

## **Belonging: Blurring the Boundaries**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper applies Whitchurch's (2008) concept of the 'third space' to the emergent territory occupied by further education college students as they 'cross the boundary' to continue their studies at the university. Findings reveal that these transitioning students face barriers to success, feelings of being isolated and encounter negative perceptions. While this paper focuses on the Scottish education system and emphasises the Scottish Governments aim to remove barriers to widening access and participation in HE, the findings have a more general applicability and can support a variety of transitions made in the education sector. Research outcomes can, therefore, inform academic leaders, enhance the student experience, guide policy makers and aid knowledge transfer.

**Keywords:** FE to HE transition, FE students' sense of belonging; third space and transitions in education; crossing the boundary from FE to HE

### **INTRODUCTION**

The educational landscape within Scotland has shifted significantly in recent years with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) increasing their focus on widening participation and providing more articulation opportunities for students progressing from further education college to university (Scottish Funding Council 2015/16). The formation of the Commission on Widening Access in 2014 increased this emphasis as the SFC continued their support for the articulation of students with higher nationals (HNs) to degree study as a method of widening participation and increasing rates of access to university. The students who articulate from partner colleges are known as direct entrants when they join the university, and follow the "2+2" model, studying for two years at college followed by two years at university (Scottish Funding Council 2013:3). These transferring students enter year three with advanced standing and the four-year Scottish degree is achieved with no loss of time. This 2+2 model although underpinned by the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF), poses significant challenges for HE institutions in retention and performance, and the articulating students as they try to fit-in and adapt to the new learning environment and academic expectations. Christie *et. al*

(2013: 625) state, “they are expected to be on a par with the cohort they are joining ... and, they have less time in which to adjust to the new learning environment and hence more to lose”. A study was therefore conducted to examine the students’ experiences of this process of transition.

For over a decade, the Scottish Government has targeted the removal of barriers to participation in the HE sector, including the removal of fees for local students (Scottish Executive 2000), and the participation figures were expected to rise (Scottish Funding Council 2015/16). Unfortunately, even with this increased emphasis and investment, participation in HE in Scotland continues to be the lowest in the whole of the UK (Hunter *et al.*, 2016). College students who articulate to university positively impact on widening participation figures and through outcome agreements, universities are expected to plan transition pathways ensuring courses are designed to support articulation and provide a seamless progression (Scottish Government, 2014).

In 2013, to encourage students to engage in university, the SFC introduced additional funded places for students who are known as Associate Students while at college. These students receive dual enrolment and in effect wear ‘two hats’ – that of a college student studying for their higher national diploma (HND) and that of the university student who is working towards the third-year entry. For the academic year 2013/14, Edinburgh Napier University was awarded extra funded places for Associate Students articulating to this university for the third and fourth year of a degree programme, including 53 places in Computing. Through the Associate Student Project (ASP) we are examining the impact of supported transitions and the boundaries and barriers faced by students as they bridge the divide between college and university.

This paper explores the experiences of Associate Students and the impact of this identity on their sense of belonging and ability to overcome barriers as they transition from college to university. Whitchurch’s (2008) concept of the ‘third space’ is applied to the emergent territory occupied by these college students ‘crossing the boundary’ to university. Direct entrants may find their success impeded by their location within the third space and the following questions are examined:

- Why is a sense of belonging important?
- What effect does a feeling of belonging, or lack of, have on academic performance?
- What are the barriers to successful boundary crossing from college to university?
- How can we overcome these barriers?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The unique challenges faced by students making the transition from college to university can be understood by exploring several theoretical concepts inherent to establishing identity in a new context. The notion of transition itself is a key concept and delineates the period of change experienced by students as they progress from college to university. As they make this transition concepts such as “boundary crossing” become significant (Star 2010; Akkerman and Bakker 2011). Akkerman and Bakker (2011:133) understand the term “boundary” as “sociocultural differences leading to a discontinuity of action or interaction”. In this

paper, the boundaries we refer to are those that are embedded in the divergent delivery systems represented by partner colleges and the university. Christie *et al.* (2008:572) argue that “learning competence” in one context is not always transferable and as such, does not mean success in a new environment.

Students in transition, therefore, are faced with boundaries in two main areas. Firstly, from college to a new university campus - in the physical sense the campus change requires orientation and adaptation to different travel routes, perhaps new living arrangements, changes to library facilities, an alternative method of receiving email and logging into the IT systems, altered support infrastructure and, significantly, a new staff and student cohort. A study by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) found that this particular shift of location results in a number of potential challenges for the student, “generally colleges offered smaller class sizes and greater tutor support encouraging completion and, therefore, the opportunity to progress” (HEFCE 2002:19). Secondly, transitional students are required to adapt to a shift in curriculum, accompanied by altered terminology, assessment methods, grading criteria and new expectations of independent learning. The Department of Education and Skills (2003: 62) argue that “FE has strengths in providing ladders of progression for students particularly those pursuing vocational routes and serves the needs of the local students who want to study locally”. Traditionally, college and university have offered differing teaching models and served the needs of a different community of learners with the focus of further education institutions being on vocational courses and universities on higher education. Articulation routes from college into university demand that these two disparate educational pathways should merge seamlessly as students make the transition from higher national study at college to the third year of a university course.

Moreover, these different modes of learning can mean that there is a negative perception of articulating students, within the university context, as ill-equipped in terms of entry requirements and academic grounding (Baser, 1992; Yorke, 2005). Cohen and Garcia (2014), amongst other academics, argue that these negative stereotypes can have an adverse effect on academic performance and on establishing a sense of social belonging in the educational context (see also, Zigler and Butterfield 1968; Steele, Spencer and Aronson 2002; Schmader and Johns 2003). When crossing the boundary from college to university, therefore, students encounter a range of transitional barriers which are logistical, academic and social in nature.

Transition is frequently associated with change; however, these two ideas are not the same. Change is situational: the reorganisation of a team or merger of departments. Transition, in contrast, is psychological: it is the process individuals go through as they internalise and come to terms with the new situation (Bridges 2009). Within the UK, a traditional school transition takes place at eleven when pupils transfer from primary to secondary school. This is considered an important life event and is characterised by changes in the environment, social interactions and academic demands (Riglin *et al.*, 2013) similar to those adjustments encountered during the college to university transition albeit this is a different age group. Early research on primary school transition focuses on preparation (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008) and research by Rice (2001) introduces the term “institutional discontinuities” to identify the problematic institutional differences that

pupils transitioning from middle to high school experience (Rice, 2001:2), concluding that students need to be prepared for their transition. Her work found preparedness to be multi-dimensional, incorporating academic preparedness, independence and industriousness, conformity to adult standards and development of coping mechanisms. The emphasis on preparation had been previously accentuated by Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999) who developed the 'Five bridges of transition' recommending that schools should 'build bridges' to allow pupils to make a smooth crossing.

Bridging within transitions is not a new concept; students' transitioning from college to university within the Scottish system are undoubtedly crossing a boundary (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011) – they are bridging the divide between the two systems. Achievement of the entry requirements for articulation into the third year is not adequate preparation alone for transition into university. Furthermore, unlike the primary to secondary school pupils, university students are joining an existing cohort of students and the social context of this should also be considered. Recent efforts by Rice *et al.* (2015) indicated that a successful transition involved functioning well in two areas: being academically and behaviourally involved in school and feeling a sense of belonging.

A focus on belonging and empowerment (Lawson and Kearns, 2010) is emphasised as critical during any transition and encourages a positive sense of identity and worth (Lingam, Novak, Emond and Coad, 2014). This sense of value can be built with three categories of intervention: cognitive, interventions such as online materials, assemblies and written information about their secondary school; behavioural interventions, such as visits, adapted timetable, high school vocabulary; and systemic interventions such as bridging projects, peer support and parent groups. Best practice was found in the use of systemic strategies at primary school which involve bridging links and continuity between primary and secondary school (Rice *et al.* 2015). Becoming both academically and socially involved in university aids transition and develops students' sense of belonging and student identity. Encouraging simple activities such as engaging students in class discussions and allowing them to ask questions during lectures can build their participation levels. Outside of the classroom, joining clubs and societies will further develop their sense of belonging and student identity.

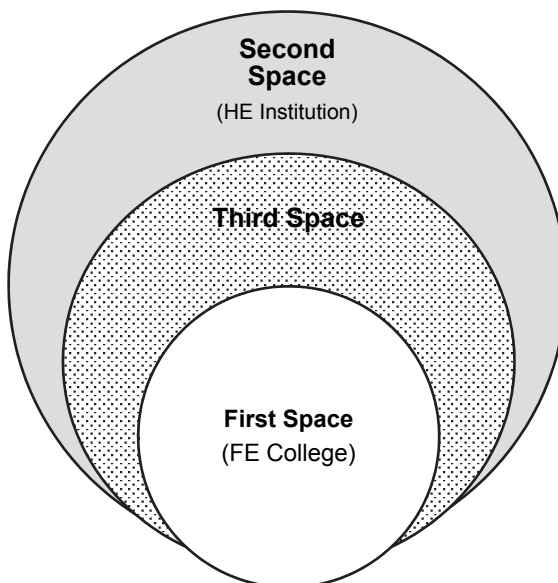
Institutional discontinuities can be identified between middle and high school (Rice 2001) and similarly between colleges and universities which can put direct-entry students at a disadvantage over their first-year entry peers unless appropriate mechanisms are put in place to prepare them for the transition. Preparation is essential for transition, however, the importance of participation before, during and after the transition is also emphasised in the literature (Finn 1989; Lawson and Kearns 2010; Rice *et al.*, 2015) which identified the impact non-participation can have on lowering students' sense of identity and belonging in the university.

A student who takes the non-traditional pathway to HE can feel like a 'fish out of water' as they navigate the 'alien environment' which is the new HE landscape and this can result in suspension of studies and poor retention rates (Tranter 2003; Askham 2008). Christie *et al.*'s (2008) longitudinal study exploring the transition experience of college students to an elite university concludes that transitioning students present "a strong emotional desire to engage in the social

practices of learning. But they were only ever partial members of the wider community of practice, and their engagement with ‘proper’ student life engendered strong emotional feelings of ambivalence and dislocation” (p. 579).

Whitchurch’s (2008) concept of the ‘third space’ is a useful means of exploring the paradoxes at the heart of transitioning from one manner of working to another. Whitchurch explores professional identity in the HE sector and how the roles of staff have shifted as they appropriate new modes of identity by expanding their remit to accommodate new dimensions of working. Increasingly, professional staff are developing more academic skills, while academic staff are moving towards more project-based work thus blurring the traditional boundaries between academic and professional functions in the HE context and creating a new type of “blended professional” (Whitchurch, 2008: 4). Whitchurch posits the notion of the “third space” to define and explore the emergent territory occupied by HE staff who fulfil both academic and professional functions. Whitchurch (2008: 7) states that, “As a result of blurring boundaries between activities, what might be described as third space has emerged between professional and academic domains”. Figure 1 illustrates the concept of the ‘third space’ and what it means for articulating students. Initially, students begin their academic journey in college where they study for their HND – this is the ‘first space’.

**FIGURE 1 WHITCHURCH’S NOTION OF THE ‘THIRD SPACE’ APPLIED IN THE CONTEXT OF STUDENT TRANSITION FROM COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY**



During this two year period of college study, Edinburgh Napier University has introduced interventions to help ‘blur the boundary’ between college and university. Before the introduction of the Associate Student Project in 2013 students crossing the boundary did so with limited tailored support from the

institution. They were expected to adjust academically and socially, integrating seamlessly with the third year cohort, when they made the transition to university – the ‘second space’. Within the context of this study, we adapt Whitchurch’s notion of the ‘third space’ to be the blurred area between college and university. This space, during the transition, exists for an extended period of time from initial application to the university, during the second year at college, and extending to the end of the first trimester in year three at university – a total time frame of approximately one year. Through empirical research, this paper now examines the implications for college students of this ‘blurring of boundaries’ and how the student is able to establish a sense of belonging and credibility in a university context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilises a mixed method approach to the research utilising baseline data, focus groups and interviews. Mixed methods techniques are suitable for expanding the scope of and deepening the insight into the study (Sandelowski, 2000) and allow for increased understanding of the concepts being explored (Greene, 2008), gaining perspective and nuance (Darlington and Scott, 2002). Quantitative data for the research objectives were extracted from the student records system within the university and used as an initial exploration of the issues providing an early indication of student retention and performance.

The qualitative portion comprised of two focus groups, ten interviews and an anonymous follow-up questionnaire with students who have articulated from college. Each focus group involved five participants, selected by responses from an email sent out to all direct entrants enrolled in year three of a Computing degree programme at Edinburgh Napier University. As this study is interested in articulating students and their experiences of ‘third space’ working, qualitative methods of data collection were considered most appropriate and focus groups allow us to gather rich perspectives on the collective, localised views of the target market (Pickering, 2008). Krueger and Casey (2000) propose that this research approach is a dynamic process, which is flexible, not standardised, allowing the moderator to follow-up on relevant points of discussion.

However, while there is a range of advantages to the focus group method (Kitzinger, 1995), in the context of this study, the public nature of the set-up is less conducive to open, honest communication about private subjects. Academic and social transitioning can be particularly sensitive topics for students to discuss in front of their peers, especially if challenges have been experienced. It was, therefore, determined that triangulating research findings with in-depth one-to-one interviews and a follow-up anonymous questionnaire, with all focus group participants, would offset any methodological limitations.

The questionnaire was based on the *PISA 2000 study Student Engagement at School: a Sense of Belonging and Participation* (OECD, 2003). A number of alternative questionnaires were identified as a potential source to use as a framework for this research. For example, Goodenow’s (1993) *Psychological Sense of School Membership* (PSSM) uses a 28-item scale to examine the extent to which students feel accepted, respected and included by their peers. While Thomasson *et al.* (2006) posit that *The School Concerns Questionnaire* (SCQ), a self-report system which identifies potential concerns about joining the secondary

school and Coie and Dodge's *The Guess Who* (1983) employs a process of peer assessment to explore student characteristics.

While the PISA Study (2000) focuses on school students, this research examines the experiences of direct entrants after transitioning from college to university. Participants were asked a series of questions to determine their views on how well they had integrated socially at university and whether this had any impact on academic performance. Participants responded to questions using the same four-point scale, which included: "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" and "strongly disagree". The PISA study (2000: 11) however, makes use of a questionnaire "to measure two components of student engagement at school – sense of belonging and participation", with "participation" referring to "skipping school, paying attention in class, doing homework". The questionnaire asks students to indicate how they feel about a particular item using a four-point scale: "strongly disagree", "disagree", "agree" and "strongly agree". The study aims to establish a link between belonging and engagement and it was, therefore, deemed appropriate to use selected questions to form the basis of the quantitative dimension of this paper.

For the data analysis themes were identified using a manual coding process as a data reduction technique and using the following criteria: belonging and participation. The raw data was coded, according to the research aims, with a view to determining emerging patterns and ideas (Basit 2003). At all times, ethical considerations were a priority and participants were fully cognisant about the aims and outcomes of the study. Informed consent was obtained and student contributions were anonymised to protect the confidentiality of all participants in the study.

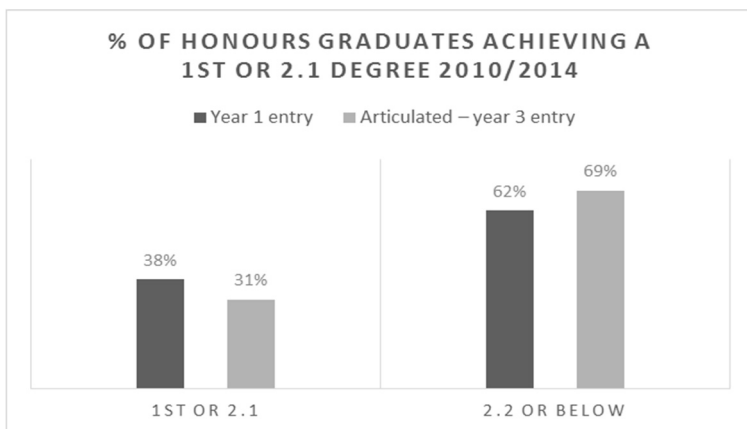
## **DISCUSSION**

Baseline data from internal performance measures indicate that students articulating from college to a degree at Edinburgh Napier University's School of Computing are less likely to get a First or 2.1 degree than students who entered in Year 1 (See Figure 2 below). A chi-squared analysis shows that there is a significant difference between articulating students and non-articulating students achieving Firsts and 2.1s. ( $\chi^2(2, N=290) = 12.133, p < 0.05$ ).

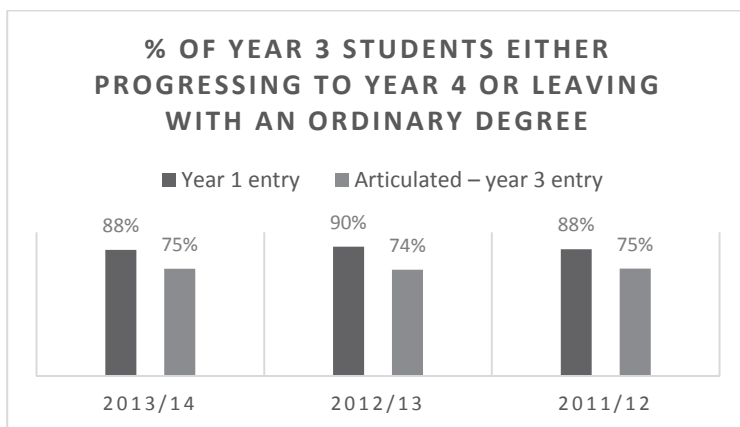
Additionally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the number of year 3 direct entrants and continuing students either progressing to year 4 or leaving with an ordinary degree. The results show that there is a significant difference between the percentage of university-only, first year entrants and third year articulating entrants progressing to the fourth year or leaving with an ordinary degree ( $t=18.783, p < 0.001$ ) (Figure 3 below).

Articulating students, therefore, are less likely to receive a First or 2.1 classification than their continuing counterparts and are more likely to leave with an ordinary degree than progress to the fourth year. Establishing this baseline data is important for evaluation and longitudinal research around transition support from college to university and has implications for the wider education community where this 'third space' area exists.

**FIGURE 2 PERCENTAGE OF HONOURS GRADUATES ACHIEVING A 1<sup>ST</sup> OR 2.1 DEGREE CLASSIFICATION BETWEEN 2010/2014**



**FIGURE 3 PERCENTAGE OF YEAR 3 STUDENTS EITHER PROGRESSING TO YEAR 4 OR LEAVING WITH AN ORDINARY DEGREE**



Whitchurch’s concept of the ‘third space’ allows us to explore the notion of belonging in relation to direct entrants seeking to establish their role in the unfamiliar zone between college and university. The following discussion summarises the main issues under each of the research questions and considers the repercussions for articulating students of ‘blurring the boundaries’ between college and university, and how direct entrants are able to achieve a sense of social belonging and academic credibility at the university.

**EXPLORING WHY IS A SENSE OF BELONGING IS IMPORTANT**

Whitchurch (2008: 9) posits that “A sense of belonging to a particular project or team...has implications for the credibility of individuals in their current roles and for



their future career paths". In relation to direct entrants, therefore, after transitioning to university it is paramount to establish a sense of belonging in the new HE context as this has implications for their present and future performance. However, the outcome of the anonymous questionnaire, undertaken by all direct-entry participants from the focus groups (n=11), identifies that 44 per cent of direct entrants surveyed feel like they do not 'fit-in' at the university.

Although, some responses indicated that 'fitting-in' was not a barrier to achieving at university, Chris<sup>1</sup> from College B argues, "I think it's very independent anyway so it doesn't matter if you fit in or not". For some students transitioning into an already established cohort can be challenging, "I do get on well with people", comments Roza from College C, "but there are groups that have already formed and been there from the first year already. They stick together more and it's harder to infiltrate that". The implications of feeling like an outsider are encapsulated by Isaac from College B, "If you feel like you fit in you're not going to think I can't be bothered to go, I'll just stay at home". Thus suggesting that establishing a sense of belonging has an impact upon retention rates and performance for some students.

### *Belonging and its impact on academic performance*

A range of studies has been conducted to examine the relationship between 'belonging' and performance specifically for what has been termed the 'new student'. Laing, Chao & Alan (2005) argue that the "new student" is tasked with balancing the demands of both work and study, with Haggis (2006) asserting that this type of student comes from a more diverse background and spends less time on campus making social integration more challenging. Leese (2010) posits that it is the post-92 institutions that are most likely to have to adapt to the changing needs of the "new student" and that studies show that at this group of universities there was "less social engagement (Yorke and Longden, 2007) and a lack of social integration (Wingate, 2007), resulting in a negative experience for some students" (p. 243). Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy (2011) found that although students have well developed online social networks they struggle to engage in on-campus social activities which negatively impacts on their sense of community and belonging. They recommend classrooms activities which engage and support students through intellectual discovery to build involvement and support. Engaging in the new community of practice and the social aspects of student life can be enablers of transition and this has ramifications for the "new student" (Hockings et al. 2007).

The PISA study (2000) concludes that a "student's sense of belonging and participation are not strongly related to each other at the individual level and both of these dimensions of student engagement are only weakly related with literacy performance" (p.54). The PISA study, therefore, hypothesises that belonging and participation are not intrinsically connected. Conversely, the outcome of the questionnaire conducted with direct entrants (n=11) contradicts this premise with 64 per cent of students "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" with the notion that how well they have fitted in at the university has impacted on their grades.

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1. All participant names from this point are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of those taking part in the study.

Indeed, a number of studies would support this idea of a link between belonging and participation with Cohen and Garcia (2014: 365) concluding that “a salient social identity can trigger psychological threat and belonging concerns” and these “can produce persistent performance decrements” (see also, Zigler & Butterfield, 1968). This premise is endorsed by Julia from College A who suggests that: “For me, if I came on my own, and didn’t know anybody or make connections with anyone it would seriously impact on me staying on”. The benefit of social integration and how it can positively influence academic performance is further illustrated by David from College C who comments: “I like bouncing ideas off students and staff and having a big group around you to call upon”. Establishing a sense of belonging can, therefore, influence performance but what do direct entrants perceive the barriers are to achieving successful social and academic integration at university?

### **EXPLORING THE BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL BOUNDARY CROSSING**

A small cross-section of respondents, one student from College A and one student from College B, determined that the transition from college to university is largely a smooth one, with James who was enrolled at College A, stating, “I can’t think of any barriers”. The sample of students involved in this study broadly divide the transitional challenges they experienced into two main areas: social and academic. In relation to academic barriers, moving from the college curriculum and mode of working, to the university educational environment, was perceived as a challenge with Keira who studied at College B explaining that, “I think coming into third year the demands workwise are a huge jump”.

Aside from potential academic issues, crossing the boundary from college to university has a number of social repercussions. These can be logistical in nature, with Keira, College B stating that, “The first two or three weeks the direct entrants are very new and we’re trying to find out where the toilet is, where the café is and you’re aware that there are people more comfortable because they’ve been there two years”. Campus familiarity is not the only concern for direct entrants. Additionally, the established relationships that university staff have with continuing students, for direct entrants can emphasise, and compound, the feeling of being an outsider. “You’ll hear members of staff referring to continuing students by their first name”, says Petra a previous student of College A, “and there’s nothing wrong with that because they’ve been here but it sunk in that these people are known and familiarised with staff and the environment”.

A less tangible barrier for direct entrants to negotiate is negative perceptions. Graham from College C reports that “When we came [from college] there was a perception that we’d had a ‘slacker education’ to get to this point. We’ve not been through the university process”. Steele *et al.* (2002), argue that “a fear of confirming a negative stereotype...can undermine performance by raising stress and increasing mental load” (in Cohen and Garcia, 2014: 365). It is, therefore, vital that this barrier, and any social/academic challenges identified by direct entrants in this study, is responded to by implementing university interventions.

## EXAMINING HOW WE CAN OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS

The professionals in Whitchurch's (2008) study identify "secondments, mentoring and study leave" as effective strategies to support 'third space' workers at HE institutions and the respondents in this study made their own recommendations (p.11). Josh from College B argues that closer curriculum matching for HNs and degree courses could offset any academic challenges felt by third year entrants, "If they made the modules at college more specific towards university then it would have been ok". According to Roza (College C), more visits from university staff to college sites would be beneficial, stating that HE staff could, "say this is the course you're going to be doing, this is what you need to know", while Petra from College A proposes that, "they [university staff] could see what you'd done and advise you to take a certain course". Increased university staff engagement, therefore, might facilitate college students to make more informed decisions regarding university course selection and enhance academic preparedness.

In terms of the social barriers that direct entrants experienced, strategies to overcome these challenges focus on creating social bonds at the university. Tamara who studied at College C suggests that having a key contact to discuss issues with might promote successful boundary crossing. "The support teacher we had, she said 'any problems come to me'. It takes a huge weight off your shoulders". Additionally, events organised through Edinburgh Napier University reportedly allowed students to socialise, ask questions and engage with university life. 'The Fresher's Fair was an eye-opener and really good", comments Jay (College B), "it gave you an insight into what happens. The open days were also a good help. You met people beforehand and when you started Uni you recognised them".

Moreover, online avenues are another effective method to promote social engagement. Sasha from College A states that: "I do think the Facebook page did help us because we had another line of communication with the people on the course". Online interaction, through Facebook, can help to create a sense of community in what would otherwise be a disparate group where articulating students can be predisposed to segregation, finding it difficult to blend in with the existing student cohort (Jenkins *et al.*, 2012).

In conclusion, classifying the blurred area between college and university as the 'third-space' helps to identify this unfamiliar zone. Our research findings highlight the struggles and issues faced by students as they try to adapt and fit-in to their new learning environment often feeling isolated and experiencing negative perceptions. The opportunities and activities introduced by the ASP were designed to overcome these feelings and to develop a sense of belonging – building a timeline for the transition which spans the third-space. We propose that social barriers can be overcome by utilising engagement methods such as events, key contacts and social media. The challenges raised by 'third space' students, transitioning from college to university, have informed strategies to overcome many of the barriers to articulation at 'Pre-Entry' and 'Post-Entry' level. The ASP team at Edinburgh Napier University is currently working to determine and implement best practice in articulation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Widening access to university has been central to Scottish educational policy for over thirty years and articulation models have been a key driver when it comes to increasing participation numbers (Scottish Funding Council, 2015/16). While pathways from college to HE support the Scottish Government's widening access agenda, there are issues related to the experiences of students once they enter HE. This paper explored the barriers experienced by 'third space' students transitioning from college to university and concludes that while funding initiatives and policy are vital to support widening participation initiatives, if a support infrastructure fails to be in place to facilitate transition these policies may prove ineffectual. Ultimately, the widening access agenda should not only be about increasing participation in university but, also, increasing student outcomes.

Our data shows that articulating students are less likely to receive a First or 2.1 classification than their continuing peers and are more likely to leave with an ordinary degree than progress to the fourth year. In order to go some way to address this discrepancy, the ASP has introduced a series of interventions to support this 'third space' journey. These activities have been informed by research, a dimension of which is presented in this paper, and our findings support the pre-existing literature which posits that successful transition is both academic and social in nature, with peer engagement and social integration representing enablers when it comes to performance and persistence (see Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy, 2011; Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012). Any interventions put in place, therefore, must be cognisant of this dual imperative. These conclusions may not only be true in the context of articulation but, also, in terms of educational transitions in the wider sense. While we are only in the early stages of what is a longitudinal study, supporting articulation pathways to university, early indications demonstrate that delivery of a support model to promote academic and social engagement has a positive impact on attrition.

Widening access should be synonymous with widening opportunity. The outcomes of this paper, therefore, make an important contribution to promoting social justice for the non-traditional student entrant and inform approaches to further the democratisation of education within the Higher Education sector.

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