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Nomads in Contested Landscapes: Reframing Student Engagement and Non-traditionality in Higher Education

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Abstract

The findings of this study challenge essentialised conceptions of “the student” as a young national, entering higher education directly from school with appropriate school-leaving qualifications, to devote themselves entirely to their studies, undistracted by caring responsibilities or work commitments, unconstrained by disabilities, conforming to an unproblematised binary conception of gender which informs an appropriate choice of study programme, participating in stereotypical student extramural pursuits along the way.

The study tracked 23 students from 7 universities who volunteered themselves as ‘non-traditional’ in their own study contexts over the course of a calendar year. Drawing on concepts of ‘diaspora space’, ‘nomadism’, dis/identification and mis/recognition, this study maps out these students’ perceptions of the different aspects of their engagement as these changed over time as well as their self-conceptions and their descriptions of their ‘imagined communities’. The importance of relationships of different kinds (with other people, with their studies, and with their universities and other structures) in their decisions about persistence is noted.

Student Engagement (SE) has been widely accepted as contributing positively to the student experience, student success and outcomes, including persistence / retention. ‘Non-traditional’ students, while having the potential to benefit most from SE, are often reported as feeling unengaged or alienated, and constitute ‘at risk’ groups in terms of persistence / retention. This study has established that the construct ‘non-traditional student’ can be considered a ‘chaotic conception’, since students bearing that label may have nothing in common beyond not conforming to ‘traditional’ criteria. Students may consider themselves ‘non-traditional’ in their particular study contexts for many reasons, often presenting with more than one factor from a checklist of what is not traditional in that context.

The study also found reported mismatches between resources and services offered by universities for defined groups of ‘non-traditional’ students, and the support sought by students in this study. These mismatches hinge on factors such as fear of stigma, disparities between how target groups are defined and how students self-identify, opacity of systems and processes and perceived differences in priority.

Lay Summary

When one thinks of “a student”, what springs to mind is often a young person from within the country, entering university directly from school with the appropriate school-leaving qualifications; this imagined student has no job or other responsibilities to distract them from their studies, no dependents or extended family to care for, and no disabilities. They identify unproblematically with the gender they were assigned at birth, and this predisposes them to select an appropriate programme of study and to participate in stereotypical student pursuits.

This study challenges these assumptions. It tracked 23 students, who identified as “non-traditional” in their particular study contexts from 7 universities, over a calendar year. It mapped out their changing perceptions about their engagement with their universities and how this influenced their persistence plans and behaviours. It noted the importance of relationships of different kinds (with other people, with their studies, and with their universities and other structures) in their decisions about persistence.

The study also found reported mismatches between resources and services offered by universities for defined groups of “non-traditional” students, and the support sought by students in this study. These mismatches hinge on factors such as fear of stigma, disparities between how target groups are defined and how students self-identify, opacity of systems and processes and perceived differences in priority.

Declaration

This is to certify that this thesis is my own unaided work, both in conception and execution, and that apart from the normal guidance from my supervisors, I have received no assistance. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:


Date:

Acknowledgements

As this is not an Academy Award acceptance speech, I shan't be thanking my parents, my puppy and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. However, acknowledgement is due to the following:

My informants: the students I interviewed formally, whose lives have become my “data”, and without whom this thesis or any of the insights contained in it wouldn't exist; the students I spoke to informally in the “pilot” phase; and the staff I spoke to informally whose knowledge provided useful background;

My supervisors: Dr Charles Anderson and Dr Ken McCulloch, to whom I owe an immense debt of gratitude. The ritual PhD student greeting (“Who are your supervisors?”) was invariably followed with “you're so lucky!” and other exclamations of envy. Their skilful guidance, insight, encouragement and good humour have made this process far more enjoyable than it ought to have been.

My partner, Paul: whose transformation into domestic god while I laboured away over a hot keyboard allowed life to continue intact. Thanks for the support, the space, the sacrifice of a “normal life”, and – oh, everything. 

To the ESRC for funding the study, and allowing me the privilege of full-time immersion in a PhD, and to all those taxpayers who made this generosity possible. Viva the “public good” conception of higher education, viva!

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Chapter One – Introducing and Locating the Study

Whilst all this intellectual flux led to a reassessment of the notion of experiential ‘authenticity’, highlighting the limitations of ‘identity politics’, the debate also demonstrated that experience itself could not become a redundant category. Indeed, it remains crucial in analysis as a ‘signifying practice’ at the heart of the way we make sense of the world symbolically and narratively.

- Brah & Phoenix (2004:82)

Background to the study

This PhD study builds on the groundwork of funded research I have conducted for the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (see Trowler, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010a; Trowler & Trowler, 2010b; Trowler & Trowler, 2010c; Trowler & Trowler, 2010d; Trowler & Trowler, 2010e). It brings together research interest and experience in Student Engagement with an abiding interest in widening participation issues, and on-going concerns about student persistence / retention. While the construct will be unpacked more fully in subsequent chapters, some introductory comments may be helpful at this stage. For the purposes of this study, student engagement is understood as:

... the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution. (Trowler, 2010:6)

Student Engagement, as a construct, can be said to be as recent as ten years old or as hoary as seventy years old (Axelson & Flick, 2010:40). It developed out of earlier work on student involvement (Astin, 1984) Chickering & Gamson’s (1987) work on

“educationally purposive activities”, and the work of others which established positive correlations between student involvement in such activities and a range of indicators of student ”success”, including persistence, academic achievement, student satisfaction and social engagement and a sense of belonging (Berger & Milem, 1999; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). I noted previously (Trowler, 2010:3) that while that provenance holds true especially for the North American and Australasian tradition of SE, in the UK the roots lay elsewhere, in work on student representation, student feedback, and student approaches to learning.

Student Engagement has been described as “ubiquitous” in the discourse around Higher Education policy and research (Gourlay, 2015:402-3), and a trawl through the literature reveals an exponential growth in articles published listing “Student Engagement” as subject heading (see Table 1.1, below).

| Date | All | Journal articles | Dissertations | Reviews | Conf. proc. | Books | Other |
|-----------|------|------------------|---------------|---------|-------------|-------|-------|
| < 2001 | 11 | 4 | 5 | 1 | | 1 | |
| 2001-2005 | 70 | 41 | 13 | 3 | 9 | 1 | 3 |
| 2006-2010 | 500 | 233 | 179 | 14 | 48 | 5 | 21 |
| 2011-2015 | 1405 | 778 | 416 | 22 | 128 | 24 | 35 |

Table1.1: Publications listing “Student Engagement” as subject heading, personal search March 2016

We know that student engagement (SE) is positively correlated with persistence/retention (Astin, 1975; 1993; Bean, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Bridges et al., 2005; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peltier, Laden & Matranga, 1999; Pike, Schroeder & Berry, 1997; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003; Tinto, 1993; 2000;

2005). There are also positive correlations with widening participation - both ways: “non-traditional” students (understood here as those historically underrepresented in that particular HE context) benefit disproportionately from engagement (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Cruce et al., 2006; Kuh, 2009a; Kuh et al., 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); and students in more diverse universities are more engaged than students in more homogeneous universities (Kuh et al., 1991; Markwell, 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005) (unless the university is completely homogeneous, which also increases engagement (Pike & Kuh, 2005)).

It thus follows that student engagement has a positive role to play in encouraging persistence among “non-traditional” students. However, these students – whilst having the potential to benefit most from student engagement – are often reported as feeling alienated or unengaged (Krause, 2005; 2006; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Ten Yew & Farrell, 2001), and constitute “at risk” groups in terms of persistence/retention.

While not seeking to test an explicit hypothesis, I found mapping the relationships between the various concepts encountered in the literature into a “conceptual framework” helpful. This is illustrated in the heuristic (Figure 1.1).

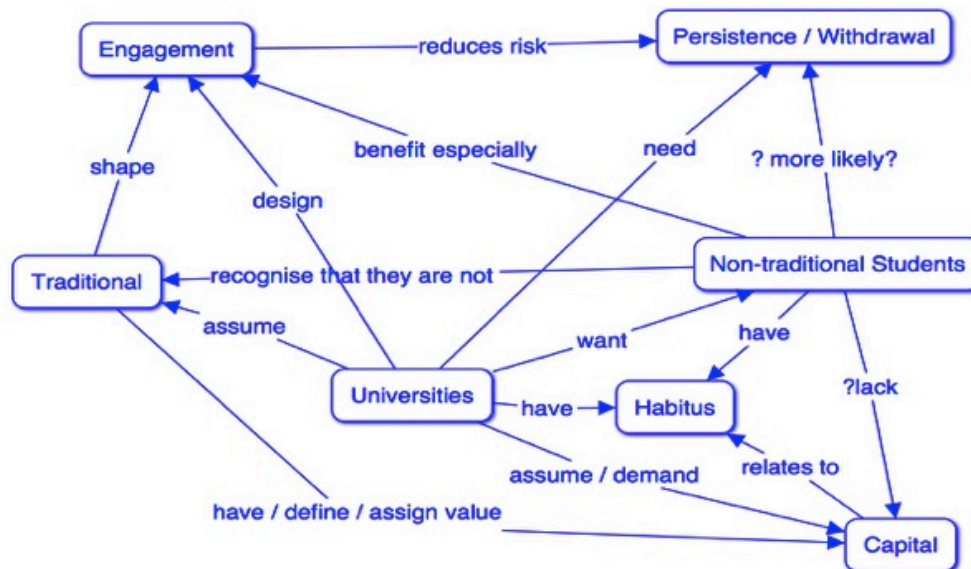


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework from preliminary reading of literature

This study aimed to explore students' experience of engagement at university, tracking over the course of one calendar year a number of students who defined themselves as "non-traditional" in the context of their institution or programme of study. This design recognises engagement as dynamic, thus unsuitable for a static, single snapshot design. I explored the participants' own engagement - congruent and oppositional, along the behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions identified in my earlier studies - as well as their perception/reception of their institutions' engagement attempts; I then analysed this together with their expressed intentions and behaviours regarding persistence or early departure. An ancillary aim was to assist in policy development for improved retention among at-risk groups of students.

Research questions

1. How do students who consider themselves "non-traditional" within their study contexts perceive their own engagement, as well as their universities' attempts to engage them?
2. How do these perceptions influence their intentions to persist (and their persistence)?
3. What are the implications of the answers to these questions for institutional policies and practices aimed at the alignment of relevant policies, for example, on student engagement / the student experience / student partnership, feedback, student governance and widening participation?

Significance of the research

Contribution to Knowledge

This study has built on my earlier work (Trowler, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2011) in conceptually unpacking and refining understandings of student engagement (Trowler, under review). It has engaged critically with the "chaotic conception" of "non-traditional" (Trowler, 2015b), thus offering both a conceptual and an empirical contribution.

This research also aimed at rectifying the anomalous and ironic fact that the student voice is largely missing from the very large literature on SE (as I noted in Trowler, 2010). In addition, it has helped to address the relative paucity of studies from the UK on student engagement in its fuller sense, understood as

... the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution. (Trowler, 2010:3)

The study has contributed to the recently emerging body of literature that engages critically with the concept of student engagement, rather than simply adopting the normative approach that characterised so much of the earlier literature. The study has expanded understandings of how students are engaging in their particular study contexts through unpacking the concept and engaging more rigorously with engagement in context.

By choosing to focus on students who define themselves as ‘non-traditional’ in their own study contexts, this study has also gone beyond “checklist” approaches to understanding diversity, widening access / widening participation and related debates in Higher Education. It has adopted a more nuanced, intersectional approach to students’ own perceptions of difference (and marginality), taking debates beyond categories and definitions that are not always congruent with the ways in which students choose to frame their subjectivities. Through adopting an interpretivist approach, this study has striven for an “experience near” depiction of the lived experiences of students who may be the targets of well-meaning policies, but who may not be benefiting as envisaged by the authors of these policies.

Potential for Impact

A fine-grained picture detailing “non-traditional” students’ experience of engagement has emerged, shedding light on the priorities and perceptions of these students and their relationships with their institutions. Considering the degree of (lack of) “fit” between institutional initiatives and uptake from “non-traditional”

students, and the complexity of how students engage with their institutions, could lead to improved understanding of what these students seek or value, and how this differs from offerings based on essentialised notions of “the student”, or of students presenting with a “label” (such as mature students, working class students, or students with disabilities).

Outline of this thesis

If you’re writing, say, a book review or an essay, it’s sequential. You type out some notes to figure out more or less what you’re going to say. And then you find a place to start, which becomes the beginning, and you wander off in search of the end. But with a poem, you’re in the middle, and then you’re at the end, and then back at the beginning, all with your eyes. You’re always looking at the same piece of paper. One single piece of paper is stretched out there in front of you, the lyric poem, as big as the salt flats in Utah...

Nicholson Baker (2009:40) describing the difference between writing prose, and writing poetry, captures the process of writing a thesis. It’s a poem.

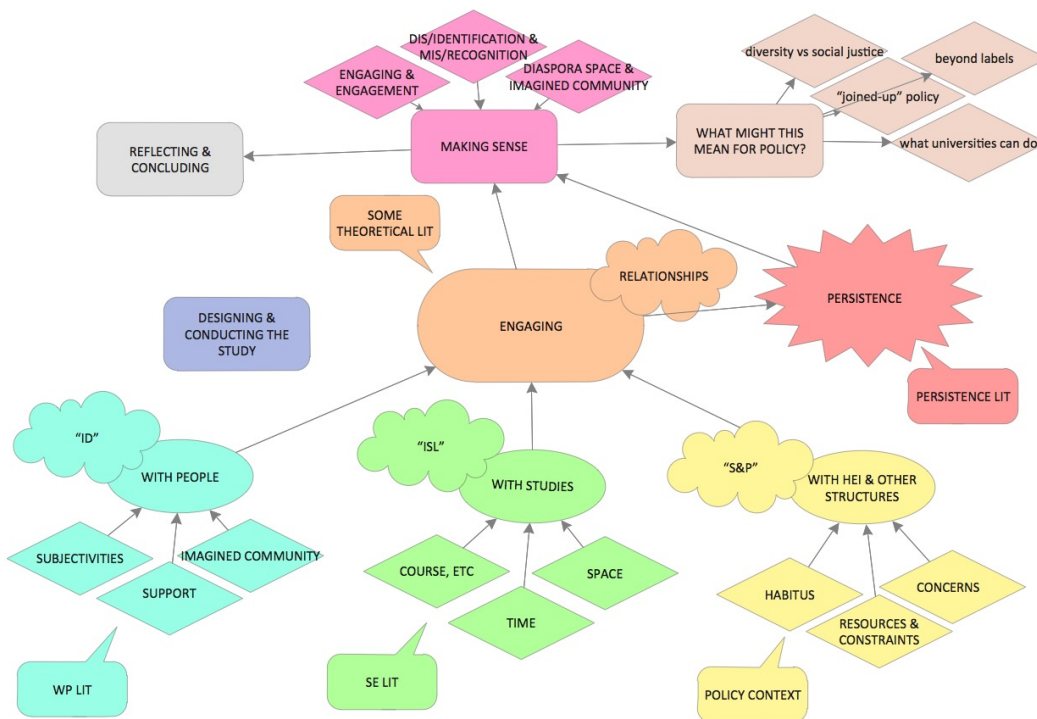


Figure 1.2: Structure of the thesis

The figure above illustrates the structure of the thesis you are about to read. Braidotti (2011:15) asserts, “if the only constant in the third millennium is change, then the challenge lies in how to think about processes rather than concepts.” In keeping with that challenge, chapter headings describe processes rather than objects, and the thesis itself is structured around the key process of engaging (illustrated in orange, above).

Rather than construct a single Literature Review chapter – which would perforce be long and unwieldy, given three distinct bodies of literature to review – I have chosen to separate the literature out. Thus, chapters three to six present different aspects of the findings, framed within the relevant literature. This was determined in large part by the nature of the findings, which started to make more sense to me when I acknowledged the centrality of relationships – with people, with their studies, with their universities – in the data, and I have harnessed it as an organising device. Thus, of the following four chapters, the first three are conceived as aspects (or targets) of engaging, and the fourth as an outcome of these aspects (or targets) of engaging. After reading Chapter four, you may notice that this structure seems eerily familiar: Chapters three, four and five show some degree of correspondence to the three foci I found in the (Trowler, 2010) literature review, *viz.* identity issues (ID), individual student learning (ISL) and structures and processes (S&P) respectively.

In keeping with the “thesis as poem” sensibility, chapter outlines are presented as tanka (with a final haiku). A less “poetic” format follows, over the page.

CH1:

Which you have just read

Sets about introducing

And locating the

Study through background, research

Questions, and contribution

CH2:

Locates the study

In the context of theory.

How I designed and

Conducted the study and

My positionality

CH3:

Engaged with others.

Who are “non-traditional”?

Ask the literature.

Ask the students. Who are their

Imagined communities?

CH4:

Engaged with studies.

What is student engagement?

Ask the literature.

Ask the students how do they

Engage, and with space, and time

CH5:

Looked at policy.

Positioned by their uni,

What resources do

Students draw on? How do they

Characterise their uni?

CH6:

About persistence.

Ask the literature, again;

And the students, over time;

Which relationships matter?
How they handle life-events?

CH7:

How to make sense, now?
Engaging and transition
Diaspora space
Imagined community
Dis/identification

CH8:

On to policy:
What can be done about this?
Move beyond labels:
Intersectionality.
Alignment. Social Justice.

CH9:

Reflects and concludes.
What do we know now that's new?
Valid? Relevant?
Reliable? What limits?
You have reached the end, at last!

But wait, there is more!
References, appendices.
At last you can rest!

Chapter 1 – which you have just read – sets about *introducing and locating the study* through providing some background to the study, introducing the research questions, and introducing the contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 2 – focuses on locating the study within the context of theory which informed it at various stages in its conception and execution, and on *designing and conducting the study*. It discusses the process I followed in designing and conducting the study, the choices I made and my motivations for these within the context at the time. It includes reflections on the role of my own positionality, and on ethical issues, and concludes by introducing – through brief pen portraits - the students I interviewed. This chapter is shown in indigo on the left hand side of the figure, above.

Chapter 3 – shown in cyan on the bottom left of the figure above – focuses on *engaging with others*. It considers the following questions:

3.1 – Who, *according to the literature*, are “non-traditional” students?

3.2 – How do students *in this study* who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study contexts describe themselves and their subjectivities?

3.3 – How do these students describe their imagined communities, and how do they characterise their engagement with their imagined communities?

3.4 – Which relationships do they draw on for support?

Chapter 4 – shown in green on the bottom, centre, of the figure above – focuses on *engaging with their studies*. It considers the following questions:

4.1 – What, *according to the literature*, is student engagement?

4.2 – What do the study data tell us about how students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context receive and perceive their institution’s attempts to engage them in their course, and how they characterise their engagement with their studies?

4.3 – How do these students construct their engagement with space?

4.4 – How do these students construct their engagement in, and with, time?

Chapter 5 – shown in yellow on the bottom right of the figure above – focuses on engaging with their university (and other structures). It considers the following questions:

5.1. – What is the *current policy context* as relevant to this study?

5.2 – How do students *in this study* who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context describe how they’re positioned by their university, and how do they construct “the university”?

5.3 – What resources (structures, systems, processes) do they draw on; which do they reject; and how do they consider themselves enabled or constrained by these structures, systems and processes?

5.4 – What concerns emerge in their relationships with their university (and other structures), and how do they characterise their engagement with their universities?

Chapter 6 – shown in pink on the right hand side, middle, of the figure above, focuses on *intending to persist, or leave*, and considers how the engagement described by these students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study contexts, influences their intentions to persist (or leave), or their persistence (or leaving). In particular, it addresses the following questions:

6.1 – What does *the literature say* about persistence and its converse?

6.2 – How do the persistence intentions of the students *in this study* manifest over time?

6.2 – How are their intentions influenced by the expectations of others, and which relationships are particularly important?

6.3 - How do they harness happenstance?

6.4 – How do they perceive of their own agency in dealing with “non-college life-events”?

Chapter 7 – shown in magenta on the top, centre, of the figure above, focuses on *making sense*. The discussion clusters around three foci:

7.1 Engagement and Engaging, Transitions and Transit

7.2 Traversing Diaspora Space and Forging Imagined Community

7.3 Essentialising, Dis/identifying and Mis/recognising

Chapter 8 – shown in beige on the top right of the figure above – addresses the third research question, and considers what the findings of this study might mean for policy. In particular, it focuses on four areas:

8.1 – What universities can do, according to students in this study who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study contexts?

8.2 – How can support and policy move beyond labels, to consider intersectionality, so as to reach the “right” people?

8.3 – How can policies be better aligned with each other, so as to avoid policy contradictions and achieve “joined-up” policy?

8.4 – What are the implications of policy being driven by a social justice agenda, or a diversity agenda?

Chapter 9 - shown in grey on the top right of the figure above, wraps up the thesis with *reflecting and concluding*. It considers what it is we know now that we didn't know before this study, muses on matters of “validity”, “reliability”, and relevance (in lieu of “generalizability”), and offers some reflections on limitations of the study.

Chapter Two – Designing the Study

“To see the experience of another, one must do more than dismantle and reassemble the world with him at its centre. One must interrogate his situation to learn about that part of his experience which derives from the historical moment. What is being done to him, even with his complicity, under the guise of normalcy?” (Berger & Mohr, 1975:104)

Theoretical Framework

Abes (2009:141) observes that “all theoretical perspectives that guide research are incomplete”, and argues that “rather than being paralyzed by theoretical limitations or confined by rigid ideological allegiances, [bringing together multiple and even seemingly conflicting theoretical perspectives to uncover new ways of understanding the data] can lead to rich new research results and possibilities”. She notes, in particular, the complementary offerings brought by combining interpretivist and poststructural theories, whose respective strengths (which she lists as “revealing a rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation”, and exposing dynamics of power underlying the phenomena being studied):

whereas poststructuralist theories seek to deconstruct reality, interpretivist theories, including constructivism, seek to understand the construction of realities [and]...how participants made meaning of their identities.

Abes’s approach, inspired by Lather’s (2006:47) rejection of “methodolatory” and Lather’s embracing of (2006:48) “the messiness,... that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories”, Abes terms “researching in the borderland between multiple perspectives” (Abes, 2009:142). A theoretical borderlands approach differentiates itself from mere sloppiness in that it recognises the fundamental differences between the perspectives it combines in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology; it seeks to use these tensions creatively to explore not only the re/presentation of those researched, but of the researcher and the research process. In Abes’s (2009) example, she began her study from within one perspective (constructivism), then moved to

engage with her data from another (queer theory) because of the limitations of the first (specifically, the absence of considerations of power in explaining the data). Thus, research questions, methodology and initial analysis were all conceived from within one perspective, and later augmented from another, to add theoretical richness and explanatory power. A not altogether dissimilar approach was followed in this study.

In conception, the study drew on the related concepts of capital, habitus and field, as outlined by Bourdieu (1986), which function together to create social reproduction through higher education (Naidoo, 2004:459). Various forms of “capital “ were examined in exploring what it is that “non-traditional” students bring with them to university, and what it is that is recognised, affirmed and valued by the university, and how this translates into these students’ readiness to engage (or otherwise).

Subotzky & Prinsloo (2011:184) offer a socio-critical model for explaining, predicting and enhancing student success that positions students and institutions as “situated agents” who are constrained by structural factors yet free within the constraints of those to strive for success. In this, they are aided by the acquisition of capital (financial, cultural, intellectual, organisational and attitudinal) and their efforts are shaped by their habitus, which Subotzky & Prinsloo (2011:186) define as “the complex combination of perceptions, experiences, values, practices, discourses, and assumptions that underlies the construction of our worldviews”.

The “field” of higher education in Scotland was considered, informed by Naidoo’s (2004) work. Institutional “habitus” - defined by Thomas (2002:431) as “the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’ s behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation” – was compared and contrasted with the individual “habitus” of the respondents to ascertain the extent of congruence. This approach was informed by Thomas’s (2002:431) claim that:

In relation to student retention in HE the notions of habitus and institutional habitus appear to be useful tools. If a student feels that they

do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early. This can be contrasted to a student from the dominant social class who, in Bourdieu's words 'encounters a social world of which it is a 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 & Wacquant, 1992:127). Conversely, a student from a non-traditional background may therefore feel like 'a fish out of water', and thus return to their familiar habitus.

Bourdieuian concepts of “field” and “institutional habitus”, however, proved less useful in this study – in part because of the level of the unit of analysis (individual students in their specific study contexts). Rather than dealing with “institutional habitus”, in many cases it was “departmental” or “programme” habitus that was material to whether or not a student considered themselves to be “non-traditional” in that context. It became clear to me that the “unit of analysis” needed to be the individual student, rather than the site. Similarly, the focus of the study was on the perceptions of the students, rather than on any “objective” reality, and it was thus *their perception* of the habitus of the institution, the department, the programme or whichever level that mattered.

Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) concepts of “mattering” and “marginality”, which were developed in the context of mature and “second chance” students in the US higher education system, also informed the development of my thinking for this study. Schlossberg's aims and methods of locating participants on a mattering - marginality spectrum were not applied, however; her research was aimed at obtaining a snapshot of the extent to which mature students in the US felt marginal / felt they mattered, through the quantitative analysis of large-scale surveys, which (while useful information) was not the aim of this study. (Nor would it have been original: Rayle & Chung's (2007) study sought to revisit Schlossberg's approach.) “Mattering” and “marginality” were retained as sensitising concepts when analysing the data.

Holland *et al.* (1998:28) subscribe to a view of identity that recognises that

...differentiated by relations of power and the associated institutional infrastructure, [culturally and socially constructed discourses and practices of the self] are conceived as living tools of the self - as artefacts or media that figure the self constitutively, in open ended ways.... [T]he self is treated as always embedded in (social) practice, and is itself a kind of practice... “[S]ites of the self”, the loci of self-production or selfprocess, are recognised as plural.

This perspective was helpful in mediating the tension between the structural view outlined above, and the more phenomenological approach centred on participants’ own interpretations and meaning-making regarding their engagement.

The analysis was particularly assisted by the construct of “diaspora space”, as this deals with issues of identity, space, belonging, power and time – all of which emerged strongly as themes. Brah & Phoenix (2004:83) describe “diaspora space” thus:

The concept of diaspora is increasingly used in analysing the mobility of peoples, commodities, capital and cultures in the context of globalisation and transnationalism. The concept is designed to analyse configurations of power – both productive and coercive – in ‘local’ and ‘global’ encounters in specific spaces and historical moments... The intersection of these three terms [“diaspora”, “border”, and “politics of home”] is understood through the concept of ‘diaspora space’ which covers the entanglements of genealogies of dispersal with those of ‘staying put’. The term ‘homing desire’ is used to think through the question of home and belonging; and, both power and time are viewed as multidimensional processes. Importantly, the concept of ‘diaspora space’ embraces the intersection of ‘difference’ in its variable forms, placing emphasis upon emotional and psychic dynamics as much as socio-economic, political and cultural differences. Difference is thus conceptualised as social relation; experience; subjectivity; and, identity.

Additionally, the analysis drew on the concepts of dis/identification (Skeggs), mis/recognition (Fraser) and nomadity (Braidotti). These are discussed more fully in Chapter 7.

Motivation for Choice of Design

It is self-evident that methodology matters. Burke (2012:5) observes that:

Methodologies shape the ways in which researchers collect and analyse data, the formulation of questions or problems, the ways ethical issues are handled and made sense of as well as the ways that knowledge is constructed and represented.

As such, when reflecting on the matter of research design, I found Maxwell's (2012:71) discussion very helpful. He notes (emphasis in the original) that:

*...designs are models **of**, and not simply models **for**, research; they are intended to represent what is actually taking place, not simply what the researcher plans or intends.*

Maxwell goes on (2012:73) to discuss the tension that arises between the two aspects. The "design for" sense, in which the researcher discusses their original plans and how well (or badly) they measured up to that, is held in tension with the second aspect. In the "design of" sense, the researcher reflects on the actual design as embodied in the researcher's actions: the values and logic guiding how the researcher responds to the environment, the research informants, and other factors; essentially, the myriad decisions taken during the process to make the research more productive or more relevant. The discussion that follows here, then, draws on this tension between reporting on the design-as-planned (and how the study followed, and departed from, that) and reflecting on the design-as-process (the thinking behind why the study followed, and departed from, the design-as-planned).

When deciding how best to answer my research questions (as introduced in Chapter One), I was heavily influenced by my previous work (see Trowler, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2011) and thus initially adopted an approach that was largely innocent of context. Having found evidence in the SE literature of three foci (*viz.* Individual Student Learning, Structures and Processes, and Identity Issues) I had sought sites for the 2011 study (on Leadership Practices to enhance SE) which reproduced those foci, through choosing as case study sites one site which was acknowledged as a

leader on engaging students in their individual learning situations, both inside the classroom and beyond; another which had embraced a more radical view on student partnership in structure and processes at many levels; and a third which sought to capitalise on identity through a collegiate structure, with acknowledged success. While this design worked well for the 2011 study in highlighting different aspects of leadership, it soon became evident that this design was not appropriate for my PhD study.

In part, this was due to the policy context: Scotland, unlike the location of the three case studies from the 2011 study, had put Student Engagement at the forefront of its “Enhancement Themes” for learning and teaching (see <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/>) and singling out three HEIs with particular SE strengths proved difficult. All HEIs professed to embrace SE as a policy priority, and those HEIs who were acknowledged (through awards, such as sparqs Student Engagement Awards) as SE “leaders” demonstrated strengths across all three of my “focal areas” rather than a single strength in a single area.

I then considered selecting a geographic area – such as Edinburgh, or Glasgow – which hosted a few HEIs, with a view to selecting as case studies three universities in the same city. Sheer numbers led to “three universities” being revised down to two, since the original proposal was to interview 20 students at each HEI three times over the course of an academic year. However, once I had begun to publicise the study through social media in order to recruit informants, I began to receive responses from students based at universities beyond those I had targeted as potential sites, volunteering for interview. This led to me interrogating my rationale for the selection of “sites”, and recognising that – since my unit of analysis was to be the individual student rather than the HEI – the notion of “site” was redundant, as long as all of my informants were within the same policy context. For this reason, I abandoned the consideration of “site”.

As my thinking distilled, it also became more evident that the specificity of micro-context mattered – students can be defined as “non-traditional” in a macro-policy

context (e.g. Students from SIMD 20 or SIMD 40¹ are considered “non-traditional” across Scotland because they are underrepresented proportionally), but at a finer-grained level, students may consider *themselves* “non-traditional” for any number of reasons specific to their own personal characteristics and history within their own study context. Thus, a middle-class Scottish student may present at a macro level as conforming to “the norm”, but in the micro-context of being the only woman in a class full of men studying Computer Game Technology, taught solely by men, she may perceive herself to be “non-traditional”. Similarly, students from working-class backgrounds studying on Access Courses (specifically designed for their demographic) may not conceive of themselves as “non-traditional” within the micro-context of their course intake. The idea of “site” as being significant thus only really made sense when considered at a micro level. The choice of epigraph at the start of this chapter serves to signal my increasing realisation of the significance of context in the design of this study.

While I did not conduct a “proper” pilot study, I did interview two students at an early, pre-collection phase, to help sharpen my thinking around whom I wanted to interview, and what I wanted to ask them. For this phase, I contacted two students I had been alerted to by others, who suggested that they might have useful insights as “non-traditional” students. I did not approach either student as a “non-traditional” student; I contacted them both via Skype, after an initial email exchange where I explained the purpose of the study I was planning to conduct. I informed them that I’d been given their names as students who might be able to help me think through some of the issues, and asked if they were willing to chat to me via Skype. On Skype I asked them broad questions around student engagement. These included: were they familiar with the term? how did they understand the concept (once I’d given them the working definition I was using) in their own contexts?, did they consider themselves engaged?

¹ Those ranked within the most deprived 20%, or 40%, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

I also asked questions around “non-traditional” students (including: had they encountered any in their own study context? who had these been? did they consider themselves non-traditional?). Some techniques from cognitive interviewing (see Beatty & Willis, 2007) proved very useful in this phase – specifically asking them to describe a situation, like who the non-traditional students were in their study context; then asking them to reflect on the process they were using to determine and describe that situation, as a means to understand their approach to (and understanding of) the constructs.

One student – an older male, first-in-family – did not consider himself non-traditional; the other – a BME female, also first-in-family – did consider herself non-traditional, but for reasons other than demographics. The data from these interviews were pivotal in helping me reconceptualise “non-traditionality” as a “chaotic conception”, and helping me reconsider whom I might wish to interview, and where I might find them. Given the significant difference between how others (my contacts who had provided me with the names of these students) defined them as “non-traditional” and how these students defined themselves, it became obvious to me that I should not work from a pre-defined set of criteria for inclusion, but rather seek students who defined themselves as “non-traditional” within their own study contexts. As the “pilot” interviews had surfaced a lack of clarity around the term “non-traditional”, I decided to ask, on recruitment media, “when your university thinks of ‘students’, what kind of person are they likely to be thinking of? How well does that description fit you?” as a way of stimulating students to consider whether or not they might be “non-traditional” in their study context.

Students were recruited to the study through volunteering in response to one or more of the recruitment media: posters were placed on noticeboards in academic, social and recreational venues on campuses at two universities (the revised “sites” – one Ancient and one New university, as described earlier). A copy of the recruiting poster can be found in Appendix 2. These posters were also photographed and posted on Instagram, and posts were made on Kik, several blogs and bulletin boards drawing attention to the recruitment of informants. Posts were made on social media

sites / “pages” linked to student societies and student groups linked to universities in Scotland. A dedicated Twitter account was set up and tweets were sent, and retweeted from my other Twitter accounts. 26 students responded in various ways (text / SMS, Direct Messaging on Twitter, Private Messaging on Facebook or Bulletin Boards, via email). Each of these students was sent an “information pack” together with a request to schedule a first interview. The “information pack” contained the Further Information sheet, the Consent Form, the Introduction to the Study for Participants and the interview guide (containing the list of discussion prompts, to give the participants an idea of what would be involved in the interviews). All of these can be found in Appendix 3.

The number of informants recruited finally settled at 23. This represents the number of students who made themselves available for three interviews over the course of the year of data collection. It must be noted that some interviews were longer than others; some produced more / “richer” data than others, and some interviews had to be conducted via Skype or even text chat in a couple of instances due to logistical issues (and, in one case, as a fore-runner to face-to-face interviewing to establish trust).

While the initial intention was to recruit mainly first-year students because of the significant literature on transitioning to a “student identity” and the particular vulnerabilities around persistence attached to this, it was also acknowledged that subsequent years of study present other challenges, which have received rather less attention in the literature. Additionally, there were definitional dilemmas for students who had commenced studies at a college (so-called “HE-in-FE” students) and later moved to continue their studies at a university, entering in their second academic year. As a group considered “non-traditional” in some university contexts, it seemed important not to exclude such students should they volunteer, even though they were not strictly “first years”. Thus, broadening the scope to include volunteers in subsequent years of study seemed a sensible course of action. Year of study was therefore not specified in the call for participation, and of the respondents, 13 students were in their 1st year, eight in their second year and two in later years.

Details of the attributes of the informants are shown in Appendix 1, and pen portraits of them appear at the end of this chapter.

The other significant departure from the original design was the timing. The study had originally been conceived to run over the course of an academic year, beginning when students were just entering the HEI and ending at the close of their first academic year. Since the year of study had been reconsidered, the concern about capturing the course of their first academic year dissipated, and other factors were considered. These included:

- beginning the study too close to the start of the academic year may have hampered recruitment efforts, with students too involved in more pressing matters to consider volunteering to participate in the study;
- students – particularly new students – may not yet have had the time to consider whether or not they matched the criteria for inclusion (considering themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts);
- running over a calendar year allowed a natural space (the end of the academic year) to consider seriously whether or not to return;
- how could they comment meaningfully on their responses to their university’s attempts to engage them, when they might not yet have experienced anything they could confidently describe thus?

As a result, the study was timed to run over the course of a calendar year, with interviews timed at three points throughout the year. The aim of the interviews was to track the development of the students’ perceptions of their own engagement, and their perceptions and reception of their universities’ engagement attempts, and thus to provide a more dynamic view of their engagement over the course of the year than would be achieved in a single snapshot study.

Data collection:

The original intention was to collect data through “life history” –type interviews, with the aid of a Smartpen to record the interviews. In reality, data were collected via face-to-face interview for most of the first interviews. The exception being “Alex”,

who – having rescheduled the interview twice - finally requested that we conduct the interview via Skype (text) chat, initially. Having built up sufficient trust during this first “meeting” (where she disclosed a sexual assault she had not previously spoken to anyone about) she provided me with her “real life” contact details and agreed to further, face-to-face, contact. The second interview with Alex was thus conducted face-to-face, and the third (for logistical reasons) via Skype video chat. A couple of later (second, or third) interviews with other respondents were conducted via Skype, for logistical reasons. All interviews were transcribed in full, and the log of the first interview with Alex reformatted into a similar format.

For the first interview, questions broadly followed the “interview guide” (contained in Appendix 3), with the order being determined by the flow of discussion. Questions were open-ended, allowing more probing questions to be asked where required to follow up, and discussion was allowed to range freely. The working definition of student engagement (see Chapter One) was used as a prompt to allow students to focus on experiences from their own contexts. Permission was also sought to “follow” Twitter accounts or to “friend” Facebook accounts where these had been the source of initial contact, for which I used dedicated, minimalistic Twitter and Facebook profiles. Access granted varied between complete access and minimal access; however, use of social media among these students varied enormously too, with some students (like Tristan) eschewing social media entirely and others, like Frankie, using multiple platforms for multiple purposes. Data collected from social media were, where available, considered alongside interview data, but do not form part of this thesis.

Second interviews built on data collected during the first interviews, and so were different for each of the students. Students were offered transcripts of their first interviews – though several chose not to engage with those – and follow-up questions were asked regarding whether their views had changed materially as a result of anything that might have happened. Because analysis was conducted alongside data collection, I was able to surface themes as they emerged, both with other students and with those same students in later interviews. Where I had had

access to social media data, I used these as prompts to encourage discussion on relevant issues. Ahead of the third (final) interviews, I emailed the students asking them to bring along some object or image which represented their engagement with their university. This prompted very useful discussion in many cases.

Decisions to mix methods were in most cases not taken consciously. The choice of drawing on cognitive interviewing techniques (see Beatty & Willis, 2007) during the “pilot” phase was prompted by recent exposure to these through having participated in the PRES (Postgraduate Research Experience Survey) Project. This involved field-testing the proposed new questions for the PRES, and these techniques had proved helpful in accessing certain types of data. The decision to use social media as a complementary source of data arose from my comfort with these media (having taught courses in Media Studies on the use, and phenomena, of social media), and my use of visual research methods in the third interviews was simply an idea that struck me as potentially useful at the time.

In retrospect, reflecting on the use of mixed methods with the assistance of Greene (2007:98-104) and Maxwell (2012:107), my intentions were to initiate, to expand and to seek complementarity rather than to corroborate / seek convergence. That is, I was more interested in teasing out a multiplicity of perspectives and insights on how these students experienced their own engagement, and how they received / perceived the engagement attempts of their universities, than in developing solid assurance that the insights I had distilled were the definitive ones.

The decision to gather data mainly through interview was informed by the desire to combine both depth and breadth.

Literature on SE is predominantly drawn (see Trowler, 2010) from quantitative studies, particularly in North America and Australasia where NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement, conducted in the US and Canada) and AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, conducted in Australia and New Zealand) have provided much of the data on this subject. As the intention in this study was to

generate fine-grained data, qualitative methods have been chosen above quantitative ones.

While it may be considered that, ideally, the richest data would be gathered through an ethnographic approach, using participant observation to spend concerted time with “non-traditional” students to share, and get inside of, their experience, feasibility would have limited data collection to a very small number of participants in order to conduct such a study thoroughly, which would then reflect the particular experience of a tiny subgroup of potentially “non-traditional” students. If the aim was to explore the perceptions of a particular subset of “non-traditional” students, this approach might have been more appropriate, but given the focus on a greater diversity of experience, such a design would have been too constraining. Choosing depth, via ethnographic approaches, would have meant sacrificing breadth and diversity of experience.

But isn't interviewing “ethnographic”, anyway?

Contrarily, Clegg & Stevenson (2013:7) argue that interviewing in higher education research is an insufficiently acknowledged form of endogenous ethnography, since the researchers are usually insiders (to the system, if not to the particular institution under study), who “live the policies we are describing”, and thus have embedded knowledge which is typically omitted from accounts of the research. They claim (2013:8) that

Rarely then, if ever, are our data simply the “interview”, but we contrive to pretend they are by making our knowledge of the field invisible.

I disagree that immersion at any point in the system has equal relevance to immersion at the site of enquiry (assuming one has chosen one's site of study most appropriately to answer the research question) – and hence with the claim that interviews are necessarily ethnographic merely because both interviewer and respondents are located within the same system. However, I do agree with their contention that our location within HE does provide us with a repertoire and a

lexicon of experiences that may be analogous, or common – or that may be assumed to be.

Rather than the uncritical assumption that Clegg and Stevenson appear to be adopting regarding our common “living of the policies we are describing”, I would caution that it is all too easy to assume that we “live” these policies in the same way, and that particularly where we occupy positions of greater power relative to our respondents (for example, academics vs. “non-academics”, staff vs. students, postgraduate vs. undergraduate students) we are likely to be unaware of the myriad “hidden transcripts” (see Scott, 1991) that differentiate our respondents’ “living” of the policies from our own. Thus, while I would support their call for a focal shift in accounts of research from data collection techniques to methodology and theoretical framing, their emphasis (2013:12) on the need for greater reflexivity and awareness of our own habitus and positionality in the field, and for greater acknowledgement of the other sources of data we bring to bear in our construction of meaning, my reasons for doing so would differ from theirs.

Data analysis:

Meanings are understood as discursively produced, tied to power and authority and as non-linear, subjective and tied to emotional and intuitive, as well as rational forms of knowing and meaning-making.

- Burke (2012:ix)

Data analysis took place alongside data collection, with emerging data being used to inform subsequent interviews, as described earlier. While the study did not – and could not, given the extent of my previous immersion in the literature – follow a grounded theory approach, I did draw on the data analysis process described by Charmaz (2014:109-191) with regard to the coding of data. Using NVivo for Mac qualitative data analysis software, I began with initial coding of the data, working through line-by-line and highlighting things that caught my eye. As I collected more

data, I began looking for similarities and differences between and within interviews and began to assign more meaningful names to the initial codes. I progressively augmented this initial coding with focused coding; I began organising the codes into categories and teasing out relationships between these categories. I revisited this process a number of times, tweaking and adding codes as newer data pushed themes to the fore or backgrounded other codes. I made numerous notes, akin to the memos Charmaz describes and true to her exhortation to “do what works for you”, (2014:165) arriving along the way at a design framework which I organised in NVivo. The resulting Thematic Coding Framework, and examples of coding during the process, can be found in Appendix 4.

However, the process I followed differed from that outlined by Charmaz (2014:109-191) in an important way. Where Charmaz advocates a strictly “bottom-up” data-driven process, I followed two processes simultaneously, one data-centric and the other concept-centric. This parallel process involved unpacking and mapping out concepts which I distilled from the literature, from hunches which emerged from my previous exposure to the constructs surround student engagement and widening participation, and from theory, and for this I used a number of concept mapping apps including ConceptDraw, Mental and Ideament. This “helicopter view” complemented the bottom-up process, and as I progressively included the themes from the coding process, the figures that appear in Chapters Three to Six emerged.

This “bottom up meets helicopter view” process was one I’d used successfully in several previous research projects. However, in this study, I felt I needed a different, additional way of making sense of the data. When one of the informants used the metaphor of movement / travel, describing an interaction with a tutor where the tutor had used the phrase “learning journey” which had produced a visceral objection in the informant, I had an epiphany of sorts. Rather than the unidirectional metaphor of a “journey”, which has a start, a route, an end, and involves the “traveller” being in a single place at a given moment, I envisaged the “movement” more akin to the map of the London underground, with each “route” (informant) having multiple starting and finishing points, with multiple trains running in each direction at any given time, as

consistent with their narratives. I plotted “Tube maps” for each of the informants as a way to understand, as well as depict, their own “travels”². Examples of these are included in Chapter 7.

By happy accident, I found resonance with the analytical process described by Maxwell (2012:118-123) where he describes analysis of qualitative data through a process of integrating categorizing and connecting strategies. From his description, the “bottom up” strategy of coding would comprise the “categorizing” strategy, while the “Tube maps”, which drew on narratives, would comprise the “connecting” strategy. While the “helicopter view” is also a strategy of connections of sorts, Maxwell (2012:120) draws a clear distinction between connections at the level of *concepts* – such as my “helicopter view”, or the process of axial coding he cites from Strauss & Corbin (1990:132) – and connections at the level of *data*, which engages with narrative, as do my “Tube maps”.

“Categorising” strategies look for similarities and differences in the data, as I described in my account of coding my data. “Connecting” strategies seek what Maxwell (2012:119) refers to as “contiguity” or the development of a “story line”, through delineating relationships between these “categories”, such as my “helicopter view”. However, “connecting” strategies can also be applied to data, and Maxwell (2012:120-122) cites an extended example from Miller (1991; in Maxwell, 2012:121) in which she describes

...that an essential aspect of the data was missing; namely the narrative nature of the [informants'] accounts... This narrative quality of the data, and its implications for understanding... were lost in the process of coding... To deal with the limitations [of the coding matrices] ... I moved to... the construction of narrative summaries. These summaries are narrative in that they seek to preserve the context and story..., yet they are summaries since they are my analytic abridgements of the narratives heard.

The “Tube maps” I constructed fulfilled a similar analytical purpose in my own study.

² This led, in turn, to integrating the work of Brah (Diaspora Space), Braidotti (Nomadity) and Bender & Winer (Contested Landscapes)

Integrating these three different views of the data – the “bottom up” coding into themes, the “helicopter view” mapping of concepts, and the “Tube mapping” of narratives – allowed me to construct in my mind an understanding of the processes at work in the engagement strategies of these “non-traditional” students as they navigated their way through the contested landscapes of the study contexts.

Ethics Appraisal

In most research projects, the researcher holds power over the “researched” by virtue of setting the research agenda: choosing which questions to ask, controlling what, and how, data is collected (and what ignored), how they are analysed and what sense is made of them, and how those researched are re/presented. This is particularly acute when researching those who occupy positions of marginality. Given that the informants of this study self-identified as “non-traditional” in their study contexts, there was a strong possibility that at least some of them would have felt marginal/ised in some way, leading to inequalities of power lurking below the surface along many possible dimensions in this study.

I tried to militate as far as possible against these – allowing the students to choose the venues for interviews, so as to maximize the likelihood that they would feel comfortable (though this did compromise quality of recordings in several cases), clarifying my own student subjectivity and stressing my gratitude to them for volunteering, providing points of commonality when asked (such as explaining my “foreign” accent to informants from outside of the UK, or disclosing my having been a student parent, or being frustrated by late-running trains), dressing informally and attempting to set the students at ease.

Having trained many years back as a lay counsellor, I tried to maintain the three guiding principles of Genuineness, Empathy and Respect throughout – albeit without complete success, since one informant [“Tristan”] responded to a (perceived or projected) tone of “disapproval” in one question (see discussion in Chapter 3) by declaring me to be “like his Dad” (i.e. not in complete agreement concerning his priorities). Nonetheless, I was conscious of these potential power dynamics and strove to sustain sensitivity through my interactions with informants.

With one of the motivating factors behind the study being the almost complete absence of the student voice in the relevant literature, I tried to re/present the voice of informants as authentically as possible, without exploiting their perspectives, commoditising their experiences or becoming proprietorial toward them. Having previously (Trowler, 2014) reflected on the methodological, ethical, political and associated challenges of researching marginalized people in a Higher Education context, I was very conscious of bell hooks’s (1990:241-3) indictment:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk.

In reflecting on a possible “observer effect”, it must be acknowledged that outcomes may well have been influenced: that by virtue of participation in the study, students may have felt inclined to greater levels of engagement than they may otherwise have felt, and that this may in turn have influenced their decisions regarding persistence; or that students may have, through discussion of their “otherness”, come to feel greater levels of alienation and may thus have become more disengaged than they might otherwise have, done, or may have come to engage more negatively than they might otherwise have done. However, given the complexity of the shifts and changes in their engagement behaviours and in the ways in which they

reflected on these, it seems fair to say that any influence in one direction was likely to have been offset by opposing influence in another direction, since none of the students reported simplistic unidirectional trajectories. Rather, it is more likely that participation in this study fed into the myriad other sources, amplifying some, mediating or countering others, being heeded or disregarded within the informants' changing sense of priorities and attitudes.

Formally, ethical procedures required by the university were duly followed: Ethics forms were completed and submitted through the appropriate channels. Due care was taken in obtaining informed consent, with the consent form written in accessible English at a level deemed understandable to speakers of English as an additional language who are fluent enough to commence higher education in Scotland. Participants were assured of pseudonymity, and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point should they choose. Data have been securely stored, used only for purposes for which permission was expressly granted, and have not been (nor will be) made accessible to anyone else. Any recordings made as part of this study will be destroyed on completion of the study. Professional codes of conduct were observed throughout. Students were not paid for participation, though coffee (and beer, on one occasion) was bought when appropriate for informants, and one informant was refunded for travel costs to reach the interview location.

My own positionality

...The selection of the research questions research problems and methodologies for data collection and data analysis are all related to the question of the subjectivity and positionality of the researcher. – Torres in Burke (2012:ix)

It seems germane to acknowledge that I have been considered “non-traditional” in many of my own previous student contexts: as a “first-in-family” student; as an English-speaking undergraduate at an Afrikaans-medium university; as a part-time student studying alongside full-time students; as a student parent; as a “second chance” student, having left undergraduate

studies without formally graduating and returning to postgraduate studies with “degree equivalence” via a recognition of prior learning (RPL) route; as a postgraduate student in a discipline very different to my undergraduate studies; as a “white” student at a historically “black” university; as a mature student; as an international student; etc.

Within those subjectivities, I have not consistently felt “non-traditional”, or otherwise. Rather, it was something that manifested only in particular situations, usually in response to assumptions made about students in general, or myself in particular, and as such I am not sure how I would have responded to seeing a call such as the one I issued for volunteers for this study. Would I have recognized myself in that? Almost certainly it would have depended on whether something had recently triggered a feeling of “otherness”, or had challenged any sense of complacent belonging I might have acquired. This “contextual contingency” has predisposed me to consider feelings of being “non-traditional” to be both fluid and depended on micro-context, and to seek evidence of this in the responses of my informants. Given that I interviewed them all more than once, over a calendar year, change rather than absolute consistency is probably a reasonable expectation, and thus any changes reflected in the data are unlikely to be wholly a result of my own projection. Nonetheless, I am aware that my own background will foreground some readings at the expense of others, and I’ve tried as far as felt natural to check with informants that I was not committing too much violence to their data with my readings.

I have also previously participated in the generation, implementation, monitoring and review of social justice policies, including “widening participation”-type policies as a staff representative at a university, albeit in a different policy context, and thus have an extended repertoire of cynical views at my disposal. However, I have endeavoured to consign those to a mental closet (for dinner parties and social media) and to engage with my data as they emerged mindful of the difference in context, informed by my

values rather than being dictated to by my prejudices. I have taken advantage of friends who are far better informed (and far less jaded) to engage in thought experiments informed by my emerging data, to reduce the risks of operating within an intellectual echo-chamber smugly reassured of the correctness of my own responses.

I am also aware that my own long-past experience as an undergraduate who engaged both congruently (in some courses, as a student representative, etc.) and oppositionally (reinterpreting assignments, organizing protests, etc.) will offer interpretations of data that may differ from those favoured by informants, and that my own interests and biases will nudge me toward certain interpretations and away from others. I recognise in Clegg & Stevenson's (2013) argument a need for heightened sensitivity on my own part to my own positionality, and a requirement for reflexivity and open dialogue between all data, whether collected from participants, from secondary sources, from the literature, from my own experience or from other sources.

Introducing the Informants:

All names used are pseudonyms, and were chosen in consultation with the informants. Two informants were enrolled at HEIs not classified as universities, though included as "universities" by the Scottish Funding Council. Universities, in this document, are thus listed as Ancient, Old, New and Other, and are not identified individually.

Lindy identified as a white cisgender woman, studying archaeology at an Ancient university. She was 23 years old at the start of the study, in her first year of study. She was Scottish by birth, but had completed her schooling in Australia, where her family had lived for several years. She had returned with them to Scotland, and had obtained work in a call centre while waiting to comply with residence requirements for free higher education. In the meantime she had gotten married, lived with her

husband – a postgraduate student – and during the course of the study confirmed, and miscarried, a pregnancy. She volunteered to participate on the grounds of: being married; being older (through the delayed transition) though not comfortable with the label of “mature” student: and being “foreign-ish”, since she felt foreign from her years abroad, but was not subject to any of the constraints of international (non-EU) students.

Marian presented as an older, white, cisgender woman, in her second year studying Social Policy at an Ancient university. She identified as having had a working class background, being first-in-family to study beyond school. This was her motivation, together with her age, for volunteering to participate in the study. She had caring responsibilities toward an extended family, identified ethnically as Scottish, and had been made redundant from her job through the economic crash, which had provided her with the impetus and opportunity to enrol at university.

Alex volunteered to participate on the basis of her mental health issues, which she had not disclosed to the New university at which she was enrolled in her first year, studying journalism. She identified as a white, cisgender woman, transitioning directly from school. Ethnically, she reported that she was English, (classed RUK – rest of UK, thus eligible to pay fees) and she reported having no caring responsibilities. Alex was the student who asked that our initial “meeting” take place via Skype text chat, in order to establish trust.

Blair was initially unsure whether or not he complied with my criteria for inclusion: as a working-class, first-in-family student he felt that he was not particularly “non-traditional” at the New university at which he was enrolled in his second year to study Chemistry, “since it was designed for students they think are like [him]”, but he considered himself “non-traditional” in the context of his cohort whose instrumental orientation he eschewed, considering his own motivations for study - engaging with knowledge – out of keeping with the vocational emphasis of his study context. Identifying as a white cisgender man, he had transitioned directly from school and was native Scottish.

Tristan volunteered for the study as a 21-year-old white, cisgender man from England, on the grounds of his delayed transition (and thus being slightly older than he perceived of most of his classmates to be) and his primary identity as a musician, rather than as a student. He considered, at the start of the study, his enrolment in his first year at an Ancient university, studying literature to be a way of killing time until his band garnered recognition – at which point he would leave university and engage full-time in music.

Kris identified as a transgender womxn in transition, the basis of their volunteering to participate in the study. Enrolled at an Ancient university to study Physics, Kris was in their first year of study, and identified ethnically as white Irish, with no caring responsibilities. Through the course of the study, Kris used various gendered pronouns to describe themselves – where quoted as direct speech, these have been retained as used. Elsewhere, gender neutral pronouns (singular “they”, “their”, “themselves” etc.) and LGBTQIA+ -friendly descriptors (such as “womxn”) have been used.

Karin was enrolled in her second year studying informatics at an Ancient university. She volunteered to participate in the study on the basis of her mental health concerns. She had been diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in her native Denmark, where she was registered as having a disability, but had not disclosed this as a disability at the university where she was enrolled. She identified as white, as a cisgender woman, with no caring responsibilities.

Greg volunteered for the study on the grounds of having been in care. He identified as a white, Scottish cisgender man, enrolled in his first year studying computer games technology at a New university. Greg reported having no caring responsibilities.

Frankie identified as a white, working-class, cisgender Scottish woman, enrolled in the third year of her journalism studies at a New university. She reported no caring

responsibilities. She volunteered on the grounds of feeling “out of place” because of her class background - not at her university itself, but within the journalism profession, and at the industry placements that were required as part of her course.

Courtney volunteered for the study as a student lone parent. She was enrolled in her second year of a primary teaching course at an Old university, and had delayed her transition to study because of caring responsibilities toward her children. Ethnically, she identified as being white, Scottish, and middle class.

Uche was enrolled in his first year of engineering at an Old university. He volunteered to participate in the study as an international student from Nigeria, and reported having caring responsibilities toward his family back home in Nigeria. He identified as an African / Black cisgender man.

Steve was enrolled in his second year studying Business at a New university, having transferred from College. His participation was grounded in his being older, at 36, and having entered university from the HE-in-FE system rather than having transitioned from school with Highers / Advanced Highers. Steve identified as a white, cisgender Scottish man, with caring responsibilities toward his estranged family.

Andy described himself as a “second chancer”, a “former bad boy” from a working-class background – the basis on which he volunteered for the study. At 27 he was classified as a mature student, and he reported having a child from a former relationship when asked about caring responsibilities. Andy identified as “black British”, from England, and was enrolled in his first year studying Social Work at an Old university.

Celia volunteered for the study on the basis of her gender – she identified as a white, cisgender woman, the only woman enrolled on a course in computer games technology at a New university. She had transitioned directly from school, reported no caring responsibilities and hailed from England.

Yumna was enrolled in her first year in a design course at an Other HEI. She described herself ethnically as “British” [though from a Black / Minority Ethnic (BME) background] and volunteered to participate in the study since she considered her HE participation “non-traditional” in the following ways: as the child of immigrant parents, she was the first in her family to attend university; as a woman from an observant family, she was also enrolled on a course that involved the study of figures and figuration, which was considered “haram” i.e. forbidden, within the Muslim tradition to which her family subscribed. Her family, though, were broadly supportive of her “bettering herself and her prospects” through her studies. While she reported no caring responsibilities, it was evident indirectly that there were expectations on her relating to her gender and place in the family.

Nina identified as a white, cisgender Scottish woman, enrolled part-time in the first year of an applied psychology course at a New university. Her participation was based on her identifying as a mature, part-time student, who also acted as the carer for her disabled brother.

Sian volunteered to participate because of her specific learning disability. Identifying as a white, cisgender woman from Wales, Sian was enrolled in the second year of a law degree at an Old university, where she had disclosed her dyslexia. However, she found that the nature of her disability was ill-matched to her programme of study.

Brian identified as a white, cisgender English man, enrolled in the first year of a course in Dance at an Other HEI. His participation sprang from his identification as a “heterosexual man in a career regarded as female”, and he reported no caring responsibilities (other than his “art”).

Emma was enrolled in her first year, studying film studies at an Old university. Identifying as a white, cisgender German woman, Emma volunteered for the study based on the perceptions of others of her as a former model, embarking – at 23 - on a second career. She identified no caring responsibilities.

Mike identified as a white, cisgender English man, enrolled in his second year in a course in fashion at a New university. He volunteered as a “straight man in a ‘gay’ profession”, and reported no caring responsibilities.

David volunteered to participate in the study because, as an Asian international student (from Vietnam), he “felt foreign”. David reported no caring responsibilities, and was enrolled in his first year of a social science degree at a New university.

Gabi identified as a Black, Jewish cisgender woman from England, an ethnic mix that bore testimony to her being adopted, and which formed the basis for her participation in the study. She reported having no caring responsibilities, and was enrolled in her first year, studying history, at an Ancient university.

Vanessa was enrolled in her second year of a modern languages course at an Old university. She volunteered to participate in the study as a white, working-class cisgender Scottish woman, the only one on her course who had not travelled abroad, particularly to the source countries of the languages under study on the course. Vanessa had no caring responsibilities “beyond occasional babysitting” for extended family.

As a group, I noted some key absences – such as the lack of any students reporting physical disabilities, or students identifying as gay or lesbian – but also some unexpected presences, such as Tristan’s self-identification as “non-traditional” on the basis of a slightly-delayed transition and an subjectivity constructed around his music, and Emma’s self-selection on the basis of her having had a previous career (as a model), despite being only marginally older than most of her classmates. The unpredictability of the self-selected “sample” brought home to me risks of assuming who perceives themselves to be “non-traditional” in their own study context. Chapter Three engages with this matter.

Chapter Three – Engaging with Others

“Difference” is not a neutral category, but a term that indexes exclusion from entitlements to subjectivity. (Braidotti, 2011:270)

This chapter sets out to answer the research question, “how do students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context receive / perceive their institution’s attempts to engage them?” by examining how these students engage with others. In order to do this, it considers in turn four questions:

3.1 – Who, *according to the literature*, are “non-traditional” students?

3.2 – How do students *in this study* who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context describe themselves and their subjectivities?

3.3 – How do these students describe their imagined communities, and how do they characterise their engagement with their imagined communities?

3.4 – Which relationships do they draw on for support?

Who are “non-traditional” students?

Burke (2012:4) notes that “widening participation has become a significant theme of educational research over past years, contributing to the growing field of higher education studies” – but cites Archer & Leathwood (2003) and Burke & Jackson (2007) as being critical of its “atheoretical” character, and Tight (2003) as claiming that it “lack[s] sophisticated levels of attention to methodological issues”, arguments I found largely consistent with my own observations.

She argues (Burke, 2012:12) that

Widening access and participation is largely concerned with redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education. However, the concept of widening participation is highly contested and there is no one agreed definition.

Universities in the UK have become more diverse following the Dearing Report's call for "widening participation", and internationally massification has been a characteristic of most developed countries for the past five decades. Massification is also becoming increasingly prevalent in developing countries (Beerkens-Soo & Vossensteyn, 2009; Varghese et al., 2014). In Scotland, the HE participation rate increased from below 10% to 50% over 40 years, with the late 1980s contributing the largest increases (Carney & McNeish, 2005:1).

With the expansion of HE provision the demographic profile of students attending university has shifted, with "non-traditional" students now estimated to be in the majority at many HEIs in the US (Choy, 2002) and comprising an increasing proportion in many other places. For example, EUROSTUDENT data (Orr, Wartenbergh-Cras & Scholz, 2015) shows an increase in the proportion of students in Europe aged 30 or over, an increase in the proportion of "delayed transition" students (with a delay of longer than two years between leaving school and entering HE), and an increase in the proportion of students for whom their studies are not their main or sole focus (for example, students who work as well as studying). In Scotland, the increased participation rate has been associated with a changing profile of students, including average age on entry and more variety in entry routes (Reibig & Kemp, 2005:4). However, as Burke (2012:11) notes,

...those benefitting the most from policies to expand HE are those with relative social, economic and cultural advantages.

"Non-traditional" students are, according to Leathwood & O'Connell (2003:597) those who "are the focus of widening participation policy initiatives".

An expansive literature exists detailing how to address the challenges posed by accommodating "non-traditional" students in HE classrooms, and SE – with its links to "student success" – is often conscripted to this end. This increasing heterogeneity has led, as described by Krause (2005:3), to

institutions [being] keen to know how they can engage students from diverse backgrounds and with such diverse needs. Related to this has been a concerted effort to enhance access to and monitor the experience of under-represented and disadvantaged students in higher education.

However, despite increased heterogeneity, there are still clear challenges concerning equity and representativity. Yorke and Thomas (2003:64) observe that “it is a particular challenge for higher education to make inroads into the under-representation of the lower social groups” and according to Thomas & Quinn (2007:1)

... there are still pronounced inequalities in the patterns of access [to tertiary education] by traditionally under-represented groups ... Participation in higher education (HE) especially is associated with privilege and enhanced life opportunities, including improved social standing, employment and earnings, civic participation, cultural engagement, health and life expectancy.

This is particularly acute in Scotland, which, according to NUS Scotland (2012:5) has

...the poorest rate of access to university in the whole of the UK for students from poorer backgrounds. While there has been progress in higher education participation in recent years, this has primarily been as a result of increased numbers in college higher education, where 23.3% of students are from the most deprived communities, compared to just 11.6% in universities. Access figures are even worse for young students (compared to mature students) from these backgrounds, who make up just 8.6% of students at our universities.

Widening participation has both moral and instrumental imperatives. Excluding students who have the potential to succeed who come from traditionally under-represented backgrounds is considered unfair since personal as well as social benefits are associated with participation in HE, including enhanced life opportunities,

increased civic engagement, and providing for the needs of the economy (Thomas & Quinn, 2007:1) Moreover, widening participation has also been positively correlated with increasing excellence. NUS Scotland (2012:36-9) cites four case studies of widening participation programmes at UK HEIs which identified and admitted students who would otherwise not have gained admission, who went on to outperform classmates who had entered from “traditional” routes. If admission is to be truly meritocratic, they argue, entry for these students needs to be facilitated.

Burke (2012:12) argues that

The policy of Widening Participation (WP) has been framed by particular perspectives and assumptions, most powerfully by that of neoliberal globalisation.

She observes that, historically, WP policies have been driven by “human capital” needs (2012:13), the need for more Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) group professionals in the wake of racial tensions (2012:14), and a social justice agenda aimed at redressing social inequalities (2012:14). However, as she argues (2012:35), if the project is to be about *widening* rather than merely *increasing* participation, then the agenda must necessarily be one of social justice, since it

...places focus on those groups who have been traditionally excluded or under (mis)represented in higher education. This must then pay attention to the patterns of social inequality in higher education... Struggles over access to higher education illuminate explicit processes of exclusion and marginalisation – the persistent under-representation of certain groups and communities from a key site of the re/production of privilege and life chances.

Traditionally, HE has been the preserve of students constructed as “male, white, middle class and able bodied... autonomous individual[s] unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self doubt” (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003:599), or understood in the UK HE context (as noted in Trowler, 2015b:299) to be:

native British, mostly white from broadly Christian traditions, fully able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual young people whose

parents attended higher education, directly transitioning from public or 'decent' state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades of Highers or A-levels, and without dependents or family responsibilities, studying full-time, forming a gendered distribution among the disciplines.

By way of contrast, Finnegan, Merrill and Thunborg (2014:3) define non-traditional students as:

students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, students whose family members have not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from minority ethnic groups, students living in what have traditionally been "low participation areas" as well as mature-age students and students with disabilities.

Thomas & Quinn (2007:2-3) argue that specifically targeting groups who are under-represented in HE leads to most effective widening participation initiatives. They acknowledge that differing countries – though I would argue that this can be true at institutional level too - have different widening participation target groups, and that these include:

- Students from lower socio-economic status households
- Minorities: students from alternative country of origin, language, ethnic group or religion to the majority
- Students with disabilities
- Adult, mature or second chance entrants
- Students of a particular gender (especially in relation to specific discipline areas)
- Rural or isolated students
- Indigenous groups
- First generation students

Such a list cannot be considered exhaustive, however; nor should the importance of context be overlooked: in South Africa, for example, even at universities where black

students comprise the majority of the student body and white students the minority, black students can still be said to be “non-traditional” (and, by extension, white students “traditional”) because of structural factors which continue to constrain their full participation, such as: language of instruction, a skewed curriculum, financial issues, a history of structural exclusion and legislated discrimination, habitus mismatch, family obligations, etc.

In addition, a “checklist” approach – although convenient from a bureaucratic perspective – obscures qualitative differences that may exist between categories: is an American student at Oxford University as “non-traditional” as a student from East Jaywick³? Can a student with dyslexia be said to be “non-traditional” in the same way as a student coming to study after retirement? Furthermore, checklists can also mask complexity: many “non-traditional” students present with several “non-traditional” factors, such as being a mature, first generation student from a lower SES background, with caring responsibilities, working part-time (or full-time) alongside their studies. These factors can interplay in complex ways, requiring an intersectional approach⁴.

A failure to adopt a broader, intersectional approach can lead to a simplistic analysis and the pitting of one group against another. An example of this concerns the trend toward the “feminisation” of HE, as characterised by greater numbers of women than men entering university. A simplistic reading would posit this as an assault on equal access for men, as exemplified by former UK Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts MP (Burke, 2012:18) explaining the paucity of working class men in HE as being due to feminism.

As Burke (2012:16) notes,

³ East Jaywick is the most deprived neighbourhood in England, according to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation

⁴ Mc Call (2005:1771) defines intersectionality as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations”

In understanding the history of inequalities in higher education, and struggles for the right to access and participate in HE, it is imperative to examine the complex intersections of gender with race and class.

The construction of “the non-traditional student” is cast in a discourse of deficit: “in ability, in not having a ‘proper’ educational background, or in lacking the appropriate aspirations and attitudes” (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003:599). Devlin (2013:943) also notes how policy discourse constructs some “non-traditional” students (in this case, students from “low socio-economic status” in Australia) as deficient in “will and skill” to succeed, rendering failure to succeed at university an individual rather than a structural issue. Smit (2012:369) observes that

Employing a deficit mindset to frame student difficulties perpetuates stereotypes, alienates students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in perpetuating the barriers to student success. In the process, universities replicate the educational stratification of societies.

This choice to focus attention on individual, rather than structural, factors led me to frame (Trowler, 2015b:297) the construct “non-traditional student” as a *chaotic conception*:

In contrast to fuzzy concepts, whose precise meanings vary according to context and conditions..., chaotic conceptions are abstractions [Vorstellung] that require further disaggregation into simpler and simpler concepts [Begriff], unmasking the ‘rich totality of many determinations and relations’... ‘Chaotic conceptions’ are neither simply sloppy nor accidental; they function actively to carry out real ideological work, disguising interests and inequities. ... The conception ‘non-traditional’ when applied to students encompasses a large variety of characteristics that have little of significance in common, do not form structures, nor do they interact causally in any notable fashion. Rather, they are included by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic they possess in common.

While, as Sayer (1992:139) notes, chaotic conceptions can be used without problem for descriptive purposes, it is when they are used analytically and “explanatory weight” is ascribed to them that assumptions are made regarding common attributes

or behaviours which may not exist, causing problems. As I commented elsewhere (Trowler, 2015b:297),

Thus, material differences between objects that are internally heterogeneous become obscured and assumptions are made that what defines, or distinguishes, the object, will necessarily be causally significant.

The “ghettoization” of “widening participation” is not limited to students who bear the label. Burke (2012:7) notes that WP Practitioners “themselves might be constructed as ‘non-traditional’ and even marginal in academic spaces”, given the “complex power relations... within universities” which position WP activities in its own “special space, outside the main work of academic staff.” This, she notes, has implications for decision-making processes on WP strategies, and for questions of associated authority with regard to transformation. This observation resonates with my own experience. Having worked in an academic environment (in South Africa) where issues of transformation / “widening participation” were of critical importance (for social justice as well as more mundane pragmatic reasons, such as sustainability), I can attest that even there such concerns were deemed marginal, and that the central focus continued to rest on research.

Given the significant changes to student demographics, the persistence of essentialised notions of “the student” invites closer inspection. Leathwood and O’Connell (2003:599) observe that

...the construction of the ‘normal’ student persists, and is reinforced by the classification of others as ‘non-traditional’... In the move from an elite to a mass higher education system, it is these students that represent ‘the masses’: homogenised, pathologised and marked as ‘Other’ compared with existing students who are perceived to be there ‘as of right’, representing the normal against which the others are judged and may be found wanting.

This is reminiscent of other forms of “othering” against which identity is constructed in HE, such as the positioning of academic identity against “non-academic”, as was noted by Game (1994), and likened by Jones (2000:163) to “the delegation of housework to women, or of paperwork to secretaries”, so as to “preserv[e] the boundaries between academics and their others.” The practice of “centring” some at the expense of others, who are relegated to the margins, results in some feeling affirmed and “at home”, while others feel tolerated rather than welcomed, or even unwelcome.

Schlossberg (1989:5-6) comments that

people in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter... The larger the difference between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new roles. The first students of nontraditional age to attend traditional campuses, for example, faced such problems. They had no norms to anticipate their pioneering role.

The students in the study all considered themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts in some way. Some perceived themselves to be “pioneering” through being first-in-family, or from a gender, sexual identity, religious affiliation or nationality different to those who had gone before. Others felt “different” for other reasons, which are explored in the discussion below.

How do students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context describe themselves and their subjectivities?

Locus of Displacement

Each of the students, for reasons of their own, considered themselves “out of place” in their study context. For some, like Gabi, this felt intrinsic, simply an extension of her usual mode: a black child adopted into a Jewish family, she had always stood out

as “different”, and her university studies continued the trend. Her choice of History as a subject of enquiry was informed by her seeking somewhere to fit in, somewhere she could “disappear into the background” and become “unremarkable”. For Tristan, a carefully cultivated sense of *anomie* was essential to constructing an identity positioned as “other”. Kris, too, felt “out of place” within herself, a transgender woman trapped within a body that did not reflect the identity within, while for Yumna, the trajectories of her cultural (as embodied by her parents) expectations and her own developing sense of herself in the world seemed to diverge critically over her choice of studies involving figuration, which was considered “haram” [forbidden].

For some, pre-existing factors became more pronounced in their study contexts. Sian had learned to “work around” her dyslexia at school, but was finding the transition to Law studies difficult, while Karin and Alex found that mental health issues they had learned to manage or suppress in their earlier contexts reasserted themselves and required more attention in the context of their university studies.

Others, experienced more of an external sense of displacement, the loss of a space in which they had felt “at home” and comfortable. For Uche and David, it was the physical and cultural distance they experienced in leaving their home countries to study in Scotland. As David states:

I knew it would be different... I had watched British movies and TV shows, and so I knew I would have to get used to... But, it was also not what I thought. Fish and chips was easy. Even the rain [laughs]. What is harder is... People assume, I'm Asian, so I must be Chinese. They don't ask, it's just “oh you Chinese people are so quiet in class”. And alcohol – people drink a lot, and if you don't there is something wrong, you're not enjoying yourself.

For Brian and Celia, the discomforting came from choosing fields of study in which they stood out by virtue of their gender, or for Mike, through his sexual orientation; for working class students like Vanessa, Blair and Frankie, and for Greg who had been in care, mismatches of habitus and cultural capital contributed to these feelings

of displacement.

However, for some of the students the sense of displacement had been triggered by changes in life circumstances outside of their studies, and the decision to go to university was a part of a shift already underway. For Lindy, her family's relocation to Scotland had delayed her studies, so that she was older, married, and "foreign-ish"; for Emma and Marian, and Steve, changes in career circumstances had led to them seeking to reinvent themselves against the strong pull of habitus; for Courtney and Nina, taking on the care of children or a disabled sibling motivated them and constrained them in pursuing their studies, while for Andy a promise to his dying grandmother led to a reappraisal of life choices.

This internal, external, or mixed locus of displacement contrasts sharply with more traditional "checklist" approaches to diversity in Higher Education discussed earlier in this chapter, where students who are seen to possess characteristics listed as "non-traditional" are labelled thus and expected to possess a deficit of desirable and necessary attributes for persistence and success at university. As illustrated by the students in this study, students consider themselves "non-traditional" or otherwise for a huge range of reasons, which may or may not appear on any list, relating both to intrinsic factors (such as being transgender) and to the specifics of their study context (such as a man who defines himself as heterosexual studying fashion design).

How the students in this study described themselves and their subjectivities

During the first interview students were asked what kind of person their university was likely to be thinking of when they thought of "a student", and how well that description matched themselves. In reflecting on this, they offered a range of markers of difference. **Age** was named by several of the students. Marian noted that "most of the students here are much younger", while Lindy and Tristan who were both only marginally older than their classmates, observed that they were older. Steve, Andy, Nina and Emma also remarked (directly or indirectly) on age differences, with Nina remarking that

when you've already had a career, and you come to study, they look at you like – like, so some people don't make it, and have to come back, like maybe this might be me, I might study and have a career but in ten years time maybe I'm back also, looking for something else to do... Like you're some kind of horrible omen reminding them that their choices might not work out for them, success isn't guaranteed. That growing up can be scary.

Older learners and “mature students” have been identified as being “at risk”, with Carney & McNeish (2005:2) reporting that the non-continuation rate in the UK is more than double that for younger entrants (14.9% to 7.3%), that they had more social, emotional, and psychological problems than younger students (2005:2), and that their **delayed transitions** had left them at a disadvantage academically (2005:4). Alheit (2009:161) remarks that mature students “feel stupid, too old, inflexible, somehow just not belonging.” Carney & McNeish also observe (2005:3) that they are likely to face different challenges, such as having partners and dependents, jobs, and financial commitments. While this was true of many of the older students in this study, these were challenges that some of the younger students in the study were not immune from. Working has become commonplace among many undergraduate students, and younger students can have day-to-day caring, or remote financial, responsibilities to their own children (like Courtney) or extended families (like Uche).

Davies (2001:188) notes that the decision to participate in HE as a mature student carries greater economic risk, since they are more likely to enrol at “new” universities, more likely to earn less on graduation than younger graduates and more likely to find employment in the public sector. Baxter and Britton (2001) identified social risks, in terms of challenges to relationships with family and friends. While the former (the risk identified by Davies) was less of a concern to the older students in this study, a couple of whom had had careers implode during the recession, the latter was more of an issue. For example, Marian commented that

My family think I'm daft, really they do - "what do you want to learn about that for? Read the newspaper if you want to know about politics, or go out on the street and see what their policies are doing to us!" But

they don't understand that it's not the same, living it, reading the papers, and getting to understand that it's not just some git in Westminster having a silly idea but part of something much bigger, much more scarier.

However, as Hampton-Garland (2015:2) observes, older students have amassed capitals throughout their lives, which are often ignored. Archer, Cantwell & Bourke (1999:45) and Carney & McNeish (2005:3) comment on the greater commitment shown by mature students to their studies, and Bamber *et al.* (1997:19) similarly note the determination and motivation of mature students to succeed. These observations are consistent with the views expressed by students in this study, such as Andy's assertion that "I've got to succeed at this. I just can't afford to not."

Class often presents together with other markers of difference. Often students from working-class backgrounds are also **first-in-family**, and class is experienced differently depending on how it is filtered through other factors such as "race", gender and age. Brah & Phoenix (2004:81-2) remind us that

social class makes the biggest difference to educational attainment, followed by 'race' and then by gender – although ...class outcomes are always intertwined with gender and 'race'... Class has an enormous impact on participation in higher education. However, "working class" people do not constitute a unitary homogeneous category...

Lower rates of participation among working-class people were borne out in the observations of some of the students in this study, with Marian noting that "it wasn't really for us, you see", and Blair remembering

At school no one really talked about going on to Uni..It's not that we weren't allowed to think of going on to Uni, or anything like that. Just, no one had.

Students in this study who commented on their class subjectivities either did so in conjunction with other "non-traditional" aspects, such as Marian who identified as older, working-class and first-in-family to enter HE; and Andy, who identified as older, working-class and a "reformed bad boy"; or they identified themselves as

working-class in response to their particular study context. For Blair, it was within the context of a new university which he felt was designed for working-class students and therefore disappointing. For Frankie, it was within the context of structured internships as part of her study programme within a profession where her class stood out. For Vanessa, it lay in a study programme where not having travelled to the countries whose languages she was studying defined her as different.

For some of the students in the study, their relationship to class was ambivalent: Blair describes his class background thus:

I suppose I did grow up in a home that was "working class" [makes scare quotes with finger], or at least, where I grew up, the community had been working class when there had been work.

Class could also be uncomfortable for middle-class students. Tristan, disidentifying even more strongly, observed that

I don't know any of my sixth form classmates who didn't go to Uni. [laughs] I suppose they were a bunch of bland middle class, uncritical lemmings. I didn't want to be like that.

Discussion of dis/identification is picked up in Chapter Seven.

While none of the students in this study reported a physical **disability**, one reported a specific learning disability (dyslexia) and two others reported mental health concerns. Fuller, Bradley & Healey's study reported (2010:457) that the proportion of students self-identifying in 2000/1 as having a disability was almost 5%, although they speculated that the figure might be closer to 10% given a lack of obligation to disclose. They identified dyslexia as the most common declared disability, followed by "unseen impairments" (such as epilepsy, diabetes and asthma), with fewer students with hearing-related disabilities, and still fewer with mobility difficulties, mental health concerns, vision-related disabilities and other, or multiple, disabilities. Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson (2004:640) propose that the increase in the number of students disclosing dyslexia may be due to increased incentives, such as being eligible to buy a computer to help with spelling and grammar checking, through Disabled Student Allowance, and receiving extra time in exams.

Neither of the two students in this study who presented with mental health concerns had disclosed those to the university. Alex admitted that

Nobody knows I'm different...The Uni doesn't know. When you fill out forms asking if you consider yourself disabled, I always say no. It's like... If I say yes, there will be questions. I can't let on, now. I've pretended everything's fine until now. If I let it slip now.... I don't want anyone to find out.

Madriaga *et al.* (2011:902) discuss “disabled students feeling like they do not belong, having low self-esteem and having a reluctance to disclose support needs”, while noting that “disabled students who do not have university support underperform”. Support seems critical: Riddell, Wilson & Tinklin (2002) report that even when students with disabilities enter university with comparable qualifications, *they encounter more barriers* and thus achieve lower final degree classifications, while Richardson (2009:134) found that

provided that they receive appropriate support, students with disabilities are as likely to obtain good degrees as are students with no known disability.

Given that accessing support makes such a difference to success, the reluctance of the students in this study to do so may be cause for concern. In part, this is due to a perception of stigma. Alex worried that

Calling it disability service... do I want to be “that crazy chick” who needs special help, can't I just take my pills and not have everyone staring at this huge label? If you walk in there, into that building, everyone will know.

Likewise, even Sian who had disclosed her dyslexia did not draw on the full range of support to which she was entitled, because of stigma:

you don't want them to think you're not coping, that it was a mistake for them to accept you. You don't want to be the charity case.

Understanding who qualified for support was also an issue. Because of perceptions around resource scarcity, and a perceived hierarchy of need, Karin felt hesitant to seek support:

This [OCD] is a real thing, you get a grant at home, but here, you feel – if I go and ask for help, will they say, “you are not really ill, look at that person in the wheelchair, or that one who is blind”?

Madriaga *et al.* (2011:916) argue that “inclusive” measures such as giving students with disabilities extra time during exams may mark them out as different, serving to exclude them further, and that inclusively providing support for all students, irrespective of disability status, may be more effective.

Issues around **gender and sexuality** were reported in different forms. Kris disclosed being a transgender womxn, transitioning from the gender they were assigned at birth. Kris had struggled with knowing how to self-identify during initial interactions with their university, and as a result had been recorded as male (their legal gender). Issues of mis/identification are discussed further in Chapter Seven.

Celia and Brian each identified as belonging to the non-normative gender for each of their programmes of study. As the sole woman on a computer games technology course, Celia reported regularly having to establish her “geek cred”, in order to be taken seriously by her classmates and her instructors:

It was like a competition, who had maxed out on the most obscure cancelled series over the weekend. Who had been outside the least. Who had eaten the most junk. If you admitted doing anything vaguely healthy, it was like, “well, I suppose you’re on a diet...” or some other putdown.

But whereas Celia experienced pressure to be “one of the guys” and distance herself from female stereotypes, Brian, as a heterosexual male dance student, found himself under pressure to conform to stereotypes of heterosexual masculinity. This is consistent with Fisher’s (2007:46) description of male ballet dancers engaging in a

“making it macho” strategy in order to support their “heteromascularity”, and Haltom & Worthen’s (2014:757) observation of

ballet [as] one of the most highly gender codified sports, [requiring] male ballet dancers [to] negotiate their identities as men while performing a dance form that is highly stigmatized as effeminate.

Interestingly, while both experienced considerable pressure to conform to stereotypes because of their gender, these pressures ran in diametrically opposed directions. Celia felt under pressure to renounce any stereotypes associated with her gender, to conform to the desexualised “geek” image she observed among her classmates and instructors. Brian, by contrast, felt under pressure to conform to stereotypes of machismo, rather than adopting the social and cultural practices of his classmates. He described pressure to project a “jock” identity, stressing the athleticism and physicality of dance, rather than appreciating the aesthetic, artistic aspects.

Mike’s experience, as a man who identified as heterosexual in a discipline stereotyped as female or gay male, reported similar experiences to Brian’s. When meeting new people and identifying himself as a fashion design student, he found his sexuality called into question and his masculinity challenged. As a result, in potentially “threatening” situations, he pretended to be studying something else.

Nationality and ethnicity led to some students feeling different. David, who is Vietnamese, commented on being assumed to be Chinese, and having Chinese stereotypes projected onto him; while Uche struggled with the risks of projecting “Africanness” onto other (unknown) black people he encountered as he wavered between an “African” way of behaving toward others, and a “British” way. Both were extremely concerned about causing offence or being perceived as rude, while noting that many of their classmates and others whom they encountered seemed unaware that their own stereotyping, projection and assumptions might cause offence.

A couple of other students – notably Marian – contrasted their own lack of visible difference with that of “foreign” students, who were “instantly recognisable” as different and for whom allowances particularly around **language** and discourse were then made:

At least if you're foreign, you're not expected to know, especially if you are really foreign like from China where their system is so very different and even their alphabet is different so you wouldn't expect them to know, you're not surprised when they look blankly back because then it's the fault of the lecturer who isn't explaining it well enough.

In a different vein, Lindy declared herself “foreign-ish”, having grown up abroad despite her own British nationality, having a “funny accent”, and confessed that she felt more at home among

foreign students here - international students or whatever - ...in some ways I feel more like them than I do the local students.

However, she recognised that she differed from many international students in that she was not subject to the same vulnerability imposed on Tier 4 Visa students (international students from outside the EU, who are granted permission to study in the EU on “Tier 4” visas).

Stevenson (2014:46) comments on the contradiction between the growing “internationalisation” of UK campuses and the reluctance to recognise fully the full range of cultural expressions inherent in such internationalisation, particularly with regard to **religion**. She notes (2014:51) that

at the same time as policy and practices designed to enhance internationalisation have flourished, religious discrimination, harassment and intolerance has also increased on the higher education campus.

Religion was at the heart of Yumna’s identification as “non-traditional”. She had been raised in an Islamic tradition in which representations of the human form (“figuration”) were considered “haram”, i.e. forbidden. She was registered for a

programme in design, which involved elements of figuration and a module in figure drawing, including drawing the human nude. While her family were broadly supportive (without seeking out details), she felt awkwardly positioned. Dressing modestly marked her out as observant, drawing stereotypes she did not feel comfortable with (and, she felt, drawing disapproval for her course of study), while her more “liberal” friends encouraged her to discard her “oppressive” religion. She felt neither option to be completely authentic.

Gabi, similarly, felt constrained by stereotypes. As the adopted (black) child of Jewish parents, she felt her identity called into question, and her “race” and her religion held in opposition to each other, despite her existence “proving that Jews could be black”. She related that other black students expressed scepticism toward her religion, while Jewish students were suspicious of her colour.

Literature on students self-identifying as “non-traditional” for reasons (among possible others) of religion, seem concerned more with “outward” manifestations of “othering” than with “inward” expressions. For example, Stevenson (2014:56) reported that

Most of the students in [her] study believed that they were ‘othered’ on campus predominantly, though not exclusively, because of their religious identity, through the processes of stereotyping and, what they perceived to be, discrimination.

Yet for both Yumna and Gabi, “othering” by others was only part of the story; they felt “othered” by those they considered “like them”, too – for Yumna, other Muslim students who “judged” her for her choice of studies; for Gabi, other Jewish students who felt uncomfortable about her colour, and other black students who felt uncomfortable about her religion.

Given the intersectional nature of identity, and the complexity of the interplay of different subjectivities, it is unsurprising that students feel “othered” from within as well as without, in environments where their subjectivities are notably different from the dominant subjectivities. Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah (2010:5) comment that

“super-diversity” – which they define as “people not identify[ing] around single identities and feel[ing] conflicted allegiance (if any allegiance at all) to pre-defined groups”- has led to the irrelevance of activism around particular “strands”. While I disagree concerning the need for activism, the findings of this study suggest that this may be true to some extent for the targeting and provision of services, including engagement attempts.

How do they describe their imagined communities, and how do they characterise their engagement with their imagined communities?

Benedict Anderson (1983:5-6) coined the phrase “imagined community” to refer to nations:

*In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is **imagined** because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.*

Unaware of Anderson’s use of the phrase, I began using it to describe the groups, constructed in their individual or collective imaginariums, of which people aspire to membership, to whom they profess allegiance perhaps, and in which they might feel “at home”. These communities may be geographic communities, communities of practice, or communities of interest, comprising a meeting place for like-minded individuals to gather physically, virtually (in the online sense) or “in spirit”. They share aspects of IM Young’s (1986:20) “unoppressive city”, with a high tolerance of heterogeneity, yet lack the aspects of a city that can be experienced as alienating – anonymity, vastness, depersonalisation. In an imagined community, the members *matter*.

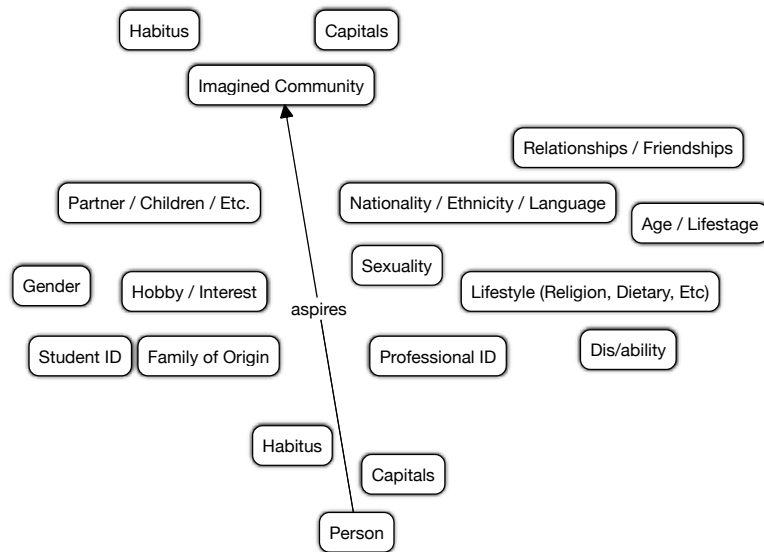


Figure 3.1: Imagined communities

Individuals aspire to membership of their “imagined communities”, and attempt to align their habitus and capitals with those of the “imagined community”. Examples of students from the study and their engagement with their “imagined communities” include the following:

Tristan, in the first interview, defined himself against his classmates from school and his university peers, seeking community among artists and musicians. Although he describes himself as “engaged”, this appears to be limited to compliance with minimum requirements, and occasional chats with his tutor about films.



Figure 3.2: Tristan’s position relative to his “imagined communities” during Interview 1

During the second interview, his perspective shifted, placing more importance on his relationship with his tutor (not wanting to disappoint him, and describing a process of “getting it” and becoming invested in his studies, caring about his studies), and reporting greater distance from the band (following an incident with the drummer). However, he still positions himself as a “prize” that “two women” (his studies and his music) were fighting over, and his description of his engagement appears to be confined to “knowing how to give them what they want” – more akin to being a “strategic learner” than a fully engaged student.

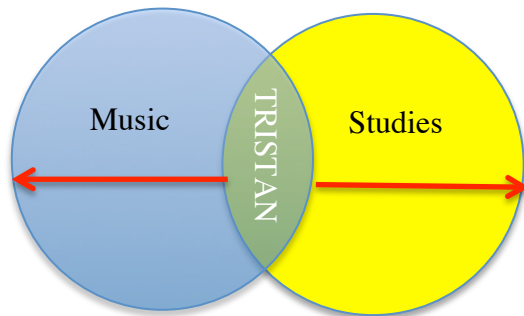


Figure 3.3: Tristan’s position relative to his “imagined communities” during Interview 2

During the third interview, Tristan expressed a greater presence in his study context, expressing regret at disappointing his tutor, and expressing disappointment that his university had “failed” to engage him fully, despite recognizing the efforts of his tutor. He still identified with his music, but it seemed to have shrunk in importance for him, and he no longer spoke of the imminence of his departure from university to pursue music full time.

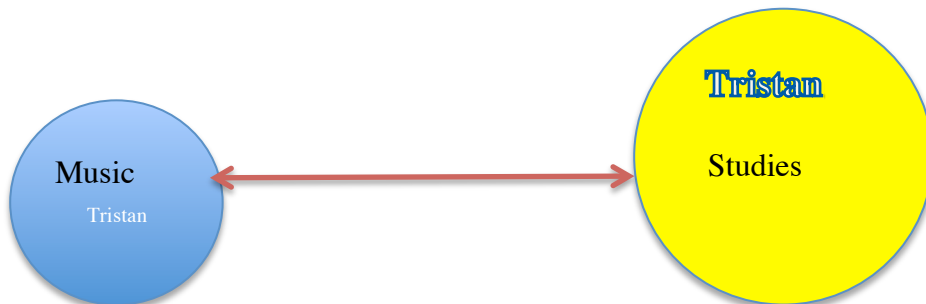


Figure 3.4: Tristan’s position relative to his “imagined communities” during Interview 3

It would appear that, over time, Tristan’s reliance on his “imagined community” of artists and musicians had receded in importance, reflecting on a reduced need to attach his identity to a performance space outside of his studies as he became more engaged in his studies and more established within them.

Marian saw herself as occupying different psychic spaces at home and at university, describing a process of “mode shifting” or compartmentalisation during the first interview.



Figure 3.5: Marian’s position relative to her “imagined communities” during Interview 1

Marian became involved in voter registration and information giving prior to the referendum on Scottish independence, and through this, was able to bring her two “selves” closer together. This manifested during the second interview in an identity that she described as more authentic, that drew on both “modes”. There was also evidence of her engagement shifting. Previously she had engaged on an academic basis only, feeling that keeping up with course requirements as sufficient and that anything beyond that was for those with the luxury of having the resources to pursue such engagement.

She recognised that involvement in the referendum was important to both of her “modes” and so she made the time to become involved through the Student Association and outside of that. She was at pains during the second interview to stress that it was more than just “student engagement” that had gotten her involved.

Marian had also considered standing as class representative, but still saw herself as "not representative" of the students in her class and felt tensions around the visibility of other students "like herself" (“non-traditional”) so did not. Yet she reported

feeling "more daring" in class, with more to contribute, through involvement in the referendum.

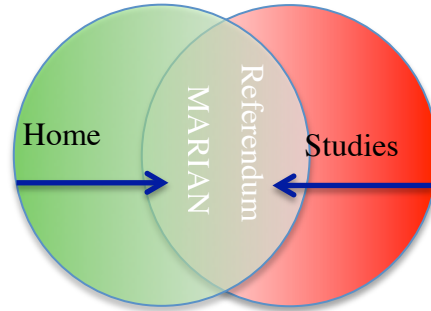


Figure 3.6: Marian’s position relative to her “imagined communities” during Interview 2

In the third interview, Marian reported an even greater congruence between her “home” and “study” selves, with her family now more able to grasp the point of her studies, if not the discourse she occasionally found herself slipping into. She still credited the referendum with bringing the two modes closer together for her, and claimed to feel far more engaged with all aspects of her studies.

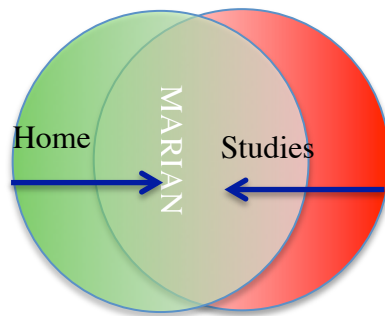


Figure 3.7: Marian’s position relative to her “imagined communities” during Interview 3

Figure 3.8, below, illustrates the relationships between these students and their “imagined communities”. The student, with their habitus and their

capitals, aspires to membership of their “imagined community” with its habitus and capitals. “Identity resources” on the left, in blue, are examples listed of ascribed characteristics, which form their context and help shape their habitus. “Identity resources” on the right, in green, are examples listed of achieved characteristics, which shape their concerns and contribute to the capitals they hold.

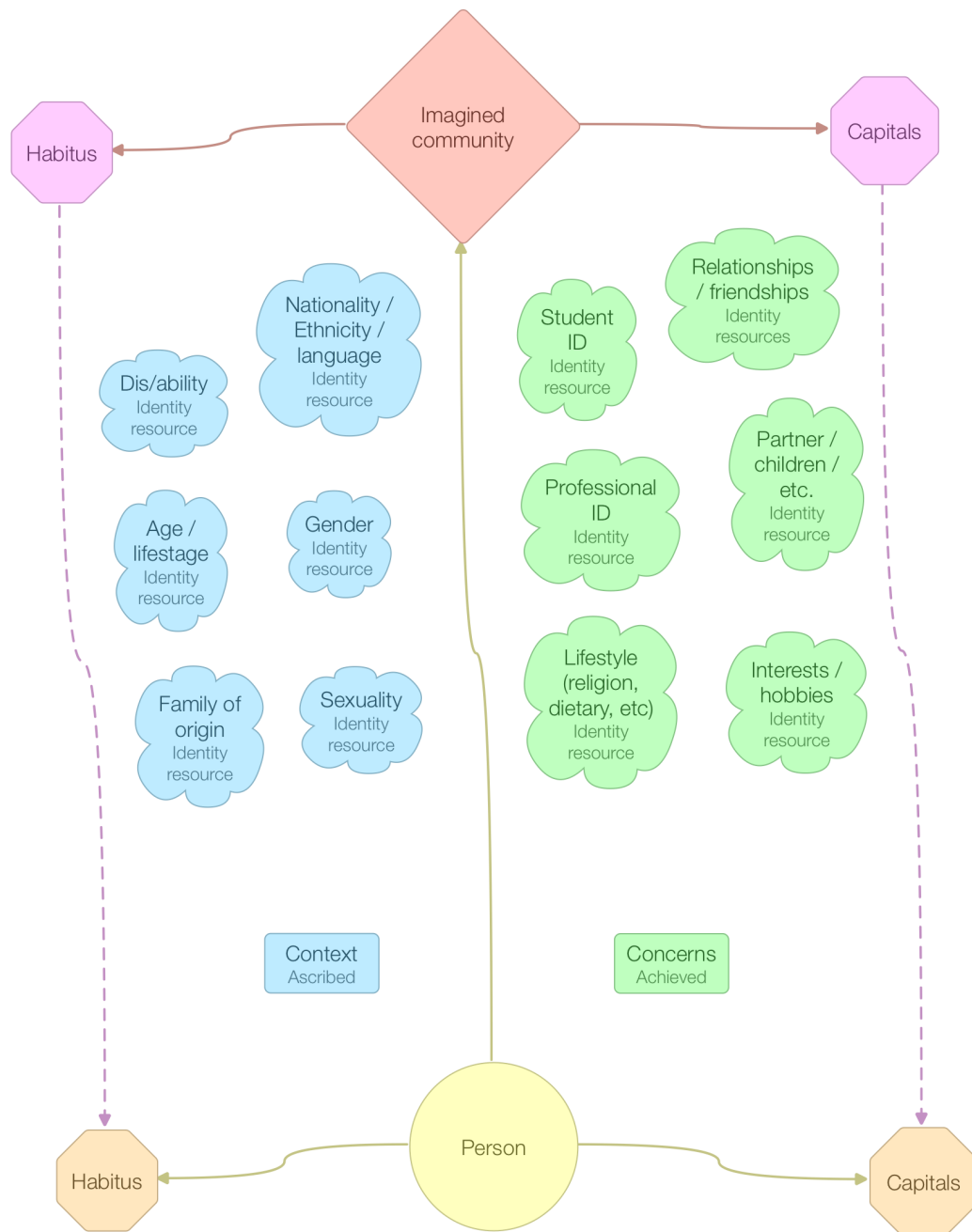


Figure 3.8 Imagined Communities

Which relationships do they draw on for support?

Many identified their **family** (whether family of origin, or a family of their creation) as a source of support, although this was seldom straightforward. For Tristan, as expressed in his first interview, it was a source of expectation and pressure:

... So yeah, my family thinks it's good I'm here, they want me to graduate and maybe even do postgrad but I don't expect to be here that long. I've got nothing against it, I wouldn't mind if nothing was happening with the band but I don't want to take on a whole lot of debt for a degree I'm not going to use, just to keep them happy.

For Marian it provided a source of challenge:

My family think I'm daft, really they do - "what do you want to learn about that for? Read the newspaper if you want to know about politics, or go out on the street and see what their policies are doing to us!" But they don't understand that it's not the same, living it, reading the papers, and getting to understand that it's not just some git in Westminster having a silly idea but part of something much bigger, much more scarier.

Family was a fluid notion for Lindy, whose pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage unsettled former certainties:

I'm seriously nervous, although I haven't really told anyone that. I just act like I'm cool about it all. My husband is quite excited, he thinks we'll be like a proper serious grown-up family, and he's making all kinds of plans about how we're going to do shifts so that we both get to sleep, at least some of the time, and he can get time for writing as well and I can get my sister in to babysit - she'll be doing her Highers but she's happy to come over and she's a lot better with babies than me. She just picks them up and they smile and coo but when I pick them up they scream. Maybe they can tell I don't have the first clue what to do.

For Courtney it was an ideal against which she felt herself inadequate.

Maybe it's a middle class thing, but parents always make it look so easy. The spotless house, the spotless kids, all the accomplishments lined up neatly. Maybe they're secretly knocking back the Valium, I don't know,

but I just can't do that! Most days I'm happy if we're all alive by the end of the day, fed and sort of clean and almost ready for tomorrow. I'll never have the kind of composure they manage – I'm always thinking, is there carrot in my hair?

For Steve, family served as a motivator:

I like to think that if I can do this, get the degree, I'll have something, I can earn my family back. I won't just be the loser that lost his job, lost their home, lost them... It won't have been all in vain, maybe they can be proud of me in some way.

and a stick to beat himself with:

You do. You blame yourself. Yes, the economy crashed. But some people kept their jobs. Why wasn't it me? Why couldn't I be one of those? And so, of course, you take it personally. And then your family starts to believe you deserved it, too.

For Uche, Frankie, David, Andy and Vanessa, family provided pride and pressure, as

Uche notes:

When they [extended family] choose you to be here, it is not just for yourself. It is for them, too. It is like a small boat and a wide river. They send you across, and you have to go alone. But you are also carrying them across the river. You cross the river, but you are carrying them all with you.

However, for Kris and Mike, family was something best not spoken about because of a complex array of issues around being “good enough”. Kris admitted

I don't think of them. I can't... I came here to get away from that. I don't need to hear them telling me. I need to forget about it and just show myself that I can be good enough, that who I am is also OK.

And for Blair and Greg, family was something to be overcome. Greg disclosed that:

I didn't have that start, sure, but you just have to get over it. It's like walking in after the others have already started. You just have to be quicker to catch them up.

Whatever their backgrounds, and whatever their feelings about their family, all of the students interviewed considered their family backgrounds to have provided them with resources which proved valuable in their studies, disputing notions of “deficit” inherent in constructions around non-traditionality.

Friends were often presented as “the family you choose”, and Tristan and Celia in particular drew upon friends as their primary source of support. Celia remarked that:

They're the ones who know you best, your friends, so it's natural that they'd be the ones who... Well, sometimes it's kinda... I didn't used to think about it, not fitting in, but sometimes it matters, like when everyone else wants to go and get ratted and you'd rather binge out on a full season or two of your favourite series. Having a chat window open, even if your friends are miles away you can still hang out together, you can still have a good time with them.

Andy saw his friends in a different light:

They're like I was, before... It's not like, like I don't wanna see them, but there's not that much in common anymore, and it gets a bit awkward... But yeah, it helps, seeing them. It reminds me that I was there, I was like that, and even if I struggle at this, I'm not like that anymore and my Nan can be proud.

Courtney found herself making new friends, later in the year:

Remember how I was like, my friends just don't get me anymore? I don't even think of those kids as my friends anymore. They are so – history! Meeting these other parents has just been, wow, like winning the prize! Even if we can't hang out the way I used to with my other friends before – well, we do sometimes hang out, with our kids, but they're all different ages so it's not that easy, but it's just great to have people you can text and have a quick coffee with or just, you know, if you're late to a

meeting, they'll cover for you because they know what you're up against. I never expected this but it's been such a bonus!

Tristan found himself less enamoured with some of the friends he'd previously regarded as "family":

This girl I'd had a kind of thing with... she dumped me and then she took up with the drummer, but she was always trying to get back with me and she came to a couple of the gigs and I got wasted one night and gave in to her and he found us and broke my guitar and so we had to cancel the next gig because of needing a new guitar. And a new drummer.

Blair was another whose valuing of friends shifted over the course of the year. In the first interview he mentioned that:

...we didn't really keep in touch when I decided to come here. I don't really have contact with anyone from back home besides my own family.

He was equally dismissive of his fellow students:

You can tell some of them are only here to find partners! They're not interested in studying and they shouldn't be here.

By the second interview, he was speaking more positively about the classmates he was sharing accommodation with:

When you're older... like my roommate [name]. He's pretty serious about making a go of it. He saved up for ages to be able to do this, and he's not going to waste it. I can respect that.

During the third interview, after a visit back home, he recounted:

...understand[ing] where they're coming from. I don't think we'll ever be close, but the paths they chose are probably as valid as the path I've chosen. They still have to live there. I can come back here and shut the door and open my books. They've got each others' backs, and that's not a bad thing.

Stopping just short of admitting that he envied their closeness with each other, Blair mentioned wistfully the “comfortable certainties” that still shaped their lives, while his had increasingly become prone to questioning. The role of others seemed to have shifted from providing a backdrop against which to play out his vocation, to becoming actors in their own right, with some gaining his grudging respect.

Friends served both as an affirmation for those needing support during transition, and as a foil for those trying out new ways of being. In this respect, the “unchanging” nature of friends as presented by the students interviewed was seen as both a positive attribute – a source of constancy in a changing world – and as a benchmark against which to measure one’s own growth. Where friends’ own changes were noted, these were typically dismissed as being negative shifts. Yumna remarked that:

They feel they have to throw away completely who they are, and become just like [the other students]. As if you can’t still be yourself, be a bit different, even if you’re not as observant as you used to be.

Karin mourned the loss of a close friend who had recently become involved in a relationship:

You’d think no one ever fell in love before! It’s all about [name], [name], [name]. She used to spend hours here every day, and now she hardly ever visits, and when she does, it’s all she can talk about. So instead, I clean. Or I write. I tried to work but I just can’t seem to settle. I bother less with friends now. They change, and you’re left with... frustration.

Alex also found the vagaries of friendship testing:

She just started ignoring me in class. She’d wait for me to sit down, then go and sit somewhere else. I’d save a seat for her but she went to sit with other kids. I’d just look at my phone because I didn’t want them to see me looking at them. I started going later to class and then I stopped going. It just felt... I felt... [shrug] I wasn’t going where I wasn’t wanted.

Tinto (1993) and Thomas (2012) stress the importance of both academic and social integration to improve student persistence and success. Friendships can clearly contribute to social interaction, although – as illustrated by earlier quotes from Tristan – they can also act against social integration where they exist outside of the “student sphere”, providing a pull in a different direction.

Friendships wax and wane over time, as illustrated by some of the quotes above, and inasmuch as a strong friendship can act as a source of support (and a possible aid to social integration), a failing friendship can also act as a source of stress. For students like Karin and Alex, who identified as having mental health concerns, this was particularly difficult, and affected their ability to engage with their studies.

Cree, Christie and Tett’s (forthcoming) longitudinal study of “unusual” students, who had been accepted into university with “non-traditional” qualifications as part of a widening participation initiative, demonstrates the importance of relationships. These, they argue, are “central to students’ well-being and success at university”. They cite relationships with tutors and other staff, and with peers, as fundamental to students developing a sense of “being held”, or to use Schlossberg’s term, “mattering”. Data from my own study appear to support that assertion.

Next, we will turn our attention to other relationships that matter at university – students’ engagement with their studies (Chapter 4), and with their universities and other structures (Chapter 5).

Chapter Four – Engaging with their Studies

Students are likely to be “agentic”, that is they seek to exert some influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. (Klemenčič, 2015:11)

This chapter sets out to answer the research question, “how do students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context receive / perceive their institution’s attempts to engage them?” by examining how these students report on their engagement with their studies. In order to do this, it considers in turn four questions:

4.1 – What, according to the literature, is student engagement?

4.2 – What do the study data tell us about how students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context receive and perceive their institution’s attempts to engage them in their course, and how they characterise their engagement with their studies?

4.3 – How do these students construct their engagement with space?

4.4 – How do they construct their engagement in, and with, time?

What is Student Engagement?

The provenance of the Student Engagement construct has been reported in Chapter One. For this study, I chose to use the definition cited earlier (Trowler, 2010:3) since it conveys a sense of mutual responsibility by positioning SE as

...the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution.

My 2010 survey found that engagement literature tends to focus on three themes, viz. individual student learning (including student retention and success), systems and

processes (including student representation), and identity issues (including widening participation issues) (Trowler, 2010:12).

Student engagement has been recognised by many to have social justice benefits. For example, Kuh (2009b:689) argues that:

...engaging in educationally purposeful activities helps to level the playing field, especially for students from low-income family backgrounds and others who have been historically underserved

...and (Kuh, 2009b:685)

...engagement has compensatory effects on grades and persistence for students who most need a boost to performance because they are not adequately prepared academically when they start college.

This is supported by Harper & Quaye's (2009:3) assertion that:

... a large volume of empirical evidence... confirms that strategizing ways to increase the engagement of various student populations, especially those for whom engagement is known to be problematic, is a worthwhile endeavour. The gains and outcomes are too robust to leave to chance, and social justice is unlikely to ensue if some students come to enjoy the beneficial byproducts of engagement but others do not.

Thus, if a university or a higher education system embraces values of inclusion rather than elitism, it may be said to have a duty to engage "historically underserved" or otherwise marginalised students. To this end, Riddell *et al.* (2013b:1) assert that "[o]ne of the fundamental principles underpinning the Scottish education system is the meritocratic idea that, irrespective of social background, all children should have an equal opportunity to develop their academic potential". Krause (2005:10), however, highlights that some subgroups of students perceive their engagement with the university negatively:

Regardless of the explanations for these findings, they nevertheless point to the need to challenge old paradigms which depict engagement solely in positive terms. The international subgroup is a case in point. As a group, international students score high on the usual measures of engagement. They spend more time on campus and in class than their domestic peers. They engage in online study far more than domestic students and devote relatively little time to paid employment. Nevertheless, they are having difficulty engaging with study and learning and are feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do. The finding points to the need for multiple indicators of engagement and a theorizing of the concept which allows for multiple perspectives. To understand engagement is to understand that for some it is a battle when they encounter teaching practices which are foreign to them, procedures which are difficult to understand, and a 'language' which is alien. Some students actively engage with the battle and lose – what do we do for them?

Gourlay (2015:402-3) cites the ubiquity of the term in HE discourse on research and policy, in and beyond the UK, in recent times, and posits that its symbolic significance illuminates the envisaged future of HE. Previously (Trowler, 2010:2) I suggested that SE was seen as a “magic wand” to solve all that ails HE during “increasingly straitened economic conditions”, and Zepke (2015:2) claims that the widespread acceptance of SE may have resulted in it becoming “an uncritically accepted academic orthodoxy”.

Yet, as I (Trowler, 2010), Kahn (2013), Gourlay (2015) and others note, the construct has historically been “weakly theorised”, poorly defined (Kahu, 2013), and/or nebulously focused (Ashwin & McVitty, 2014), leading to it becoming a “fuzzword” (Vuori, 2014), deployed uncritically (Zepke, 2014a) or “chaotically” (Trowler, 2015b), allowing it to be used to “comfortably serve the purposes of various stakeholders across learning and teaching, institutional management and national policy contexts” (Ashwin & McVitty, 2014). However, as I have observed elsewhere (Trowler, under review), the focus in more recent studies – including the examples cited here - has shifted from normative, atheoretical literature to a more critical examination of the construct itself, its deployment and the factors underlying its popularity (Trowler, 2010; 2015b; 2015c; under review; Trowler, 2015a; Kahn,

2013; Kahu, 2013; Ashwin & McVitty, 2014; Vuori, 2014; Zepke, 2014b; Zepke, 2014a; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2014; Zepke, 2015; Gourlay, 2015)

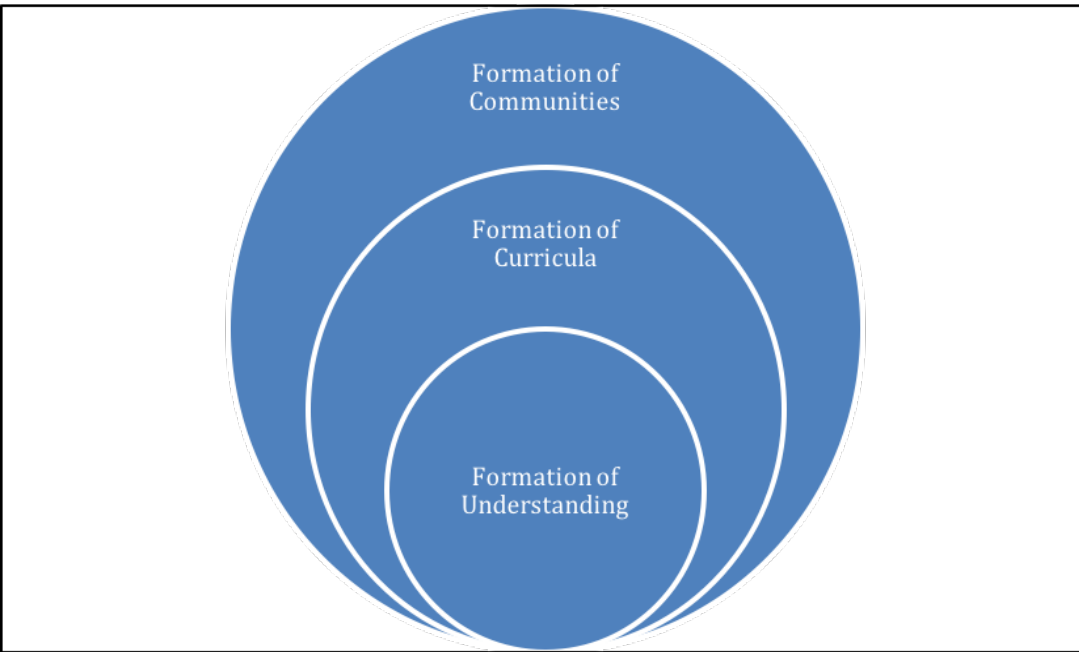


Figure 4.1: Nested hierarchy of the objects of student engagement, from Ashwin & McVitty (2014)

Ashwin & McVitty (2014) place “engagement with professional or disciplinary knowledge” as a *sine qua non* for SE, stating that “for student participation in higher education to be considered ‘engagement’ under [their] framework, they need to be engaging with disciplinary or professional knowledge”. They organise SE into an hierarchical nesting (see figure 4.1), in contrast to Trowler’s (2010) identification of three foci, and Bergan’s (2015:366) three respects, although the “objects” / foci / respects map onto each other to a great degree. This is illustrated in Table 4.1, below.

| Trowler’s “foci” (2010) | Ashwin & McVitty’s “objects” (2014) | Bergan’s “respects” (2015) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Individual student learning (ISL) | Engagement with professional or disciplinary knowledge to form understanding | Participation in the learning process |
| Structure & Process (S&P) | Engagement to form curricula | Participation in HE governance |
| Identity issues (ID) | Engagement to form communities | Participation in the life of their HEI and the life of their community and society |

Table 4.1: Comparison of models: Trowler (2010), Ashwin & McVitty (2014), Bergan (2015)

By positing *all* SE as arising at source from an engagement (whether congruent or oppositional is not stated) with this particular kind of knowledge, Ashwin and McVitty (2014:3) appear to be endorsing some forms of SE as valid, while negating those which do not have an engagement with disciplinary or professional knowledge at source. As Ashwin states elsewhere (Ashwin, Abbas & McLean, 2014:123)

It should be noted that this positions student engagement as a knowledge-centred activity because students’ engagement in the formation of communities and curricula is predicated on their engagement in the development of understanding. Thus for student participation in higher education to be considered ‘engagement’ under this framework, they need to be engaging with disciplinary or professional knowledge. This is deliberate and based on the view that “it is the critical relationships that students develop with knowledge that makes a university degree a higher form of education.”

Perhaps because of the “fuzziness” and lack of agreement concerning the deployment of the construct, it has in turn given rise to the concept of Student Partnership, or “students as partners”. This has led several authors

to propose “levels” of engagement, including the following examples set out in Table 4.2, below:

| | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Healey <i>et al.</i> (2014) | Klemenčič (2012) | Ashwin & McVitty (2014) |
| | Access to information | |
| Consultation | Consultation & dialogue | Consultation |
| Involvement | | |
| Participation | | |
| Partnership | Partnership | Partnership |
| | | Leadership |

Table 4.2: Levels of Engagement, from the Literature.

For many, Student Partnership, or “students as partners”, (HEA, 2014; NUS, 2012; TSEP, 2015) has been cast as the Holy Grail of SE. However, as a construct it has been subjected to cautions and qualifiers (Trowler, 2015c:201-3; Bovill *et al.*, 2016). These are based on recognition of the realities of where power lies in relationships between students and their institutions, as well as concerns regarding co-option, role conflict, and the potential for loss of legitimacy. Positioning students as “partners” can also serve to erode the space for student protest and other forms of “oppositional engagement” (see discussion below). Ashwin & McVitty (2014:4), by way of contrast, position Student Partnership as a waypoint, preferring “leadership” as the culmination, which they describe thus:

In leadership, the emphasis is on the ways in which students can create new objects through their engagement. In this level of engagement students set their own terms for what engagement entails and for the outcomes of engagement.

I offer an alternative model for considering levels of engagement, based on SE initiatives I have observed currently at the time of writing, in Table 4.3 below. It is perhaps worth noting that these example initiatives can be the result of staff initiatives, student initiatives, or joint initiatives, unlike the models offered above

which assume staff (or “the University”) to be the initiator (with the exception of Ashwin & McVitty’s final level).

| | Example | Benefit | Risk |
|-----------------------|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| Student Participation | Invite students onto committees | Easiest to put into effect | Seen as “Tokenism” |
| Co-Production | Research project; curriculum review | Defined projects, clear roles | Seen as “Elite” |
| Student Partnership | Governance issues e.g. determining fee levels | Signals that student input is clearly valued | “Co-option”, threat to legitimacy |
| Transformation | “Decolonisation” | Addresses issues of power | Interests may be in conflict |

Table 4.3: Proposed Levels of Engagement, with examples.

For each of these proposed levels, there are clearly benefits and risks. Rather than adopting a normative position and assuming that the level with the highest amount of student engagement – “Transformation” in this model – is the most desirable, I would propose that the context, constraints and possibilities are considered and the most appropriate level *for that particular initiative* is located.

Writing about the compulsory education sector, Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004) have described Student Engagement as a “metaconstruct”, possessing affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions. I proposed (Trowler, 2010) that each of those dimensions had a congruent and an oppositional expression, in addition to “non-engagement”. Oppositional (formerly “negative”) engagement was coined to describe those activities previously considered outside of the ambit of SE, or even contradictory to SE, which evidenced students engaging with their subject material, courses, institutions or the HE system or context more generally but with values which conflicted with the prevailing interests. Much publicised examples of oppositional engagement in recent times include the UK student fees protests, the

Chilean student protests, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in South Africa, student-led protests in Hong Kong, and student engagement in protests against benefit and service cutbacks in many European states. However, oppositional engagement is not limited to newsworthy acts of public defiance.

There has historically been a lack of recognition of oppositional forms of SE, both in the literature and in the study contexts of individual students. It has often been characterised as “alienation”, “protest” or “non-engagement”, and subject to sanction, because of the constraints of structures and systems which, almost by definition, struggle to accommodate oppositional forms within the parameters of curriculum, timetabling, and due process. Yet criticality is “what makes HE ‘higher’”, and what teaching staff anecdotally claim to value most in students (rather than “visible participation”, as asserted by Gourlay, 2015).

Based on analysis of data from this study, I reflected critically on the Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris model and concluded that the HE domain differed significantly from the compulsory education domain, and that this required a revision of the model to better reflect the realities of the HE sector. As a result, I identified (Trowler, under review) three additional dimensions, which I have provisionally labelled critical, political and socio-cultural. These can be understood as follows:

- * critical - how the student relates to the authority (of knowledge; of structures, systems and processes; of identity) and the extent to which this is accepted at face value, interrogated or rejected;
- * political - the extent to which the student assumes agency or consumes passively (relating to production/consumption of knowledge; participating in, challenging, or receiving structures, systems and processes; adapting identity, adopting identity or reshaping identity);
- * sociocultural - the student's relationship to the networks of practices embodied in academia, and their own academic context (in the domain of knowledge; relating to structures, systems and processes; concerning

identity). Essentially, this dimension considers how a student relates to “appropriate” convention: whether they observe, ignore, or challenge academic or disciplinary conventions. Observing conventions would serve as a form of “legitimate peripheral participation”, inducting them into a community of scholars. Ignoring conventions would position them outside of such a community. Challenging the conventions would seek to review the values of the community, to question its legitimacy or to redefine its boundaries.

The revised model, together with examples, is illustrated in Table 4.4 below. It is important to note that engagement is not only fluid and changing over time, but also complex and nuanced even at a particular time, with engagement along any of these dimensions involving multiple simultaneous (even contradictory) positions for different (aspects of) objects of engagement. For example, a student could be bored by Romantic Poetry but engaged by his/her tutor’s teaching of a particular Romantic poem, even while rejecting the construction of the curriculum that includes Romantic Poetry.

| | Congruent Engagement | Non-Engagement | Oppositional Engagement |
|-------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Affective | Interest | Boredom | Rejection |
| Behavioural | Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm | Skips lectures without excuse | Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures |
| Cognitive | Meets or exceeds assignment requirements | Assignments late, rushed or absent | Redefines parameters for assignments |
| Critical | Holds own views in dynamic tension with | Reproduction | Engages from a contradictory |

| | Congruent Engagement | Non-Engagement | Oppositional Engagement |
|----------------|---|-------------------------------|--|
| | “received” views | | paradigm |
| Political | Assumes agency toward construction of knowledge | Passive consumer of knowledge | Challenges assumptions about what constitutes “knowledge” ⁵ |
| Socio-cultural | Observes protocols of referencing and citation | Plagiarises | “Steals”, “borrows”, or “samples”, in the hip hop tradition because “knowledge wants to be free” |

Table 4.4 Examples of different forms of student engagement, from Trowler (2015)

While research has typically focused on the behavioural (see Zepke, 2015), cognitive (Ashwin, Abbas & McLean, 2014) or affective (Kahu, 2013) dimensions, it has seldom considered the intersections of these, and in particular, where students engage congruently along one or more of these dimensions and oppositionally, or not at all, along others. The deployment of the construct by policymakers and others similarly positions SE as something students do, or don’t do, in the contexts and to the ends they deem valid, rather than representing the nuances of how - and to what extent - students are engaging variously with different objects and along the different dimensions, within a particular context.

Student Engagement has, as a construct, followed different trajectories in different regions, and this is reflected in the literature. I identified (Trowler, 2010:2)

⁵ Context matters: this may be regarded as congruent, within the Philosophy of Knowledge. Thanks to Charles Anderson for reminding me of this!

differences between the North American / Australasian trajectory, and the UK trajectory, of development of the construct. The North American / Australasian trajectory has been heavily influenced by the use of large scale surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and AUSSE, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, and has focused on individual student learning. As a result, it has tended toward positivist, quantitative studies rigorously validated. In contrast, the UK trajectory has built on early studies of SE focused on student representation, and later contributions concerning small, single case studies, often appearing as conference presentations and often focused on the use of a teaching tool or technique.

Within Europe, more broadly, the focus of SE has historically been on student representation and student governance (see Klemenčič, Bergan & Primožič, 2015), while elsewhere (China, Ireland, South Africa) locally adapted forms of NSSE / AUSSE have been piloted and deployed, in the service of locally identified priorities (such as social justice, in South Africa). More recently, in the UK, UKES (UK Engagement Survey) has been piloted and deployed alongside the National Student Survey (NSS) (see Buckley, 2014). Zepke (2014b) has depicted these different trajectories as conforming (US-based constructions of SE as a measure of the efficiency with which HEIs generate student “success”), reforming (UK-based constructions of SE as a means to elicit student belonging and “success” in HE and employment, and to hold HEIs to account for quality) and reframing (an as yet unspecified location, whose future trajectory is characterised by democracy and criticality, focused on social justice).

How policy is framed, and how it is received, domesticated and enacted, are shaped by ideology. Zepke (2014a; 2014b; 2015), following McMahon & Portelli (2012), argues that student engagement has an “elective affinity” to neoliberalism, and that this accounts for the current popularity of the construct. Others, such as Bryson & Hand (2007) argue that SE is inherently progressive as it positions students as “co-creators” of curriculum rather than as consumers of teaching.

| Ideological Perspective | Educational Ideology in relation to teaching | Role of students | Implications for engagement |
|--------------------------|---|--|--|
| Traditionalism | Teaching is about transmitting information, induction into the discipline. Information transfer/ teacher-focused approach | Learning through absorbing information provided to them. | Students need to be interested in the content. Students participate through attending lectures and complying with behavioural norms. |
| Progressivism | Teaching is about developing students' minds so they can better appreciate the world, about making them autonomous. Conceptual change/ student-focused approach | Learning through co-construction of knowledge | Students need to be engaged in, and with, learning – both in and out of the classroom. |
| Social Reconstructionism | Teaching is about empowering students to see the inequities and structured nature of advantage and disadvantage in the world, and to change it. | Learning through questioning, challenging and 'speaking truth to power', and effecting change. | Students need to be engaged with the world beyond the classroom, challenging and changing structural inequity. |
| Enterprise | Teaching is about giving students the skills to thrive in their careers and to contribute to the economy. | Learning through application of knowledge across disciplinary boundaries to real-life practical problems | Students need to be engaged in work-based/ vocational learning |

Table 4.5: Conceptions of teaching as ideological and implications for engagement (Trowler 2010:41)

By contrast, I had previously (Trowler, 2010:41) considered the ways in which different ideologies, as they manifested in thinking about education, might shape the context for different expressions of student engagement. An “enterprise” educational ideology (underpinned by neo-liberalism) could give rise to an instrumentally / vocationally focused expression, while a “social reconstructionist” educational ideology (underpinned by a social justice orientation) could inspire an expression of SE which focused on engagement beyond the classroom, into the world, striving to challenge and change structural inequity. These are illustrated in Table 4.5.

Revisiting this terrain more recently, informed by exposure to SE initiatives I have observed and developments in my conceptual understanding of SE generated during this study, I have revised this schema. Drawing on the levels, or “expressions” of SE

I set out earlier in Table 4.3, I have mapped out how ideological perspective might manifest in SE in Table 4.6, below.

This line of thinking suggests that SE itself has no inherent ideological affinity, but draws up on ideological context to shape its expression.

| Ideological perspective | Role of T&L in HE | Expression of SE |
|--------------------------|---|------------------|
| Traditionalism | Transmitting information, induction into the discipline | Participation |
| Progressivism | Developing students, students becoming autonomous. | Co-creation |
| Social reconstructionism | Empowering students to see inequities and to change the world | Transformation |
| Enterprise | Developing knowledge and skills for employment and for the economy. | Partnership |

Table 4.6: mapping of level or expression of SE onto Ideological Perspective

Gourlay (2015:403) takes a different position – arguing that SE is itself an ideology, since it encapsulates values (explicit and implicit), subject positions and practices, grounded in the “reification of the notion of ‘participation’”. She argues that “active, public and observable forms of participation” are privileged, while “passive” behaviours are decried – a view echoed by Macfarlane (2015:339). I would argue that this is a selective reading, focusing only on the behavioural dimension (while ironically denouncing SE’s ideological fixation with the behavioural, rather than cognitive, dimension of learning).

Reducing the “expectation” that students engage beyond the confines of the classroom to “extra-curricular activities”, Gourlay (2015:404) creates a false dichotomy between a “retrograde” focus on academic content (which can be

caricatured as “the nerd”), and a “legitimate and desirable” subject position (“the jock”). While US authors (notably Kuh, 1993; 1994; 1995; Kuh & Lund, 1994; Kuh, Palmer & Kish, 2003) stress the importance of “extra-curricular activities” as part of the SE package, these can include “participating in a learning community”, reading outside of the classroom, or communicating with teaching staff outside of class, alongside the more physical or sporty options. The “reflexivity” argued for by Gourlay (2015:405; citing Kahn, 2013), rather than being at odds with SE, resonates very comfortably with several of its less visible dimensions. Interestingly, the “privileging” of the active, and extra-curricular, decried by Gourlay, is viewed by Zepke as a deficit – he argues (2015:6) that rather than focusing too much on what happens outside of the classroom, SE fails by not focusing on that enough.

My own view, informed by the data from this study, tends more toward Zepke’s position: what happens outside of the classroom informs what happens within it. While I would not adopt the position caricatured by Gourlay - that students are not fully engaged unless they are also engaged in “extra-curricular activities” at the university – I would caution against drawing a boundary around what happens inside the classroom and limiting considerations of SE to that. The data from this study have shown that students’ engagement in terrains beyond the classroom can shape the extent, the form and expression of engagement inside the classroom, and vice versa (see, in particular, discussion of Courtney and Marian’s engagement). I would thus argue for an holistic consideration of SE.

In a similar vein to Gourlay, Kate Thomas (2014) takes issue with Liz Thomas (2012) for her uncritical acceptance of students’ participation in “learning communities” as a *sine qua non* to their developing a sense of “belonging” (as part of the student engagement project) as a critical success factor toward their retention and ultimate success (measured by graduation). Kate Thomas argues that for “non-traditional” students, the capacity to engage in many of these activities is constrained by their circumstances, and they are thus structurally excluded from engagement in this way. However, as many examples of student protest indicate, sometimes assumptions about

the constraints facing “non-traditional” students and their capacity to engage are mistaken - these constraints can be challenged when the need to do so is compelling (as illustrated by #FeesMustFall protesters in South Africa).

What I find more usefully highlighted by the arguments of Gourlay (2015) and Macfarlane (2015) than questions of “which students are more (constructively) engaged”, is concerns about the climate of performativity in which student engagement plays out. As noted by Zepke (2014b), much of the UK literature on SE has developed in a climate of accountability where HEIs are increasingly under pressure to justify their use of public money, to be seen to be efficient in their teaching (and other activities) and effective at “producing” students who are employable. Given the robust evidence correlating SE with student success (Kuh et al., 2008:555; Coates, 2005:26; Graham et al., 2007:233-234; Pascarella, Seifert & Blaich, 2010:20), SE is seen as a means of optimising student “throughput” and student “success”, increasing the performance of the HEI. While indicators of engagement do not yet drive UK rankings in the way that student satisfaction (as measured by the NSS) does, this has already happened in the US, where “highly engaging universities” market themselves thus (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009:13), and where “engagement” is seen as an indicator of “quality” (Kuh, 2009b:685; Pascarella, Seifert & Blaich, 2010:21).

Similarly, for individual students, SE can be used strategically. While it may not yet be as true in the UK as it is in the US that “what students bring to HE, and where they study, matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student” (Kuh, 2003:28), students are increasingly under pressure to differentiate themselves from their peers. With concern about “grade inflation”, grades alone are no longer seen to distinguish sufficiently among students, and so employers, graduate schools and others increasingly consider HEARs (Higher Education Achievement Reports), Personal Development Plans, Progress Files and other indicators of engagement. Likewise, in an increasingly competitive job “market”, the “warrant” provided by graduating from a university that offered such

opportunities can be seen as a benefit. For students with an instrumental view of their higher education, this can be significant.

This is not dissimilar to the climate in which individual staff – both academic and “blended professionals” – are assessed, and remunerated, according to the individual value they add through their performance. Many staff have forged a career on the back of the SE trend – in practice-oriented roles deploying student engagement strategies and policies, or in development roles researching how best to engage students, or in academic or research roles researching the construct itself. For such staff, the reification of SE is a godsend, and as such they are deeply invested in keeping the construct “alive” not only because of potential benefits to students and their institutions, but also because of personal career interests. (This has, indirectly, benefited the academic publishing industry too.)

Relatedly, an entire industry has been spawned, albeit presently more focused on the compulsory education sector. Consultancies offer personalised solutions to counter the moral panic spawned by claims that students are “academically adrift” (Arum & Roksa, 2010). Companies manufacture and market “clickers” (also known as “classroom response systems”) to foster greater engagement during lectures, and numerous technological solutions for facilitating and monitoring engagement within online and distance learning contexts are on offer. In the Australasian HE context, the measurement of SE through the deployment of AUSSE has been outsourced to a private company (unlike other countries where it is conducted through statutory bodies or agencies within the HE sector).

Given the myriad meanings ascribed to the term, the alacrity with which the construct has been adopted - and monetised - and the numerous (often conflicting) interests represented, it is useful to view it through the lens of “chaotic conception” (See Chapter Three for an exposition of this term.). I have observed elsewhere (Trowler, 2015b:296-297) that

How the term is understood has implications for the attribution of responsibility and accountability, the formulation, implementation and

monitoring of policy, the allocation of resources and the definition and evaluation of success. Thus, these contestations are seldom trivial but, rather, indicative of interests and ideologies. As an illustration, a relatively benign example can be found at Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2012), in which student engagement is reduced to ‘representation’, with the subtext that, in order to have a good student experience, students need to volunteer to assist the Quality Assurance Agency in carrying out quality assurance work within their universities.

Given that SE “is widely viewed as the ‘silver bullet’ solution to fix all that ails higher education” (Trowler, 2015b:296), it is unsurprising that it has been deployed in policy at various levels, including the classroom, institutional and national level. Chapter Five, in exploring the current policy context, discusses the “problems” for which SE is the putative “solution”, and the ways in which these policies support and/or work against each other.

It is also worth noting the structural constraints that limit the forms of SE which can be legitimately acknowledged. While anecdotal evidence suggests that many university teachers relish oppositional forms of engagement – from holding contrary (but well-argued) theoretical perspectives to engaging in protest activity around social justice issues – pressures of syllabus, time, and assessment criteria, among other factors, often serve to limit the forms of SE that can be tolerated in the classroom to congruent expressions, creating a tension between these constraints and teachers’ imagined ideals of “critical engagement”.

Navigating the contestations around the SE construct, and considering the constraints within which students’ engagement plays out, we are now at a point where we can meaningfully consider what the students in this study report about their own engagement with their studies, and their universities’ attempts to engage them

How do students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context receive and perceive their institutions’ attempts to engage them in their course, and how do they characterise their engagement with their studies?

I was struck by the extent to which the students claimed to be engaged with their studies, given that these were all students who considered themselves to be “non-traditional”, and thus possibly a little marginal - though engagement meant different things to different people, and at different times. Initially, discussions of “engagement” elicited responses around events, process, systems and structures, as illustrated by Tristan’s response to the question, “Can you recall any examples of efforts your university has made to engage you?”:

Who do you mean by “the Uni”? I did get letters about Welcome Week or whatever they call it. I didn’t go. Well I went to the academic sessions but not to the social stuff. I didn’t see the point really. I’m not here to socialise, I have my own friends and my own life and I don’t need the Uni to give me a fake group of friends to fill my lonely hours. My tutor engages me... But I don’t really have much time, between my Uni work and the band and my friends, there’s not really time for anything... What are they supposed to do? Is it just... [reads] Oh. OK. I suppose so. I mean, that’s my tutor’s job..? He’s OK, don’t get him into any trouble...

Tristan’s response, while dismissive of attempts made by “the Uni” as a structure, is more receptive to, and defensive of, efforts made by his tutor. Lindy’s response revealed similar cynicism toward processes, structures and systems, albeit in a more moderated and more nuanced way, while also implying a relationship of trust with her personal tutor:

Examples of efforts my uni has made to engage me - me, or students more generally? There are loads of emails, and surveys [rolls eyes] and of course your personal tutor, which is for everyone, but me in particular I don't think they would. Yes I read all the emails and sometimes if I have time I'll have a look at the survey but I don't think I've actually ever filled it out..I think the University does try to engage students but I don't think they really know how. I think it's all about "fixing feedback" and winning the NSS, at least that's the impression I got from my personal tutor, I think it's about how to make the uni look

better and be more attractive to students without losing its core values and what it is that attracted us here in the first place. So I think it's quite hard to do. We're students, we're only here for a few years and then there will be others and they will likely want something completely different again so I can see why they might think it's probably best just to ride it out if the students get too twitchy or demanding.

Marian's response also picked up on systems and structures, but contained even more rationalisation:

I'm not sure about "attempts to engage me". I mean, we all have personal tutors, and in class I get picked on same as anyone else, but I'm not sure what efforts they would make specially for me, or for someone like me? We're all students, and they're trying to engage all of us. Perhaps it's easier with some students than with others.

Her implied blaming of her difference for the university's efforts falling short of resounding success contrasts starkly with the views of Blair, who was less positive:

You asked [reads] "Can you recall any examples of efforts your university has made to engage you? Please describe these, and your response to them." And no, I can't. I don't feel "engaged", as you describe it, not by my course, not by the Uni. To be frank, I can see that they are making efforts to [makes quotes with fingers] "engage students from backgrounds like mine", and there are all these services and people to help if you have problems with money or your kid needs child care or whatever else they think working class kids need [hollow laugh] but that's not really me. It doesn't feel like they really know what I want or need, just like they've read up on what someone they think is like me is likely to be needing.

Though he went on to say:

So aye, it's nice to have access to a library full of books and journals, it's nice to have nothing to do but read all day, and argue ideas with other smart people, but the course itself... [pulls face] and the Uni [wobbles hand]... I want to use my brain. That's why I'm here! I want to be learning.

It was clear from the initial interview, and Blair's later interviews, that his engagement with his university, and his course, was primarily oppositional. Although he initially denied feeling engaged, the behaviour he described – challenging teaching staff on the finer points in class, researching new or controversial applications of his discipline and raising those with tutors who were trying to focus on the syllabus – demonstrated oppositional engagement along several dimensions (see the earlier discussion on SE).

Over the course of the study, parallel processes took place. With sustained communication and repeated interviews, relationships between myself and the students taking part in the study developed. Not only did growing trust allow for greater levels of disclosure, but students also likely picked up on the aspects I appeared most attentive toward, and moderated later responses toward those – appearing as a shift in their perceptions of their own and their universities' engagement. Thus, while initial interviews tended to focus on what may have seemed more obvious markers of engagement attempts – structures and processes put in place by the university, events designed to engage, or people (such as tutors) clearly tasked with engaging – in subsequent interviews, students reflected more personally on their own individual student learning, their own subjectivities, and their changing relationships with their universities.

In later interviews, discussions of engagement focused more directly on students' own learning, rather than the environmental context in which such learning might take place. Tristan, for example, describes the feeling of discovering that he was engaged:

Well it's really weird because I was really enjoying it... I got good feedback on my assignment and I really thought I got it, I was understanding what they were looking for and I knew how to give it to them. Like when you're crashed on your friend's couch watching TV and there's some freaky sport on, like American football or something, and suddenly you understand what they're trying to do and it all starts making sense, and then the game has some kind of point, you're not just staring at people running up and down the field, you actually know what they're trying to do and you pick a side and hope they win, and you feel something when they score or when the others score. Like you suddenly

understand, and so you care. 'Cause it makes sense. And you know what the point is, and so... So I knew what they wanted, and I started doing that.... Because they want you to reassure them that they're not wasting your time making you read stuff that doesn't matter anymore. So yeah, I thought I had it, I could do this.... So yeah I suppose I did feel like I... I dunno, like I fell in engagement or something? Like I got it.

Events were used by the students in the study as indicators of relationships, states and situations that were quite fluid, like snapshots onto which they could project a process that had led to that point, and which promised to lead somewhere else from that point. Lindy, too, described an epiphany that had brought her studies to life:

We had an assignment. And I went to the library, and read up about it, and I also went to the museum. And there was an older man standing there, staring at the display, and he was still there after I'd been walking around, still in the same place, and I wanted to look at that display a bit longer too, and we started chatting about it, and then we went to have coffee, and it turned out he was retired, he used to teach the stuff at [another university] and he'd always been fascinated by those artefacts, and we chatted about my assignment, and I explained what I was thinking of doing, approaching it from a slightly different view, and he gave me the name of a book to read that was nothing at all to do with the topic, but someone who'd tried a similar approach in a very different subject and I went and got it from the library and wow! It made so much sense to me, so I used it for my assignment and I started to read everything quite differently, it just made everything come alive for me. I wish I'd written down the man's name, so I could mail him and thank him, because it's really helped me. I got good marks for my assignment, though I'm not really sure my tutor "got" it quite, just how exciting it all was, but perhaps that was because when you're writing in academic passive it's hard to sound thrilled. Anyway, that assignment convinced me that I was doing the right course, and that I'm in the right department. It's so what I want to do. I'm not sure why I'm even thinking about going back to the call centre. Really, this is where I belong. I just hope I can make it work.

A similar process of enlightenment occurred for Marian, though for her, it went beyond engagement with her studies:

Well [pause] It's about my engagement as me. Part of that is me as a student, and this does relate to that. Not only to the course I'm studying,

but I went to [the Student Association] and asked if they were running any campaigns around the referendum, and they told me about signing up students to vote, and I've done some of that. But I took it further, too... I suppose this referendum is helping me in some way to bring the different parts of my life closer together. I can be [Marian]-the-student and [Marian]-the-family member and all the other [Marians] at the same time, doing this, in a way that's quite difficult with so many other things.

While Blair's engagement had been oppositional from the outset, his cognitive engagement with his discipline developed a strongly congruent component, and he became even more determined to succeed at his studies to enable him to

... stick it out, and graduate - if I do well enough, hopefully that will get me in somewhere better to do postgrad. Because I'm not stopping at this. I'm at Uni to learn, to develop myself, not for some vocational purpose of getting a better-paying job.

For each of these students, and many of the others, "trigger events" provided opportunity to reflect and consider not only changes in their relationships with their universities (as manifested through individuals, structures, events and processes) but also changes in themselves and their subjectivities. Participation in the study prompted greater reflection on their engagement, and while this was positive for most students, this was not universally the case. For Kris, engagement became increasingly fraught over the course of the study:

It's like, this is exactly how it's been engaging with the Uni. Like they're banging on the door, wanting to speak to [Christopher]. And I'm stood at the door, telling them, he doesn't live here anymore, I do, and they're saying "please give him a message" and I'm like, "shouldn't you be speaking to me? I'm here now" and they're not really getting what I'm saying, they're so stuck on [Christopher]... Like, I know that sounds bad, and I don't mean that they're doing it maliciously, they think they're looking out for him, not wanting to speak to me about his business, respecting his right to confidentiality I guess, but in doing so they're not looking out for me.

This process led to a complete breakdown of the teaching and learning relationship, and Kris's decision to suspend their studies. Interestingly, their decision to consider a different course (as well as a different university) on their anticipated later return reflected not a rejection of the discipline, but a new awareness:

I definitely want to go back. To finish. Maybe not Physics, though. I mean, there's nothing wrong with Physics, though perhaps my reasons for choosing it were more complex. Kris won't need to hide, so I could really do anything I wanted.

On the whole, students projected positive (if sometimes misguided) intentions onto their universities' attempts to engage them, and tended to frame both their, and their universities', engagement efforts as being largely congruent. However, closer inspection suggests that the picture is more complex. A closer reading of a selected sample of the students reveals greater nuance.

Cognitively, Blair appeared to be congruently engaged with his studies. He presented as curious and eager to learn, and read avidly on topics related to his discipline. But he reported finding himself bored in class, and affectively did not feel "at home" in his university, describing feelings of "alienation" when encountering graffiti on toilet doors in the library, and "hostility" when group work assignments were of a disappointing standard. He confessed to having secured a reputation among his teachers as "grumbleguts" due to his oppositional engagement on the affective dimension, despite his attendance and participation and the high standard of work he submitted on individual assignments testifying to his congruent engagement on the cognitive and behavioural dimensions.

In terms of criticality, Blair's description of his engagement with his discipline appeared congruent. He accepted the paradigms as presented, and engaged robustly within the frameworks provided, but his engagement with the authority structures of the university presented a mixed picture of congruent and oppositional engagement. While recognising and respecting the authority

of the Senate, the Court, and the Head of Department, he felt that the Student Association lacked credibility and legitimacy and was not sufficiently representative. He thus chose to “work around them, rather than through them”. Politically, this led to oppositional engagement with student representative structures, while his political engagement with knowledge remained congruent, as did his socio-cultural engagement within the domain of performance of a professional identity as a nascent chemist. He took pride in a tutor’s comment that he was “a good chemist but a horrible student”. Blair’s goal was to graduate with outstanding results, which would secure him a funded position on a postgraduate programme at an Ancient university.

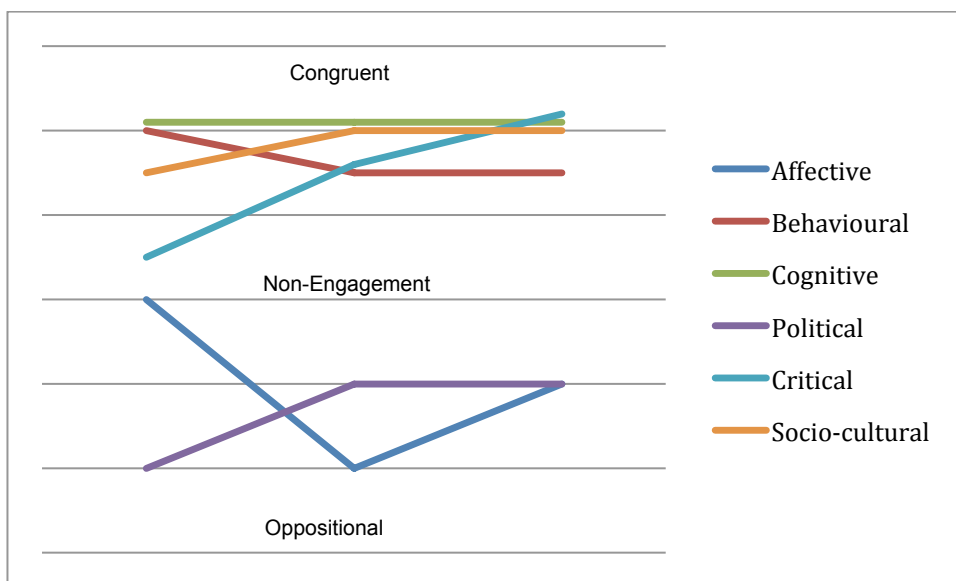


Figure 4.2: Blair’s Engagement over Time

Courtney was studying primary education at an Old University. Her middle class background had led her to assume she would transition straight from school to university, but she found herself taking an “enforced gap year” when she fell pregnant in her final year of school. She moved to a flat with her boyfriend (from whom she later separated) and began her studies later than most of her erstwhile classmates. Determined not to fall “further behind”, she rejected the advice of her parents to study part-time, and took a full course load after arranging childcare with a family member. Courtney found

studying difficult: after time adapting to parenthood (with her boyfriend, and then as a lone parent), she found “student identity” uncomfortable, “like stepping back into something I left behind when I became a parent”, almost infantilising. She resented the chiding tone her tutor took with students whose assignments were late, recognising it as the same tone she used on her infant daughter, and she found herself disinvesting from her coursework - complying rather than engaging.

A chance encounter with another student-parent led to an involvement in student politics, and the lobbying for services and processes to support student-parents on campus. Courtney soon found herself drafted onto workgroups and committees advising on student support, facilities and even curriculum issues. In class she continued to comply with requirements, but saved her engagement energies for the broader context of the university, where her engagement was often oppositional, challenging university management on issues she felt mandated by her constituency to pursue. In turn, she found herself propelled into the spotlight as the “go to” person among her peers, and found a supportive group of other student-parents with whom to share her triumphs and travails.

Over the course of the study, Courtney’s engagement grew and changed. Whereas her initial focus of engagement had been as a student-parent, engaged often oppositionally in issues relating to structures and processes, over time she found herself being drawn into issues relating to curriculum and began to engage more with her own learning. As she became drawn into the structures of student politics, her engagement displayed a greater mix of congruence and oppositionality, and overall levels of non-engagement dropped. She developed a sense of agency over the creation of knowledge, rather than simply reproducing or reframing it, and blogged about her experiences as a student-parent. She engaged in turn congruently and oppositionally on the critical dimension with regard to her coursework, using her own lived experience as an index.

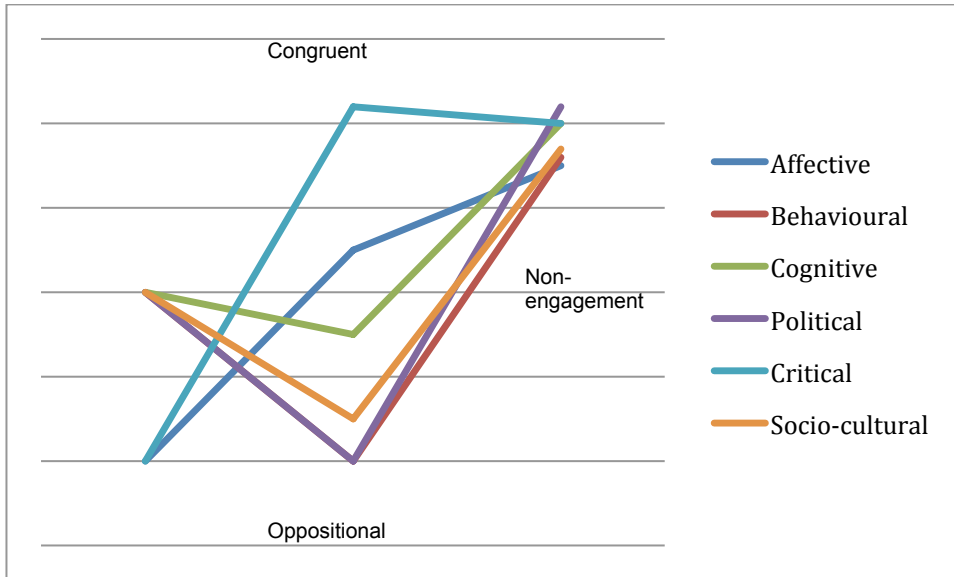


Figure 4.3: Courtney's Engagement over Time

Greg had been in care prior to enrolling at university, that being the basis from which he identified himself as “non-traditional”. He chose to study computer games technology and described himself as being highly engaged as a student. Growing up, gaming had provided an escape for him at times when his environment had not seemed very welcoming, and Greg saw a career in games development as his way of helping out other kids like himself.

Behaviourally, his engagement was largely congruent, with Greg complying with the requirements of being a student as far as he could. Cognitively, though, his engagement was less consistent, as the reality of the drudgery of much of the coursework took its toll. Critically, he often found himself engaging from a different paradigm - thus oppositionally - despite the affective congruence of his engagement. Politically, he engaged both congruently and oppositionally - assuming an authorial voice, while at times challenging assumptions about what constituted “valid” knowledge.

But it was in the socio-cultural domain that Greg felt misunderstood. Drawing on traditions from popular culture - which he considered appropriate to the medium of computer games - he preferred to “borrow” from, or “pay homage” to, those whose work he admired, rather than observing standard protocols of citation and referencing. Often this was missed entirely by his tutor, but where it was picked up, it was regarded as “plagiarism”, invoking remediation or sanction, despite Greg’s attempts to explain what he was trying to achieve. He struggled with the tension between being a creator - where one set of rules was valid - and being a student, where one’s work was judged by another set of rules. He felt that his insistence on being appraised against professional rather than student frameworks of acceptability was being misinterpreted, and being ascribed to his having been in care and not having been appropriately socialised. Thus, he found himself labelled with a failure to conform rather than being recognised as rejecting the standards to which conformity was expected.

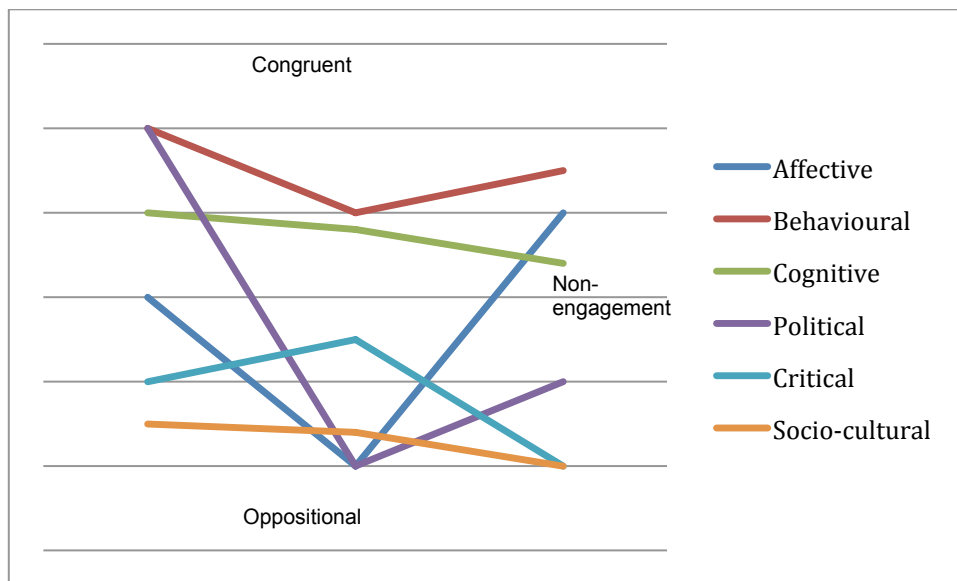


Figure 4.4: Greg's Engagement over Time

These examples illustrate the limitations of portraying engagement as a binary (engaged vs. unengaged) or as a hierarchy (as per Ashwin & McVitty, 2014). Students in the examples above were engaged congruently on some,

but not all, dimensions, and were engaged oppositionally on others - or were unengaged. None of these students, displayed engagement that was simply present, or absent - rather, it was present in some forms, along some dimensions, in some contexts, absent in others, and present in other forms in other contexts.

Engagement also changed and shifted with time as evidenced by a growing level of engagement (congruent or oppositional) along some dimensions and waning engagement along others. It also changed and shifted with context: Courtney engaged congruently on a task team exploring the use of library space to better accommodate the needs of student-parents, while engaging oppositionally through organising protests at rumoured timetabling changes which were awkward for students with caring responsibilities; while Greg engaged congruently in his affective identification with the professional codes of behaviour of computer games designers, but oppositionally with some of the demands of the socio-cultural positioning of students.

The arguments for an hierarchical conception of SE are, likewise, subject to challenge by the evidence of the engagement of these students. By positing *all* SE as arising at source from an engagement (whether congruent or oppositional is not stated) with disciplinary or professional knowledge, Ashwin and McVitty (2014) would appear to be endorsing Blair's and Greg's engagement as valid, while negating Courtney's. Courtney's engagement arose from her identification as a student-parent (flagged variously as "identity" (Trowler, 2010), "community and society" (Bergan, 2015), and "community" (Ashwin & McVitty, 2014) – see Table 4.1, above) and prompted engagement in student activism and student politics (flagged as "systems and processes" (Trowler, 2010), "governance" (Bergan, 2015) and "curriculum" (Ashwin & McVitty, 2014) – see Table 4.1).

The complexities of the engagement of these students also call into question the neat fit of the SE construct with neoliberalism, as claimed by Zepke (2014b; 2015). If SE was simply ideologically aligned with neoliberalism through an “elective affinity”, then all SE would be congruent, along all dimensions simultaneously, and would exhibit growth over time, to produce students who conformed uncritically with the “individual benefit” and “HR function” purposes of HE, as outlined earlier. That students engage oppositionally as well as congruently at the same time, along different dimensions, or with different foci or in different contexts, and that engagement ebbs and flows with time, suggests a far more nuanced picture than Zepke’s claim assumes.

In addition, students themselves conceived of their engagement in more subtle, complex ways. Blair rejected his classmates’ instrumental motivations for and approaches to their studies, contrasting them with his own cognitive engagement. He overtly distanced himself from neoliberal views of his studies as preparing him for the world of work - views that he associated with the approach of his classmates. At the same time, however, his congruent cognitive engagement gave rise to his oppositional affective engagement, since he found his context too vocationally focused for his liking. Zepke’s (2014b; 2015) stance would suggest that Blair’s congruent cognitive (and, in many respects, behavioural) engagement was aligned with neoliberalism, a view that Blair would find abhorrent.

Likewise, Courtney’s engagement - born out of oppositionality - has led to increased criticality, heightened activism, questioning of authority and a strengthened sense of solidarity with a “marginalised” group: surely more closely aligned to Zepke’s “social justice” agenda than compliance with neoliberal objectives. Greg’s overt espousal of a framework of “borrowing” and “homage” rather than due deference to individual intellectual property might also position him in a complicated relationship with neoliberalism.

Figure 4.5 below maps out some of the examples cited by students during interviews of attempts made by their universities at engaging them. Examples on the left, shaded yellow, represent systems, structures, processes and events listed by the students in the study to which they did not ascribe any personal response or connection: they recognised these as “attempts”, but did not report feeling engaged by or through these. Green-shaded items, by contrast, represent “attempts” that were considered successful; these were directly cited by students as being instrumental in their engagement. The blue-shaded octagon represents events beyond the control of the university, but which fuelled engagement, and the dotted lines represent contextually contingent relationships rather than structural ones (solid lines).

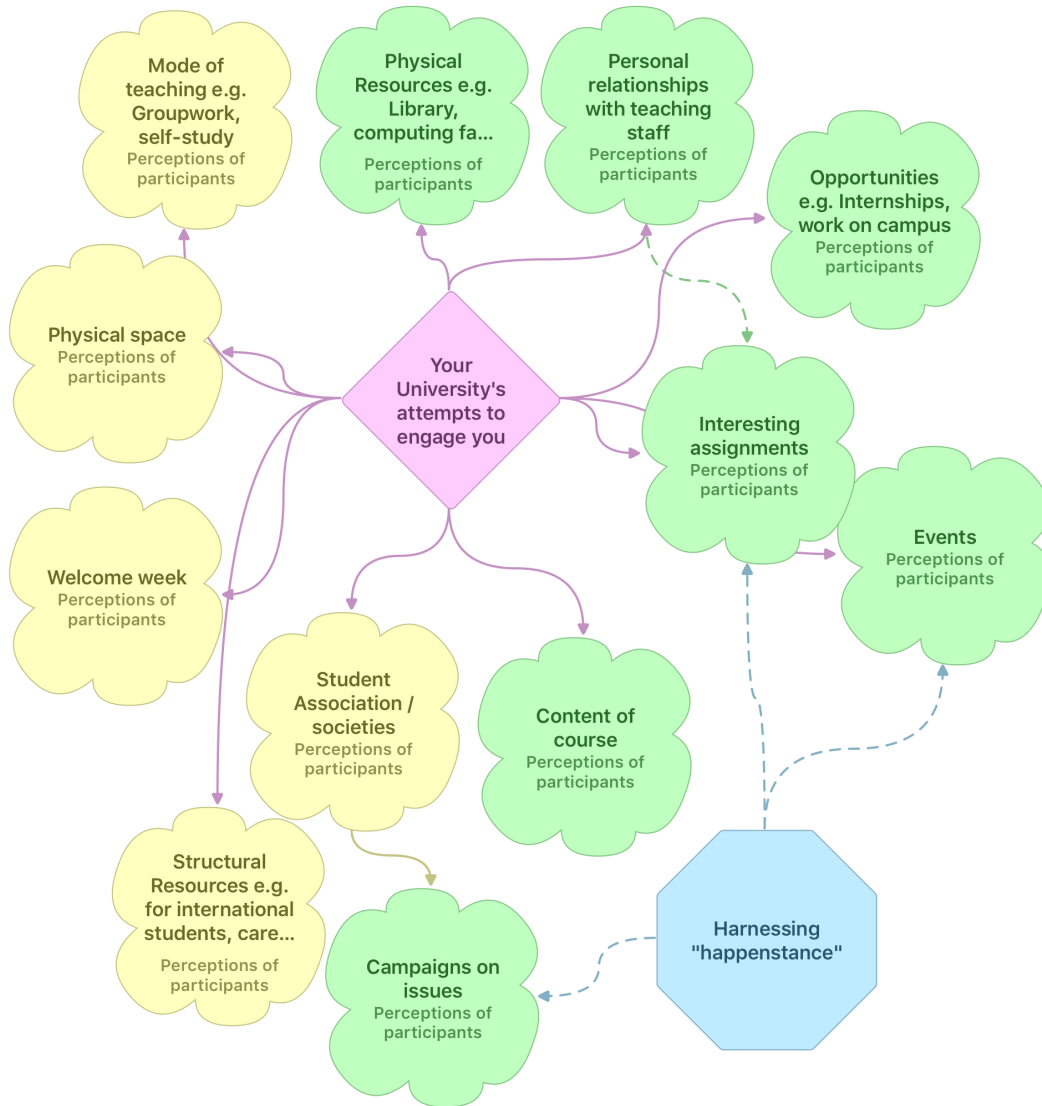


Figure 4.5 Examples cited by students of Universities' attempts at Engagement

Physical space is listed as one of the ways in which universities attempt to engage students. Students' engagements within, and with, space, surfaced frequently in the data, and the discussion now turns to these.

How do they construct their engagement with space?

Feelings of displacement were reflected in observations about space, and place. For Uche, the space around individuals became viewed as "territory":

British people have a weird sense of "personal space". Like, "We used to own the planet, and now we still own this space around us". Like there's, sort of, an invisible bubble around them, that you're not allowed into. If you sit too close, or talk too loud, you're trespassing on what's rightfully theirs.

This perception was shared by others. While not quite feeling like a trespasser, Marian reported that:

As an older student, there are definitely spaces that aren't for you. I mean, not just nightclubs or that, but other spaces too. Perhaps it's because we didn't grow up in coffee shops, or have money to "hang out" in shopping centres, but there is a distinct sense that if you accidentally wander into the wrong place everything stops, and people turn to look at you like you're lost and they want to help you find your way back out as fast as possible so that everything can go back to normal... Yes, like social spaces. Like if you sit on the steps outside [name] Building before class. Or the "wrong" part of the library, where they always sit and chat. They treat you like a spy. They won't tell you to go, but they stop talking, and look at you, until you realise it for yourself.

This projection (by those who lay claim to the space) onto others they consider different of being "lost" resonated with Gabi's description of "white space":

When I first arrived, I didn't realise there were certain spaces that were for me, and other spaces that were not... When I went to [a pub

frequented by students] I didn't know it was a white space. I just heard a classmate speaking about what a great place it was, and so I went to see. It was... I saw I was the only... Nobody there looked like me. No one said anything, but they all looked at me like I was lost. I didn't stay long. Later I found [another pub nearby] and saw, this is where I'm supposed to be. Maybe it wasn't as nice a place, but it was a place for me.

Neither Gabi nor Marian reported any overt attempt to make them feel unwelcome, yet both felt distinctly that they were regarded by others as “out of place” in those spaces. Gabi reported feeling uncomfortable as a result of looking different, preferring instead the less upmarket location nearby where she could blend in more easily. This tendency of students to cluster together with those who look like them, or resemble them in some manner central to their self-definition, has been noted elsewhere. In a study of black (African, Coloured, Indian and Chinese, as per pre-1994 descriptors) students at the historically white University of Cape Town in South Africa, Kessi and Cornell (2015:7) report one of their respondents, “Kopano”, describing seating practices at lectures:

First day of lectures and the class is split almost perfectly by race. All the white students sat in one section we coined “Camps Bay”⁶. All the Indians sat in another, Most of the coloured and Muslim students would sit next to the Indian section or at the back of the class or “Mitchell’s Plain”. The upper middle class black students congregated in a small area and finally the rest of the black students populated the remainder of the class “Khayelitsha”. I was in shock...

They ascribe (2015:7) this behaviour to “a historical practice of oppression that signified a division between superior and inferior ‘race’ groups” rather than “benign separation”. While the historical and structural contexts of the South African students behaviour, and that of their Scottish counterparts, clearly differ significantly, the attribution of a dimension of power is helpful in understanding how the students in

⁶ These areas would be well-known to any Capetonian. Camps Bay is a wealthy, historically white coastal suburb of Cape Town; Mitchell’s Plain is a sprawling township on the outskirts of Cape Town to which people classified as “coloured” were forcibly removed under the Group Areas Act; and Khayelitsha is a sprawling township – initially an informal settlement- on the outskirts of Cape Town where people classified as African were required to live under the Group Areas Act.

the present study – who positioned themselves as “marginal” relative to those they constructed as “traditional” – experienced and rationalised their relationships to certain spaces, and those who laid claim to inhabit those spaces.

For students who feel themselves to be “non-traditional” in their study contexts, blending in is not always easy. Some students described trying to assimilate, trying to “pass”, or “faking it”, like Greg:

There's always just this assumption... Your Da taught you this. Your Mam did that. You learned to read at Nana's knee... You learn quickly not to say not, not to look strange. Just do what the others do, or crack a joke. You don't want them wheeling out the pity wagon, and you don't want them staring at you everywhere like you grew an extra head. You want to be able to get by in those places, just be one of the group, not stand out like a freak. If you want to be able to go places, to hang out in spaces and just have a good time, sometimes you have to be less “you” and more “them”.

Miller (2003:148-149) describes “passing” thus:

Passing involves, whether intentional or not, disguise and dissimulation. In one sense, all faking it is a form of passing, but the idea of passing is properly reserved for the big fakes... What makes passing full-fledged Passing is that it is undertaken in relation to what is perceived to be a low-status default identity.

It is this perception among students who define themselves as “non-traditional” that their “default identity” warrants a lower status, or is imbued with less power, than the identity they construct as “traditional” against which they define themselves, that compels them to seek to blend in, rather than being comfortable standing out.

Feeling “out of place” may manifest in another way. Kessi & Cornell (2015:6) quote a respondent “occupying a space that wasn't meant for me”. By this, they meant not just physically, as experienced by Marian or Gabi (above), but as in having secured admission to the university rather than someone else (constructed as a “traditional” claimant on the place). Gabi reported a similar sentiment:

When you meet local students, so, from here, but studying at [other local university], sometimes they're like, "of course you got into [Ancient University]. They want your fees! We don't bring in all that hard currency, so they rather take you!" and then you wonder, was I really good enough to get in? Maybe they just took me for my money, after all...

Some of the observations around space were more positive. David commented, after going to see the film "Sunshine on Leith"

It was amazing! I was watching these people singing and dancing in streets I had been in! They were in places I actually knew! I was sitting with my friend, we were saying, "look! That's there – and there!" We were like little children. Everyone else was staring at us. I suppose they are used to recognising their own homes and their familiar places in films. To us, when we see home or somewhere we know on TV it's always about a disaster... When we left the cinema we were like wow! We've arrived! We also know places in films now. And so we went and walked around Edinburgh, and went to some of those places, just to tell ourselves it was real.

For these students, responses to space and place mark them out as different, through visible behaviours (such as David describes) or more nuanced dis-ease in spaces that feel new, as described by Marian. (For Marian, the responses she perceives from others could be to her appearance as an older person rather than to her lack of confidence in the space – although these are likely to be mutually reinforcing.) Uche struggled to adjust to behaviours he considered rude (speaking quietly in public spaces, for example) and to model his behaviour accordingly, and commented on how difficult he found meeting other black people and not knowing whether to behave in "African mode" or in "British mode" with them.

Some of these students sought out other spaces, off campus, as "safe spaces" or spaces where they could interact more freely or authentically. Mike (a heterosexual male studying fashion) remarked that

It's quite a macho scene, really. Like, tough guys from tough backgrounds, watching the footie on the telly and I suppose being

English I'm a soft target. Now I lie about what I'm studying, because they assume I'm gay if I tell them I'm studying fashion, even if I'm with a girl, and it can get quite rough... But mostly I go off campus to hang out. I'll take the train to [city] which is much more, civilised? That sounds awful, but you're less likely to get smacked about because you don't conform to their idea of what a man should be like.

Mike's description exemplifies the benefits of Young's (1986:20) "unoppressive city", where anonymity and a (perceived) greater cosmopolitanism provide more tolerance than the perceived prescriptiveness of the campus community.

For Tristan, student spaces were distasteful and at odds with his self-image:

I don't stay in Halls, though. I don't think I could stand that. I keep away from "studenty" stuff. I don't go to the Students Union bars or events, even if it's cheaper. I've got my own group of friends - they're not students, they're mostly musicians, a couple of writers and a few artists.

He viewed student spaces - along with being a student - as merely transient, to be passed through:

But I've lived, I've worked, and I'm in the band and I know this is just now, tomorrow will be different and there will be opportunities and this is just... It's a space you're in, for a moment. It's not life.

For Blair, relatedly, the specifics of his campus spaces felt alienating:

Perhaps some other Uni would have been better for me. An older Uni, with buildings that don't need security on the door. No graffiti carved into the toilet doors, no gum under the tables in the lecture theatres. Not like some cheap clapboard film set, proper stone buildings that look permanent, lofty, commanding respect. No vomit stains and no stench of hopelessness.

While Tristan experienced being a student as anomalous to his self-perception, and thus found student spaces alien, Blair relished being a student but found the specifics

of his particular university, and the spaces on his campus, disappointing. Their superficially similar responses thus come from diametrically opposed impulses.

Karin's OCD left her anxious in both teaching and social spaces on campus, and she preferred to retreat to her own apartment:

It's just easier... You have some control. These aren't bad people, and the spaces aren't disgusting, but it just takes a small thing... seeing someone wipe their nose on their hand and then put that hand on the seat and suddenly I can't sit comfortably on the seat anymore. So I do most things online if I can, and my friends come around here to visit.

By contrast, for several students, the university provided asylum, a safe space into which to withdraw from stressful aspects of their "other" lives. Alex reported "appl[ying] for Uni far from home, to get away", and Kris similarly claimed

When I applied to come here, I didn't really think too much about the course, or the university. Just that it was far enough away from home, I could leave all of that behind, be how I wanted to be – even if I didn't really understand quite what that was at the time. Just that – oh god it wasn't like [home]!

For Kris, university failed to live up to the promise of asylum, requiring Kris to seek asylum elsewhere. However, it did provide a springboard to leaving the old, ill-fitting identity and the "trying on" of the new one, and furnished at least temporary relief. Courtney likewise relished the respite university provided her from her life as a student lone parent:

Sometimes I just want to stay longer, pretend I was delayed in class or something, so I don't have to go home yet. I love them [her children], I'm not saying that, but it can be... unremitting! There is always something – this one is sick, that one doesn't like fish fingers anymore, the jumper doesn't fit anymore or someone broke the jar of mayonnaise all over the kitchen floor. Once they're asleep, and the house is stabilised, you have to fight for your headspace. I know home is a refuge for most people, but sometimes I just need a refuge from home!

For Lindy, having worked in a call centre before coming to study, she found the contrasts between the two contexts stark:

And I'm worried that if I go back to the call centre it will be like that's where I really belong, like I tried it out in The Other World [speaks with emphasis] but I couldn't quite handle it somehow, so I went crawling back to the safe space of the call centre where you really don't have to think. In fact, thinking is a disadvantage. They want you to follow the script, and if it's not on the script you must refer. I want to be here, I want to belong, and I'm really worried that instead I'm going to end up working in Tesco's on a check-out for the rest of my life, going home to watch Coronation Street and getting excited about Royal weddings and whether Kate has lost her baby weight.

As a result, she really valued the freedoms offered by being a student:

I mean I'm not some kind of dangerous radical wanting to firebomb Westminster or something but I want to be able to have opinions and not have to pretend I can't think for myself just to keep my job and pay my bills. I've done my time doing that.

For some students, the physical space (or physical distance from “home”) provided relief; for others, what mattered more was the intellectual or emotional space, and for others, it was a combination of “all of the above”. Similarly, online spaces provided sanctuary to many of these students. Working class students like Vanessa felt more in control behind a keyboard where she could take time to formulate the perfect response and not have her “horrid accent” get in the way, and Alex’s mental health problems left her feeling vulnerable and exposed socially:

I have to be strong, it's like a suit of armour I put on when I go out, and because it's totally fake I can't really make friends. They all think I'm this total snob who won't hang out with them but I just can't keep it up for too long. It's easier online... I've got friends and we hang out online, we use Whatsapp and Snapchat and stuff and it's just easier.

While online spaces are often portrayed as misogynist, homophobic and racist (see Shaw, 2014:273) in reality many marginalised groups, or individuals feeling unsafe in their physical environment (such as frail older people), have found or created “safe

spaces” with like-minded others online (see Trowler, 2009). An online connection provided a way out of current frustrations for Kris:

There’s a woman I met, online - no, not like that! It was on [social reading app], we were discussing crime fiction and ... she runs a bookshop in [city]. A bit alternative. So I went over there one weekend and browsed, just to see, and she walked in and spotted me straight away even though I hadn't told her I was coming. So we've kept in touch, and she says I can work there for a few years.

One specific “place” mentioned by several students was “home”. There are different views (see Lange and Thaver's comments in DHET, 2015, for example) about whether or not a university was – or should be – considered a “home” by students, but it is clear that some students do⁷ and that others feel aggrieved if they do not share that sense of being “at home”.

For Greg, growing up in care, home was a more nebulous concept:

You make your own home. In here [taps head] – so you carry it around with you. Like a tortoise... So it's always there, and you can just slip inside if you need it. Because you do. They [other students] carry it around on their skin – everywhere is home, to them. This is like their back yard. But we've also got our home, and when you're tired of being in their home you can always go back into your own.

His comment about other students “carry[ing their home] around on their skin is reminiscent of Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992:127) comment about bourgeois students being like “fish in water” at university – to them it feels natural and transparent, in contrast to Greg and others, who feel they are in someone else’s “home”.

⁷ The YouTube clip of the young woman interrupting the SRC meeting at Wits, protesting about “bringing strangers into our home”, illustrates the strong emotional investment some students feel in this regard. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVjLoJT-t0w&sns=em>

Gabi, by contrast, had a strong sense of home, and while she considered it a place of love and security, it was not without its tensions. As an adopted (Black) child of (White) Jewish parents, she was conscious from an early age of difference:

Well, home, like, you belong there, it's your home, and it's where you are safe, but...You kind of belong, and you kind of don't. No one says you don't belong, but when you go to shul and you're the only black person, or when family comes over and they all look the same and you're different... And you get presents to remind you of "your culture", so you won't hate your black skin or something. And then, just when you get used to that, you come here, and everyone thinks you're foreign or exotic until you open your mouth. And oh my god when they find out I'm Jewish – it's like, what is that girl? So yeah, home, well, that's another business entirely!

Home was a source of more overt conflict for some students. Kris, a transgender womxn, saw university as an opportunity to flee the oppressive morality of home that forced them into an inauthentic mode of existence. Home was not safety, as it was for Gabi. For Kris, home represented danger, and estrangement was welcomed. Danger was associated with home for Uche, too – though it also offered safety:

My other father went to a conference abroad, and while he was there they raided his home and took his stuff. He's a doctor, but he was accused of plotting against the state. So we had to phone him and say, don't come home, your life is in danger. We had to move, many times, and change our names, when we were younger. I think it's better now, but I wouldn't want to go back to [city] to test that out, in case. But there is always family. If you need to feel safe, there is family. Here, it is safer. No one just vanishes. So you think it is safe. But there are other dangers. No one tells you what is the thing to do, or to say. It's a test, everything is a test, to see how well you fit in, if you can pass then you can stay. Otherwise, this is not the place for you.

Home was also associated with demands, as Courtney described earlier. The demands presented by home could also be from parental expectations, as articulated by Tristan – though these are likely commonplace among students. Nonetheless, Tristan felt that his attending university was a symptom of parental expectation, rather than what he would have wanted:

..my parents - well, they're academics, it was unthinkable to them that I wouldn't go to Uni. They were gutted when I said I wasn't interested, that I wanted to hitch hike around Australia for a few years learning about life, and then make films that made no money but changed people's lives. They had saved up for me to study, put money aside so I wouldn't need loans, and when I wanted to spend that on a ticket to Oz instead they went apeshit!

Space was something these students both inhabited and moved through. It was experienced as physical and psychological, as captured by Bender (2001:6):

People's sense of place and landscape thus extends out from the local and from the present encounter and is contingent upon a larger temporal and spatial field of relationships. The explanation of what is happening moves backwards and forwards between the detail of everyday existence and these larger forces...

For the students interviewed, the spaces provided to them in which to conduct their lives as students offered both opportunity and threat. The possibility of reinvention, of escaping the constraints of “home” and of selves they felt no longer fitted, appealed; but at the same time, the strangeness and “foreignness” of the new context amplified by their feelings of difference or marginality was experienced as challenging, unsettling or even hostile. The conflict inherent in these opposing impulses was experienced at least to some degree by all of the students interviewed. The discussion of movement and space is revisited in Chapter 7.

How do they construct their engagement in, and with, time?

Time featured in all the students' accounts, but it featured differently, in part related to their age / lifestage and circumstances. For some of the younger students, time hung heavy. Blair considered his undergraduate years

... really just treading water.... When I graduate, I'll go on somewhere better, a proper Uni, where I can really get stuck in.

Treading water, or marking time, was also mentioned by Tristan, who considered his studies a way of passing the time until his music career took off, and by Vanessa, who felt in a hurry to qualify so that she could get a “respectable job” with a good income to contribute to, and justify her studies, to her extended working class family. For Alex, it was even more of a struggle. She wished

...to wake up one day and really have it together. I'm tired of having to battle through this, pretending to be normal, and I know it's just going to take time, but I just wish that I was there already.

For others, due to differences in age or circumstances, time was a commodity in short supply, subject to multiple demands. Marian stated:

I have to take my turn caring for the sick and the elderly, and visiting the ones in hospital, and doing fun things with the kids during half term. Being a student they all think I have more free time, that I can be a babysitter or a carer or a personal shopper or anything at a moment's notice, where they can't, they really can't. And it is easier for me, but it's also difficult to explain to them that the reading I was going to do wasn't just for fun, it still has to be done, and it just means I'll get less sleep.

In a related way for Nina, caring for her disabled brother while embarking on part-time studies demanded advanced time management skills. Similarly, Courtney – a student lone parent - felt:

It's not just poor in money – though money is obviously scarcer when there's kids. It's time, really. Time is what you have least of. You always feel like time on studies is being stolen from something else.

Courtney's experience is consistent with other student lone parents. Hinton-Smith (2012a:54) reports student lone parents overwhelmingly struggle with a lack of time, money and childcare, with their lack of time often exacerbated by their needing to undertake paid employment to afford childcare. However, she comments that even those student lone parents who are financially able to subsist without the need for paid employment still report struggling with a lack of time due to being the sole carer for the children in a climate where "intensive parenting" is the cultural expectation. She reports (2012a:55-6) that

...time emerges as a major issue for lone-parent students...The overwhelming majority of those discussing their use of time lament not having enough of it. There being insufficient hours in a day is a frequent complaint.

Hinton-Smith (2012a:3; 2012b:111) draws attention to the commonality of experience between student lone parents, and mature women students – in part because of the large overlap of these two groups (most student lone parents are of "mature" age, although some – like Courtney – are of traditional age). She notes a number of ways in which the experiences of student lone parents are shared by mature students of all genders, including difficulties with social and academic integration at university, lack of geographical mobility, increased risks of financial hardships, and the juggling of time to meet conflicting demands. For Steve (an older student, who had entered university after college) the latter was certainly true. He mused that

...every day you wake up and you're older, and the time is rushing away from you, and you think, how will I ever get a grip on this?

If some of the students in this study felt time to hang heavy, and others felt it to be a scarce commodity, there were some whose relationship to time was more complex. While Tristan, as noted above, felt that he was marking time, he also (as described on page 61-2) saw his studies as being in competition with his true passion (music) for

his time, his attention, and indeed himself:

Like my music and my studies are these two girls fighting over me, and my music is the girl I've always loved, and suddenly I have this hot scene with my studies and my music gets jealous and tries to wreck things with my studies, and I'm left with my heart hurting and everything kind of unclear.

For some of the students, a sense of not having enough time sometimes spilled over into a sense of not having enough control over their time. This perceived lack of control over their time emphasized a general perception of being disempowered, as in Karin's feeling that:

You feel powerless, sometimes. And then you want to impose order, to get back some control. I made dividers with coloured tabs for my binders, to file all my notes every day. I make notes all the time. I need to sort them so I know what is from class, what is from my thinking, what from reading in the library... but it all takes time, and when you have no control you have no time.

Sentiments of disempowerment reflected in a lack of control over time were evident also in Frankie's perception that she (a journalism student from a working class background) was:

...definitely at the bottom. Especially when it comes to your time. It's all decided by them, you just have to scabble to keep up and show you've got what it takes, that you have the right to be there.

Disempowerment, frustration, helplessness and responsibility all converged for Uche, whose concerns regarding time and place intersected in his explaining that:

To be here, you have to be here and there. Your life at home carries on, and you are still a part of that, you still make the decisions and share the lives as though you were there. But you are also here, and your life here is very different. You have to forget about life there, although you

carry it with you everywhere. You have to live here and there, together but separately...

This sentiment has resonances with Trinh's (1994:15) observation (with respect to migration) that "Every movement between here and there bears with it a movement within here and within there." (This discussion is continued in Chapter 7, which also considers another way in which time was present: Because students were interviewed three times over the course of a calendar year, their views changed across, and sometimes even within, interviews.)

In ways not unrelated to the earlier discussion around space of "university of asylum", some of the students perceived time at university as "time out", which offered a second chance or a wormhole in the space-time continuum: Marian appreciated the opportunity to explore "unlived lives", while Emma (a former model, planning a second career in film studies) saw it as a chance for "reinvention"; and Andy commented that it was as though he'd been

...given another chance, really. I supposed I'd been a bit of a bad boy. Nothing too serious, though it would probably have gone that way if I'd kept going. But I've been given this chance now, and it's up to me to make something of it. I owe it to my Nan. I really have to make it work!

It allowed a pocket of time to explore, if not resolve, issues, such as Kris's learning to inhabit a transgender female identity; Greg's coming to terms with leaving care and needing to "catch up" with his contemporaries emotionally; Lindy's lack of confidence in which aspects of herself to foreground, which she described as "knowing who to present", or Gabi's uncertainty around

...who to be, here. You need to have a label so that people know how to relate to you, you can't be too many things because that's just, whoa, too much! If you're going to be different, you have to pick how – is it because I'm English, or Black, or Jewish, or adopted... I'd rather just be Gabi, but Gabi takes time, and most people want the soundbyte not the novel.

Time at university as “time out”, (university) space as “asylum”: these are probably not unusual responses, although rendered more complex for students who perceive themselves as “non-traditional” or even marginal within their study contexts. As observed by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009:1105):

...when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. ...The mismatch between high-status university and a low-status social background produces a dearth of opportunities for self-affirmation at university, creating tension and unease.

Discussions on habitus, field, and students’ engagement with, and construction of, their universities continue in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five – Engaging with their Universities (and other structures)

New images and representations... do not readily appear out of thin air. To produce a new imaginary requires the means of revisiting it, acknowledging it, and understanding the complicity between “difference” and “exclusion” in the [old] mind-set. (Braidotti, 2011:260)

This chapter sets out to answer the research question, “how do students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context receive / perceive their institution’s attempts to engage them?” by examining how these students engage with their universities, and other structures. In order to do this, it considers in turn four questions:

5.1. – What is the current policy context?

5.2 – How do students *in this study* who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context describe how they’re positioned by their university, and how do they construct “the university”?

5.3 – What resources (structures, systems, processes) do they draw on; which do they reject; how do they consider themselves enabled or constrained by these structures, systems and processes?

5.4 – What concerns emerge in their relationships with their university (and other structures), and how do they characterise their engagement with their universities?

What is the current policy context?

Policies can be thought of in many different ways. For the purposes of this discussion, the following framing is helpful to understand how policies constrain and enable the ways in which universities interact with students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts. Ball (1994:16) describes policies as

representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors, interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context).

This view of “policy as text” captures how policies come about through a complex and incomplete process of compromise, reflecting differing interests and agendas, and thus cautions that policies should thus be considered within the specifics of their contexts.

Furthermore, Ball claims (1994:22) policies are also discourses, circumscribing “who can speak, when, where and with what authority”:

We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. We are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows. ...we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies.

Viewing policy as power relation, as well as the encoding and decoding of complex interplays of interests, provides a helpful framing for considering how is re/created at different levels, in different contexts, and by different players.

Higher Education is a devolved matter in Scotland, and is thus not subject to Westminster policies on HE⁸. However, Higher Education exists within a framework of broader policy areas, some of which are not devolved. Policies are domesticated within individual HEIs, which in turn promulgate their own policies within their own specific contexts; these are further domesticated within departments, and by individuals. Processes of domestication may involve a range of responses, from enthusiastic application to wilful misunderstanding, active resistance complete apathy.

In addition to “top down” policy movement, policy can also flow “from the bottom up”. Policies can, for example, arise in response to changes “on the ground”, for example in responding to changing student demographics, or spread “from the

⁸ Thus, instead of being bound by *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011), HEIs in Scotland are subject to *Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government 2011).

middle out”, such as policies that respond to changes in practices such as those prompted by technology use. Policies are amplified, mutated or counteracted by other policies and practices, and thus should not be considered in isolation.

Policies which address “non-traditional” students

Higher Education in Scotland: A Baseline Report (Kemp & Reibig, n.d.:91) states that “widening access to HE from under-represented groups is a key priority for the Scottish Executive” aimed at “a Scotland where people have the chance to learn, irrespective of their background or current personal circumstances”. This policy ambition is reflected in a complex array of policies at different levels.

At a UK level, the Equality Act (2010) brought together a number of earlier policies outlawing discrimination against a range of identity-based characteristics. Eight of these characteristics were in turn protected through “specific duties” for Scottish HEIs (ECU, 2012), namely age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief (including none), sex, and sexual orientation.

Separately from this, socio-economic status is foregrounded within many Scottish policies. Gunn, Morrison & Hanesworth (2015:16-17) describe the “longer-standing, historical rhetoric of a collectivist and collaborating social context for Scottish HE” in which “socio-economic concerns play a dominant and historical role”. Gunn *et al.* argue (2015:18-19) that the Scottish policy approach can lead to a number of problems, including a focus on equality of access rather than equality of outcomes, resulting in efforts being directed to recruitment and admissions, with less attention being paid to the experience of students once they are in the system; a lack of consideration of intersectionality; confusion and conflation at the level of compliance with regulations, and a focus on institutional compliance at the expense of responsibility toward curriculum, pedagogy and staff orientation to improve student experience and outcomes; disjunctions between how the FE and HE sectors engage with the diversity and equality agenda potentially creating problems for students who

enter HE from FE via articulation routes. Some of these concerns can be seen to play out in the experiences reported by some of the students in this study (see below).

At the institutional level, Gunn *et al.* found (2015:20) evidence in reporting of

..growing understanding of the subtler manifestations of social injustice and inequality in the lecture-hall, workshop and laboratory (low numbers of identity groups within student cohorts creating a vicious cycle of low enrolments, unconscious bias in teaching styles, inadvertent exclusionary language use, physical access to the teaching space not being inclusive, etc.).

Reviewing documentation, they found evidence that some Scottish HEIs were attempting to embed equality and diversity within the curriculum, using “toolkits” or quality assurance frameworks or drawing on the expertise of equality and diversity units within the HEIs. Of the HEIs at which students in this study were enrolled, all were listed at least once as engaging in some way in activities aimed at rendering curricula more inclusive. It would thus not be incorrect to claim that all of these HEIs were sensitised at some level to issues of diversity and equality; however, it would be erroneous to assume that that translates into an institutional climate perceived as welcoming to all students from “identity groups”, or by all students who perceive themselves as “non-traditional” within their own study contexts.

Table 5.1 shows the percentage of Scottish domiciled entrants to HE (as full-time equivalent) for all levels of study, by “protected characteristics”, from “Learning for All: Measures of Success” (SFC, 2015:21). A comparison with the table expressed as headcount rather than FTE demonstrates a greater percentage of mature students, indicating that more mature students study on a part-time basis. The report also reveals a skewing by gender at subject level, with “subjects allied to Medicine” and “Education” predominantly female, and STEM⁹ subjects and “Architecture, Building and Planning” predominantly male. Looking at all students rather than just entrants, it is clear that the proportion of mature students has been dropping steadily, while the

⁹ Sciences, Technologies, Engineering and Mathematics.

percentage of students from the 20% most deprived households, and from the 40% most deprived households, has risen slightly.

| | Disability ¹⁰ | BME | Male | Female | Young | Mature |
|---------|--------------------------|-----|------|--------|-------|--------|
| 2009/10 | 8.3 | 6.2 | 41.6 | 58.4 | 47.3 | 52.7 |
| 2010/11 | 8.4 | 6.3 | 42.0 | 58.0 | 49.1 | 50.9 |
| 2011/12 | 8.7 | 6.6 | 42.3 | 57.7 | 51.6 | 48.4 |
| 2012/13 | 9.7 | 6.9 | 41.9 | 58.0 | 51.4 | 48.6 |
| 2013/14 | 10.3 | 7.2 | 42.1 | 57.9 | 50.9 | 49.1 |

Table 5.1 Percentage of Scottish domiciled entrants as FTE (at all levels of study) by protected characteristics. (SFC 2015:21)

In 2013/14, HESA collected data on care leavers for the first time, and there were 266 known care leavers in Scottish HEIs in that year out of 935 young people who were in care at some point during 2012/13 and who left school during that academic year. Figures for students from the Rest of the UK (RUK) studying at Scottish HEIs show a slightly higher proportion of male students, of students with a declared disability, and of BME students – though relative to the Scottish BME population, Scottish BME students are slightly over represented while RUK BME students are slightly underrepresented at Scottish HEIs (SFC, 2015:24). (Figures for students outwith the UK at Scottish HEIs were not provided).

These figures provide some background against which to consider the reported experiences of the students in this study. In some cases, their presence at university shows them to be exceptional – Greg, as a care leaver, had only a 28% likelihood of

¹⁰ Latest available figures. Increase in reported disability may be due to HESA changing the definition of disability, as well as improvements in reporting. BME = Black and Minority Ethnic. Young (under 21) and mature (21 and over). Note: in 2012/13, HESA introduced a category of “other” for gender. The SFC chose not to include this category owing to small numbers, but as a result “male” and “female” figures from and since 2012/13 may not add up to 100%

attending university, against a 51.5% likelihood for young people in general in Scotland (Kemp & Reibig, n.d.:71) while Sian's dyslexia / specific learning disability put her in the 10% of students with a declared disability. These students are not demographically representative of students at Scottish HEIs. They may, or may not, be representative of students who consider themselves "non-traditional" at Scottish HEIs. They do, in many cases, represent growing populations of students at Scottish HEIs and their experiences speak to those of students who may feel overlooked or marginalised and who thus may be at a greater risk of leaving before completion, or succeeding sub-optimally, without mitigation.

Policies which address student engagement

In the UK, student engagement was endorsed at the highest policy levels with the 2011 English White Paper for Education, "Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011), which mentioned SE seven times. In this white paper, SE was largely used as a proxy for quality, a position congruent with the North American tradition promoted by the large-scale use of surveys of student engagement. By way of contrast, the Scottish equivalent document, "Putting Learners at the Centre" (Scottish Government, 2011) makes mention merely twice of "learner engagement" – both in the context of Scotland's international reputation for its quality enhancement regime, which is based on three principles, of which learner, or student, engagement is one.

Student Engagement has been central to Scottish policy considerations of quality (framed as "quality enhancement", rather than "quality assurance") since 2003, when sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland – originally student participation in quality Scotland) was founded. The focus of SE as embodied by sparqs is on "quality and governance of the learning experience" (sparqs, 2016). This is consistent with the understanding of SE presented in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B5: Student Engagement (QAA, 2012) which sets out institutional requirements for all providers of HE in the UK.

This highly instrumental view of SE positions the construct uncritically and with authority, masking the many debates about what the construct means and how it is

used. Milburn-Shaw and Walker (2016:3) decry such one-dimensional, instrumental understandings as “reduc[ing] SE to measurable outcomes, and suggest[ing] a diminished vision of universities as training and accreditation institutions.” They call (2016:11) for an understanding of SE which does not “cultivate a behaviourally compliant individual in a politically compliant university” – perhaps not unlike that which I set out earlier, in Chapter Four.

Policies concerned with student persistence and retention

Higher Education in Scotland: A Baseline Report (Kemp & Reibig, n.d.:73) notes that the policy focus of the Scottish Executive was on student success through, among other mechanisms, improving retention. The report observes (n.d.:72) that “retention and progression rates are high but vary between institutions and types of student”, with entrants aged less than 21 more likely to persist than mature students (n.d.:85). The authors comment that they expected the widening access premium, for students from low participation neighbourhoods, to lead to improved progression for such students.

However, in 2007, the SFC released an additional £10 million as a “Widening Access Retention Premium” for universities with higher numbers of students from low-income areas, to address “relatively high drop-out rates” (SFC, 2007), suggesting that this had not achieved its projected ends.

While figures improved since then, the most recent HESA figures (2013-14) show an increase in first year non-continuance for Scotland to 8%, up from 2012-13’s figure of 7.5%, (The 2013-14 figure for the UK was 7.2%.) with a projected non-graduation rate of 9.2% (see discussion in Chapter 6). While retention remains a policy focus for the Scottish Executive (Denholm, 2016), it is clear that current policies and associated funding alone are insufficient to address the relatively (to the rest of the UK) higher proportion of students in Scotland that do not persist at university.

Other relevant policies

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 defines all post-16 education bodies including Scottish HEIs as “corporate parents” (Scottish Government, 2014:Part 9). This confers on them the responsibility to make themselves aware of the needs of care leavers among their students, and to assist those care leavers to use the services and support they provide to them. Scottish HEIs are required to promote the interests of these young people, to facilitate their participation and to plan and report on their duties as “corporate parents”. With HESA collecting data on care leavers since 2013-14, universities should find it easier to identify and support students who are care leavers through appropriate policies and service provision.

Although not all universities in Scotland collect information on whether a student is a parent or not, NUS Scotland (2016:12) estimates that “anywhere from 7.8% to 20% of the overall student population is made up of student parents”. Mostly these are mature students, in full time study, with almost half (46.5%) of the respondents in the NUS Scotland study being in their first year of study. Student parents are eligible for benefits while studying, yet NUS Scotland (2016:25) notes that despite there being a large contingent of supportive staff in universities and student associations able to advise student parents and others on benefits and support that may be available to them, many students do not access (or do not know how to) access these services.

In addition, NUS Scotland (2016:25) observes that a significant number of mature students (who are more likely to be student parents) do not access student loans, although their benefit entitlement is calculated on the assumption of their having taken their maximum loan entitlement irrespective of whether or not they do so – which can leave some students receiving no financial support at all. NUS Scotland (2016:26) predicts that, with the introduction of universal credit, the situation will worsen, potentially contributing to early withdrawal due to lack of financial support.

The NUS Scotland survey on which the report (2016:appendix) is based identified that most universities provided information online for student parents, but that only six (out of the eighteen surveyed) had identifiable policies specific to student parents, and that support (in the form of on-campus nurseries, partnerships with local nurseries, provision of family accommodation, breastfeeding / child-friendly areas and maternity leave allowances) was uneven across the sector.

How do students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context describe how they’re positioned by their university, and how do they construct “the university”?

Despite “non-traditional” students being positioned discursively as subject to deficit (see earlier discussion in Chapter Three), the students interviewed for this study all reported drawing on their backgrounds as a source of strength, and noted ways in which that which marked them out as different also provided them with capacities which facilitated their success.

Capitals

Illustrative examples are provided below, grouped here for discussion purposes into different types of capital, drawing on Bourdieu (1986). Interestingly, the students typically spoke of forms of cultural capital – whether embodied as “culture”, knowledge or practices, objectified as artefacts or institutionalised as qualifications or certifications – in describing what they had, while forms of social and economic capital were more often ascribed to others, or in absence to themselves.

Two types of **cultural capital** – embodied and objectified - are touched on in the first example. Gabi argued that as a Black Jewish woman she had two cultural repositories to draw on:

When I look back, all those seders, all those hours in shul, and learning Hebrew... It taught me something, I'm not sure what, maybe about belonging in a tradition that goes back thousands of years, or... And

also, the little Black Like Me dolls, the kikois and beads and stuff to connect me to a Black culture somewhere in Africa that's supposed to be mine. I suppose it makes me different, but also in a good way, having two histories, two traditions, two identities where most people only have one. I can be multicultural just by showing up! But yeah, studying history, I think it helps. Carrying two long histories around inside me, I don't know, stuff just makes more sense?

It is perhaps unsurprising that she relates embodied cultural capital to her Jewish cultural repository (through knowledge and experience) while her African / Black cultural repository is founded on artefacts – presumably acquired by well-intentioned but uninformed family who themselves lack the embodied cultural capital to pass on. Uche, by contrast, drew on his embodied African cultural resources to enable him to relate to others who seemed, at first, very different:

People here seem... impatient, in a hurry, with other people. Africans, we take the time to connect, always to ask, how are you, before we give money for the milk, or ask where is the station. When everyone is so different, just stopping to ask, is your family well, it makes a connection, and you remember next time, that is the man who has the little boy just starting school, or that is the lady whose children live very far away and she misses them, and then you have a relationship you can start from. When you are new in a place those things help.

The RANLHE study of “non-traditional” students identified (Field et al., 2010:15) something similar in one of their informants, whose

multi-cultural background could be seen as rich in capital, enabling him to deal with unempathic and even racist encounters.

Another of the RANLHE informants was described (West, 2010:6) as having

...limited confidence with English, which is a third/fourth language. This cannot simply be read, however, as absence or cultural deficit. Mathew recognises the value of the languages he does know, viewing them as opportunities for better understanding of others' worlds.

This dual view of cultural capitals was not uncommon among the students I interviewed, who recognised that for each attribute they “lacked”, they had in its place another of value, such as Lindy, who observed that

...if I'd gone to school here, like my sister, I'd know what to talk about, what music to listen to, to be cool... But then I wouldn't have had other opportunities, and maybe wouldn't see things like I see them now. I can look from outside, and from inside sort of, and choose what makes sense for me, not just adopting views because that's how people here see things.

For Alex cultural capital had instrumental value, too. As a journalism student, she found that her experience of living with mental health issues allowed her to approach stories with more empathy, and a greater ability to understand the “logic” behind the unfolding narratives she wrote about. Similarly Karin found the attention to detail and need for order that her condition (OCD) imposed on her, and the habitus she'd developed around that, allowed her to approach her studies in a beneficial manner, and Greg reported that the resilience he had developed through being in care allowed him to “stick with it” when coding assignments were tedious.

Greg's experience as a care leaver in HE finds resonance in the literature. For example, Cotton, Nash, Kneale (2014:7) discuss

... aspects of resilience which have enabled [academically-successful care leavers] to overcome difficulties faced ('risk factors'), through having access to so-called 'protective factors' [which] include: strong self-motivation; relationship with a significant adult; stable positive identity; supportive school experiences; feeling in control; social networks; and undertaking extracurricular activities or volunteering.

Their list of “protective factors” touches on several aspects of student engagement, suggesting that care leavers who are engaged as students demonstrate greater resilience (or, conversely, students who demonstrate greater resilience are more likely to engage as students).

Steve found that being older, and having “lived a life before studying” helped him locate his business and study ambitions within a more failure-tolerant mindset while for Andy, his background on the “other side” of the law helped him appreciate the context of his studies:

When we're learning about like social problems and everyone's like "why don't they just find a job" and stuff and you know 'cos you've been there and you can say, maybe there is no work. Or maybe there is work but not for them, they look wrong or sound wrong or whatever or maybe just their family has always been on benefits and no one has sat with them to think about them maybe finding a job some day... It's like, unless you've been there, you don't really know what it's like, and if you're working with people and you can't get why they does what they does then you will come across like you're judging and how's that going to help?

Both Steve and Andy revealed, during interviews, what the RANLHE project referred to (West, 2010:4) as a “learned capacity to engage with diversity, including in others” because of cultural capital they’d accumulated in their earlier lives. Steve also noted that

...when you work, you need to manage your time – get up when you need, to get to work, don't waste time so you get done and don't have to stay late to catch up. It helps, when you study, too. Some of the others don't seem to understand that yet...

While often having more complex lives than “traditional-age” students, leaving them with less time overall to commit to their studies, mature students have often developed the skills to deal with those complex lives, such as the time management described by Steve. Similarly, Carney and McNeish (2005:4) report on studies that found that

older students had better time-management skills than younger students... [and] perform better than traditional age students and have a positive influence on a course.

The rich and varied lives that “non-traditional” students have lived thus far have thus bequeathed these students a range of embodiments of cultural capital which they can draw on in their studies. Hampton-Garland (2015:1) describes embodied cultural capital as

... the core of who we are and how we define ourselves. It is through this capital that an individual identifies their authentic self. Embodied cultural capital is derived from one's life-long investment in education from all sources including community, family and schooling... Embodied capital can be increased by investing time into self-improvement in the form of learning. However, the individual must believe that the action or improvement is natural and right in order for it to become embodied.

Thus for Blair, attending university seemed like a natural step, despite his working class background:

And I was smart, so my teachers said, so I thought that Uni must be a place for people like me. I mean, Uni is for smart people, right? And that's supposed to be me.

Economic capital was less of a positive consideration for many of these students, who were – as described by Marian – “not exactly flush with cash”. This led to choices, such as that outlined by Lindy:

[my partner studies] part time so he earns an income. I've just got my savings from when I worked and I get some money from my parents. So not much money for going out partying, even if we wanted.

Blair's choice of where to study was influenced by his relative lack of economic capital:

I thought, this is close enough, I can take a bus, and live at home, then I won't have to take big loans to afford rent, and all that, and they offered me a place so I took it.

However, he felt himself out of place at his (New) university, regretting his choice, and later also revisited his choice to live at home, moving in with classmates:

It does cost more, so I'm working weekends, which gives me less time to visit, but maybe that's OK too.

A lack of economic capital can put pressure on such students, who may then be at risk in terms of persistence, as has also been noted by the RANLHE team (West, 2010:5):

material pressures faced by [such] students, can drive them to leave fulltime university education.

However, for some “non-traditional” students, there are benefits, as observed in a study by Carney & McNeish (2005:5):

[Respondent] suggested that most mature students have the potential of earning more money than their younger counterparts who may have less work experience and hence are confined to the less well-paid jobs.

Because “non-traditional” students are not a homogenous group, it is unsurprising that some will have attributes that benefit them in some ways while others appear to lack those. The changes in circumstances which led both Steve and Marian to study involved loss – of employment, and in Steve’s case, of family too – and while they may in theory have had work experience which allowed them to access better paying jobs than some of their younger (and less experienced) classmates, they also had other pressures on their time which constrained their ability to fully realise such opportunities.

As noted earlier, Courtney, a student parent, captured the interplay of a relative lack of time and money:

It's not just poor in money – though money is obviously scarcer when there's kids. It's time, really. Time is what you have least of. You always

feel like time on studies is being stolen from something else. Maybe it's a middle class thing, but parents always make it look so easy. The spotless house, the spotless kids, all the accomplishments lined up neatly. Maybe they're secretly knocking back the Valium, I don't know, but I just can't do that! Most days I'm happy if we're all alive by the end of the day, fed and sort of clean and almost ready for tomorrow. I'll never have the kind of composure they manage – I'm always thinking, is there carrot in my hair?

Considerations of **social capital** were more mixed. At one extreme, Blair initially considered his social capital more of a liability than an asset, and declared that

I don't really have contact with anyone from back home besides my own family...

Meanwhile Tristan revealed the extent to which social capital had smoothed his path when he needed it:

I got a job. Retail, nothing fancy. I didn't want to do the Gap Year thing like some spoiled brat, and my parents made it clear they expected me to earn my own keep if I wasn't going to study. So my mum spoke to someone she knew at work, and his brother offered me a job selling mobile phones in a tiny shop down a back alley...

One of the benefits of a longitudinal dimension to the study was the way it allowed informants to reflect on changes to their perceptions. This was especially useful for considerations of social capital, since the students were forming – and severing – relationships continually, rendering social capital a fluid notion, as captured by Courtney:

Remember how I was like, my friends just don't get me anymore? I don't even think of those kids as my friends anymore. They are so – history! Meeting these other parents has just been, wow, like winning the prize! Even if we can't hang out the way I used to with my other friends before – well, we do sometimes hang out, with our kids, but they're all different ages so it's not that easy, but it's just great to have people you can text and have a quick coffee with or just, you know, if you're late to a meeting, they'll cover for you because they know what you're up against. I never expected this but it's been such a bonus!

Bourdieu's conception of capital relates to habitus and field. Habitus – defined by Robbins (1993:159) as “the disposition to act which individuals acquire in the earliest stages of socialisation and which they consolidate by their subsequent choices in life” – is interwoven with cultural capital, and is valorised (or not) within the field in which it functions. Thus, according to Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992:127)

..social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And 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.

For students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts, this is not the case. The RANLHE team describe (West, 2010:12) how

Being and becoming a student in the diverse spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires different levels of understanding. This includes the psychological alongside the socio-cultural, to be understood in dynamic, not deterministic ways. There can be dissonance as different capitals meet – the working class world of South London and the middle class habitus of an elite university – and students may struggle to claim space.

This has resonance with Reay, Crozier & Clayton's observation (2009:1105) that

when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty.

They ascribe this dynamic to the example of working class students encountering the unfamiliar field of the elite university – though, by extension, it could be said to be true for any student who considers themselves to be “non-traditional”, by definition.

Rather than considering the university (elite or otherwise) as “field”, some authors have instead credited universities with “institutional habitus”. Thus, Reay *et al.* (2001:1.3) define institutional habitus as “the impact of a cultural group or social

class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation", and Thomas (2002:431) observes that

Institutional habitus should be understood as more than the culture of the educational institution; it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice.

The RANLHE study noted (West, 2010:2) "culturally exclusive habitus" at some universities, which might lead to what Thomas (2002:431) described as

a student from a non-traditional background ...feel[ing] like 'a fish out of water', and thus [wanting to] return to their familiar habitus.

Such students would be at risk of not persisting. The following discussion explores the resources, in terms of structures, systems and processes, that students in my study drew on when confronted with this "unfamiliar field" which did not valorise their capitals, at universities whose "institutional habitus" was at variance with their own.

What resources (structures, systems, processes) do they draw on; which do they reject; how do they consider themselves enabled or constrained by these?

As noted earlier, Cree, Christie & Tett's (forthcoming) study stressed the importance of relationships for the success of students who considered themselves "non-traditional". This was borne out in the findings from my study, with several of the students I interviewed singling out individuals within their universities who had intervened at critical points for them.

Tutors and other teaching staff were often mentioned in an engaging or supportive capacity. For example, Tristan noted early on that

My tutor engages me. We talk about all sorts of stuff, not just essays or readings. We seem to like the same kind of films, and he's given me a list of films he thinks I'll like and I've been downloading them to watch when I've got the time... I think I do matter to my tutor. He enjoys

talking to me. When he sees me in the corridor he stops me to chat. I think he'd miss me if I left.

Lindy, likewise, felt that “my personal tutor is nice, though. A bit like an academic godmother”, while Frankie observed that

It really mattered when I went on my first placement. Being able to email my tutor and say “help!”, and to hear that I wasn't being a numpty, that most students [from that university] felt shite at [organisation] and that I'd done really well to get a placement there... It just made me feel, maybe I can do this.

Positive experiences were, however, tempered with less positive ones. Kris described how their tutor's lack of understanding of their situation had made their decision to suspend their studies much easier:

You know, when I went to tell my tutor I wasn't coming back, and he started telling me about how he had struggled to fit in when he started, and how it's not easy being such a competitive field, and I was thinking, you're not really talking to me, are you? You're talking to [Kris's legal name], and he's not here anymore, and then, and then - he said something ... I think I actually laughed when he said that. Or shook my head. Or something. 'Cause he stopped, and looked at me, and asked what was wrong. And I said, you really don't understand it at all, do you.. And he was just looking at me, and I was just, “forget it. You tried. Thank you for trying.” And I left. Didn't go back.

Lindy's epiphany about her studies, sparked by an assignment, was slightly muted by her tutor “not quite getting it”, and (as observed earlier) Courtney struggled with the “infantilising” treatment her class received from some teaching staff:

...[becoming a student] was like stepping back into something I left behind when I became a parent... If anyone is late with an assignment, the tutor is like “honestly, can't you even manage...” and I'm like, huh? That's how I speak to my toddler when she's naughty!

During the second interview, Tristan related how he had discovered that his tutor's benevolence was not unconditional:

I went to speak to my tutor. I asked if I could just do resits or something because of the tour and he was really weird...He gave me this lecture, how I should take my studies more seriously because I showed real promise, like he was my dad or something, and I felt really shit.

Despite this, however, Tristan recognized that

I think I still matter to my tutor. I think he's still hoping I'll pull through, that I'll realise how important all this is and that I'll really focus on it and make it my top priority, even if my music has to take second place for a while. And I sort of get his point. I know he was disappointed...

Blair, despite his oppositional positioning, took pride in a tutor's overheard comment that he "... was a good chemist, but a horrible student!" and resolved to work hard and achieve outstanding results which would position him well to secure a funded position on a postgraduate programme at a "high status" university.

It was not only academic staff who were singled out as important in students feeling engaged, supported and able to continue. **Support staff** played a valuable role for Greg and Steve in particular. Greg recounted how:

I was pretty clueless, even before I arrived. I didn't know how to fill the forms in – which forms, where, how – and there wasn't really anyone I could ask. So I went to the university, and found the department, and there were all these closed doors and I was about to go when this woman came – she said she was the administrator - and asked if she could help... Now she always keeps a lookout for me, and there's always a cup of tea waiting if I just want a chat or, you know...

Greg admitted that, as a care leaver, many of his relationships with adults or people in authority were "ambivalent". He was slow to trust, cautious in new situations and wary of exposing his vulnerability. Having formed a bond with the departmental administrator, Greg felt that he had someone he could approach if he needed to, and that allowed him to lower his defences at the university.

Steve, having transitioned into university from college via an articulation route, was still struggling to adapt to university life when

..this guy who helps in the labs called me over. He showed me how to [save money on printing costs] and asked if I was new. We had a chat and he said what about a beer later, and... It's just nice having someone to show you the ropes. Not just the obvious stuff, the things that really matter.

Articulation between colleges and universities has been heralded as a widening access strategy in HE in Scotland (Kemp & Reibig, n.d.:85), allowing more students from working class backgrounds, and more mature students, to access HE. Yet, as Steve's experience demonstrates, accepting students with HNC qualifications into "advanced standing articulation" – directly into second year – has its disadvantages. There are many small things that students learn tacitly during their first year, and newcomers entering second year have not had the opportunity to learn these, but are assumed to know. Students who feel marginal may struggle to approach others to ask for help, and may not even know what it is they don't know until confronted by an unfamiliar situation they have no way of navigating. Friendly, non-judgmental support mattered to Steve in that situation.

Gabi had been struggling to adjust, and feeling overwhelmed when she found unexpected support at a tough time:

My library books were late. Really late. I just couldn't face going in... I was having problems returning the books. I actually needed to renew one but I had major fines. The librarian came over and asked what the problem was. She had a look on the system and saw how much I owed. I just burst into tears ... She took me round the back and gave me a cup of coffee, and asked if I was struggling. So I told her... She had a serious chat with me, but she really listened, too. She said she'd felt the same when she was a student. She handed me the book I needed. She'd overridden the block from the fine, or something... It really helped, just knowing someone wanted to help. I didn't feel like I was alone in this big machine anymore. There was a human face, and it really helped.

Gabi admitted that until that point she had been in denial about how badly she was faring. She had tried to submerge herself in her studies, but was finding it increasingly difficult to focus and had found herself reading and re-reading the same page several times, unable to retain what she'd been reading. Having been confronted with her struggle, she was able to admit to herself that she needed to “get a grip” and followed advice from a study skills pamphlet she had been given which helped her to regain some sense of control. She confessed that she'd had the pamphlet since she arrived, but had simply filed it along with campus maps, special offers from the students union shops and other “bright coloured stuff” handed out during Welcome Week. Without the discussion with the librarian, she felt, she would probably not have read it, and may have fallen too far behind as a result.

A common thread ran through many of the accounts from students. Personal relationships were valued more than the content of the engagement or the outcome of the engagement: that someone was willing simply to take the time to connect with them was enough. For students feeling alone, alienated or overwhelmed, having someone reach out with empathy made all the difference and allowed them to regroup their resources and continue.

Yet although individuals – academic and support staff – were singled out as being engaging or supportive, **structures** and processes were not. This is illustrated by a comment from Kris:

Look, I don't think it's the people's fault. They're just working with stupid systems. Systems that were designed by people a long time ago who didn't have much clue about people who weren't like themselves. It's a bit like the police, like institutional racism. It's not about an individual police constable having to make a call about whether that black kid in a hoodie hanging about is up to no good or not. It's about a whole system that's designed to assume that certain people in certain contexts are more likely to pose a threat, and that what a threat is, is defined by people who aren't black kids in hoodies, and that what a desirable situation is, is the same for everyone because it's that way for you.

Structures designed to be supportive were seldom accessed by these students, with most expressing a lack of clarity about the remit of many of these. There was also wariness about using such services, as Sian describes:

You can, like, get someone to read your materials for you, and it's recorded, so you don't have to struggle yourself, but I've never asked for that. They know I'm dyslexic, and I get extra time in exams and stuff, but if I ask for someone to read my stuff... It's very specialised, legal stuff, not something just anyone off the street would be able to do... But mostly, you don't want them to think you're not coping, that it was a mistake for them to accept you. You don't want to be the charity case.

Greg, who had accessed discretionary funds to help him out financially, had mixed feelings about the experience:

It was forms to fill in, it wasn't a problem really, but... I felt I'd failed, in needing it. Even though they were very nice, they didn't make me feel "you've already had so much money and now you're wanting more", I still felt I'd rather not have... It's great it's there, it definitely did help, but... Others manage, why couldn't I? Having to be the one who says, I'm not managing – I suppose it just confirms what they expect.

Concerns were also expressed by some of the students about who qualified for support services – whether they were “needy enough”, Karin felt (as previously noted):

This [OCD] is a real thing, you get a grant at home, but here, you feel – if I go and ask for help, will they say, “you are not really ill, look at that person in the wheelchair, or that one who is blind”?

Another concern was whether they wanted to be marked as those so needy they warranted support, as Alex expressed:

Calling it disability service... I've got the letter from my doctor, I could go. But do I want to be “that crazy chick” who needs special help, can't I just take my pills and not have everyone staring at this huge label? If you walk in there, into that building, everyone will know.

These comments do not only reflect a fear of stigma. They also reveal issues of identity, of having to admit somehow not managing, of needing support when “others” succeed without. This evokes the deficit construction of “non-traditional” students – that these are students who are “lacking” and that resources are needed to shore up these deficits. Several of the students in the study admitted to conflict in this regard: they rejected a deficit model which constructed them (and others like them) as inherently lacking, based purely on their “non-traditional” attributes, while at the same time experiencing “imposter syndrome” as a result of having internalised such discourses themselves. Celia described it thus:

You swing wildly. You know they think you shouldn't really be there, that you're going to fail, that you need to work twice as hard to make up for some kind of something you don't have, that they never really tell you what it is. You know that, so you can't let them see if you're not coping, you've got to, got to just be extra good to show... but also you think, sometimes, like, not all the time, but just sometimes, when you did really well at something, did they give me those extra marks because they felt sorry for me? Like you're just waiting for them to catch you out, to tell you, Hah! You don't really think you earned that do you? You don't really think you belong... And you know that's not true, you earned your place as good as anyone else, but, sometimes, it's nothing they say, but you just think...

Structures, processes and systems which flagged their difference thus played on these students' own insecurities regarding their right to their university places, their successes and their belonging. Such structures were set up, they felt, as an institutional signal that students like them needed to be accommodated and tolerated in a system in which they would otherwise not succeed. By making use of these structures or resources, they were affirming this judgment not only on their own capabilities, but on the capabilities of other students like themselves.

David, an international student, observed that at his university, support for international students focused on language support and support around visa issues, as well as what he described as “fake” integration, where international students could meet other international students and form “ghettos”:

I did go, and I met lots of Chinese students, and students from South-East Asia... We spoke sort of “Chinglish” and I also learned a little of their language but I was always asking, should we be learning Scottish? It’s not the same as the English we learned, and the accent also, and it would be more helpful to me here than learning Mandarin I would think only they mix us with ourselves and not help us to get to know local students and learn to understand what they are saying.

Uche, another international student, also felt that his university misrepresented their “international” reputation. He recounted that the university did little to engage “home” students with international students – the focus was on getting international students to adapt and blend in:

You’re the problem, you must change. Its not about them becoming international, it’s about you becoming like them.

Both David and Uche’s observations about the perceived unwillingness of their universities to embrace their alleged international orientation by supporting international students to socialise with each other, or to assimilate into dominant (local) ways of behaving and being, suggest an institutional habitus that is fixed and unable, or unwilling, to change to a more inclusive orientation. This institutional response is not unusual; Archer & Leathwood noted (2003:176) that:

it is the working-class individual who must adapt and change, in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education institutional culture.

Vanessa hadn’t really considered university until someone from the university gave a talk at her school. She was impressed by how much the university representative seemed to care that “working class kids also got a chance in life”. The experience encouraged Vanessa to attend the open day, where she found staff to be very friendly and helpful, and she came away with armsful of information. She related how she had “looked forward to starting, but when I got there... It’s like they’ve got you, and now you’re just left to sink or swim”. When asked what support she’d have wanted when she arrived, Vanessa was silent for a while before responding:

I know we're supposed to be like self-directed learners and shite, but... if they'd told us it was going to be so different, told us how it was going to be different, so we could have known what to expect... I knew learning other languages was going to be hard, but we haven't all grown up having holidays in Barcelona or watching French movies and maybe if they'd told us... Or [shrug]... maybe just not assume everyone has had the same life before uni?

Gunn *et al.* (2015:18) referred to universities focussing on compliance with regulations “at the expense of responsibility toward curriculum, pedagogy and staff orientation to improve student experience and outcomes”. Vanessa’s experience provides a case in point: having complied with policy to facilitate her entry into the university, the university appeared to consider their duty discharged. Rather than interrogating a curriculum that made assumptions about the prior experiences of students – and, importantly, did not convey these as requirements or recommendations to prospective students – or sensitising staff to a more inclusive orientation, the focus appears to have been disproportionately on the recruitment of students such as Vanessa with little attention paid to facilitating their success once they were in the system.

Vanessa, similarly to several of the other students, was at great pains to stress that it was no individual who was at fault. Instead, while there may have been individuals within the university who were kind or helpful to them, the system itself was experienced as alien, hostile and unwelcoming. The following discussion considers some of the specific concerns raised by students in the study that emerged from their relationships with their universities.

What concerns emerge in their relationships with their university (and other structures), and how do they characterise their engagement with their universities?

In contrast to earlier discussions where it was easier to discern shared foci and track greater coherence of themes among the informants, discussions around concerns

showed greater individuality and came to resemble in my mind a room of chattering monkeys. In general, it was students who identified as women who were more likely to comment in depth about such concerns, with students who identified as men more likely to frame responses in a word or two, augmented by a shrug if pushed to expand. The exception to this was Tristan, who was always happy to share his insights.

One of the concerns raised by some of the students, related to issues of habitus as discussed above, was the need for compartmentalisation. Andy spoke of having to “climb into [his] old self” when visiting former friends, and Uche related having an “African person” and an emerging “European person” within himself that would change places as he changed clothes at the airport. Marian described a similar process:

I think I do that too, between Uni and home. I'm one person at Uni, and someone else at home. Only it's more mode switching than code switching. It's not just a discourse, it's a whole different way of being. I can't be who I am at home, at Uni - it calls for a different way of looking at things, and a different way of acting.

The need for compartmentalisation, or developing different personae for each context, also related to whether or not the students felt they mattered. Students who felt they mattered seemed to have less of a need to compartmentalise, or to adopt radically different modes of being at university and at home. Uche, for example, laughed when asked if he thought he mattered to his university, shaking his head and expressing surprise at the idea. Tristan, by contrast, is able to sustain a persona at university that is more consistent with his home persona, and reports feeling that he matters on an interpersonal level:

I do think I matter to my tutor. He enjoys talking to me. When he sees me in the corridor he stops me to chat. I think he'd miss me if I left. But I don't think I matter in any grand scheme. I don't think any of us do.

A number of students made related comments expressing doubt as to whether any students mattered to their universities in ways beyond the instrumental. Marian, commenting as a Scottish (thus, not fee paying) student from a working-class background, offered the following observation:

In a sense we're here under sufferance; we're not bringing in all the hard cash those students bring in, though I know we do matter too because [this uni] is one that gets told off for not having enough disadvantaged students in, and so those of us who meet their criteria for that are at least a bit of a bulwark against that threat of sanction if they don't comply. So we matter in that way, even if they don't really know what to do with us as individuals.

Lindy made similar comments about the instrumentality of certain groups mattering, while the individuals in those groups simultaneously are not given a sense of mattering:

I'm not sure I matter. I think the students who matter are the foreign students who bring in loads of money and the English students who pay fees and I think the home students matter especially the students from working class families because they show up on the stats like some kind of prize, hey, we're doing well, we've got more poor Scottish students than [another university] so we're OK. I'm not trying to be nasty, I do think those people should matter and should be made to feel like they matter, not just like they're a gigantic chequebook, but I'm not sure they do feel like they matter in the way they should. They matter as a group, as an income stream. I don't think that as individuals they feel like they matter.

For Alex, mattering was a more personal issue, but one she felt was unresolved. She felt invested, and that studying and the university mattered to her, but she was unsure whether that was reciprocated:

I like my course, I enjoy the work, and I do feel I belong, it's like it saved my life, I don't know what I would have done otherwise. It matters to me... Do I feel I matter? I don't really know. I never really thought of that.

Carney & McNeish's study of mature students reported (2005:6) that those students perceived the university as pompous and uncaring, and that as students they felt isolated and unnoticed:

The perception was that a number of lectures could be missed and no one would know or care. There was a sense of wanting someone to 'show they cared'.

As the work of Schlossberg (1989), Tinto (1975), and Dixon Rayle & Chung (2007) indicates, feelings of integration and perceptions of mattering were positively correlated with persistence and success. Their work suggests that students who felt less integrated or that they mattered less were more vulnerable to underperforming and / or leaving early.

Another of the concerns that emerged was blame and responsibility. Marian speculated that a “lack of preparedness” for HE was the “non-traditional” students’ responsibility:

maybe ... it's all our own fault. Because that is the big fear, really - that they expect you to know because you were told, just like the others [kids from middle class homes] were, only you were too dumb or too distracted to pay attention and to remember it. So it's really our own fault for not knowing all these things, that's what we're scared of, letting them see that we're the ones who were fooling around in the back when the important stuff was being discussed.

For Marian, this concern extended beyond the classroom, too. She displayed an initial cynicism toward the concept of “student engagement”, framing it as yet another way to demonise “non-traditional” students who “failed” to take up opportunities for extra-curricular activities because of a lack of resources, time or interest. To her, simply keeping up with coursework demonstrated engagement when one was struggling against the odds, and she saw no opportunity to “pad out” her CV with impressive accomplishments:

I'm sure if you're choosing between two applicants for a teaching post at a primary school, you'd rather have the one who has loads of interesting stories to tell, but it's just another stick to beat us with at the end of the day. More opportunities we "had", that we didn't take, more things we should have done that we didn't do.

For Alex, “blame” and “responsibility” reflected a sense of confusion around agency in her personal life, sparked by her feelings of complicity in her own abuse:

She'll think it's my fault... I know it isn't really, but I let it happen, for 8 years. So I suppose that does make me responsible too. No, don't say I'm not. I... I need to get my shit together. I must stop letting stuff happen to me.

A perceived lack of agency or power was picked up in another comment by Lindy, who observed the effects of vulnerability among international students:

They're always having to prove they're legit and always worrying because they heard about someone who got sent home because he missed a check in when his computer crashed and he hadn't checked his uni email for a couple of days so he didn't know. I mean, that's never going to happen to me - I'm allowed here, no one is breathing down my neck threatening to send me home if I sign a petition or take part in a march. And there's always stuff going on on Facebook, petitions about the bees or the bedroom tax and stuff, and if you don't sign it looks like you don't care, and even if you do care passionately you can't risk taking part in a protest if you're a foreign student because your visa can be cancelled without warning or even a reason. I was talking to a guy from China the other day and the people at the airport nearly didn't let him back in when he went to a conference in France although his visa was fine, they just gave him a hard time because they could. And he's not even Muslim. I think they get the worst of it.

Feeling vulnerable could also lead to other negative effects, as described by Carney & McNeish (2005:5) who reported how

One student used her student loan to pay her monthly mortgage repayments of £200. She was concerned about her financial situation and often lost sleep worrying about juggling part-time work and study to help ease the situation.

Concerns around stigma, whether related to the specifics of their contexts or more generally around “being different”, were highlighted by several of the students. Alex referred to it as “secret non-traditional... the hidden ‘other’”, while commenting that she preferred to be “invisible”:

We're here, but we're hidden. Sometimes we're discovered, when things go wrong, but a lot of the time we manage to carry on, undetected. [pause] Nobody knows I'm different. My parents... Sometimes I think they suspect something, but they don't know. I've never told them. I can't. The Uni doesn't know. When you fill out forms asking if you consider yourself disabled, I always say no. It's like... If I say yes, there will be questions. I can't let on, now. I've pretended everything's fine until now. If I let it slip now.... Sometimes I'm just scared. ... I don't want anyone to find out.

Yet while some sought to blend in and craved invisibility, for others the reverse was true. For Lindy, rigid categorisation which marked someone as either a “home” student, or “foreign”, failed to capture the nuance of her lived experience which defied binary classification:

There doesn't seem to be anything in between - either you're a homegirl or you're from Outer Space.

Marian spoke of feeling “a little lost and a little bit invisible”, as an older undergraduate from a working class background:

No, I don't really think the uni really understands students like us, I don't think we're visible enough, we look like we fit in - mostly - so they assume we do.

She contrasted her position with that of “visibly foreign” students, who are expected to have language or other needs:

So I think it's a bit easier for them. Everyone knows where they stand. Whereas for us, we all think we know, or should know, and then we find out we don't, and it's awkward. I don't feel I can sign up for those classes for foreign students, but I also feel perhaps I should. It's like an invisible disability. They don't know we have it - unlike the foreign students, where it's expected - and mostly we don't know we have it, either.

For Marian, the onus for challenging this lack of visibility lay with herself, and with students like herself:

If I wanted to engage students like me, I suppose I'd teach them about Rosa Parks. About not sitting in the back of the bus. Because I think that's what we do, we sit at the back of the bus, we're just so happy to be allowed on the bus, we don't think we have the right to sit at the front, too. I think we need to sit at the front of the bus more, and then perhaps they'll see us better. How can we expect to be visible if we always sit at the back of the bus?

One of the impediments to challenging or changing the situation that “othered” them, that students noted, was transience. As Lindy observed:

I think it's quite hard to do. We're students, we're only here for a few years and then there will be others and they will likely want something completely different again so I can see why they might think it's probably best just to ride it out if the students get too twitchy or demanding.

Tristan similarly remarked on this transience with reference to his own time as a student:

But I've lived, I've worked, and I'm in the band and I know that this is just now, tomorrow will be different and there will be opportunities and this is just... It's a space you're in, for a moment. It's not life... Next year there will be other people. And then other people. We are just a moment. [taps feet, looks away]. Maybe I should write a song about that.

While concerns reported by the students about their relationships with their universities reflected both perceived injustices of distribution and perceived injustices of recognition (see discussion in Chapter Seven), it was issues of misrecognition that seemed to elicit the strongest responses in students. This was also reflected in the ways in which they sought to characterise their engagement with their universities.

Characterising their Engagement

Prior to the third, final interviews, I contacted the students and asked them to bring along an image or object that, to them, exemplified the nature of their engagement with their universities. Below I present a selection of these, anonymised where necessary so as to protect the identity of the students concerned.

Several of the students chose images or objects that reflected a perception of being misrecognised. These included images reflecting stereotypes, masks, misdirected mail, images of assimilation and camouflage and promotional material in which the student's demographic was present, but out of focus. Examples of these included:



- Emma – Legally Blonde promotional image

Emma, a former model, chose a promotional image for the film “Legally Blonde”, since it signified to her the stereotyping of an able, intelligent woman as a “bimbo” based solely on her appearance as an attractive blonde woman.



- Kris – misaddressed letter from the university

Kris brought along a crumpled letter addressed to the previous occupant of their flat, on which Kris had written “return to sender. No longer at this address”. As a transgender womxn poised on the cusp of transitioning, Kris felt that the university’s engagement attempts were directed to someone who no longer existed, while they felt unacknowledged in their own right.



- Mike – disguise

Mike, a man identifying as heterosexual studying fashion design, chose an image of a woman in masculinised disguise, reflecting his misrecognition within his course based on assumptions of gender and sexuality.



- Alex – smiley mask

Alex brought along an image of a “smiley” emoticon mask. She felt this characterised the “fake, jolly” nature of engagement with her university where authenticity from either side would be too risky. Instead, the (New) university pretended to “have it all together” – and so did she.



- Uche - Borg poster

Uche depicted his engagement with his university through a Star Trek poster proclaiming that everyone would be assimilated. This summed up his sense of being required to adapt to the dominant habitus at the university, and adopt a persona that was foreign to him but more acceptable to the university than his own.



- David – camouflage

David brought an image of a soldier in camouflage, reflecting the pressure he felt he was under to “blend in” and not stand out as different, as an international student.



- Brian – ballet picture with male dancer out of focus

Brian’s choice was a promotional image for a ballet course that depicted a group of dancers at the barre. The dancers were almost all young white women, with the sole man being visible toward the back, out of focus, reflecting his sense of being included but not really acknowledged on his course.

A few other students selected objects and images that expressed greater defiance or oppositionality in their engagement with their universities. These included the following:



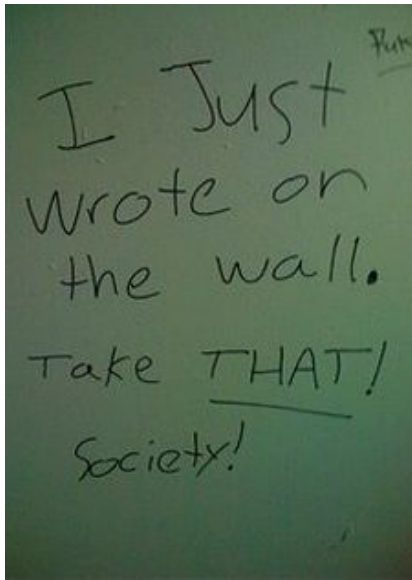
- Marian - “Aye” badge and sticker

Marian brought a sticker and badge from the Independence Referendum proclaiming “Aye We Can”, which she claimed represented both Scotland’s future outside of the UK and her – and other students like her – ability to succeed at university as “non-traditional” students.



- Courtney – meeting minutes covered in food

Courtney depicted her engagement with her university through minutes of a meeting that were splattered with food. This reflected the tension between her roles as student and parent, and the persistence with which each role impacted on the other despite her attempts to focus on them separately.



- Blair – graffiti on door

Blair’s choice of “oppositional graffiti” to depict his engagement with his university reflected both his expressed alienation from his university, because of issues like graffiti, and the oppositional nature of his engagement with the structures and processes of the university.

A couple of students chose images of disconnection, including:



- Tristan - Michelangelo’s creation

Tristan depicted his university’s attempts to engage him as God reaching out to Adam, and Adam reaching back, but not quite making connection.



- Yumna – disconnected

Yumna chose an image that depicted a similar idea, though rather more strongly, of a connection being severed. She expressed feelings of “betrayal” at the readiness with which her university complied with pressures to monitor students – especially Muslims – perceived as other, thus threatening.

Other students chose images or objects reflecting struggle (Sian, Gabi and Nina), absence (Celia, Karin), blindness (Greg), a race (Andy), hope (Lindy) and aspiration (Vanessa). There were markedly fewer positive images (e.g. hope, aspiration) than ambivalent or negative images, and fewer ambivalent ones (e.g. struggle, a race, oppositionality) than outright negative images (e.g. blindness, absence, disconnection and misrecognition). Misrecognition emerged as an important theme, and is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

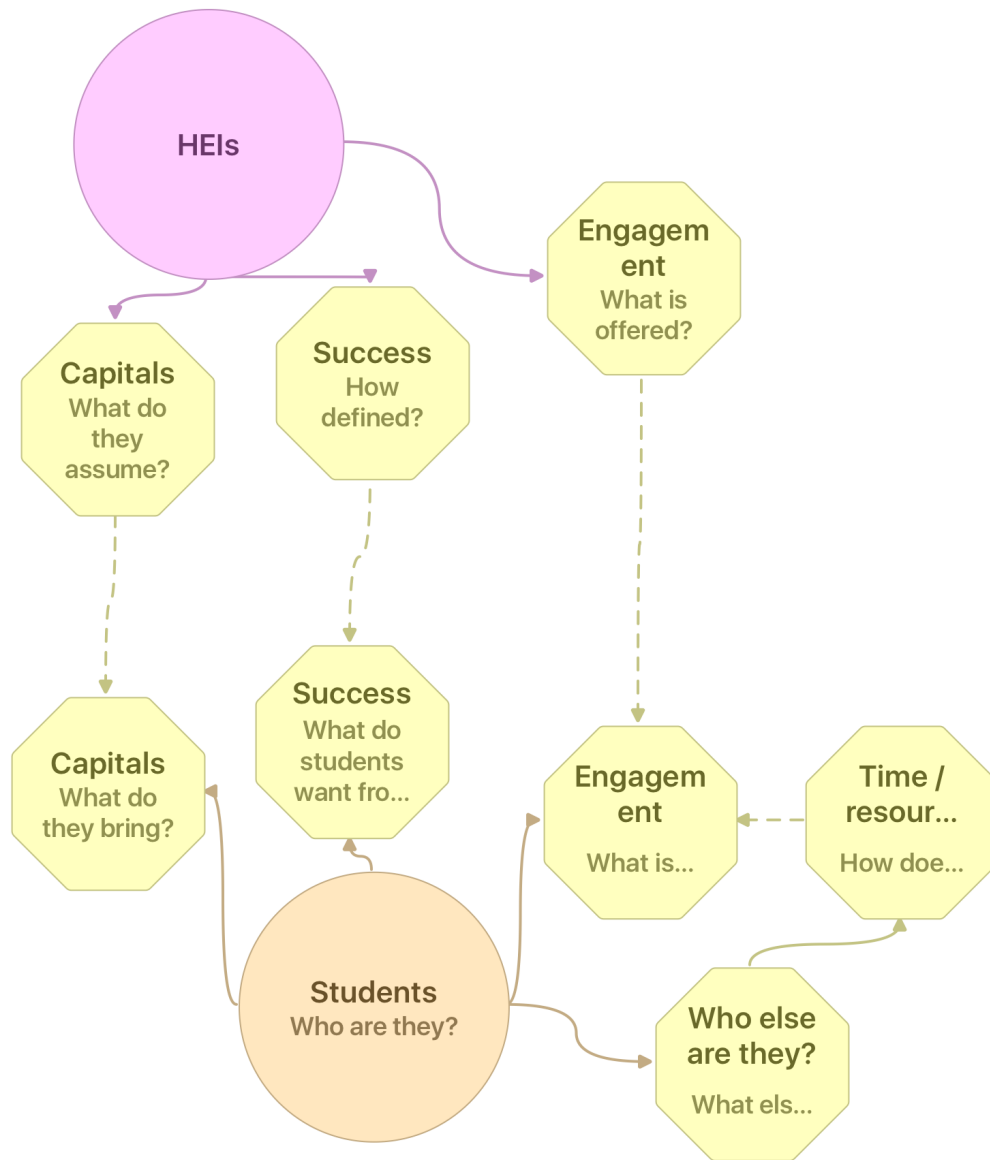


Figure 5.1: Students Engagement with their Universities

Figure 5.1 summarises the engagement between students and their universities. Universities assume students to possess certain kinds of cultural capital (as well as other kinds of capital) that is congruent with the institutional habitus. Success is defined in terms of retention and throughput, as well as the grades of graduating students. Universities’ engagement offerings are predicated on these assumptions, which are largely based on their experience of “traditional” students, however these are defined for those particular HEIs / departments / courses.

Students present as “traditional” and “non-traditional” in each study context, bringing a range of capitals which may or may not be congruent with the institutional habitus of the university / department / course. Students may also define success in their own terms, not necessarily predicated on persistence or graduation, or obtaining good grades – what they want from HE may or may not be the same as what the university assumes a successful outcome to be. Students – especially students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts – also have other subjectivities and roles outside of their roles as students, and other activities on which they are required, or choose, to spend their time and resources. Understanding how HE fits into their lives can help to understand what forms of engagement they may find attractive, and what they may find effective.

This chapter opened by locating the study within the current policy context before examining how students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study contexts describe how they’re positioned by their universities, and how they construct “the university”. It explored the resources they draw on and the concerns that emerge in their relationships with their universities, and how they characterise their engagement with their universities.

Chapter Six will consider how the engagement described by these students influences their intentions to persist, and their persistence.

Chapter Six – Intending to Persist, or Leave

They set out on unmapped journeys, travelled with the uncertainty of unknown destinations, found ways to pilot themselves among the confused streets of anonymous cities, mastered difficult, often obscure languages; tasted a variety of cultures, learned to modulate their voices to a European pitch, to adjust their eyes to the foreshortened landscapes, the diminished skies. And they knew they would never again be situated in the normal. “We’re always temporary,” said one exile, “You don’t belong.” (Bernstein, 1994:23)

This chapter sets out to answer the research question, “how does the engagement described by these students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context, influence their intentions to persist, or their persistence?”. In order to do this, it considers in turn four questions:

6.1 – What does the literature tell us about persistence and its converse?

6.2 – How do the persistence intentions of the students in this study ebb and flow over time?

6.2 – How are their intentions influenced by the expectations of others, and which relationships are particularly important?

6.3 -- How do they harness happenstance?

6.4 – How do they perceive their own agency in regard to “non-college life-events”?

What does the literature tell us about persistence and its converse?

Student retention, according to Aljohani (2016a:1) is “one of the major issues that concerns tertiary institutions around the world”. The RANLHE Literature Review (European Lifelong Learning Project 2008-2010, 2011:4) suggests several reasons for the current policy interest in retention and early leaving, including massification and increasing public spending on HE, coupled with a belief in the economic and social importance of HE and the rise of a culture of accountability for the public

sector. Within this framework, they distinguish (European Lifelong Learning Project 2008-2010, 2011:4) three levels of “poor return” represented by student non-completion:

- A macro level, where student “drop out” signals poor economic return on investment at national and international level, and a poor social return if widening participation and aspiration are compromised by poor retention of underrepresented groups;
- A meso level, where HEIs can suffer financial penalties and reputational damage; and
- A micro level, where student investments in financial and time / commitment terms are poorly realised.

Student “drop out” is framed negatively, which can be disempowering for these students, yet Quinn *et al.* (2005) found that it did also provide positive experiences to offset this to some degree. For institutions, there are also reputational and financial implications to reduced retention (see Yorke & Longden, 2004) and Johnston & Simpson’s (2006) cost-benefit analysis found that an investment of £200 towards student retention efforts drew a 550% Return on Investment in terms of the financial costs of student non-persistence that were averted. Yorke & Thomas (2003:64) note that:

Where a government has invested heavily in its higher education system, it has a particular interest in seeing that the investment is put to optimal use. Withdrawal and non-completion are likely to be construed as inefficiencies in the system, whose magnitude should be minimised (even if they cannot be reduced to zero.)

Whether considered from the student’s perspective, or that of the institution, most sources agree that persistence and retention are to be encouraged, and that premature withdrawal from studies should be minimised.

For under-represented groups, this issue can be further compounded. Bourdieu (2003:33) asserts that “the educational diploma is not merely a mark of academic distinction; it is perceived as a warrant of natural intelligence, or giftedness”. This can lead to groups which have historically been under-represented in HE being perceived as somehow “less able” because they are insufficiently visible among the body of students and alumni, or to questions of whether such students belong in HE.

The link between widening participation and retention has been hotly contested. Following the House of Commons Select Committee Report (2001:Section 18) linking widening participation to lower retention rates and increased risk for institutions, the NAO (2007) figures showed that completion rates have mostly been stable despite “massification”, and Thomas & Quinn (2007) found that students from lower SES groups do not necessarily have lower rates of success than others.

Two measures of retention are commonly used in the UK, viz. completion rate, which is the proportion of students who start within a given year who go on to graduate with no more than one consecutive year out of HE; and continuance rate which provides a more immediate measure, being the proportion of intake which is enrolled in the year following their first entry to HE. HESA compiles benchmarks for each institution that take account of students’ entry qualifications and subjects studied. These have until recently (2010) been available for full-time students only.

Jones (2008:2) prefers the term “retention” to “persistence”, which he defines thus:

Student retention refers to the extent to which learners remain within a higher education institution, and complete a programme of study in a predetermined time-period. A wide range of terms is used in both the UK and internationally to describe retention and its opposite. Some tend to emphasise what might be termed the student dimension, e.g. “persistence”, “withdrawal” and “student success”. By contrast, others focus on the place (e.g. retained within an institution) or the system (e.g. graduation rates) and then the responsibility shifts to either the institution or the government.

My own preference is for the term “persistence” since this reflects a student view rather than an institutional / policy maker perspective, placing the agency within the hands of the student – without necessarily shifting the burden of responsibility for enabling that persistence wholly onto the student. Indeed, as argued by Thomas (2012:7)

Regarding ethics and social responsibility it seems reasonable to argue that if an institution admits students to HE it has an obligation to take reasonable steps to enable them to be successful... Thus, institutions recruiting students must put in place a strategy to support them to be successful.

Student success is defined by Subotzky & Prinsloo (2011:191) to include “retention, persistence, course success, and graduation, as well as student satisfaction and effective graduate attributes”, in other words, pretty well everything. In itself, this definition is not particularly useful as it raises questions not only of causality, or relationships among and between constituent components of “student success”, but also of the degree of dynamism of some of these components, such as “student satisfaction”, or “effective graduate attributes”, which would vary depending on what aspect or proxy was being measured, when the measurement was taken, and how the concept was weighted and understood. However, definition aside, their analysis does contain useful insights.

For example, they argue (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:179) that:

*factors impact on success at three related levels: **individual** (academic and attitudinal attributes, and other personal characteristics and circumstances), **institutional** (quality and relevance of academic, non-academic, and administrative services), and **supra-institutional** (macro-political and socio-economic factors.) Numerous lists of variables impacting on success have been compiled, with various studies exploring combinations of variables (and models) to solve the student ‘departure puzzle’. [emphasis in original].*

As an example of the lists Subotzky & Prinsloo cite, Aljohani (2016b:46) lists the following factors distilled from the literature which contribute to student attrition:

| Categories | Factors |
|--------------------------|--|
| Family Background | Family income Parents' level of education Family approval of HEI choice Family socio-economic status Family support and encouragement Level of goals, institutional & external commitments |
| Student-related factors | Academic abilities and background High school grades Academic performance Study skills Study habits Intention to leave |
| Social factors | Being a member of a minority group External job commitments Family and occupational responsibilities Residency status Feeling of belonging Friends' support and encouragement |
| Economic factors | Student and family income Financial aid Study cost Cost-benefits match |
| Student's goals | Institution is the first choice Major certainty Academic goals commitments Occupational goals commitments Availability of other opportunities |
| Institutional experience | Quality of institutional experience Satisfaction Level of academic & social integration Intellectual development Quality of peer interactions & relationships Quality of student-staff interactions & relationships |
| Institutional factors | Quality of HEI services & facilities Major availability Institution level, type & size Academic and social advising Fairness in policy & rules enforcement Participating in decision-making Institution preparation for future job |

Table 6.1: Common student attrition factors, from Aljohani (2016b:46)

Kember (1989:279) cautions that the complexity involved in understanding attrition renders the prospect of explanatory theory impossible, since the number of constructs required would topple the theory into unmanageability. Rather, he recommends the use of models that focus on significant factors. However, I would argue that given the significance of context and the difficulty of establishing which factors can be deemed most significant (thus worthy of inclusion in such a model) across all contexts, such models will necessarily have limitations.

Aljohani (2016a:2) notes that early understandings of student attrition were based on psychological rather than sociological understandings, with the 1970s seeing a change as models with “theoretical and empirical coherence” were introduced. He identifies the six most popular models as follows:

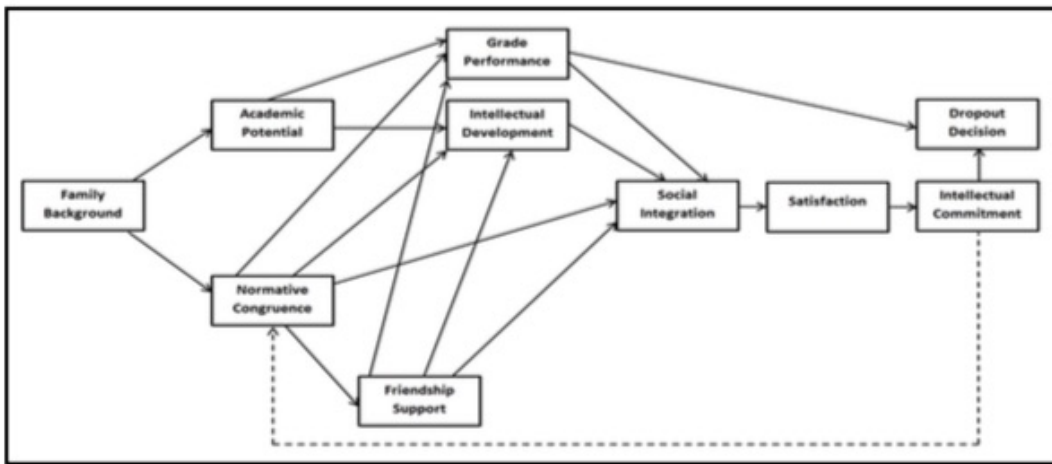


Figure 6.1: Spady’s “Undergraduate Dropout Process” Model, from Aljohani (2016a:5)

Spady’s (1971) model was informed by the sociological perspective of Emile Durkheim (notably his 1951 work on suicide), predicated on student “dropout” being seen as a form of “voluntary withdrawal” from society. Essentially, the argument behind this model was that students’ interactions with their university’s environment determined the extent of their integration (academically and socially) and thus their persistence. In this model, academic integration depends on “grade performance” and “intellectual development”, and social integration on “friendship support” and

“normative congruence”, as illustrated in Figure 6.1. (Larger versions of Figures 6.1 – 6.6 can be found in Appendix 5.)

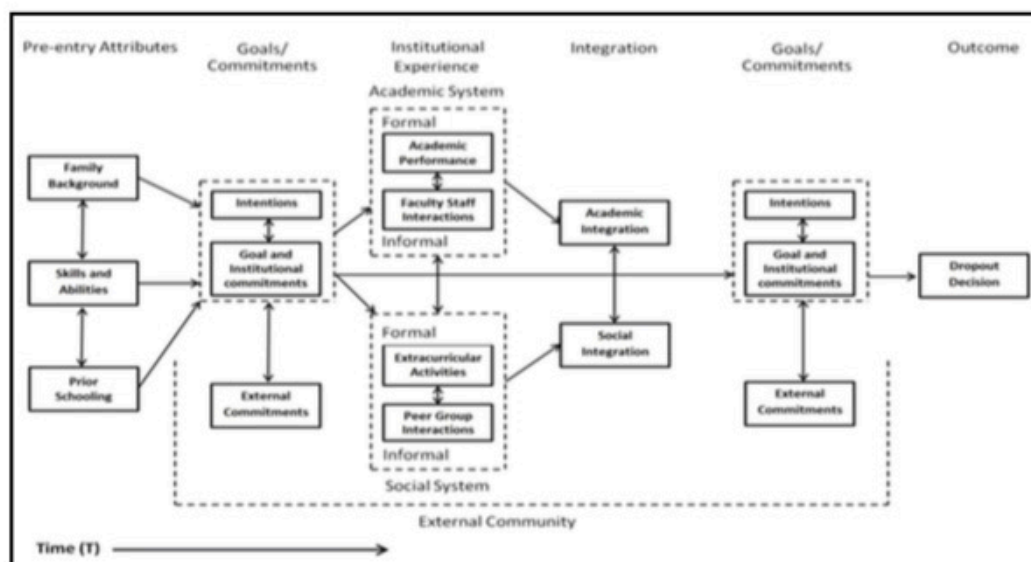


Figure 6.2: Tinto’s “Institutional Departure” Model, from Aljohani (2016a:6)

Tinto’s (1975; revised 1993) model built on Spady’s model, but integrated the social anthropology perspective of Van Gennep, notably his 1960 work on rites of passage. Students’ transition during their first year, Tinto (1993) noted, reflects similar stages of separation, transition and incorporation. According to this model, the extent to which the institutional experience (the academic and social systems) strengthens or weakens the student’s goals, commitments and intentions will affect their decision to persist or leave. This is illustrated in Figure 6.2.

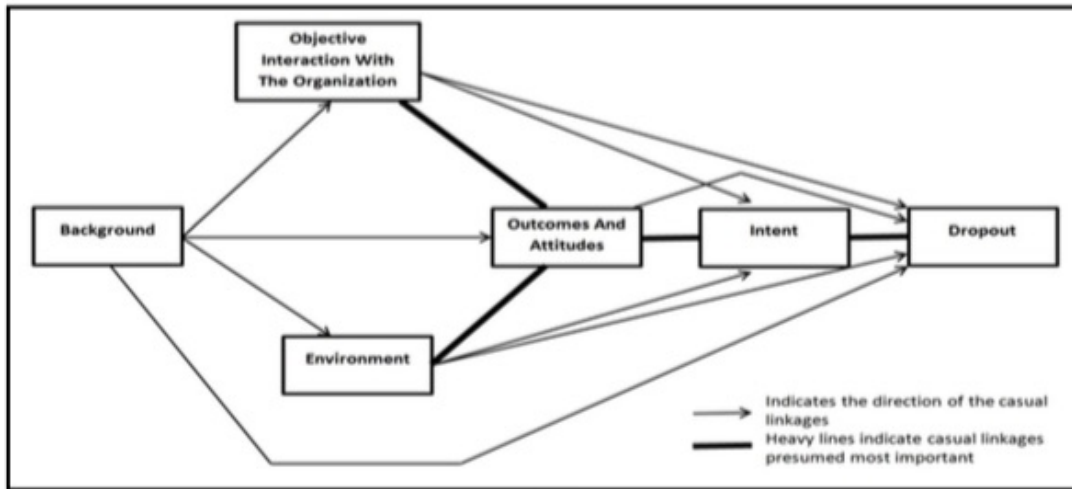


Figure 6.3: Bean's "Student Attrition" Model, from Aljohani (2016a:8)

Bean's (1980; revised 1982) model took as its basis studies of staff turnover in the workplace, notably the work of Price (1977). This model is based on the assumption that both employee turnover and student attrition are caused by dissatisfaction, and that intention to leave is the main indicator of departure. Four categories of variable are included, *viz.* background, organisational, environmental, and outcome and attitudinal, as illustrated in Figure 6.3.

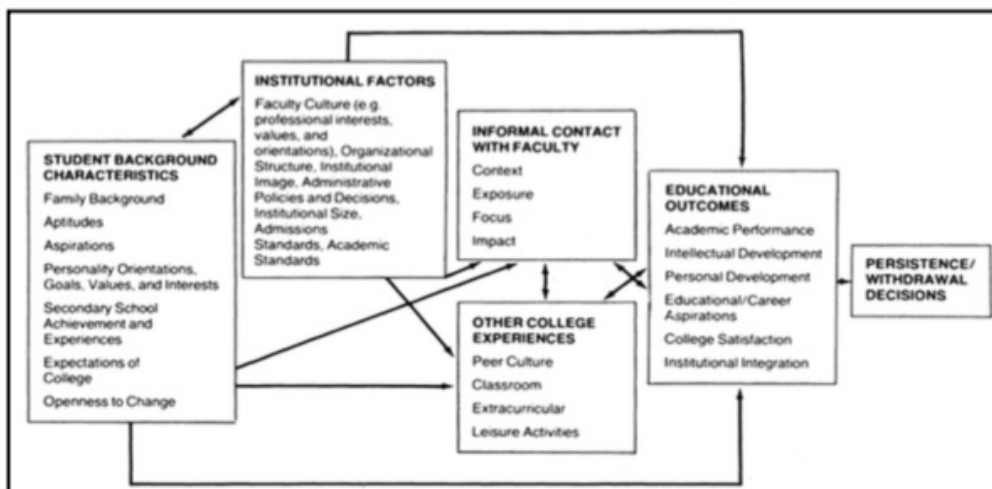


Figure 6.4: Pascarella's "Student-Faculty Informal Contact" Model, from Aljohani (2016a:9)

Pascarella's (1980) model combined student factors (background characteristics) and institutional factors (organisational culture, structures and processes) with other

university experiences (inside and outside of the classroom) and introduced “informal contact with faculty” (academic staff) as an important consideration into students’ decisions on persistence. Unlike the Tinto model, which included “Faculty Staff Interactions”, this model extends the focus to contact outside of the classroom, which is influenced by both student and institutional factors, and notes that qualitative differences in informal contact can have a material impact on persistence. This is illustrated in Figure 6.4.

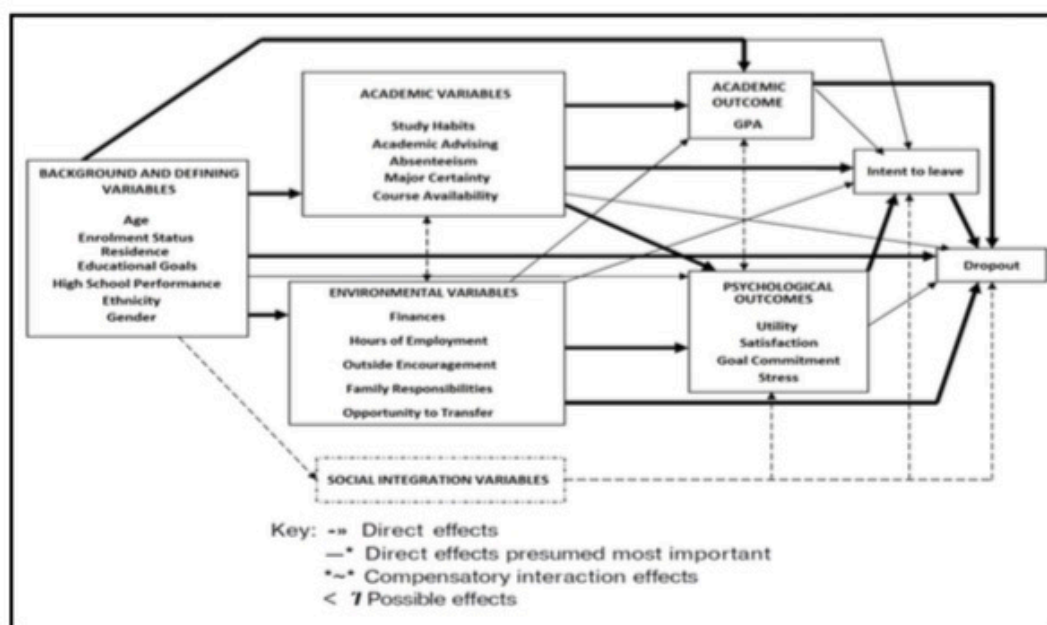


Figure 6.5: Bean & Metzner’s “Non-Traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition” Model, from Aljohani (2016a:10)

Bean & Metzner’s (1985) model focused on a group of “non-traditional” students, *viz.* commuter students, for whom (they argued) social integration was less important to their persistence decisions. This model thus emphasises environmental factors at the expense of institutional integration factors. These are illustrated in Figure 6.5.

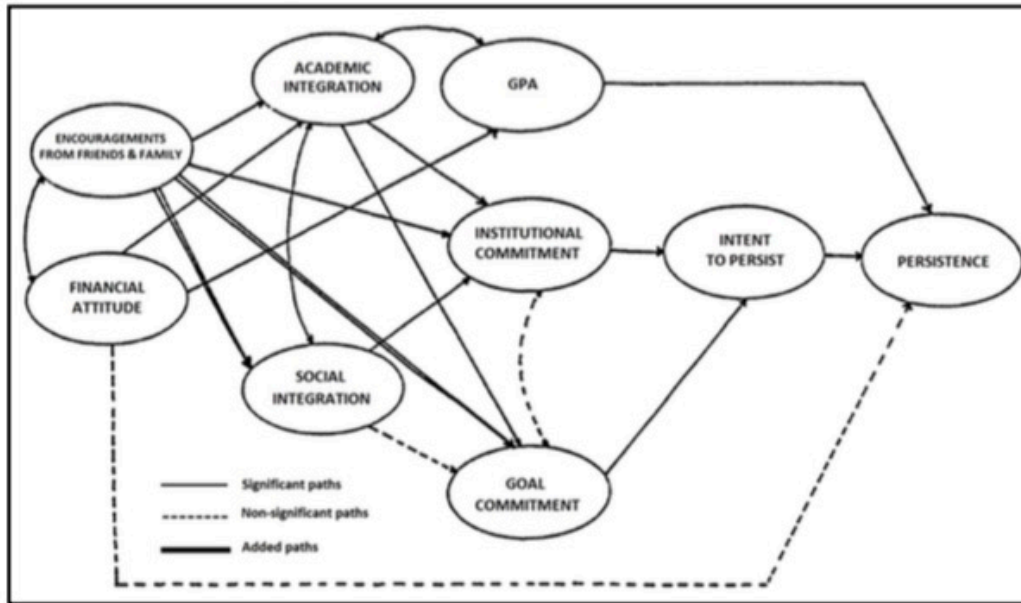


Figure 6.6: Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda’s “Student Retention Integrated Model”, from Aljohani (2016a:11)

Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda’s (1993) model essentially combines the earlier models of Tinto (1975) and Bean (1982), including variables from both models that were validated in Cabrera *et al.*’s study, with some variables disaggregated where these were found to have particular statistical significance. It tested two alternative hypothetical models using a longitudinal research design, gathering data twice during one academic year, as described by Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda (1993:129). A survey questionnaire generated attitudinal data while GPA (Grade Point Average) data were used to determine academic success, and the data were subjected to rigorous statistical testing. The resulting model emphasised environmental variables to a greater degree than the Tinto model, as supported by the statistical analysis. This model is shown in Figure 6.6.

Reading through the study design, however, a number of concerns spring to mind. Because both the Tinto and Bean models had been tested only on “traditional” students, i.e. those who were new to university (not returning students), in their first year of their studies, under 24 years of age, US citizens or permanent residents, and unmarried, only students who met these criteria were selected for the Cabrera *et al.* study, which was conducted at a “large, southern (US) urban institution”. These

students numbered fewer than 2500, and a total of 466 usable questionnaires were returned. While the demographic profile of the returns matched the broader target population, the attrition rate was slightly lower, and questions can be raised as to whether a demographic match can be assumed to be an attitudinal match, since both components were key to the model.

Broader questions arise about the extent to which the attitudes and behaviours of a group of fewer than 500 undergraduate students (with particular demographics) in a single cohort at a single university can be generalised – not only to other institutions, as Cabrera *et al.* caution (1993:136) but to other demographics, and across time, as the student population and the higher education environment changes. Similar concerns have been noted by others (e.g. Jeffreys, 2012), while others (Ho Yu et al., 2010) have argued for replication to test the generalizability of such models in different contexts. Aljohani (2016a:13) also cites criticisms of such models including insufficient attention to matters such as the relationships between the variables, and the inadequacy of the models in differentiating between transfer between institutions and permanent withdrawal from studies.

My own reservations go beyond these to the inability of such studies to provide sufficient information at a fine-grained level to understand what is happening when a student decides to withdraw from their studies. While such quantitative studies may reveal that a student from a certain demographic facing certain circumstances is more likely to withdraw, and that tweaking this particular variable is more likely to be effective than tweaking that one, at best that establishes correlation rather than causation and, given the complexity, does not provide the sorts of answers (“put more resources into strategy X”) it may be assumed to. I thus concur with Johnston’s (2000:159) assertion that research on student departure and persistence needs to be qualitative, culturally sensitive and (2000:166) informed by students’ own narrations of their “journeys”, since “the more thorough the understanding of the evidence, the more appropriate the response will be” (2000:167).

The cultural aspect is also noted by Kuh & Love (2000), who argue that a student's culture of origin serves to mediate their experience of higher education, and that a greater cultural distance between a student's culture of origin and the immersive culture of the HEI lessens the likelihood of persistence – unless the student is able to acclimatise or join an “enclave” or affinity group (especially where members of the group prize persistence and achievement). I would extend their argument to include not only essentialist notions of “culture of origin”, since “culture” is itself a dynamic and contested construct, but the panoply of identity resources, subjectivities, capitals and habitus that students bring with them in their encounter with the HEI.

Subotzky & Prinsloo (2011:183) identify a further shortcoming to popular models, in that

*Predominant models do not adequately recognise the **mutual responsibility** in the process. Students must acquire and develop the required attributes, skills, and knowledge for successful higher learning, while institutions must constantly review, adapt, and improve their practices to eradicate hidden administrative, socio-economic, and cultural barriers to equitable access and ensure success, particularly in relation to non-traditional and diverse student populations. [emphasis in original]*

The model they propose, Prinsloo's Socio-Critical Model (Prinsloo, 2009:93), relies on five constructs:

1. The student as situated agent – students have agency and exercise choices, but they do so within dynamic contexts that constrain and enable them in different ways. As such, autonomy is not absolute but relative, and institutions share responsibility for student retention / persistence.
2. Student habitus – the dynamic, structured disposition students bring with them, including capital (of various forms) they have accrued and continue to accrue.
3. Institutional habitus – Prinsloo (2009:104) distils this into three domains, *viz.* academic, social and operational.

4. The “student walk” as a dynamic construct – beginning with the student’s initial consideration of going to university, throughout all of their time at university, through graduation into (hopefully) employment, this all-encompassing, complex construct is painted as a “recursive process of emergence in which different constructs interact dynamically and in a non-linear fashion” (Prinsloo, 2009:110).
5. Defining success – rather than adopting an instrumental view of success as “throughput” or “employability”, Prinsloo (2009:111) argues that societal expectations / requirements of students, and the views of students themselves, should be incorporated into considerations of “success”.

This model is shown in Figure 6.7.

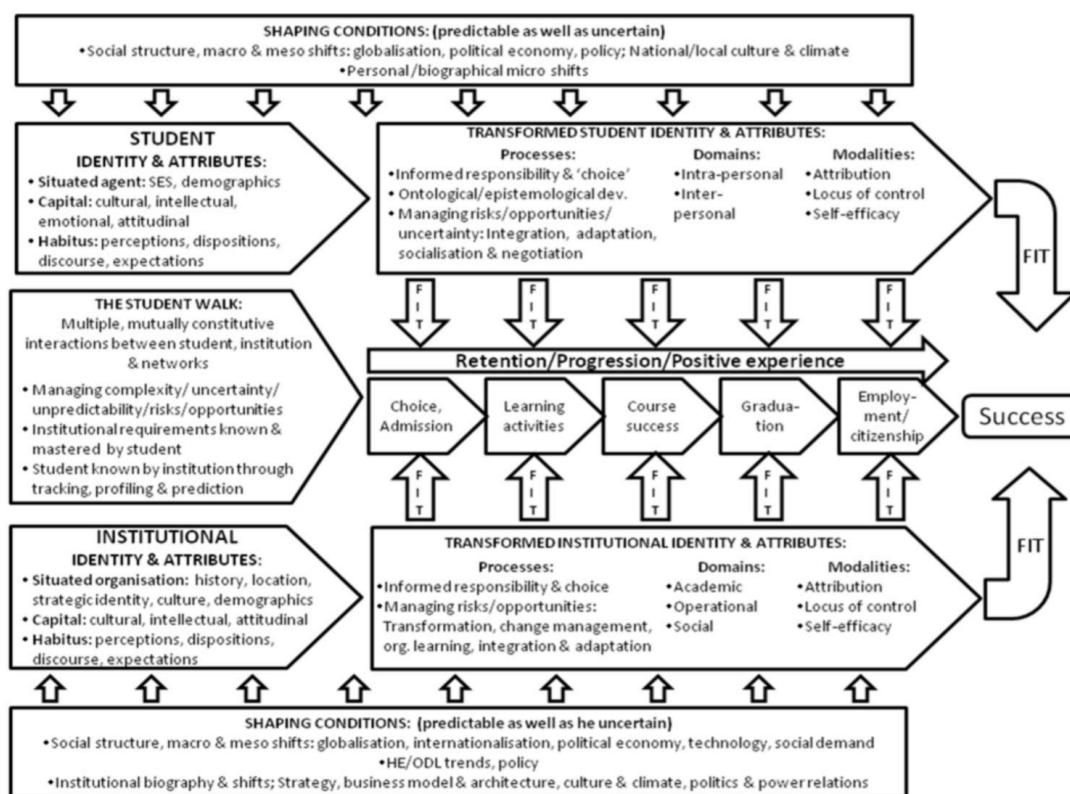


Figure 6.7 Prinsloo’s Socio-Critical Model, from Prinsloo (2009:115)

The RANLHE study (European Lifelong Learning Project 2008-2010, 2011:37) observed further that the construct “student success”, as opposed to “retention”, is student-centric. Because of this, it can be defined more flexibly in terms of the student’s personal ambitions and subjective experience of HE. Whitston (2008:7)

commented that “success is more than retention; and retention isn’t the only kind of success”. Other aspects of success, however, were beyond the remit of this study.

Even notions of retention, however, are not unproblematic. As Leathwood & O’Connell noted (2003:603) with reference to their own study,

The research findings... all point to a very diverse cohort of students moving through, and sometimes into and out of, their degree studies at varying rates, with different levels of attachment and / or marginalisation at different times. The study challenges any simple notion of a straightforward linear developmental path through their degree courses... As we have been monitoring the progression status of these students over the 3 years of the study, it has become clear that the same students may be recorded as having been excluded (for example, for tuition fee debt) in 1 year, only to find they have returned at a later stage. Similarly, students may move between full-time and part-time study... What these figures do indicate, however, is that for whatever reason, undertaking and successfully completing undergraduate study is not easy or straightforward for many of these [non-traditional] students.

Relying on non-continuance, or non-completion, data, then, can provide a misleading picture, since students who do not conform to definitions of traditionality may follow equally “non-traditional” routes through HE, entering and leaving HE, and moving between modes of study (full-time and part-time), courses or institutions, as appropriate to their needs or circumstances.

Riddell *et al.* (2013a:59), in noting the near-universality of plans to improve retention rates in outcome agreements of Scottish HEIs, observe that mainstream understandings of retention cannot be extended unproblematically to part-time students. They quote the Open University in Scotland’s Outcome Agreement (2012/13:8):

Retention of part-time students is complex since for many students success is measured by progression to other HE providers and/or professional development outcomes based on successful module completion. Part-time learner journeys are often non-linear and cannot be measured and monitored by the same measures as full-time campus based study.

A recent AQMeN study (Kadar-Satat, Iannelli & Croxford, 2016) into the non-continuation rates among Scottish-domiciled young people at Scottish HEIs examined which students (in terms of socio-economic status, protected characteristics, year of study, articulation from FE, and type of HEI, and whether or not the students participated in SHEP, a Widening Participation initiative) were more likely not to persist, and what reasons (academic or non-academic) were reported for not continuing. The headline findings are presented in Figure 6.8, below.

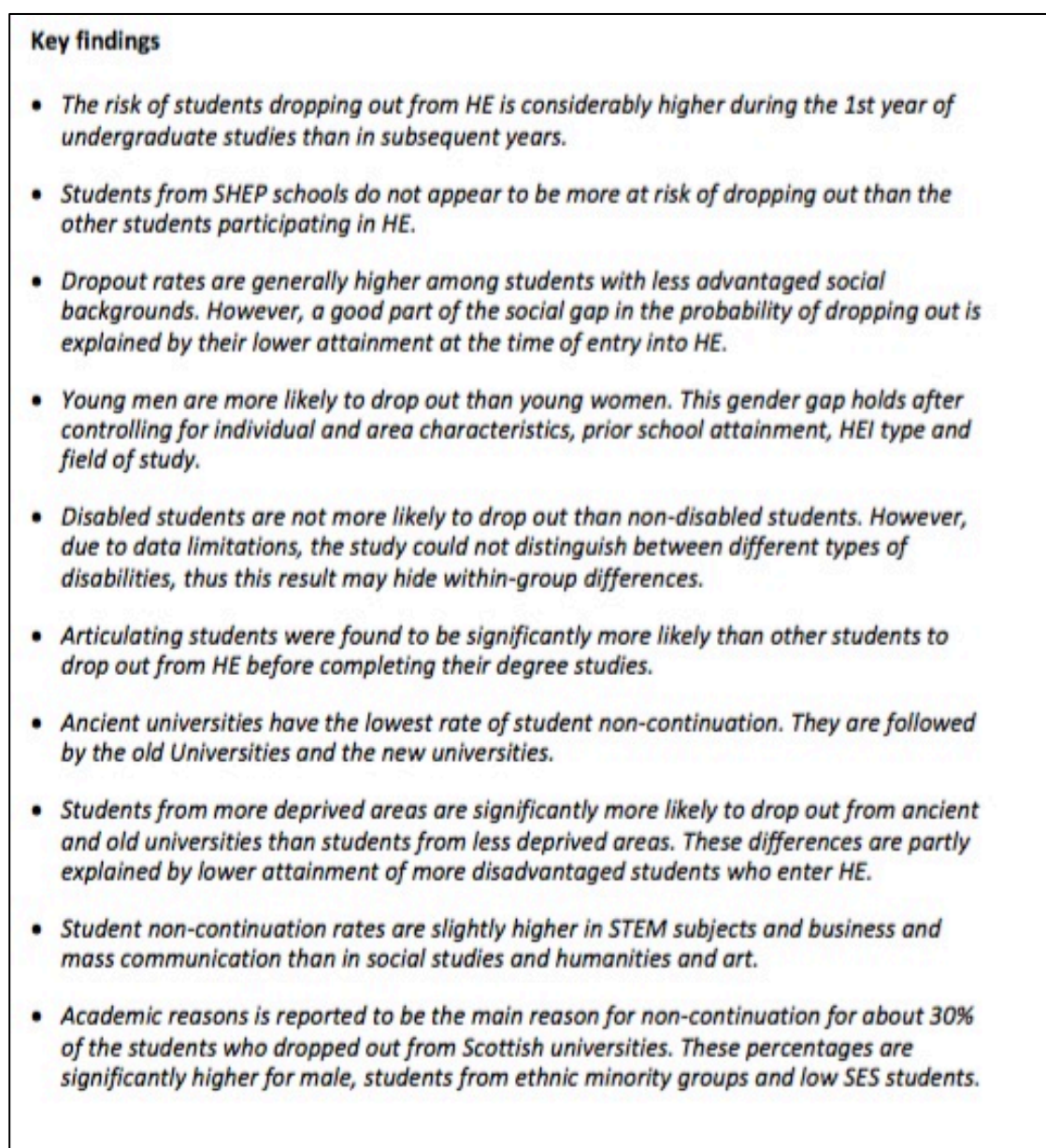


Figure 6.8: Key Findings of AQMeN study: Beyond Access to HE: Widening Access Initiatives and Student Retention in Scotland. From Kadar-Satat et al. (2016:3)

The AQMeN study drew on 2012/13 HESA data. The working sample was restricted to Scottish-domiciled students who were aged 21 or younger on entering HE, registered for a first degree, studying full-time at Scottish HEIs. The reason for excluding mature students was that information on parental education and social class is not available in HESA for such students. Small sample sizes in some cases limited the amount of detail that could be used in the study.

However, it would appear from the findings that students who may be considered “non-traditional” in some contexts, such as students from more deprived areas, first-in-family students, students from Black/mixed/other ethnic groups, and students articulating from FE colleges, are more vulnerable to non-completion than others. International students, part-time-students and mature students were not included in this study, and students with caring responsibilities, care leavers, and students whose gender, sexual orientation or religious or cultural affiliation may be experienced as “non-traditional” within their course of study or study context, were also not visible within the data.

The most recent HESA figures (2013-14) show an increase in first year non-continuance for Scotland to 8%, up from 2012-13’s figure of 7.5%, (The 2013-14 figure for the UK was 7.2%.) with a projected non-graduation rate of 9.2%. This can be seen in Table 6.2.

| | Non-con 12/3 | Non-con 13/4 | Proj n.g. 12/3 | Proj n.g. 13/4 |
|----------|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| Scotland | 7.5% | 8% | 10.2% | 9.2% |
| UK | 7% | 7.2% | 10.1% | 10.2% |

Table 6.2: Non-continuance and projected non-graduation¹¹ 2012-13 and 2013-14, Scotland and UK (compiled from HESA data)

¹¹ **Projected non-graduation**

This measure projects what proportion of the full-time first degree starters that are likely not to have qualified after a period of fifteen years). The fifteen year period has been chosen as an over-estimate of the amount of time that the majority of full-time first degree students should have gained a qualification, transferred to another HEI, or left HE. The projection is based on the current pattern of students at the HE provider. Full details of the method used can be found in the

For the UK overall¹², the increase in the first year non-continuance rate for students aged under 21 at entry was even greater for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with an increase of 0.5% to 8.2%. Newer universities, with higher proportions of students from SIMD 20 and SIMD 40, showed higher rates of non-continuance than did older universities with lower numbers of students from SIMD 20 and SIMD 40. Denholm (2016) reported that “students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to drop out because of financial concerns and lack of support from families who have little experience of university”, though he quoted Alastair Sim, director of Universities Scotland, as saying

There can be many reasons, academic and personal, why a student might decide to leave their institution... The data doesn't give us enough detail to understand what issues student encountered last year, but we do know that efforts on widening access and retention go hand-in-hand.

Against the context of an increase in student withdrawal in Scotland, and certain groups of students being more vulnerable to non-completion, I will now turn to the departure and persistence intentions and behaviour of the students in my PhD study.

How do the persistence intentions of the students in this study ebb and flow over time?

The persistence intentions of the students in this study – both as they reported feeling at the time of each interview, and as they reported having felt over time preceding each interview - were subject to ebbs and flows. During initial interviews, only one student (Tristan) reported not intending to persist and graduate:

Will I complete? Well, that depends on.... Probably not. I mean, we're on the verge of making it really big. And then I won't have time for this. We'll be touring a lot more, and recording, and all the PR stuff - interviews, photo shoots, all that. It's pretty full-time, he told us.

[technical](#) document on the HESA website.

¹² Comparative figures were not available among the HESA data for Scotland.

Tristan saw his presence at university as complying with his parents' expectations, rather than following his own desires. He clarified his feelings about his studies in his first interview:

So yeah, my family thinks it's good I'm here, they want me to graduate and maybe even do postgrad but I don't expect to be here that long. I've got nothing against it, I wouldn't mind if nothing was happening with the band but I don't want to take on a whole lot of debt for a degree I'm not going to use, just to keep them happy.

By contrast, Blair - the most openly oppositional during the initial interviews - was fully committed to persisting at that stage:

Oh aye, I'll definitely stick it out, and graduate - if I do well enough, hopefully that will get me in somewhere better to do postgrad.

For Brian, Mike, Emma and Yumna, resistance and struggle made them all the more determined to persist, and succeed. Celia framed it thus:

It kind of makes it more... Like, you've gotta get there, you have to do it. Because you've chosen this path, you've taken on this thing that they said you shouldn't - couldn't - do, and you're doing it. And you're kicking ass! And you know that when you walk out with your degree they'll be like, wow, you did that? And you'll be like, why did you doubt it!

Students like Kris, Alex, Andy, Nina and Courtney saw their studies as a refuge from aspects of their lives they wanted to flee (or escape temporarily for respite, in Nina and Courtney's case) and were adamant that that was where their futures lay. Other students, like Uche, questioned why I was even asking about their persistence intentions:

Why are you asking this thing? You think I will fail? Why would I leave otherwise? ...When they [extended family] choose you to be here, it is not just for yourself. It is for them, too. It is like a small boat and a wide

river. They send you across, and you have to go alone. But you are also carrying them across the river. You cross the river, but you are carrying them all with you.

There were some students whose commitment was less assured, due to their circumstances. Marian, for example, announced that she'd "love to stay on and do postgrad", but then qualified her position:

I do want to finish, it certainly is the plan, but I can't say for sure yes or no. There are so many things to consider. Family obviously is one.

Lindy's confidence in completing was muted by her uncertainty regarding being pregnant:

So yeah that's the big unknown. If I am pregnant I may have to take time out and I'm not sure how that would work. I've heard it's really tough to study with a small baby and part of me thinks I might just go back to my old job until the kid was old enough and then come back and finish.... So much depends on whether I'm pregnant or not. If I am I do still want to complete, even if it's not immediate.

By the second interviews, things were changing for a number of the students. For Brian, the physical demands of his course were taking their toll, and he reported having considered withdrawing (but knowing he would not):

There's, like, this rule, no one drops out. You just don't. You have all these performances and stuff and others are relying on you and you'd be over, your career would be toast before it started. But sometimes you just get so tired. The adrenalin sometimes isn't enough. Sometimes you miss just having nothing to do, just lying around. So sometimes, yeah, I think, what if I just took the train home, went to pull pints at the local, what if one day my body just said, enough? But you also know you won't. You know you'll be down in the studio tomorrow, stretching, when you could be on the train. You know you'll stay. You can't leave.

Many other students also reported, during the second interview, having experienced periods of uncertainty between the first and second interviews. As the second interview, for many of the students, focused more on the course / classroom / studio experience rather than the bigger "dealing with the university and being a student"

experience, it was also for many of them because of academic considerations (or, like Brian, other aspects of the course) that their certainty about persisting wavered. Uche, who had been so certain previously, admitted that he was struggling a little with the way things were being taught, and wondered whether he might be forced to withdraw, while Gabi admitted to feeling overwhelmed at times by the sheer volume of work, to the point that she anticipated having to withdraw. Greg felt frustrated that his tutor was not understanding his approach:

I was sent for remedial – they don't call it that, it's called the Writing Centre or something but it's remedial, whatever they call it. Because of my referencing. Plagiarism, they said, but don't worry, your probably just don't know better. I just looked at them, like, where have you been these last decades? Do you not understand popular culture? Easter eggs, heard of those? Homage? I wasn't plagiarising, I knew what I was doing, planting references to other games, movies, songs... But oh no, they want citation, MLA, stuffy referencing like we're back at school, not creating cultural artefacts here.

Not all of their persistence uncertainties sprang from academic reasons, however. Alex's crisis of confidence sprang from the social domain, arising from difficulties within a friendship:

She just started ignoring me in class. She'd wait for me to sit down, then go and sit somewhere else. I'd save a seat for her but she went to sit with other kids. I'd just look at my phone because I didn't want them to see me looking at them. I started going later to class and then I stopped going. It just felt... I felt... [shrug] I wasn't going where I wasn't wanted.

Lindy's uncertainty, predicated on her possible pregnancy, was confirmed with her pregnancy. She desperately wanted to persist, but was unsure how possible that would be after a discussion with a woman in her department who had children. Having recently experienced an academic epiphany with an assignment, she confessed that

Well, I am really enjoying my course at the moment, and I am worried that if I break the momentum I'll find it hard to get back into it. It's a

different way of thinking, it's... I don't know, I know that when I started off last year that it took me a while to get my head into the different space, that I was so hungry for it and even so it took a while for it to feel natural. And I'm worried that if I go back to the call centre it will be like that's where I really belong, like I tried it out in The Other World [speaks with emphasis] but I couldn't quite handle it somehow, so I went crawling back... when I first saw your poster, before I emailed you, I remember seeing something on there about "non-traditional" or something and I wasn't sure if that applied to me and so I Googled it and it said something about "students at risk" and I was horrified, I thought, "no, that's not me at all, I'm not at risk, I know why I want to study and I know why I chose this course and I'm really interested in it and I'm really ready to study now and I'm not at risk!" And now... yes, I do feel I am at risk. I'm scared that however much I want this, that it might not be enough, that this hijacker [gestures at abdomen] has taken over my life and put me at risk.

Tristan bucked the trend – having stated during his initial interview that he did not intend completing, he reported during his second interview

If you'd asked me, I dunno, a few weeks ago, before the tour, I'd have said of course I'd complete. I was getting it, and it was like it was getting me, or at least my tutor was, and I thought it would be easy to keep things like this for the next couple of years... But yeah. I'd have said yeah, I'd like to complete. And I do, still. But I'm not sure that's going to happen.

Tristan's "getting it", like Lindy, Marian and others, reflected an epiphany between the first and second interviews which saw them engaging with their studies in a different way (see discussion in Chapter Four). This engagement saw him becoming invested in his studies and wanting to complete. However, like some of the students mentioned above, academic struggles (in his case, a bad exam experience because of his touring with his band) undermined his certainty regarding completion.

The final interviews brought further changes. Two students – Nina and Emma – reported having come close to withdrawing between their second and final interviews. In Emma's case, it arose from struggles with her student identity:

When you go to a Look-See [as a model] sometimes they want you, sometimes they don't, but you know that it's not about you it's about a

look they want, and so it's not really rejection ... I found it really hard, these marks are really about you, about making you change and be like who they want you to be, and if you can't do that it really is rejection. I found that so hard, I thought, If you don't like me as I am this isn't for me...

For Nina, the concerns had been financial. Struggling to get by, she'd considered dropping her part-time studies and finding a job that she could fit in around caring for her disabled brother. While – during the interview – she was no longer set on withdrawing, she was still uncertain whether she would be able to persist over the longer term as she still felt financially vulnerable.

Lindy miscarried between the second and final interviews, and resisted recommendations to take time off from her studies to recover. She distracted herself with her studies and expressed certainty about completion:

It's like a fresh revelation. Remember the guy at the museum I told you about, and the assignment? This was sort of like that. Like another messenger come to show me the way. Like I know now what I have to do, I've been working towards this for years and now it's here and I must just do it. If I do well enough and get into postgrad, it won't be a loss. It will just be another one of those detours you sometimes have to take to get to where you really want to be.

The remaining students, whether or not they admitted to periods of uncertainty between interviews two and three, were all certain by their final interviews that they would complete – with two exceptions. Tristan, though more engaged and committed to his studies, still held out the possibility of withdrawing to commit full-time to his music:

It's probably not going to happen. The age of bands is over. But we might catch the tail, I can't give up on that dream and become a lemming, that's death. So I won't say yeah I'll definitely complete. I'd like to, but [shrug]...

The other exception was Kris. Kris, between the second and final interviews, had spoken to a counsellor about gender reassignment, and had decided to suspend their studies for a few years:

As you know. I've tried, but it's just too complicated. The system doesn't know how to handle me. I need to be in a space where I can shape things for myself, first. I need to get to a place where the documents say [Kris], not [Christopher]. Where it says I'm me, not the shell. So I need to go through all that, and then, then I can come back. Or maybe go to a different Uni, one where my records won't speak of a historic person called [Christopher] who tried but had to leave... But yeah, I definitely want to go back. To finish. Maybe not Physics, though. I mean, there's nothing wrong with Physics, though perhaps my reasons for choosing it were more complex. [Kris] won't need to hide, so I could really do anything I wanted...

By the end of the data collection period, Kris had left university and moved to a different city. All of the other students were still enrolled and on track to complete their respective courses.

Of all of the students interviewed, only Blair was certain throughout the period of the study that he would complete, and at the end of the data collection period was still on track to do so. Kris was initially certain about completion, but between interviews two and three became certain about withdrawing, which they did. All of the other students vacillated between periods of certainty regarding completion, and periods of doubt occasioned by academic concerns in most cases, and by external cases (finances, pregnancy, social issues or mental health concerns) in some. Changes in persistence intention over time are shown in Figure 6.9.

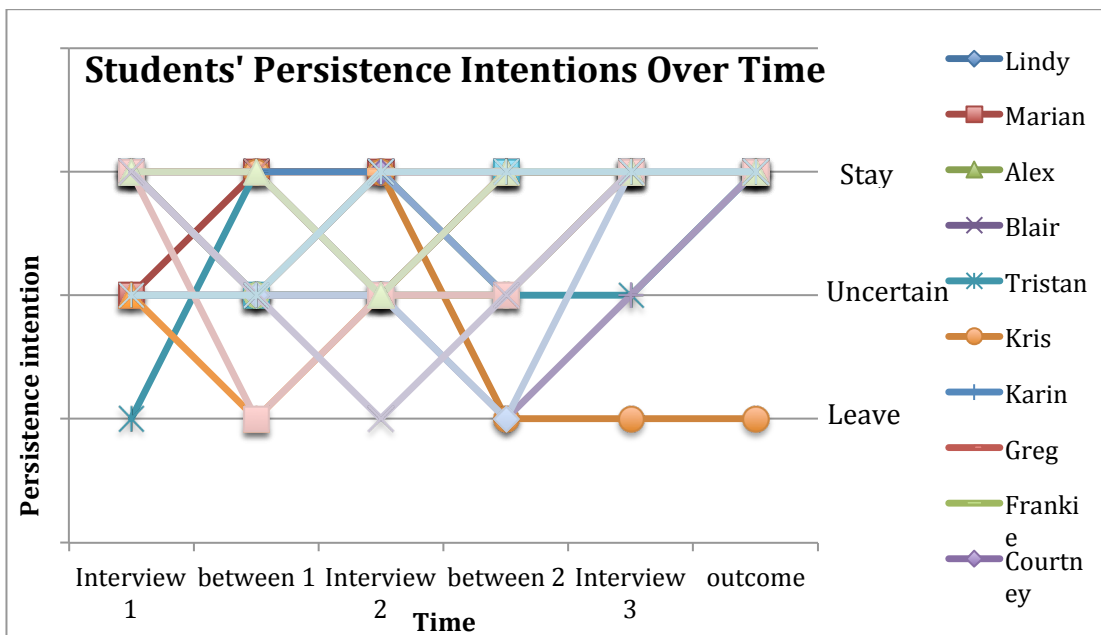


Figure 6.9: Students' Persistence Intentions over time

How are their intentions influenced by the expectations of others, and which relationships are particularly important?

As noted above, several students were strongly influenced in their persistence intentions by the expectations of others. For Uche, whose extended family had designated him as the one invested with the hopes of the family, notions of failure or success thus became communal rather than individualised, since as he stated “you are carrying them all with you”.

Similarly Vanessa, from a working class background, felt that she carried a community’s hopes with her:

I didn't know anyone who'd been, but my teacher at school really believed I could do it, and my family quite came round to the idea. They thought it would be quite glamorous, I could become a travel agent and get them discount holidays to exciting places. The lady at the post office said I should become a diplomat, and of course my teacher said I should teach...

For others, the relationship was seemingly more straightforward. Andy felt a need to make his grandmother proud, having previously been

a bit of a bad boy. Nothing too serious, though it would probably have gone that way if I'd kept going. But I've been given this chance now, and it's up to me to make something of it. I owe it to my Nan. I really have to make it work!

Marian was initially uncertain about whether she'd be able to complete, given her circumstances. When she became involved in voter education prior to the referendum, she was more able to convey to her family the purpose of her studies, and they were more supportive, and she became more certain of her prospects of completion.

Tristan had more complex responses to the expectations of his parents. On the one hand, he expressed some resentment towards their hopes for him, while on the other he noted that

I don't want to disappoint my tutor. Or [hollow laugh] my parents. It would be much easier if they thought I was doing OK.

For others, the expectations of others were something to be proven wrong by persisting and succeeding. Emma, for example, felt she had to shake of a negative stereotype as a "bimbo" by showing she was up to the academic demands of her course, and Steve hoped to prove himself to his estranged family by succeeding, when they "had [him] pegged as a failure".

For Greg and Sian, internalised stereotypes projected onto nameless others drove them to succeed. Greg did not want to be seen to be needing help, for fear of stigma ("I suppose it just confirms what they expect"); and Sian similarly felt that

you don't want them to think you're not coping, that it was a mistake for them to accept you. You don't want to be the charity case.

David felt that the stereotype of Asian students as “swots” was a liability:

If I do well, I'm just the typical Asian swot, all work and no play, but if I don't do so well and show my more fun side then I have to worry about what happens. It costs a lot to be here, and if I fail and lose my visa, what happens then? Then I'm not an Asian swot, but what am I then? What future do I have?

Courtney felt that her persistence mattered both in instrumental terms – graduating would allow her access to a career in which she could better support her children – and in terms of the example she was setting for her children:

I want them to see that you don't have to just stay with some guy just to have a roof over your head and food on the table. That you can do it for yourself, and your kids, study and find a good job and have a good life, it doesn't have to be the middle class thing of two parents and a nice house in [the suburbs].

Families – whether families of origin, extended families, families they'd formed with partners of their own or without – carried great importance. In many cases, they wanted to live up to family expectations, or to place themselves in a position to be able to provide (economically, and as role models) for families or extended families through succeeding at their studies, while in some cases, such as Kris, they wanted to create distance (physical and/or psychological) between them and their families by studying. The traditional image of the student as a young person leaving the family home to strike out as an individual often writes the family out of the picture, yet data from this study suggested that families – however constructed – continue to exert significant influence (positively or through invoking opposition) for students of many different kinds.

Peer relationships mattered, too. This took on different forms, such as providing support, as Mike reported:

Not having the pressure... just being friends with girls, not having to be into them or putting on a pose all the time, just chilling with friends after class, and having them cheer you up when things aren't going well with your girlfriend or you didn't get chosen for the show...

For Sian, classmates provided a model:

It's really hard to know, sometimes, how to balance things. You can feel that you have to compensate and so you're working all the time, or you feel you can't compete so you kind of give up, kick back and don't do much... It's nice to watch and see how much effort they're putting in, what kinds of limits they set, what's sort of normal, you know? You know what to aim for, to do well enough but also get time to live.

For Blair, his old peer group from school served as a marker of how far he had come:

There's... comfortable certainties they've got, still shaping their lives. Sometimes I miss that. All I've got now are questions.

Their imagined communities were influential, too. For students like Greg and Frankie, the professional personae they adopted aspirationally shaped their behaviours in the classroom and associated spaces, and their persistence intentions. Frankie reported that:

I was always thinking, how would Nick Robinson [of the BBC] approach that? If he were here, what would he say? Even if it wasn't what the tutor wanted sometimes, I knew it was the right answer for me... And I just had to keep on. Nick [Robinson] wouldn't give up over that!

Brian described how, in the performing arts disciplines, a camaraderie which extended towards students kept him engaged:

Although you're a student, you're not just a student. You're also a performer. A colleague. You belong to the same tribe. There's respect, and that keeps you going.

For Tristan, his imagined community existed outside of his study context, and provided a competing pull that threatened his persistence, as described earlier. And for Kris, an imagined community of LGBTQIA+ people with interests in reading, introspection and sharing succeeded in luring them away from their studies.

Relationships with tutors, teaching staff and support staff mattered to varying degrees, with positive relationships (such as reported by Tristan) inspiring and engaging, and negative relationships (such as reported by Kris) serving to motivate in other ways.

None of the students reported taking decisions in isolation. All reported that their responses to situations that impacted on their studies were mediated by relationships, and decisions regarding their studies were taken in cognisance of effects that these decisions would have on those others that mattered to them. Even where factors such as finances or pregnancies were material to their persistence or otherwise, it was the filtering of these factors through the experiences of, and with, others which allowed these students to interpret the risks, benefits and imagined futures in ways that allowed them to make informed choices. This is consistent with Thomas & Hanson's (2014:62) observation that

Although the primary reason for students [considering withdrawal] are academic issues, the most important influence on them staying is support from friends and family.

Considering the models discussed earlier, it is tempting to attempt to map individuals onto the models to see which produce the best "fit". However, there is no way of knowing how accurate my interpretation of the subset of factors they chose to share with me would be for such purposes – and where correlation can be found, arguing causality would be difficult given the layers of interpretation and the vicissitudes of

reconstructions over time. Rather than attempting to model a mechanistic algorithm, I would argue, we derive more value through approaching such models as sensitising constructs, and seeking to ensure that there is an adequacy of each material factor – and where there is a shortfall, some structure or process in place to help develop capacity to address this.

How do they harness happenstance?

Policies and initiatives to attract and retain students from diverse backgrounds often assume certain predictable processes during what Prinsloo (2009:110) refers to as “the student walk”. “Resilience” has been identified by many authors (see Cotton, Nash & Kneale, 2014; West, Fleming & Finnegan, 2013; Christie et al., 2008 as examples) as a necessary attribute for persistence at university, especially for “non-traditional” students of many kinds, because, as Cox *et al.* (2016:1) note, “life happens”. However, I would argue that while resilience may be a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one, and that in addition to resilience, some measure of creativity and a sense of agency is also required.

Cox *et al.* use the descriptor “Non-College Life Event” (NCLE) to convey a stressful event happening outwith the student’s university lives that has the potential to disrupt their studies and decrease their likelihood of graduating. Drawing on Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory, they argue (2016:3) that these events spark a change in the student’s assumptions about themselves and the world, forcing a change in behaviour and relationships.

With reference to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Model of development, they identify (2016:4) a number of microsystems that form part of students’ contexts:

Many of students’ microsystems may be associated with a college or university—particularly for traditional-aged residential students whose classrooms, living quarters, recreational facilities, and other daily-life environments are likely to overlap with a consistent group of other students on the same campus. But these students also typically have at least one microsystem totally unrelated to college (e.g. family,

hometown friends, employment); adult, commuter, or other “non-traditional” students may have several microsystems unrelated to higher education.

In considering how students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts harness happenstance, I will examine examples of NCLEs that affected the persistence intentions (and, in one case, outcome) of the students in my study. Each – to at least some degree – sparked a change in the students’ assumptions about themselves and the world; all occurred in micro- or exosystems unrelated to their university lives.

Lindy’s pregnancy resulted from a personal relationship external to her life as a student. It was unplanned, and Lindy experienced it as having happened to her, rather than as the consequence of her own agency. Finding that she might be pregnant forced her to re-examine her subject positions – as a student, as a former call-centre worker, as a partner to her boyfriend and as a member of her family of origin – and her assumptions about her future life trajectory and her imagined position in the world. Her relationships changed – her relationship to her studies, her department, and her university became more tenuous as she considered the possibility of having to withdraw, if only temporarily; her relationships to friends and family changed as she sought support (and commitments to future support, such as child-minding from her sister) and she felt more vulnerable in the world as her certainties were challenged.

Asserting agency, she sought out someone in her department who had children to speak to, imagining her future self into a similar role to weigh up her prospects of success. After her miscarriage, she defied advice to take time off and instead reasserted her student subject position, engaging more vehemently in her studies and re-creating an imagined future as close as she could muster to her pre-pregnancy imaginings. While Lindy could have chosen to withdraw – whether temporarily or permanently – at the point of confirming her pregnancy, and at the point of miscarriage, she chose to persist and to strive toward the imagined self she had dreamed of while working at the call centre.

Tristan's NCLE and subsequent reappraisal of his assumptions arose within the microsystem of his band. Having expressed at the outset the unlikelihood of persisting, Tristan had made it clear that his commitment was to his music and not to his studies. His experiences on tour – falling out with the drummer, living the “touring” life of late nights and copious drinking which impacted on his academic performance in an exam – tarnished his idealised conception of life as a musician, and the fear of academic failure and the disappointment of his tutor, his parents, and himself, forced him to re-examine his assumptions about what he wanted in life and how he related to others.

While, ultimately, he was unwilling to relinquish entirely his dream of withdrawing from university to ride the wave of rock stardom, he achieved a more tempered understanding of the likelihood of that, and reconciled his student subject position with his music aspirations and engaged more actively in his studies. Tristan also noted a change in his relationships – those with fellow band members seemed to weaken, while he invested more in his relationship with his tutor and gave more credence to his relationship with his parents. Rather than mere resignation or rationalisation, Tristan demonstrated a creative interweaving of his student-present and his imagined future that drew on elements of both subject positions and allowed an assertion of agency toward the achievement of those imaginings. His NCLE, rather than undermining his chances of persisting and graduating, instead strengthened them.

The NCLE which forced a re-examination of self and the world for Marian came from the political exosystem, through the Independence Referendum. Marian had been struggling to reconcile her student-self with her home-self, and bringing these together in an unproblematic way to imagine a future self had thus been difficult. With the advent of the referendum, she had found a means to refashion both her student-self and her home-self through the medium of a political-self that spanned, and transcended, both.

Marian had, from the start, expressed a desire to complete, tempered with a lack of certainty as to whether her circumstances would allow her to do so. With her activism around the referendum, which she successfully integrated in both her student-self and home-self, she triggered a greater understanding in her family microsystem of what her studies were about, and her motivation for undertaking them, and this in turn unlocked a greater level of support for her in achieving her study goals. Her behaviour changed, both at home and in class, and her relationships changed in both loci too, as she became more comfortable occupying space as a student in both spaces. As with Tristan, Marian found that the likelihood of her completing was strengthened rather than eroded through her NCLE.

Nina suffered a NCLE of the type classified by Cox *et al.* (2016:5) as “financial interference”. Like Marian, Nina was subject to a NCLE from the political exosystem, in Nina’s case relating to changes in changes in benefit entitlements. As a part-time student caring for a disabled (adult) brother, Nina’s context was characterised by a number of microsystems unrelated to her study context, and she found herself vulnerable to withdrawal as she struggled financially to support herself and her brother following a series of unplanned expenses.

Having only recently commenced with her studies, Nina was forced to re-examine her assumptions about her self, her plans, and the future she’d imagined for herself and her brother post-graduation when it appeared to her that she’d be unable to afford to continue studying. She felt her relationships had changed – she felt vulnerable and lacked power when dealing with people in positions of authority, and found her behaviour becoming more compliant and less assertive. Unlike Marian, Nina considered that her likelihood of completion was threatened by the NCLE. However, after a period of reflection, she felt a need to assert agency, rather than see herself as a victim, and so she modified her behaviour to adopt a more frugal lifestyle and actively sought other sources of income, with some success, which allowed her to persist with her studies (at the time of the study).

While Kris's "NCLE" might perhaps be viewed as a process rather than an event, their decision to suspend their studies was triggered by a specific event, i.e. speaking to a counsellor. It was during this exchange that Kris learned of the possibility of gender realignment, which provoked the decision to withdraw. The decision, and the context in which it was taken, were clearly stressful. Kris re-evaluated assumptions about who they were, how they related to the world, and what that might look like in the future. There followed a definite change in behaviour – the confrontation with their tutor being a case in point – and relationships changed.

Unlike the other examples, where the students harnessed resilience, creativity and agency to thwart the pressures to withdraw, Kris instead harnessed those attributes to make the decision not to continue in a mode they considered inauthentic. Withdrawal, to Kris, did not represent a surrender, but instead an active life choice: to take time to redefine themselves, and to resume their studies at a later date, making new choices from a position of power rather than desperation.

For the students in this study, then, happenstance in the form of NCLEs was not something they responded to passively or that they allowed to usurp their agency. Rather – at least in their retellings of the events – they constructed themselves as creative agents, drawing on resources and others to allow them to craft responses that best suited their imagined futures.

The Cox *et al.* (2016) study found that NCLEs had a negative impact on the likelihood of students completing (or of doing so within a four, or six, year timeframe), albeit a statistically insignificant impact for two of the three sub-types. They construct students as recipients of these events, which have the potential to delay or prevent their completion. The students in my study, by contrast, did not construct themselves (or at least, their narrative selves; their positioned selves, as alluded to by Nina, may have been constructed differently) as passive recipients of such events. Instead, they responded creatively and agentially in pursuit of their objectives.

How do they perceive their own agency in regard to “non-college life-events”?

Inden (1990:23) defines agency as:

...the realised capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view.

The students in the study all considered themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts. With this typically comes an assumption of a degree of marginality¹³ (although, in some cases, such as a male student on a traditionally feminised course, there are more complex factors regarding subject position). Marginality and agency are often counterpointed, since agency – as per Inden – invokes power and capacity to act, both of which may be denied the marginal.

The students in the study at times expressed frustrations, disappointment, feelings of powerlessness when confronted by systems, structures or environments within which they could not find resonance – yet all demonstrated agency in different ways and contexts. Engaging (congruently or oppositionally) with their studies and study contexts, authoring their identities and their relationships, they acted (within their constraints) on their worlds to shape futures congruent with those they imagined.

Figure 6.10 illustrates the processes surrounding persistence decisions and outcomes as distilled from the accounts of the students.

Students’ subjectivities provide them with identity resources. These identity resources lead them to seek or project membership of imagined communities, and also shape perceptions of whether or not they matter. This, in turn, informs their

¹³ As perceived by the student.

identity as students, and shapes a sense of belonging or otherwise. A sense of belonging facilitates a high level of engagement, which in turn fosters intention to persist. Circumstances also mediate ability to engage at a high level, and generate happenstance. Intention to persist shapes how happenstance is handled, leading to persistence or withdrawal.

Persistence also iteratively strengthens intention to persist, and amplifies a sense of belonging. Both happenstance and persistence affect the students' relationship to their imagined communities.

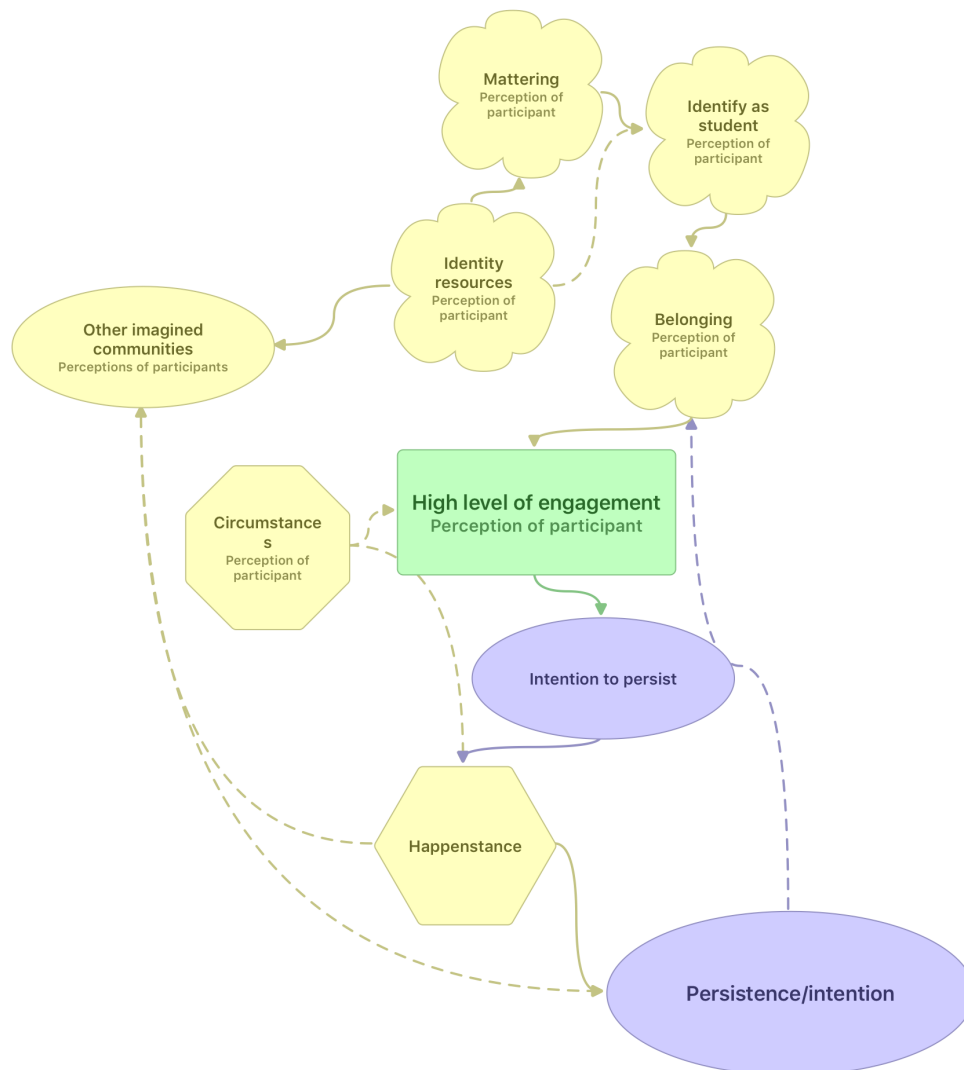


Figure 6.10: Understanding persistence intentions and persistence

Discussions of imagined communities are resumed in Chapter Seven, which attempts to make sense of the findings that have been laid out in Chapters Three to Six.

Chapter Seven – Making Sense

“It’s not enough simply to say concepts possess movement; you also have to construct intellectually mobile concepts”. – Deleuze (1995:122).

This chapter discusses the findings presented in the previous four chapters, and attempts to make sense of these. To do so, it engages with the findings around three themes:

- Engagement and Engaging, Transition and Transit
- Traversing Diaspora Space and Forging Imagined Community
- Essentialising, Dis/identifying and Mis/recognising

Each of these is discussed in turn.

Engagement and Engaging, Transition and Transit

Chapter Four discussed student engagement as a construct, and considered how the students in this study were engaging with their studies. (Chapter Three considered how they were engaging with others, and Chapter Five considered how they were engaging with their universities.) Chapter Four also introduced the expanded model of student engagement developed from this study – presented in Table 4.4.

This discussion doesn’t seek to replicate the earlier debates over the meanings, ambit or legitimacy of the construct. Nor does it aim to pluck any further rabbits out of the hat to produce yet more dimensions, or forms of expression, to an already complex construct. Instead, it offers a meta-discussion about engagement, and engaging, and how we construct and position students and student engagement discursively; and how this relates to the concepts of transition and transit.

You may have noticed that the titles, chapter headings and sub-headings all use verbs rather than nouns. This is not accidental. It is in part a response to Deleuze’s (1995:122) challenge in the epigraph of this chapter not to violate the dynamism and

mobility of the findings; it is also a response to Braidotti's (2011:15) observation that:

If the only constant in the third millennium is change, then the challenge lies in how to think about processes rather than concepts.

Engagement is a concept. Engaging is a process. Since we're in the domain of mobility, a transport metaphor seems appropriate: We use the clutch of a car to disengage the engine in order to change gears, and release it to (re)engage the engine. Changing gears allows us to change direction – into reverse – or to change speed (within the comfortable tolerance of the engine). It also allows us to adjust our car's behaviour to the terrain – a lower gear allows us to climb hills or holds back the engine on a steep downhill slope.

Engaging students suggests readying them for movement – setting them up in the appropriate state to make headway in a general direction (forward / backward; the specifics of direction are left to the steering wheel). Does the metaphor unfairly deprive students of agency in the engagement process, since “engaging students” (used as a verb rather than an adjective) implies an action carried out on students? Not necessarily. The work – the movement – is still down to them. Engagement enables; it does not achieve.

But importantly, the metaphor recognises the relative power of the HEI compared to the individual student – especially those students who identify as “non-traditional”, who may thus feel some degree of marginality. The HEI has the power to include or exclude the student; the power to pass or fail; to credentialise and qualify. The structures and processes of the HEI constrain, define the limits and set the standards in which student agency plays out. Students achieve, or fail to achieve – but they do so within parameters prescribed by the HEI. Students do not have equal power when it comes to engagement. A student cannot engage on their own, if there is nothing to engage with.

Ashwin (2016) argues that student engagement can lead to changes in students’ sense of self. Transition has been defined (Scott et al., 2014:75) as changes in “how students navigate institutional pathways and, specifically, how these movements affect shifts in identity and agency”. It has also been linked to student engagement by others (see Thomas, 2012; Wayne et al., 2016). While transition has traditionally been associated with the First Year Experience (FYE), a more holistic, student lifecycle view has been proposed by Wayne *et al.* (2016) that considers not only transition into university, but transition through and out of university too, as illustrated in Figure 7.1.

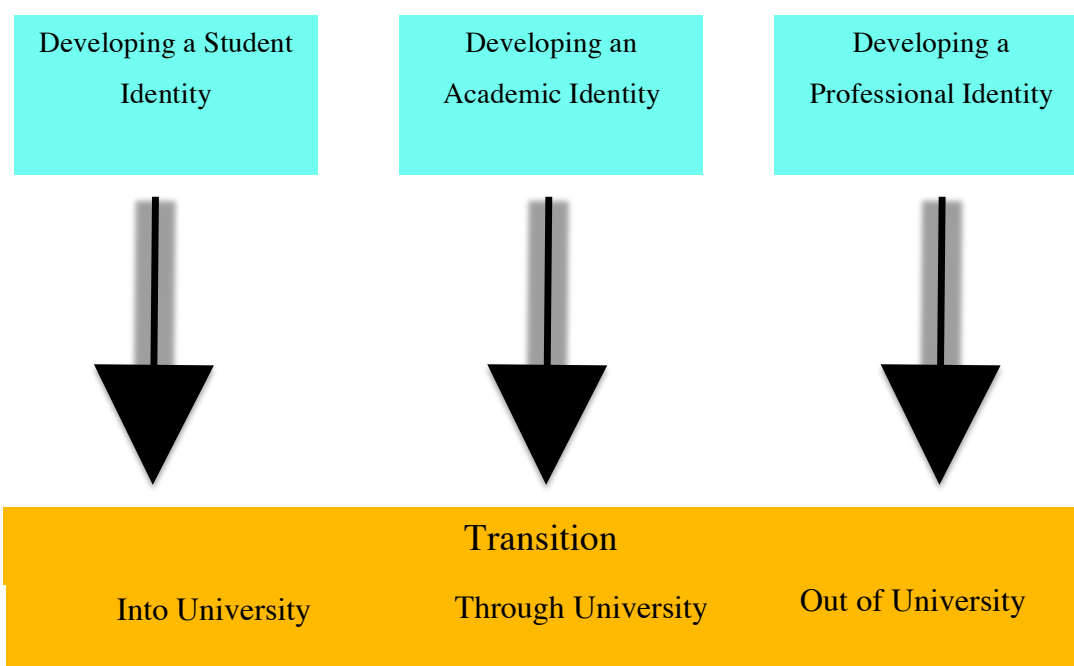


Figure 7.1: Transitions, adapted from Wayne *et al.* 2016

The Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) model recognises the importance of engaging students affectively, behaviourally and cognitively. This is a necessary but not sufficient requirement at HE level. In and of themselves, those forms of engagement do not lead to “graduateness” nor the levels of professional proficiency demanded by adherents of the employability agenda. For students to succeed in HE according to these measures, further forms of engagement are necessary. These I

identified in Chapter Four (based on data from this study) as critical, socio-cultural and political.

Considering each in turn:

Engaging *critically* is fundamental to development as a student. Whereas success at the compulsory education level requires an ability to synthesise and present information, success at HE level demands the development and application of critical insight, with critical thinking positioned as core to HE (Beasley & Cao, 2014; Lederer, 2007; Davies, 2006). This can be mapped onto Wayne *et al.*'s "Transition into University" and the development of a student identity.

Engaging *socio-culturally* requires students to orientate themselves (congruently or oppositionally, or in combination) relative to not only the "canon" of appropriate and acceptable practices around being a student, but also to the "canons" of practices, ontologies and epistemologies associated with the discipline/s they are studying. This process is captured in Ashwin, Abbas & McLean's (2014:221) account of undergraduate Sociology students in England, where students' understandings shift from understanding content, to constructing meaning, to seeing themselves implicated in such knowledge. This can be mapped onto Wayne *et al.*'s "Transition Through University" and the development of an academic (or disciplinary) identity.

Engaging *politically* demands of students that they develop their own authorial voice, asserting agency in the creation of knowledge and / or practice. This can be mapped onto Wayne *et al.*'s "Transition out of University" and the development of a professional identity. The mapping of these forms of engagement onto moments of transition is shown in Figure 7.2.

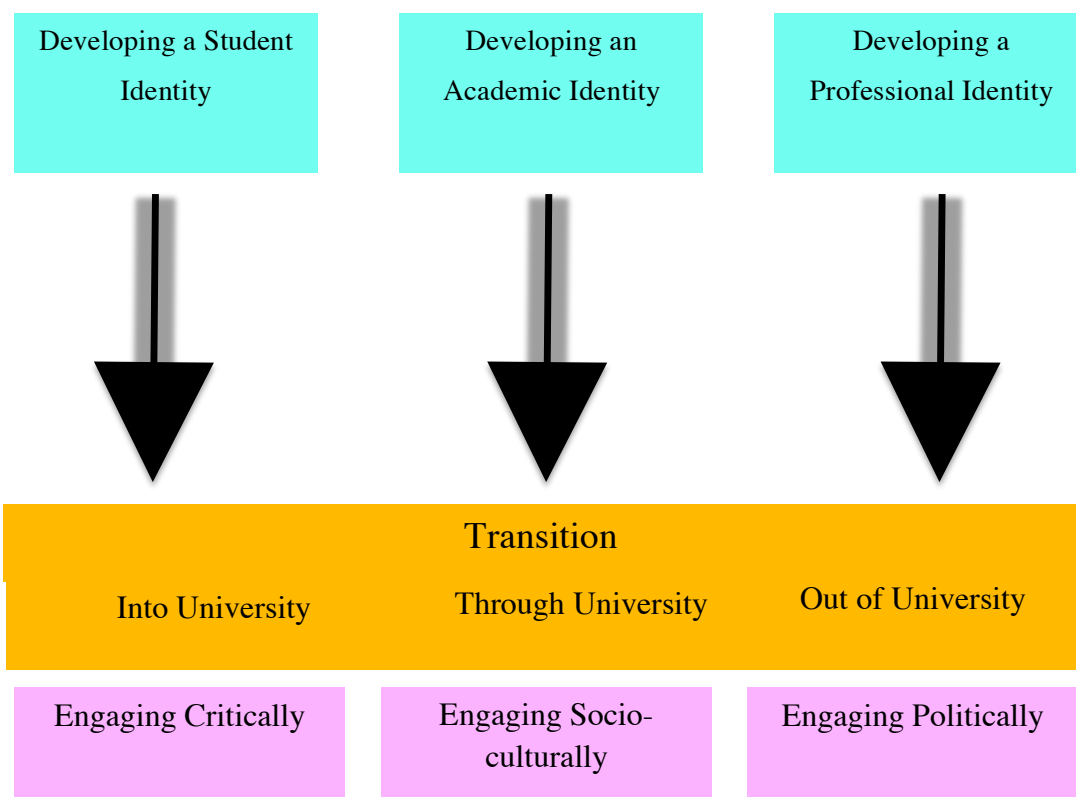


Figure 7.2: Transitions and Engaging, informed by Wayne *et al.* 2016

While Wayne *et al.* (2016) propose transition as having these three discrete, sequential phases, I would argue that this is too simplistic a reading. The data from this study suggests that students do not first develop a student identity, and then an academic / disciplinary identity, and finally a professional identity, but that these are all developing alongside each other in more complex ways. Greg’s insistence, for example, that he was following “professional” rather than “student” practices in sampling from a range of sources without overt citation, demonstrates an aspiring professional identity in conflict with an academic and student identity, whose norms of referencing were being flouted.

Likewise, Tristan’s assertion of a “professional” identity (as a musician) was in conflict with his developing a “student” identity. This conflict was addressed – though never fully resolved – by his developing an academic / disciplinary identity, which allowed a nascent student identity to begin to emerge. For Brian, his

professional identity as a dancer emerged together with his academic / disciplinary identity (as a dance student) and aided his transition into his student identity.

I have thus shown (in Figures 7.1 and 7.2) transitions as contiguous rather than discrete, though I would propose in real life the diagram would look far messier, with the orange “transition” blocks more muddled and jumbled than is presented here. I would also propose that assigning labels of “into”, “through” and “out of” represent ideal types rather than distinct phases, and that any attempt to map these onto a single, sequential timeline acknowledges that it is for illustrative rather than representative purpose.

While transition is about change – of state, form, style or place – it shares a Latin root with transit, which is explicitly about movement. Themes of movement are considered in the next section, which introduces the construct “diaspora space” and returns to the notion of “imagined community”.

Traversing Diaspora Space and Forging Imagined Community

James Clifford (1997:247) considers diaspora to be

A history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship.

Several of these can be applied to many of the students in this study, who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts. They arrive from elsewhere, bearing habitus which grounds them in their places of origin; they feel strange, marginalised – perhaps even alienated – in their study contexts, and may yearn to return to what they know (though this is contested); they identify elsewhere – if not with their place of origin, then somewhere in their imagined future, and this aspirant membership of an imagined community provides important identity resources for them.

Metaphors of space, time, and movement occur in several informants' accounts of their developing engagement with their study contexts. During the study, I was particularly struck by a description by Kris, in their third interview:

[My tutor] said something that really just made it all make sense to me. He said something about my "learning journey" - yes, he used that word, "learning journey" and I understood. He really sees it like that. Like, you're in one place, and you start walking. Or running, or crawling, or whatever. But you move. And then you're in another place. And you've learned. And you've moved. Like you inhabit some kind of simplistic two-dimensional universe. I think I actually laughed when he said that...You're never really just in one space. There's where you are, like, physically - but your head is somewhere else, you want to be somewhere else, your heart and your imagination anchor you in other places, and so where you start out from isn't one place, but many. And when you start out isn't one time, but many. And where you end up isn't one place, but many. ...So yea, it's really about that, about being several people at the same time, or several personas or personae or whatever, or identities or entities or I'm not really sure how to explain it. But basically, when you're like me, like many people - most people, probably - then who you see isn't all there is. That's just who that person feels is safe to put on display. There is more, there are others, but they're tucked away, elsewhere, out of view, for now. So when the journey starts, do you have to round up all the characters and get them into the car, or do you let the others make their own journeys in parallel, elsewhere, trusting that somewhere you'll all end up together again, or at least the ones that really matter will make their way to the places that really matter, even if they take a different route and arrive at a very different time? Or, maybe some of them are there already, waiting for others to catch up? Dunno, it all falls down because the journey doesn't really do it justice, as a metaphor. It's too constrained, to linear, too stuck on a simplistic model of the progression of time. I think it's more complex.

In this extended quote, Kris highlights the dangers of metaphor (and models), which by their nature seek to strip down complexity to discern a core, an essence, which can help to convey understanding but in the process can lose some of the critical complexity of detail which grounds the experience (or phenomenon) under discussion. To Kris, the stripped-down metaphor of the journey, with its unproblematic notions of start, route, and destination, lost crucial elements of the

experience as they experienced it, and, as a result, created an “us-them” distinction in their interaction with their tutor.

Notwithstanding the limitations of simplistic representations of journeys, images of movement and travel do convey the sense of transition, and transit, across and within different physical, cognitive and emotional spaces, as introduced in Chapter Four. HEIs, like other spaces, are sites riven with power dynamics, as described by Valentine (2007:18):

Specific spaces (home, family, community) 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.

As discussed in Chapter Four, there were spaces in which some of these students felt out of place, through their being marked as different, both in the situations from which they’d come, and in the study contexts to which they’d travelled. These were sometimes shaped through overt structures of power (such as the power of parents to shape the hegemonic culture of the home to which children were expected to adapt) and sometimes by internalised notions of appropriateness, shaped from larger structural forces into assumptions or prejudice (such as an older student feeling “out of place” in “younger” spaces).

It was the complexities of the interweaving of power with space, and the shifts and changes over time, in the informants’ narratives which attracted me to the work of Brah. Intersections of power, space, time and movement coalesce in Brah’s notion of “diaspora space”, (Brah & Phoenix, 2004:84) which

covers the entanglements of genealogies of dispersal with those of “staying put”. The term “homing desire” is used to think through the question of home and belonging; and, both power and time are viewed as multidimensional processes. Importantly, the concept of “diaspora space” embraces the intersection of “difference” in its variable forms,

placing emphasis upon emotional and psychic dynamics as much as socio-economic, political and cultural differences. Difference is thus conceptualised as social relation; experience; subjectivity; and, identity.

These four "modalities of difference" are further articulated thus by Feldman (2006:103-104):

- *Experience: symbolic and narrative construction in struggles over material conditions and meanings.*
- *Social relations: contexts of dialogic constitution through systematic relations mediated by institutional discourses and practices.*
- *subjectivity: self-construal, the site of self-in-the-world sense making.*
- *identity: manifestation of subjectivity as coherent, continuous, stable, having an inherent core.*

Within this framework, space is inherently historicised, similar to Massey's (1994:5) construction of place as "a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings".

Just as Kris rejects the notion of a "learning journey" as being "simplistic" and failing to capture the complexity of the multiple shifts that take place for students who define themselves as "non-traditional" through their engagement with their contexts of study, so too "the concept of diaspora signals these processes of multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries". (Brah, 1996:194). Diaspora space - defined as "the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (Brah, 1996:181) - is, furthermore (Brah, 1996:208-209),

where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition.... Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of "us" and "them", are contested.

Diaspora space contains not only diasporas, but also the "indigene" - in the HE context, this could equate with "traditional" students. Power and belonging are constantly contested and negotiated within these spaces, along many different axes. There is not a simple transition from being an outsider to becoming an insider - and, in the process of transition, the very notion of what an insider is becomes subject to negotiation (Brah (1996:209) cites the example of immigrants from Asia, Africa and elsewhere to England, destabilising the definition of what it is to be "English"). Similarly, students who define themselves as "non-traditional", like those before them, challenge dominant discourses of "the student" - both more generally, and, importantly, to themselves.

Celia, for example, admitted in her final interview that

It has changed a bit. Like, at first, it was, like, “dudes, you need to – oh, and [Celia].” Now it’s more, like, “listen up everyone” and even if no one else notices it, I do. Even the posters for stuff, like, socials, it’s not just pictures of nerdy boys anymore. It’s pictures of, like, the social – bowling, or paintball, or whatever. Like they’ve realised we’re not all the same.

Marian, during her second interview, described how her political engagement impacted on her study time:

It has needed some all-nighters, and I’ve missed out on sleep sometimes, or once or twice skipped meals because I was working, but that’s also made me feel more like a real student!... I suppose I’m falling into those same stereotypes. [laughs] I meant, the way the student experience is always portrayed in the media, in popular culture, of kids living it up and then running out of time and having to stay up all night to meet a deadline. Or drinking their grant up and having to skip meals. Of course not all students are like that and of course other students are just as real, but I suppose despite living that, I’ve not really believed it myself, in some way.

The students I interviewed for this study had all put themselves forward because the description in the recruiting poster: “When [your university] thinks of a student, what

kind of person are they likely to be thinking of? How well does that description fit you?" These students had images of "the student" that they felt were held by their universities, which they experienced as "other" to the images they held of themselves.

Like the image of "Englishness" which becomes destabilised and contested through the arrival of immigrants from other continents, the image of "the student" is subject to destabilisation and contestation by the presence of students who perceive themselves to be "non-traditional" in their contexts. This destabilisation can manifest in the university / department reconsidering who their actual students are, and adopting a more inclusive rhetoric, as experienced by Celia, but it also manifests importantly in the "non-traditional" students themselves coming to recognise themselves as "students", and validating and valorising their own rights to wear the label, and to occupy those spaces.

These contested spaces include those they come to occupy, and those they have left. An important theme allied to diaspora space is that of home, and "homing desire" (Brah, 1996:190). This yearning manifests not simply as homesickness - and Brah recognises that not all diasporas seek to return "home", despite Clifford's assertion cited above - but as a complex longing to feel "at home", and the staking of a claim to belong. Home is acknowledged as inherently contradictory, as a site both of the familiar, and of danger (Brah, 1996:180). This ambivalence toward "home" is reflected by several examples in my data - including those of Greg, Gabi and Uche cited in Chapter Four, and Andy, who mused that

...in a sense you can't really go home, once you've left. You can visit, but the place you visit isn't really "home", not because it's changed, but you have. What you think is home now, isn't that. It's, it's something else, somewhere else. Or maybe nowhere, not anyplace real. Some place you haven't gone yet, some place you still have to create.

This resonates with Bender's assertion (2001:15) that

we affect and are affected by the landscapes we move through. We return home, but not to the same place.

“Home” is thus both that which is left behind, and that to which one aspires - the "imagined communities" introduced in Chapter Three. Brah (1996:194) refers to this as the “multi-placedness of ‘home’ in the imaginary” and stresses that it does not preclude a sense of becoming “anchored” in the new context.

While “home” and “belonging” often exist in tension with each other, due to ambivalences and complexities, feeling “at home” is typically used to denote a less problematic sense of belonging. Feldman (2006:109), commenting on a study of “mainstream” (or “indigene”, to use Brah’s term) interviewees, draws on the concepts of alterity, mobility and home:

... alterity encompasses the array of Brah’s (1996) ‘axes of differentiation’ (class, gender, etc.) that shape interviewees’ sense of difference, outsidership and alienation from the ‘majority’ of which they are identified as being part. Mobility is used to capture their personal and material capacity to access and move among and between different communities, positionalities and institutions. Home/belonging refers to the struggle to cultivate a sense of place within a rapidly changing nation. As such, this triad assists analysis of the impacts of the diverse understandings among members of the ‘mainstream’ of their ‘place’ within their society, their freedom and ability to be themselves, move comfortably and effectively across symbolic and material boundaries, and access resources and capital necessary to exercise their free choice.

These same constructs can usefully be applied to students who self-define as "non-traditional", and whose "mobility" (as defined by Feldman, above) is differently constrained and enabled through their habitus and the capitals they bring into diaspora space. Thus, Lindy is able to draw on positionalities of being both a "home student" and an "international student", moving between the two communities though feeling fully "at home" in neither, due to her alterity:

Well, I'm kind of non-traditional [makes "scare quotes" with fingers] although I'm also not... My parents are Scottish, I've got a British passport but I grew up and went to school in Australia ... So..., I speak with a funny accent and I don't have Advanced Highers, although I'm classed as a Home Student and don't pay fees... There are loads of foreign students here - international students or whatever - and in some ways I feel more like them than I do the local students, although I'm supposed to be a local student. I joined the society and hung out with them for a while but while it was great to talk about "back home" it was also different for me, my family is here and I don't have the same issues they have...

Frankie, meanwhile, found her alterity – as a student from a working class background - more constraining of her mobility as she struggled to negotiate a sense of place during her placement at a media organisation:

It's like, you're "regional", the minute you open your mouth. Whether or not you're interested in "national", or maybe you'd be good at it even, you're not going there. You sound "regional", so that's where you're going.

While Tristan's capitals allowed him greater mobility, into and out of student spaces and positionalities as he chose, for others with different capitals it was less easy. Vanessa felt "shut out" of conversational spaces among her classmates owing to her not having travelled abroad, resulting in her access to a "sense of place" being limited:

You get tired of asking, and they get tired of explaining, so after a while you just don't anymore. Either you Google it later or you don't bother. You pretend to be texting or something and wait for the conversation to move on to something you know something of...

For Nina, a "sense of place", or belonging, in HE was conditional on other aspects of her life affording her the time:

I'd probably belong more if I had more time to spend on it, to be fair. So these [classmates] are together all the time, I'm there some of the time. And next year, they'll still be together, and I'll be with others, so I'll be starting all over again, getting to know new people, explaining the same shite again about being part-time. If I even get there. If something happens with [brother], he's my priority, not this [course].

Nina's time constraints were not the only limiting factor in her ability to belong fully. She admitted that the material reality of caring for her disabled brother was an aspect of her life she couldn't share with her classmates, whose lives were very different. This led to a degree of self-censorship, of occlusion of aspects of her life, leaving a partial version on display to them. This experience was shared by others, like Alex, who carefully screened how much of herself she would expose to others, and Yumna, who found it easier "to let people assume what they're going to assume, anyway. It stops making everything a debate, or a lesson". Brian found his gender "invisibly unwelcome" on his course, but accepted this wryly:

You can't really complain, can you? Like, men own the world, here's one space where we're a bit invisible and if we're yelling to get noticed, what does that say about us?

"Freedom and ability to be themselves", as mentioned by Feldman (above) was a driving force for all of the students interviewed in this study, and their imagined communities provided the psychological and emotional space for this. Nizińska (2010:2) stresses the importance of being part of a community for student persistence. She argues that this creates a safe and secure environment for students, where they feel valued and that they belong.

Creating "a sense of place", and forging community, are interwoven. Berger (1984:63) describes the process as follows:

By turning in circles the displaced preserve their identity and improvise a shelter. Built of what? Of habits... the raw material of repetition turned into shelter... words, jokes, opinions, objects and places... photos, trophies, souvenirs... The roof and four walls... are invisible, intangible, and biographical.

For the students in this study who define themselves as “non-traditional”, the habitus and capitals they bring with them into the new, unfamiliar environment of HE form the “building materials” to improvise shelter, as described above by Berger. With repetition, even new practices become familiar, helping to create a sense of belonging – though this is always mediated through relationships.

Bender (20015-6) captures it thus:

By moving along familiar paths, winding memories and stories around places, people create a sense of self and belonging. Sight, sound, smell and touch are all involved, mind and body inseparable.... As people go about their business, things unfold along the way, come in and out of focus, change shape and take on new meanings... People’s sense of place and landscape thus extends out from the locale and from the present encounter and is contingent upon a larger temporal and spatial field of relationships. The explanation of what is happening moves backwards and forwards between the detail of everyday existence and these larger forces.

These students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts, and who thus do not feel fully “free and able to be themselves” will feel differently enabled and constrained by the various communities in which they find themselves in their study contexts. Their imagined communities anchor them in a space where they can feel fully “at home”. It is, however, important to note that imagined communities are not static, objective entities. They are continually constructed anew by the aspirant members, according to how they make sense of their subjectivities and position their identities.

The dynamic according to which students who consider themselves “non-traditional” feel themselves constrained and “not fully free and able to be themselves”, and thus construct their imagined communities, is discussed below. This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 7.3.

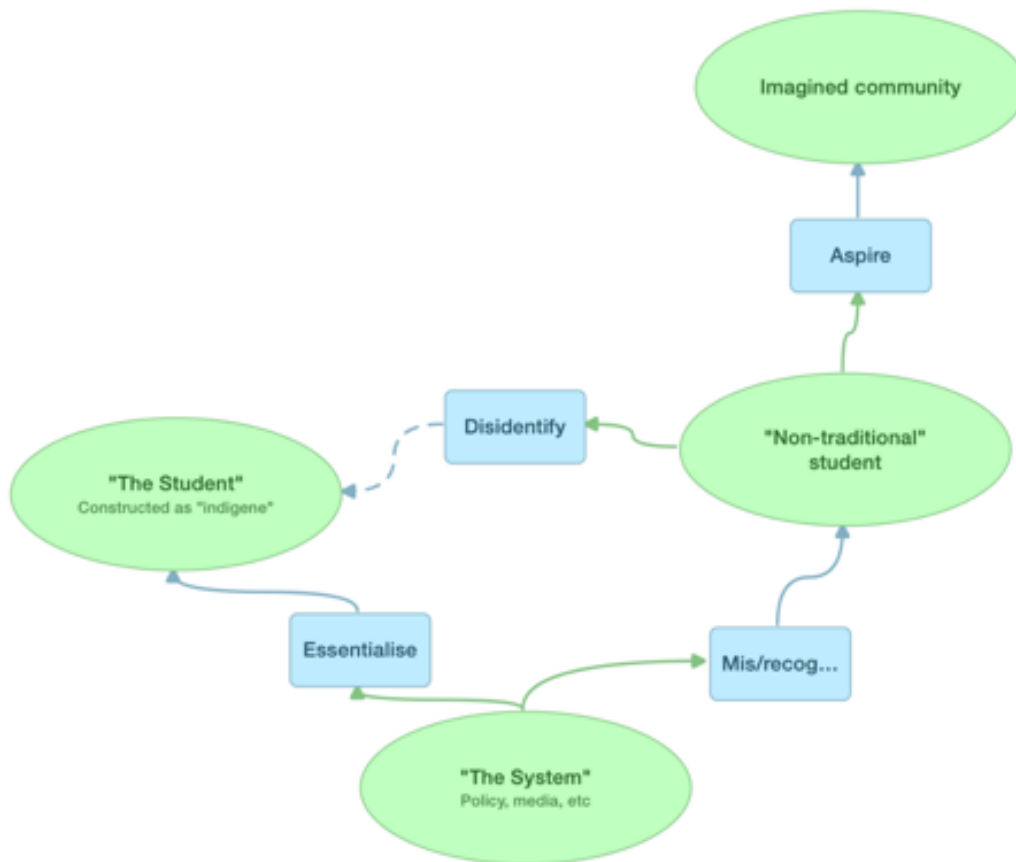


Figure 7.3 Imagined Community and its relationship to Dis/identification and Mis/recognition

Essentialising, Dis/identifying and Mis/recognising

Students who self-identify as “non-traditional” do so for many reasons; in essence, though, they perceive an essentialised notion of “the student” constructed through policy at various levels, broadcast and popularised through the media, and re/presented uncritically through popular discourse. When this construct does not reflect their self-image back to them, they disidentify, making “enormous efforts to distance themselves from the label” (Skeggs, 1997:74), as illustrated by Blair’s dismissal of his university’s attempts to engage “someone they think is like me”, or by this extended quote from Tristan, revisited from earlier:

When my Uni thinks about "A Student" [makes quotes with fingers, speaks as in title case], no, it's not me. It's those kids who've moved through on the conveyer belt straight from school, a nice school, full of nice middle class kids whose parents all went to Uni and who want their kids to go to Uni... Advanced Highers, or A-levels, two As and a B, or whatever it is. Good grades. A CV full of worthy achievements - DoE [Duke of Edinburgh] preferably Gold, maybe a gap year volunteering in Bhutan, second violin in the National Youth Orchestra and first team rugby captain. Or an Olympic medal for skulls. Not. Me. At. All.

Skeggs (1997:74) describes disidentification as a “structuring absence”, in that despite the refusal of recognition and the conceptual distance informants seek to put between themselves and the rejected label, it continues to constrain and permeate their agency. Tristan, for all his disavowal of his social and cultural capital, still draws on it uncritically to his own benefit, as illustrated by this admission:

So my mum spoke to someone she knew at work, and his brother offered me a job...

Disidentification can also draw on the strategy of "contrastive rhetoric", which "signifies what is reasonable or normal behaviour by introducing alternative practices and social forms in stylized, trivialised and generally pejorative terms which connote their unacceptability' (Hargreaves, 1984:218), as illustrated by Tristan's positioning of "traditional" students as "uncritical lemmings" on a "conveyor belt", opting for higher education as a default position flowing from their habitus.

Two levels of dis/identification took place for these students who identified as “non-traditional”. By self-identifying as such, they were dis/identifying as (the essentialised construct of) “student”. However, as they transition and develop student, academic / disciplinary and professional identities, other forms of dis/identification take place, as they attempt to shed those subjectivities that mark them out as different. Thus, for Celia, the pressure to deny her gender through conforming to the (desexed, but still essentially male) standards of “geekiness”

assumed as “normal” on her course changes her behaviour as she dis/identifies from the essentialised construct of “feminine” projected onto her by her classmates and tutors.

These students who self-identified as “non-traditional” perceived themselves to be mis/recognised by the essentialised construct of “the student”. The term mis/recognition is used to convey a process of not simply failing to recognise accurately, but of simultaneously delegitimizing. Fraser (1995:280) describes mis/recognition as

...not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others' conscious attitudes or mental beliefs. It is rather to be denied the status of full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life—not as a consequence of a distributive inequality (such as failing to receive one's fair share of resources or “primary goods”), but rather as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.

While the most acute example of mis/recognition among the students in this study must be Kris, a transgender womxn student who had arrived at university identified as male (as exemplified in the quotes in Chapter Four), other students reported experiencing mis/recognition, too. Vanessa felt mis/recognised in the assumption that all students on her course had travelled to the countries whose languages they were studying, and Yumna perceived that her course assumed a “western”, broadly Christian background in terms of exposure to design, which was at odds with her own background. Courtney provided the following account, as a student parent:

Groupwork. I don't know why they're so obsessed with groupwork. Have you ever tried to work in a group with people when you have kids and they don't? ... The others all want to meet late, in the evenings, when they don't have other commitments, but you do. There's just this understanding that you're free to drop everything because your studies are all you've got going on and kids aren't like a job where you can just phone in sick or ask for a different shift. So every time there's a groupwork assignment my heart just sinks, because they really don't get it.

In contrast to their disidentification with the essentialised construct “the student”, students who self-identified as “non-traditional” aspired to become (or imagined themselves to be) full members of an imagined community of others who mirrored those aspects of themselves they most readily embraced, or those values to which they most eagerly aspired. For some, like Tristan, that manifested in the company they sought (see quote in Chapter Four about avoiding “studenty stuff”, and seeking community with fellow musicians) while for others, like Marian, it was expressed through engagement in a cause, group or activity that provided them with a sense of meaning or mission:

I'm having a lot of fun, I must say, talking to young 'uns about these things, it's like sneaking back into the playground when you're older and having a go on the swings. Those kids are so passionate, they haven't had the stuffing knocked out of them yet, they really feel they can change the world even if people on the telly are telling them they can't. And it makes me feel that my studies are actually about something important, too. That the things I'm learning matter in very important, direct ways, not just in assignments and in hypothetical situations, but to actual real people living in actual real places facing choice now. Well, soon. [smiles]

Perceptions were not static but shifted over time, both between interviews and sometimes within the same interview, referring back to the past or ahead to projected futures. While some simply revised their accounts of the past, insisting they'd “always” felt that way, others, like Kris, were more reflexive:

I don't know what I said before, in those other interviews... No, no, don't show me. It doesn't matter. What I mean is, now, I probably see it differently. So I don't want you to think I lied, or that I'm changing my story, or that I'm reinventing the past to suit myself, but, I suppose, this is the way it makes sense to me now. And it's probably different to what I said before. And, [laughs] all of it is the truth!

Putting it together

Considerations of transition and engagement suggest that to transition successfully into, through, and out of HE, students need to engage, and to be engaged, critically, socio-culturally and politically, developing student, academic / disciplinary and professional identities – although these are not discrete, sequential processes but are mutually constitutive and dialogical. These processes are common to all students, but for students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts, such as the students in this study, developing these identities may be more troublesome than for other students. In part, this may be due to perceiving an essentialised notion of “the student”, constructed from images conveyed through popular discourse, projected by policy and amplified by the media, in which they do not see their own reflection. These students may perceive themselves to be mis/recognised in their study contexts, and this may lead to a process of dis/identification as a student. In order to feel fully “free and able to be themselves”, these students construct “imagined communities” of which they aspire (or imagine themselves) to be full members, drawing on a better fit of the habitus and capitals they bring with them. This process is illustrated in Figure 7.4.

Higher education can be understood as a landscape of contestation, with claims and counter-claims including those relating to who has a “right” to be there. Understanding this landscape as “diaspora space”, with “indigene” (or “traditional”) and “diaspora” (or “non-traditional”) mutually negotiating their identities and claims, and developing practices which, with repetition, begin to construct a sense of belonging or feeling “at home”, makes explicit the dynamics which constrain and enable transition.

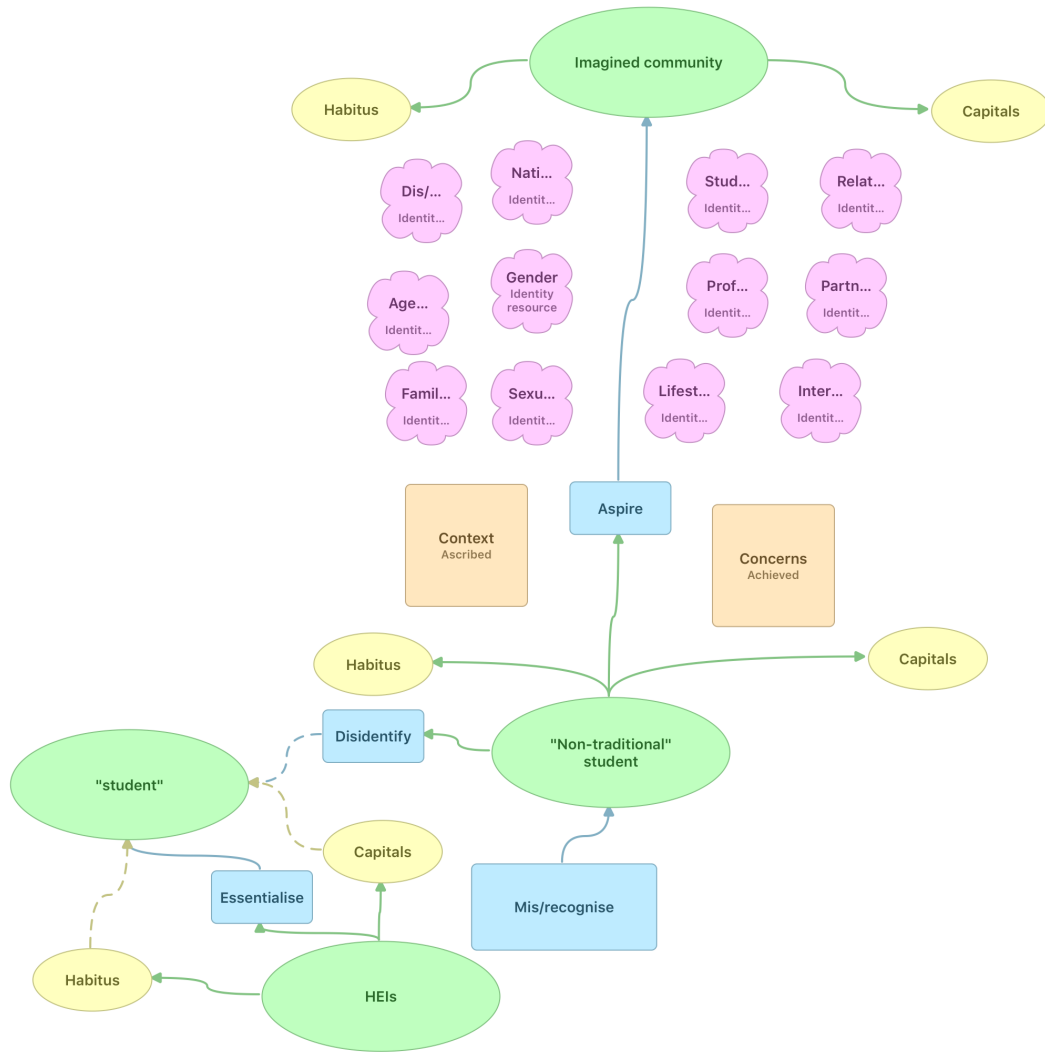


Figure 7.4: Putting it all together

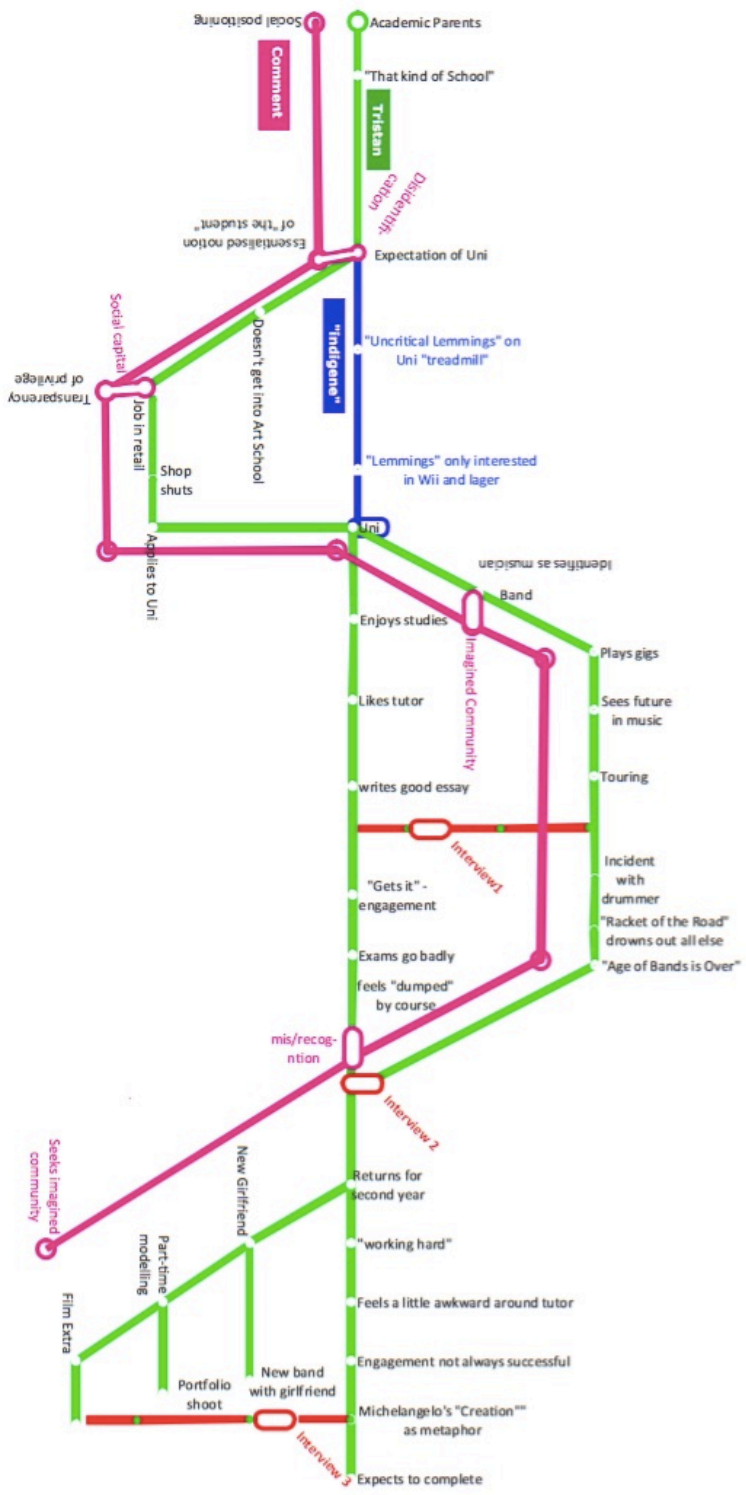


Figure 7.5: Tristans' traversing Diaspora Space

Metaphors of space and movement provide useful means to aid understanding of transitions through physical, cognitive and emotional landscapes, and while the simplistic comparison of the journey struggles to capture the complexity of experience related by these students, the analogy of the “Tube map” allows for greater complexity, including multiple points of departure and arrival, many vehicles travelling along the same route, or its variations, simultaneously, in the same or reverse direction. Figure 7.5 provides an example of the engagement experiences of a single student – Tristan – mapped out in this way, with the green line representing his route, the blue line his depiction of the route of his school contemporaries, and the magenta line providing analytical comment. Red lines mark interviews.

Multiple branches represent simultaneous “travel” along different routes, of different aspects of engagement. For example, Tristan’s studies represent one engagement route, while his music represents another. Later, his studies again represent one route and his extramural interests (new girlfriend, part-time modelling, working as a film extra) represent other engagement routes.

Understanding the nature of how students engage and are engaged, and how this facilitates and constrains transition, provides a useful backdrop against which to consider the experiences of students who identify as “non-traditional” in their own study contexts. For these students, who experience mis/recognition and thus (at least initially) dis/identify with the essentialised construct of “the student”, the landscape of HE represents a landscape of contestation in which they must negotiate their identities, and in thus doing, renegotiate what it means to be “a student” both for themselves and for those who may be considered “indigene” or “traditional”.

Scott *et al.* (2014:96) report the assumption that the process of undergraduate studies transforms “non-traditional” students, such that by the time they graduate, “they will be reconstituted as the ‘standard’ or ‘traditional’ student”. However, they note (2014:97-98):

Transitions are... always tied to complex relations of power and embodied intersections of difference. Transitions are thus complex

processes of change, resistance, re/positioning and subjective construction...It is not only the process of naming or being named that constitutes the identity position as “student”: it is through taking up of particular practices and ways of doing and being within particular cultural contexts that the subject may be recognised as a student.

For these students who identified as “non-traditional” within their study contexts, then, being recognised as a student required not only the adoption of context-specific “ways of doing and being”, but the challenging of assumptions about who might legitimately be considered to be a student in that specific context.

What implications might these experiences and contestations hold for policy, and how might institutional processes and practices take better cognisance of these so as better to support these students to facilitate their persistence? Chapter Eight now turns to these questions.

Chapter Eight – Suggesting thoughts for Policy

Changes that affect one's sense of identity are especially delicate... Changes of this qualitative kind happen more easily at the molecular or subjective level, and their translation into a public discourse and shared social experiences is a complex and risk-ridden affair. (Braidotti, 2011:219)

This chapter sets out to answer the third research question: what might be the implications for policies and practices of an understanding of how students who consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts perceive engagement and how this influences their persistence and persistence intentions? In doing so, it considers each of the following questions in turn:

8.1 – What can universities do, according to students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context?

8.2 – How can support and policy move beyond labels, to consider intersectionality, so as to reach the “right” people?

8.3 – How can policies be better aligned with each other so as to avoid policy contradictions, and achieve “joined-up” policy?

8.4 – What are the implications of policy being driven by a social justice agenda, or a diversity agenda?

What can universities do, according to students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study context?

Fraser (2003:9) claims that social justice depends on both recognition and redistribution, that neither is reducible to the other, and that each is implicated in the other, in the sense that neither exists in an “ideal type” form in the social world; each

example includes dimensions of both. Injustices of distribution, such as those rendered visible by a class-based analysis, also turn up injustices of recognition (such as the discourse of derision surrounding poorer classes); and injustices of recognition, such as those rendered visible through “identity politics”, often lead to injustices of distribution – an example being apartheid, founded on an injustice of recognition (racism) but turned into a system for structurally disadvantaging people on that basis. Injustices of recognition are described as “cultural”, while those of distribution are deemed “socio-economic”.

Many of the concerns raised by students in this study seem, at core, to arise from issues of recognition, although these may give rise to a distributive element. Examples of these include recognising that some students have caring responsibilities (for children, family or others), which constrains their ability to engage at non-scheduled times, or to access resources such as libraries during prescribed opening hours, or to meet up with peers for group work: at root, recognition that “students” may also be carers or parents is “cultural”, yet the most obvious strategies for addressing this (extending opening hours, providing child care / carer relief to allow students to engage at other times, etc.) require resources which place it firmly in the “socio-economic” domain.

Other issues of “recognition” may require less ongoing “socio-economic” responses (although some resource may be necessary initially, for reconceptualisation or redesign), such as recognising that not all first-language speakers have equal access to particular discourses, because of different habitus, (due to class, nationality, or

ethnicity, for example) and so rendering expectations and assumptions visible in a way that is equally accessible, and making sure that communication has been successfully understood as intended.

Similarly, no significant resources are required for the recognition that not all students seek to participate “actively” or “visibly” and that some are more comfortable away from the spotlight, but are still engaging in their own way. Understanding the complex nature of engagement rather than reducing it to its most visible or congruent elements, and facilitating students to engage in their chosen way, is likely to achieve more than demonising those students who are not participating in a particular, socially sanctioned fashion.

Relatedly, in recognising the diversity of the student body, universities could recognise that not all students have equal capacity to “take up opportunities” for engagement in, for example, extra-mural pursuits, internships or summer activities, and that this does not indicate a lack of “quality” of student, or interest, or engagement, but could be down to a lack of resource, or a habitus mismatch, or a choice informed by other priorities. Students with work commitments or caring responsibilities, for example, may not be able to take up an unpaid internship – or even a paid one.

Importantly, universities can also recognise that “success” means different things to different students, and that the values and goals assumed by the university are not universally shared. Performative measures such as top marks, glittering HEAR

reports or even speedy completion of their degrees may not matter to students whose priorities are more concerned with ensuring that their dependants are cared for and their other commitments met. For some students, simply being able to hand in an assignment on time is a measure of success. The discourse surrounding “the student experience” needs to take cognisance of the very different situations, and experiences, of students, rather than projecting a single ideal to which students should aspire.

Students arrive with different capitals, as discussed in Chapter Five, but only some are recognised and valued at university. This leads to dis/identification and mis/recognition, and may result in missed opportunities for drawing on those capitals and recognising strengths that do not match the overtly valued habitus and capitals. For example, a student who has been placed in care may have developed a reservoir of resilience; a student parent may have well-developed time-management skills, and a working-class student may, in defying the odds to reach university, have developed an ability to imagine far beyond their experience. At the same time, it would be equally erroneous to assume that such students conform to stereotypes of “exceptionality” and to cast them in that mould. Rather than defining them, listening to how they define themselves and working with what they identify would be key.

In her first interview, Lindy commented

If I wanted to engage students like myself, I'd first make sure that the forms they filled in to apply contained useful information so that I could have an idea of who they were and what they might be wanting. Then I'd have some kind of database matching up people that were kind of similar, and asking them to opt in or out of

sharing their contact details with others who matched up on the stuff that was most important to them. Like, say, feeling foreign but not being classed as foreign on a visa. Or having worked but not being really old. Or whatever. Something about your identity as a student. And you would have access to your own record on the database so you could edit it and change your priorities as they shifted, so as your needs changed or your circumstances you wouldn't forever be "that Aussie kid" but maybe "the girl who's pregnant in her second year."

A couple of important issues emerge from this. The first is that many students don't arrive at universities with ready-made "communities" with which they identify. Allowing students to define for themselves what characteristics matter most to them, and to find others easily who not only have those characteristics but consider them an important marker of their identity, could help students who identify as "non-traditional" to forge a sense of community more easily. Another important issue is that how they define themselves changes over time, as subjectivities wax or wane in importance, and experiences shift their self-perceptions. Lindy describes her possible pregnancy looming in her consciousness and demoting her "foreign-ishness", and similarly other students' conceptions of themselves broadened, deepened or shifted entirely over the course of the data-gathering period.

Reports such as *The Bairn Necessities* (NUS Scotland, 2016) and *Learning with Care* (NUS, n.d.) have urged universities to collect information on students' caring and parental responsibilities; other constituencies might similarly argue for the collection of information that enables adequate resourcing and monitoring. Information collected on entry is only one facet – students' circumstances are subject to change during the course of their studies, as are those aspects they may choose to

disclose or withhold. A database which allows students to edit their own records, relating not only to protected characteristics or data the university is required to report against, but those subjectivities they consider important to their own self-definition, allows for a more dynamic picture – and, if linked to an app with an intuitive interface and benefits for the students (such as meeting similar others), might be useful to these students.

How can support and policy move beyond labels, to consider intersectionality, so as to reach the “right” people?

One of the striking findings of the study was the apparent reluctance of several of the students to draw on sources of support that had been designated for students “like them”. As discussed earlier, this was due in part to concerns about stigma – similar to Scott *et al.*’s (2014:97) description of how

...the subject of a widening participation discourse attempts to avoid becoming the identifiable “non-standard” student of the often derogatory discourses of widening participation, embedded in classed and racialised assumptions about lack and deficit.

This relates to Braidotti’s (2011:17) remarks on the equation of difference with inferiority:

In the contemporary political context, difference function as a negative term indexed on a hierarch of values governed by binary oppositions: it conveys power relations and structural patterns of exclusion... To be different from means to be less than.

Other concerns were bound up in this reluctance, too – identity concerns in admitting that they were struggling while others (apparently) soared, concerns that they were “not needy enough” compared to others who may have had more of a claim than they had, or dis/identification – that was simply not a categorisation of themselves that they recognised.

Support is most often earmarked for target groups, arising from discrete funding sources (such as support for care leavers, funded by local authorities) with some generic “hardship” funds being available on a discretionary basis. However, when students do not self-identify in the way the funding allocations are made, they will not seek support based on that criterion as their first option.

Additionally, questions of managing intersectionality arise. Students who present as “non-traditional” do so for many more reasons than may be noted in terms of support needs, and they also may have several reasons. Thus, many working class students are older, and many mature students have family responsibilities and working commitments, as noted earlier. Fitting students’ support needs into a single, discrete category when their lived reality spills over many categories becomes tricky, and coordinating among different sources of support can be complex and time-consuming.

Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah (2010:15) found, among people aged 35 and under, a reluctance to identify with formal markers of race / ethnicity, nationality, sex/gender or disability status, and a greater propensity to identify with “chosen” (as opposed to

“given”) aspects of identity – perhaps not unlike the “ascribed / achieved” distinction offered in Figure 3.8, earlier. Along with a greater focus on the complexity and multiplicity of embraced subjectivities they noted among their respondents, Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah also (2010:17) observed a greater fluidity in conceptions of identity, which they termed “super-diversity”. They quoted on respondent thus:

People have more than one identity, they have multiple identities and multiple interests. With modern technology that's easy to forge because you can belong to different communities in a non-physical way through the miracles of technology. And young people are very happy to do that.

Braidotti (2011:17) considers this “super-diversity” to be a function of advanced capitalism that “proliferat[es]... differences for the sake of commodification and profit”, and advocates moving away from binaries toward a “nomadic, non-hierarchical, multidirectional social and discursive practice of multiplicity”. How this would manifest in practice as distinct from “super-diversity” appears to rest on dismantling axes of power behind the “labels” rather than in the content of how people may wish to self-identify.

Catering for “a self that is joyfully discontinuous” (Braidotti, 2011:235) becomes more of a challenge. The “one-stop-shop” model implemented by some HEIs of a single point of contact for all support issues can help to address both matters of stigma and questions of coordination across different support structures. However, where the support structures themselves are located in different “silos”, once referral from the initial point of contact takes place, coordination can be lost. While personal

tutors can advise and refer, some students' circumstances may exceed reasonable expectations of pastoral support or expertise from personal tutors, and may warrant a "case worker" providing pastoral oversight in addition to the role of the personal tutor.

With different sources of funding for different support priorities, questions may also arise as to whether policies are supporting or working against each other. Examples provided anecdotally include the focus in some universities on enrolling international students, who bring in international fees, vs. the recruiting of SIMD20/40 students. A university seeking to increase its proportion of SIMD20/40 students may struggle to finance the support needed to recruit and support these students adequately, while deriving a comfortable income from international student fees. It may thus face the choice not only of how to balance its intake, but also how to balance the use of this income in supporting international students or augmenting the resources to support SIMD20/40 students.

How can policy be better aligned so as to avoid policy contradictions, and achieve "joined-up" policy?

In launching her party's 2016 election manifesto, Scotland's First Minister (Sturgeon, 2016) committed to a Scotland that was "wealthier, fairer, and more equal". With HE being a devolved area of policy, it would be easy to take that commitment as being the value steer shaping policy as it cascades down into classrooms, labs and libraries – yet also very naïve. Setting aside obvious cautions that party political manifestos are not government policies, or even government

commitments, there are clear issues in terms of bigger constraints that shape the way in which such commitments would be able to be enacted. In reality, there are likely to be trade-offs where each of these goals – greater wealth, greater fairness, greater equality – is pitted against the others, and priorities determined in each context and moment. There will be instances where these goals not only compete with, but even contradict – each other, and where hard choices will need to be made about which matters more in that instance, despite possible negative effects on the others. (These issues are likely to present in other national contexts too. For example, in a South African context where the government committed to no increases in university student fees¹⁴ for 2016 as a “social justice” commitment to “facilitate access for poorer students”, offsetting this cost by raiding the budget for technical and vocational education - which is more likely to be accessed by poorer students.)

And so, too, at an institutional level. Universities are required by the Scottish Funding Council to show they are being “fairer” through increasing their admissions of students from SIMD20/40, and policies such as contextual admissions, articulation from FE colleges and participating in programmes such as SHEP¹⁵ aim to address that. Universities are also required to be “more equal” through ensuring that all achieve excellent quality in standards of teaching through the Quality Enhancement Framework, and the Enhancement Themes, and through minimising student attrition (“non-persistence”). And, analogous to showing themselves to be “wealthier”, universities are under pressure to prove themselves better performing across a range

¹⁴ In South Africa, fees are set annually by each HEI independently of the State. The State decree was thus seen as an assault on “academic freedom” and university independence.

¹⁵ Schools for Higher Education Programme, see: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0038/00388752.pdf>

of measures, including the REF, the new TEF, any number of league tables and rankings and the NSS¹⁶. Each of these brings financial incentives (or penalties), facilitating compliance. These are far from all of the policy imperatives visited upon universities: each policy demands compliance, and many are accompanied by sanctions or incentives to encourage this.

Salience, congruence and profitability have been proffered (see, e.g. Trowler, 2013:95) as considerations in determining the likelihood of policy innovation taking root. Changes that are deemed more important compared to others being demanded, more attuned to prevailing values and practices, and more likely to deliver benefit, are more likely to take hold. Yet values are seldom universally shared, benefit seldom equally delivered and importance rarely unanimously agreed, and such contestations are subject to all manner of micropolitics, so even these considerations may not yield definitive guidance.

It is theoretically possible to hold regular reviews of internal policies, to ensure that none is internally contradictory, and each is aligned with core institutional values and mission, and – as far as is feasible – none are actively working against others, yet few institutions have the luxury of undertaking such wide-scale internally focused review even as part of strategic planning activities, given the rapid rate at which new policies are being generated and rolled down. In reality, it is left to those interpreting and applying policy in their daily practice to ensure that they maintain some measure of consistence within, and across, policy directives. Ensuring that staff (and students

¹⁶ REF – Research Excellence Framework; TEF – Teaching Excellence Framework; NSS – National Student Survey

and other role players, to a degree) understand institutional priorities and values, and persuading them to share these in their execution of their roles, may be the best way to prevent too much policy contradiction affecting practice.

What are the implications of policy being driven by a social justice agenda, or a diversity agenda?

Burke (2012:177) observes that much widening participation policy is predicated on discourse of diversity, which obfuscates issues of power, material inequality and mis/recognition. The discourse of diversity, as noted by Scott *et al.* (2014:27-28) positions society as “constituted of individual citizens who, regardless of their social position and background, share a set of values and perspectives”, obscuring the likelihood that the “shared set of values and perspectives” are likely to be white, middle class, able-bodied, cis-gendered and heteronormative. Archer (2007:635) argues that the New Labour pursuit of neoliberalism subverted the symbolic association of “diversity” with “equality” and “social inclusion”, with the result that increasing the diversity of students within HE does not equate to a more socially just system.

The stated aim of widening access policies in Scotland, as noted in Chapter Five, was “a Scotland where people have the chance to learn, irrespective of their background or current personal circumstances” (Kemp & Reibig, n.d.:91), which would align with a “diversity” rather than a “social justice” agenda, leading to critique from Gunn, Morrison & Hanesworth (2015:18), as was discussed in Chapter Five. By contrast, much of the more recent political rhetoric has sought to position Scotland as

“fairer and more equal” (such as Sturgeon, 2016), drawing on a discourse of social justice.

While the discourse of diversity focuses on individuals, rather than disadvantaged groups - thus occluding structural considerations - social justice perspectives foreground issues of power, structure, and access to resources. Thus, rather than being concerned with social mobility and the improved life chances of individuals, the focus shifts to what Scott *et al.* (2014:27) describe as

the transformation of institutional structures, cultures and practices that unwittingly reproduce deeply embedded inequalities... [that] are intertwined with longstanding cultural and discursive mis/representations.

This is not to suggest that a social justice agenda would, or should, focus exclusively on “barriers to participation”, such as class, “race” / ethnicity, gender, age, sexual identity, sexual orientation, disability status, geography, or language - since that implies that once the “barriers” are removed, full (and fair) participation would follow automatically. Rather, a social justice agenda would consider removal of “barriers to participation” as a necessary but not sufficient condition, recognising that equality of outcomes rather than equality of access relied on appropriate support as well as the removal of obstacles.

Importantly, a social justice focus would recognise that these “obstacles” did not appear only at the point at which students considered applying to university, but were a function of the structure of society. Adopting a social justice approach would thus

extend way beyond the piecemeal application of widening access policies, to a programme of teaching, research and community engagement that sought to understand, challenge and change the fundamental inequities which gave rise to these social injustices.

In summary, the following are offered for consideration:

- Collect comprehensive data on applicants and students, including information on, for example, parenting and caring responsibilities, a history of care, working commitments, etc. going beyond the requirements around protected characteristics while explaining why this information is important. This information should be used to inform adequate provision of appropriate services to facilitate full participation of students whose circumstances may otherwise inhibit their participation. Knowing who your students are can help to identify constraints and inform support.
- Recognise assumptions embedded in design of teaching and services (e.g. designating opening hours of services, prescribing group-work, requiring non-scheduled activities) that may exclude students because of their circumstances, and consider more inclusive design.
- Render expectations visible, so that assumptions encoded in classed, gendered or similarly arcane discourse are made accessible to all. (For more on making teaching more inclusive, see Gunn, Morrison & Hanesworth, 2015)
- Understand the complexity of student engagement, and recognise that students engage in different ways, only some of which are privileged and

valued by universities. Recognising that not all students seek to engage visibly, that not all students have the capacity to “take up opportunities” for engagement, and that not all students define success in the same way will facilitate a more constructive engagement with students.

- Recognise also that, if HE is successful, it precipitates great change in students, and as a result students’ identity, agency and engagement are dynamic and often contain contradictions.
- Facilitate community, based on students’ (changing) self-definition.
- Embrace intersectionality, and organise support and services to support this.
- Recognise and value other forms of capitals and habitus.
- Align policies as well as is feasible, given the often contradictory policy environment, and adequately resource important strategic areas.
- Adopt a “social justice” agenda that seeks to address social injustice rather than palliating its results – supporting disadvantaged or marginalised students is important; eradicating the source of disadvantage and marginality more so.
- Ensure that all students matter, and that all students know they matter.

Chapter Nine – Reflecting and Concluding

Something in the world forces us to think. (Deleuze, 1994:139)

In reflecting on and concluding this thesis, the following questions are considered in turn:

9.1 Over all, what do we know now that we didn't know before this study?

9.2 How “valid” are these claims?

9.3 How “reliable” are these claims?

9.4 How relevant are these findings, and to whom?

9.5 Cautionary tales

9.6. In conclusion

Over all, what do we know now that we didn't know before this study?

This study sought to answer three research questions:

- How do students who consider themselves “non-traditional” within their study contexts perceive their own engagement, as well as their universities' attempts to engage them?
- How do these perceptions influence their intentions to persist (and their persistence)?
- What are the implications of the answers to these questions for institutional policies and practices aimed at the alignment of relevant policies, for example, on student engagement / the student experience / student partnership, feedback, student governance and widening participation?

Answering the first question showed that student engagement is a complex construct, often chaotically conceptualised in policy and discourse. Students in this study

perceived themselves to be engaging, and mostly to be engaged – although the nature of this engagement, and their understanding and description of it, changed and shifted over time.

Initially, engagement was understood in binary terms – they were either engaged, or not – and the engagement they described initially focused on “the university”, and some individuals who mediated or mitigated this engagement. This was especially, but not exclusively, true for students in their first year (or new to the university, but in subsequent academic years), and could be understood as an encounter between habitus and an unfamiliar field, to use Bourdieu’s terms. “The university” was still largely perceived as monolithic, with broad brush strokes rather than finer detail occupying focus. By volunteering to participate in the study, these students were signalling a degree of dis/identification with the essentialised construct of “the student”, and were feeling mis/recognised in their study contexts.

Later, engagement was understood in more nuanced ways, and descriptions of engagement moved from “the university” to what was happening in their classrooms, labs and studios, on their campus spaces and in interpersonal relationships on and beyond their campus spaces. As students (however ambivalently) allowed a degree of identification as “a student”, for some of these students, some measure of dis/identification with their markers of difference occurred – resulting in self-censorship and strategies to “fit in”, or to choose consciously “which self” to present in which context. Over time, greater integration of “selves” (or subjectivities) was evident in most cases.

The data from this study enabled a reconceptualising of “non-traditionality” beyond the usual construction of “target groups” defined by a single characteristic (such as class, “race” / ethnicity, age / lifestage, disability status, etc.). Looking beyond a “checklist” approach allowed the recognition of other, self-perceived, forms of “non-traditionality” and surfaced more strongly the role of intersectionality.

A critical reconsideration of the construct of “student engagement” was also necessitated by the data from this study. A more nuanced understanding (with more,

and bigger, tables) has emerged together with an appreciation of the complexity, dynamism, and even contradictions, within actual enacted engagement by, and of, students. A discursive choice to use verbs rather than nouns (hence, “engaging students” rather than “student engagement”) has also conceptually positioned students as “engaging” – if not ultimately winsome or charming – as a counterpoint to the discourse of derision following texts such as Arum & Roksa’s (2010) *Academically Adrift*.

The mediating, mitigating and amplifying role of relationships was evident in answering the second research question. Interpersonal relationships could certainly make or break persistence intentions, with evidence provided in both directions (of a student who hadn’t intended to persist coming around to wanting to complete, because of a good relationship with a tutor, and another student who had initially intended completing feeling affirmed in a decision to leave based on a breakdown in communication with another tutor). Relationships with people (classmates, tutors, family and others), as well as relationships with their studies and their universities, were all material.

Answering the third research question provided some suggestions of possible policy implications, ranging from small-scale, low resource changes to understandings and behaviours, to large-scale philosophical reorientation of mission and ambit. Understanding that students do not necessarily self-identify in the way that support and resourcing is targeted and organised within universities, resulting in some students not benefitting from support and resources as they might, might provoke a student-centric rather than sponsor-centric review of provision to achieve a better fit.

In summary, this study has offered both a conceptual and an empirical contribution. In adopting an interpretivist approach, it has sought to provide “experience near” description to allow an understanding of the lived experience of students who perceive themselves to be “non-traditional” in their own study contexts, thereby challenging essentialised constructions of “the student” and facilitating a greater recognition of actual students in their particular study contexts.

How “valid” are these claims?

In considering this, I will draw on Maxwell’s (2012:127-148) discussion of what constitutes validity in qualitative research, and how this can be gauged. Rather than equating validity with methods, Maxwell insists that validity rests on not simply which methods were followed (and how exactly), but to what degree the findings and conclusions are congruent with the methods, and to what extent the conclusions arise from the data.

Maxwell distinguishes three forms of validity:

- Descriptive validity – the factual accuracy of the account.

Using a SmartPen allowed for the simultaneous recording of audio, and taking of note linked to the audio, thus in theory allowing for a richer collection of data than other forms of audio recording and note taking. However, as with any form of recording, it is still of necessity selective, and while the files link an observation (such as “smiles”) with a particular vocal inflection, audible on the audio recording the veracity of the note (“smiles”) is not independently verifiable and relies on trust of the researcher.

I have tried to maximise descriptive validity by writing fieldnotes and transcribing audio recordings as soon as possible, to retain a sense of context. However, in some cases several interviews were concluded in succession, confounding this (and allowing for possible contamination). Also, some interviews were conducted in less than optimal surroundings, such as coffee shops, requiring careful listening and reconstruction of sense from background noise. For interviews conducted via Skype, the sense of “context” was even more limited, given the very focused and selective view presented by the webcam.

- Interpretive Validity – an emic reading of the account.

One of the benefits of the longitudinal aspect of the study design was that it afforded me both the opportunity to check back with informants about what they'd said previously and how I'd interpreted it (though, as Maxwell (2012:139) cautions, this is subject to informants misremembering, or misrepresenting, their earlier intentions) and the opportunity to form grounded enough impressions of the informants over time to have a sense of whether or not such interpretations were "plausible" or consistent with how I observed the informants to be. Additionally, I could "cross check" my understandings by offering the perspectives of other informants, where they may have commented on seemingly similar matters, to see if that was what they had meant.

Students' views changed over time, sometimes even within a single interview, and I was attuned to expect change rather than consistency so was not sceptical of apparent contradictions – and sought to represent these as authentically as possible. However, because of my own subjectivities, there is always a possibility that some "emic rendering" may have been contaminated by projection, and that even the assurances of the students that my rendering of their intentions was accurate may be insufficient guarantee.

- Theoretical Validity – an etic or explanatory rendering of the account.

On this dimension I have been both enabled and constrained by my history of working with these topics. Being steeped in the literature has rendered my interpretations more consistent with those to which I have been exposed, reducing the likelihood of completely maverick interpretations; however, it may also have foreclosed on interesting and novel readings that have been rendered "inconceivable" as a result.

Because I used a "theoretical borderlands" approach, and drawing on both interpretive and post-structuralist frames to interrogate the data, this "conceptual foreclosure" may have been contained to acceptable limits, and while my findings are consistent with the general trajectory of my thinking, the fact that there were some genuine surprises does seem to support that hope. Moreover, as an eager

participant in exchanges and debates, I am confident that this aspect of validity will be tested in journals, conferences and more social occasions (where, indeed, it has already started).

How “reliable” are these claims?

Might someone else have gotten different findings? This is a very difficult question to address. Someone else would almost certainly have taken a different approach, spoken to different students, and asked different questions. Assuming, however, that they did not, how different might the answers they were given (and the same intentions), have been?

I am visibly a collection of particular subjectivities – some of which may have resonated in particular ways with particular students, inspiring particular answers or particular intentions. Someone else with different subjectivities may thus have elicited different responses. However, I would argue that even the same researcher, and the same students, at different times or with different immediate circumstances, may have produced different data at a particular interview. Context matters.

One small additional factor was that for some of the participants, I had access to social media – Facebook and Twitter primarily – and the “data” from these sources were consistent (broadly speaking) with the data obtained through interviews. Given the very different intended audiences for the social media postings and the interviews, some inconsistency is to be expected, though I was surprised there was not more.

How relevant are these findings, and to whom?

This study makes no grand claims of generalizability. The experiences shared by the students interviewed are theirs, arising from their own particular study contexts, and as such are unlikely to manifest in exactly the same way elsewhere. However, there

are issues which arise from this study which are relevant beyond the 23 students, and which might inform understanding and action elsewhere.

Firstly, the conceptual contributions regarding understandings of “the student”, “non-traditionality” and the dynamic intersectional interplay of subjectivities as these manifest through transitions at university can inform broader considerations around what constitutes a “student identity”. Relatedly, conceptual contributions regarding the complex nature of student engagement in higher education – as distinct from compulsory education – extend beyond the specifics of this study. Conceptual frames, such as chaotic conception, nomadity and diaspora space can enable fresh understandings of higher education, particularly as experienced by those for whom it may be a “contested landscape”.

Secondly, the data themselves shed light on how at least some students experience engagement – both their own, and the attempts of their universities to engage them – and how their understandings, and behaviour (such as persistence) informed by these understandings – change over time because of this. It provides a sense of the lived reality for at least some students who define themselves as “non-traditional” in their study contexts, which can act in a sensitising fashion to inform an awareness of the diversity of experiences of a group of students in another context. In addition, it exposes the possible gaps between how “we” may view students, and how they view themselves, in different contexts.

Cautionary Tales

As noted in Chapter Two, I brought my own baggage to this study. My interest in the topic/s of this study stems from my own peculiar (in all senses) history. As I’ve stated elsewhere (Trowler, 2014:43) “It is a political choice to turn the spotlight onto the marginalized, but there are important reasons for doing so.” Students enrolled at well-resourced universities in a wealthy country may not be considered “marginalised” in absolute terms, but in the context of these universities, students who perceive themselves to be “non-traditional” are feeling at least some degree of marginality in their own contexts, and may therefore be “at risk”.

Passion is not necessarily anathema in research. Van Maanen (2010:338) notes that

A grievance or sense of righteous indignation it seems can get one to the field and keep them there. It may well be just one grievance (or two or three) that lies behind a good deal of our published work... for without an affront, injustice, complaint, or beef to explore we might well become ciphers-qua-celebrants, happy agreeable sorts who wallow in unmitigated delight within the organizations we study and, in the end, have little to say other than everything is hunky-dory.

I have attempted to temper my passion – and any other interfering emotions – through reflexivity, through immersion in the data and the literature, and through discussion with others, but invariably my subjectivities will have nudged me towards some points of interest and away from others, made some interpretations seem more apposite than others, and engaged me more on some conceptual points than others. Given the considerable amount of data (70 interviews, transcribed and coded) it is also inevitable that some of the students will have received more “air time” than others, in the selection of what is presented in this thesis, and while I have tried to be fair to the students (not only in not violating their intentions and meanings in my interpretations, but also in allowing all voices to be heard so that their time wasn’t completely wasted) a great deal of data – of students’ words, time and insights – have landed on the cutting floor. I’m thankful to my supervisors for continually reminding me that this thesis need not be the only output from this study, so haven’t felt compelled to try to jam everything in, but it does bear mentioning that there is a great deal more that could be said about these matters, and other matters, that is not said here, and that this account is thus a partial one and makes no claims at being the comprehensive, last word on the matter.

There are also many other research questions I could have asked. Having asked what I did, and gotten the answers I have, I am itching to ask further questions, or have others ask them, to provide a fuller, more contextualised understanding. Among these questions are:

- How do the engagement perceptions of students who *do not* consider themselves “non-traditional” in their study contexts compare to those expressed by these students in this study?
- How do the engagement perceptions of students who consider themselves to be “non-traditional” in other study contexts compare to those expressed by these students in this study?
- How will the perceptions of these students change, looking back on their studies, years from now?
- How resonant are these experiences across context and time, given their rootedness in the specifics of context (and time)?
- How might oppositional forms of student engagement (such as protest) be harnessed to engender more congruent forms in a more sustained way, to facilitate “success” (as understood by the students, rather than simply defined by “throughput”)?
- How might universities respond to changing student populations in socially just and sustainable ways?

...and so many, many more.

These questions illuminate the limitations of this study. In the end, it represents the changing views of 23 undergraduate students enrolled at seven universities in Scotland over the course of a calendar year. A different “sample”, a different site, a different design – and a different researcher – may all have yielded different findings. Yet in seeking to find out from these students whether they felt they “mattered” in their study contexts, this study was asserting that they did – and do – matter; and these findings, and the interpretations and conclusions drawn from them, offer a small contribution to understanding that bears testimony to the “mattering” of all students – even those who may not match what we think students are (or ought to be).

In conclusion:

This thesis reports on a study of 23 students who volunteered themselves as “non-traditional” within their own study contexts, examining how they perceived their own engagement and the attempts of their universities to engage them, and how this influenced their intentions and behaviour concerning persistence. It found that student engagement was a more dynamic and complex construct than formerly depicted, and that “non-traditionality” manifested in a wide range of ways that were closely tied to context and that were subject to the interplay of intersectionality in ways obscured by the discursive construction of the essentialised “student” and particular groups of students (as the subjects of policy). This has implications for policy and for provision of support and services, for which some suggestions have been offered.

Nomadic texts are not written for those who confuse thinking with the mere exercise of sedentary protocols of institutional reason. (Braidotti, 2011:225)

We looked at non-traditionality
Chaotic'ly conceived we found it is
Likewise that other thing we know to be
Student Engagement, though it seems "the biz".

Students engage at university
Congruent and opposing in a mix
More complex than the school context, with three
Additional dimensions now, to fix.

Students define themselves so differently
Within their contexts, and changing with time,
While funding shapes the services you see
No wonder then how badly those things rhyme.

Nomadity in diaspora space
All students matter, all should find their place.

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Appendix 1: Attributes of the participants

| Name | HEI Type | course | year | nat_eth | age | gender | BME | carer | identity |
|----------|----------|---------------------|------|---------------|-----|--------|-----|--------------------------------|--|
| Lindy | Ancient | Archaeology | 1 | Scottish / Oz | 23 | f | n | was pregnant, miscarried | married, older, foreign-ish |
| Marian | Ancient | Social Policy | 2 | Scottish | 54 | f | n | family | older, FIF, working class |
| Alex | New | Journalism | 1 | English | 18 | f | n | no | mental health issues |
| Blair | New | Chemistry | 2 | Scottish | 19 | m | n | no | working class |
| Tristan | Ancient | Literature | 1 | English | 21 | m | n | no | musician, older |
| Kris | Ancient | Physics | 1 | Irish | 19 | o | n | no | transgender |
| Karin | Ancient | Informatics | 2 | Danish | 20 | f | n | no | mental health issues (OCD) |
| Greg | New | computer games tech | 1 | Scottish | 19 | m | n | no | was in care |
| Frankie | New | Journalism | 3 | Scottish | 21 | f | n | no | working class |
| Courtney | Old | primary teaching | 2 | Scottish | 20 | f | n | children | student parent |
| Uche | Old | engineering | 1 | Nigerian | 18 | m | y | family back home | African |
| Steve | New | Business | 2 | Scottish | 36 | m | n | estranged family | older, articulated from college |
| Andy | Old | social work | 1 | English | 27 | m | y | child from former relationship | older, working class, second chancer, former bad boy |
| Celia | New | computer games tech | 1 | English | 18 | f | n | no | girl in boys' world |
| Yumna | Other | design | 1 | British | 18 | f | y | no | FIF, immigrant parents, studying |

| | | | | | | | | | "haram" content |
|----------------|---------|---------------------|---|------------|----|---|---|------------------|---|
| Nina | New | applied psych (p/t) | 1 | Scottish | 34 | f | n | disabled brother | mature, part-time, carer for disabled brother |
| Sian | Old | Law | 2 | Welsh | 20 | f | n | no | dyslexic |
| Brian | Other | dance | 1 | English | 19 | m | n | no | male in "female" career |
| Emma | Old | film studies | 1 | German | 23 | f | n | no | second career (ex model) |
| Mike | New | fashion | 2 | English | 20 | m | n | no | straight in a "gay" profession |
| David | New | social science | 1 | Vietnamese | 18 | m | y | no | Asian, feels foreign |
| Gabi | Ancient | history | 1 | English | 18 | f | y | no | Black Jewish, adopted |
| Vanessa | Old | modern languages | 2 | Scottish | 19 | f | n | no | working class, hasn't travelled abroad |

Appendix 2: Recruiting poster

eusa
Edinburgh University
Students' Association
Your university wants to make your experience as a student even better.
Registered Scottish Charity
No. SC015800

When they think "student", what kind of person are they likely to be thinking of?

How well does that description fit you?

I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh.

I want to interview students who consider themselves "non-traditional" in some way.

If you might be interested, please contact me

vicki.trowler@ed.ac.uk

Do you feel you belong at your university?

Do you feel you matter?

Do you feel your university adequately understands the needs of students like yourself?

Appendix 3: Information Pack for Participants

Information Sheet and Consent Form

Engaging “non-traditional” students in Higher Education for persistence

Project Overview

This is to request your participation in the above project as an interviewee. I will be interviewing a number of students who consider themselves to be “non-traditional” in the context of their university or programme of study, to explore such students’ experience of engagement at universities which are making efforts to engage their students. Over the course of a calendar year, I will interview each participant three times, in order to gauge the participants’ own engagement, as well as their perception/reception of their institutions’ engagement attempts, together with their expressed intentions to persist or leave (as well as any actual leaving). An ancillary aim is to assist in policy development for improved retention among at-risk groups of students.

This research will form the basis of my PhD thesis, but may also result in one or more scholarly publications (such as journal articles) and / or non-scholarly publications (such as policy briefing documents). Findings may also be shared in a globalised way which does not permit identification of any individual respondents with any student societies, associations, or university structures whose mandate is to support “non-traditional” students in their engagement with their universities, in the form of workshops, presentations or materials.

The research is conducted in the interests of gaining a better understanding of the engagement experiences of students who consider themselves to be “non-traditional” to improve the prospects of their persisting and succeeding in their studies.

Work I have previously done on student engagement

You may be interested to see the resources to which I have previously contributed, funded by the Higher Education Academy:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/universitiesandcolleges/studentengagement>

and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education:

<http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/small-development-projects/sdp2011/lanc-fr.cfm>

The interactive website, built from these projects, is at:

<https://sakai.lancs.ac.uk>

(login with username: sakai.guest@gmail.com and password: welcome)

Ethical guidelines around our interviews

Should you agree to be interviewed, I commit to the following:

1. Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.
2. I will ensure in any publication or presentation that any interview quotations used cannot be attributed to you. Respondents and their institutions will not be named or identified specifically in publications and presentations.
3. Any recording, transcript or notes of the interview will be kept in a secure, private location and will only be used by the person named below.
4. I will destroy any recordings at the end of the project, once the thesis and any publications have been published.
5. You will have the opportunity during interviews 2 and 3 to comment on any interpretations of your interview data to ensure that you do not feel misquoted, misinterpreted or at risk of having your insights put to uses which may lead to negative consequences for you.
6. If you have any preliminary questions or need further clarification please contact me at the email address below.
7. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research, you can contact my supervisors at the University of Edinburgh, Dr Charles Anderson and Dr Ken McCulloch.
8. You should keep a copy of this for your own records.

Consent

I consent to being interviewed and am happy with the ethical guidelines set out above.

I am / am not happy with the interview being digitally recorded, under the ethical conditions set out above. (PLEASE DELETE ONE)

Signed

Date

Thank you

Vicki Trowler (PhD Candidate). vicki.trowler@ed.ac.uk

Introduction to the study for Participants:

Your university wants to make your experience as a student even better. When they think "student", what kind of person are they likely to be thinking of?

How well does that description fit you?

Do you feel you belong at your university?

Do you feel you matter?

Do you feel your university adequately understands the needs of students like yourself?

I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, and I am particularly interested in the views of students who don't fit the stereotype. I want to find out how you feel about your university's efforts to improve your experience, and how you rate your likelihood of completing your degree.

For my study, I am looking to interview students who consider themselves "non-traditional" in the context of their university, or their course of study, or some other aspect of being a student. I plan to conduct three interviews with each participant over the course of a year. These interviews focus on your relationship with your university, and its efforts to engage you. You will be free to withdraw from the study at any point should you wish to do so.

If you might be interested, please contact me via email vicki.trowler@gmail.com for more information.

Introduction to the study for Access Facilitators:

I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, and I am exploring how "non-traditional" students receive and perceive their universities' attempts to engage them, and how this affects their intentions to persist in their studies or not.

For my study, I am looking to interview students who consider themselves "non-traditional" in the context of their university, or their course of study, or some other aspect of being a student. I plan to conduct three interviews with each participant over the course of a year. These interviews focus on their relationship with the university, and its efforts to engage them. They will be free to withdraw from the study at any point should they wish to do so.

If you know of students who might be appropriate and interested, please contact me via email vicki.trowler@gmail.com for more information.

Rough interview schedule

Your university wants to make your experience as a student even better.
When they think "student", what kind of person are they likely to be thinking of?
How well does that description fit you?

How did you come to be a student here?
How is this viewed by your family, friends, etc.?

We understand student engagement as

...the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution.

Can you recall any examples of efforts your university has made to engage you?
Please describe these, and your response to them.

Do you feel you belong at your university?
Do you feel you matter?
Do you feel your university adequately understands the needs of students like yourself?
Does this come through in the university's efforts to engage you?

If you wanted to engage students like yourself, how would you go about this? Does your university do (enough of) this?

How engaged do you feel:
* with your studies?
* with your classmates / other students?
* with your university more generally?

Why?

As things stand now, how likely do you think you will be to complete your degree / programme successfully? What would make you more / less likely to succeed? Do you feel your university has done what it can to give you the best chance to succeed? What else could it have done? What else could you have done? Why was this not possible?

Appendix 4: Thematic Coding Framework and examples of Coding

Engaging “non-traditional” university students for retention

Design Framework

| Data Type(s) | Unit(s) | Variables | Longitudinal | Themes | code |
|---|---------|--|--------------|---|--|
| Interviews Tweets Facebook posts | People | Age Gender Nationality / Ethnicity Disability status Access Qualifications | yes | Capital +economic +cultural +social +academic/intellectual Habitus Concerns +Blame/responsibility +Compartmentalisation +Mattering +Power/vulnerability +Visibility +Transience Identity +Age +Class +Gender +Delayed Transition +Disability +Entry Qualifications +Language +Nationality/ethnicity +Student identity +Identity switching +Family ++Family of Origin ++Partner/children Emergent coding | e c sc a/i h b/r cm m p/v v t a cl g dt d eq l n/e s is foo pp |
| Secondary sources: national policies institutional policies | | | | | |

First interview with Lindy (LT)

| Text | Code |
|---|--------------------------|
| VT: Thanks for agreeing to this [mutters] I see you've brought the stuff I sent you... | |
| LT: [nods] | |
| VT: Is there anything you want to clarify... or find out more about... or... | |
| LT: No, it's fine. | |
| VT: OK, well, if you're happy to start... Can I ask why you volunteered to speak to me? | |
| LT: Well, I saw the poster up outside [student union venue] toilets, and I was just feeling... I'd just been to the library, and my card wouldn't scan, and everything just seemed so... Like, why was I here anyway, and I went to the student union to ask where [building] was to find out why my card wasn't working, and there were all these queues of people and I went downstairs to the toilets and saw the poster and thought, mmm... | |
| VT: Something on the poster you recognised? About your experience... | |
| LT: [laughs] well maybe it was my mood, but... | |
| VT: So what was it that caught your eye? | |
| <p>LT: Well, I'm kind of non-traditional [makes "scare quotes" with fingers] although I'm also not... My parents are Scottish, I've got a British passport but I was grew up and went to school in Australia and when my parents decided to move back I didn't qualify for free uni because we hadn't been living here long enough. So I had to go out to work for a couple of years which wasn't great. I worked for a call centre - which was bizarre because they must have thought I was on the other side of the world when they got me on the line - and most of the people were older, they'd been working in jobs that they liked and then the jobs disappeared and they landed up at the call centre, hating it. So everyone there kind of hated on it, so I didn't like it much either. It's kind of brain-dead work. There's a script, and you just respond to what they say from the script, and when you can't help them anymore, you put them through to another department. But it did teach me which brand of phone not to buy, because I know what goes wrong with them now and which models are the worst. My friends quite enjoy that, having an expert to advise them when they upgrade. But to me it felt like treading water, waiting to get on with my life.</p> | <p>n/e d/t</p> |
| VT: Yes, I can understand that. | |
| <p>LT: So, I'm older, I speak with a funny accent and I don't have Advanced Highers, although I'm classed as a Home Student and don't pay fees. Also, I'm married. Which is weird for an undergraduate. The whole student culture thing is aimed at young people going out to get drunk and get laid, and get get a job, and that's so far from where I'm at! Getting</p> | <p>a; n/e; eq pp</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>drunk lost its attraction when I had to go in to work in the morning with a hangover, and by the time you get married you're so over the whole hook-up culture thing. And I've had a job, I could get my job back tomorrow if I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing that....</p> | |
| <p>VT: So how is your coming to university viewed by your family, and your friends...?</p> | |
| <p>LT: My parents are sort of hippyish, my mother is Reiki therapist and my father does digital security. Computer stuff. So we grew up quite alternative, and although it was never really mentioned I just assumed university would be part of my future. It was like people who worked in shops or banks were part of a system that was killing the planet or something and if you wanted to do something that was conscious then you needed to study and qualify because being critical was the kind of luxury only some people could afford, not if you were stuck in one of those jobs they could take away tomorrow. I mean I'm not some kind of dangerous radical wanting to firebomb Westminster or something but I want to be able to have opinions and not have to pretend I can't think for myself just to keep my job and pay my bills. I've done my time doing that.</p> | <p>Life project Uni as asylum</p> |
| <p>VT: So you felt ready for university...?</p> | |
| <p>LT: [nods] [pause] So I feel really weird, like I'm not young enough to be an undergraduate student, and not old enough to be a mature student - although technically I am. That's what it says I am. I'm 23 and so I'm a mature student. Which is bizarre because there are properly mature students here. There's a woman in my class who is 59, she's worked all her life and raised kids and now she wants to study after she lost her job with the recession. Which is great. Not that she lost her job [laughs]. Great that she wants to study. But she's in a different place to me, her interests are different and her time is different and to me the fact that we're all lumped together as though what we'd want is the same is just bizarre.</p> | <p>s</p> |
| <p>VT: you'd think.</p> | |
| <p>LT: There are loads of foreign students here - international students or whatever - and in some ways I feel more like them than I do the local students, although I'm supposed to be a local student. I joined the society and hung out with them for a while but while it was great to talk about "back home" it was also different for me, my family is here and I don't have the same issues they have, missing family and friends and struggling with Skype and finding a time when it's not too early or too late to call "home". And visas. They're always having to prove they're legit and always worrying because they heard about someone who got sent home because he missed a check in when his computer crashed and he hadn't checked his uni email for a couple of days so he didn't know. I mean, that's never going to happen to me - I'm allowed here, no one is breathing down my neck threatening to send me home if I sign a petition or take part in a march. And there's always stuff going on on Facebook, petitions about the bees or the bedroom tax and stuff, and if you don't sign it looks like you don't care, and even if you do care passionately you can't risk taking part in a protest if you're a foreign student because your visa can be cancelled without warning or even a reason. I was talking to a guy from China the other day and the people at the airport nearly didn't</p> | <p>n/e p/v</p> |

| | |
|---|--------|
| let him back in when he went to a conference in France although his visa was fine, they just gave him a hard time because they could. And he's not even Muslim. I think they get the worst of it. | |
| VT: So you're not quite sure where you fit in? Or.. | |
| LT: [nods] So, yeah, I don't know if you think that fits? Is that what you're looking for? Should I answer your questions? | |
| VT: If you're ready for that...? | |
| LT: OK, what kind of person the uni is likely to be thinking of when they think "student" is someone younger, straight from school, or someone older, who has basically lived their life and now come back to study. Someone who grew up here and knows the way it all works here, or someone who just got off the boat and doesn't speak English too well. There doesn't seem to be anything in between - either you're a homegirl or you're from Outer Space. So, yeah, it doesn't really fit me very well. And probably a whole bunch of other people too. | C v |
| VT: [shrugs] | |
| LT: How did I come to be a student here - well, my parents moved here to my granny's place while they were looking for a place to buy, and I quite liked the look of the place although I was told that it's really hard to get in and that I'd be better off trying one of the others seeing as I didn't really know what I wanted to do. So they thought I was being a bit cheeky applying and they thought I didn't stand a chance and then when I got in they were probably quite pleased, but of course they just teased me and said well, that's set the bar very high for my younger sister. She wants to do fashion though so she's looking at [New university]. She's doing her Highers next year. | |
| VT: So they're supportive, generally? | |
| LT: Oh yeah, they sort of have to be... OK [reads] Examples of efforts my uni has made to engage me - me, or students more generally? There are loads of emails, and surveys [rolls eyes] and of course your personal tutor, which is for everyone, but me in particular I don't think they would. Yes I read all the emails and sometimes if I have time I'll have a look at the survey but I don't think I've actually ever filled it out. My personal tutor is nice, though. A bit like an academic godmother. | |
| VT: [smiles] That helps. So, do you feel you belong here...? | |
| LT: Yeah I do feel like I belong, but I'm not sure I matter. I think the students who matter are the foreign students who being in loads of money and the English students who pay fees and I think the home students matter especially the students from working class families because they show up on the stats like some kind of prize, hey, we're doing well, we've got more poor Scottish students than [another Ancient university] so we're OK. I'm not trying to be nasty, I do think those people should matter and should be made to feel like they matter, not just like they're a gigantic chequebook, but I'm not sure they do feel like they matter in the way they should. They matter as a group, as an income stream. I don't think that as individuals they feel like they matter. | m |

| | |
|---|------------------|
| VT: [nods] So do you feel the university adequately understands your needs as a student, or the needs of students like you? | |
| LT: No I don't really think the university understands the needs of students like me, and I'm not sure they really understand the needs of any students. It's like the campus was designed by someone who really hated students, with [Halls of Residence] miles from anywhere and uphill so you can't just pop back between lectures for a nap if you've had a heavy night - I don't live there, I live in a flat with my husband - but that's what the other students say. | |
| VT: Is... | |
| LT: Yes, my husband is also a student but he's a postgrad and he's part time so he earns an income. I've just got my savings from when I worked and I get some money from my parents. So not much money for going out partying, even if we wanted. | Pp e |
| VT: I guess. So it sounds like you don't feel the university is really making an effort to engage you? | |
| LT: I think the University does try to engage students but I don't think they really know how. I think it's all about "fixing feedback" and winning the NSS, at least that's the impression I got from my personal tutor, I think it's about how to make the uni look better and be more attractive to students without losing its core values and what it is that attracted us here in the first place. So I think it's quite hard to do. We're students, we're only here for a few years and then there will be others and they will likely want something completely different again so I can see why they might think it's probably best just to ride it out if the students get too twitchy or demanding. | t |
| VT: So if you wanted to engage students like yourself, how would you go about it? | |
| LT: If I wanted to engage students like myself, I'd first make sure that the forms they filled in to apply contained useful information so that I could have an idea of who they were and what they might be wanting. Then I'd have some kind of database matching up people that were kind of similar, and asking them to opt in or out of sharing their contact details with others who matched up on the stuff that was most important to them. Like, say, feeling foreign but not being classed as foreign on a visa. Or having worked but not being really old. Or whatever. Something about your identity as a student. And you would have access to your own record on the database so you could edit it and change your priorities as they shifted, so as your needs changed or your circumstances you wouldn't forever be "that Aussie kid" but maybe "the girl who's pregnant in her second year." Did I tell you I was pregnant? Well, I think I am, I'm not 100% sure yet, I'm going for the test next Tuesday. It's a bit scary as it wasn't planned and I'm not sure yet what we'll do. | S T pp |
| VT: Wow. That's quite something to have to deal with. | |
| LT: So yeah that's the big unknown. If I am pregnant I may have to take time out and I'm not sure how that would work. I've heard it's really tough to study with a small baby and part of me thinks I might just go back to | |

| | |
|---|---|
| my old job until the kid was old enough and then come back and finish. I don't know. Part of me hopes I'm not and that it's something else and I don't have to worry about all these choices and decisions. [laughs] If I was a real mature student I'd know what to do, wouldn't I? | a |
| VT: Don't count on it! So, it sounds like you have quite a lot going on right now. With all that, all those other demands, can you still manage to feel engaged? With your studies, or...? | |
| LT: How engaged I feel - yeah, I do, honestly. I enjoy my studies and although I don't have all that much in common with my classmates I like them well enough, and I'm still glad I came to this uni even though I feel a bit of an oddball. | s |
| VT: [nods] | |
| LT: I'm not sure how to answer the rest of the questions. So much depends on whether I'm pregnant or not. If I am I do still want to complete, even if it's not immediate. So I guess the best thing the uni could do in that case is stay in touch, so that when the time is right, I feel like I still belong. | m |
| VT: Yes, I can see that. [pause] This must be a stressful time for you, all this uncertainty... | |
| LT: [shrugs] yeah, a bit | |
| VT: Perhaps we should leave this there for now, and keep in touch... | |
| LT: Yep. Thanks for coffee... [end of recording] | |

Second interview with Marian (MS)

| Text | code |
|--|---|
| VT: I see you've been busy [indicates bag of forms and flyers]. Have things changed much since we last spoke? | |
| MS: Aye, I see what you mean [laughs]. Last time I probably said I isn't have time for stuff and nonsense, and here I am, walking around like a political advertisement, signing up kids to vote. But this is important. It really does matter. It's not like some drinking club or learning about which way to hold a tea cup. These kids are going to have to live with whatever decision they make, or whatever decision gets made on their behalf, and they'll have to live with it a lot longer than I will! | M s |
| VT: This is for the referendum? | |
| MS: Of course! I'm assuming I don't need to sign you up. It really is vital. I've got my own views on independence, of course, but what I care about even more is that everyone gets a say, so no one can say later that this was something that was pushed off on them, whichever way it goes. If we get a really good turnout, then it will be easier to accept the outcome, whatever that is, but also to get people to have the debates, to understand the issues, to think about the kind of life they want in the kind of Scotland they want to live in. Do I sound convincing? I'm having a lot of fun, I must say, talking to young 'uns about these things, it's like sneaking back into the playground when you're older and having a go on the swings. Those kids are so passionate, they haven't had the stuffing knocked out of them yet, they really feel they can change the world even if people on the telly are telling them they can't. And it makes me feel that my studies are actually about something important, too. That the things I'm learning matter in very important, direct ways, not just in assignments and in hypothetical situations, but to actual real people living in actual real places facing choice now. Well, soon. [smiles] | a/i s m |
| VT: So last time we spoke you mentioned the different people you had to be at home and at uni. Do you still feel that way? | cm |
| MS: Well I guess less so in a way, all this referendum stuff comes up on the telly now and again and I'm sure more and more as it gets closer, and it's | |

| | |
|--|---|
| engagement as a student? | |
| <p>MS: Well [pause] It's about my engagement as me. Part of that is me as a student, and this does relate to that. Not only to the course I'm studying, but I went to [the Student Association] and asked if they were running any campaigns around the referendum, and they told me about signing up students to vote, and I've done some of that. But I took it further, too. Because it's not just students who need to register to vote, it's also kids of 16 and 17 and kids who have left school but aren't studying or working or are working but not in places where they can easily talk about these things, and I thought, I know where some of these kids will be. I know where they might go on a weekend or how I might be able to get hold of them, because of where I might have gone at their age too, and I also spoke to my family, and my neighbours, and just asked around about young people that they knew who hadn't voted before. So yes I've stood at tables with [Student Association] banners handing out flyers and talking to students from Malaysia about why it matters that they vote even though they don't live here permanently and I've attended seminars about what an independent Scotland might look like so that I can offer insights when people ask me why it mattered and what might change. Even though I was stealing time from other things. It was important, and I made it a priority. And also I've gone into neighbourhoods I don't know, and waited at bus stops for schools to close, and chatted to people working on tills at Tesco, and everywhere I've gone about my usual business I've made sure to carry some flyers with me in case I get the chance to speak to someone about voting.</p> | <p>Cm, s</p> <p>C</p> <p>Sc</p> <p>time</p> |
| VT: [nods] | |
| <p>MS: [pause] I suppose this referendum is helping me in some way to bring the different parts of my life closer together. I can be [Marian]-the-student and [Marian]-the-family member and all the other [Marians] at the same time, doing this, in a way that's quite difficult with so many other things. And, I suppose, by standing behind a [Student Association] table I'm making students like myself more visible. I was asked a couple of times if I was a student, so I suppose at least for those people who asked they now know that some of the people who look like me are also students, and also undergrads, not just staff or postgrads or people who stumbled that way in error.</p> | <p>Cm</p> <p>v</p> <p>s</p> |

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| <p>VT: You spoke about “stealing time from other things”, and about there being a cost. Has it impacted negatively on your studies, or other aspects of your life?</p> | |
| <p>MS: Well it has taken time from things like reading, or writing assignments, and of course from things like housework - that’s always the first to go [laughs]. But it’s forced me to work smarter, too, to make sure I download the resources I need as soon as we get an assignment, and to read them on the bus or in the bath, or waiting for the water to boil. And to make sure that when I write I write as if it’s the final version, not as if I’m sketching out something I’ll have tons of time to rework, so I use the right words first time, even if I have to look them up, rather than writing a long sentence to describe the concept I think should go in there with a view to looking it up later and finding the references then. I get it all together and plug myself in and go - and I don’t let myself get interrupted. It has needed some all-nighters, and I’ve missed out on sleep sometimes, or once or twice skipped meals because I was working, but that’s also made me feel more like a real student! But I’m not sure I’d really describe it as a cost, in any nett way. There have been costs, but there have also been benefits, and I’d like to think that the benefits are outweighing the costs, for now.</p> | s |
| <p>VT: You say it’s helped you to feel “more like a real student”.</p> | |
| <p>MS: I suppose I’m falling into those same stereotypes. [laughs] I meant, the way the student experience is always portrayed in the media, in popular culture, of kids living it up and then running out of time and having to stay up all night to meet a deadline. Or drinking their grant up and having to skip meals. Of course not all students are like that and of course other students are just as real, but I suppose despite living that, I’ve not really believed it myself, in some way. Perhaps that’s also why I held back from putting myself forward as a rep. Perhaps I do still feel a bit of a fake, in some way. Interesting. I hadn’t really thought about that. I was just being flippant.</p> | s p/v s |
| <p>VT: Has it shifted anything about your feelings about belonging?</p> | |
| | |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>MS: It has, oddly. It's strange, but it's as though going to [the Student Association] gave me a kind of platform to go out into those other neighbourhoods and communities that I wouldn't have felt I had the right to do otherwise. It's somehow given some legitimacy to what I wanted to do. Being armed with those flyers and forms, even though anyone can print them off, lets me feel I have a right to be there. And it's because I'm a student at [University] that I have access to that. Going out there, away from uni, validates that I do belong here at Uni, that I am a real student and I do belong.</p> | <p>p/v s m</p> |
| <p>VT: Has it had any effect on your sense of belonging in class?</p> | |
| <p>MS: It has made me a little more daring. Because of these seminars I've been going to, and some of the reading I've been doing, I've had things to say in class sometimes, where before I would just have sat and only spoken if I was asked, now sometimes I'll even volunteer something. I don't do it often, because I've seen how other students roll their eyes when the gobby ones start up, and of course if it's completely off-topic then you're just going to get shut up anyway, so I do choose when to do it and when not, but I am starting to feel sometimes that I have something useful to offer, and I suppose that's progress.</p> | <p>a/i /l</p> |
| <p>VT: Wow.</p> | |
| <p>MS: Do you mind if we pick this up another time? It's just... I lost track a bit of time and I need to be on the other side of town in a few minutes?</p> | |
| <p>VT: Sure, I'll send you an email about meeting up again...[recording ends]</p> | |

Appendix 5: Larger Figures of Models cited in Chapter 6

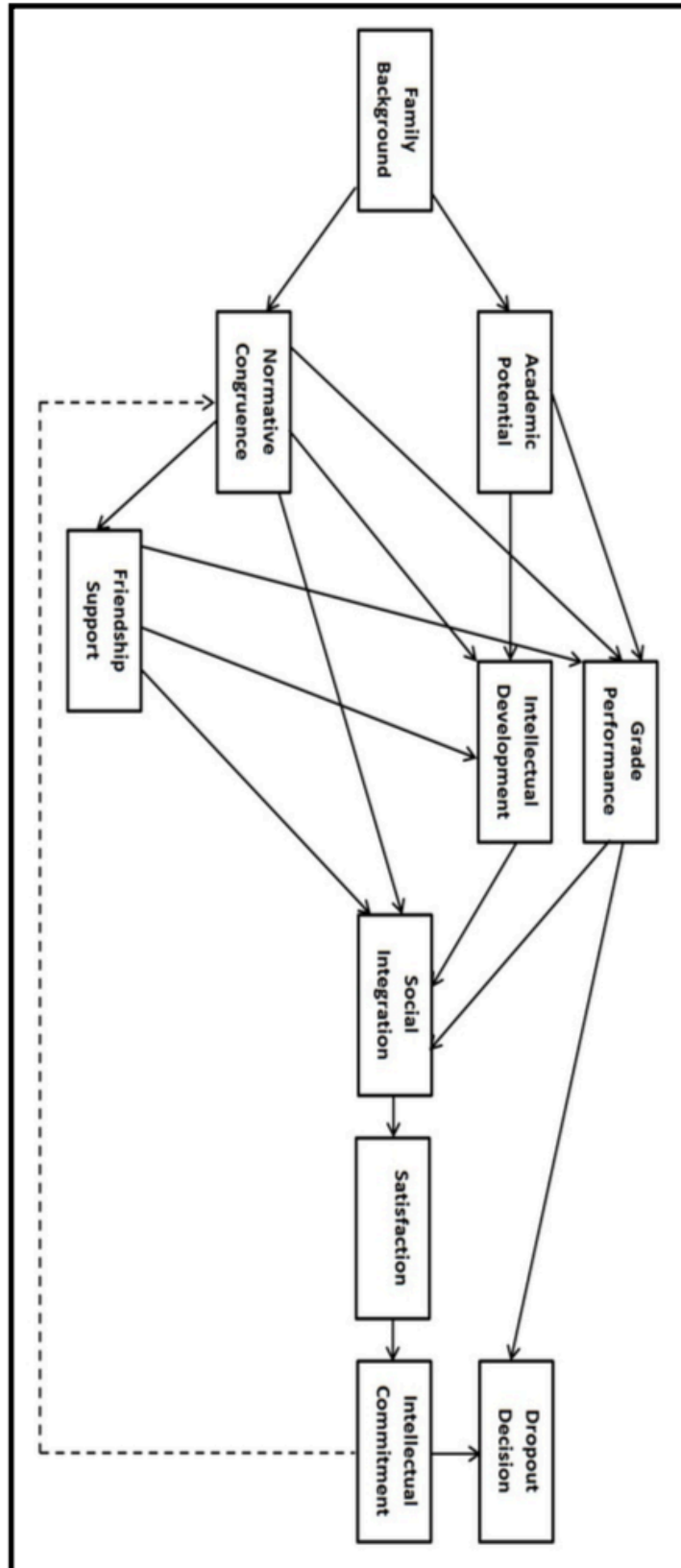


Figure 6.1 : Spady's "Undergraduate Dropout Process" Model, from Aljohani (2016a:5)

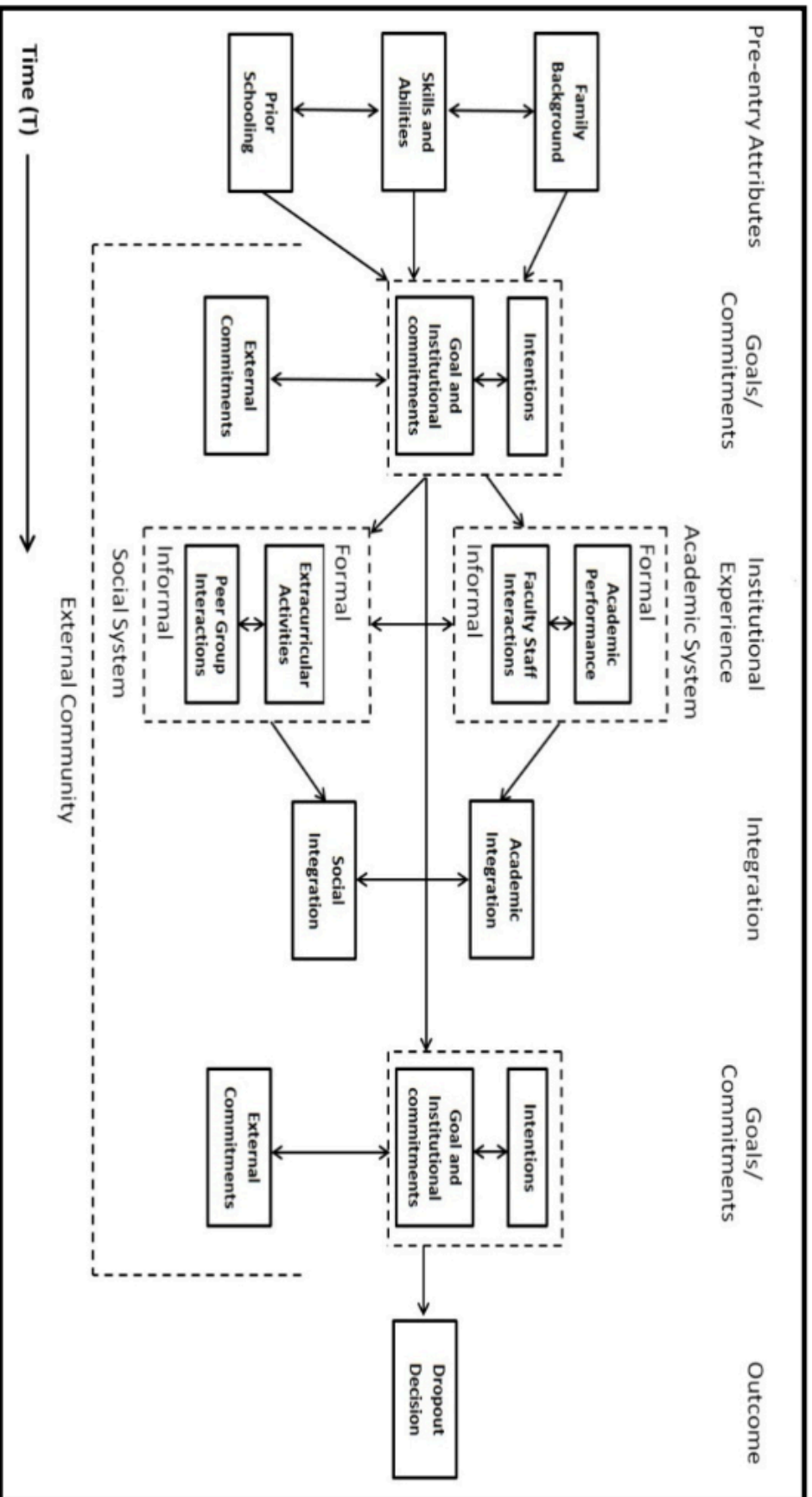


Figure 6.2: Tinto's "Institutional Departure" Model, from Aljohani (2016a:6)

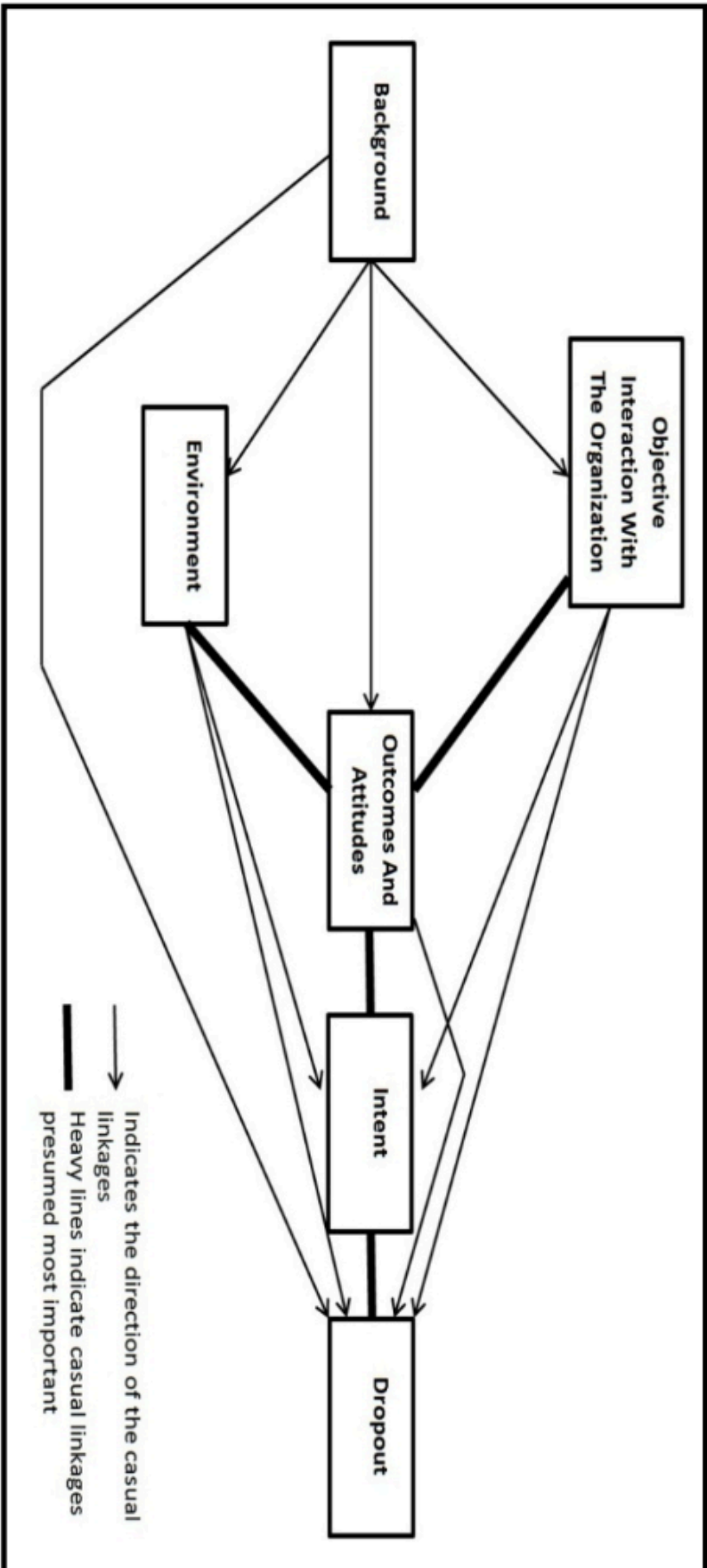


Figure 6.3: Bean's "Student Attrition" Model, from Aljohani (2016a:8)

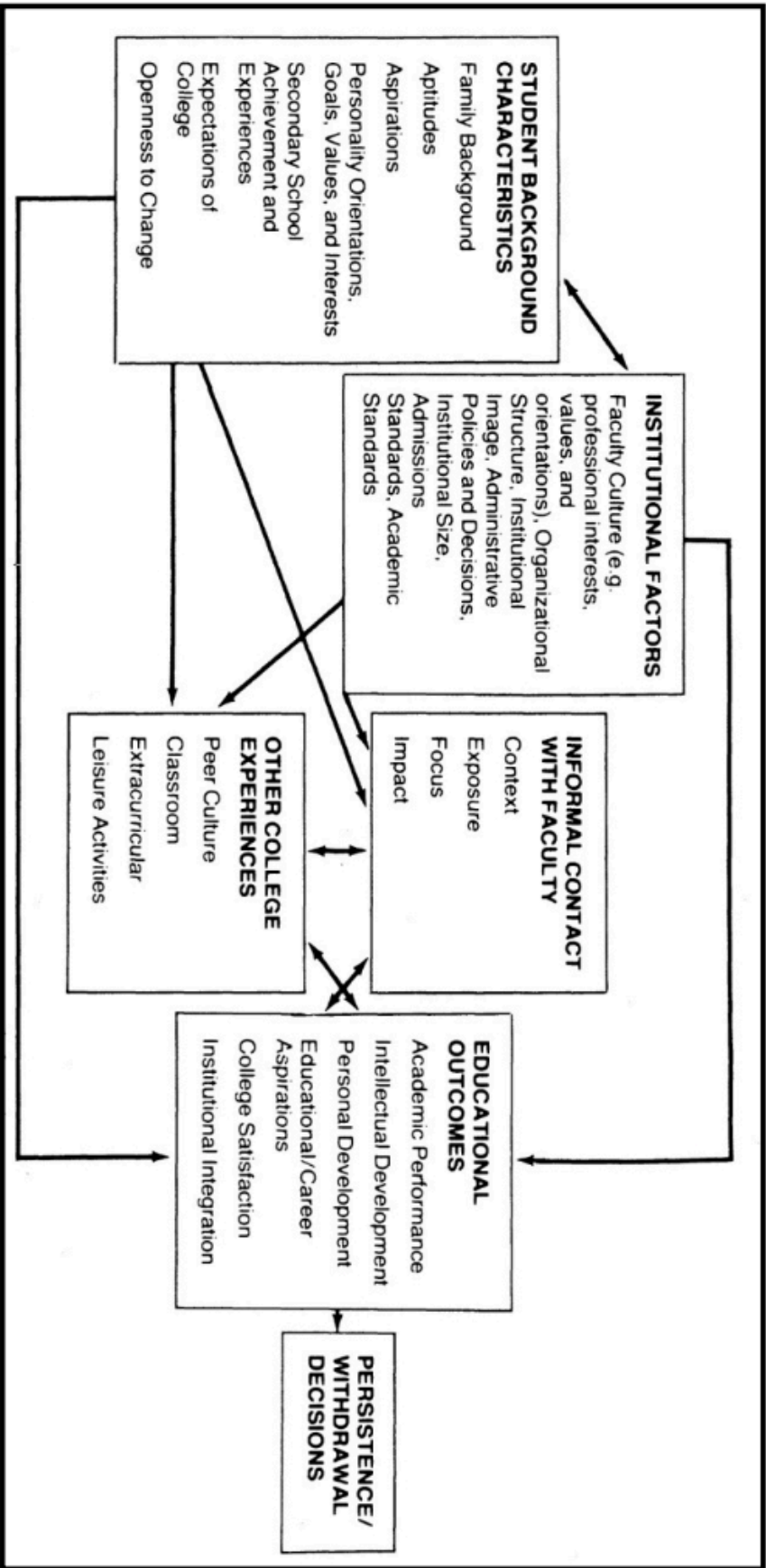


Figure 6.4: Pascarella's Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model, from Aljohani (2016a:9)

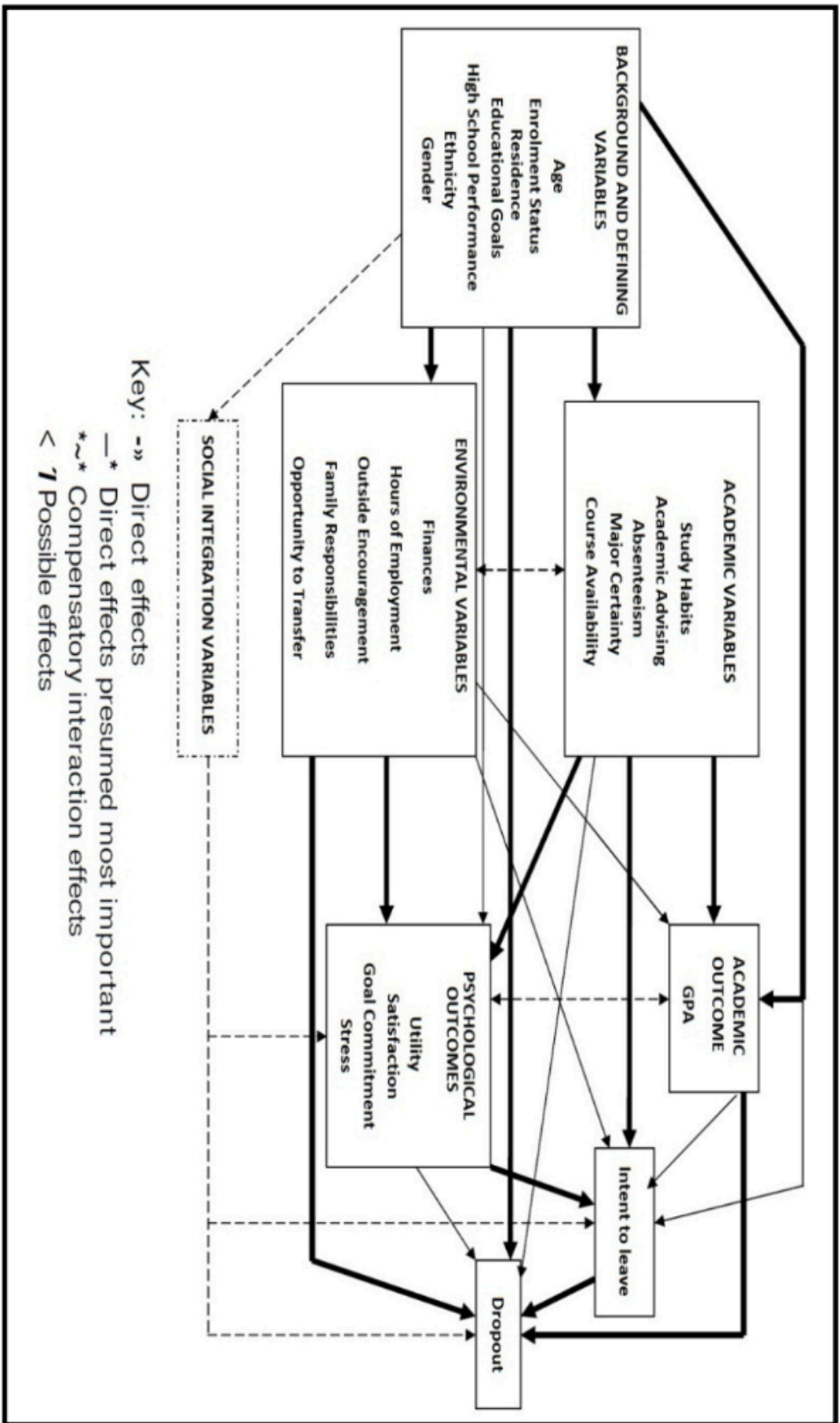


Figure 6.5: Bean & Metzner's "Non-Traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition" Model, from Aljohani (2016a:10)

Appendix 6: Publications arising from this thesis

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Negotiating Contestations and 'Chaotic Conceptions': Engaging 'Non-Traditional' Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

Student engagement has been widely hailed as the solution to all that ails higher education but there is little agreement on the meaning or ambit of the term. Similarly, literature concerning 'non-traditional' students is characterised by a multiplicity of meanings and assumptions, seldom spelled out, ascribed to the term, which is nonetheless imbued with analytical and predictive significance. This paper uses data from early stages of the research to illustrate the importance of conceptual clarity in a study of engaging non-traditional students, illuminated through the lens of the Marxian notion of 'chaotic conceptions'. The paper examines the ideological work being done in disguising interests and inequities through the use of chaotic conceptions and uses the examples of students who define themselves as 'non-traditional' in their own study contexts to illustrate the problems of deploying such chaotic conceptions for purposes beyond description.

Introduction

Research needs to have conceptual clarity if it is to be useful and usable. There is a need for consistency in the use of terminology to allow meaningful discussion and debate between studies of phenomena observed. Also, researchers and other readers (and users) of research need to understand without ambiguity what is included, or excluded, by concepts that are deployed and what their explanatory weight can reasonably be expected to be.

A study undertaken in Scotland to explore the engagement of 'non-traditional' students at university and the effects of this engagement on

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their intentions to persist or otherwise revealed problems with the understanding and use of the concepts of student engagement and 'non-traditional' students. Both are the object of considerable attention from policy makers and both are the subject of considerable resourcing. Therefore, it would seem sensible that what is meant, and understood, by both of these terms is explored and that conceptual clarity is attained. This paper deploys the lens of 'chaotic conception' to explore ideological work that may be hidden in the apparently careless use of these terms with the aid of data collected in the early stages of a research project which is still ongoing.

Engaging students

Student engagement is widely viewed as the 'silver bullet' solution to fix all that ails higher education, yet there is little agreement about what precisely the term means, encompasses or excludes (Trowler, 2010, p. 9). Moral panic generated by texts such as *Academically Adrift* (Arum and Roksa, 2011) and earlier texts such as those by Rodgers (2001), Booth (2001) and McInnis and Hartley (2002) sparked a headlong rush toward student engagement as a strategy to increase student retention, success and learning (Markwell, 2007; Harper and Quayle, 2009; Salamonson *et al.*, 2009). Baron and Corbin (2012, p. 759) reported that:

ideas about student engagement in the university context are often fragmented, contradictory and confused. Even the meaning of the term 'student engagement' is uncertain.

However, without a common understanding, or at least a specified definition when used, confusion and misunderstanding are likely to result. It is not that an essentialist definition, true for all deployments in all situations over all time, is required; however, in order to 'ask more critical questions about research and policies relating to student engagement' (Ashwin and McVitty, 2014) and to militate against 'use of the concept [that] is ambiguous, tangled and even misleading' (Vuori, 2014, p. 509), it is necessary to agree at least within a particular context what is being denoted, and what understood, by the use of the term. How the term is understood has implications for the attribution of responsibility and accountability, the formulation, implementation and monitoring of policy, the allocation of resources and the definition and evaluation of success. Thus, these contestations are seldom trivial but, rather, indicative of interests and ideologies. As an illustration, a relatively benign example can be found at Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2012), in which student engagement is

reduced to ‘representation’, with the subtext that, in order to have a good student experience, students need to volunteer to assist the Quality Assurance Agency in carrying out quality assurance work within their universities.

‘Chaotic conceptions’

Likewise, studies of ‘non-traditional’ students in higher education indicate a concept whose edges are blurred, not through fuzzy thinking but so as to mask the ideological work afoot. This is akin to the ‘chaotic conceptions’ identified by Marx (1973) and introduced in higher education research by Clegg (2004).

The Marxian term ‘chaotic conception’ was introduced in the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1973) with reference to the construct ‘population’. In contrast to fuzzy concepts, whose precise meanings vary according to context and conditions (Haack, 1996), chaotic conceptions are abstractions [*Vorstellung*] that require further disaggregation into simpler and simpler concepts [*Begriff*], unmasking the ‘rich totality of many determinations and relations’ (Marx, 1973, p. 100). ‘Chaotic conceptions’ are neither simply sloppy nor accidental; they function actively to carry out real ideological work, disguising interests and inequities.

From a critical realist perspective, Sayer (1992, p. 138) distinguished chaotic conceptions, or ‘bad abstractions’, from ‘rational abstractions’. He argued that the former ‘arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby “carving up” the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form’. (Sayer, 1992, p. 138). The conception ‘non-traditional’ when applied to students encompasses a large variety of characteristics that have little of significance in common, do not form structures, nor do they interact causally in any notable fashion. Rather, they are included by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic they possess in common.

Chaotic conceptions can, as Sayer (1992, p. 139) observed, be used unproblematically for descriptive purposes but when they are deployed with any ‘explanatory weight’ problems may arise as similar properties or behaviours are assumed where these may not exist. Thus, material differences between objects that are internally heterogeneous become obscured and assumptions are made that what defines, or distinguishes, the object, will necessarily be causally significant. A minor example of this is the reductionism implied in inviting students with disabilities and racial or ethnic minority students to select artwork for the walls of a new

building (advocated by Harper and Quaye, 2009, p. 9) as if these students would necessarily share taste across (or even within) such diverse groups and that this taste would differ significantly from other, more 'traditional' student tastes. Of greater material significance would be a decision to redesign the curriculum based on a homogenised assumption of the needs of non-traditional students.

Who are 'non-traditional' students?

The term 'non-traditional' student (elsewhere depicted as 'the new student'—see Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p. 598) has been used uncritically in the literature for several decades, often as a shorthand marker for those seen as the intended beneficiaries of widening participation-type policies. Few authors define their use of the term and most elide seamlessly between this term and more specific groups, assumed to be the real focus of their studies, such as working-class students, first-in-family students, students from minority ethnic or religious groups, or mature students. While there are sound reasons for selecting certain groups who have suffered structural disadvantage or historic exclusion and who continue to be underrepresented in higher education or particular higher education contexts, all too often use of the term in both literature and policy fails to distinguish adequately between specific identified target groups and more general usage. As an example, Juststroud (2011) demonstrates the unreflective reduction of the term 'non-traditional' to 'old', while Adnett and Slack (2007, p. 23) reduce the term to refer to students from less advantaged backgrounds. Oftentimes, students in the study present with more than one of these characteristics (for example, working class students, the first in their families to participate in higher education, who have come to higher education later in life) and yet the relationships between these constituent characteristics, when they occur together, are seldom explored, nor are differences within the groups (where some students present with multiple characteristics and some with fewer, for example) teased out to develop a finer-grained understanding of the nuances within these conveniently homogenised experiences.

In the same way that the 'other' has been distinguished from the 'norm' in many other contexts (for example, 'non-white' used as a bucket-term to cover all people whose only common characteristic is that they are not 'white'; or 'non-academic' which is still used in many universities to designate all staff whose only common characteristic is that they are not employed on academic conditions of employment), 'non-traditional' students exist as a group only in the presence of

'traditional' students. These 'traditional' students are often understood in the UK higher education context to be native British, mostly white from broadly Christian traditions, fully able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual young people whose parents attended higher education, directly transitioning from public or 'decent' state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades of Highers or A-levels, and without dependents or family responsibilities, studying full-time, forming a gendered distribution among the disciplines.

This suggests that 'non-traditional' students possess at least one of the following characteristics: international or immigrant students; minority ethnic or religious-affiliated students; students with disabilities; working class students; lesbian, gay, trans- or bisexual students, or students questioning their sexual identity; mature students, or students returning to higher education after early departure; first-in-family students; students with vocational or other qualifications; student parents and students with caring responsibilities; part-time students, or students registered for full-time study but working too; students choosing to study in a discipline in which their gender has historically been under-represented.

However, in reality, there are a multiplicity of factors that may lead to a student feeling 'non-traditional' in a particular institutional context (including, for example, region of origin, such as 'having a dopey northern accent' at a southern university, or holding unpopular political views) even if on the surface they appear to meet the 'traditional' characteristics; and likewise, a student who may appear to be 'non-traditional' for one or more reasons may not consider themselves to be so and may identify more strongly with those characteristics they have in common with more 'traditional' students. This can be seen in the examples below.

What does this mean for operationalising the term?

Pilot interviews conducted for an ongoing PhD study (Trowler, forthcoming) indicated clearly that individual students consider themselves 'non-traditional' or otherwise for a far broader range of reasons than could have been anticipated in advance. These may have little to do with the categories listed earlier and may also reflect changes in identity politics as experienced by incoming cohorts of a diversifying student population. Subsequent interviews affirmed these findings, with students who identified as 'non-traditional' substantiating their claims with a variety of evidence. Students were recruited through posters, emails and social media postings calling for students who considered

themselves different to what their university was likely to be imagining when thinking about 'students'. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting between one and two hours, conducted loosely along 'life history' lines, and were recorded before being transcribed and analysed with the use of qualitative data analysis software.

The examples selected (below) include students from both pilot and later interviews, reflecting a range of views on their non/traditionality. J and N were both interviewed during the pilot phase, having been identified through others as being 'non-traditional' students. They were asked if they would be willing to assist, being students, with testing out the resonance of concepts for the study among students who were not deeply institutionalised or steeped in the rhetoric of student engagement. They were asked how they came to be students, whether they considered themselves 'non-traditional' and why and how they viewed their engagement with their university contexts. B & T were interviewed during the 'live' phase of the study, having both responded to the recruitment efforts outlined above, and the data below derives from first interviews in which they were asked how they came to be students, why they felt they were 'non-traditional' and how they viewed their engagement with their university contexts.

J was 63 when interviewed. He runs an online business from his home, which he shares with pets since his long-term relationship ended about eighteen months prior to the interview. Partly to distract himself from his loneliness, and partly because a health scare made him conscious of the fragility of life, J decided to commence undergraduate studies, having worked since leaving school. No one in his family had studied further; his children had disappointed him deeply by not doing so either.

J elected to study psychology, wanting to gain insight on 'the human condition' since he 'so obviously sucked at understanding how people worked'. He was asked whether he considered himself 'non-traditional' and he did not: despite being a mature student, a working student (running a business 'full-time' and registering as a full-time student), a first-in-family student, a student from a working-class family of origin and a student with no vocational intentions linked to his course of study (it was purely for 'personal development').

Although he spontaneously commented several times that it was 'weird' to be studying at his age, he felt comfortable among his classmates, affirmed at their asking his advice on assignments, he felt he belonged and that he mattered to his lecturers and his classmates and he felt fully engaged in his studies and that his needs as a student were well

catered for. (It is likely that the habitus of the university at which he was studying would have contributed to his feeling 'at home'. The study was designed to explore students' perceptions of engagement within *their particular* study context. Different students with their different habitus will feel more or less comfortable in different universities with different habitus.)

In speaking of 'non-traditional' students, he felt that 'they' (in which he included a young mother of an infant, a couple of international students whose home language was not English and whose dress set them aside as 'foreign' and a student with a severe visual disability) were not as well understood or catered for: that the curriculum assumed a white, western paradigm, access to time and resources that only the 'single and restless' could muster and insider knowledge of support structures and services that would be opaque to 'non-traditional' students.

N was interviewed when aged 22, from a traditional Muslim family and herself observant of her faith, studying law. She was also first-in-family, from an immigrant family (though she completed her schooling locally). N did consider herself 'non-traditional' albeit not for reasons that may be immediately obvious. Her reasons were that she, unlike other female Muslim students who would be dropped off in the morning and would immediately disappear into the cloakroom to remove their hijab or niqab before joining their friends, would continue to wear her burqa on campus, aware that it marked her out as different; and that she studied law, despite having no intentions of practising as a lawyer. She planned to accept a traditional marriage after examinations, without attending graduation, and become a full-time wife and mother.

She felt comfortable at university and felt that she mattered but was ambivalent about whether she belonged, feeling she inhabited some kind of resistance identity in a context she found quite homogenising. She felt others around her would feel a lot more comfortable if she dressed as they did. She felt that the university made an effort to accommodate diversity but that there was a naïve ignorance about 'otherness' and was unsure where the responsibility lay in addressing that: was it incumbent on the university to make itself familiar with, and welcoming to, every single culture and subculture that might exist, or was it the duty of students who felt 'othered' to speak up and challenge assumptions, making people aware of this diversity? Nonetheless, she felt fully engaged.

Both J and N had their own understandings of traditional and non-traditional and did not stop to interrogate what might have been meant by that. Both were highly committed and highly engaged.

T offered himself as a non-traditional student on the basis of his delayed transition to higher education. Having applied unsuccessfully during his A-level year through the UCAS process for a place at art school, he had instead elected to turn down his fall-back offer of a place to read English at a metropolitan university in England 'because he did not want to be on the same treadmill as all the others—just going to university because it was expected'. It was almost universally expected of his A-level class: he could not name any of his former classmates aside from himself who had not gone on to higher education, describing them as 'blandly middle class, uncritical lemmings.' He found work in retail and socialised with other, mostly older, working people. After two years of work, he felt ready to return to his studies, electing to study at an ancient university in Scotland.

Consciously eschewing the 'student' social scene, he preferred to socialise with a small group of musicians, artists and writers (most of whom worked in the service sector to finance their cultural lives) and spent time on campus only when formally required for lectures or tutorials. He considered himself engaged in his course, insofar as the concept held resonance for him but his real passion was music. He played in a band that was 'on the verge of success' and he was a telephone call away from giving up his studies to play full-time with the band. He considered himself a musician rather than a student; similar to his friends who worked as waiters or call-centre operatives, he saw his day job as simply a means to occupy himself before the inevitable success beckoned.

Like N, T inhabited a 'resistance identity', which he wore as a badge of honour, but unlike N did not feel that the university made any effort to engage his brand of 'non-traditionality'. He felt that the university's engagement attempts were directed at 'the students on the treadmill', on the one hand, and at 'cash cow' international students, on the other, with students such as himself being left to define their own experience. When pressed on what engagement efforts he would wish the university to make and what might lure him away from his decision to leave his studies should the call come summoning him to a full-time role with the band, he admitted that any such efforts would be futile, as his heart was set on his musical career and his studies were only a means of marking time; although he did consider himself fully engaged with his course and spoke very warmly about receiving positive feedback on an essay he had submitted and an affirming chat he had had with his personal tutor (whom he had not informed of his intentions to leave the course when the opportunity arrived).

B oscillated in his identification as non-traditional. His initial contact had been hesitant: 'I'm not sure if I'm what you're looking for' and several times during the interview he stopped to check whether what he was saying matched the criteria for inclusion. He had rescheduled the interview twice after failing to appear at the first appointment and seemed to have doubts about whether he fitted or not: either the study criteria, or at (his) university.

B had grown up in a home that had been traditionally working class but with the decimation of the manufacturing sector had been severely affected by unemployment, with many members of his extended family on benefits or in precarious underemployment. He had attended a school with others from similar backgrounds and had been the only one of his former peer group to progress to university. He did not know where most of the others had gone, as he had not kept contact with people from his home town beyond his immediate family.

He admitted that, growing up, he had never questioned that he would go on to university: after all, he recounted, universities were places for smart people and his teachers had always told him he was smart. He had applied successfully for a place at a new university that was close enough to his home town to commute, although he had soon chosen to move into accommodation he shared with classmates because he felt that the emotional distance between his former home and the university was growing exponentially larger and harder to span.

His university was full of 'people like him', who were smart, and he knew of several who had come from similar backgrounds to his own: although he did not feel that this in any way made them alike (beyond that they qualified, as he did, by virtue of their 'smartness'). However, he did not feel engaged; neither by his course specifically, nor by his university more generally. He recognised that they were making efforts to engage 'students from backgrounds like his', with a wealth of services and structures but did not feel completely at home in any sense beyond the intellectual. He enjoyed having the run of the library and the freedom to associate with 'other smart people' but found little of resonance in his course or in the climate of the university and wondered whether another, older, university may have been a better match. Nonetheless, he was determined to 'stick it out' and graduate, in the hopes that a good undergraduate degree could provide him with access to a different university to continue with further studies.

In considering what his university could do to engage him more fully, B listed a range of ideas spanning 'instil more respect for learning among some of the students' and 'make the campus look more like a serious

TABLE 1
Examples of congruent ('positive') and oppositional ('negative') engagement

| | Congruent engagement | Non-engagement | Oppositional engagement |
|-------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Behavioural | Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm | Skips lectures without excuse | Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures |
| Affective | Interest | Boredom | Rejection |
| Cognitive | Meets or exceeds assignment requirements | Assignments late, rushed or absent | Redefines parameters for assignments |

Source: From Trowler (2010, p. 9).

academic institution', before catching himself and laughing that he was 'describing [the ancient university not too far away], which this will never be!' He described his motivation for engaging with higher education as 'developmental, rather than instrumental' but admitted that he would not be satisfied with a 'menial' career and aspired to work that satisfied him intellectually.

Reflecting on these four examples, some interesting differences emerge. J's intention in studying may be considered 'non-traditional' in contemporary terms since his studies were entirely for personal development rather than for any vocational purpose and N categorised herself this way for a similar reason; while T and B both claimed that their studies were not vocationally inspired, both had instrumental (though differing) reasons for participating in higher education. The debate as to whether or not a university education should necessarily be linked to an instrumental outcome (a career), which is clearly contestable and value-laden and raises questions about the nature and purposes of the university, is beyond the scope of this paper; this issue is one of many that demands a more critical reflection on what we mean by 'student engagement'.

This can be contrasted with notions of congruent *versus* oppositional engagement (Table 1) since both J's and N's engagement would be congruent, with respect to affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions; despite N's rejection of the goals, while B's and T's engagement would be congruent on the cognitive and behavioural dimensions, while oppositional on the affective dimension. Table 1 illustrates the three dimensions of student engagement identified by

Fredricks *et al.* (2004, pp. 62–63), namely behavioural (what the student does), affective (what the student feels) and cognitive (what the student thinks), mapped onto the antithetical forms of engagement (congruent and oppositional; contrasted with non-engagement) identified by Trowler (2010, p. 9).

A naïve understanding of student engagement, which fails to discriminate between affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions and their congruent and oppositional manifestations, might then easily mistake T's visible engagement (congruent, as observed on the behavioural level and congruent on the cognitive level as evidenced by his assignment submissions) as predicting intentions to persist, while in reality the failure to engage on an affective level has him ready to depart at a moment's notice. A fuller, more nuanced understanding of how students engage, and with what, thus allows greater use to be made of the concept of student engagement and greater understanding achieved as to how it might affect outcomes and, thus, how institutions can tailor their efforts to maximise the benefits derived from their investments.

Likewise, a more fine-grained understanding of how 'non-traditionality' manifests in a particular context, allowing for the fact that there will be heterogeneity of experience and understanding, may provide a more authentic expression and may facilitate the representation as accurately as is possible under the circumstances, of the nuances and dynamics involved, so as to unmask the 'rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx, 1973, p. 100).

Distilling order from chaos

In *Sorting Things Out*, Bowker and Star (1999, p. 6) described their purpose as follows:

First, we seek to understand the role of invisibility in the work that classification does in ordering human interaction. We want to understand how these categories are made and kept invisible, and in some cases, we want to challenge the silences surrounding them.

A similar process of interrogation is required here, in order to examine what ideological work is being done through the use of these chaotic conceptions and what is being rendered invisible through this.

What ideological work is being done by conceptualising student engagement chaotically?

Defining student engagement as engagement *by* students lays the responsibility and accountability at the door of students: students who

are not engaged have failed to engage. The implication here is that the responsibility of the institution is not to provide resources, or review structures, processes or curricula, or seek in any other way to engage their students. Their duty is to refine their recruitment and selection processes to improve their ability to attract the 'right' students, who will engage and persist.

Defining student engagement as engagement *of* students ascribes responsibility to institutions but denies agency to students: students who are not engaged have not been engaged (but will be when the institution does it 'right'.) The implication here is that students are passive recipients of resources, programmes and offerings designed for them by the agentic university. Once the institution correctly understands the character of the 'changing student body', it can target resources and implement programmes that will engage students, inspiring them to persist and succeed in their studies.

Defining student engagement as engagement *of*, and *by*, students ascribes mutual responsibility but blurs the lines of accountability and glosses over issues of interest and power. The new discursive device of 'student partnership' (in reality often a form of ideological co-option) is an example of this: students now share responsibility and accountability for unpopular decisions such as the magnitude of the fee increase in some English universities through their membership of governance committees making these decisions.

The students in the examples outlined above all claim to be engaged, though it is evident from their descriptions that both B and T are oppositionally engaged along the affective dimension. A definition of student engagement which ascribes responsibility to either party alone would see this oppositional engagement as either a 'failure' to engage congruently by these students and, thus, outside the remit or the duty of the institution to address; or as a failure by the institution to target the correct engagement strategy which would necessarily have resulted in congruent rather than oppositional engagement.

In reality, in both of these cases, neither position is helpful. Enrolling these students and alienating them, however unintentionally, achieves little. Rather, a form of dialogical engagement by both students and their institutions would seem necessary to move beyond the impasse. For T, this may involve more active engagement with his tutor and greater honesty on his part regarding his intentions, while for B it may involve transferring to a university whose *habitus* is more closely aligned to his expectations. However, slapping on a coat of 'student partnership' without exploring the differing positionalities and interests of these

students and their institutions is also unlikely to achieve much. These positionalities include the social and political landscapes students inhabit, usually referring to factors, such as 'race', ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, disability status, religion, socioeconomic class, whether rural or urban in background, and home language. Merriam *et al.*, (2001, p. 411) argued that 'positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to "the other". More importantly, these positions can shift', which differs from a position or a perspective in its relationality and context-dependence.

What ideological work is being done by conceptualising non-traditional students chaotically?

Conceptualising students as non-traditional sets up the notion of a traditional student that is seldom defined but, when it is (such as Munro, 2011, p. 115), is often depicted thus (or similarly):

Typically, for most of the post-war period, the traditional university student was a recent graduate from high school with good grades and enrolled full-time. Most importantly, such students came predominantly from high socio-economic backgrounds that equipped them with the kind of cultural capital that provides a head start in the academic environment.

Thus, the 'traditional' student is the one equipped for higher education, while the 'non-traditional' student is by contrast 'poorly equipped'. Defining students as 'non-traditional' thus positions them as 'other' and subject to deficit, leading to them being or feeling marginalised and disadvantaged by their institutions (Read *et al.*, 2003, p. 1).

Using the term uncritically and slipping into the particular 'non-traditional' population one wishes to concentrate on also has the effect of equating the term with that population, rendering invisible other groups who feel similarly marginalised or 'othered' (for a discussion on the difference between marginalisation and 'othering', see Canales, 2000), leading to a climate of where some groups are seen (or depicted) as being more deserving (of attention, of affirmation, of resourcing) than others. This is yet another problem with the use of 'chaotic conceptions' such as 'non-traditional': that despite their having no traction beyond the merely descriptive within a particular context, their use within that context is assumed beyond that context to refer to the specific group as if the term were synonymous with that group across all contexts. This leads to the rendering invisible in other contexts of groups who, in those other contexts, may more appropriately (or may also) be deemed

'non-traditional'. Where the term is used beyond mere description, for example to govern policy regarding resource distribution, this will have material consequences.

Conversely, not looking at the specifics of a particular manifestation of 'non-traditionality' leads to assumptions or projections of homogeneity, which in turn leads to insufficiently nuanced policies and strategies for provisioning, that may fall short of the mark.

In the cases of the students described above, the examples that would most obviously have ticked boxes on the 'non-traditionality checklist' (J the mature student and B the working-class student) were less likely to consider themselves 'non-traditional' (or to consider themselves 'non-traditional' in an unproblematic way). Of the other examples, whose claims at 'non-traditionality' may have appeared more tenuous, N (the student from an immigrant/observant Muslim family) and T (the delayed transition student) more readily assumed the label, if for reasons than might have been less obvious (relating to their purposes in choosing to participate in higher education). In these cases, interventions targeting the groups on the 'non-traditionality checklist' may have failed because the targeted beneficiaries did not define themselves as needing the interventions, while the other examples may have been bypassed for attention or resourcing, or have had the 'wrong' type of intervention designed for them. Given that it was one of the latter who was most at risk of early leaving, such ill-matched interventions could have had a double negative effect: 'wasting' resources on mismatched provisioning while not providing interventions where these may have had effect.

Conclusion

Concepts such as student engagement and non-traditional are typically used in ways that may appear merely slapdash but, in reality, often mask positionalities, interests or disparities of power that embody ideological ends. Exploring these concepts through the lens of 'chaotic conceptions' allows the unmasking of this ideological work, exposing what is rendered invisible through these discursive choices. Inasmuch as the essentialised construct of 'the student' provides a convenient but ideologically laden concept for policy, the chaotic conception of the non-traditional student similarly allows for a construction of an essentialised being whose presence in higher education can be accommodated through carefully choreographed interventions. Conceiving student engagement chaotically allows for the term to be reduced or expanded to encompass whatever an agency, an institution,

or a policy might wish, without the need for explicit recognition: thus, student engagement might serve as a convenient umbrella term to justify directing substantial resources to secure a better ranking in a league table; alternatively, it can be used to mask institutional monitoring of international students to appease politicians; elsewhere, it might be invoked to introduce fundamental reform of curriculum.

Without agreement on (or understanding of) what a term means when deployed at a particular time in a particular context, allocating resources and responsibility, monitoring progress and defining and evaluating success become hit-and-miss. Focusing on real examples of variously engaged students who define themselves as ‘non-traditional’ in their own contexts for their own reasons reveals the gap between the assumptions of who these students are and how they engage and thus how best to design and resource student engagement initiatives, and the perceptions and understandings presented by these students themselves. This resonates with Sayer’s (1992, p. 139) caution about deploying such conceptions for any purposes beyond simple description and allows for unmasking the ‘rich totality of many determinations and relations’ (Marx, 1973, p. 100).

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