

Recognition and belonging: engaging first generation students

Wayne Richards, Faiza Elgazarri, Hugo Sugg, Carly Fowler

University of Worcester

(corresponding author: w.richards@worc.ac.uk)

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Abstract

This paper is based on a reflective journey taken by project members which offers insight into the unique challenges that first generation students face and considers the institutional responses needed to enhance their engagement and experience. The student as academic partner's project was developed to further explore issues of recognition, belonging and engagement for first generation students - who are the first in their families to attend higher education. Whilst this group of students should be celebrated as pioneers of higher education they are more likely than their counterparts to drop out of their studies or have a difficult transition to higher education because they lack the required social capital. In the face of widening participation and increasing access to university for students from diverse backgrounds the paper will consider the tension between the need for students to adapt in order to fit the university and the university's need to adapt in order to fit the students. We will highlight small developments that can have the largest impact on both the university and the student population. Through this research, we believe that being a first generation student is not a barrier but a real and ongoing achievement!

Introduction

Students who are the first in their families to enter university are pioneers who add diversity to the student body. They carry with them their hopes and the potential to change their family's futures. I was alerted to the unique challenges faced by such students by Carly – a student on the Youth and Community Work programme at the University of Worcester. Having made a comment to her about her being 'aloof' she replied to me through an assignment in which she wrote that tutors need to give more attention to the experience and concerns of students who are the first in their family to go to university.

'Even the way I communicated my thoughts around an assumption that I was perhaps aloof as a student wasn't in a conventional way. I did not address this comment, nor did I seek one to one time to speak with Wayne. Instead I held onto that information, and my frustration until the next assignment. The assignment which raised this concern about other people's perceptions of a person. How academic people see people like me and make assumptions, that aren't always the case...The most shocking result arose from this, I was actually heard, listened to and understood. The way I translated this message to my tutor shows in itself unwillingness to communicate with tutors and gain support. I would much rather have expressed my feelings in an essay, that if marked by someone else may have fallen on deaf ears. Then this message may not have been heard.' (Carly)

Given that promoting social inclusion is a core value of youth and community work, this was a challenge that was pertinent and needed to be followed up. Conversations with Carly (and a focus group discussion with other students who also identified as first generation) highlighted common experiences related to a lack of recognition and belonging within the institution. Carly co-presented with me at the Worcester Teaching and Learning conference in 2014, sharing her experiences and the findings of the focus group study with a confidence that I had not previously seen. When asked where this new found confidence came from her reply was 'because this is important.'

'This is a key point I used to cry and have panic attacks over presentations, because I felt inferior to everyone else. I didn't fit in and everyone else had such confidence, I had never been that way. The more confidence each student demonstrated the more withdrawn I became. Presenting with Wayne was different as the people in the room were actually there to hear what I had to say. Not just because it was lesson time.'

(Carly)

A core message delivered at the conference was that where students have to enter the alien territory of university, without a map and without parents who are able to help them navigate the system, it increases the likelihood of reduced levels of engagement, progression and achievement. This view is consistent with research into first generation student experience (Capriccioso, 2006; Choy 2001, Soria and Sebbleton, 2012). Greenwald (2012) suggests that universities are not doing enough to support students in this position.

The SAP Project

A student as academic partners project [SAP] was instigated to follow up this initial study and to build on the themes of recognition belonging and engagement which were highlighted. The focus of this project was to give voice to first generation students and allow them to reflect on their journey through the University of Worcester and tell their story regarding the challenges they faced, the strategies they employed and to identify support needs which would have assisted their transitions. It addresses the 'striking absence of student voice in the literature on student engagement' pointed out by Trowler (2010: 50) in a review of literature on student engagement. The focus of the SAP project was primarily on the experiences of first generation students studying on the Youth and Community Work programme - although experiences have also been sought from students within Applied Health and Social Science and the wider university. The project team was comprised of Wayne Richards as academic staff and Hugo Sugg and Faiza Elgazzari who were both second year students on the Youth and Community Work degree course as academic partners. Both students in their own ways were struggling with issues of engagement. The purpose of the project was to raise the profile of first generation student experience through initiating discussion and conversations. Students were approached through opportunistic contact, Facebook, tutor groups, lectures, and a planned workshop.

Additionally, meetings were held with staff from the university who were interested in the project. Discussions and conversations were used as the basis for reflection which drew on individual reflective journal entries. This led to shared reflections as a research group on the themes of recognition and belonging, allowing us to build a narrative and develop deeper insight in relation to the meanings of these themes. The initial findings were presented at the 2015 Teaching and Learning Conference.

The participation of Carly in the initial small scale research and subsequently Hugo and Faiza in the Student as Academic Partners project gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own sense of belonging as first generation students and the importance of recognition. This paper will privilege their voices as they reflect on their common experiences. In doing so the aim is to give insight to the collective voice of first generation students.

There is a lack of research on first generation student experience in a British context. Instead it tends to be subsumed within a widening participation agenda. Thomas and Quinn

(2007) in their international study, *First Generation Entry Into Higher Education*, recognises that first generation experience is compounded by a diverse range of other exclusionary pressures which can be attributed to class, race and culture etc. which have an impact on reducing social capital, and economic resources. However, they claim that it is the lack of parental exposure to Higher Education that has the most significant impact - influencing academic preparedness and capacity for parental support. As a project team however, we found that isolating a distinctive first generation experience was not straightforward because of the complex demographic which also included homelessness, care leavers, disability and childcare responsibilities also as factors with significant impact.

Student Experiences

We brought together fragments of conversations, observations and journal entries as material for in-depth reflection. We sought to identify those commonalities of experiences filtered through our own transits to higher education as first generation students. As such we were insiders to the research, striving to find a collective 'we' which gave meaning to our own experiences and the experiences of others. Individual reflective commentaries on this were written by Carly [C], Faiza [F] and Hugo [H] which have been reconstructed as the dialogue below.

[F] 'One of the biggest struggles was the feeling of belonging, do I fit in? Am I as capable as everyone else on the course? Being able to find your place within the university as a whole, as welcoming as it can be and social as it can be, it's equally isolating if you feel you do not belong. It was hard for me at the beginning especially. I felt if I reached out for help that this would only expose me more to not being as worthy as everyone else.'

[C] 'Even worse when you get into university and you're not well spoken and a little more working class you are shunned by students too It's ridiculous, I remember feeling inferior to everyone else because, I wasn't pretty enough, I didn't dress nicely enough, I had pack lunch rather than canteen food, my car wasn't good enough. My parent's jobs weren't highly respected. The colour of my skin, smoking Tobacco instead of cigarettes. Other people in the class being able to tell I got my book or pens or plastic wallet from the pound shop. Someone knowing I can't afford lunch

that's why I'm 'dieting'. Constant suggestions let's get pizza, let's go to McDonalds. Drinks, clubbing it all cost money.'

[H] 'I know when I first started, I really struggled with my academic identity. I had never been in university education before and I felt out of depth. I know when I first came, the university felt like a world away, and not a world that I had any entitlement to. It was a massive risk to be at university because I knew it would single me out from my friends and family who haven't been to university.'

[C] 'It's singled me out so much my peers and even general people on my estate would accuse me of being stuck up and thinking too much of myself. These people were my friends before I was accepted to university. Nothing else had changed so why had their opinion of me changed. I ended up having to take on two personas. The Carly Fowler who drunk, got into trouble and was up for a laugh. Then the educated Carly Fowler who went to university. This takes up a lot of time and effort in itself.'

[H] 'Putting on a hypothetical blank mask on and forcing me to recreate myself. It truly took me two and a half years to become settled in university and not feel like an imposter. Although it's an extremely common occurrence in universities it's rarely talked about either amongst students or university staff. I felt lonely many times in my first two and a half years at university – after that 30 months had passed, I felt settled into the environment but I was still battling the other complexities. Before that time, the amount of times I felt like dropping out over staying was extremely high, and there were times when I would seriously consider quitting and going back to the life I had before. The life of come home, work, earn money, pay bills, work, come home, earn money, pay bills etc. this was the life I had before, and at times wanted back! Being somewhere I didn't feel comfortable was unnerving and frightening... But I managed to break through it, just!'

[C] 'No one at work went to university so I had to hold my opinions back else I would get the 'just cos you go to uni now don't make you better than anyone else.' When we sat and eat lunch as peers from the course I was on at university. I would mention

snippets of my life and everyone would react and call me a chav. When I spoke to family about stress at uni they would advise me to quit. They would say 'there's no point getting worked up about school work, you've already got a job.' I especially hated it how all my family referred to me being at university as going back to school. Automatically dismissing any sense of achievement from what I was doing.'

[F] 'I feel as though I am still struggling to fight this as I am still swinging backwards and forwards to place to place. I feel sabotage is my defence mechanism. I never reach out for any help as I feel if I do this it is a sign of weakness, so avoiding-seems so much simpler. As a first generation student I feel I have missed out on many opportunities because of my own choices. I felt going to university would be a fun and happy place. I didn't get to socialize much in the first year as I didn't manage to get into halls.'

[C] 'Living in halls is a massive thing at university; it's like a social hub of everything uni related. If you are not in halls it feels as if everyone else who is in halls are a part of this amazing excited secret society and you're not invited.'

[F] 'I lived in university housing with people who I had nothing in common with. The first year was very lonely which I feel made me swing backwards and forwards even more to home which was my comfort zone. This has caused me not to settle in Worcester and call it home as much. I like the elements of the independence but it can hit hard at times. Also the fact that my parents have never been to university so they are unaware of the struggle financially and socially. This meant I still had to keep my job in Leicester in order to survive university.'

[C] 'This is the exact same situation I was stuck in. Sometimes life gets in the way and you get a massive bill, your washing machine breaks, its someone birthday or Christmas. It puts so much pressure on your studying as you need to work more to pay for these things, so you miss lectures to go to work, start falling behind and getting into a mess.....If I think back to my class I think I may have been one of the only students working full time alongside the course. In year 2 and 3 I worked one full time job, one part time and studied. So of course you have to turn down social events

and bonding opportunities. You'll walk into lectures after the weekend and nearly the whole class would discuss something that went on over the weekend and you would be clueless as to what it was, but everyone else is talking about it so you just sit quietly and try not to be seen as the square one sat in the corner.'

[F] 'This made me lag behind with work and the reading needed to enhance my academic performance. Also, it didn't give me the opportunity to socialize and meet people as I didn't have the money to. I feel I have got to the point where I can be happy in my placement and course although I still feel like I could have done better with past assignments and making an effort.'

[H] 'One of the only things keeping me at uni was the social element. Meeting new people was really important for me. I dealt with feelings of social isolation for a while before university and I knew that I would almost click with people here straight away. And yes, I did. But then the feelings of being a stranger and imposter magnified because suddenly I was in a collection of people (most of whom weren't First Gen) who knew what they were doing and knew more about expectations of higher education. I didn't feel like I belonged to the university or the lifestyle it created. In my first year, I had a pretty excitable social life and the academic side to my University life was put on the back burner although I knew it was going to need to be addressed soon.'

[F] 'Support is a big issue for me as I didn't really find it in the first year; this was because of my own personal choice. I feel like I knew I needed some help but I just could not bring myself to reach out for it - which seems clearer now with the first generation research. I finally feel like I am entitled to do the degree but I feel that I never will completely.'

[H] 'Coming to uni as a first generation student is a difficult transition to make, and one that there is very little support available. But even with the support that is there, it can be very hard to go to. Help is something you ask for when you feel like you're ready to let someone else into the problem or issue – and that can be really tricky to do anyway. So how does it feel to ask for help when you don't feel like you're entitled

to it? Deep down I know they wouldn't laugh, make fun or judge me but it the fact doesn't always numb the anxieties. I was told by my lecturers that my academic writing wasn't very good and needed improvement – so they handed me a leaflet that said times and dates a writing workshop was on. This piece of paper had the answer to my problem on, but my reaction was to throw it away because it showed a different thing to what I wanted. I wanted my lecturer to help me with my writing, in a room where I felt comfortable and with people who knew me.'

[C] 'Encouraging first generation students to come forward for extra support may never work. The whole way and reason we are programmed to behave from childhood would have to be reassessed, along with our attitudes and those of others.'

[F] 'Once you are on that slippery slope you tend to feel worse and worse... it's very hard to redeem yourself once you're on it. Trying to get back up is almost impossible yet falling happens so quickly. Once you are so behind on work it is very stressful trying to get back up. Missing lectures would not help my cause either as I barely knew what I was doing because of this. I feel in the second year of university by doing the first generation project helped me in many ways to understand why certain things were happening. This enabled me to form a good relationship with one of my peers who were also a first gen student. This helped as I didn't feel so alone anymore and isolated.'

[H] 'The biggest thing that got me about starting university was knowing I was homeless and living on the streets three years previously.'

[C] 'I went to university as a mature student after suffering a domestically abusive relationship which left me homeless and having to stay in a refuge. It takes strength.'

[H] '...And the transition of these two lifestyles was a very tricky one. I didn't feel like I deserved to be there, and although I have a strong mind-set and strive to get out of the situation I was in those years ago, [but] there was still something holding me back and making me not be able to fully let go. Through the process I went through many

transformations – gaining a thriving (and in the end probably detrimental) social life, a circle of friends, an ignorance for academic knowledge and thinking I knew it all. I had an identity of a youth worker who had only hands on experience, but not as a complex and layered identity of a youth worker, academic, university student and a first gen. This complexity caused much confusion and a lot of the time the feeling of loss of where to turn but I managed to fight through it.’

[C] ‘Recognition of your situation from others is a wonderful feeling. It reassures you that you’ve done well to get here well-done. It may be due to the lack of praise I had as a child as to why it meant so much. The first time I experienced recognition was in my first year. I had a placement meeting with my tutor. I had been telling my manager in casual conversation before about university life. I have worked at phoenix house since 2009 and we were a friendly bunch. My managers sat there and told my tutor about everything I had been though. It was the first time someone at university was aware of my past. My managers sung my praises so much. Explained how valued I was and how capable I was at work. As I was quite quiet in class this is the first positive stuff anyone at university had heard. My tutor was so pleased with me, I could see she was proud, she understood my troubles and how hard I fought to even be there. In class she started looking over to me and smiling, giving me a sense of approval. When she referred to work placement she often mentioned me and my placement as an example. It gave me a sense of pride and enjoyment from her lectures.’

[H] ‘I’m pleased I don’t feel like an imposter now, and I would like to work with people who feel like they are. With support from peers who have been through the experience, I believe it is really important that someone is there to guide them. Not feeling like an imposter is a really amazing feeling. It means I can let go of most of the worries I had about coming to University, and in light of the feelings – not want to drop out as much. After I didn’t feel like one [an imposter] anymore, I felt the weight of pressure was lifted and I understood who I was and my purpose.’

Discussion

In the statements above, Carly, Faiza and Hugo reflect on their individual journeys and challenges as first generation students. As a first generation student I too could identify with

the issues they raised. I arrived at university wholly unprepared for the challenges I was to face. Reaching university itself was perhaps the pinnacle of achievement beyond that I had the task of entering a foreign territory and culture without parents able to reassure and guide me. I was lucky in that my being at university was a source of family pride. However, for some we talked to, coming to university was met by indifference or even incredulity by their family. For others it was a retreat from a more hostile outside world.

In this section we move towards a collective voice based on our shared reflection and learning from our engagement with other first generation students. As a project group we were constantly asking ourselves what makes the first generation experience different to that of other students? We concluded that there was no single factor that allowed a claim for uniqueness, instead multiple factors combined to amplify the struggle of adapting to a new culture. Amongst them economic inequality, academic preparedness, feelings of being different from peers and out of one's depth. This is echoed by Cushman (2007: 45) who talked to students about the culture shock of going to university:-

Differences in income, social styles, and even speech patterns cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders. Their first concern is often to make friends, which invites all the difficult identity issues of late adolescence. It takes tremendous self-esteem and determination for them to focus on their academic goals.

Our attention focused on what was needed to mitigate against the culture shock of making the transition from the home culture to the culture of the university. In a successful transition one can anticipate that the first phase for all students starts with the Initial honeymoon period of fresher's week and induction which is potentially a time of excitement and novelty - meeting new people and having new experiences. The second phase being a period of deflation when the reality of academic social and financial pressures kick in and as a result raise anxiety levels. This downward pressure bottoms out in the third phase as students learn to adjust and adapt to the new expectation and norms of the university culture and they are able to make settled connections.

It was noticeable that some first generation students had greater difficulty in making the necessary adjustments to the new environment and culture and remained in freefall during

that second phase. We reviewed the range of support systems available for students who are struggling in different ways and were satisfied that adequate systems were in place if they were to be accessed. However, it seemed that some of the unwritten rules of how the system works appeared to be missing. Such rules would normally be available in the oral transmission from other family members. In particular, the unwritten rule that 'it is ok to ask for help' was not registering. As we looked further into this two factors emerged as significant: firstly that of entitlement, whereby students did not view support as a right. Instead, for many students, asking for help felt more like an admission of failure and inadequacy. This was compounded by the sense of being an imposter, and being out of place and undeserving of being at university. This second factor meant that a toxic mixture of shame and pride resulted in the avoidance of support systems and keeping a low profile because they risked exposure.

As the deadlines approach for the first set of assignments, the additional risk of being found out and could trigger the fight-flight mode, hence developing undue assessment stress and anxiety or avoiding submission of assessments. The offer of support at this stage often gave too much emphasis on study skills and academic support and missed the underlying emotional concerns. It is at this time that students may start to disengage from the university and turn their attention towards home or to other aspects of university life where they feel more secure such as sports teams, nightlife or workplace experience. Some students on applied courses are able to excel and gain recognition in placement whilst not performing in their academic work. The workplace may alternatively be a source of income to make up for the financial gap that needs to be filled where students come from lower economic backgrounds or are self-supporting.

The swing towards home can be experienced as a reverse culture shock where students find themselves caught between two different cultures – that of university and home. This is recognised by Auton-Cuff and Gruenhage (2014) who refer to students experiencing a liminal journey – disconnected from both worlds. Furthermore, they found that where students had to negotiate different identities betwixt the three spaces of university, work and home, this can be a very disconcerting time during which students can experience a striking sense of isolation. We realised that despite first generation students comprising a significant proportion of the student body they do not recognise each other and their shared experiences and end up feeling alone. The more students tend to disengage the more difficult they are to reach even when it is recognised that they are struggling. Seeking help at

this stage would mean that their hidden secrets are brought into the open. By getting trapped in a shame spiral - not feeling entitled to ask for help and thus using avoidance tactic - students ultimately sabotage their own progress. Reduced engagement with support systems and the academic environment impacts on progress and satisfaction. The implications of this is that it is not enough to signpost support systems when the very systems themselves pose a threat.

Conclusions

In her summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student retention and Success programme, Liz Thomas (2012) emphasises the central importance of nurturing a sense of belonging as a means of enhancing retention and success for students. Nurturing a sense of belonging from the onset is seen in the programmes reviewed by Thomas as being a way to address feelings of isolation and 'not fitting in' which often goes alongside other academic issues. Our observations were that these issues were particularly acute for first generation students. Furthermore, they were exacerbated by feelings of lack of entitlement and the unworthiness of being an imposter which created barriers to asking for help and making connections where it was needed. Thomas (2012:6) suggests that 'The academic sphere is the most important site for nurturing participation of the type that engenders belonging.' We felt however that a more holistic vision was needed which views first generation students not only in relation to the university as students but also encompasses the many faces they bring as they swing between university home and the workplace. A holistic vision may allow us to reframe participation and achieve a more realistic appraisal of engagement which recognises individuals struggling against the odds to achieve economic and academic survival rather than being judged on attendance or talking in class. It may recognise endurance and the persistence of hope for success and positive futures. Recognition would also value diversity where widening participation is not just about increasing recruitment but an opportunity to enlarge and enrich the culture of the university.

Amal Treacher (2006) suggests that the act of recognition is problematic and troublesome since in recognising the 'other' the ordinary and taken for granted becomes as space of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty. She adds that the challenge is to articulate that which would otherwise be felt but hidden. This was certainly our experience of reflecting on the place of recognition in engaging first generation students. We are caught in the paradox that the first generation label should be one of celebration of the pioneering spirit of

individuals but instead it tends towards a recognition of potential failure and a label of deficit. To target first generation students for special treatment is to expose individuals who fear exposure and yet these are the very people who are falling down the slippery slope towards failure and feeling increasingly disconnected from the university.

Thomas and Quinn (2007) consider a transformative approach to widening participation to support first generation entrants proposing that rather than students having to adapt to the culture of the university, the university should look to how it can change to better accommodate the diversity of experience, perspectives and needs represented. Such a person centred approach did raise questions which challenged the dominant values and the taken for granted aspect of the university culture. This would mean identifying and writing the unwritten rules that operate powerfully, hidden in the background. This was beyond the scope of our project however, working with students as partners has been a process which has offered reassurance of worth and value that could be used to shift perspectives and increase a sense of belonging. This is well summed up by Hugo:

'The experience I went through to get us to this point was amazing, I loved every minute of it – even writing these journals. It's nice to be able to get my thoughts down on paper and really analyse them. It's been a struggle to keep on top of it – but it just goes to show that if I really want to do something and make it succeed – I'll put my time into it. It was interesting when Wayne and I were talking to one of the first years on my course, and she said that talking about her worries and issues as a first generation student really helped her and made her feel confident about being a student at the University again. It was this interaction that in my eyes, really turned the project from something that was just 'done' because it seemed like a good idea to something that actually genuinely and physically helped someone understand themselves and their life better whilst here at University.'

Our conclusion was that engaging first generation students is less about academic preparedness even though this is clearly an issue but about creating a person centred culture which values and recognises individuals and their potential. This would mean establishing a relationship with a personal tutor at the onset which focuses more on hope than on failure. There is a small window of opportunity during the honeymoon period of fresher's week and Induction before performance doubts begin to give substance to feelings

of being an imposter. Finally, more open and positive engagement in inviting first generation status to be recognised and discussed is needed to make it less of a hidden secret.

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Biographies

Faiza Elgazarri, Hugo Sugg and Carly Fowler are graduates in Youth and Community Work from University of Worcester. Hugo is a Campaigner and activist supporting homeless young people and Carly is Managing Director of Guiding Light, providing supported accommodation for young people at risk.

Dr Wayne Richards is a Senior Lecturer in Transformative Practice and Youth and Community Work at University of Worcester. He is interested in the development of transformational practices that enhance the capacities of individuals to make changes in their lives and in the social systems in which they are embedded.