personal and Academic Tutors - that's it, PATs, everybody's got to have a PAT. Um now, for my programme, I looked at this and thought, now how are we going to manage this because they come in for a five week module, the sixth week is the research module which I teach, sort of drip feed through the year. How are we going to manage this? We give a group of students' names to a member of staff who they might not actually ever meet. You know, there are various models that you could adopt. So I made a decision that the Personal and Academic Tutor would be the person who would be drip feeding them through the research module because they would be seeing them at various times all the way through the year. To be honest, if we had an OFSTED scenario and OFSTED came in and said 'Do you know who your Personal and Academic Tutor is?' they wouldn't know. It's in the handbooks and everything but they see the person who they see in the week and they know I'm the Programme Director and so forth. There have been some issues I think on the Fd, where groups of students have been given to a tutor who they haven't seen, the tutors have to make the effort to go on the day. Are there hours attached to it in workload planning? No. It ... hmmm. It's a model that doesn't particularly work but we've got to do it. And I've suggested to the Programme Director, it could be the person who does the Research Module in Year 2, a little independent study, but that isn't being drip fed now, that is going to be short and fat at the end of the year, so that model doesn't work for them either. Um and we had a team meeting just before Easter and this came up on the agenda - how's it going? And people went 'Oh well, I've tried to make contact with my students, I've gone to meet them, I held the session, two out of 15 turned up - or whatever. So there is this notion of a personal tutor, um but I think we've always dealt with issues and students have always felt that could talk to the people were in front of them, for those sort of issues. I mean interestingly, the tutoring is Personal Academic tutoring - it seems that the policy is pushing this notion of support of academic work. Which ok, that's fine but it tends to be, for our students, personal issues that need the support. You know, the academic stuff they're doing all the time and if they're not happy or they want guidance, they can book tutorials. But again, that system that a normal student would say 'Are you going to be in your office at 3 o' clock? Yes I am, come and see me on Thursday - doesn't work because they're in one day a week. But we seem to get round those issues and tutors are very good, skyping and phone calls and Facetime or whatever. Increasing use of that sort of technology which can help our students - I can't make

that day but could we have a telephone conversation? They're happy to do that. Um, yeah, it's never been an issue but it's interesting that you should ask the question, bearing in mind we've had this sort of policy sort of waved at us and we've got to be seen to be doing it and as I say, it definitely comes from the Student Survey but what I would say, certainly the evaluations I get back, the one thing that keeps coming up is that they are very happy with the level of support that they get, they feel that there is support there. They're not just left. And you know the emails you get, you don't get huge numbers of them but it is very nice at the end of the three years, you know, 'I wouldn't have been able to do it without...thank you very much'. And that notion that coming to university was a big scary thing but actually when we got there we had the group of peers around us who were equally as scared as we were and we had tutors who, I think I'd be right in saying we've got a team of tutors who understand their needs. Being critical for a moment I think we've suffered a little bit from too much cossetting, we've perhaps wrapped up in too much cotton wool sometimes and we've tried to pull back on that in terms of towards the end of Year 1 and certainly in Year 3, you know it's 'You're in Year 3 now' and they're happy with that. Not without their sort of 'Oooooohh, we're scared again!'

R It's that transition, transitional development.

I Absolutely yeah. But this is why I try and say on the first day of Year 3 'Here you are today, think back to two years ago!' That was Day 1. Do you feel any different? And everybody sorts of laughs and goes 'No, still scared!' They are and they aren't. They're apprehensive, they don't want to muck it up, this is their go at it, their chance to prove that they are something, they can do it.

R Great. Thank you. I've finished all my questions, I don't know if there's anything else you want to throw in the pot?

I No, the sort of things you might want to talk about, we have. I don't know, it's slightly frustrating...I still feel a need to give you some statistics! Real evidence! You know, it's just rather, well I think this, I think that. I think the frustrations are us battling with central systems that don't, for whatever reason, don't understand our type of student and we're not the only programmes that are running. Some of these Reviews things I've been too. Masters programmes suffer a bit from that because somebody's imposed some sort of policy decision which probably is ok for the majority of full-time undergraduates, but not for everybody else. But I'm trying to think of examples where students have really got upset with us and what we've done and how - and I can't really think of anything. I think that question you were asking about what would be their main issue and it comes back to this workload balance. I mean one of the things that I've done, I suppose I've revalidated the top up (laughs) feels a lot longer than three times, but I think it's three times. Obviously it's a five year cycle. And we've certainly shifted the emphasis to independent learning and I always say to them, 'There'll be a lot of independent learning but not on your own. Not 'hello, this is September, see you with your dissertation in July.' But trying to build time into the day that they're here. So for example we've moved, I think in Year 3, morning lecture/seminar type group activity stuff, afternoons, if you're at X (building), go to the library, stay around for a group tutorial, go and use some of the IT and put your name on the list...A lot more time, rather than sort of saying, you're coming in at half past nine and we're going to teach at you until half past four. And I think there was a tendency certainly, a decade ago, that's what you need to do with these students. And I think slowly we've realised that doesn't work. And if you want to, if you're asking

them in Year 3 to choose their area of focus, their area of interest - and I think that's one of the things that they like. You know, 'Are we doing X (theorist) again?' (laughs) Or whatever it is! I often sort of stand there tongue in cheek and say 'You may never hear the names X, Y and Z (theorists) again! That isn't to say you don't want to but the choice is yours! We're not going to stand here and go blah blah blah.' But in a way some of that stuff, that scaffolds, are a way ago and it's a wide open space. So it's ok, here's a wide open space, where do you want to look at this and through research methodology, which sort of underpins the whole of Year 3, what are you interested in? How are you going to find out the answer to the questions that you've got? And so it turns the tables which I think unnerves them but then slowly they begin to appreciate that they've got that freedom and it's all right to look at that area and look at that issue and produce an assignment. And although it's an assignment, because they're relating it to their work-based study and to what they do as professionals within their setting, it's got some meaning. Not to say that the full-time undergraduates don't have that but ... And I think that sort of works, it's not just about - I mean someone said to me, 'Oh, my teacher said it's not just about going to university and doing this, this and this. And I said to them, no, I'm going to ask you next week if I can evaluate your lesson. And they were like 'What are you doing that for?' And I said 'It's because it's work based, it's about me looking around where I work, what I do, being a teacher.' 'Oh, oh right, oh right!' It's not just about going to lectures and learning stuff. Which probably demonstrates entrenched views of staff in school about what their university experience was like and what they did.

R Absolutely. It is an interesting role isn't it, that teaching assistant role. I'm aware - the tensions you were talking about, the teachers' attitudes to them and their work and the studying, as well as the teaching outside ... a huge amount seems to be required of them.

I Oh, absolutely and increasingly. This came up in conversation yesterday with a group. What was interesting about what the person was saying was that there is still this sort of strata within the support staff in school. You've got those who've gone for the higher level teaching assistant. You've got those who've got responsibility for behaviour or learning support. And then - this was quite a surprise - you've got those that want to come in and wash paint pots up. Because I thought that had all gone, since this notion of upskilling, but in this person's school was still there. But as she said, we're all being paid the same. So whether that was unique to that school? I mean the conversation was that her friend didn't want to learn how children develop, didn't want to x, didn't want to y. Eventually I said - is your friend in the right job?! (laughs). Doing the right thing? (laughs). She doesn't want to do an awful lot, does she?! You know there are other opportunities to hone the washing up skills, or Marigold technology or whatever! Is supporting children not what she wants to do? That's probably us not being in school now and knowing what's going on. I mean, it's interesting just thinking about...what we pick up and know about school is from our students now rather than us being in there.

R You don't go in then, to do an evaluation?

I No, no. Interestingly for a Foundation Degree - and I never went to them but there was a group called Foundation Degree Forward, I don't know whether you've come across that?

R Yes, yes.

- I My predecessor, she used to go along to the big meetings that they held. And of course, we - and I think other HEIs - took this very much as an academic route, whereas for a number of people doing Fds, it was very much the skill, the business, the industry that they were in and assessing them in that. Because I tried to explain to a couple of people before, saying OK well, they're getting a Foundation degree and it's about x, how do you assess that from their professional practice? And you don't actually. And I'm not sure, when I've read the precepts of Foundation degrees, it is about that, about acknowledging their work. We obviously do it through an academic route but other people are - can they make a difference on the production line or whatever it is? That they're doing that whereas we're not.
- R I think Foundation degrees are interesting in all kinds of ways actually but one Foundation degree is not like another, they are not transferable essentially. You couldn't start doing Year 1 here and go and do Year 2 there, because every institution has its own model and some as you say are much more work-based and others are work-connected.
- I Yeah, yeah, I mean the subjects of placements and things, when they come up, my Head of Department turns a shade of puce when you mention it. And I think there are very sort of logistical reasons why we wouldn't necessarily want to do that. But in writing a reference I always have to put the caveat that I can't comment on this person's work in school because I just don't know. I know what they talk about but we don't have a placement procedure. Hmm.
- R Thank you very much

**(end 1.00)**

## STAFF: ACADEMIC TEACHING

### EXAMPLE B (Modern Eastern)

I My role is Course Leader of X (programme), our cohort is a part-time cohort. I manage the course, which means I am responsible for day to day management, for troubleshooting, the booking of rooms. I will keep an eye on placements although it's not my responsibility, but I keep an eye to keep student satisfaction going, so I will be in personal contact with the placements team. I attend meetings, I input to the general departmental assessment panels, to the practice assessment panels, to student reviews etc. So it's really, basically, having the day to day management for the course to run smoothly.

R Can you tell me something about the degree programme you run?

I It's a four year course. It's been developed around that. Initially we developed it in response to the local authority's request for trainees. They wanted to train, upskill employees as well as get them their degree. And so we developed it over a four year period and that happened more in 2003 when it changed to a BA, we changed it to that and it's just seemed to have changed and moulded as it's gone along. There are things that we're now thinking could be done more online, because what we're getting now are not people that are seconded but people who are self-funding. And if they're working, it gets very difficult for them to manage the work-life balance. So again, that's a new area that we will be - well, that my colleague will be looking at in the future.

R So what kind of size is the course, approximately? What's the intake?

I We aim to intake 20 each year. We did have one year when we took 33 in. We did have quite a drop out in that year. The past two years have been particularly difficult to recruit because of the change in finances. Partly because of the fees we lost the trainee secondment, the local authority couldn't afford the fees with their restricted budgets. And also, particularly last year was the changeover from...students can now get, ask for Student Loans. What it means is that they can ask for Student Loans but they can't get the top up that the full-time students get, so they don't get that £3-4000 a year top up. So financially, they're in a real difficulty really. And they can apply to the Access to Education Fund but they've been severely cut, so part-time students have a hard time financially because they have to work to fund their way on the course, particularly if they've already got a degree, they can't get Student Loans so they have to pay the full fee themselves. Even more difficult. So that's the main issue for us at the moment. And so it's seen numbers drop to last year where we recruited 10 in the end which has gone down to 7. This year we've surpassed that already and I think the numbers will come back because more people will have to work to support themselves on the funds. So again you know, I said it would be two bad years and if the university could hang on and support us through it, then we would come up again and hopefully our numbers will come back. But it has been difficult last year. So our group sizes vary from 22 to this year's first year which is 7. Not good, not good. The 7 isn't good because it's too small to get the exercises. You can do it with them but they've got nowhere to hide.

R Yeah, and if one or two are off sick ...

I It really does hit your numbers. So we don't like it to be that. As I say, this year we've already got 12 offers out, 12 confirmed and I think we've got another 7, 8 offers out. So we should be OK this year.

- R You mentioned your profile was the more mature student?
- I The more mature student.
- R So could you say a bit more?
- I It would be students who might be returning from having their family, they've had a break for their family. Or they might be students who've been working in x (field) for many years and want to qualify. Students who have taken an Access course, that again are thinking of wanting to get a career. We have occasionally taken students of 19, 20 but we find that they don't seem to stay because we don't have the time to spend on them. They attend one day a week, it's an intensive day, they've got to do the studying in the rest of the week. And on the part-time we don't offer the university going out, clubbing, that sort of life. You come in, you do your one day a week, you work in the week, prepare for next week. Yes you can get tutorials, you're in touch with your tutors but you're actually only attending one day a week. So we can't offer that student 'let's stay on campus have a riot life' which my son did when he was at university. You know, you've got to come in and be prepared to work. And also we want students that bring experience so that they can talk about those experiences. Very interactive, we work quite interactively with the students, although they get the same material as the full-time students, we tend to do it in a much more interactive way. Because we've got smaller groups we can do that. So in a sense I would say we offer more quality but that's about opinion rather than fact.
- R And gender bias?
- I Mainly women, mainly females.
- R Overwhelmingly?
- I Overwhelmingly female. Still.
- R And in terms of ethnicity, does it reflect the local population?
- I It's beginning to be more... this city is unique in its population mix, but we're not getting that reflected yet. We are getting more Asian, Muslim people applying and Black African people applying. More Black African than Black African-Caribbean. I think the breadth of the migrant population here will eventually filter through, that we will get more from Eastern European countries particularly, but still, if you look at our groups, I would say Black and Asian people are in the minority.
- R And does that reflect the profession you are training graduates for?
- I Yes I think it does. Which should be more cosmopolitan, but I don't think it is.
- R My impression at City campus was that there were more BAME students there than I'd seen in the whole of the city that morning!
- I Yes that's right. I think there's a positive feeling about you know the university wanting all types of people, I think there's a real positive feeling. I think it's just that traditionally my profession in this region does not reflect that so much. So again, I think that's the issue, it's not the fact about selection because when I've selected students for the course it's not about their ethnic background, it's about their ability to demonstrate the competencies that we need for the profession.
- R Are most of your students local?
- I No, no no no no! It's started to get more local but this course at North campus was so successful I used to get students from all over. You see it's easy because they



can get a train up here. But when they opened River campus because they did open a part-time up at River because we'd been so successful here and there was a call for it in that area, I think that took some of our people. But now that one isn't running next year, we're having people from a wide area, because they can get here, in what? An hour and half on the train. If they choose to. It's got good links. And I would think of the present groups we've got, quite a few do travel quite a way although we are getting a lot more from this region and the county next door. We get a lot from there because we've now got placements there. Networking as you do and of course they're 'No' but then if you say 'Would you like to just take a look at what we've got on offer...'

R I don't know what the provision is at the university in that county?

I Well normally...they've signed a partnership with X University, that's what I was told but I did say we have part-time students that are mature and will come a bit more prepared than some of the younger ones. And so I was offered a couple of places. Because the other thing is, they'll be looking for jobs in that county and it's been so successful and they rang us this year and said 'have you got any students for us?' (laughs) And I think that is the thing, we do claim to have a more mature student. As I say I will accept younger people. In fact, on the Year 1 we've got two quite young ones. One's got a background where the parents have fostered so she's got some knowledge and the other one has come from a care background, so ... we do take them but they have to be quite tough I think. So but I think we will have to take more and more younger ones as they have a need to work, financially they're going to need to work.

R So in terms - and I'm not asking you to give me statistics or reveal any information that's uncomfortable, but to talk in more general terms, what would you say are the key issues for your students around retention, around staying on course? You've mentioned finance?

I Funding is the biggest issue. Timing for the students, can be quite anxious particularly if they've got children in school. What we did was, when we revalidated the course a while back, we had to revalidate because originally we'd been doing trimesters so it gave us longer to teach them. But to try and bring them into line with the full-time students and to meet all those assessment panels, we semesterised it which means that they've got a longer day and a more intense day but they do now get time off in the holidays to catch up. So they get - like for example the year fours have finished on May second but they've got assignments to hand in on May 18th and then they're finished. So they can, we try because of childcare, we tried to accommodate because childcare can be quite a problem. The cost of childcare can be a problem, so again, the timing can be a problem. Because we're only allowed to take a certain amount of credits each year because we're part-time, again the students can say - well why are we doing half a day when we could be doing a whole day. But we've got to in most cases, put one module across two semesters to make up 90 credits. So I've tried to explain that to them but they're saying - we've got a half day we could have used there. So that sometimes can be an issue with them when they think it's not worth coming in for half a day. The placements are the biggest issue. A real big issue and again, that's all changing round because we've now got new regulations which say that they have to do 170 days in placement and 30 skills-? days in the university. Don't ask me what I think of that, it's come from the professional body!

R Did you say skill space days?

I Skill-based days.

R Is that contact hours?

I Yes. So they have to come into the university and they have to do 30 days of these skills which prepares them to go out into practice. That's the theory. Because the practitioners in the field were saying 'They come out and they can't run with it'. Well no, they're students. But ... so that's the theory. So they have to pass an assessment point before they can go out onto practice. And if they don't understand the assessment point, they get another try and then they've got to retake the module again. So it's a bit of a weeding people out. Now in part-time this is the first year we've taken this on because we only started it last year part-time. So what that means then is, in their first year they've got to accommodate something like 14 extra days to their curriculum. Where initially we sold it on - in your first day you'll only be one day in the university. So we negotiate with students and we think we've found a compromise with that. The full-time, it's expected. So that can be a problem for them because they've then got to go back and re-negotiate with their employers. If we change the date it can be a problem for them because they've negotiated with their employers for that day off. So it's difficult to change days. It's difficult anyway in the university but if we need to change it's difficult because of those issues as well. The placements are a really anxiety provoking time for them, non-only because they're going to be assessed but because they've got to fit that in with their full-time work and university. So in their first stage placement, they can do no less than 2 days per week placement, plus a day in university - you have a problem, if you're not careful. They are told, at recruitment and at induction, that it's going to happen but it doesn't always sink in as you know, with students! They're reminded all the way through the course that this is what they're going to have to plan. So this can become a problem. We normally can overcome it in stage 1 but there's a lot of tears - you can do it - encouragement, support. We do sometimes get people drop out at that stage because their employers refuse to release them, so they renege on their promise, but normally we can point them to an agency so they can work flexible hours. If they can do that, but if they've got a mortgage of course, they've got problems. So it comes back to finances. In Year 4, which is our extra year, they have to do 100 days now and that is a real problem for them because they've got to squash in 100 days from September to May and do their work. What sometimes happens is, the ones that can afford it actually give up work for that 6 months and just concentrate on placements. The other ones we have to just nurture along and extend. But normally by the time they get to Year 4 we're not going to lose them because they can see light at the end of the tunnel and they want it. I have occasionally lost somebody at Year 4 but then it's been right. There's one that went on intermitting and hasn't come back and we tried to contact her and so I've sent out the withdrawal letter. But to me, she doesn't need to come back. And I think she's not in the right career.

R So the work that they're doing to fund their studies, tends to be in the same field they're studying?

I It could be or it could be related. Sometimes they're in office work where they're doing admin stuff. We did have one person in retail and she actually gave that up because it was too difficult. She was trying to fit everything in her holidays and couldn't so she's now got a job which is much more flexible. Lost a lot of money of course. She's a single person supporting herself. The other issue that has hit us really much and goes a long way to retention is the government's change to

benefits. Because if they've got to report to be ready for jobs, to draw their Jobseekers Allowance, well of course they can't be, because they're at university and they won't count it. So changing the benefits has actually - because I get quite a lot of single parents that are saying I want to make a better life. I've got one now and without breaking confidence, this student is £20k in debt. She's in Year 4, she was in tears two weeks ago saying 'I don't know how I can do it ...' She's got 25 days to finish her placement and the nursery have withdrawn the placement for the twins, for three of her children because she's in debt with them. And she was in tears. So I sat with her and said OK, what have you done to try and - she said I've written to everybody, I feel like I'm begging and all I've tried to do is get myself qualified to make a better life for myself and my children. Genuine person. She last year got £4k from the Access to Higher Education, this year she only got £1k. She's appealing it at the moment because that £4k would pay her nursery fees. So there you have a student that has worked so hard to get to Year 4, really worked hard to make a better life for herself but it actually at the moment, at the point of breaking, with 25 days to go on placement. So those are the things that hit us for retention. The other things that happens is, and I always say to new students - being on this course will change you. Don't think it won't. It might actually challenge your relationship and we get a lot of relationships breaking up. Part of the casualty because they get to know themselves better and so financially, that can hit them as well. As well as emotionally so what we offer is that much more intensive support because we've got smaller groups and we reach them quicker. So they will come to us, or I can say ... like I had one student and I said 'You all right today?' 'Yeah I'm fine'. 'You sure?' 'Yeah I'm fine.' 'All right then, if you need to talk...' Because you get to know your students better and we can because we've got smaller groups. And it works but - and that helps with retention. But the other things don't help. So sometimes you get people that - we've had one or two transfer to other programmes because they're on the wrong course. Normally you can tell the first year and I have actually said to a couple of students 'Are you sure you're on the right course'. And one of them I said 'I think you want to be in x (profession) don't you, not in x (profession)? And she said - Yeah.' (laughs). Sometimes we get people start on part-time and say I'd rather go on full-time because of the extra finances I can get. Of course then they've got to make up modules. They'd have to go to City campus, but they're also a module behind. We do sometimes get people transfer from the full-time to the part-time. Once they get further into it, it's more difficult but after the first year it's possible. I had two, well one of them excellent students, who really wanted to stay here but she was saying, I've got to do the full-time because I can get more support financially and that'll pay for my child's nursery and after school fees. She went to City campus in the end. Going great guns over there and I had another one that, she was a single mother, got all her benefits withdrawn. So the government is not helping. It becomes political. But there are some students who are on the wrong course and you have to get them to acknowledge that. Our drop out rate, because we've got such small groups, is not that bad, it's when we get to the big groups. If you think we started off with a group of 32 and we ended up with a group of 25, it's quite a big drop out rate. But some of them would have been ones that, I think in that year, we had so many applicants and although we thought we were selective, I think now, when I'm looking for a student for the mature course, although I don't always interview, they could be interviewed at River or City campus, I'm looking for the stickability factor. They get the same questions and the same interview and the same process but to me, I'm looking for that stickability factor because they're

going to have to juggle so many things. Sometimes we get drop out rate because of the difficulty in relationships. Because they've changed. So rather than face what might happen, they drop out. I've had that a couple of times. I've had a couple of students who have been really ill, that were taken ill and I had a student who was successful in applying for the course, was interviewed successfully, then had a stroke, deferred for 2 years then came on but actually the stroke had damaged her too much and she couldn't cope with it. So we had to very gently persuade her that, maybe she wasn't ready. She just couldn't retain the information, so obviously it damaged her. It was really sad because her heart was really - but then you've got to think about the people she'll be working with.

R That's right. In practice.

I And I have that in my mind when I'm interviewing as well.

R So just out of interest, how do you judge stickability? Is it examples of being resilient, you know in their lives up to date? Or is it just a gut thing?

I Bit of both I would say. Sometimes it how they, they get the same questions and their responses and sometimes it's about if they've prepared for something and they say yes, I could see that could be difficulty but because I've got three children I know I'm going to find that difficult, this is what I've put in place. This is what I've thought about. So sometimes it's that forward thinking. Sometimes it is just that this person has gone - because although they get the same questions, sometimes they'll drop in quite a lot that you don't ask for and sometimes you can think, yeah this person's really got...they've had a struggle to get here and it's not necessarily about they've been in care or they're single parents or whatever, sometimes it's about how they present. And you can only go with what they've said because the process now says they've got to pass three different processes each time and sometimes in the observation one - and I think they probably might change it next year, but we do an observation of them in a group task. And it's how they respond in that task and how thoughtful they are before they just jump in and you know, some people are naturally quiet but when they put something in, it's really worth listening to. And other people will be straight in there but actually are not listening to people around them. So there's all sorts of things, but your gut instincts are normally right because I think we're all from backgrounds in the profession, so we're knowing what's out there and I still have a foot in practice, as do a lot of the tutors, still have that link with practice. And so you know what's out there and you know what ... but you can never guarantee it. If I had that magic formula, I'd sell it!

R What's it like being - perhaps you don't think of yourself as this, so perhaps it's completely wrong - what's it like being an outpost of Modern Eastern University?

I I think a few years back it was quite difficult and at meetings there was always me saying - what about North campus, what about North campus? I would say that it's taken a lot of time for us to feel part of the wider picture but one has to be persistent and I'm always in there with elbows and fighting for part-time and X (colleague) now is the same. The students might say at times that they've felt quite isolated. I think we do get isolated, I think because we tend to get on with everything, we get forgotten sometimes in some of the decision-making process, because we're not a big cohort here and a lot of the decisions are made on the full-time and the MAs and I have to say - have you thought about part-time in that?! But I think sometimes it has its pluses as well as its minuses and it's how you view it. If you view, oh poor me, I'm isolated and you don't make the effort to be part of the wider campus, so I think I have to be pro-active and my colleagues have to be

pro-active in always bringing forth to the students, or saying - what about part-time, and make sure that part-time is covered. Have you thought how that might impact on part-time? Placements is one good thing. Placements came out - the students have to do three days a week in placement. And I said - I'm sorry, that will not fit with part-time. It's not what the part-timers have been sold and if you put something on the website, you have to honour it. So you have to be quite assertive. But I think in general it's better than it was, but it can be isolating. You've just got to make sure that you're not left out really. And that's what my mission has been all these last 12 years. The students have complained about communication but I think it's better now. I think sometimes they think everything is based on River and City campuses which it is. And we are a very small cohort in a big cohort of X (programme) here. Everything centres on them here. So again, I've got to be quite proactive with the other academics and what we sometimes do is they will come and do a bit on one of our modules for us, I'm doing something in a couple of weeks for their students. So we cross-fertilise like that because we are a close team here. We're part of the X Faculty and you've got the X school here but they're part of a different faculty. They were going to have X (programmes) here but I think that's going somewhere else. Because they want to build this campus up so it will become much more busy. Which'll be good. But there'll be some minuses along the way, so ...

R Parking?

I Parking's a nightmare! Wherever you go, isn't it?! But I think it's good for us to be among others, for our students to be meeting others because they're not working in isolation. So your answer to that is, we could be isolated but we have to remind them that ... I think sometimes it's easy to feel more isolated from River campus and it's easy to feel that all the decision-making is made there, but I do go to River quite often. I mean I must admit, recently I've tried to get out of because why should I want to travel two hours...

R Are you nearer to River campus than you are to City?

I We're actually nearer to City but in some ways, for me, it's easier to get to River campus in the mornings. It can take me less time to get to River than to get to City campus from where I live. So it's a matter of us being proactive. But we are slightly the forgotten outpost though. It's always '...and North campus'. At least we've got our name on things, we've got North campus, our name, on things. That's taken a few years to change (laughs). But yeah, we've got a very strong, supportive Associate Dean here, she's been a strong advocate for North campus, for all our programmes. But the students I would say, probably feel a bit isolated from the main campus.

R But then maybe they don't, as you say, I mean with the young students, might be much more likely to want that kind of wraparound stuff, whereas mature students wouldn't so much be looking for that would they? Part-time students tend to be in and out...

I That's right, that's right. That's a difficulty sometimes. I only work part-time but X (colleague) is here full-time, but they always want to see us on the day that they're in. So the days that they're in is manic because you've got them queuing up. They want tutorials, they want this, they want that and that for them can be quite difficult because they say, you haven't got the time, and we say we've got lots of other time in the week. And some of them will come in other times in the week if they live locally or, you know, if they can get an hour off placement or an hour off

work. But mainly they want it on the day they're in and sometimes you can feel like ... What happened was, last year, X (colleague) had a sabbatical so I had the whole cohort. There was more students then as well, I think we had about 80 something students across the four years and he was on 6 months sabbatical. And although I got hourly paid staff, that was more work supervising the hourly paid staff! So I didn't communicate very well with them and what I've learned when the feedback came back was that - We've lost communication. And I agree with them. So this year I've made a real effort on a Friday which is their day in although the new year are going to come in on a Wednesday, to go and - because we've now got this nice cafe place - to make sure that I go in there to get something to eat and I can go round and meet them all and say hello and go and have a chat. It normally means I don't end up actually eating, because then if I'm teaching again...but at least it's that communication. Because what they don't like is the closed doors to the office. That's another barrier for them, although necessarily for confidentiality. But they don't like because in the old building they could just walk into our office and see us and meet with us and they don't like that. So they won't knock on the door sometimes because it's a barrier there. And I did mention that to the colleagues who came to talk about the NSS. But they were actually saying - yes I agree with you, it is a barrier for students but we've got to have a halfway barrier that you know, they either come in and say 'Can I see you outside' because the offices are now big and busy and you know, they necessarily might be talking about other students.

R It's almost like you need a Reception area.

I You need a Reception area, yeah. I mean our receptionist downstairs, she's excellent. She's so helpful to students so she takes a lot of that sting out. They can go to her and ask her and she'll always try and find us if she can you know, says - there's somebody here wanting to see you. But for them I would say that that's sometimes when they think, it can easily get lost because on a Friday we're busy but they want that attention on a Friday. Which is another reason for moving the first years this year and next year the second years is onto a Wednesday, so we've got more time on those days to accommodate that.

R One of the themes that I've been looking at so far, particularly it's very strong in retention literature, is this thing about belonging...

I Mmmm, a sense of belonging. Yes.

R I just absorbed it initially but then I thought, there's real issues around the way it was articulated in a lot of the retention literature, there's real issues with that around part-time and mature students...

I There is, yeah. Belonging to what, and how, when you're busy and you've got a job. And when?

R And so that's a theme I'm following really. What sense of belonging do students have and how do they kind of create that?

I Well what we have done is that we always get somebody from a previous year to come and talk to them at their Induction. This is what it's like, warts and all. I'm a student on the course. So that's part of trying to get - because the idea of sticking to one day was that at some point they'll all be in together. So hopefully they'll talk to each other? No! They just sit in their own groups. But what we did this year is we arranged a Careers Fair and we invited each year to it. Now some of the first

and second years said - well, it was all right but it wasn't really appropriate for us. But at least they were together in the same room. As a whole group.

R As a full course group.

R As a full group. And we actually had a good response. Out of 60 students, 65, we got half, so that's good. Considering that some of them were in class and some of them, they've got assignments coming up so we felt it was quite successful and then they had a networking event afterwards where they could chat to service providers and employers. And a recruitment agency, a volunteer bureau which was actually one of the students had done a placement there from Cambridge, so I said well, you can tell them what the course is like then! So I think it was successful and we can build on that next year. It's about trying to get events which will satisfy all four years and encourage them...because otherwise you can put an event on but you can't make them come to it and you know, if they've got the choice between - it might be 'I've got this assignment I've got to hand in on Monday', they'll take that day for the assignment. So we try and do it when they're going to be in so they're a captive audience and then evaluate what we've done, if we can do better. Because the year before we did Speed Interviewing, for Years 3 and 4 which was great fun, totally disorganised. Which was great fun! And it was a very different event this year because we speakers come in. We had the professional body representative come in as well. And he spoke for most of the time..! (laughs). But it was a different event so again, that's how we try to get them together. We try to send out a newsletter. Now I know City campus send out a newsletter with news and events on it, so if there are any significant events we send that out to all the groups. So anything like training or anything happening at River or City campus. Which again, they say 'why's it not happening at North Campus?' But they've got the option so... But we've decided that the newsletter is probably more, for us, cost effective, maybe at the beginning of semester, the end of semester and so four times a year because we don't have a lot to say. We try to do the thing about News, Views and leavers and beginners but we don't have as much going on as the full-time group so a lot of them don't bother even to read it.

R Is it paper or online?

I It's email, so every student gets it. So what I sometimes do, if there's events at City, I'll obviously cut and paste onto ours, but if there's something significant coming along, I'll say send it out to all of the years so they get a chance. For our students, the university life is that day when they're in. It's not like being at university full-time.

R What about the building, social spaces. They've got that new cafe space now?

I They did have, on the first floor, what they called a break out area and they would use that and some still tend to use that because they like it. But they still tend to sit in their own groups. And I'll go round each one and say 'Oh look! Year Two's in today, why don't you go and say hello?' They still tend to segregate themselves. And it's quite difficult to get over that.

R I was running a group yesterday with a group of part-time, similar, one afternoon a week, Foundation degree students actually. They'd been together for a year and became obvious that people at the front didn't know the name of the people at the back.

I Yeah, yeah. Well we have that with - it used to be - these are the trainees and they're ok because they get everything paid for and we're the self-funders that are

not OK because we've got to self-fund ourselves. And it became quite an issue at one point and we've got one group of trainees now, we've got two more years left of the trainee scheme. We're hoping North campus is going to start it again. Anyway, but you do find they do segregate into their own little groups within a group. So to get them to mix as a big group all at once ... because on the Induction Week they usually have an introductory ... like they have a fair in the afternoon where they have stalls and freebies and we always open it up to every year so they can go and look round. And we always make sure they get a chance to go. So we're looking at things that we can put on that could include all of them to get them talking more really. But it's hard.

R And I suppose when they're on placement as well, again that might fracture the social bonds, you know - although they're on placements simultaneously?

I Some will be.

R Some. It's not like they're here and then they go away for a month and then come back?

I No, we don't - for part-time, because that was what was being sense about, when I was saying 'that doesn't work for part-time', they were saying 'well they can do a block'. No! They're working! How many years have I been saying?! Please listen to what I've been saying!

R It's extraordinary.

I Well, it's extraordinary that I've been saying it for 12 years and certain people still don't hear it and sometimes I get quite frustrated at the battle but you have to carry on. You have to because I wouldn't be doing my students justice. So that was - well they'll have to do a block'. No! 'Well they can take their holidays..'. No! They have families and they need to spend time with their families! Would you like to do a block and then not get any holiday for a year? Would you not be exhausted? We have a duty of care towards our students! So I'm quite sort of pro-active in pointing out all those things. And eventually I managed to get my own way. (laughs). But I just have to keep my eye on it because if you take your eye off it ... But it is extraordinary after all this time that people can still think like that and it's not necessarily the people at the top. It's the people that I've spent time explaining part-time to. Because they just don't want to change their routines. The actual admin is wonderful for, our admin for the placements, she's brilliant, lovely woman. And I just, most of the time, talk to her and say 'Listen, do you think we could do this? Do you think we could do that for this student?' She's pretty good but it's other people that just don't seem to want to think beyond the box.

R And do you feel the top level strategies within the University - there is a Retention Strategy, or Student Success Strategy...?

I There is, yes.

R Do you feel that those address the issues and the needs of part-time and mature students?

I No. No. Because I think, again, we're a very small cohort so most of it is done on the full-time course.

R Or full-time students full stop?

I Although they do have a lot of part-time courses here, they've got a lot of distance courses. And I will say that my own manager is very open to that discussion and



the Deputy Head of Department, he's been absolutely brilliant and he's been a strong advocate for part-time. But in a sense, because they've got so much coming at them and sometimes if I'm not there saying it all the time - and it's very easy if I'm tired or really busy or if I just take my eye off the ball, something happens and I think - I just didn't think about that. Because the assessment panels are centred around a full-time student because we've gone from trimesters, so therefore it makes it very difficult for our students to meet some of those deadlines. Because everything has got to be put on SITS for assessment dates. For examples, the portfolios now have to have an assessment date, so a hand in date. Whereas before it was always the day after they handed in, that was their date. Well of course that doesn't sit with the panels because if they miss a certain panel, they might have to wait for six months. So again, but I will say that the university now have put in fall back positions. Because for the MAs it's been quite difficult for them to meet deadlines, so they've now put in, well we'll have mop up panels in August and September. Why don't they just schedule them in? You know, why make it so early that the students can't meet the bloomin' deadline?! And my students will say, why are we finishing in May and not coming back until September? So I've had to fight to say - why can't my students work all the way through the summer on their placements? Well, we're not insured. Yes we are! (laughs). It's silly things like that!

R The traditional academic year.

I The traditional academic year in a new university which just doesn't sit right. And so constantly I have to be saying, well why do they have to start in September? Why they can't they start in July if they wish to? Why can't we get them their placements organised by the beginning of July and if they wish to start in August, in July or August? Well, then we'd have trouble doing the whatsit agreements. Well, no, we'd make sure that people are around to do them. The learning agreements. Cos to me, where there's a problem, you can see round it. Because I've had to be like that with part-time. And it's just this traditional mind which says - oh no, we've got these dates and we must put them in there. So the students get worried because they say - I've got to do it that time, I've got to do it that time...! And I say - leave it to me. (laughs). Because it's published! So they get anxious. So they get all that anxiety for nothing.

R Just going back to the idea of the top level strategies, with Retention Strategy for instance, the university's retention strategy - is that something that you're across? Because you're saying - we do what we do, we've adapted it...? I mean, would you know what's in it?

I I wouldn't know it in depth if I'm honest. I do know the idea is that we have to pull out all the stops to retain students. So we spot the problem early, we communicate effectively with them. They've all got their own personal tutors. They all have to be met now, they all have to be met now at least once a semester. Obviously new ones more. And so part of the retention strategy is that we have more communication with students which could be electronic or it could be face-to-face. And that where we see that a student might be wobbling or looking, that we try and troubleshoot and assess for that student, what we can do to retain them. The problem with that is because this is such a difficult profession, sometimes we need to say - you're in the wrong profession. Yes? Which goes against our retention policy really.

R That's interesting.

I Isn't it. But it's the best thing we can do for them and the profession, if we sort of say ... I mean you can't tell them and you can't counsel them out but you could actually raise the question in their mind. And if I feel strong enough - and I won't just make the decision on my own, I'll talk to colleagues and managers and say - look, I'm getting these worrying signs. And it might be coming from practice - you know, they're really not responding to what they've been asked to do, they can't cope. And maybe we have to ask the question - is this the right profession for you, because until you get out in practice, you might not necessarily know. By which time, they're into their second year. So it's quite difficult to be seen to be saying to people, is this the right profession for you? Because our retention policy is 'do your best to support them and troubleshoot through the problems'. We've got, I will say, we've got good systems for support. We've got good counselling systems which are all confidential. You can refer a student anytime, they can refer themselves.

R Are they here?

I No, not at the moment, but I think if enough students ask for it... We have got Learning Support here, which we fought hard for and we've got also a Student Advisor here, so we've got some good support systems in the university. So again, we would be looking at the students talking to all those other areas. Offering them what support mechanisms there are, to retain them. So I know what I should be offering, so we're given that very clear message. We start that from the very beginning. Really good librarian here, really good. Which is crucial. The library is not as big as the other campuses, the students moan, there isn't enough books. But I would say, my son's fiancé, she works for X University as a librarian ... And she came to look at our books and she said our facilities were far superior.

R Really?

I Yes! They did an exchange...she was saying - yes they've got older books, they've got some rare books, but she was saying our technological stuff is far superior. Because they can access those sorts of things ... it's about getting the students to look at what they can access and use it. Because sometimes they say - well I can't get that. And you say, hang on, you can get that on ebooks. It comes back to - well I want the book and it's not available. Well, why don't you get the ebook for the time being and then you can put in for the book? It's about... so the thing is as Course Leaders and Tutors we have to be pro-active in pulling out all the stops and supporting them. And I actually quite agree with that. So I know the basic things but I wouldn't say I've read it from cover to cover!

R No. And would you say, would it be fair to say that mature, non-traditional students, even in a university like Modern Eastern, certain groups of non-traditional students are regarded as problematic in terms of retention?

I No. I think once we get them, once they stay, they stay. In fact if you look, we were saying on the part-time we've got a very high success rate of people getting firsts, pro rata. Yeah? We've got - often what we do have a lot of problems with is that sometimes they're people that are returning back to study after many years, so that can be problematic, can be seen as problematic. Because they're adjusting to the academic. And that's what I'm saying, I would take a student that maybe their academia is not so good, but they show potential for their values, they've got sound values and they've got relevant experience. I would take more of a gamble I think on some of that and I've been proven to be right on that. And I think what doesn't happen for that is that when they come, they're seen as problematic

because they don't necessarily have the right entry requirements. And we can't do anything about that, because the professional body set that. I mean I would like to change it but the professional body set it.

R What are they?

I It's 240 UCAS points, or an Access or BTEC. They won't accept NVQs any longer. Now if you think of somebody that's done NVQ 4 in Management, they've done a lot of work.

R 240, so 3 Cs?

I Yeah. So I can see the argument and agree with the argument but I do think that extra year gives them that bit more time to catch up with it and be successful. You know? So I think that can be seen as problematic at times, rather than they're just a pain, the part-time. I think because the part-time doesn't schedule, doesn't fit easily, that can be seen as problematic, but that's when as the Course Leader you've got to come out and be - well yes that's different but this is why it's different. And if I can justify it with my Head of Department who can then make an argument at the top for it, that's fine, I'll do that. And I have, because it's been validated - we got validated last year, we were revalidated externally and internally - we had three validations in two days! Great fun! But we got through fine you know, with very few recommendations actually so we got through. But I had to make an argument for part-time in that and why it works. So although sometimes it can be seen as a pain - I think you would say the admin see it as a pain. Because it doesn't fit. So we're doing things at different times but that's fine (laughs). Doesn't bother me!

R I'm conscious of time, I've covered my questions, I don't know if there's anything you want to say?

I I think I feel very passionate about part-time learning for mature students. Having been a mature student myself. And what I would say is that I think in general, we turn out practitioners that are more able to be up and running to go. I may be biased in that of course.

R Because they're part-time or because they're older?

I I think because they're older they've got more life experiences. I do not support the view that an 18 year old has got life experiences to come into a course like this, although that's what we have to do.

R Is it common to have younger students then?

I Yeah, well we get quite lot of young – City and River get a lot of younger ones. And you know, a lot of them do go ... but they're 21 and they're dealing with some serious issues. I don't know what the success rate is about that, I don't know what research has been done. But I can go into this city and I can see part-time students at the coalface, working with complex work and I think - they're on part-time, they're on part-time. And I'm now going into the next county to see students on placement and - they're on part-time. And really you know, really consolidating that learning and being a better all-round practitioner. But I think I'm biased.

R Well as you say they've got that extra year - although it's not an extra year is it...?

I It's not. It's the nurturing I think. We're smaller groups, we can pick up the problems. We can nurture because often they need nurturing through. I mean I've had Year 4 that have just left, we had something like six babies born in that year.

All unexpected! So you can imagine! And they were laughing about it, saying we think we take the record of all the years for having babies and I said - that's not a good way to get out of your degree! But they were saying, you know, we nurtured them through it and we did what we had to do and I think it's that maturity that helps and that's why I'm passionate about part-time. And I know that X my colleague is too. I think it works. So that's all I've got to say.

R Brilliant. Thank you.

**(end 1.00)**

## STAFF: STUDENT SUPPORT

### Example A (Metropolitan Elite)

- I I've been here about nine months now and the role is hopefully giving students a good experience. I think it operationally, it sits in two areas really: that traditional one-to-one, pastoral support officer, so if the person, any of our students, don't know where to turn to they have a problem, a really kind tiny problem maybe to do with registration, or a big kind of life crisis where they just think - Arrggghhh I don't know what to do, I'm their first point of contact and I work with them to try and find that resolution. So there's that one-to-one role and then I guess there's a function around the experience of our student body as a whole. So that might be nice fun things like social events, social activities, trying to create that sense of belonging or home here. As well as kind of trying to improve a lot of the communications and the support mechanisms that we have in place for all of our students, as a full body. So I think there's that operational aspect of being quite reactive to students coming to me and saying 'We've got this problem and can you help?' and then I step in and try and fix it. But then there's that proactive angle of strategically trying to look and think well - how can we improve all of the support services that we have to better equip us as a lifelong learning centre in supporting centre. If that makes sense?
- R Yes absolutely yes. Would you say there are any particular issues in relation to retention of students in the Hub that you've come across?
- I I mean, as the Hub we're charged with working with and recruiting students from non-traditional backgrounds and as a result of that we have most of our students having non-traditional problems really. And I guess one of the big ones certainly around mature students is that they've lived a life and they have a life and they have different commitments, not exclusively but in the main they have different commitments to those of younger students, 18, 19, 20 year olds, insomuch as they may have jobs that they have to hold down, they may have caring responsibilities, they may be parents, they've got financial kind of commitments, they have relationships, they maybe don't have good support networks in place, where an 18 year old student might be supported by their parents and other family actually, these students are coming to us, often very alone in their aspirations to study here. So I mean the main thing around retention is trying to help those students when those life events and life crises kind of happen, that wouldn't potentially happen to other students, certainly a high level of mental health and disability issues in proportion I guess, to a traditional student. And it's a lot harder to try and guide students through those problems when they are a lot of the time, quite massive issues that are happening in their personal lives quite frankly. And that's not to say, as I say, that younger students don't experience that. I think just by its very nature of the fact we are working with a big number of students from non-traditional backgrounds, we have to deal with a lot of those bigger issues. So yeah certainly kind of things around finance, certainly things around mental health, certainly around confidence. I'm sure all students feel that, it's just harder for someone who's 30, 40, 50 to think 'I'm going to plough through here'. I guess it's more important. I'm guessing although I've got no evidence really that an 18 year old student perhaps sees that the three years of university is the most important years of their life and if they couldn't go to university then their whole life would be absolutely ruined and what on earth would they possibly do? Actually, I don't think a student in their 30s or 40s does see it like that, it would be more easy to walk

away if the pressure kicks in. I think. I can't back that up, I mean that's purely anecdotal.

R Because they've got other things going on ... ?

I Yeah. Their life doesn't stop just because they don't come to university here, their life carries on because their life is well-established really.

R So just leaving aside the one-to-one work that you do, the other work that you do, I understand that some of the things you do are to encourage social engagement with students, within the Hub? Would that be right?

I Yeah, this year, because I'm fairly new to the role, everything I've done has been fairly new and I haven't been sure what worked and what hasn't. In Semester Two ... in Semester One sorry, I took the approach on social events just to organise standalone events that I thought students might like to do. So that might have been a visit to an Art Gallery or a visit here. Attendance was really low. People just didn't want to engage with it so we didn't have those students coming together to be social animals as it were. I think there's a couple of problems in that certainly with the part-time students, they treat university a lot of time as a part-time evening class. They have their jobs and then on a Wednesday night or a Thursday night or a Tuesday afternoon they come here for three hours, they study and then they go home and they return to their lives until next week. So to try and engage with those students and say - Oh do you want to come to that art gallery? Well they live in the city anyway, they could do that anyway, so - No - is the answer! They don't! They're perfectly busy and perfectly kind of settled because most of them have lived here, they know the city quite well. In the second semester we took a slightly different tack in that the university's Students' Union runs, certainly through its clubs and societies, two or three hundred different events each year, so that might be the Ballroom Dancing Society or the Sign Language Society. They've a really nice series of Give it a Go events that any students that might be interested in joining a club or a society can go along and try it. Mature students and part-time students I guess, are quite unlikely to do that. They hold those fears that that kind of thing is not for me, or it'll be full of young people, or I'll be the only mature student there and everyone'll stare at me. So they talk themselves out of going, they think - that's for the younger students, I'm not going to do that. So we handpicked a good selection, probably about six or seven of those events and said to all of the mature students, well, let's have tea and coffee somewhere as a collective beforehand really and we'll go along to those events together and we'll experience them together, we'll be nervous together, we'll not know what to expect, we might be the oldest people there, people might look at us and we might think this isn't for me but at least we're not alone. We'll try it. And when we took that tack we found that people would say, well yeah, I've always wanted to try ballroom dancing, or to learn about first aid, I'd love to come along and do that and feel supported that way. And what we've now found is that by breaking down those initial barriers a lot of the mature students now regularly attend those events. So that's fantastic.

R A real success!

I Yeah so trying to get rid of those nerves where they talk themselves out of reasons to do x, y or z, whatever it is. Just saying, look we'll do it together as a group. With that kind of sense of belonging again. That sense of we're all in this together.

- R I was wondering - I can absolutely see the strengths of a centre like this which has got a really nice feel to it, a sort of safe space where you know who you're going to see and you know they're going to be doing the same thing as you, or similar things as you, but then going, literally outside the door must be a very different experience for those students. Or do they just go straight out the Exit?
- I Yeah...and again, it's the mature students that we're here to serve, so there's a distinction to be made between the mature and part-time students that are the Hub's courses, that have that sense of the Hub and that's what we're here for. But we're here as a service for mature students and part-time students across the university, who don't maybe see the Hub as a sense of place, a sense of home. They see their school or the Faculty as that sense of home. But we still need to try and scoop up those ones that are struggling a little bit and aren't feeling um as kind of involved. Ideally you want those students out on the university campus, on the different schools and faculties to be perfectly supported and feel completely engaged in everything that they do, so that they never need to come to us, but ideally you still want to create that sense of place where they can come to us and feel that this would be a place for them. But yeah, I mean they certainly feel as if they're the only mature student on the campus really. When you tell them that there's - I think it's 10,000 mature students, only about 3500 undergraduates, they just can't believe it! Because they hold this belief, I think it's almost reverse ageism at times, where they just think well, this campus is full of young people and there's no one else like me here. And that Union building isn't for me, it's for the younger students. When you tell them there's 3500 students here and you tell them about all of the activities that are taking place for mature students, I think it's a real eye opener for people.
- R And in terms of the proportions? So the students - that this is their base, they're doing the Foundation Year and the students 'out there' - what kind of proportion? Are there many more people there than are based here or...?
- I I'd say, if we were saying there were 3500 undergraduates that are mature students, so not part-time time students, we're just talking mature, undergraduates...if there was 3500 I would say there was about 400, 500 here. Roughly speaking, but I would check those figures. So there's a lot more out there than there is on our programmes. But what we find is whenever we do any kind of social activity or any engagement with mature students, we have a 50/50 split really of people accessing those opportunities. So um...the message is getting out that we are here but I think we can do a lot more to reach out to those students that are studying on non-Hub programmes. I mean we've had students here in their second year or third year for the first time and they never knew we were here and never knew that support was there. Which is fine if they've never had a problem, but you sometimes uncover students who have really struggled in their university journey and would have really valued knowing that we were here. So I think we do a lot of work in getting the message out as best we can to mature students, but I certainly think there's more work to be done, which in turn will help with that kind of retention of those students that we don't know about and are just, in that faculty maybe they're the only mature student on that course, or maybe they're on a course with ten others. But I think we've got some work to do to reach out to those.
- R And how would you anticipate doing that? Do you have any particular plans?

I I mean we do it - we do have Welcome events for mature students on our programmes before the main kind of craziness of Freshers Week happens. We have our own standalone Welcome events where we say to people, come along, find out more, be around other mature students, find out more about the support that we offer. We can target communications as well, exclusively to mature students so we don't have to just do a blanket email out to everyone and hope that it reaches the intended target. We've just started this year with the creation of a mature student Handbook as well. So every mature student that arrives has this kind of thing that they can either download or print. It's a sort of a crash course - this is how to be a mature student - and dispelling some of those myths as well: you're not alone, there's 3500 other people. And yeah, just flagging some of the support that is available.

R Do you think part-time, mature students, particularly part-time students, they have a need to belong in a way that other, younger students might? Bearing in mind all the other things going on in their lives?

I I think some do. I think it's a smaller proportion. I think some ... more students on a part-time course do come maybe for vocational reasons or um they have jobs or they're wanting to start a new career so they're just coming once a year to do this. But we've got a smaller group I think of part-time students where they've enrolled on a part-time course almost like as a toe in the water, so they'll come to us maybe after a year of studying part-time thinking, think I've made a mistake here, think I'd like to come full-time. Because they've experienced that part-time taste, they like it, but then they find they're only in that one day a week and they'd like to be in more. In fact two certainly contacted me today who've been saying that exact message really, that I'm a part-time student, I'm doing this course but I'd like next year to change my mode of study to full-time because I don't feel that 'belonging' or I'm only here once a week. It's a very small proportion of them, but it's not to be kind of overlooked, how we enable that transition for people that are using part-time as an easy way in. You know, certainly I wouldn't just throw myself in the deep end and say oh right, I'm going to go to university, let's do it full-time, Monday to Friday, that's a big... if you haven't studied for 20, 30 years, 10 years even 5 years really. Say all right then, stop what you're doing, go to university five days a week. I wouldn't do it. But I think there is a core of student that take that first step, get the taste and then do want to be part of what we have to offer and what the university has to offer, not just academically but I think all of the things that surround that kind of core curricular stuff.

R I suppose because you've only been here nine months you haven't had the opportunity yet, to see that transition that students have to make from that Foundation Year into Year 1 or whatever?

I I've spoken a little bit, I've done some work with students from last year. So I haven't seen that transition, but I've certainly spoken with and been around the students that have. So for example, at about 5 tonight, we've got students who progressed from our Preparation for Higher Education course coming back. Just an alumni kind of reunion thing really. To find out how they're doing in the Faculties, can we support them in different ways. But it's certainly one of the things that's completely on my radar that a Hub student isn't just with us for that one year when they do the Foundation Course. We value them as students and as friends really, over the full journey of when they're here with us and I think we...well certainly I will still see the student support and the student experience that were on offer, to run through the kind of the journey really. So I haven't seen that transition yet, but



it's one that I'm completely aware of and certainly not wanting us to be in a position where at the end of the Foundation Year they get a big handshake and we say 'hope you do well in whatever course you progressed on to!'. It would be the worst case. Because we don't learn anything from that as well. We don't learn anything about the Foundation programmes that we run, anything about the needs of the Schools that the people are progressing onto. And yeah, a lot of the students need that bespoke support really that some of the Schools and Faculties aren't geared up to give. Some give really good support to mature students and others less so really. So at least we're this constant place for Foundation students to return to if they need us really. Ideally they don't. Ideally they don't, but if they do need us, they can come back.

R The central resources area you have here, that's a nice space.

I Yes (unconvincingly). Yes and we've got the Student Common Room upstairs and there's a cafe in the building too. I think people do generally see this as a place where if you're a mature student you can come and study here. I sense a little bit of tension - not tension, that's the wrong word. But I think the Hub, objectively speaking, as someone who's fairly new, has historically only worked with mature and part-time students, now is opening that up to Foundation students as well, so that non-traditional route. So I suspect that we'll probably have to go through a few bumps around that clash sometimes between students who are in their 30s and 40s and 50s using that space and others in the building as well as students who are 18, 19, 20, 21, even the younger kind of mature students as well. I can see some tension and conflict maybe, between the two. I think we've got some work to do on that. And not ... not trying to create a 'mature students here' and 'Foundation students here' but very much a sense of a Hub student and what that encompasses.

R And what do you think those tensions, or whatever, where do you think they're coming from?

I I think there's mature students who've been here for ... some of our mature students have been here for six or seven years and so have used the Hub and other spaces as their designated kind of safe haven for that duration. So naturally if we then just drop in 100, 120 younger Foundation students into that space and other spaces there's maybe just that culture shock of 'I thought this was our space'. I'd be interested to see how that pans out with next year's intake of new mature students and new Foundation students because yeah, they won't have that kind of historical thing, thing behind it. And some of the conversations that our younger students have are conversations that some of the older learners won't and there's just sometimes, you can feel a little bit of tension. But on the whole I think the shared resources area and the Hub as a focus for mature students, I think that message is still there, most mature students feel quite comfortable with that. It's not to say as well that our younger Foundation students are in any way kind of rude or different, it's just that group dynamics thing really. But I suspect it's more to do with students that have got a long history of using this centre and therefore find like, just that change thing really.

R This is my turf?

I Yeah it might be a bit of that. But I think we've got a little bit of work to do around that. We don't want to lose that um, that sense of home or sense of place for mature students. Yeah.

- R Where else would you say on the campus, for instance the mature students, part-time students, use particularly?
- I You mean use as just a space that they can go to?
- R Well do they for instance, would they use the library or would they tend to use that online?
- I I think they would use the library and from the feedback that we get from, I know focus groups that we've ran around supporting mature students and looking at good practice, the libraries came up there as a really good, a place and as a resource as well. Because it treats all students equally, as if all students don't know. So all the information that the library provides doesn't expect you to have had some kind of knowledge, it doesn't judge you on how old you are. It's just very factual: this is the information and this is how you access it. I get a sense that mature students like that sense of equality and there's no expectations from the library, they like using the space, they like the resources online and printed and I think they value it quite a lot. Yeah. Less likely to find the Students' Union as a place where they can be and spend time. There's a huge volume, they're outnumbered. There's a huge volume of 18 year olds in there and it's quite a loud building. But I think the Students' Union themselves do some stunning work in relation, or certainly have this year, around mature students, student parents, events for those with families and a lot of our students regularly attend those events and see that as a sense of place, as somewhere where they go - Christmas parties, Easter games, films for the kids. Cafes where mature students can meet and talk to each other. We've worked quite closely with Students' Union officers on a few things, so an example of that is creating Good Practice Guides and training for any staff member across the university in supporting mature students. Because there's a lot of good practice out there and we want to shine a light and there's a lot of bad practice maybe as well, people are not intentionally bad at supporting mature students but we want to just bring them in or go out to them and just say, yeah, we're specialists in working with mature students, here's some good practice guidance on how to sort of effectively support them. The Union is working closely with us on developing that training really. It's been good.
- R As you say, you've come in recently, you've got quite a fresh perspective on the Hub. Would you say the rest of the university knows you're here?
- I The rest of the university means everyone in the university so I would say there's a lot of people that do, both staff and students. There's probably an equal amount that don't.
- R Do you think you're seen as - that's where the part-timers are, that's where the mature students are? Obviously it's not where all of the mature students are. I'm just thinking because of the separate-ness of it which has its strengths, can also make it easier for some people to just push it off to the side.
- I I think that we're seen as the place where students who apply to the university but don't quite fit the entry criteria. I think we're seen as the place where maybe they could, so they're referred to us. I think that's a good thing. I think just being a centre where students maybe have that second chance is a lot better than that student being told well no you can't study at this university, so that's good. I think we're often seen with some student support officers as the place that deals with mature students, so I think it's odd sometimes where if a School has say, 100 students, but that student support officer will support 95 of those students are

told, go to the Hub. I've seen examples of that. Not in all schools really, we've got some support officers who are really really good and support mature students really really well. But at times we're maybe seen as - well, we don't deal with mature students, go over there and they'll support you, which I think's fine. We are here to support those mature students but I think there's work to do on educating those people on how they can support them as well rather than palming them off. Are we're seen as the place that does part-time? I'm not sure is my honest answer. I'm not sure.

R Ok.

I Maybe, because we probably are.

R Because you do, amongst other things.

I We probably are, yeah. But I think what I'm trying to wrestle with in the question is whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing? Because I'm thinking, is it fine just to be those people over there that just do part-time?

R I suppose the good thing about is that there where expertise resides, it's a specialist service for those students which they may not, probably won't get elsewhere in the university, for a number of reasons. But the downside might be, ghettoising is one way of putting it. But that is probably only a problem when those students come out of there into the rest of the university.

I And I think though, that there's enough students across the university for everyone to be aware that mature students are spread out. So yeah, I mean we don't even have the most mature students in a School here really, and I think that's widely acknowledged. That there's just a lot of mature students and that we are the specialist providers in that and that the part-time pathway and the Foundation pathways as well.

R One thing that really struck me today was that I came in through the main entrance to the university and the Hub is right here.

I Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R So it's quite visible.

I Yes and I think that's deliberate as well - I get the sense. It's almost ... the Vice-Chancellor, this is his building. If it's good enough for the Vice-Chancellor being here, it's good enough for mature students as well. I think the Hub in its previous iteration was at the bottom end of campus, in a building which didn't have windows and all that. So it's a very bold statement by the university to turn round and say well, not only do we value mature students but actually we're gonna put the money where the mouth is and make it really visible, yeah.

R Do you know how long it's been in this building?

I Um, I want to say 2010.

R So pretty recent then?

I Yeah. But I guess that's a message to all staff across the university, the weighting that the university gives the Hub and mature students. But also to the students themselves as well. They're not relegated into that little room, that ghettoised thing I think. The building plays a large part in that I think, the reason why that doesn't happen where the mature students just feel well, you're the people over there. They just feel integrated into the full campus or even if they don't feel like

that, we create that environment where they can feel like that, in this building I think.

R Yeah, it's an impressive building. Um, that's probably the end of my questions. I don't know whether there is anything that you wanted to throw in? If there's something you feel I've left out?

I No, I don't think so. I mean there's maybe things around - I see the Hub as being really good at bespoke support, that individual support if we're looking at retention as well, because we don't have a traditional student or a traditional student body at any time. We can't have that traditional text book that says this is how we support students and these are the things that we can expect as well. So yeah, I think we do that really well but it's a challenge as well.

R It must require a broad set of skills and knowledge?

I Yeah. And a lot of big challenges with students as well, that are time-intensive at times but if we put that time into them, the rewards are so much better because we're working with people who just wouldn't study otherwise and would never think that study was for them or wouldn't think that this university was for them and all that. So if we just go that extra mile and work with everyone on an individual basis and they succeed, then yeah, we've done something really good I think.

R And how big are the groups generally? Say on a Foundation, what would be an intake?

I Depends really. 50, 60?

R That's quite a lot of students to be one-to-one, isn't it?

I Yeah, we don't - some of them we never really need to deal with. They do their thing and we never speak to them and some of them are quite small, just operational interventions where you just hand hold them, time to time. But there's just a larger than normal set of students here that need really major interventions to help them get from A to B at times. And as the Hub and in this role as a Student Support Officer we just have to bend over backwards really, do anything we can to get that student through because they don't have the time to devote to both studies and those major kind of things going on in their lives. It is a one or the other thing. It's not like study's the only thing that they're doing, that if something goes wrong they can work full-time to put it right. So they need that greater intervention to try and help them get from A to B. So it can be quite draining at times, but quite rewarding. I often wish the student support role was one where students knocked on your door and said - everything's fine, I just thought I would tell you, everything's wonderful! But every time the phone rings, every time the email goes, every time the door knocks, you just know instinctively it's something. But within that you are kind of helping people and you are trying to retain them, trying to get them to where they want to be, so it is rewarding in the long term. Yeah.

**(end 38:23)**

## STAFF: STUDENT SUPPORT

### Example B (Modern Eastern)

I OK so I'm the Student Advice Manager within Student Services. The Student Advice Service support students with all matters relating to their progression in their course. So a student would typically come to our service if they either needed to make some choices about their mode of study, the course they're enrolled on, a possible change to that, advice on modules within their course, or if they're having difficulties and need referral on to specialist services. So we're a first point of contact/signposting services and our service is delivered in a very accessible format now. We've recently co-located and offer a sort of a day long continuous drop in session and we centralised the service in terms of one email address, one telephone number, and one location on each campus.

R So before that change...?

I So before, Student Advisers were allocated to a particular faculty, as I was and students in that faculty would come and see me. But obviously, just being one of me, there were times when I had to do things, go to the loo etc. and a commode wasn't appropriate! So one of the problems students had was that their timetables were very busy, mature students need to come in for lessons etc. and sometimes I just wasn't available when they were and it was becoming difficult for them to access the service. So the decision to co-locate was to make the service more accessible and it's certainly done that.

R Does that mean Student Advisers generally work across all faculties?

I Yes it does. I mean it was planned in advance and leading up to the period of co-location we kind of embarked on a work-shadowing programme where we all work-shadowed Advisors from other faculties and got to know about the sort of quirks and anomalies within the faculties and kind of particular quirks to courses etc. that we needed to know. So yes, it's been a steep learning curve but we're all fairly clued up now on the university-wide issues.

R And how does that service work in the other campuses at Modern Eastern?

I Well, it's exactly the same on the River campus. On North campus we have one Advisor, so she didn't need to centralise herself, she operates in the same way, although she is term-time only, part-time. And with an ever-increasing number of students going to North campus, we're going to have to look at increasing our resources there.

R What kind of interaction do you have with retention issues in your work, would you say, directly or indirectly?

I A lot directly. I mean students would come to see us - I didn't mention this before, if they want to think about intermitting or withdrawing. So withdrawing is obviously directly related to retention and often a student will come in and they just feel they're in a hopeless situation, they haven't done very well due to adverse personal circumstances and they just think the situation's not retrievable. And you know, sometimes we're able to talk them through it, they can appeal, we can try and get them onto track, we can put some kind of study plan together for them. And once they realise that it's not a hopeless situation they're quite happy to continue, so actually they don't want to withdraw, they just feel it's their only option. So we try to retain students who ask us to withdraw. Sometimes we just can't because a student who officially formally wants to withdraw has in effect,

withdrawn already. So they may not have attended for several months and actually their situation is not retrievable. But they're few and far between thankfully because we try to more proactively deal with non-attenders etc. Intermitters - that's a difficult one because intermission is both a retention tool and doesn't reap in itself very good results. So half of our intermitters don't return, of those who do return I think most of them get third class degrees.

R Right. So in a way for some people it's a way of deferring a final decision?

I It is yeah. But it's difficult because I think the university's position on intermission is because of these very poor results, we don't want to encourage students to intermit. But if a student comes to see us and they say it's just not the right time to be studying, I'm hoping things are going to be better next year, it just doesn't feel right to say to them, you need to permanently withdraw. It seems like the right thing to do to offer them an intermission and this academic year, I've devised a kind of intermission management programme where we keep quite regular contact with intermitters, check things are ok, offer them support, remind them that they're still entitled to use our support services, timely reminders about reapplying for student finance, all that kind of stuff. The aim is that they will come back and they'll be better equipped when they do. So that's the hope. So we have to see how that turns out and whether it helps.

R Yeah, because I guess mostly, people disappear and then it's out of sight out of mind.

I Yeah, there's lots of that and they just don't really engage with anything related to their degree and I think it just helps them feel that they're part of something, while they're intermitting.

R Will you be formally evaluating that in any way?

I I will and if it works I'll be making a huge deal of it in our annual report and if it doesn't I'll just mention it! So (laughs). But at least we can demonstrate that we've tried to improve things and early indications are that students have been quite happy to be contacted by us and they've seemed to be ok with it, it's not been too intrusive. I was worried that it might be too intrusive to those students who really want to put university behind them for a while. But it's working out ok.

R That's really interesting. Do you think, in your experience, are there any particular groups of students, or student with particular attributes, or characteristics that are more difficult to retain or are more vulnerable to withdrawal?

I I think students with mental health difficulties are the hardest to retain. Both because I understand that their mental health difficulties can be quite overwhelming in the sense that they can't prioritise their studies but also in the sense that we sometimes get some indication from their mental health workers that actually, it's in their best interests to withdraw and that university is a distraction from dealing with the problems they need to deal with. So I would say that our most vulnerable group, in my experience, has been students with mental health difficulties, quite serious mental health difficulties.

R Right. And in general would you say other factors involved in people's decisions, or wanting to withdraw, are they evenly spread across academic and personal, external or is there any particular trend?

I Well I recently produced a report and overwhelmingly the most common reason for withdrawal and intermission was medical and kind of personal/domestic

reasons. Lots of students don't enjoy their course and they start their course and they really want to change to something else. But it's really related to medical, domestic - we have a lot of mature students who feel quite disappointed actually with their experience. I don't mean to paint too negative a picture of the mature student experience because lots of students come here and they like the richness and diversity etc. and it's great. But just in terms of the struggle so you know, juggling all of the things they have to juggle and not being able to participate fully. So only being able to come in for lectures and seminars and not being able to attend sort of clubs and society events and all of that kind of thing, I think they feel that their experience of university is not as rich as it could be.

R Right. Do you think they have that expectation before they started that they would be able to join those things or that it's only when they come and see what there is available that they can't participate in?

I I think a lot of students anticipate a more bespoke programme that fits their circumstances. So students will come and say, I applied, they can see I'm a mature student with kids and I live x miles away. I thought that all of my lectures would be on one day and so what surprises them is that actually they're a part-time student or a mature student within a programme that's designed for a range of people and not specifically for them. So I think they perhaps feel that the consideration they perhaps hoped would be given to them as a mature student, commuting, with lots of children, it's not quite as they expected in some cases.

R Right. That's a tough one.

I It is a tough one. It is a tough one. I don't know what the answer to that really is. I can understand from the university's point of view that to create degrees for mature students, you know, it's a difficult task. Equally, I wouldn't like to see that separation anyway because I think one of the great things about the university is the interaction between all kinds of groups of people. So I think as a university what we need to do is maybe make our position clear in terms of what students can expect, attendance-wise and how much time they can expect to commit to it.

R I've had a look at the university's part-time courses prospectus and there's a lot in there about flexibility. I wasn't surprised to see that, I would be surprised if it wasn't there because that's kind of part of the whole part-time offer isn't it really? That they're not being tacked on...?

I I think the flexibility that part-time students might expect isn't necessarily the flexibility we offer and so I mean we say to a student, fine, if you can't come in at 9 on Friday morning you could do this module instead and it runs on a Tuesday. So we're being flexible because we're allowing them to take another module and actually they want us to be flexible with the module they want to do, not the other one we're offering! So somehow we have to be very clear about what we mean by flexibility and how we're going to be flexible. I think - yeah.

R That's a good distinction. How visible - because you talked about the diversity of students here - how visible would you say part-time, mature, part-time and mature students are within the student body? Is it a primarily young student body or is it fairly equal?

I It's fairly ... I mean I think just generally, around the campus it's fairly evenly distributed. We see many more younger students because I don't know, I don't like to kind of stereotype or put people in holes but I suppose school leaver students are able hang around maybe a bit more, so the mature students do tend to leave

the campus quite a lot. In terms of access to our service, we see quite a lot of mature students, usually telephone/email whereas the non-mature students tend to come to the drop-in. So all access our service and it seems to me quite natural and sensible that more mature students contact by other means. And on our course committees attended by student reps, there's a good representation of mature students on that, actually, which is very heartening actually that they get involved with that.

R One of the themes that I'm pursuing in my research is the theme of belonging and the question of how belonging relates to retention. I'm wondering if there are some problems with that in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates because - not because part-time, mature undergraduates can't or won't or shouldn't belong, or have a sense of belonging, that the way belonging is talked about in the literature is very much around that kind of young, full-time student hanging about joining clubs. That kind of engagement. And that's never going to be the engagement that a part-time mature student can physically, practically have. I don't know whether you've got any thoughts about that - about belonging generally or what different needs, perhaps, the part-time, mature students bring?

I Yeah. I sat in a Fresher's session at the beginning of this academic year, it was for a Masters programme with lots of mature students, professional people, wanting to specialise. And so you can imagine that - I don't know, I'd say about 70% of the 25 students sat there were 30+ and the Students' Union came in and they did a presentation and it was about Vodka Revolution Bar in town and it was like - you can come there and shots, jelly shots, blah blah blah! And it was really really cringeworthy. And I could understand from the Students' Union point of view that previously they may have come and spoken to cohorts with a completely different dynamic and it probably went down really well but it was quite cringeworthy and I came away from that session thinking that the very early experience of those students was actually, this isn't an environment that's suited to us, you know, the university environment generally. And I think if I were one of those Masters students my attitude would have been: right, I just need to get my head down and get this work done, in and out and get it finished. I don't think I would have felt a part of anything. So I really think that we need to think carefully about how we bring everybody in to the university environment and I think we need to think carefully about what we offer students and ensure we offer something - a full range of activities that suit everybody because for me that was very very troubling, very cringeworthy and very troubling.

R .... a mismatch really. Is there a Mature Student's Network or Society?

I There is a Mature Student's Society and some mature students participate in the clubs and societies which are run by the Students Union. More often than not - and it's really nice to see - mature students get together and form their own societies, which is great and I think there needs to be more encouragement and promotion of that opportunity. But there are particular types of clubs and societies, like the Law Society for example, which are commonly populated by mature students. So I think there are things there, I think it would be really good actually, to give mature students a sense of ownership about their experience here as well and what they can achieve and just some encouragement with the whole formation of societies, etc. because as I understand it, the few mature student societies that have been set up seem to be going well. I need to find out more about them actually, I don't really know that much about them.



- R Are they subject-related do you think?
- I I wouldn't say subject-related, they seem to be department/faculty-related, but I'm not quite sure how widely they recruit. I don't know whether they would recruit students from other faculties for example.
- R I've been reading the universities strategy and Access Agreement documents and I've counted nine interventions ... activities related to promoting retention or promoting engagement. And I wondered if there was any that you felt were particularly successful here? Or not successful?
- I Well, there've been some retention initiatives that as a service we've promoted ourselves so these have been kind of mid-semester workshops where we've invited particular cohorts of students to come in and see us. I'm not sure whether that was terribly successful and I think we need to think about how we manage those in the future. Another team in the university have retention-focused workshops. They take place each week on each campus and they also invite students in. They deal primarily with things like study skills and study support. I think that team have funding to help students in other ways if students are struggling financially from under-privileged backgrounds. So they've been actively contacting students for whom we know it may be a real struggle for them to be here and they've been getting them along. And we've been working with them, sort of doing kind of closed referrals between the two services.
- R You mentioned workshops you ran that you didn't think worked particularly well. Are you basing that on attendance or some kind of data that you used to measure it?
- I Well, we keep episode data. So every student we see, every student episode, every student who comes to see us, phones us, emails us, we keep a record of why they come. And we found that the students we'd invited to come didn't and it was pretty much business as usual. So it was very busy but it was very much business as usual so it obviously didn't reach that target audience.
- R Hard to reach students?
- I Yeah.
- R So are you saying that the people that are coming are the people who are, in a way, already actively taking charge of their situation?
- I Yeah. To be honest it was ... the difficulty we had at the time is that we weren't co-located at that point so we had our individual offices and we sent all these individual emails to students saying, you know, come and see us during this week and we were sat in our offices and we just saw the people who would usually come by and see us anyway who would have no idea that we were offering anything other than the normal drop-in session. So it didn't really have much impact. We have to find another way of doing that. And I think now that we're co-located, we could find better ways.
- R Do you think there's an issue about targeting individuals like that?
- I There's a general issue about targeting and that's we struggle to reach the students ... it's always the students who need us most we struggle to reach and so our targeting ... we've got no problem with identifying those students we want to come and see us but we really struggle to get them to engage and come in and I'm not suggesting that's through apathy but just difficulty coming onto campus outside teaching times and all of that kind of thing.

- R Do you work quite closely then with academic staff?
- I We do, yes, so we do lots of referral and we do lots of referral between personal tutors and Student Advisors. So if students come to see us and more often than not they'll say they're struggling with understanding their work etc. we try to encourage them to see their personal tutors or their module tutors in office hours each week to get some help and we find the reason why they don't do that is that they're not very confident and they feel that by going and asking for help they're kind of exposing themselves as some kind of failure. So it sometimes really takes some persuading to say actually tutors would love you to go and discuss the lecture - if you don't understand it and there are aspects of it you want to discuss, they'd love you to go along and do that, they won't see it as a weakness, it's a really positive thing. And I've found an new line that encourages people, you know, I say 'all the people that are getting firsts, these are the people who (laughs) these are the people more often than not, who are going and discussing things with tutors, engaging with academic staff. Because actually there are clear statistics that show that students who access their personal tutor achieve better degrees. Obviously we're not guaranteeing it.
- R And is the personal tutor system here, has that been set up for a while, is it quite established?
- I We're running on the second academic year of a reinvigorated personal tutoring programme and this is target based. So in the past, students were allocated a personal tutor and they were just encouraged to see the personal tutor as and when necessary. The reinvigorated personal tutoring system actually challenges personal tutors if you like, to see students x number of times throughout each semester. They've included group sessions in that, so that students are now timetabled for a group personal tutoring session and I think the purpose of that is to introduce the student to the personal tutor so they know who they are and where to find them etc. and the hope is that they would then be given information at that session about why they might like to see a personal tutor and they're hopefully see that their personal tutor is a friendly, approachable person who actually wants them to come and see them.
- R Does that seem to be having an impact?
- I Yeah I think it has had some impact, yeah definitely. Again, it's the students who we don't hear from who disappear who aren't engaged with that service but that's a prevailing problem.
- R One of the other themes I've been exploring is the different spaces within institutions and this is partly linked to belonging and people feeling a sense of being at home in a space or a place. And there's two aspects to that. One, I'm interested to find out what places part-time, mature students, or part-time, or mature students are comfortable in within their campus and also I'm interested in the differences between the different campuses of the same university. I have been to River campus.
- I Oh it's very different, don't you think?
- R Very different. Architecturally but also in terms of numbers of people. I kept thinking - where is everybody?
- I Yes, it's a large campus with fewer students. Yeah it's very tranquil and quiet. It hasn't got the buzz.

- R Yeah. A member of staff here was saying that there is a very significant percentage of students at River who choose River because they want to work at home. So therefore they're not engaged with the campus in the same way.
- I Mmmmm
- R But then I would have thought there would be quite a few students here at City campus who are commuting students essentially.
- I Yeah, yeah we do, we have lots of commuting students, partly because of the high cost of living and accommodation here, but lots actually live in surrounding towns and villages so it's like a local university to them. They're not really leaving home and coming away, they're coming to a convenient local university so it's pretty much the same here.
- R Yeah, so that doesn't quite explain it.
- I We have more international students here at City I think so you know, we have that added diversity. There is I guess, some diversity at River campus in the sense that they have lots of people who commute to it, but they're still, nevertheless, predominantly home students whereas we have lots of students who actually come here from another country, you know and so that creates a really rich mix.
- R And in terms of social spaces, spaces that are provided within the campus ... I mean I can see that it's a bursting at the seams kind of campus in terms of space available. Would you say that there are a diversity of social spaces here at City campus?
- I There isn't a bar, much to the disappointment of many many students. So I guess the social space is really the cafes, canteens etc. and it certainly doesn't cater for everybody. So there's a lot of - which I think is quite nice actually - there's a lot of hanging about, lots of groups of students hanging about. Great if you've got the time. But I think that gives the university quite a nice feel but I also think it might be nice if there was more of a social space. I think the students would appreciate and engage more if they had more social space. Because there is only so long you can hang about for...
- R Is there a Students' Union area or building?
- I Down in the canteen as you'll have seen, there's sort of canteen booths and a bar at the back and I think at weekends, the Students' Union lay on events etc. and that transforms into a clubby, bar type place. But that - I mean I wouldn't dream of going to it because I'm in my 40s but again that really only appeals to a section of the university population.
- R There are cafes and stuff on River campus aren't there and it's got the river view...?
- I Yeah it's got that really nice vista. But lots of students go off campus too and so they go to cafes and things there.
- R Yeah. Ok. Is there anything else that you wanted to say about retention or the university or part-time or mature?
- I No, not really other than to say I hope that the picture I've painted of the university hasn't come across as too negative because actually, I think it's a great place to study, I think that the support that's offered to students is immense, there's so much there for them and I work with great colleagues in student services who are equipped to deal with just about any problem that comes through their door and the problem is just getting that message out there to students and supporting

them in the way they expect to be supported - or vice versa. I just think we need to get a more common understanding of what flexibility is etc. But you know, generally I think it's a really positive thing.

R I've done quite a bit of reading around retention and I've worked in universities for quite a while myself before becoming a student myself – but retention is a really hard thing to get a handle on. There are so many different factors, so many different reasons for one individual's choice that actually find solutions or strategies is really difficult - and then measuring the impact of those is very difficult. I think it's a very slippery kind of subject.

I It is very difficult but sometimes as well I think we have to accept that actually somebody's reason for wanting to leave is a good and correct reason. You know we have students who say I didn't expect the academic standard to be this high, I'm struggling, not prepared for it and actually maybe that's the right thing, for them to leave, increase their skills, basic skills, come back at a later stage ... Withdrawal is usually treated as a negative thing, but sometimes it's the right thing.

R OK, thank you so much for your time.

**(end 35.15)**

### STUDENT A (Northern City)

I I'm currently on X degree course, first year, we started September this year, before that I was studying an Access course at X (other university), just to get my qualifications up to date really and then in conjunction with that also studied part-time Maths and English GCSE. Part-time is just convenient at the moment really, it fits well in my life. I've got a wife and grandkids and children and it allows me to study what I want as I want and when I can really. Fit it in with family life.

R You're not working in addition?

I No, my wife is registered disabled so when I'm not here I'm caring for her and when I'm here my daughter takes turns then.

R So unpaid work?

I Yes, sure.

R What's the time commitment on the course?

I It's 4 hours a day, give or take, sometimes it's 2 over three.

R Prior to the Access course, how long before that were you in formal education?

I I did some short courses at X (college) in X (town). They were just short courses to sort of see if I was still ready for it really or capable you know, so I did quite a few that were really interesting. I studied X, Y and Z (courses). And it really floated my boat to be honest, so I signed then a couple of years ago for X (college)'s Level 2 Diploma which I passed and at the same time I studied GCSE English and I got a B for that which I was well pleased with! I was given the chance to stay on and do their Level 3 Diploma but I'd been there for a long time, perhaps 18 months ... and I felt I needed to spread my wings a little bit really and sample other establishments. So as a result of that, I applied to X (university) and managed to successfully get a place on there. They didn't call it an Access course for some reason, but that's what it was. Their Access course was like the first year of a 4 year degree if that makes sense. And at the same time I was doing that, I did a GCSE Maths at my local college, the lower set, I just wanted a C and that's what I got. I didn't want to overstretch myself. Because that was the requirement for here. I was pleased with that. Then enrolled here at Northern City on their X (degree programme).

R How have you found it so far? Obviously, it's quite early days.

I It's early days. At the beginning of the course in comparison to the end of the course at X (university) it was quite slow because obviously the beginning of X's course was quite slow and they build you up and you start getting deadlines closer together just to add that extra bit of anxiety like, you know. So I was at that level, two deadlines a week and that was perfect, then we started here at Year 1 and it was right back to the beginning again. So we went an awful long time just with lectures and seminars. I handed my first piece of work in, due in end of November, but now it's started to ramp up a little bit now as expected.

R That must have been an interesting experience that change of pace?

I Very much so. Because I'd also done a lot of the x (subject) stuff already, it was very familiar. I wouldn't say I knew it all but I had a fairly good idea of theories and all that stuff and then of course, being in a class or a group where I was old enough to be most of their dad's, that was quite an experience.

R Yes, so how was that?

- I It's been all right and I think they see me as a dad because they all come and sort of ask for advice and they're all great kids, there's not many blokes on my course, there's probably half a dozen out of group of 90 so mostly women and girls - I mean young women.
- R So are there other mature students on the course?
- I There's one other that I've seen -
- R Officially to count as mature you need to be over 21 ...
- I There's a few then I would say. There's two or three of us at the top end, 50+, there's a few I would say, half a dozen between 40-50 and I would say the majority of them are between 25-35. A lot of them are mums with children and they've done a lot of volunteering for one thing and another as well which is what's pointed them in this direction.
- R Are most of your fellow students studying part-time
- I Yes,
- R So that's not a point where you feel ...?
- I No, it's the social side really and I think they expect me to know more because of my age and able to attach life experience to scenarios.
- R What, your fellow students do?
- I Yes. Not the tutors, the tutors are very good, they treat everybody the same and if we need help or whatever, I know they're always there but I get the feeling that my fellow students always expect me to know a little bit more. Even though we're all equally qualified, Access or A Levels. We're all on the same level. But I volunteered for about 15 years and that really just opens your eyes to life really. It's quite easy as a 50 year old + to get set in your ways and know what you're doing but when you have young people sort of talking to you and confiding and whatever, it's an eye opener it really is. And a lot of that sort of impacts on my studies because there is a lot of my previous life I can bring in and give practical examples of. And my life before that in the Services. And that's how I tend to sort things out in my mind is trying to attach a practical situation to a theory and that helps the theory to stick and then it's easier to reflect and do a bit of writing or whatever.
- R I wondered whether you've come across people who've withdrawn?
- I I have come across people and it's usually due to external pressure or commitments at home from what I've experienced, that's the main reason that I've observed anyway is like I say, pressure from home or their children or spouse, partner, husband, wife whatever. And to be honest that would probably be the only thing that would make me leave is if my personal circumstances at home changed drastically and I couldn't find any alternative. And students I've spoken to, not really here because we've only been here since September, but at X (previous university), I still keep in touch with fellow students and that seems to be a common theme. Home pressure, home life, family commitments and stuff.
- R One of the words that comes up a lot is 'juggling'?
- I I would agree with that. There are some times - the perfect example is you just have to do what you have to do and juggle is probably a good analogy I would say.
- R Do you think your tutors recognise that?

I They do, I have to be honest, a lot of the younger students have been trying to fiddle the timetable, if that's right. The problem with that is people that myself who might need a doctors' appointment or something who wants to change a seminar group, can't because the session is already full. So it means then rearranging appointments or getting somebody else to take the notes - but it's never the same as actually being there. You know. I'm a student rep as well for our course so that's one thing I have brought up and they are looking into it. It was because of that a lot of the girls have youngsters and they have childcare commitments and a lot of it is bookable a week or more in advance, they have to know if they're going to be in and if they're not and they have the same, you know, the kids get ill and mum's needed at home and they might need to reschedule and they're just not able to. I would say the tutors are very aware of it and whenever possible, they do accommodate. Once I've had to do it for a doctor's appointment and I personally didn't have any issues with it ...

R The student rep thing - what led you to take that on?

I Again, it's the meeting people. I was President of the Students' Union at X College and that was quite a unique experience, I was the first part-time student to take that role. And that was an elected role. For the eight months ... The age I am, I understand the other side of the coin as well, having been sat in management positions. Then last year I was a course rep at X (previous university) as well and again, it's the meeting people and seeing different faces because you get loads of emails from people and it's just nice to be able to put a face to a name now and again. I have to say I like to be up front, to be able to talk to people and sort of put people's wishes forward and all that you know. I think that's the sort of leadership sort of role that I got from the Services. It just seems normal to me. If I got a question it just seems normal to go to someone and ask for an answer whereas perhaps a younger student would think - I don't really want to ask that. I'll ask questions for others as well.

R What effect if any do you think that has on your links to the university?

I It's definitely cemented I would say because the reps for my course - obviously there's one per seminar group, sometimes they have to have time off and I would get a chance to speak to people I wouldn't normally talk to in a normal day's learning and it's really nice to be able to sit down and talk to tutors as an adult and have them see you as, not as an equal, but on the same sort of par. I like that. I like talking to people anyway. I volunteered for a long time and was an instructor and I used to teach adults ... I was never short of coming forward and I've carried that on to here. It fits quite well, because I'm a listener and a doer. That works quite well for the listeners in the group that are perhaps finding their feet before they feel confident enough to step out of their comfort zone perhaps.

R One of the big themes in the way universities talk about retention is that they want students to have a sense of belonging and they think that will play a part in keeping them on course.

I I would probably agree with that. I do feel a part of Northern City definitely. It's just, it's really strange to explain but tutors say hello, good morning - and fortunately I'm never late for anything, I go nuts if I'm on time even - but that's just what I've lived with all my life, so I quite often arrive early and I'd rather sit and have a coffee rather than go in to a lecture two minutes to and fumble around. It's nice that the lecturers come down and I had quite a lengthy conversation yesterday

with one, informal chat just over an assignment we've got and I pretty much got all the answers I needed. That was very informal.

R Is that tutor someone you've met through the rep work?

I No, just through the course. We've had her twice for lectures and we did last week, sort of co-operative learning week, co-operative communication so it was all about communication and working together and all that sort of stuff and she was our group tutor for that. A lot of them seem to be struggling with understanding the assignment. And I just asked a couple of questions and she was very willing. It was good. So yes, I do get a sense of belonging here. I could see the other side perhaps if somebody did feel isolated and perhaps not made to feel as welcome, I could imagine this would be a pretty daunting place to have to come back to day after day. Pretty intimidating.

R What would make it intimidating?

I The course you're doing, the size of the place, it's just breaking that barrier, if you can pull down that - a perceived barrier I would say. I haven't experienced it but I'm imagining what it might be like.

R Would it be more difficult for part-time students to feel that sense of belonging?

I I have to say, I am lucky, I was lucky last year and this year. All the responsibilities I have at home, my daughters have jumped into the pool so I know what's at home, I know it's gonna be looked after and cared for. But yeah, I could see where being a part-timer just in for a couple of hours and gone would be difficult. Again I spend that extra time as a course rep as well so again I get to meet other course reps from other courses in actual fact, I would probably say I'm better off than most because you get to know people ...

R A broader spectrum

I yes as opposed to just our course. I know people from different courses ... to have a conversation with and sit and talk.

*(Sense of Belonging questionnaire)* I very rarely give anything five because I feel there's always something I can do or someone else can do to improve. But I have to say, I feel very welcome on the course and here and the dealings I've had with faculty at rep level, you know, I've had a few issues given to me by the students and I have to say they've been very good in taking it on board and acted or changed accordingly. The year group is a little bit different because we are quite a large group, there's 90 of us and it does sometimes feel a little strange when we're all together in a lecture theatre you know and there are some sort of unfamiliar faces that you don't get to see any every day. People tend to form their own sub groups. But I'm not one of them, I'm not for that I'll just go and sit wherever you know and just start talking because they like they sit in their little groups up in the canteen there and I just say, don't mind if I join you do you? I'm like a little bee hovering above the flower you know what I mean.

R Do you have a small group, one or two people you know well?

I There are probably a couple that we speak to, having said that there are five of us preparing for a group presentation next year and I was put with four people who I thought I would never be able to see eye to eye with but it's exactly the opposite - we're really getting on like a house on fire. We're all begging, when we going to meet again just to discuss the topic. I think what we want to do ultimately is if we can get the lion's share done before Christmas then we sort of relax over Christmas



then and then start the new semester off with practices with all the background work sort of done and just concentrate on the 20 minute presentation. But yeah, that was a random choice as well.

R You were put in a group or you chose?

I We were given groups. The five of us get on really well.

R (*Mapping Belonging* exercise). Do you use City campus at all?

I No, we're all up here. Of all the places we go, this one is the main one really. The Learning Centre is quite good as well, the staff over there are marvellous. We've got our own dedicated librarian, he's very good. Most of our books are e-books so you don't have to go and physically take a book off the shelf, but I like to do that, I like to hold a bit of paper in my hand. I would say probably here, we have our first lecture on a Monday there and that's X Hall, and I think the reason for that is, I think I feel that we're intruding because they're all people from X (degree programme) and it's a completely different discipline. That's where they go for all their stuff. It feels - I'm sure it's just perception, but it just feels very unwelcoming - it's probably not if you just stop and talk to them. Everywhere else really, the main building we have a couple of things in. There's a brand new building, there's a nice canteen in there. What I do is walk all the way up there, have a coffee and then we go back down to the main building for a lecture then. That is quite good. I use quite a few of the buildings in the campus. We've also used X Court, that's quite nice, tucked in the trees and where else - Y building - we did intercollaborative working there. All the Students' Union buildings are down at City campus. I don't really go there. I perhaps think I should, even occasionally, look at the Learning Centre down there. The closest I get is walking along the road after I get on the bus, walking for the tram. That's probably as close as I do get and I often think if I've got a half hour one day, I'll pop in have a look. ... But yeah, they're probably the four main ones. It's mainly X Faculty here where we are now. It seems quite compact but when you have to walk from here to here, it's not quite so compact!

R So you feel pretty comfortable generally, around the campus?

I As a whole, I do. I don't confine myself. I walk to the library and now, people external to my course say hello, how are you and that's nice, that gives you a nice sense of belonging you know and they're people I might have met doing the repping or like last week, the intercollaborative working. That was quite good.

R Just to finish up, anything else you want to say about your experience of being a part-time, mature undergraduate here at Northern City?

I No, I don't think there is. But I would recommend anyone to come and give it a go, part-time learning. I originally thought, oh funding and money but it all works out. Just as soon as you think - oh I've got transport issues something else comes along and it all just falls into place but that was experience from last year really. I did fret a bit last year but this year I'm more relaxed because I know what to expect.

R It sounds as though your previous course was a good preparation in a number of ways?

I Oh yes, socially as well as academically. Getting your conversation skills back, talking to other adults instead of talking to kids like you would at home. Even though in my home life you do talk, it opens up a whole new sort of area with different common interests and I find it works really well. It's great. Very pleased.

**(end 41.37).**

### STUDENT C (Northern City)

- R First of all I wondered whether you could just describe your studies here?
- I I'm studying at Northern City, I'm an undergraduate studying X (programme). I'm on Year 5, final year and just completing my dissertation.
- R How has it been? I know it's 5 years so it's probably been different at different times ... ?
- I Hard work, stressful, very great time commitment, because I'm a Saturday student so I work FT Monday to Friday and come into university every other Saturday roughly, which is a huge strain on my family. I started this course when my little girl was 2, my little girl is now 7 so quite a lot of her baby time and starting school time has been 'mummy being at university' and she finds it enormously difficult.
- R And what about you?
- I You just kind of swing from module to module and think I'll just get through this module and then the next one comes up and you think, I'll just get through this module. It is very very demanding and very very time consuming. The amount of reading you need to do because, to get the high marks and I want the high marks - if I've committed all this time to it I want a First and to get a First you need to give it absolutely everything. There's not much let up.
- R It sounds like you must have had to put good support structures in place.
- I Yes, my husband's amazing. I've got my own business so I work from home, my business runs from my house. Halfway through the course my husband went from working full-time to part-time and started working alongside me and then about 18 months ago my husband then quit his job and he's sort of taken over the more day to day running of the business and about a year ago we took an apprentice on as well. So that support structure is what's now giving me the time to do my dissertation and things like that. So we've had to build the support in gradually as more and more time's needed for university. Because as you go from Level 4 to 5 and then to 6, the demands of the time you need to do the work increases. So you have to build in more and more and support.
- R That a long period over which to have to manage all that.
- I It is a very long period for part-time students.
- R It sounds as though you are very motivated to complete the course?
- I Yes. My motivation comes from wanting to provide a better life for my family. I live in a very deprived area of X (city), we bought our house at the peak of the housing market, housing prices have crashed, so in order for us to make sure our daughter has the best possible chance in her life, we know ultimately we're going to have to move house, so I need a better paying job... That's why the journey continues.
- R So when you started doing the degree, the Foundation degree and this top up, were you intending to use that to move out of self-employment into ...?
- I Yes, the long term aim was that I would do the Fd and then do the top up and then move out of self-employment into an employed service. However, current job market being as it is and the rates of pay, we've now figured out we're better off staying as self-employed. The rate of pay is so woefully poor that financially I'm no better off and it is kind of a bit of a kick in the teeth that after all the effort you've

put in, to realise actually, I could have just stayed as I were and not bothered with university at all. It's very demoralising. So my career has changed slightly, which is why I've applied to do a Masters, then ultimately I'm going to apply for a doctorate. So another 5 years at university!

R Do you think you'll take a break?

I Within the plan, there's a year you have to have off because in order to apply for the doctorate you have to have graduate experience. So you have an enforced year out. But there is quite a nice bursary attached. That's what we'd use to live on.

R So the experience of studying here specifically, at Northern City - how's that been as a place to study?

I It's somewhere where you come every couple of weeks and then go. You don't feel that your part of a student community. You have your own little community within your classroom and to quote from Brunner's Ecological Systems Theory Model, you've got your little microsystem and your mesosystem and the things like that. We have our own little system in our little group and I sort of created a Facebook page to support people, so we have our own little community of support within that group, but in terms of wider support from university and SU, we're not involved. At all.

R Would you like to be?

I I just don't think it's geared up at all for part-time, mature students. It's like a ghost town in here on a Saturday. You're lucky if you can get a cup of coffee or a warm drink. Vending machines sometimes do not work. I just don't think universities are geared up for courses to be run on a Saturday. I mean the Learning Centre's open 24 hours which I understand the Students' Union lobbied for that which is amazing for us. I mean I'd no idea they were doing that but it's great because at least now we can get in and get books and return books at times that are convenient to us. Whereas accessing student support services, we can't never do because they're only open midweek. When all of the group had issues with Student Finance not covering all of the course costs, you had to go to Student Finance in the university and they don't open past 5pm and they don't open on a weekend and it's those kind of things where you have to take time off work to come into uni to sort things out. You can't access them online, because you've got to bring the forms in to apply for other bursaries and things and they're just not open.

R So really, the people you've engaged with are very much the people who come on the Saturday? And I guess the tutors ... ?

I The tutors are amazing, really supportive, it's just the wider university system is just not geared up for part-time students, Saturday students, mature students. It's still very much focused on the undergraduate, 18 year olds that come in and do Freshers' Week and there's the student life, you just don't really feel a part of it.

R Do you feel like a student?

I No, I don't. I feel like a wife and a mother and I feel like a businesswoman. Feeling like a student comes way down on the bottom of the list. It's nice that I get on the bus for a £1 rather than paying full fare but that's the extent that my student card gets used. I forget to use it in shops. Especially when you've got your husband and your child and you say - can I have student discount please and they sort of look at

you as if to say - why have you got a student card? Scrutinise it very closely to make sure you are the person!

R So are you saying people outside the university think of students as young - well, you are young, but very young.

I I'm getting old! I'm going to be 33 next birthday. I'm not very young!

R Have you ever, in this very long period, thought of withdrawing?

I There have been times when I thought about it but I know I've invested too much to do it. Now I'm at the final hurdle and it's just immense and it's just so much work but there has been times when it has been very difficult to come in. Especially if my little girl's been poorly and she's been in bed and my husband's like - no you need to go, I'll look after her - sort of the pull of home when things are going wrong at home, just means you can't concentrate but you know if you miss a session, you're going to miss so much because of the condensed nature of the course. I missed one session because we were on holiday and I felt lost for weeks because I'd missed that session and trying to recap and even if friends provide notes and things, it's still not the same as being in the session. So it is very very hard and there have been times where I've just thought - why have I bothered. Especially when you look at rates of pay in the profession, you sometimes think - why did I bother?

R So the financial aspects and the implications for employment are very important to you for clear reasons, but is there a reward personally for studying?

I Yes, my reward has been my professional development and the impact it's had on my practice and my business. I've got that confidence and that self-belief because I'd got the theory and the evidence and the knowledge that I could put that forward and it did make a massive difference. And it does make a massive difference to what we do - it also takes over your house.

R Do you have a study space?

I No, our house is not massive so our living room has been converted to a workspace and we typically don't use that outside of work time, so we tend to live in my bedroom upstairs. If we're gathering as a family ... Because you want to leave work at the end of the day. So we tidy the room up, we close the door and then we go upstairs. It kind of takes over.

R (Sense of Belonging Questionnaire). Would you mind filling out this questionnaire. What do you think about a sense of belonging? You've said you don't feel like a part of the university?

I No. (filling out SOB questionnaire). I feel part of my course, instantly go for that one. I very much feel part of my Year group because they combined, there was the Thursday group and the Saturday group and then from the start of last academic year, they combined the two together, so there was an adjustment period. So we still very much sit in our Thursday/Saturday little mingling groups but it is still a cohesive year group I think.

R And you started the Facebook page you said?

I Yes, it's a group and people from both Thursday and Saturday are both in the group and we share ideas. But it's a way, it's used as support and it's probably used as the go to support first over other streams of support. Because 6pm on a Saturday night, when you've got to submit on a Monday morning, there's nowhere else you

can go for support apart from your peers. So I think people do use that as very much academic support - has anyone got any ideas, has anyone got a reference to support this? That's how it's used. Or if someone's struggling with an assessment criteria, we sit and discuss assessment criteria and people contribute and chip in. It's definitely well used.

R Do the tutors use it at all?

I No, no tutors. Tutors are not allowed, because we use it as a sounding board as well. We sound off. So if we've got issues with tutors we use it to share as well. So no, tutors are not allowed.

R I've heard of some courses where the tutors contribute to the Facebook page.

I Yes, I don't think Northern City has embodied Facebook as much as they could do. As an institution Northern City could set up official Facebook groups for students and have students contributing, however I think because they use Blackboard, there is scope on Blackboard to have a discussion board set up and that's just being set up now for our module site, so if we wanted to ask a question to one of the tutors we can post it on the discussion board on Blackboard and they can get answers from it. So students will probably use that now but if they've got - FB is so instantaneous, so ... I would say I don't feel a sense of belonging ...

R Do you own a Northern City sweatshirt?

I I do, I own several!

R Is that important to you?

I It was because then it would help me feel like I belong but does it really? I wear them for work quite a lot. I had one custom made - got my business name on the back as well.

R You are a business woman!

I Yes, I had one custom made but it's just something - you see students about and students have Northern City hoodies and Northern City stuff and you think - Yeah, I am a student, I deserve one of these. But I don't know if actually helps you feel like you belong? It's just making you feel like you blend in that little bit. Because you do look out of place. When I first started this course and I used to have come in to the university, I used to have to come in with a double pram and three kids. And then the lifts don't work!

R So when you came in to give forms in ... ?

I No, returning books to the Learning Centre before the hours were a lot more student friendly. There was a specific time as well it was so frustrating. I got into Northern City and I asked somebody in Reception how to get to the library. And she said - you need to go out and walk all the way round. But there isn't, you need to go down to Level 4 and go through to the big building. But I'd got the kids into the building and she said, no you've got to go back out and all the way round. I'd got two kids in a double pram and one walking.

R What was it like going into the Learning Centre with a double pram?

I It was interesting, people look at you, students are like - what on earth are you doing? I think I needed to pay fines, I think that's what it were - another bone of contention with being part-time. I'd got to pay fines and you can only pay fines during staff hours. They've now changed it so you can pay fines online, but at that

point you couldn't so I needed to bring the books back and pay my fines. Cos with part-time students, sometimes you can't get into bring books back and if the course is really popular and there's a key text which everybody and their dog wants and there's only 10 copies - so you get it out, you read it and you go to renew it and somebody's got a hold on it. So you're at the end of your renewal period and it needs to be back within two days or you get fined. And you think, I've got to work next week. I'm going to get fined for not taking this book back and if you've got 4 books and they've all got a hold on it gets very expensive. And there's nothing - and you phone the university and they say there's nothing you can do you have to bring it back. BUT I WORK!!!

R No book drops anywhere?

I You can post books in but that's expensive. It's very expensive to post books back.

R I'd appreciate it if you would have a look at one more thing. This is an exercise called *Mapping Belonging*.

I This building - I hate this building, it's horrible. Full-time students would use a range of buildings, they would feel comfortable using a range of buildings but - I know this sounds odd but today I've used the gents toilets because I couldn't find the female toilets because it's all dark down that corridor, it said toilets that way, walked past the gents and it was still dark, carried on going and I'm like - I've no idea where I'm going, I don't want to get lost, so I went and used the gents toilet. Because I didn't feel comfortable going any further. So I don't feel comfortable in this building when there's no one around. What I'm going to do is - because I only feel partially comfortable in the Learning Centre - if you come in during the week it's very busy with lots of younger students and it feels a little bit scary and I just don't feel very comfortable. It's better when it's quieter at the weekend when I come in because then I can find things a bit easier and the staff are not as busy to help you find things. Because when you don't use the library on a day to day basis, finding texts can be a nightmare. Especially if you're coming in with children, the staff can sometimes be a little bit reluctant to help you find things and then trying to navigate double prams down narrow aisles that are only made for one person to get through, let alone a pram, you can't ... There's a system where you can find a book online, place a hold on it and then the staff pick it for you and it's put behind the desk. After my disaster with the double pram, that's what I decided to do because then you don't have to go down and find the books yourself and it's terribly lazy because I'm more than capable but the library's not geared up, set up for people to come in with children. If you've got toddlers in prams, they start pulling things off the shelves, you've got a 4 year old running round ...

R As part of this project I've interviewed members of staff in different roles in this university and one word they use a lot is 'inclusion' - they say they're very inclusive. The other one's 'engagement' - which is a big buzz word which you might be aware of in higher education at the moment. From what you're telling me, those are not words that you feel apply to you?

I Inclusion as a student - my student aspect is probably slightly included but there's not much allowances made for family aspect or business aspect. Sort of when we first started on the course we had to submit physically and do a manual submission with written papers at 4pm on a Monday. Don't finish work till 6pm. So I then had to try and juggle my work to hand in earlier so I could meet the submission hand in date and then we got online submission which was a lot easier. But just the whole mind set is just like with the dissertation that's got to be printed and physically

submitted and it's just the actual - I've got to make sure my work's done 2 weeks beforehand, so I've got time to get it in to get it printed and bound, time to pick it back up and then time to get it handed in. Sometimes the lecturers - I know they work really really hard - but sometimes they don't see outside the university bubble. They only see within their little university bubble, they don't see the stuff that goes on outside of it.

R Even tutors on your course?

I I would say yes, sometimes.

R (Looking at the interviewee's *map of belonging*). So you've got that building where you've had most of your classes. Then the places you've put in green are ...?

I No idea what that is, no idea what's there. This building, I've put that in green. That one, no idea what that is, would hate to go there. Pretty much everywhere else should be green, just didn't want to colour it all in! That building - never been in there. That one - that building's horrible. The big block in the centre and then it goes over the bridge.

R What about the Glasshouse where the cafes are?

I Now I know where I'm going, if you go through the main hall, you can go through the Glasshouse to get to the Learning Centre. That building - don't know my way round there. This one's awful, that's where Student Support is and you can never get to it.

R You wouldn't go and hang out in the Glasshouse? If you had time?

I No, no, no, no. No belonging in the Glasshouse! If we hang out anywhere in between sessions, we stay in X (building). We generally walk to Sainsbury's and then we come back and we stay in X. I think something in the Glasshouse is now open on a Saturday, or if there's an event going on, but the cafe in X is never open on a Saturday, the vending machines barely work. Sorry, there's a lot of green on that page!

R Don't apologise! Is there anything else you'd like to say? No? Thank you. I really appreciate your time.

**(end 31.30)**

## APPENDIX 2: SENSE OF BELONGING QUESTIONNAIRE

Using the following scale 0-5:

- 0** no sense of belonging at all/out of place
- 1** very weak (awkward/uncomfortable)
- 2** weak (less than comfortable)
- 3** neither weak nor strong (comfortable enough/neutral)
- 4** strong (comfortable)
- 5** very strong (very comfortable/at ease)

*please rate your 'sense of belonging' to the following*

1. X University (as an institution)

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

2. X Campus

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

3. Your degree course/programme

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

4. Your department or faculty

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

5. Your year group

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

*please turn over*



6. Your subject/academic discipline

0                    1                    2                    3                    4                    5

7. People you have met through your course

0                    1                    2                    3                    4                    5

8. Your profession/job role

0                    1                    2                    3                    4                    5

9. Your workplace

0                    1                    2                    3                    4                    5

### **APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE FIELD NOTES**

**15/01/14**

Really helpful and broad-ranging preliminary meeting with X at New Ecclesiastical today. They had spent a lot of time gathering data that would be useful to me and we also discussed ways in which to manage some of the logistics. X also identified a good pool of potential interviewees and I met one of the Student Engagement Officers which is helpful as I think they will be involved in setting up student focus groups.

**03/03/14**

First fieldwork visit, New Ecclesiastical. Aim to focus on 'place' and city/HEI as diasporic spaces as well as on data collection through interviews. Mapping belonging starting from a blank space?

Massey - 'the stabilisation of meaning ... the site of social contest, battles to impose the meaning to be attributed to this space'. What meanings are attributed to New Ecclesiastical's campus space, this HEI, this city?

**25/03/14**

Preliminary visit to Metropolitan Elite. Am struck by use of the verb 'parenting' in the Hub booklet. Seems patriarchal – also infantilising, condescending? Disempowering? Implies the Hub is in a more powerful position in relation to its students. A power dynamic. You 'belong' to us. I wonder whether this help is always gratefully received or whether Hub students can be spoiled or babied? Do some students rebel against their parent?

**27/3/14**

Experiencing low level concern about the student element of the research. Setting up the student focus groups feels like walking through treacle. I'm having to become more creative about how I think about getting hold of students. This is providing several learning opportunities:

- to think carefully what the student groups are for
- to highlight how difficult it is to access these students – peripherality, nature of engagement with the institution
- to think more creatively about how to conduct interaction with students.

I'm coming towards the end of Phase 1 of my fieldwork. I feel like in some ways I'm winding down, but actually in terms of content, I might be winding up. My questions in interviews are more considered, I'm more aware/observant of what people say and what I want to get from each interview. And the student groups are really just getting off the ground.

**08/05/14**

The interview with X (Modern Eastern) made me realise how important the tutors' voice is in this part of the case study and also, X having offered without me asking – that the tutors are probably the best means of accessing the students. X articulated the gap between strategy in the institution and the complex realities of part-time study, particularly the challenge of funding for the mature/part-time students. A whole network of social/societal relationships brought to bear on HE participation – benefits, withdrawn, relationships ending, financial hardship. She also stressed the role of the tutors as nurturing. This is a theme I've been identifying in various interviews, not only with tutors but support staff. The necessity of it. Transcribing the interview with X yesterday made me think about Kathryn Ecclestone's **therapeutic model**. HEIs seem to feel they must be ever-present, every-ready, ever-available for students' needs academic and pastoral. Is this necessary? Effective? Appropriate? To what extent is this reflected in retention strategies? The dominance of **the NSS agenda** is becoming apparent – 'every living hour' spent trying to strategise/respond to scores/issues. A tyranny of league tables?

**09/06/14**

**Student Workshop, Urban campus, New Ecclesiastical.**

The students tend to cluster in the classroom and the one dedicated café. Interesting to hear the comments about Urban campus. The students are generally disparaging about New Ecclesiastical's efforts to maintain an institutional identity. Definitely 'could do better'. Of the 5 students, 4 'local'. Most of them minimal exposure to the rest of campus. When I gave out the campus map one of them said 'is it that big?'. Big gripe about the library from one student and more evidence of the lack of effect/inappropriateness of the personal tutor system – inaccessibility, subject discrepancies. Tutors are not allowed to borrow books from the Urban campus library, only City campus. Seems odd. Talking (untaped) to their tutor (not an interviewee) afterwards she said that part-time, mature students still an afterthought, despite being well-established and present in large numbers. Degrees of peripherality (as well as dimensions of belonging).

**07/14**

While case study institutions were selected on basis of successful showings in part-time/retention criteria, funding changes have changed the part-time landscape - there is the sense of everything being about to change, being on the edge of a precipice with the student numbers cap coming off (flux, change). Sense of walking into the unknown without a map.

I feel pretty tired actually. I've got an image of me literally sitting on a huge pile of data. A real challenge to make sense of it. But on the other hand I'm keen to start shaping the case study template and working on the integration of space/place/diaspora and data.

As I've returned to each case study my practices have changed. Can I compare this to the experience of a PTM? First visit – all is strange, finding my way around is challenging. Second visit, familiarity is increased, you may return to somewhere which felt comfortable. Third visit you're less conscious of 'finding your way' you have what feels like established routes you

follow. Fourth visit you have the confidence to explore, you recognise how places fit together, you can take your place within certain boundaries. But I'm someone who 'knows the game', the layout, the template of a university – headstart?

## APPENDIX 4: ETHICS APPROVAL

### ETHICS APPROVAL FORM

via email [sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk)

Dear Kate

The feedback regarding your submission is as follows:

This is a routine submission.

It is not uncommon for students to use their host institution as a means of deriving a sample. In this particular case it is possible with the right safeguards and protocols in place for the research to go ahead. We would recommend that you get permission from X to use the institution as the sample institution. Appropriate care should be given to how participants are going to be accessed and information sheets are prepared. Information sheets should clearly outline the researcher's role and your connection with X in order to meet required ethical standards.

Accessing participants: There needs to be a clear separation between the researcher and the potential participants in the sense that the researcher does not have access to student information other than those sources that are freely or publically available to attract participants.

If you require further advice on the above please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

Team Leader

Department of Psychosocial Studies

### PROPOSAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH INVOLVING ADULTS (over 16yrs)

#### SUBMISSION TO SCHOOL ETHICS COMMITTEE

1. Name of investigator: Kate Thomas \_\_\_\_\_
2. Status (e.g. lecturer, researcher, Phd student, undergraduate): \_PhD Student\_\_
3. Name of supervisor (if investigator is student): \_\_Professor Sue Jackson, Professor Claire Callender \_\_\_\_\_
4. Course/Programme (if student): \_- \_\_\_\_\_
5. Contact address for investigator: \_\_1a Rodborough Terrace, Butterrow West, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 3UE
6. Telephone number: Mobile: \_07752 674149\_  
Email: \_kate.thomas@sps.bbk.ac.uk \_\_\_\_\_
7. Date of Application: \_\_25 July 2013\_\_\_\_ Proposed starting date: \_24 September 2013
8. Reference Number(s) of any previous related applications:<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_ n/a \_\_\_\_

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<sup>10</sup> Only for 'routine' proposals

9. Is any other Ethical Committee involved:

**NO**

If YES, give details of committee, stage of process/decision, enclosing any relevant documentation:

    N/A    

10. Title of study (15 words max):

**The impact of retention strategies on part-time, mature undergraduates in English higher education**

11. Aims/objectives of the study (20 words max):

*To conduct a pilot and four case studies investigating the impact of institutional retention strategies on part-time, mature undergraduates.*

12. Rationale: Which are the main theoretical debates or research traditions within which your research question is framed and becomes relevant? (100 words max):

*This research is framed within a constructivist epistemology and takes an interpretative approach, one often drawn upon where there is a desire to understand social worlds as they are lived and experienced by actors (Silverman, 2001). Case study methodology is thought to be particularly suitable when the aim is to study phenomena in context (Robson, 1993), and when the purpose is to look at the particular rather than the general (Stake, 15 1995). The selected research methods are better able to reveal complexity in social situations; particularly important where the research questions are exploratory and concerned with 'how' and 'why' (Yin, 2003?).*

13. How will participants be selected?

***Pilot study site/participants***

*The pilot study institution (Birkbeck) has been selected firstly because as a specialist part-time provider with an active Retention Strategy, Birkbeck provides an appropriate site for testing research methods and lines of enquiry on part-time retention. Birkbeck also provides an accessible site and relatively straightforward access to key participants primarily because the researcher's supervisor has co-responsibility for the institutional retention strategy. However the researcher's supervisor will not take any part in the pilot study.*

*Staff participants will be selected on the basis of the relevance/remit of their work to retention strategy and practice and in consultation with the co-chair of the Birkbeck Retention Strategy.*

*Student participants will be part-time undergraduates over the age of 21 (mature students), in the first or second year of studying for a first degree.*

***Case study sites/participants***

*Case study institutions will be selected on the basis of a) significant part-time student populations; b) 'good' and improving retention rates for part-time undergraduates; c) institution size, type and location in order to achieve a variety and balance in the group. The case studies are not intended to be representative or 'typical' of the higher education sector as a whole. Within each case study*

*institution, staff participants will be selected on the basis of the relevance/remit of their work to retention strategy and practice. Student participants will be selected in consultation with the participating institution but will be part-time undergraduates over the age of 21 (mature students), in the first or second year studying for a first degree.*

14. Any inclusion/exclusion criteria?

*No*

15. Where will the study be conducted?

*X (pilot study site) and four other case study sites which will be higher education institutions in England to be confirmed after the pilot study is completed.*

## **MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES**

16. Briefly describe what participating in the study will involve. (Max 1 page)

*Each case study will involve*

- *case institutions being prepared to make retention data and strategy available for analysis by the researcher, subject to appropriate confidentiality and anonymity measures. Analysis will be conducted off-site as long as access to documentation is agreed; if this is not possible or desirable, the researcher will make appropriate arrangements with the institution;*
- *case institutions facilitating access to selected staff and target student groups available for interviews and focus groups.*
- *case institutions permitting the researcher to observe specific events relating to retention strategy development/part-time, mature undergraduate retention eg: Steering Group Away Days, Senior Management Team discussions. It is acknowledged that this may not be appropriate or possible in each case study institution.*
- *for up to 5 staff participants whose work is directly relevant to retention strategy and practice within the institution including strategy development, retention monitoring and student-facing work – participation in an individual interview lasting no more than one hour. Interviews will cover the following broad topic areas (depending on staff remit):*
  - *key retention issues within the institution/in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates*
  - *aims, objectives and anticipated impacts of retention strategy*
  - *strategy development processes and resourcing*
  - *monitoring and review of strategy*
  - *key messages and practices*
  - *target groups if any and reasons for targeting*
  - *perceived effectiveness of retention strategy; perceived barriers to success*
  - *interface with associated institutional agendas (eg: recruitment, widening participation)*
  - *issues for future development*

*The interview will be taped and transcribed.*

- *for up to 2 student focus groups of no more than 10 students per group: participating in a focus group discussion with a workshop element featuring participatory diagramming on the theme of 'belonging'. The focus group(s) would last for no more than one hour. Discussion topics will cover the following broad topic areas:*
  - *the part-time, mature student experience – academic and social*
  - *withdrawal – likelihood/timing (critical periods)/benefits to student*
  - *persistence – motivating factors/challenges/benefits to student*
  - *experience of institutional practice(s) related to retention*
  - *sense of belonging to the institution? peers? other?*

*The discussion will be taped and transcribed.*

17. Equipment/facilities to be used (if not included in answer to 16). Please provide details of questionnaires<sup>11</sup>, interview schedules etc, & attach copies if they are not standard ones. Comment on content area of questionnaires, could any questions cause distress or offence? Invade privacy? Is there a strong rationale for conducting this research in spite of this risk? How would this risk be managed?

*Interview schedules for this piece of research are considered standard.*

*Interviews and focus groups would be taped using a digital tape recorder supplied by the researcher. Visuals produced as a result of the participatory diagramming workshop session would be photographed using a digital camera.*

When thinking about this question please bear in mind that according to College ethics guidelines researchers have a duty of care towards the participants, the College and their own safety. (Please read carefully the Ethics guidelines at the end of this document for further details). Additionally, you are required to be mindful of another criterion as described in the **Section 1.2 of the [College Ethics Responsibilities and Procedures](#):**

***1.2 Ethical requirements arise from an evolving understanding of the rights and duties of human beings. Ethics are broader than law, though the law can both reflect and clarify ethical duties. School staff are part of a changing social system. They are, therefore, required not only to abide by ethical principles such as justice, truthfulness, confidentiality and respect for persons, but also to attend to the evolving understanding of how these principles are expressed in society at a particular time.***

Researchers are required to demonstrate a critical stance towards the assumptions and beliefs underpinning their proposal, so not to reproduce stereotypical and prejudicial views of participants. This is particularly crucial when dealing with vulnerable and disadvantaged populations.

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<sup>11</sup> Please note that in some disciplines within the School, some questionnaire studies (e.g. when questionnaires are non-contentious, are administered anonymously and online) are likely to be 'routine'. Please discuss the issue with your ethics officer.



18. How will you find/access potential participants? (Include details of any relevant documentation e.g. letter to manager, advert, notice to go on notice board.)

*Potential case study institutions will be identified through applying relevant selection criteria (see 13. Case Study Sites) and accessed through new and existing contacts within the higher education sector. Following initial informal contact, a formal request letter containing information about the project will be sent to the appropriate institutional contact/gatekeeper. A preliminary face-to-face meeting will take place to discuss the research process and access issues. At this point, the researcher will consult with the case study institution to identify potential staff and student participants and to discuss appropriate recruitment methods. It is acknowledged that the means of facilitating/recruiting for the student focus groups will differ across institutions and may include established formal networks such as Student Unions and/or Mature Student Networks and/or Faculty/Departmental fora.*

### **INFORMED CONSENT**

19. Potential participants must give free and informed consent. You need to provide sufficient information about your study in an information sheet or note for participants. This needs to explain confidentiality and right to withdraw. Please modify the template information sheet at the end of the form so it is appropriate for your study.

Tick one entry here to explain how you will use the information sheet:

- Information sheet distributed to each participant
- Information sheet displayed on screen for all participants
- Information included in header of questionnaire
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

20. Participants must sign a consent form to indicate consent. Participants must sign two copies – participant keeps one, you keep the other. Please modify the consent form at the end of this application form so it fits your study. The only exception to this is if you do not meet your participants because you send a questionnaire through the post to participants, or they respond to an online questionnaire, or the questionnaire is administered face to face in the street, in which case their completion of the questionnaire signals consent. In all these cases, you will need to ensure that participants have read or otherwise been informed of the consent statement contained below. How will you obtain consent?

- Signed consent form attached to end of this application form
- Postal or online questionnaire study

## CONFIDENTIALITY

21. It is important that you respect the confidentiality of your participants.<sup>12</sup> You should only record identifying information if necessary and wherever possible it should be kept separate from the data. Possible ways of doing this are: data is coded and the key linking the code and the participant's identity is kept in a separate locked cabinet from the data. All data with identifying information must be kept in a locked cabinet. Particular care needs to be taken with interviews. Names should be changed on transcripts and tapes locked up. Please describe here how you will maintain the participants' confidentiality in this particular study?

*The project will*

*during the data collection process:*

- *code data relating to institutions and individuals (staff and students)*
- *record identifying information separately from the data*
- *keep identifying data securely*
- *change names on transcripts*

*during the writing up process:*

- *assign each case study institution a pseudonymous name;*
- *keep participant's identities anonymous in transcripts and reports*
- *take great care not to identify case study institutions through other means eg: when providing descriptive detail*

22. If the answer to any item below is YES please give details and outline how you will ensure the participant's well being. Does the study involve:

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| (a) Unpleasant stimuli or unpleasant situations?                                  | <b>NO</b> |
| (b) Invasive procedures?  | <b>NO</b> |
| (c) Deprivation or restriction (e.g., food, water, sleep)?                        | <b>NO</b> |
| (d) Drug administration?  | <b>NO</b> |
| (e) Any procedure which could cause harm to the participant?                      | <b>NO</b> |
| (f) Any groups of participants whose physical/mental health could be put at risk? | <b>NO</b> |
| (g) Actively misleading or deceiving the participants?                            | <b>NO</b> |
| (h) Withholding information about the nature or outcome of the study?             | <b>NO</b> |
| (i) Any inducement or payment to take part in the study                           | <b>NO</b> |

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<sup>12</sup> If anonymity is **not** required, or if knowing the identity of the participant is integral and necessary information for the project, you will need to clearly state why this is the case. In such circumstances, you will need to provide participant's written consent to their names being used.

(j) Any procedure that might *inadvertently* cause distress to the participant?

**YES/NO**

(ja) if the answer is **NO**; tell us why

(jb) if the answer is **YES**; you will need to prepare for the possibility of a participant becoming distressed. We suggest the following: if the participant shows any sign of distress, their wellbeing, rather than data collection, has to be your priority. It is advisable to stop the recording and ask the participant if they would prefer to stop the interview. They might want to talk to you about what is distressing them. Be mindful of boundaries and that the participant might benefit from professional help which you are not in the position, nor under obligation to provide. In such eventuality, you need to have information about support services available to offer to the participant in the unlikely event that they do indeed become very upset. Outline this here.

Please consult your supervisor or experienced colleagues to prepare yourself before embarking on your research.

*Although focus groups will take place in participants' natural settings and will cover material familiar to them, there is the possibility that student participants may find that talking about experiences of considering withdrawal, or factors which motivate them to stay produces an emotional response. To prepare for this and to counter the impact, the researcher will:*

- *prior to each focus group, outline the structure and content of the focus group according to a standardised information sheet;*
- *remind participants that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they are free to withdraw/ask for recording to be stopped at any time;*
- *have acquired information about student support structures and services at the institution and have this available for all students;*
- *be prepared to stop the focus group for the participant to leave, talk to a peer, or take a break;*
- *have a staff contact to whom any problems can be referred either immediately or after the focus group.*

23. If you feel the proposed investigation raises other ethical issues please outline them here.

n/a

24. I consider my study conforms with the expectations of ethical psychological/social/sociological research:

**YES**

SIGNATURE of investigator:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_ K C Thomas \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 25/07/13 \_\_\_\_\_

**If this is a student project, the supervisor must read the application carefully, and answer the following questions and sign below.**

**It is the supervisor's responsibility to send the non-routine proposals to the SSHP Ethics committee for approval**

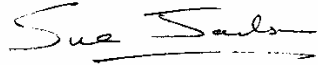
I have read the application and/or discussed its ethical implications with the student and confirm that in my view all ethical issues have been addressed: **YES/ NO**

I consider the application routine because it does not raise ethical issues beyond those of a study which has already received school ethics approval: **YES/NO**

I consider the application non-routine and believe it needs to be assessed by the ethics committee: **YES/ NO**

SIGNATURE of supervisor:

Date:



29/07/13

**SAMPLE INFORMATION SHEET (STAFF/\*STUDENT PARTICIPANT)**

Department of Psychosocial Studies  
BIRKBECK  
University of London  
Malet Street,  
London WC1E 7HX  
020 7631 6000

**Title of Study: Dimensions of belonging: rethinking retention for mature part-time undergraduates in English higher education.** (original thesis title)

*Kate Thomas*

The study is being done as part of my PhD degree in the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London. The study has received ethical approval. This study wants to explore the impact of retention strategies on part-time, mature undergraduates in English higher education. It will involve analysis of institutional strategy documents, interviews with staff with a remit for retention and completion and focus groups with part-time, mature undergraduates.

If you agree to participate we will agree a convenient time and place for me to interview you. Interviews will take no more than one hour. You are free to withdraw at any time.

\*If you agree to participate we will agree a convenient time and place for me to conduct a Student Workshop. Student Workshops will take no more than one hour. You are free to withdraw at any time.

A code will be attached to your data so it remains totally anonymous.

The analysis of the Workshop will be written up in a report of the study for my degree. You will not be identifiable in the write up or any publication which might ensue.

The study is supervised by Professor Sue Jackson who may be contacted at the above address and telephone number.

---

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**SAMPLE CONSENT FORM (STAFF AND STUDENT PARTICIPANT)**

**Title of Study: Dimensions of belonging: rethinking retention for mature part-time undergraduates in English higher education.** (original thesis title)

*Kate Thomas*

I have been informed about the nature of this study and willingly consent to take part in it.

I understand that the content of the session will be kept confidential and a code will be attached to my data so that it remains anonymous.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I am over 16 years of age.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 5: PUBLICATION/DISSEMINATION 2013-2016

### PUBLICATIONS

Thomas, K. (2015) 'Rethinking Belonging through Bourdieu, diaspora and the spatial' *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Vol 17:1 37-49.

### REFEREED CONFERENCE PAPERS

Thomas, K. (forthcoming) 'Organisational cartographies: mapping stories'. Unpublished paper presentation at: *Art of Management and Organisation*, 1-4 September 2016, Bled, Slovenia.

Thomas, K. (2015) 'Going the extra mile: spaces between rhetoric and experience. Unpublished paper presentation at: *SRHE Conference: Converging Concepts in Global Higher Education Research: local, national and international perspectives*, 9-11 December, Newport, Wales.

Thomas, K. (2015) 'Thinking spatially about part-time, mature learners in HE'. *SCUTREA Conference: It's All Adult Education*. 7-9 July, University of Leeds, England. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/.../0BxvLcYtGQZQjdk85QXdWVG5rUk0/view> (Accessed 24 November, 2015).

Thomas, K. (2015) Thinking spatially about "belonging", retention and the first year experience. Unpublished paper presentation at: *European First Year Experience Conference*, 15-17 June, University of Bergen, Norway. (Recipient of Birkbeck Postgraduate funding).

Thomas, K. (2015) Mapping belonging in the "lifelong learning university". Unpublished paper presentation at: *UALL Conference: Making the Lifelong Learning University a Reality*, 11-13 March, University of Strathclyde, Scotland.

Thomas, K. (2014) Rethinking Belonging and the Student Experience. Unpublished paper presentation at: *SRHE Conference Inspiring Future Generations; Embracing Plurality and Difference in Higher Education*, 10-12 December, Newport, Wales.

Thomas, K. (2014) A Borderland Analysis: Rethinking 'Belonging in Higher Education. Unpublished paper presentation at: *European Conference of Education: Transforming and Changing Education: Borderlands of Becoming and Belonging*, 9-13 July, Brighton, England. (Recipient of Birkbeck Postgraduate funding).

Thomas, K. (2014) 'Rethinking Belonging and the First Year Experience', *European First Year Experience Conference*, June 2014, Nottingham, England. Available at: [http://www.ntu.ac.uk/webevents/news\\_events/document\\_uploads/167719.pdf](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/webevents/news_events/document_uploads/167719.pdf) (Accessed 24 November, 2015).

Thomas, K. (2014) Rethinking Belonging Through Bourdieu and Diaspora. Unpublished paper presentation at: *Open University Conference: Widening Participation Through Curriculum*, June 2014, Milton Keynes, England.

Thomas, K. (2013) Beyond a Fish out of Water: part-time, mature undergraduates and "belonging" in higher education. Unpublished paper presentation at: *ESREA: Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network Conference: Times of change: the role of adult education in times of crisis*. November, Linköping, Sweden. (Recipient of ESREA PhD Conference Bursary).

## INVITED SYMPOSIUM/KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

- Thomas, K. (2016) 'Developing a spatial methodology' *Edd Workshop Presentation*, 3 March 2016, Birmingham City University, UK.
- Thomas, K. (2016) 'Exploring the mature and part-time student experience' *UALL Networks Conference*, 4 February 2016, Leeds, UK.
- Thomas, K. ('Exploring the mature and part-time student experience' *UALL Networks Conference*, February 2016, University of Leeds, UK.
- Thomas, K. (2016) 'Bridging the divide between practitioner and academic' *SRHE/OFFA Seminar*, 15 January 2016, London, UK.
- Thomas, K. (2015) 'Thinking spatially: dimensions of belonging in higher education' *SRHE Seminar: International Students: Transition, Belonging and Support*, 20 November, London, UK.
- Thomas, K. (2015) 'Rethinking Retention: Dimensions of Belonging' *Open University Seminar Series: The Terminology of Widening Participation*, 7 May, Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.