An investigation into student sense of belonging at a post-1992 university

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Abstract

This study explores students' sense of belonging through the accounts of nineteen undergraduate students studying at an inner city post-1992 university. Participants' accounts were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted at three key points during their first year of study. The resulting analysis is influenced by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, capital and knowledge of the rules of the game, which are used to explore the impact of student dispositions on their experiences and perceptions of belonging.

The study shows that university can be a particularly challenging place for students from non-traditional backgrounds and it questions the view that belonging is about individual student commitment to institutional values. Belonging is conceptualised in a more nuanced multi-dimensional manner reflecting institutional habitus such as a 'one size fits all' approach to both induction and social provision.

The study argues that the onus is on the university to overcome inherent inequalities making belonging easier by encouraging student voice; providing care through help, support and guidance; examining the benefits of small group teaching and paying particular attention to the needs of clearing students. Further, strategies built on unproblematised views of elearning and the independent learner need to be reviewed as participants, especially non-traditional students, articulated both as evidence that the university did not validate them as individuals.

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I thank them all but I need to acknowledge that the work is my responsibility alone as are any errors and omissions.

Dedicated to the staff of the ECMO unit at Great Ormond Street Hospital for saving Scarlett Curran's life in March 2004.

Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction

I think that I fit in or belong here because I am to be honest bright enough to be here I believe. I think that I've fitted in here because I have made friends and I have passed the modules. (Chloe, White British, 20, Middle Class, Interview 3).

I was really unsure about myself and no I didn't belong because I was really thinking of leaving but now I think that I am part of the university… it (belonging) was definitely making friends … having that group of friends was the big thing. To have a group of people to talk to was really important for me. Without those friends I would have stopped and they helped with the things I found to be difficult. (Evelyn, (Black African, 47, Middle Class, Interview 3).

This study is an exploration of students' perceptions and experiences of 'belonging' at an inner-city, post-1992 University using longitudinal data from the accounts of nineteen participants during their first year of undergraduate study on a business programmes. The participants were diverse in terms of social class, ethnicity, gender and age, broadly reflecting the student population at this university. The accounts of the participants were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted at three stages over their first year of study. Thus, the study was qualitative and aided by a theoretical framework influenced by the work of Bourdieu.

This introductory chapter begins with an overview of the context. The rationale for the study is explained in the second section. The third part of the chapter explains the rationale for the study and its implications for higher education policy and practice. The fourth part addresses the aims and methods of the study and this is followed by an outline of the remaining chapters.

1.1 The study

The study used a qualitative and longitudinal approach of semi-structured interviews to obtain the accounts of the nineteen undergraduate participants during their first year of

studying on business degrees at a post-1992 university located in an inner city setting. The interviews were carried out at three points in the academic year 2008/9. The first interviews were conducted after participants had been at university for between four to six weeks and explored expectations of university and initial thoughts. The second series of interviews were carried out at the beginning of the second semester when participants had been at university for four months. At this stage I wanted to see if initial thoughts had undergone change and, if so, why and it what ways. The final interviews were near the end of their first year. I did not wish to lose contact with participants but also wanted to allow for the greatest time period possible to collect data on their opinions and reflections of their first year at university. A fuller discussion of the interview process can be found in Chapter 3, which explains the methodological approach taken.

1.2 The rationale for the study

1.2.1 *Retention – implications for higher education policy and practice*

This study addresses the importance of student belonging within of higher education. The issue of students' perceptions of belonging possess significance for Government, higher education institutions and students. The association of student belonging with retention highlights the importance of institutional policy and practice for the enhancement of student engagement. It is, after all, the student who personally experiences and lives with the costs of leaving university prematurely.

The extent to which students feel that they 'fit in' or belong at/to an institution has been identified as a key factor in student retention (see Furlong and Forsyth, 2003; National Audit Office, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008, Thomas, 2012), whilst Leathwood's (2003) longitudinal study found social isolation to be a factor contributing to students' decisions to leave. As stated above, the retention debate has focused on non-traditional students studying

at post-1992 institutions with diverse populations. My study contributes to the literature with an in-depth, longitudinal focus on a group of first year undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds at a post-1992 university.

The conclusions gained from this data will, it is hoped, produce recommendations for policy and practice in higher education. The importance of the implications is heightened by the fact that the site of the study has one of the highest non-continuation rates in the sector.

1.2.2   Exploring for differences in sense of belonging

Students' perceptions of belonging may be influenced by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and age. I wanted to see if any of these factors appeared to be important to sense of belonging. For example, women now dominate higher education in terms of number of students, quality of awards, and retention but I wanted to see if the masculine world of university (Leathwood and Read, 2008) impacted on their feelings of belonging. Burke (2006) suggests that the higher education sector has failed to acknowledge the needs of women, making fitting in to life at university challenging for this group. Thus the study was also about who might and who might not be able to fit in even if they stayed the course.

1.2.3   Adding to the literature

This study contributes to the body of literature through its specific focus on student sense of belonging. The literature, at the time of writing, lacked a longitudinal analysis of belonging carried out over such an extended time period using a diverse sample of participants on business degree programmes. As such the study makes an original contribution to furthering understanding of student belonging.

The use of the longitudinal approach has allowed the study to obtain in-depth and informed sets of accounts. I was able to build a story, which significantly aided my understanding of participants' accounts rather than draw inferences based on a single

interview. Previous research has either used single interview data (see Crozier et al, 2008) or no interviews (see Tinto, 1975) instead relying on student record data. Thus, I suggest, that this study offers a distinctive investigation into student sense of belonging whilst acknowledging the situated nature of the findings from a small sample.

1.2.4   *My own interest*

A major impetus for this study was my background and eventual interest in student retention. I am from a working class background and experienced a non-linear route into higher education, which is discussed in Chapter 3. I could be described as a proto widening participation student who subsequently became a lecturer at an inner city, polytechnic, and now a post-1992 university. My background and experiences naturally led me to be an enthusiastic supporter of widening participation due to perceptions of its transformative trajectories.

I had yet to be exposed to the writings of Bourdieu (1984 and 2000) when I engaged in research on student outcomes within my department. The findings of that research showed that White students were eight times more likely to graduate with a first class degree than Black students and that White students were twice as likely to leave university with an upper second degree compared to their Black peers. I was surprised by this but also by the form of deficit discussion which ensued among staff, with students blamed for failing. I conducted further research showing that Black students, especially men, were significantly less likely to complete their degrees than White students when entry qualifications were controlled for. These findings and the nature of some of the discussions increased my interest, and concerns, about the higher educational experiences of what I now understand to be non-traditional students. I elaborate on this in some depth in Chapter 3.

I have continued to be interested in the student experience since I conducted the above research findings, which were quantitative reflecting the positivist approach of my training as

an economist. The findings provided evidence of patterns but could not explain why there were significant differences between ethnic groups. To try to understand such issues I applied for the EdD programme, which has led to this study.

The thesis was centred on business degree students as this was the context in which I worked and the above research was conducted. The students expected that their degrees would primarily be about business and they were somewhat disappointed when they discovered the multi-disciplinary nature of their programmes. The students did not appear to know that they would study Economics, Law, Marketing and Quantitative Methods during the first year. The realisation that they would have a Quantitative Methods unit was a particular shock as many had disliked Mathematics at school. The business department experienced the lowest retention rates as well as the lowest percentage of 'good' degrees, defined as a first or upper second degree, in the university. Above I have noted the comparative performance of Black and White students in this department, which exhibited significant differences in retention, progression and awards rates. But the overall departmental performance was also significantly below the university average for retention, progression and awards. A debate began within the department, under pressure from university managers concerned by the data in what was the institution's biggest department by student numbers and staffing levels. This debate was multi-dimensional with some protagonists offering a deficit view of 'failing' students. Other people, myself included, started to think about what students brought to university, their knowledge of what higher education would be like and the way in which the culture and practices of the department might impinge on them.

This study is thus a continuation, in a more sophisticated manner, of the above as I moved away from the positivist, quantitative method of my economics background towards

an interpretative approach grounded in qualitative research. The departmental debate had not sought the views of students about what they thought of their experiences to gain insights into the reasons for the underperformance of the department. Instead, the debate was based solely on staff members giving their views on why students from certain backgrounds tended to experience low retention. It was during the initial modules of the EdD that I became interested in exploring students' own views and experiences, and I also began to focus on issues of belonging.

1.4 The aims of the study

The aims of the study were to:

- Investigate the extent to which students see themselves as 'belonging' to various dimensions and spaces of higher education such as the university as a whole, their course and friendship networks.

- Explore the importance of 'belonging' in the lives of students and how this may vary, for example, by social class, ethnicity and gender.

- Examine the extent to which 'sense of belonging' contributes toward staying the course.

- Apply a conceptual framework, influenced by Bourdieu, to identify, and theorise, the factors which may help to facilitate, and mitigate against, students developing a sense of 'belonging'.

The fieldwork took place at a post-1992 inner city, university with a diverse student population. The semi-structured interviews, fifty-two in total, were carried out during the academic year 2008/9 with nineteen participants. The participants were all full-time undergraduate students on business degrees with the sample comprised of eleven women and eight men. Eight of these identified as working class, seven middle class and four did not declare any class affiliation. There were eight Black participants, ten White participants and one mixed race participant showing the diversity of the sample.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

This section provides an outline of the other six chapters of the thesis. Chapter 2 reviews the literature, beginning with an examination of how student belonging is conceptualised. The early work of Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980), for example, on the student experience within American higher education is contrasted with the Bourdieu influenced approach of, for example, Read et al (2003), Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), Crozier et al (2008), Reay et al (2009) and Burke et al (2013).

The methodological approach is discussed in Chapter 3 where I elaborate on the influence of my background on the study. Thus, I reflect on my ontological view that there is no single knowable 'reality' leading to the epistemological stance that 'truth' is elusive and socially situated. Key features of this chapter include a discussion of the interview process; dealing with the problematic issue of social class and acknowledging the existence of power in interviews.

The three data chapters present my interpretations of the participants' accounts of their entry to, and first year, at university through the use of a Bourdieu influenced theoretical framework. Chapter 4 explores participants' expectations of university based on their sources of information; the Welcome Week programme; and opportunities to meet people and make friends. Chapter 5 discusses the importance of feeling cared for at university as an indicator of belonging. Chapter 6, the final data chapter, examines participants' views on the importance of feeling involved at university for sense of belonging. The study finishes with a concluding chapter bringing together the key issues to emerge from each of the data chapters as well as the study's overarching themes. The contribution and limitations of the study are discussed and leads to the implications of the study for higher education. The final section makes suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews a broad range of literature all of which are pertinent to student belonging. The concept of belonging is examined in the next section, beginning with an exploration of the work on student attrition dominated by Tinto (1975) who investigates why students leave university. This body of literature is followed by a discussion of student persistence (Hurtado and Carter, 1997) which investigate why students stay at university. Both approaches, leaving or staying, explore the experiences of students in American universities. The third section examines the importance of fitting in and belonging for non-traditional students in particular. The impact of academic cultures on feelings of fitting in and belonging is reviewed in the final section.

2.2 Conceptualising belonging

Despite the fact that the student belonging has generated much attention in the literature (Crozier et al, 2008; Read et al, 2003; Stuart et al, 2009), there is a lack of clarity about how 'belonging' is conceptualised. Early American-dominated work on student attrition (see Bean, 1980) and persistence (see Tinto, 1982) does not discuss student belonging explicitly, instead exploring student integration, academic and social. Successful integration is conceptualised by Tinto (1975) as student commitment to institutional values. The value of this body of literature can be seen in the way it focuses attention on the student as being accountable for integration and the comparative absence of institutional responsibility in promoting integration. Further, subsequent work on student persistence (Hurtado and Carter, 1997, Tinto, 2008) argues for an institutional role in promoting student integration.

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A body of literature influenced by the writings of Bourdieu (Read et al, 2003; Crozier et al, 2008; Burke et al, 2013) has explicitly examined student sense of belonging through an exploration of the importance of institutional factors. This institutional role has been articulated as 'institutional habitus' (Thomas, 2002). Bourdieu (1990), for example, uses the concept of 'fish in and out of water' to articulate the differing experiences students have as they try to navigate the world of university. He was interested in the experience of working class students in French universities who found it difficult to be part of university life. These were the 'fish out of water' who struggled to accommodate to the academic practices of French higher education which Bourdieu argued were based on middle class values. Middle class students, in Bourdieu's view, fitted in as comfortably as fish in water as the university setting was familiar and comfortable for this social class group.

The concept of belonging is, thus, a complex one, encompassing different facets of institutional settings where students from a variety of social backgrounds attempt to navigate the lived experience of their university life. The next section explains in more depth the ways in which 'belonging' is conceptualised in different bodies of the research literature, including work on student 'attrition', student 'persistence' and 'fitting in'.

2.2.1 The student attrition literature

Student attrition dominated the early literature on the student experience at university with the concept defined by Tinto as those students who permanently left their institution without graduating. This body of literature is dominated by Tinto's (1975) influential paper on student drop out from college. The paper was based around Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM), which sought to establish the factors leading to student attrition. Student belonging is not a concept used in the attrition literature as the emphasis is on why students leave university, but this literature is important as it foregrounds research on fitting in and

belonging. Tinto's (1975) paper, although much criticised, supported and revised, has influenced how researchers and policy makers view student retention.

The use of 'integration' is problematic given the way the term has been used to suggest that people new to a country's institutional settings need to conform to societal norms so as to fit in or belong. This was the situation for Caribbean immigrants to the UK in the 1950s. The immigrants were criticised for failing to integrate into the social fabric of British life but their attempts to integrate must have been challenged by signs saying 'No Irish, No Coloureds, No Dogs' (Ryan, 2004) as they looked for housing and experienced the coloured bars practiced in employment (Kynaston, 2009).

The literature on student attrition, which is primarily American based on the experiences of traditional students (Kamens, 1971; Rootman, 1972; Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1980) is directly linked to student integration with Christie and Dinham (1991) suggesting that withdrawal was more likely to occur for students who failed to integrate or maintained values different from institutional values. Tinto's research is based on traditional students at a residential university in the United States who entered directly from school. Thus Tinto's (1975) SIM approach is socially situated and clearly not a general theory of student drop out but, rather, a highly specific theory of a certain type of student and institution and thus its limited applicability to theorising the student experience needs to be recognised. Further, the student is conceptualised as White, middle class and male and 'naturally' able to integrate, socially and academically, thus limiting its applicability to settings where the student population exhibits diversity.

Tinto (1988:444-5) argues that:

The unavoidable fact is that some students are unwillingly to put up with the stresses of transition because they are not sufficiently committed to the goals of education and/or the institution …It is the individual's response …that finally determines staying or leaving.

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Thus the responsibility for staying or leaving has little, if anything, to do with the institution. Students, however, may not be able to, or wish to commit to institutional values, for a variety of reasons. For example, they may be unaware of the values or how to commit to them. This could be the case for students from non-traditional students lacking knowledge of academic culture and practice.

Davies and Garratt (2013) suggest that the requirement to adopt, and adapt to, institutional norms could be demanding for non-traditional students given their lack of familiarity with higher education. Crozier et al (2008), who use a conceptual framework influenced by Bourdieu, suggest that integration is much easier for students from middle-class backgrounds due to parenting, social class and schooling. Many middle class students will have accumulated cultural capital, which is the product of their background such as having parents or guardians who are university graduates and are able to provide information on what to expect at university. Cultural capital will tend to be different for non-traditional students reflecting their backgrounds and, as a consequence, so will their knowledge of university. Dunne and King (2014) research the experiences of students at state and independent schools with reference to the type of university applied for and the guidance received during the application process. Their findings suggest that the institutional processes of the independent school not only made it more than likely that their pupils would apply to highly selective universities and be accepted compared with state school students but also that the cultural capital of the independent school students was enhanced during the application process thereby easing their transmission into higher education. This is very much the point Bourdieu (1990) is making about the experience of different social groups within higher education in France. I further discuss the application of Bourdieu's framework to understanding 'belonging' later in this chapter.

Academic integration, for Tinto (1988), is increased by successful academic performance and intellectual development. Academic performance, measured by student grades, is a comparatively easy variable to capture if the assessment process is accepted but intellectual development requires assumptions to be made concerning starting point, precision and quality of measurement and data output. According to Tinto social integration is heightened by students developing contact with teachers. Tinto tends to place most emphasis on academic outcomes such as achieving high grades rather than on everyday social activities, for example, meeting people and making friends.

The SIM of student attrition seeks to examine why students leave university with Tinto's (1975) work constructing attrition as student failure to either socially or academically integrate into their university setting. This approach does not say why students stay, or persist, at university, and does not examine institutional factors that may play a role in integration or student belonging. The quantitative nature of this attrition research focuses attention on variables associated with the student such as age, social class and educational attainment and fails to look at institutional factors. Further, there is no explanation of student opinions, perceptions or experiences, either by interview or focus groups, due to the chosen methodology based on statistical analysis of student records.

Tinto (1982) accepts that his SIM model is only applicable to 'typical' students and was not intended to be a general model of student drop out. His specific model was based on predicting the attrition of one type of student in one type of institutional setting. Despite Tinto's (1982) clarifications, his SIM approach continued to be criticised as discussed below.

Bean and Metzner (1985), who looked at levels of attrition among non-White, non-traditional students in the United States, are critical of Tinto's approach based in a campus setting as it only explored the experiences of a particular type of student: the traditional student. Their main criticism is that non-traditional students do not need the same social

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integration as traditional students as they tended to live at home due to financial constraints and so can integrate at university in the absence of social integration. This criticism is important as it suggests that integration is not dependent on the student experiencing both academic and social integration. Within the UK, Stuart et al (2009) researched the impact of social identity and cultural capital on students from different ethnic groups at university finding that Black students tended to place most importance on integrating academically while White students tended to favour social integration. This shows that the needs of students are complex as they relate to place of study, ethnicity, social class and gender.

Tinto was further criticised for the simplicity of his model due to the use of a relatively small number of quantitative variables and the absence of qualitative research. He addressed the criticisms by arguing that it was impossible for him to include qualitative data due to its complexity. I suggest that the decision to use regression analysis dictated the type of variables used. In the absence of institutional variables such as student support the focus of attention had to be on the student.

Tinto continued to refine his SIM themed approach to student attrition. Tinto's (1993) *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* appears to mark the end of his emphasis on attrition due to the fact that despite the body of research on why students left higher education in the US the retention rate remained unchanged at 50%. Although there is no reason why research would change practice. The emphasis in research on the student experience began to focus on persistence, rather than on attrition i.e on why students stayed at university rather than why some leave. This is discussed in the next section.

2.2.2 The student persistence literature
This section explores the work on 'persistence' which is of importance to the study as it explicitly introduces feelings of fitting in and belonging at university into the literature. The

work of Spady (1970), which predates the influential contribution of Tinto (1975), has argued that a subjective sense of belonging is important to an understanding of persistence as belonging mediates the relationship between student involvement and outcomes such as student commitment and persistence. Student commitment has been defined in a number of ways to include attraction to a particular university, match with that university, satisfaction and sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) point out that earlier work had almost completely neglected the role of a subjective sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter argue that there is conceptual justification for examining sense of belonging in studies of student persistence. Most persistence studies include measures of social and/or academic integration, but Hurtado and Carter maintain that the sense that one is an accepted member of one's community, or sense of belonging, is distinct from one's level of involvement with the community.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) researched the experience of non-traditional Latino students at a predominately White university in the United States. This is an important departure from Tinto (1975) as Hurtado and Carter's research is recognising that the university has a part to play in drop out decisions. Hurtado and Carter (1997) explicitly introduce ethnicity as a factor but it might also be that they are theorising on social class as the Latino students in their research are mainly from lower social status groups. Ball et al (2002) in their research on higher education choice in the UK suggest that work that includes students from ethnic minority groups is in many ways also an examination of how social class is at play in education. Hurtado and Carter's findings show that student sense of belonging is strongly associated with talking to other students, mainly Latinos, about course related issues. This, I suggest, identifies the importance of 'community' and friendship to sense of belonging.

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Hausmann et al (2007) examined the experiences of Black and White first year students at a state university in the United States within a predominantly White student population. The authors conceptualise sense of belonging as being a valued member of the university community. The methodology used to test the impact of being a valued member on student belonging was to send students literature emphasising their status of being valued. Being told that they were valued increased White students' sense of belonging but had no effect on Black students' sense of belonging. It seems as if the White students feel valued, due perhaps to sense of entitlement, with the letter confirming their feelings. For the Black students the letter is not persuasive, perhaps reflecting a lack of entitlement on the part of these 'non-traditional' students. Sense of belonging could be conceptualised as feeling validated but it is for the student to subjectively decide if they belong and not for the institution to tell them that they belong.

Hausmann et al (2007: 807) further conceptualised sense of belonging as students being involved. They explain:

> The emphasis on student involvement and perceived integration, both of which are likely to be correlated with sense of belonging, is consistent with the idea that developing a sense of belonging is important to college persistence.

The hypothesis is that sense of belonging is correlated with involvement, which the authors do not define, but involvement is a value judgement which is not tested in their quantitative work, presumably due to problems of quantifying numerical values for any of their concepts. However, this research is important due to the explicit discussion of student sense of belonging although the onus is still on the student to acknowledge that they are valued or get involved. Both of these seem to be problematic. The setting is a university where Black students are in a minority which could make it difficult to get involved. Burke et al (2013) discuss the manner in which White students position Black students at an English university

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as failing to integrate as the Black students stick together which appears to avoid acknowledging the difficulties non-traditional students face.

This body of research on student persistence has helped to expand the concept of belonging through the importance given to feeling part of a community (Hurtado and Carter, 1997) and the identification of involvement (Hausmann et al, 2007). Sense of belonging, however, appears to be to the institution as a whole rather than to specific parts of it such as friends or the course. Further, the linking of persistence to belonging is problematic given the possibility of students persisting but lacking any subjective feeling of belonging. Despite these criticisms the student persistence literature has however introduced the concepts of fitting in or belonging. The next section further explores research that examines the extent to which students fit in or belong at university.

2.3 Fitting in and belonging for whom and how

This section examines the extent to which fitting in and belonging are possible; problematises the conflation of 'fitting in' with 'belonging'; and addresses what belonging can mean for non-traditional students. The literature reviewed is influenced by Bourdieu drawing on a number of his concepts such as habitus, field and cultural capital. The section starts with the literature that focuses on 'fitting in'.

2.3.1 Fitting in

Fitting in can mean different things for different students. For example, Burke (2006), in her exploration of social class as a key site of social exclusion in higher education, discusses the struggles facing women students from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds in fitting into fields of higher education which favors masculinised approaches to learning. Burke et al (2013) articulate fitting in as a key feature of the literature on widening participation which has sought to examine the influence of social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994) for getting into and progressing at university.

Bourdieu sees the different amount of capitals, social, cultural, educational and economic, as permitting people to enhance their standing in society. Where university students are concerned the unequal distribution of the capital endowments produces differentiated experiences according to their ability to engage with the institutional setting they find themselves in. The privileged position of the middle-class gives them greater access to the capitals which tends to re-enforce sense of belonging due to feelings of entitlement. Sense of belonging is, thus, a different experience according to the accumulations of 'capital' students bring to university. This is an unequal pursuit as the 'capitals' reflect the unequal distribution of opportunities, income and schooling of the wider society.

The extent to which students can belong is conditioned by the type of university attended, its pedagogic practices and students' knowledge of the 'rules of the game' with Crozier et al (2008) and Reay et al (2009), drawing on Crozier et al's study, contrast the importance of, for example, the experience of one to one tutorials in elite settings and their absence in most post-1992 universities. The authors used Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural and social capitals, and field to examine student experiences. Non-traditional students at an elite UK University felt supported due to the detailed attention they received as part of their university's commitment to success. This type of care, which could be described as 'motherly' (Burke et al, 2013), created feelings of academic engagement for the students in Burke et al's research. This feminised description of care is problematic as it might suggest, as Lynch (2010) articulates, that it is the responsibility of women in the academy to deliver. Reay et al (2009) cite the disappointed expectations of non-traditional students at a post-1992 university, where there were no small group tutorials nor regular contact with teachers that they felt threatened their academic integration, engagement and belonging. This feeling of not being cared for was exacerbated by being directed to virtual learning environments.

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Crozier and Reay (2011) describe the advantages that accrue to students from knowing the 'rules of the game' which permit them to engage with their field and its cultures and practices but the 'rules' are not available to all as they are part of the dispositions and capitals that students bring to university such as having graduate parents. As such the 'game' of higher education does not seem a fair one as engagement and belonging will favour those in possession of knowledge of the 'rules'. Non-traditional students will thus find it more difficult to engage with the cultures and practices of higher education due to factors beyond their control. Bufton (2003:231) gives expression to the differing experiences of fitting in using Bourdieu's framework to examine feelings of disjuncture in the narratives of university students. She explains:

> In the lifeworlds of the "working-class" students in this study, social class clearly operated as a set of external and internal markers which helped to define who they were and where they fitted.

Reay et al (2009), in their research on the experiences of working class students in four different university settings in England, contrast 'fitting in' with 'standing-out'. The latter term can be viewed in both positive and negative ways but for Reay et al (2009) standing out conveys a sense of discomfort at school in the way high achieving working class school students identify themselves as, for example, 'nerds' to explain their commitment to academic work. However, these same students felt a sense of belonging in an elite university setting as they fitted in academically, even though they were from working class backgrounds.

The importance of Reay et al's (2009) research is that it articulates the lived experiences of students who struggle to 'fit in' at university and conceptualises fitting in around student attempts to adapt to the academic culture they find. From the same study, Crozier et al (2008), in their articulation of the subtleties and degradations of the student experience which the quantitative work of Tinto and others appear to miss, suggest that:

Belonging and fitting in … is more nuanced and complex than has been thought. It involves students' identities both as learners and socially.

The linkage of belonging and fitting in appears to conflate these as being the same but it could be argued that students may be seen to 'fit in' without necessarily feeling that they 'belong'.

2.3.2 Non-traditional students and a place at university

As has been seen the student attrition research tends to suggest that there is a place to fit into and, indeed, belong to at university as long as the student commits. The onus, again, is placed on the student to fit in with the student blamed for not fitting in. Reay et al (2009), however, show that many students, especially non-traditional students, might find a place, be it the university, their department or course, to fit into, although this does not guarantee a sense of belonging. This section examines the literature on the extent to which non-traditional students such as women students, Black and ethnic minority students and working class students can find a place to fit into at university.

Women students, who outnumber men students in higher education in the UK, enter what Leathwood and Read (2009) argue is a masculine dominated setting in which women lacked the entitlement experienced by men students. In Reay et al (2009), drawing on Crozier et al's (2008) study, many women students were more likely to articulate self-doubt and anxiety about being at university. Burke (2006) describes the sector as not acknowledging the needs and interests of women students from culturally diverse backgrounds, making fitting into university life challenging for many women, especially non-traditional students. Bowl (2003) argues, based on her research on non-traditional entrants into higher education, that working-class women students and students from minority ethnic backgrounds find it difficult to fit into academic cultures which are built on a masculine approach to pedagogic practices. Leathwood and Read (2009) suggest that gendered interpretations of academic practices marginalise the experiences of women students threatening their attempts to fit in.

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Evans (2009) argues that women students, especially those from working class backgrounds, tend to have a greater sense of commitment to home and family than men and this social construction of women as carers limits the time and effort women students can invest in attempts to fit in to university life. Similarly Solomon (2007) notes that students, especially women, may experience liminality between home and university which seems to be related to the increased attachment to home described by Evans (2009). Reay (2002) also describes the conflict of working class women losing their identities as caring, working class women but not, at the same time, feeling part of their new field. This body of work demonstrates the problems faced by women students when they enter the field of university with academic practices, which they may find to be alienating and difficult to feel part of.

Other research has focused specifically on the experiences of Black and ethnic minority students. Davies and Garratt (2013), who looked at the experiences of ethnic minority students at a university in England, conceptualise belonging as togetherness and lack of belonging as isolation. The authors wished to examine the experiences of Black and minority ethnic (BME) students in the context of these students representing a small minority of the student population. The concept of 'togetherness', also identified by Crozier and Davies (2008) and Burke et al (2013), was used to articulate the feelings of the BME students who reported that they felt isolated in the mainly White student population. The feelings of isolation were, for the BME students, compounded by the academic practices of the university which taught a 'White' or perhaps 'Eurocentric' curriculum without recognising the pedagogic needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Davies and Garratt, 2013). The BME students reported that there was, thus, togetherness for White students due to their majority presence complemented by a Eurocentric curriculum. The BME students, who viewed the White students as a single group, talked of feeling isolated and lacking a sense of belonging. There is also an attainment gap, measured by the percentage of the cohort

obtaining a first or upper second, which is seven per cent between White and BME students aged 21 or under, and is twenty-four per cent for those aged 36 and above (The Equality Challenge Unit, 2014).

Burke et al (2013) discuss the ways in which students from BME backgrounds struggle to conform to academic practices based on a curriculum that fails to give sufficient recognition to multi-culturalism. This research finding, similar to Davies and Garratt (2013), suggests that sense of belonging can be influenced by the importance the institution's academic practice gives to students' ethnic heritage. Stuart et al (2009) researched Black students' feelings of comfort at university. They found that Black students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds felt more comfortable at university than those from lower socioeconomic groups which appeared to reflect family and school influences on cultural capital. Stuart et al found that Black students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tended to spend less time with friends outside formal teaching than other students which Stuart et al suggest limits the formation of support groups and associated opportunities for informal learning. Stuart et al (2009) also reported that the majority of non-White students in their study appeared to lack the necessary social and cultural capital to permit them to access and use institutional support. This was also identified by Crozier et al (2008) in their account of working class students at post-1992 universities. This, again, reinforces the importance of feeling comfortable in new surroundings so that students are able to navigate institutional cultures and practices. Asian students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also felt challenged by academic cultures and reported difficulties with fitting in and feeling comfortable at university. Stuart et al (2009) found that this was not the case for Asian students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who felt comfortable in their university setting as a result of family background and schooling. The different experiences of the Asian students, by social background, could also be captured by Bourdieu's 'fish in water'

conceptualisation of those who naturally expect to fit in at university in contrast to non-traditional students.

Black and minority ethnic students have been constructed by White students as not wishing to integrate into the social fabric of university (see Burke et al, 2013). Stuart et al (2009) have argued that Black students are more interested in academic integration than social integration but this has not prevented this group being positioned as 'separating themselves off' (Burke et al, 2013: 45). Many of the White students in Burke et al's (2013) study positioned Black students as 'sticking together'. I suggest that this positioning implies that the White students thought that Black students were not integrating and so were to blame for not fitting in. Again, this has echoes of the criticisms made by the indigenous population concerning Caribbean immigrants in the 1950s but fails to see that the 'togetherness' of the Black students was their way of negotiating university. This placing of the responsibility for fitting in on students is similar to the student persistence research where students were viewed as lacking commitment. It can be seen, therefore, that conceptualisations of belonging need to understand student identities and how these identities find expression in the academic and social practices of higher education.

Burke et al (2013) suggest that non-traditional students struggling to fit into the requirements of academic practices could be exposed to symbolic violence, for example the middle class nature of the language used and assumptions made, in a new field, which rewards middle class values. This symbolic violence, again drawing on the work of Bourdieu, exhibited itself in the way non-traditional students had to adapt and assimilate to academic practices such as accepting middle class values in order to fit in. I suggest that this form of 'fitting in' is not about belonging on the student's terms. In addition, there appears to be clear advantages in entering university as a student from a middle class background who does not need to adapt or assimilate to the same extent as a non-traditional student does. Sullivan et al

(2014), in their research on the educational histories of over 7000 people in England and Wales, show that degree performance of students with private schooling from socially advantaged backgrounds is beyond that expected given the students' educational and cognitive attainment. The domination of the elite universities by students from advantaged backgrounds appears to reflect links between private schools and those institutions. Social reproduction seemed to be at play, which is also a dominant theme in Todd's (2014) research on the history of the British working class. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) report that the reproductive nature of university continues into the labour market with middle class students more likely to secure employment with elite firms within the professions than working class students with superior degree classifications.

Sullivan et al (2014) found, however, that working class students did not obtain any benefit from attending grammar schools. This might suggest that social and economic capital dominate cultural capital for these students. Read et al (2003) talk of the middle-class student being constructed as the 'norm' and that these students, possessing a well-developed sense of entitlement due to family and schooling, have a taken-for-granted sense of belonging. This sense of belonging has been described as the ability to 'move in their world as a fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1990: 163) which can be contrasted with students who are like 'fish out of water' (Reay et al, 2009: 1104). Thus, belonging appears to be constructed as a right, and not a privilege, for the 'normal' student who is positioned as being under 21, White, middle-class and male. It is important to note that not all middle class students will possess this sense of right as for many there will be personal, cultural, religious or other issues preventing them fitting in. I suggest that this sense of belonging is about more than entitlement and is a reflection of habitus, cultural capital and social class.

The pre-1992 universities are dominated by White students from middle-class backgrounds (HESA, 2013) who, Stuart et al (2009) suggest, see their universities as places

to meet friends and have fun which shows not only the importance of social integration but also the fact that these middle-class students are more comfortable with the academic demands of university due to family and schooling influences (Crozier et al, 2008).

2.4 The importance of the academic culture to fitting in and belonging

This section looks at the importance of academic culture in the lived experiences of students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, as they move to the new field of university. The literature on academic culture introduces Bourdieusian concepts such as institutional habitus, cultural capital and field into the discussion of how students accommodate to life at university. The emphasis is, thus, on the university and its culture and practices, as students try to make sense of the objectified world of higher education influenced by prior experiences including social class, family and schooling.

Barnett (1990) has defined academic culture as an accepted and shared way of life around ideas, beliefs and meanings that creates difference between those who understand its practices and others who do not. The culture is, thus, understood and shared by insiders who take for granted the practices of university life. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) argue that academic cultures can be exclusionary with implications for how universities meet the demands of students from diverse backgrounds, and both Reay (2003) and Quinn (2005) suggest that working class students feel that the culture of university, including post-1992 universities, is middle class. Reay, for example, has suggested that non-traditional students could struggle to integrate into higher education due to the 'lack of fit between a habitus still powerfully influenced by a working class past and the middle class field of higher education (which) generates a sense of uncertainty and feelings of anxiety' (Reay, 1998, p. 523). If academic cultures are middle class and, as Ainley (2008) suggests, homogenous, then students from non-traditional backgrounds could feel as outsiders given their limited knowledge of the practices of higher education and the 'rules of the game'. Thomas (2002),

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who looks at the impact of institutional habitus on student retention at a post-1992 university, draws on the work of Bourdieu and Reay to explore the impact of academic culture on the experience of non-traditional students. The concept of institutional habitus emerges from Bourdieu's concept of habitus 'which individuals acquire in the earliest stages of socialisation and which they consolidate by their subsequent choices in life' (Robbins, 1993:159). The higher education student, for example, enters the university with dispositions that are the result of, among many things, parenting, schooling and friends. Habitus, which is subjective, permits the holder to interact, easily or otherwise, with the objectified world they encounter. Thomas (2002) utilises Bourdieu's view that organisations and institutions are important in reproducing the social order. Bourdieu argued that the academic culture of universities in France was profoundly middle-class in its curriculum and, thus, favoured those students in possession of a habitus based on middle-class experiences at the expense of the academically, by middle class norms, less successful working-class students. The working class students were less successful, according to Bourdieu (1988), due to the inherent class bias of the educational system.

Using the concept of institutional habitus allows Thomas (2002) to conclude that the student experience, both socially and academically, is threatened by the way widening participation is focused primarily on non-traditional students, which can make certain students feel as Other (Archer and Hutchings, 2000) due to the fact that 'educational institutions favour knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups (e.g. White, middle-class men) to the detriment of other groups' (Thomas, 2002: 431). Thus, the student experience is conditioned by the cultural and social bias inherent in the system and displayed in the power relations between student and staff, and amongst students (Reay, 2001).

Read et al (2003), who research student conceptions of belonging and isolation at an inner city, post-1992 university with a diverse student population, are interested to explore

the degree to which non-traditional students can become part of their chosen university; the extent to which academic culture can prevent non-traditional students from feeling that they belong and the implementation of alternative discourses of the social relation between the student and its academic culture to challenge student constructions of isolation. Academic culture, for the authors, is a reflection of the traditional student that is White, middle class and male, despite the changing composition of the student population from widening participation. The result is that non-traditional students are disadvantaged by an academic culture that positions them as outsiders or, for Read et al (2003: 262), as 'other' due to background characteristics. This could prompt non-traditional students to choose academic cultures more suited to their prior experiences. The construction of the 'normal' student as being White, middle class and male can make other students, i.e. those who are working class, Black or women, feel that they cannot belong as they cannot become students in the first place. To talk of 'normal' university students is also to talk of abnormal students who appear to be outsiders due to their differences. Non-traditional students could opt for the post-1992 universities which are constructed as offering better opportunities for belonging. To explore student conceptions of belonging and isolation, Read et al's study obtained the views of mainly working class first year students representative of the diversity, age, gender and ethnicity found at this inner city, post-1992 University. Mature students, report Read et al (2003), can feel alienated by the manner in which the university, and its spaces, portray the 'normal student' as being young, especially social and recreational events which appeared to be exclusively for students who entered from school and thus challenged the ability of older students to integrate socially. The mature students felt that they had confronted the norms by deciding to enter university and some had chosen this post-1992 university, as they believed that it would be supportive of their needs. The expectation of this support was welcomed by these mature students as it suggested that they were being cared for. It was not only mature

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students who chose this university, based on the comfort of being surrounded by people from similar backgrounds, but also students from minority ethnic backgrounds who cited the importance of the institution's diversity. Again, this was framed as providing comfort and re-assurance that they were in a place with 'people like us.' Read et al (2003) describe working class students as feeling comfortable in an institution that lacked the pretentiousness of an elite university and which they thought did not make judgements of them based on social class.

The feeling of comfort, from being surrounded by other mature, working class or minority students, was tempered by the practice of higher education which led to some students to talk of feeling isolated and alienated from the academic culture of the university. These feelings of isolation and alienation were particularly related to contact with teaching staff, with non-traditional students talking of the middle-class language of university and the fact that, due to their habitus, they did not feel comfortable to approach and talk with tutors which appears to indicate that they may have lacked feelings of entitlement and self-confidence. Read et al (2003) use the concept of unequal power relations to describe the way in which students are uncomfortable with the cultures of the academy. This feeling of discomfort was related to academic activities such as researching and writing essays. There was also confusion over the purpose of lectures and seminars, which led to students feeling, isolated despite the expectation of the university as a place for people like them. The authors conclude by recommending that the lack of support identified by non-traditional students needs to be addressed through extra funding. The non-traditional students appear to have chosen this university because they believed it would be supportive of their needs but the reality is a hegemonic academic culture, which appears to create feelings of isolation and discomfort. This further accentuates the importance of help, support and guidance for

students from non-traditional backgrounds lacking knowledge of the 'academic rules of the game'.

Burke et al (2013) researched formations of gender and higher education pedagogies with the intention of examining student identities in a university with thirty-five per cent recruitment from low socioeconomic groups against a national average of thirty per cent. The authors agree with Leathwood and Read (2009) that academic culture is constructed around ideas of masculinity despite the majority of students being women and the prevalence of a discourse on the feminisation of higher education. The desire for the feminisation of the pedagogical practice was a response to widening participation and a recognition of the importance of care. Burke et al (2013: 25) suggest that the desired feminised pedagogy of care is welcomed by most students as it:

> seems to contribute to the personalisation of teaching which the students want and value and enhances their sense of belonging in the university community, which in turn stimulates greater engagement and positive learning.

The concept of a feminised pedagogical culture is not without its critics who view it as a challenge to their role as academics with its emphasis on caring, mothering and babying which many teachers believed was the institution's response to their concerns about student retention. One woman teacher talked angrily of being constructed as a minder, while men teachers stated that they were being forced to be more caring than they wished. Some staff viewed the caring approach as a threat to their professionalism. Lynch (2010), who makes a similar point to both Burke et al (2013) and Mariskind (2014), when she discusses the practice of carelessness in higher education, suggesting that the act of caring is socially constructed with women assigned the role of carers as:

> men can rely on the moral imperative of women to care, to renege on primary care work, women have no such option. Being defined as the default carers in society, women are care's footsoldiers while men are care commanders (Lynch, 2010: 57-8).

The masculinist culture of the university is articulated by the view of a woman teacher in Burke et al's (2013) study that it was not her job to care despite the fact that students, in Burke et al's investigation and in Crozier et al's (2008) research, identified care as an important part of a sense of belonging. Francis et al (2013), drawing on the same study used in Burke et al (2013), suggest that students value care constructing teachers as 'bad' when they are seen as being uncaring. Women teachers are positioned by students in Francis et al (2013) as the principal carers but not exclusively as some men teachers are also constructed as carers. This leads the authors to describe situations where men take responsibility for caring as 'exemplars of men femininity' (Francis et al, 2013:13).

Lynch (2007, 2010) articulates higher education as a field lacking in care due to its grounding in Cartesian rationality where education is divorced from emotions. She argues that:

> … the fact that much of human mental health and wellbeing is dependent on having supportive and rewarding personal relationships, and that nurturing affective relations are central to this, the neglect of care as a subject for research and teaching is a serious educational deficit (2010:61).

The academic culture as shaped by the care-less nature of higher education further diminishes the student experience due to 'competitive individualism' (2010:57) as part of the neo-liberal approach to higher education management requiring teaching staff to avoid becoming a 'care foot soldier' (2010:57). The carers, mainly women (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014), can only be carers if they sacrifice personal advancement opportunities. Lynch (2010:57) suggests that:

> … the gold standard for leadership at all levels in the academy, are those that only a *care-less* worker can fully satisfy ... senior academic posts are most available to those who are 'care-less' … and these are likely to be very particular types of men (disproportionately) and women. Men and women who are care commanders rather than care's footsoldiers are best positioned to take advantage of the career and status gains within an individualized capitalist academic system.

Lynch (2010) and Burke et al (2013) suggest that some teachers may feel diminished if they are constructed as carers as it threatens their ability to progress as academics. The academy appears to face a dilemma in its culture and practice given the challenges non-traditional students face as they try to integrate academically into the fabric of life at university. It is as if some teachers lose distinction, in the Bourdieusian sense, if they engage in caring as it reduces the time they can spend on the necessary activities to move to what Lynch describes as the academy's gold standard of researching, publishing and hence improving their academic reputation.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction, which is mediated through a taste for the better things in life as people make choices to distinguish themselves from others, can be applied to the teachers described in Burke et al's (2013) study who display a clear preference to be seen as academics and not carers with the former giving them distinction and caring constructed as being beneath them. Their academic cultural practices are, in part, the product of their cultural capital, which is itself the outcome of social class, family, schooling and university, and it is this that has given them their distinction. This practice of distinction within the academic culture results in a carelessness (Lynch, 2007; 2010), which places non-traditional students at a disadvantage. This is less of a problem for students from middle-class backgrounds whose dispositions and cultural capital ease the transition into higher education but for non-traditional students, lacking a habitus informed by knowledge of academic culture, there appears to be a need and desire to be cared for (Leathwood, 2006).

Care is a dominant theme in the work of Crozier et al (2008), who looked at the experience of working class students in different higher education settings. The differing student experiences within the four universities comprising the Crozier et al (2008) study reflected the academic culture of the particular institution. In the elite Southern University, the non-traditional students, who are academic highfliers, integrate easily into the academic

side of life at university. This successful academic integration was aided by the degree of care provided through one to one tutorials (Crozier et al, 2008). At the post-1992 Northern University the situation was very different with students having to use online resources as their main basis of support as there was little, if any, one to one support. The working class students at this university constructed themselves as not integrating academically leading Reay et al (2009) to describe some working class students as being like 'fish out of water' in their attempts to navigate the particular institutional habitus. Reay et al (2009) argue that navigation is aided by feelings of entitlement which the working class students at Southern possess due to being academic high achievers as well as the individual support, help and attention they receive in this resource rich elite institution. In contrast, the working class students at Northern struggle with the concept of entitlement. This is exacerbated by the need to search for care and support, which is generally not part of this university's academic culture. The paradox is that the students most like 'fish out of water' are those in need of the greatest care as they attempt to integrate into the academic culture.

In the absence of care, academic cultures will be, as Reay (2004) says, institutional habituses of reproduction and not transformation. Care, which manifests itself through the support, help and guidance offered, is important in providing students with opportunities to transform themselves but it is only one of many changes required within higher education. The dominant hegemony of the academic structure where care is constructed negatively as 'mothering' and thus not appropriate to the role of the academic will not be conducive to feelings of sense of belonging for non-traditional students. The paradox, again, is that the students at the elite Southern University are indeed 'mothered with care' to ensure that they engage.

The desire to protect the distinction of being an academic who teaches and researches in a disciplined manner finds support in the work of Ecclestone, Hayes and Ferudi. Their

work thus questions the therapeutic approach to student support and caring. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) are critical of what they describe as the emergence of a discourse on emotional well being within education.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) suggest that this affective approach to education is not professional in the sense that it is not the teacher's role to be anything but a teacher of the discipline. The teacher is unprofessional if affective concerns influence their pedagogical approach. Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi (2005) go further than this to conclude that the therapeutic approach has led to the legitimising of diminishing expectations in young learners. The professionalism of the teacher is threatened by the need to be constantly responsive to the therapeutic needs of the student with the result that:

> contemporary disillusionment with traditional subjects and assessment is creating a hollowed-out curriculum as an instrument for 'delivering' a plethora of attributes, skills, values and dispositions. Of all the diverse demands for the curriculum to do this, concern about emotional well-being is perhaps the most influential (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009:385).

Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi seem to have a clear view of the role of the teacher as a professional who educates in a rational manner unhindered by affective concerns. Their pedagogy appears to be what Lynch (2010) describes as carelessness. This discourse on a professionalism that ignores caring support seems to be the opposite of the conclusions of Reay et al (2009) and Burke et al (2013). Hey and Leathwood (2009), who write of the importance of emotion and student support within the widening participation discourse, suggest that the work of Ecclestone, Hayes and Ferudi is anti-emotional and so part of the rational approach to education. Hey and Leathwood (2009) suggest that the omission of the affective threatens social justice with the implication that many students, especially non-traditional students, are Othered as their dispositional needs are ignored. If the arguments of Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi were accepted, then this could move higher education

pedagogy back to the time when students were mainly White middle class men studying at pre-1992 universities.

2.5 Conclusions

The chapter looked first at how belonging was conceptualised and then explored the importance of academic cultures. The emphasis on the role of individual characteristics in decisions to either drop out or persist was a dominant feature of the US influenced body of work which seemed to explore the two approaches of attrition and persistence in an unproblematised manner reflecting the centrality of White middle class students at residential universities as the primary source of data in the quantitative based studies. This emphasis on the individual appeared to articulate a discourse viewing students as being capable of integration and seemed to place responsibility for not fitting in on the student, with limited, unproblematised discussion of what the student was integrating with apart from their university. In addition, it appeared that integration was mainly on the university's terms with a constant theme being the need to conform to institutional values. This seemed to ignore student integration in relation to other factors such as friends and their programme, which were possible without acceptance of university ideals. The need to problematise integration appeared to expose gaps in the way the statistically informed studies conceptualised belonging. The work of Hurtado and Carter (1997) showed the importance of community as a source of belonging for non-traditional students in the absence of committing to institutional values.

The work of Bourdieu influenced researchers such as Read et al (2003), Leathwood (2006) and Crozier et al (2008) has problematised what belonging means for students from backgrounds different from those of the 'normal' student who was positioned as being White, male and middle class. This body of work showed that the experience of the non-traditional student is influenced by many of Bourdieu's concepts such as habitus, capital and field,

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suggesting that fitting in and belonging are the responsibility of the university by easing the transition into higher education for students with limited knowledge of its institutional and academic practices. In doing so the researchers articulated the importance of how students such as women, Black and minority ethnic and working class students were allowed to integrate into a field which was for many completely new. As such this qualitative body of literature was able to explore the role of academic cultures and practices on student belonging. The next chapter introduces the study's methodological approach.

Chapter 3 A Methodological Approach to Student Belonging

'There is no doubt a theory in my work, or, better a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield.' Bourdieu in conversation with Wacquant (Wacquant, 1989:50).

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore students' sense of belonging through an analysis of participants' accounts of their university experiences. This chapter explores the methods used to obtain the study's empirical data influenced by ontological and epistemological considerations. The importance of Bourdieu's work to the study is discussed throughout the chapter.

The chapter starts with a description of the study and its aims and this is followed by a discussion of ontological and epistemological considerations. The rationale for using a longitudinal qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews is explained in the next section and is followed by a brief discussion of the pilot study. Sampling is addressed next, including a discussion of how, in particular, the problematic issue of social class identity was addressed. Collecting the data, ethical considerations and doing the fieldwork are then discussed. The process of analysis in which I amalgamated an inductive approach to the Bourdieu influenced theoretical framework is examined in the penultimate section. The concluding section draws together the chapter's key points.

3.2 The study

The study, which used a longitudinal qualitative approach to obtain the accounts of nineteen participants at three interview stages during their first year, was sited at an inner city, post-1992 University. The aims of the study were to: produce knowledge of the degree to which participants might position themselves as 'belonging' to the university, their course and their friends; explore the importance of 'belonging' and how this might vary by social class, ethnicity, gender and age; apply a conceptual framework inspired by Bourdieu to

identify and theorise factors which might help and hinder 'belonging'; and examine the role of 'belonging' in contributing towards staying the course.

3.3 Ontology, epistemology and me

This section provides an account of the ontological view I brought to this study and the epistemological approach used. I needed to be aware of how my assumptions, as a White male university lecturer from a working class background, informed the research process; how these assumptions influenced the way in which I framed the study and the manner of my data collection through the interviewing process.

Sense of belong can be explored by analysing the way in which people subjectively make sense of the objective world they inhabit, bringing to the fore Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Archer, 2003; Reay, 2002). The concept of habitus, which contributed both theoretically and analytically to this study, captures the importance of factors such as social class, education and family on life trajectories. Heward (1996:41) notes that 'the extent to which individuals are constrained by their structural contexts and how far they can build alternative identities despite their stigma lies at the core of any theoretical understanding of subjectivities.' This resonated with my own experiences as I recount below.

My ontological position has been the product of lived experiences on my habitus as well as doubts concerning the positivist methodology of my undergraduate and postgraduate training in economics, which was based around causality, hypothesis testing, deduction and econometrics. Thus, I believe that knowledge of the accounts of the lived experiences of students will only emerge from a qualitative approach by talking with and listening to the views and opinions of those students (Cohen et al, 2003).

This section describes briefly my life story and the dominant events which have influenced the way that I make subjective sense of the objective world encountered; my assumptions. As such it is an ontological account of how my lived experiences have

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influenced the way in which the research questions were formulated and addressed. Reay (1998:2) suggests that 'all research is in one way or another autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography'. Given the importance of reflexivity to the methodology it was important to expose my habitus in this chapter as Bourdieu (1990) argues that both autobiography and reflexivity are important to the sociology of science.

Integral to the Bourdieusian theoretical framework is the idea of the reflexive self whereby the researcher attempts to understand and make sense of personal experiences. But there are dangers inherent to the production of narratives of personal experiences as they are but fictional accounts of actual lives reflecting what participants decided to reveal. Any qualitative research endeavour needs to confront the issue of 'truth', which was challenging for the study given my ontological position that there is no single knowable reality (Burke, 2007). Thus, it was important to make sense of what participants told me in a trustworthy and rigorous manner. My ontological orientation had been the outcome of concerns about the positivist approach (Trochim, 2000) that assumes research is value free, thereby avoiding acknowledgement of the assumptions that researchers bring to the process of inquiry. Even during my training as an economist I viewed the idea of bias free research as problematic given that the researcher decides on the data to use and the hypothesis to test within the hypothetico-deductivist approach. Further, the denial of social construction within the positivist paradigm (Ryan, 2006) clashed with my lived experiences. I thus embrace a view that knowledge cannot be divorced from experience. This led to semi-structured interviews being used to explore participants' socially situated constructions of life at university. The use of interviews would hopefully generate data to meet the study's aims.

The ontological view that there is no single knowable reality influenced the study's epistemological approach. This approach based around the view that 'truth' is elusive and socially constructed is principally informed by the work of Reay (1995) and Nash (2003) who

argue that 'truth' is bounded by peoples' perceptions of socially situated events. Using a quantitative approach with an epistemology based on prediction, measurement and control would have been inappropriate given the study's focus on interpreting participants' accounts of their university experiences. Influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1977; 1990) the study recognised the importance of empirical investigation of situated practices located within specific fields featuring social, economic and cultural capital.

The importance of social construction to the formation of 'knowledge' will be shown below where I look at my own experiences from the perspective of social practices situated in particular fields and influenced by social, economic and cultural capital. This, I feel, attends to why the study used qualitative research to explore data on student experiences.

I was a non-traditional student from an Irish Catholic working class background and my Irish born parents never felt that they were allowed to belong in their new country, England. Thus from an early age 'belonging' was a dominant theme in my life. I travel on a Republic of Ireland passport with the associated citizenship of being Irish despite the factor that I have only lived in Ireland for six months of my life and the majority of my formal education has taken place within the English system, yet I consider myself to be Irish. My father, who was unemployed for seven years continuously from 1928 to 1935, was class conscious blaming the misfortunes of the working class on the pursuit of the profit motive. My mother welcomed the wave of Black Caribbean immigration in the mid-1950s as they would be more othered than us due to skin colour (Todd, 2014). My parents had experienced the 'No Irish, No Coloureds, No Dogs' response when seeking private rented housing in London of the 1950s (Corbally, 2009). The discrimination we faced in the housing and labour markets reflected our accumulations of economic, cultural and social capital, or rather the lack of them. My mother argued that discrimination based on skin colour would never stop but that her 'English' children might escape the accent based discrimination she and my

father had experienced, with education offering an escape from our relative poverty (Todd, 2014).

My parents lived an Irish Catholic life, despite the fact that my father was a communist, as church and school offered safe havens to socialise amongst our own. My dad would remind me that Sinn Fein is Gaelic for 'We ourselves' although he also argued that nationalism was the 'last bastion of the scoundrel' (Primoratz, 2008). We could have been seen as 'sticking together' similar to the way Black students were positioned by White students in Burke et al's study (2013). This positioning of 'sticking together' is articulated by some White students in their positioning of Black students as not wanting to integrate into life at university, Burke et al suggest that 'togetherness' or sticking to one's community is a reaction to feeling excluded. Again, people have different subjectified understandings of the objective reality they encounter.

My mother used to describe Church of England schools as being 'non-Catholic' and only for us in extremis. We felt constructed as 'Other' but were quick to position groups and schools as 'Other' too (Coakley, 2014). I think that my parents tended to favour the 'underdog', as witnessed by their financial support for the miners during the yearlong strike in 1983/84, which has influenced my habitus and certainly informs the way I make sense of the world.

I did not pass the 11 plus examination, which was a major disappointment to my mother, as she believed that a Catholic grammar school would overcome many of the problems of being the child of immigrants. I now see that this event has had an important influence on my ontological view as it seemed to me that very few children from working-class backgrounds went to grammar school as discussed by Kynaston (2009) and Todd (2014). This tended to reinforce a family view that opportunities as well as outcomes were unequal. This opinion was the result of what we 'saw' or came to 'know' allied to my

parents' left-wing political beliefs on inequality. I now realise that these views were socially situated in a manner that could not be captured by quantitative data. This demonstrates the richness of using qualitative research in exploring subjectivities.

I attended a Catholic secondary modern school with the term 'secondary' constructed as meaning second class as they were not grammar schools. It seemed that the children of the middle class attended the 'prestigious and valued' grammar schools and that working class children went to 'other' schools. Living on a South London council estate I have no recollection of any of my contemporaries attending grammar school. The outcome of my time at secondary school was a collection of CSEs, GCEs and one A level, and a thorough knowledge of Catholicism. School was a place where I felt that I fitted in due to the fact that the population was largely homogeneous in that it was dominated by working class boys from predominantly Irish backgrounds. Following school, I worked in fairly non-descript clerical jobs, studying at night school to obtain two more low A level grades so as to apply for university entry, with an application to polytechnic as insurance in case I did not gain entry to university. All the universities rejected me due to my low A level grades and I entered an inner city polytechnic during the post-Robbins expansion of the 1970s.

I had no idea what university or polytechnic would be like which reflected my cultural capital, but I was aware of polytechnic being different from university. It was again 'second best' with the sports teams competing in different leagues from universities. Trying to explain to relatives that I was at a polytechnic was challenging, as they had no idea that these institutions existed, which again reflected the social and cultural capital accumulations of my background.

The vast majority of the students at the polytechnic I attended appeared to be from middle class backgrounds, as did the teaching staff so this was my first real experience of being outside a working class environment. My cultural and social capitals were undergoing

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change in the middle class environment of a polytechnic (Walsh, 1997) and I started to consider postgraduate study, which led to my studying at a Canadian university on a scholarship. The choice of the Canadian university was to avoid going to an English university such as the London School of Economics, which had also offered me full funding. I felt that I lacked the confidence to cope with this type of environment and I was concerned that it would be even more middle class than the polytechnic. Yet paradoxically, in many ways my life was becoming increasingly middle class due to a process of capital accumulation (Crozier and Reay, 2011), but I still viewed the world through working class lenses. Perhaps, on reflection, you can take the boy out of Bermondsey but can you take Bermondsey out of the boy? Stevenson and Clegg (2012) explore tensions similar to mine in their research on the influence of past experiences on the future plans of mature students.

Following the completion of the masters' degree it was time to re-enter the labour market and I decided to search for a lecturing job. Polytechnics appeared to be the right place for me as I lacked the confidence to believe that I was good enough to teach in a university. I got a teaching job at an inner-city polytechnic where the departmental staff were mainly White, middle class men with very few women teachers, which replicated my previous experiences of higher education. The students were also primarily White, middle class men with many from public school interspersed with some working class and women students but very few Black or minority ethnic students.

The predominant assumption of departmental staff appeared to be that we were teaching students as if they would go to graduate school despite the fact that only 8 percent of the graduating students applied for post-graduate study. It seemed that middle class teachers gave more attention to students from similar backgrounds. I felt that the pedagogy was thus based on the staff assumption that 'good' students would be entering post-graduate study. This could be viewed as a form of social reproduction, which seemed to permit some staff to

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justify their academic practices such as favouring those students intending to apply for postgraduate study. Sullivan et al (2014) produce similar findings in their research on social origins and school advice for higher education destinations. This research shows that students from privileged backgrounds receive disproportionate levels of advice on choice of university compared to those from non-traditional communities. On reflection, it appeared that some students were seen by many staff as being aspirational while others who were not seen as fitting into the post-graduate model were excluded and constructed as being deficient. It was as if the student was constructed as the problem (Burke, 2006), replicating the student commitment and attrition literature discussed in Chapter 2.

This perception of an 'exclusive' pedagogy troubled me for a number of reasons. First, the pedagogical practice was middle class. For example, the syllabus in preparation for postgraduate study was biased towards numerical analysis, which many women and working class students struggled with, as they tended to lack A level mathematics. The onus was on students to fit in which was only possible for those with the appropriate capital accumulations. Academic practices such as assuming independent learning and the emphasis on quantitative methods appeared to aid assimilation for some students but act as a barrier to others who seemed to experience threats to their cultural identities. Secondly, some students were demotivated as academic success depended on prior education, which resonated with my experiences of the 11 plus exam, i.e. that the assessment was biased in favour of the cultural and social capitals possessed by the middle class (Kynaston, 2013). Thirdly, many students struggled to integrate academically. Students appeared to be separated by their expected degree class with those thought likely to achieve a first or upper second being seen as academic whilst the other students were distanced, by staff, through lack of interest and discussion. My concerns deepened as widening participation initiatives such as Aimhigher

(Doyle and Griffin, 2012) increased the absolute and relative distribution of women, BME and working class students in the department (Hoare and Johnston, 2011).

My dispositions were challenged by these experiences as I attempted to give subjective meaning to the world of higher education that surrounded me. Obviously, I brought these dispositions to this study, needing to be aware of this and the requirement for reflexivity. For example, by accent (the result of speech therapy to correct an impediment), education and job people would probably position me as being middle class, yet my dispositions of being homeless in the early years of my life and the relative scarcity of household income make me feel instinctively working class. Thus, I experience a form of class based liminality that makes me empathetic to the potential challenges faced by non-traditional students. In total contrast to my formative experiences, my three daughters have the economic capital of living their lives to date in owner occupied housing in the leafy suburbs of North London, with its predominantly White middle class population influencing their social capital and two graduate parents informing their cultural capital. As Reay et al (2005) note, social class is about processes permitting, and denying, the accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital.

Obviously my experiences have informed my approach to this study. I make sense of the objectified world I encounter through an ontological view that the middle class and their values dominate. This assumption leads me to see the working class struggle in the middle class field due to their unfamiliarity with the field and its rules. I thus transfer this view to an analysis of the experience of non-traditional students in the field of higher education with its middle class based customs and practices. Bourdieu (1990) uses the idea of fish in and out of water to convey a sense of those that can belong and others who struggle. I think that this is a useful starting point but I feel that life is more complex. At times, I have struggled to breathe

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in the company of the middle but at other times I have felt comfortable, although I have never felt that I have had a sense of belonging.

3.4 Rationale for selected methods

The study used a qualitative approach to gain insights from the accounts of nineteen first year students on their experiences of higher education. The fact that the study was about participants' accounts of their experiences of higher education emphasised the benefits of using a method allowing those participants to give voice to their thoughts and opinions (Henderson et al, 2012). The study was also longitudinal as the participants were interviewed at three stages during their first year of study. Many researchers, including Moreau and Leathwood (2006) and Burke et al (2013), have used a similar approach to explore student accounts of their experiences in higher education as it benefits from allowing for the identification of changes in the student experience during the interview process. This approach needs to acknowledge the likelihood of participant drop out.

As an economist I was trained within the positivist methodology of quantitative analysis but reflexivity has informed me of the benefits of listening to people rather than looking at strings of variables. Obtaining the accounts of participants' lived experiences of university was most likely to produce data rich in detail as revealed by the research outputs on the experiences of university students in, for instance, Read et al (2003), Crozier et al (2008) and Reay et al (2009) drawing on the Crozier et al (2008) study. This body of work demonstrates that qualitative research can help to understand the student experience in higher education as well as the impact of university on student subjectivities (Mason, 2002). In addition, to this influential body of work was Bourdieu's (1996:1) observation that qualitative research can 'uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds that make up the social universe, as well as the 'mechanisms' that tend to ensure their reproduction or transformation.'

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Semi-structured interviews were used because of the importance of listening to people to hear their point of view and it permits the interviewer and interviewee to have a conversation as opposed to asking for replies to a pre-determined list of questions. Semi-structured interviews based around themes can also allow the interviewee to use the language they wish to use to give expression to their views (Cohen et al, 2003). The interviews were informed by the needs of the research questions but were also designed to be open-ended and flexible.

> The expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts. A crucial feature of language is its capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 126)

To understand the role of habitus and possible changes in habitus within the context of belonging it was necessary to generate data, which produced accounts of the experiences of students prior to entering university and during their first year in higher education. The study's use of a Bourdieusian theoretical framework helped to illuminate the ways in which students' economic, social and cultural capitals impact on their higher education experiences. I recognised that the interpretive knowledge would not be an objective account of reality but rather a socially constructed one produced and mediated in the interview process. This was not only mediated by me, but also by what the participants chose to say about themselves and their experiences. Thus, the analysis for Chapters 4, 5 and 6 was the outcome of my subjective interpretation of what students conveyed in the interviews rather than a 'value free' account (McCall, 2005). Instead it reflected what the participants chose to reveal and my filtering. A dominant assumption, based on my ontological position, was that students from non-traditional backgrounds tend to find higher education a more challenging field in contrast to students from traditional backgrounds. It was important that this assumption was explicitly recognised in the design, collection and analysis of the data.

Cross-verification of the data could have been used such as triangulation (Rothbauer, 2008) to assess the validity of the data but this seemed inappropriate, as the study was not aiming to validate 'truth' given my ontological position but rather to make sense of the accounts of the participants. The resulting analysis and subsequent conclusions should thus be assessed in the light of other research on the lived experience of students (Read et al, 2003; Crozier et al, 2008; and Burke et al, 2013). I contend that my study adds to the research on student sense of belonging. But it was necessary to acknowledge that as the producer of the research I was both the storyteller and a central character in the output.

As the storyteller I decided on what was included and omitted thus producing filtered and partial accounts of the interview data. Despite this I believe that the process of reflexivity has allowed me to articulate the views of the participants to add new insights to the literature on student sense of belonging. To do this it was necessary to confront my assumptions for the interviews, the subsequent filtering of the interview data and my reporting of participants' accounts (Jacobs et al, 2011). The importance of confronting assumptions was also identified by researchers in Burke et al's (2013:22) study on pedagogies in higher education, which 'embedded a reflexive approach to consider the impact of the research team's standpoints and identities and the perspectives and values (they) brought to the research.'

Further, Harding's (1991:11) view that all 'scientific knowledge is always, in every respect, socially situated. Neither knowers nor the knowledge they produce are or could be impartial, disinterested, value neutral' has helped to inform my reflexive approach. Whilst acknowledging that eliminating all my prior assumptions is unrealistic, I contend that reflexivity can inform and limit their impact. This was achieved by focusing attention on participants' stories to limit my assumptions taking centre stage in both interviews and data analysis.

3.5 The pilot study

The rationale for the pilot study was to engage in a small-scale rehearsal for the large-scale of this study with the intention of identifying any areas of concern. The pilot study was conducted in the summer of 2008 in the department I worked in with the aim of generating a sample of 3 to 6 students to explore their experiences of higher education. I eventually managed to interview three students, who I had previously taught, due to the research being conducted at the end of the teaching year when most students were no longer at university. Each of the three volunteer students was interviewed once via semi-structured interviews. My interviewing technique in the pilot study was poor, despite familiarising myself with the literature on interviewing (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). The objective was to engage in conversations within a semi-structured interview but too much time was spent thinking about where I wanted the interview to get to rather than allowing a conversation to emerge. For the main study I needed to know the broad themes to be explored but also have the ability to pick up on points and respond to interviewee questions. On reflection, I needed to become a researcher by taking control of the research process as it became apparent from the pilot that the data would have benefited from interviewing the participants more than once to develop themes and allow for changes. This led me to consider using a longitudinal approach but the pilot had, however, served as a useful learning device for this study.

3.6 Sampling

Qualitative research mainly uses small scale sampling, as opposed to the large scale samples of quantitative research, with the sample selected in a purposive manner thus allowing the study's aim to be fulfilled (Robson, 2002, Ritchie et al, 2003)). It was necessary to decide which students to use for the study. The experiences of first year students have been explored by a number of researchers influenced by Bourdieu including Read et al (2003),

Crozier et al (2008) and Reay et al (2009) drawing on the Crozier et al (2008) study. It seemed appropriate to build on this approach, as I was interested in analysing the experiences of non-traditional students by using Bourdieu Sian concepts such as field, capital and habitus. Thus, first year students were identified as the sample. The aim was to include students from middle class backgrounds as well as non-traditional students so that the study could explore for differences. The study aimed for a sample of twenty-four students, which was small enough to be research manageable and big enough to hopefully generate sufficient data. The sample was not intended to be representative of the student population as this was a qualitative, not a quantitative, study. The dominant concern was for a purposive sample in which the interviews would generate rich and extensive information on the student experience in a socially situated setting.

A post-1992 University was selected as it allowed me to recruit a suitable sample and obtain their accounts. The study by Crozier et al (2008) used both pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions but their research project was on a much bigger scale than this study. The siting at a post-1992 university was based on the following reasons. First, I wanted to see if non-traditional students felt comfortable and that they 'belonged' in a setting where they were surrounded by students from similar backgrounds, also discussed by Read et al (2003). Secondly, I was interested to see if a post-1992 institution's perceived commitment to non-traditional students through their academic practices as captured by Thomas' (2002) concept of institutional habitus made belonging easier. I also decided to locate the study in a Business School or business department given my initial thoughts on the middle-class nature of academic practices and that my perception of the 'distancing' of non-traditional students had been formulated in a similar departmental setting.

I approached the Business School, influenced by my experiences as a lecturer in a business department, at an inner city, post-1992 University for access to students, which was

granted as issues of student belonging was much discussed in the department and so a number of lecturers were happy to help. A first year module with an enrolment of c.200 students was identified as a suitable population from which to sample. Nineteen students volunteered to participate by approaching the module leader to confirm their interest. All participants were invited to complete a questionnaire (Appendix 5), which provided background information. The questionnaire allowed participants to select a pseudonym as well as provide information on age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and social class. I also collected information on whether or not they had entered through clearing, their last job, if they had one, and information on their parents'/carers' last job. The rationale for the information collected was to obtain as many details as possible. Some participants did not provide information on the mother's or female carer's occupation.

In subsequent chapters each participant is identified by their pseudonym, which is followed by a coded description of their key characteristics. For example, in the case of Amy the coded descriptor is (White British, 22, Middle Class) showing that she is White British from a middle class background, aged 22. The following table shows the questionnaire information for each participant displaying the degree of diversity within the sample.

Table 3.1 Table of participants

Pseudonym selected by participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Social class	Parental occupation (Father or man carer shown first followed by mother or woman carer)	Student occupation	Age	Status by end of first year	Clearing (C) or Non-clearing (NC) on entry	Interviews attended
Amy	F	White British	MC	Accountant/Primary teacher	Banking	22	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Andy	M	White British	MC	Carpenter/Care worker	Clerical	27	Transfer	NC	1,2,3
Ben	M	White British	MC	Finance/Housewife	None	19	Stayed	C	1,2,3
Chloe	F	White British	MC	Builder/Secretary	None	20	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Erkan	M	White Turkish	WC	Shop owner/No entry	None	19	Left	C	1,2
Evelyn	F	Black African	MC	Farmer/Housewife	Import and exporter	47	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Geena	F	Black British	WC	Tube worker/Machinist	Local government worker	42	Left	C	1,2
Kerry	F	Black British	WC	Car mechanic/Betting shop worker	Bar worker	22	Stayed	C	1,2,3
Marcia	F	Black Caribbean	None	Teacher/No entry	Civil servant	28	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Marcus	M	Black British	WC	No entry/Nurse	None	19	Left	C	1,2
Micheline	F	Mixed Algerian	MC	Labourer/No entry	Cook	21	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Monique	F	Black French	WC	Factory worker/No entry	Bar worker	26	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Natalie	F	White German	MC	Policeman/Hairdresser	Event assistant	22	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Pilar	F	White Italian	MC	Shop owner/Shop owner	None	19	Transfer	NC	1,2,3
Roisin	F	White Irish	WC	Bricklayer/Check-out worker	None	19	Stayed	NC	1,2,3
Sulieman	M	Black British	None	Bus driver/No entry	None	20	Left	C	1
Tobi	M	Black African	WC	BT engineer/Teaching assistant	None	18	Stayed	C	1,2,3
Tony	M	White British	WC	Maintenance worker/PT shop worker	Shop assistant	22	Stayed	C	1,2,3
Velli	M	White Belgian	None	Banking/No entry	None	19	Left	NC	1,2,3

The most problematic participant descriptor was social class. The research question, influenced by the work of Bourdieu, involved an examination of the impact of social class on the ways and extent to which students' experiences of university could be seen to reflect a sense of belonging. I thought that it would be easier for the participants if they were offered the choice of selecting from 'middle class', 'working class' or 'none declared', however it was necessary to recognise the problematic nature of such an approach. No participants challenged this approach, although they may not have felt able to do so, reflecting the power imbalance between them and myself discussed below. It became clear that this approach to identifying social class background was somewhat naïve given the different nationalities and cultural backgrounds of the participants. It is important to realise that the self-definitions of social class were subjective (Rubin et al, 2014) and thus only provided an account of how the participant wished to classify themselves. Rubin et al (2014), however, argue that subjective self-definitions merit attention as they permit the person to give voice to feelings about social class.

Both Tony and Marcus self-defined as working class but their understanding of what it meant to be working class seemed to be different. Tony viewed the working class in political terms such as trade unionism, solidarity and the need for collective action, which appeared to reflect his cultural background. Marcus appeared to conceptualise 'working class' in economic terms for example such as being poor due to the lack of job opportunities for Black people, something that again reflected his own experiences. These differences are perhaps demonstrations of class fractions (McCall, 2005) showing that the working class cannot be viewed as a single homogeneous group. Reay (2002), for example, talks of fractions within the working class impacting on 'fitting in' at university and my research suggested that it was

more difficult for Black working class students to 'fit in' than their White peers, which again demonstrated the complexities of dividing students into a single social class. So although my study used broad categories to identify social class, other data existed (for example the occupations of parents/carers) to allow for a more nuanced analysis. Thus, the study was aided by the sociology of social class (Reay et al, 2005; Savage, 2003; Savage et al, 2013; Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs and Loveday, 2014) to understand the influences of economic, social and cultural capital accumulations to explore lived experiences beyond simplistic social class descriptors.

Reay et al (2005) used the Registrar General's classification to assign students from occupational backgrounds 1, 2 and 3 non-manual to the middle class and the remainder to the working class. These are also broad categories requiring, as Reay et al (2005) acknowledge, deconstruction to permit a more nuanced discussion of the role of social class in higher education. Ball and Vincent (2005), for example, discuss intermediate classes raising the possibility of students being classified by occupation but mirroring the dispositions and attitudes normally associated with another social class such as playing a musical instrument, again highlighting the complexity of social class.

The complexity of social class was also apparent in the cases of Amy and Andy who both self-defined as middle class. Amy possessed a strong sense of entitlement, had the necessary qualifications to study at a pre-1992 institution and spoke of friends who were at pre-1992, mainly Russell Group, universities. Her occupational category of banking seemed to confirm her social class as did her parents' occupations. She also demonstrated economic and cultural capital in her attendance at the open day travelling over two hundred miles. Andy who also self-defined as middle class did not seem to fit into this social class category as easily as

Amy had. He was a mature student who had attended a number of further education colleges whilst also spending time in routine clerical jobs. His parents did not work in middle-class occupations. Further, Andy's pre-entry knowledge of university was gleaned from websites rather than from attending open days. Reay et al (2005) produced evidence that students from working class backgrounds are less likely to attend open days than their middle class peers. This reflection on the complexities of social class was enhancing my research skills allowing me to see beyond simple description as well as providing important insights to be used in the analysis of the data.

In contrast to the problematic descriptors for social class used in the participant questionnaire, the participants' identification of ethnicity was much more open as they were invited to self-define. This was also the case with age at the time of the first interview. Participants were also classified by their entry status (clearing or non-clearing) and their status at the end of their first year (stayed on the course, left or transferred). The entry status data were relevant due to the perceived importance of feeling attached to university identified by Youthsight (2012) suggesting that the more attached students felt prior to entry the more likely they were to express feelings of belonging once at university. Youthsight (2012) surveyed over 60,000 students over the period 2006 to 2011 to discover which groups of students had been most disappointed by their initial university experiences. This research showed that clearing students were the most disappointed as they tend to lack knowledge and expectations of their particular university due to not anticipating studying at that university. Youthsight (2012) maintain that the situation is different for non-clearing students, especially those attending open days with high expectations of attending one particular university generating early feelings of being connected to that institution.

3.7 Collecting the data

The data for this study was collected during the 2008/9 academic year through one to one interviews which were carried out at three points: late October and early November of 2008; February, 2009; and May, 2009. Interviewing participants at the first point allowed me to obtain their initial views of university when they had four to five weeks' experience of university of being there. The second interviews coincided with the beginning of their second semester when they had finished their first four modules. By this stage they had been at university for over four months and I wanted to see if their initial thoughts had undergone change and, if so, why and it what ways. The final interviews were near the end of their first year. I did not wish to lose contact with participants but also wanted to allow for the greatest time period possible to collect data on their opinions and reflections of their first year at university. The pilot study had been a snapshot and I wanted the study proper to generate data across time.

3.7.1 The first interviews

The first interviews, nineteen in total (eleven women and eight men), conducted within six weeks of participants starting university, were designed to explore what students had expected to find at university and the basis of those expectations; explore general views about university life including social provision of university; meeting people and making friends; and views on teaching and learning (Drever, 1995).

I offered to interview participants at a place of their choice including, for example, a local café or a classroom but I did not suggest a particular venue. All participants indicated that they were happy to be interviewed in a classroom and for the interviews to be recorded. Some interviews finished after thirty minutes instead of the planned forty-five minutes. This was especially the case with some men where the interviews could be described as 'staccato' like with a number of questions producing

short answers, sometimes limited to one word. The shortest interviews were with Sulieman, Marcus and Erkan, from working class, immigrant backgrounds, who seemed to be less comfortable than other participants. Further, the data on parental occupation and education indicated that they were from families with no higher education capital and low-skilled employment in the cases of Sulieman and Marcus. It was also of note that these interviews were among the early ones when I was in the formative stage of interviewing and there were clearly lost opportunities to obtain rich data from these students who left university during their first year. One particular theme not addressed was their experiences as clearing students which might have generated data on the importance of feeling attached to the institution as identified by Youthsight (2012). I needed to reflect on this for the second and final interviews.

As a White, and to outside appearance, middle-class man born in the 1950s, I might have been constructed by participants as an outsider (Kerstetter, 2012) in the interview process. The status of being identified as an outsider has been problematised suggesting that the outsider lacks understanding of the lived experiences of those being interviewed (Hendrix, 2002) but I think that this binary divide is too simplistic. An example is that of men interviewing women where the interviewers might, due to social constructions of gender roles, have little in common with women but my richest data came from interviews with women. Alternatively, research suggests that insiders might be reluctant to divulge information to other insiders and so outsider/insider interviews may be seen as preferable (Maylor and Williams, 2011). However, my interviewer identity was not simply that of an outsider as I was at times an insider given my history of being a widening participation student from a non-traditional background enhanced by my knowledge of higher education. Mercer (2007) in her research on faculty appraisal within higher education argues that

the insider/outsider dichotomy is inappropriate as all researchers move along a continuum with their identities conditioned by, for example the interview topic, the particular participant and the location. I believe that this was also true of the interviews, which I relate below.

The first set of interviews with many women participants was very different from those with most men and could be described as conversations with a number of the women asking questions and offering detailed views and opinions. Finch (1993) has argued that women, in general, find it easier to talk than men, while Golombisky (2006) suggests that women's communication styles are generally superior to those of men.

Evelyn's (Black African, 47, Middle Class) articulation of the importance of sharing academic worries within a group was surprising as I had not anticipated asking questions about this. This theme of 'community' subsequently became an important part of the research. It seemed that the most detailed interviews were with the older women in the sample, including Marcia (Black Caribbean, 28, Middle Class), who highlighted the importance of care within the university such as the availability of help and support for students, making friends and feeling welcomed. As a researcher I needed to reflect on what the interviews with women participants could teach me in order to improve the quality of the data I was generating with men participants.

3.7.2 The second interviews

The second interviews were scheduled for the start of the participants' second semester with the intention of hearing what students thought about university at the mid-point of their first year. In preparation for these interviews I listened to the audio recordings, read the transcripts of the first interview for each of the participants and

referred to field notes. The intention was to familiarise myself with each participant's views so that I could use them as part of the opening exchanges as well as developing any particular themes raised in the first interview. The second interviews were, on average, approximately forty minutes long.

The interviews opened with questions based on my general interpretation of the first interview; issues emerging from the student's responses to the initial questions relevant to the research question; and specific questions about the student experience over the previous three months. In the specific questioning I wanted to obtain information to fulfil the aims of the study. Specifically, I wished to explore sense of belonging and staying the course without explicitly asking direct questions such as 'Do you feel that you have a sense of belonging?' or 'Will you pass the first year?' Instead, I hoped for a more nuanced conversation to occur in which I would be able to follow up participants' thoughts with questions on features of university creating feelings of satisfaction or concern. I had a somewhat flexible agenda but I wanted, as far as possible, to obtain the accounts of the participants with only limited steering on my part. In the pilot study I had been quite rigid in my desire to collect data rather than allowing participants to talk. To an extent, this was also the situation in the first interviews, so in the second interviews I thought it preferable to talk less and listen more. If a word or phrase emerged such as 'friends' or 'not happy with all the online stuff' then I would pursue it.

At this stage three students had left the university. They were Sulieman, Geena and Marcus. However, Geena (Black British, 42, Working Class) and Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class) agreed to be interviewed in addition to the sixteen continuing students. The interviews, especially those with men participants, produced a richer quality of data which I think was due to my improved interview technique;

students becoming more comfortable with me; and the longer student experience of university.

3.7.3 The final interviews

The final interviews took place towards the end of the students' first year. I continued to use previous interviews as a starting point; further explore student experiences of life at university; and ask participants what they thought would make university a 'perfect' place to belong in. The issue was not 'perfection' but rather to ask questions about what would make university a 'perfect' place for participants with the intention that the students could fre20e themselves from any limitations on what was or might be possible.

Velli (White Belgian, 19, No class stated) and Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class) had left university during the second semester. Velli was happy to attend for the final interview as he was still using the university fitness centre. Erkan declined the invitation to be interviewed and thus the number of students interviewed was now fifteen as I had lost contact with Geena and Marcus. The final interviews were again recorded and saved to mp3 files. These interviews were, on average, slightly longer than the second interviews. I found these interviews the easiest to undertake which was probably due to my increased familiarity with the students and their narratives plus, I think, their comfort with the interview process. Participants, especially the older ones such as Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) and Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class), tended to take ownership of the interviews using them to articulate happiness and disappointment with their first year experience and what they felt needed to be enhanced and changed. Again, women participants were the most vocal but a number of the men such as Tony (White British, 22, Working

Class) and Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class) became increasingly verbal in their articulation of life at university.

3.7 Ethical considerations

I adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (2004) and London Metropolitan University (2008) with reference to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. The information sheet (Appendix 3) gave potential participants details of the study and stated that any resulting data would be anonymised which was aided by the use of pseudonyms chosen by the participants. Further, participants were told that the recorded interviews and the transcripts would not be shared with anyone and that participants could, if they wished, be provided with a copy of the tape recording, the resulting transcript and a copy of the thesis. I assured participants that they were free to withdraw their participation from the study at any stage either during or between interviews and that I would not pursue them in anyway. Further, I provided participants with details of my supervisor should they wish to discuss any concerns with the interviews and the study (Simons and Usher, 2000).

It was important to acknowledge power within the interview process, the relationship between researchers and researched to allow for reflection on inequality and privilege. This can be addressed by acknowledging that power is, among other things, gendered. Radtke and Stam (1994) discuss how gender is constructed through the practice of power, while Lucey et al (2003) suggest that gendered inequalities are the result of the way power is (ab)used.

Feminist research theory, which draws attention to the need to understand the complexities of social class, ethnicity and gender to avoid homogenisation and essentialism, contains valuable insights into the dimensions of power within the

research process. This reminded me that I needed to reflect on what my background characteristics suggested about my role as a researcher. LeCourt (2004) argues that:

> my White body encodes a variety of assumptions about what I've experienced, how I think, and my position of power in culture. Even if I try to exceed those presumptions when I speak, my ''body'' is read in different ways. In a contact zone, my body speaks as loudly as does my rhetoric' (19).

McDowell (2010), who interviewed young working class men within a longitudinal study, highlights the 'exploitive' nature of interviews as the interviewer attempts to elicit 'knowledge' from the interviewee. This could be read as suggesting that the interview is a meeting between the powerful and the powerless but the situation is more complex as participants can exercise power through what they choose to reveal (Bhopal, 1995).

McDowell (2010), influenced by feminist theory, argues for interviews to be opportunities for participants to speak openly about themselves and their experiences by using the first interview to establish rapport within a longitudinal process of repeat interviews. I also used a similar approach to McDowell (2010) but it was noticeable that the first interviews with young working class men from ethnic minority backgrounds such as Sulieman and Erkan produced the least data. These two participants were quite passive and gave the impression of being intimidated by, and subservient to me and/or the interview process, which corresponded with my assumption on how middle class, dominated fields can be challenging for the working class. These interviews reminded me of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) discussion of the challenges faced by working class students within French higher education in their work on the reproductive nature of education. For Reay (2009:1110), the disjunction of field and habitus experienced by working class students creates feelings that 'nothing could be taken for granted.' But Erkan and Sulieman could perhaps be seen

as asserting power by limiting the information they cared to share, resulting in me feeling intimidated by their relative silence. Field notes indicated that Sulieman was very keen for the interview to end, which again could be interpreted as him trying to exert control, although it is of course possible that he felt uncomfortable with the process. The former interpretation resonates with Walkerdine (1990), who uses the example of a women teacher being intimidated by two young schoolboys as they make unpleasant comments about her to articulate the view that power is not fixed but rather shifts to reflect subjectivities. On reflection, I can see the shifting of power in the manner my Catholic schooling inculcated me with a feeling of superiority over people of other beliefs but these feelings were not replicated in the insecurity of my working class identity.

The complexities of power in research also occurred in interviews with other participants. Interviews with women participants from middle class backgrounds such as Amy and Evelyn revealed additional layers of complexity as I felt that some of the women, especially older ones, took control of the interviews by taking the lead as they raised issues I had not considered and by asking questions. I felt that their questions were an attempt to 'unpick' me. This blurring of the distinction between researcher and researched articulates the view that knowledge is constructed in an act of participation shared by both parties (Yost and Chmielewski, 2013).

It was important that the study was honest and transparent in its treatment of the participants' narratives but their stories were to be interpreted, filtered and told by myself to produce the data chapters. Reay's (1998) comment on the autographical nature of research was a constant reminder to understand the role played by my dispositions in the interview process and the resulting interpretations. The dominant assumption underpinning my view of the world was, and continues to be, that people

from non-traditional backgrounds tend to find it difficult to be at ease in middle class dominated structures such as higher education and the legal profession.

3.8 The process of analysis

The study used the data from the interviews on student experiences of higher education to explore student sense of belonging. To do this I began the process of analysis by using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2003) to produce meaningful themes from the data integrated with a theoretical framework inspired by Bourdieu.

To generate the themes while reflecting on the research question and the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, I listened to the recorded interviews in two ways: stage of interviews and individual participant interviews. All the first interviews were analysed to identify emerging themes with this approach repeated to detect issues in the second and final interviews. Following this the complete recordings of each participant were scrutinised for individual concerns to identify key themes. Finally, I transcribed all fifty-two recordings. This allowed me to read and re-read them by interview stage and individual to see if other themes and concerns emerged. A complete set of the three interviews with Andy can be found in Appendix 7.

A number of interviews were selected for discussions with my supervisors with the intention of creating headline codes for use with the Nvivo software programme, which accommodates the subsequent coding of transcribed interviews. The coding exercise was an iterative process as the initial approach had only used free nodes but as I became more familiar with Nvivo and its possibilities I realised that I could represent affective domain characteristics such as confidence, identity and feeling lost as well as information based features of university life such as welcome, feedback and on-line learning (Richards, 1999).

The final coding was the outcome of reading and re-reading transcripts to see what worked best in terms of the suitability of the coding in analysing the data to answer the research question. Some text was coded under two or more nodes as I wanted to produce useable chunks of data as opposed to single sentence pieces of data, which lacked depth and context as participants tended to talk about a number of things within their responses to questions (Welsh, 2002). The research question was, thus, the driving force behind the coding methodology with the free nodes attempting to capture 'sense of belonging' dimensions and the tree, and branch, nodes containing the structural factors of life a university.

In attempting to understand 'sense of belonging' in a higher education context I drew on Bourdieusian concepts. The concepts employed were habitus; field and capitals: economic, social and cultural. Habitus, which allows people to make subjective sense of the objectified world they encounter, was used to explore participants' understanding and impressions of the field of higher education. Capital accumulations, in their social, economic and cultural embodiments, creates the dispositions, which inform our habitus permitting us to make sense of the experiences encountered in the fields we occupy.

Bourdieu talks of habitus as a set of 'transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977:72), which drive social class practices. I suggest that this makes habitus a concept, which can be used to understand the experiences of participants from different social class backgrounds as they come into contact with the field of higher education. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed me to see what participants said about their experiences of higher education at three points in their first year so allowing for the process of analysis to explore experiential issues influencing sense of belonging.

The analysis used the concept of institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002) to understand the field of higher education. A number of researchers, for example Reay (2009) and Burke et al (2013), argue that the culture and practice of higher education can be accommodating and threatening to students' sense of belonging depending on their dispositions. Women students, for example, might find the 'masculinity' of higher education alienating (Burke, 2006), while for non-traditional students, their positioning as independent learners at entry might be challenging (Leathwood, 2006). For Bourdieu, people's position in the field is associated with their habitus and knowledge of the rules of the field. A form of social reproduction occurs 'when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself "as a fish in water", it does not feel the weight of the world and takes the world about it for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127). By implication, many non-traditional students might feel as 'fish out of water' in a field where their presence is not acknowledged. So use of the concept of field provided me with the opportunity to explore what participants' made of the practices they encountered across their first year at university.

Combining habitus, capital and field produces the 'rules of the field'. Knowledge of the 'rules' and how to use them were important to analysing students' sense of belonging. If education is about continued reproduction, then the field of university might be isolating for students who are not part of this reproduction. Bourdieu (1988) argued that the unhappy experiences of working class students within the French higher education system were the outcome of the middle class culture and practices these students encountered. Many researchers such as Read et al (2003) and Reay et al (2009) have found that some non-traditional students do indeed find university alienating. I wanted to explore the accounts of participants to see if

non-traditional students felt that they belonged to the university, or parts of, such as friends, and also to examine the impact of capital endowments on sense of belonging influenced by Bourdieusian concepts. Thus, my focus throughout the study was on sense of belonging.

3.9 Conclusions

This study is an inquiry into student sense of belonging based on the accounts of nineteen students at an inner city, post-1992 University. These accounts were the result of a qualitative study using a longitudinal process of semi-structured interviews. Understanding that belonging is a participatory activity made talking with students and, more importantly, listening to their accounts, the appropriate data collection method. The accounts were the participants' stories as told to me at three key points during their first year at university.

I reflected on any inherent power in the collection of the data, which led me, as a researcher, to see the difference between being an interviewer and a participant within the interviews. The influence of feminist research theory was important for the way I came to understand power within the interview. The data was recorded and transcribed with the intention of identifying themes, which would be analysed within a Bourdieusian framework. I drew on the concepts of habitus, field and capital - social, economic and cultural - as well as information on the 'rules of the game' to analyse participants' accounts.

The methodology explored in this chapter was applied as thinking tools to aid analysis of the data beginning, in Chapter 4, with participants' accounts of their expectations of higher education and their views of the 'field' of university during the early weeks of their first semester.

Chapter 4: Great expectations

I had loads of problems with paperwork and phoning and not getting answers and waiting days and starting over again. So that made me even more worried about coming here (Tobi, Black African, 18, Working Class, Interview 1).

I was expecting a lot because I was giving up a lot (Geena, Black British, 42, Working Class, Interview 1).

4.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at what participants said about their expectations of university. Their expectations were captured through their accounts of their early contacts with the university including at pre-entry open days and their initial weeks of university life. These can have a strong influence in creating a sense of belonging as these transition experiences may be the first point at which students' expectations of higher education are tested (Edward, 2003). Participants identified open days, Welcome Week, timetabling experiences and opportunities to meet people within the university's social provision as events having the greatest influences on their early impressions of life at university. These 'events' occurred prior to entry and during the first four to six weeks at university with participants' data on them drawn primarily from the first set of interviews conducted in the November of their first year at university.

This chapter starts with an exploration of pre-entry impressions of university showing different forms of preparation, knowledge, awareness and expectations. This is followed by participants' impressions based on post-entry experiences of Welcome Week, timetabling, and meeting people and making friends to explore their influences on students' developing sense of belonging. The chapter challenges some common assumptions concerning the work of Bourdieu that transition into life at university is easier for middle class students than for those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Thus, the view that middle class students are as 'fish in water' is problematised to show the importance of institutional habitus and academic practices.

4.2 Pre-entry impressions

This section focuses on three distinct groups: the first comprises those students who attended open day events or visited the university prior to entry; the second group is made up of students with offers but who did not attend open day events or visit the university prior to entry; and the final group are those students who entered the university via clearing. This data, rich in impressions of university prior to entry, provided insights into what students thought about the university and higher education in general. The data reflects many of Bourdieu's concepts such as habitus, capital and field, which help in understanding the experiences of first year students in their early weeks at university.

4.2.1 The open day experiences

The university website suggests that open days are an opportunity for prospective students to talk with staff and students about degree programmes; speak to student advisors about financial support; obtain information and guidance on university life such as accommodation; and take a campus tour. They can, thus, be viewed as a key part of the institution's recruitment strategy (Reay et al, 2005). Open days also give prospective students the opportunity to sample a taster class to introduce the subject area in an interesting and informative manner. The university is a post-1992 university, which sold itself on being accessible to all students regardless of background. The open day literature claimed that:

> Our supportive environment includes mentors for freshers, student peer support and personal academic guidance. Our staff are friendly and approachable, helping you to get the best out of your studies (University web site, accessed 9 September 2008).

The open day is viewed by the university as an opportunity to impress potential customers with the projection of the university as a caring place a central theme of the event, with a strong emphasis on student support. It is informative to note that these events are organised by the university's central marketing department. Burrows and Fazackerley (2008) suggest that the open day experience is important in creating a favourable bonding relationship between the university and applicants. Most students, in Burrows and Fazackerley's (2008) study, stated that forming a good impression of the institution was the deciding factor in their decision to apply to university.

Of the study's nineteen participants, seven had selected the university as their first choice, yet only three attended open day events. This low proportion could be explained by eight of the participants applying through clearing and another six participants applying from outside the UK, although both Pilar (White Italian, 19, Middle Class) and Natalie (White German, 22, Middle Class) travelled from Italy and Germany respectively to attend open days.

The three participants (Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class), Natalie and Pilar) to attend open day events were very impressed with the university and what it had to offer. All three were from middle class backgrounds and it seemed that their cultural and economic capital influenced the decision to attend these events. Reay et al (2005) suggest that students from economically advantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend open days. For many working class students the economic cost of attending events is relatively high while many students from middle class backgrounds expect university to be part of their natural trajectory thus making attendance at open events part of the ritual of going to university (Reay et al, 2005). Further, attendance at open days can ameliorate transitional difficulties encountered in

the new field for students attending these events and potentially increasing feelings of 'otherness' for non-attending applicants who are typically from non-traditional backgrounds. This can give middle class students an advantage in terms of feeling that they fit in or belong (Youthsight, 2012).

The fact that only participants from middle class backgrounds attended open day events introduces social class into the analysis, with the middle class possessing heightened expectations, even certainty, of university entrance which is not found to the same degree amongst the working class (Bathmaker et al, 2013). Amy, Pilar and Natalie self-identified as being middle class using the approach discussed in the previous chapter but none had graduate parents nor accumulations of higher education capital within their family backgrounds and could be defined as first generation students who are usually viewed as non-traditional. This exhibits the complexities of using class to identify, and separate, students. These three students seem to exhibit the reworking of class identities articulated by Savage (2006). Two of the three, Pilar and Natalie, are from Italy and Germany respectively so the occupations of their parents/carers may not fit into the UK approach (ONS, 2011) as a way of identifying social class. This again shows the complexities of using social class. Amy has parents/carers who seem to be in middle class occupations (banking and teaching). Pilar's parents appear to be located in a middle class occupation (shop owners) but I cannot be sure as I do not know the nature of the business or its economic size. Natalie's parents present a problem in terms of occupational classification. Hairdresser is a 'routine and manual occupation', yet the work could be exclusive, in a top salon and highly paid. Policing is classified according to rank. Not having precise information makes categorising difficult but it seems as if Natalie's parents/carers work in manual jobs, yet she self-identified as middle class.

Amy said she had liked the open day, describing it as 'brilliant'. This view of the open day was shared by Natalie, who as noted above had travelled from Germany with her parents. She explained that she and her parents had 'come to London to see…[the] open day and I was very impressed that [the] degree is what I am wanting' (Interview 1). Pilar, from Italy, was also enthusiastic about the open day event and explained:

> The course seemed very good at the open thing and the work experience, I talked to two students just on the street and asked about OK you're doing [degree name], how is that going? And they said they have great job opportunities… (Interview 1).

The positive comments of these participants suggested that all three felt at ease with the university at the open day events. In addition, the three applicants appeared to possess the economic capital of the middle classes described by Reay et al (2005), given their journeys from Cornwall, Italy and Germany respectively to visit the university and gain first hand impressions of life at university.

Later in this chapter I will show that that there were differences between the expectations students had developed as a result of the open day, and their subsequent experiences once they had started their courses. The NUS (2009) note:

> Open days are particularly useful for giving students a flavour of what to expect in terms of their learning and living experiences, but inevitably students tend to agree that it is difficult to envisage what university life will be like until they have actually experienced it for themselves (National Union of Students, 2009:13).

Nevertheless, following the open day events these three participants formed positive impressions and hence had high expectations of what university would be like. The next section explores the expectations of those students with offers who did not attend pre-entry events.

4.2.2 Students with offers

  This section looks at the expectations of the second group of participants none of whom attended open day events. This group comprised eight students holding offers, a number of whom based their pre-entry impressions on information obtained from the university web site. Most were impressed by pictures of buildings, which were described as 'very, very good looking' by Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class) who had researched the course offerings via the university web site. He explained that 'I did lots of research on what I wanted to do when I was at college and this place and the course seemed to fit the bill' (Andy, Interview 1).

  These participants said that they had formed expectations based on what the university said about itself rather than using league tables or Unistat data as sources of knowledge about the university. This highlights the power universities possess to inform decision making. Reay et al (2005) suggest that detailed information such as league tables and Unistat data is more the preserve of the middle class reflecting their advantageous accumulations of cultural capital. This is usually combined with visits to open days to generate a more informed knowledge set of what university will be like.

  Two participants' expectations were at least in part formed by the perceived quality of UK higher education. Velli (White Belgian, 19, No class declared) explained:

> The UK has a good reputation in Europe for higher education. Look at all, you know, the foreign students here in London. So I was expecting a really good education. In Belgium and over Europe universities didn't have such a reputation. There is large classes and no tutorial system as you have here. So I was expecting small groups of students (Velli, Interview 1).

It seems as if the type of positive student experiences Reay et al (2009) discuss in their description of elite universities have a dominating impact on the impressions and expectations of non-UK students. The Russell Group, for example, is comprised of

twenty-four pre-1992 universities who market themselves as being world-class research led institutions (Russell Group, 2014). Similarly, the UK Government tends to market the quality of UK higher education as a key factor in the international marketplace for students (Tickle, 2014). Monique (Black French, 26, Working Class) had also based her positive impressions on the perceived quality of British higher education compared with her native France, explaining that 'The British system is seen to be one of quality' (Monique, Interview 1). The overarching themes to emerge from participants' pre-entry impressions were that for those from outside the UK, British higher education was among the best in the world. In addition, it was expected that teaching would be small group based using modern state of the art buildings.

Most participants had not researched their courses and modules in any detail. Roisin, for example, did not know that there would be seminars to support lectures. It seemed as if the majority of this group were joining university with limited knowledge of what to expect. These participants had applied to this university and received offers but had carried out limited research to inform them of what this university would be like. They all seemed to have based their impressions on web site information and pictures plus, in the case of those from overseas, an articulation of the perceived superiority of British higher education. Many of the participants seemed to think that one university was much the same as another which suggested that they thought there was a single field of UK higher education - a view that the research study of Crozier et al (2008) on four higher education sites challenges, while Bourdieu (1988) argues that there is competition within any field. Naidoo (2004) sees the field as hierarchical with agents and institutions occupying dominant and subordinate places. This suggests that all universities are not the same and can be seen in the way UK universities compete through their membership groups such as

'Million+' for the pre- 1992 universities and 'The Russell Group' for the research intensive institutions to gain distinction from each other's institutions. When looked at in this way, it becomes apparent that UK higher education facilitates and reproduces social classifications. As discussed in Chapter 1, certain universities are highly regarded as institutions of higher learning with students primarily, but not exclusively, from the middle and upper classes (Crozier et al, 2008). These universities are thus seen as superior to other institutions such as post-1992 universities.

4.2.3 The clearing participants

In this section I explore the accounts of five clearing students. Erkan, Tobi and Marcus had formed specific negative impressions of university being difficult and challenging but only Marcus had contacted the university to get reassurances. Geena and Tony had formed general impressions of university life prior to applying. This group was made up of students who applied through the clearing process and could only form their impressions of this university over a very short period of time prior to entry.

Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class) was born in London and lived close to the university. He applied for entry to university under the influence of family and college expectations. Erkan's impression of what this university would be like was based on the experiences of students at his FE College. He explained:

> A few from [name of college] came here last year. That they had some problems. They found classes tough … difficult to understand (Erkan, Interview 1).

Erkan's expectations were based on second-hand knowledge (Reay et al, 2005) of his perception of some negative parts of the university. These seemed to be the only impressions he had of this university, or of higher education in general. Although his impressions were limited he did have second-hand knowledge of

university being 'difficult' and he was aware that students had failed the first year and had left university. His background was very different from those of a traditional student in that he was a first generation student from a working class background with no family history of higher education. One of the dilemmas facing Erkan was his relatively poor qualifications, which limited his 'choices' (Reay et al, 2005) and options resulting in applications to local post-1992 institutions. Crawford (2014) presents evidence, using measures of attainment at key stages in the student's schooling, to show that students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to drop out of university than traditional students. This seemed to be the case with Erkan who left university.

Tobi (Black African, 18, Working Class) had also formed the general impression that university was going to be very demanding and that he would be academically challenged because of his A level results which he felt questioned whether he was right for university. Both Erkan and Tobi formed general impressions that university would be difficult reflecting doubts concerning their right to be in such a setting. In contrast, few of the middle class students expressed any doubts about their rights with university being viewed as part of their intended trajectory.

Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class) was somewhat unusual amongst the participants, especially the non-traditional ones, in that he had sought specific information before applying. Marcus was very concerned about the quantitative analysis module as he found maths difficult. His impression was that he would get support and help. Marcus explained:

> I thought that the maths stuff would be okay as I had asked and asked about the maths module before I applied. I was told that the modules would be okay and there would be lots of support and help when I needed it (Marcus, Interview 1).

Marcus seemed to have the impression that university would be difficult and

also the expectation that he would be supported, perhaps reflecting a desire for a more caring university environment than the 'careless' higher education system portrayed by Lynch (2010).

Tony (White British, 22, Working Class) had general impressions of university based on the experience of his brother who had studied at their local university and had failed his first year. Tony put the failure down to his brother not getting involved in university life, living at home and relying on pre-university friends. These impressions had made Tony want to study in a big city away from Dundee and be determined to get involved at university.

Geena (Black British, 42, Working Class) had gained somewhat superficial impressions of university having formed her views from television and newspaper coverage, but she had high expectations. Geena explained:

> I was working full-time before I came to university. So I was expecting a lot because I was giving up a lot but I hoped that it would be exciting and I'd meet people and learn things. (Geena, Interview 1).

Geena was giving up a full-time job in local government as she felt that the lack of a degree limited promotional opportunities indicating that a degree could transform her career trajectory. Geena left university in frustration at the lack of administrative support and her perception that teaching staff did not care, while Tony stayed. Tony seemed to be very influenced by his brother's experience which made Tony want to be involved as much as possible. Geena also wished to be involved but argued that she never had the opportunity. Their experiences are discussed in greater detail in this and the next two chapters. This is also the case with the other three clearing students – Ben (Black British, 22, Working Class), Kerry (Black British, 22, Working Class) and Sulieman (Black British, 20, Working Class). Sulieman's experiences of university and decision to leave in many ways mirror those of Erkan

and Marcus. The experiences of Ben and Kerry are discussed in detail in this and subsequent chapters. Ben had failed to achieve the required A level grades for his chosen university where he would have studied with friends from school and he decided to study in London to be able to share accommodation with his friends. Thus, his decision to apply for university in London was driven by his sense of belonging to his friends. Kerry is a single mother who saw a university degree as trajectory to a 'better' life for her and her daughter. She wanted to study at a local university to allow her to manage childcare with her family and friends. Her sense of belonging was to her daughter.

In summary, it seemed that the impressions and expectations of participants prior to entry reflected the diversity of their background characteristics. The clearing students were dominated by students from working class, Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds who lacked detailed first-hand knowledge of the university. The participants attending open day events were all middle class, using their economic capital to obtain first-hand impressions. The group with offers not attending open events formed impressions based on second-hand information from the university web site or the perceived quality of UK higher education as a whole. It seemed that those students with the greatest sense of attending the university had the best chance of staying the course, while those entering through clearing were most prone to leave. This is a generalisation, which is challenged by Tony's experience, but it highlights the importance of capital as the clearing students tended to be from working class backgrounds while those with a sense of attending this particular university were more likely to be from middle class backgrounds.

The chapter looks now at the experience of the nineteen participants during Welcome Week. This was their first week at university and it was used as the main

transition mechanism to induct entrants into the academic practices of the university.

4.3 The welcome experience

It wasn't very helpful as a welcome to the university (Marcia, Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared, Interview 1).

The Welcome Week activities were directed at introducing students to the academic culture of the university with the emphasis, in the supporting literature, on the welcoming nature of the institution. The term 'Welcome Week', which is university specific reflecting the importance attached to making students feel welcomed, is inter-changeable with the more common use of the generic term 'induction'. The Vice-Chancellor, in his welcome to students new to the university, suggested that the institution was famous for:

> being a supportive and friendly institution, which allows all our students to achieve their full potential. From the moment you start …, you will receive expert guidance from our teams of professionals who will support you throughout your course.

> We look forward to meeting you, and on behalf of the whole of the University we hope that your time at (the university) will be enjoyable, exciting and rewarding (University Welcome literature, accessed 10 September 2008).

Reay et al (2009) articulate the importance of the development of learner identities in students' feeling comfortable at university, which are enhanced by students feeling supported and nurtured through contact with staff. The university welcome literature emphasised such support, which reinforced the pre-entry view students gained at open day events or through direct contact in the case of Marcus of the university being a supportive environment. New students, for example, were directed to the availability of free support for academic and study skills; writing and communication development; and quantitative and IT skill enhancement.

This initial support in the welcome material needed to be seen in the context of the relatively poor retention, progression and awards profile of the university, where

the percentage of non-continuing students was nearly three times the sector average

over the period 2002 to 2012 (HESA, 2014). Rules and regulations on passing

modules and progressing to the second year were prominent in the Welcome Week

content leading many participants to state that the university did indeed have a

'failure' problem.

The Welcome Week was divided into departmental activities, where the focus

was on the course, and university activities, where centralised functions such the

library, support services and IT were introduced. Each student had a personalised

welcome programme with details of meetings, which the literature explained:

> contain essential information to prepare you for your course, and explain what
> is expected from you as a student. For undergraduate students there are three
> course introductory meetings (University Welcome literature, accessed 11
> September 2008).

The first meetings were intended to introduce students to their course and the

key staff teaching on the course; explain the mechanisms for studying at university;

introduce modules and provide a timetable, which was given to students on the Friday

of Welcome Week; and to allow students to meet fellow students. A faculty welcome

event was arranged by the academic department for the middle of Welcome Week

with the development of a sense of belonging appearing to be a prime motivation for

the event, as:

> Faculty social events for new students are a great opportunity to meet
> academics and support staff from your faculty and ask any questions you may
> have about your course. You will be able to relax and enjoy free refreshments
> and entertainment whilst you make new friends. During your first week as a
> student, there is also the opportunity to take part in a number of social
> activities to help you meet fellow new students, and settle into life at
> university. Details of these activities will be available at enrolment (University
> Welcome literature, accessed 11 September 2008).

Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class), who had attended the open day and the welcome programme, contrasted her views of the two events. Using the term 'induction' to describe the Welcome Week activities, she explained:

> Induction struck me as being very disappointing. It was the opposite of the open day which was brilliant. Induction was poorly organised and tried to do too much but just confused me. It should have been welcoming. Like you welcome someone into your house but don't ignore them. Keep them entertained and warm and content. The uni is like we are here and you make the most of it (Interview 1).

Amy's contrasting of the 'brilliant' open day with the 'disappointing' induction seemed to reflect a general view among participants of feeling ignored and confused during their first week when they wanted to feel welcomed. There is in Amy's narrative the view that people should be given care and attention suggesting that Welcome Week made her feel uncared for. Further, many participants spoke of feeling overloaded with information, which they viewed as irrelevant. Welcome Week was an attempt by the university to explain what was expected of students in a field which for many was a completely new experience but this was described by Amy as the university saying 'This is us – get used to it'. Mann (2001), echoing Amy's critique, argues that the welcome to university needs to be sheltering and nourishing so that students new to university can feel that they are at home. The use of 'home' can be viewed as conveying a sense of familiarity, which is interesting given that many non-traditional students have limited awareness of what their new field will comprise. Mann (2001) suggests that students are initially visitors or strangers who need to be welcomed in such a manner that they feel part of the new environment. Many participants in my study talked of being in a strange and unsettling place. Amy's account suggested that it was the university's institutional habitus and its academic practices that made her feel unwelcomed despite her middle class background. This suggests that transition is a complex issue, which cannot simply be

portrayed as all middle class students as fish in water and others as fish out of water. Class has a part to play but the enriching experiences of non-traditional students in resource-rich elite settings in the Crozier et al (2008) study, demonstrates the importance of feeling cared for in a welcoming environment.

Roisin (White Irish, 19, Working Class) contrasted her prior experience of school with her new experience at university. She explained:

> At school the year 7 and 8 kids are kept away from the others like. They have their own playground and a transitional team of teachers to look after them but here you get the induction and then it's get on with it.

Roisin used her early experiences at secondary school to identify the special treatment she received at school to support transition in contrast to her experience at university. Roisin gives the impression of being thrown into the deep end without any support when she instead wanted a gentle introduction to the ways of university life. Welcome Week seemed, in contrast, to be a very quick introduction to a new field in which she felt that it was her job to navigate the nuances of university.

The narratives of these participants conveyed a sense of Welcome Week being about them needing to conform and commit to the rules and regulations of university when they wanted a more socially inclusive approach to their transition into the new field of university. They were left feeling that integration was their own individual responsibility, reflecting the dominant theme of the early American literature on student attrition and persistence dominated by Tinto (1975).

Both Amy and Roisin indicated that their experiences of university were at odds with their initial expectations leading them to view the institution as unsupportive and uninviting. From these participants' accounts, it appears that the university was primarily concerned with using Welcome Week to address its relatively high failure rate through a mantra of rules and regulations, which seemed to

ignore the importance of students making social connections. This was, again, a theme identified by Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class). When I asked Evelyn about her Welcome Week experience she told me that:

> Induction is a very cold experience. It was for me. I just sat there and was frightened by what was being said about regulations and failing and I was thinking that it was a bit negative, that it needed to be a real welcome and a chance for people to get to know each other. And that induction should be for a couple of weeks after term starts and not just one week. Especially if you miss it but … the danger time is the first weeks and more attention is needed to get people to start getting friends (Evelyn, interview 1).

Roisin drew on her supportive transition to school to articulate the importance of being helped and supported, while Amy talked of the need to feel warm and content and here Evelyn used the word 'cold' to convey her unhappiness with Welcome Week. Her lack of interaction with the welcome process was evident in her account of 'just sitting there' and listening. Evelyn emphasised the importance of having opportunities to meet people suggesting that social integration was important to her and something she had expected. The stress on rules and regulations is criticised by Gale and Parker (2012) in their description of induction styles leading them to argue for a transmission process which affirms the subjectivities and experiences of all students, especially non-traditional ones. Participants' comments, which captured the views of the majority, made with at least four weeks' experience of life at university, suggested that Welcome Week had not provided them with the type of transition required to ease their journey into the field of higher education. This was, for the majority, a new field, which their prior dispositions had not prepared them for. Even Amy, from a middle class background with an awareness of higher education from friends and school, felt disoriented by her Welcome Week experience. Many of the participants' spoke of the welcome programme being too short, over focused on their individual responsibilities and lacking in adequate social content. The

issue of adequate support, especially academic support, continued to be a dominant theme in participants' narratives of life at university, and it is one that is returned to in subsequent chapters.

Carter and McNeill (1998) argue that induction, although they prefer the term 'guidance', is not a state but a process and that the length of the process should be largely dictated by the student. They suggest that the process should include social and personal dimensions, such as opportunities to meet people, and also deal with academic issues in real time. Whittaker (2007) also argues that transition should be a process across the first year of university, while Knox (2005) proposes a first year module on staying at university. As Evelyn said 'the danger time is the first weeks' and she argued that the emphasis should be on helping 'people to start getting friends' which is identified by Brooman and Darwent (2014) and Youthsight (2014) as an important part of feeling welcomed at university.

The university literature seemed to be very concerned with student retention and progression and thus portrayed Welcome Week as an integral part of the initiative to produce academically successful students. Evelyn, however, believed that opportunities to meet people were more important than being told the regulations about failing. This was commensurate with the research of Yorke and Longden (2008) who argue that meeting people and developing friendships are important parts of a positive higher education experience, which could help to reduce student drop out. Further, the emphasis on academic regulations, especially failure, constructed the university, in the opinion of many participants, as an institution where lots of students failed which challenged their excitement of being at university and clearly frightened Evelyn and other participants. Roisin, for example, explained:

> Lots of stuff about failing and the regulations and getting at least 25 in
> modules and you're getting just very confused and they're saying that there

will be help and support if you need and go to the office but the queues! (Interview 1).

It seemed as if Welcome Week was a one size fits all, utilitarian approach to transition which did not take into account the needs of the students (Gale and Parker, 2012) or meet its stated purpose of welcoming students and helping them to meet people and make friends.

The student transition experience was also compromised by the manner in which timetables were issued as the department promised to provide students with hard copy timetable information during Welcome Week but many participants did not receive the correct information, causing difficulties during their first week of teaching. These experiences and how they impacted on participants' views of fitting in and belonging are discussed next.

4.4 Timetabling – get me to the class on time

Lots of rushing around and the size of the place and trying to understand the timetable (Evelyn, Black African, 47, Middle Class, Interview 1).

Students started their course programmes in the week after the welcome event. Thus induction needed to provide them with sufficient knowledge and information to get started. One particular issue causing difficulties was the somewhat problematic matter of timetabling. This section explores how students received the information, what they could do if the details were incorrect and the experience of students who did not obtain a timetable.

All participants cited timetabling as a challenging part of transition but it was a particular concern for students with childcare responsibilities such as Kerry and Evelyn. Students with care responsibilities, who are usually women, need help with timetabling (Alsop et al, 2008) from the institution so that they can fit their care responsibilities with life at university.

According to the Welcome Week programme, students were promised that they would each be personally issued with their own timetable. Students were further promised that the coded nature of the timetable information, especially the location of classes, would be explained to them to ease their transition into university. If students had timetable problems, then they were instructed to visit their Undergraduate Office for help and advice. Students could also obtain their timetables via the internet but many participants spoke of wanting the promised face to face relationship with staff as they found the university system for identifying buildings and rooms to be strange and confusing given their newness to the field. Natalie (White German, 22, Middle Class) explained:

> I had found the university to be slightly disorganised in that the timetable was late to be given to us and this confused many of the students and the way the timetable was given. It was to be given in induction but you were required in the end to look at the timetable site (Interview 1).

Welcome Week had made the provision of timetables seem like a personal event with participants stating that they were promised a face to face explanation of their timetable and its meaning. This event was anticipated with excitement by most participants as it was the start of the teaching programme and indicated that the university cared about them as individuals. However, the personalised issuing of timetables did not take place due to administrative staff being overwhelmed and students were directed to use online sources instead. This led to many participants missing classes during the first week of teaching due to confusion over the information. Welcome Week had emphasised what was expected of students but had failed to deal with what students had expected. This led a number of participants to see the university as disorganised as well as unsupportive and re-enforced the feeling that they were on their own to face long queues. Even at this early stage some participants were having doubts about fitting in at university.

A few participants also experienced problems with gaining entry to classes as only those present during Welcome Week were allocated seminar groups. Geena's case illustrated what could happen to students entering a new field with which they are unfamiliar. She could not attend Welcome Week due to applying towards the end of clearing and so she arrived at university on the first Monday of teaching without a timetable. Geena (Black British, 42, Working Class), who was giving up her job, wanted to get involved with the university straight away. She explained:

> I wanted my timetable, as soon as possible, but the undergraduate centre wasn't able to give me my timetable for week one. So I missed some classes, but I was able to find out where some classes was held. But the teachers said I was in the wrong group and to go to the undergraduate centre and sort it out, but I just wanted to start studying and everything was against me, wasn't it? So, I never really got going, and then when I got the right timetable in week 3 it was all too late (Interview 1).

The absence of a formal timetable meant that students were not on the module attendance register, which was constructed during Welcome Week, and teaching staff were instructed that only students on their register were permitted to attend seminars. Entry was, thus, at the discretion of the teacher and a member of staff who followed departmental regulations to stop non-registered students attending could be positioned as uncaring and disinterested by the excluded student. The student, as in the case of Geena, was required 'to go to the undergraduate centre and sort it out.' The onus was again on the student to find solutions to their problems when they did not know how to given their lack of knowledge of the culture and practices of the new field. She explained that:

> you stand in a corridor for ages. You get to the counter, and then they tell you to go somewhere else. But when you go to the next place they say, go to the undergraduate office, but I ain't queuing again, am I? I should be in class, studying, but I'm wasting time queuing and getting messed around (Geena, interview 2).

The result was that Geena 'never really got going.' She received her timetable at the end of week 3, which allowed her to attend seminars but by then Geena felt that she missed out on an academic welcome to her modules. She explained:

> teachers said look at the (online support) for things (to substitute for the missing seminars) but I wanted to talk to people. Not look at a computer. So this start was not good. I needed help. Talk to people. Get booklets. I was disappointed and didn't feel that the University cared. I was scared about going to university anyway, but I turned up in week one ready, I think and the University wasn't ready, I think. So, the problems, like, started early and I never really got over them (Geena, interview 1).

Again, there is the clash between the desire for the warm and personal support promised if problems occurred and the cold reality of being directed to on-line alternatives or having to queue instead of being in class. Geena suggested that the principal reason for her decision to leave university was the fact that she never really got going or involved. She explained:

> I spent so much time trying to get information and help that I never really had the chance to meet people and fit in (Interview 1).

Geena felt that the university 'should be geared up to cope with people who start late' but she explained that she was at university on the first day of teaching.

> I didn't start late, did I? No, I was here in the first week, but never got my timetable … I cared a lot, but the place didn't … you want to talk to someone and get the information then. Not wait. But you wait each day … And then you think does the University want me? I ain't so sure (Interview 1).

It seemed that the university had positioned Geena as a late starter, which she challenged, but she lacked the power to do anything about her situation. She discovered the time and place of lectures from her second week at university but was prevented from attending seminars until the beginning of her fourth week. Geena expected that the university would be supportive and the lack of support seemed to have been a key factor in her decision to leave. Geena also used interesting phrases to express her feelings: 'Everything was against' her and 'it was all too late'. Geena

described her application to attend university as one where she was giving up a lot, her job, to get a lot, a degree, which would provide her with career progression opportunities. Bourdieu (1996) talks of the 'mechanisms', which can transform or reproduce and it seemed that Geena had hoped that university would be transformative. For Geena, attending university was a risk as she was giving up a permanent job. Archer and Hutchings (2000) argue that the risks and rewards associated with higher education study are unequal reflecting capital endowments such as family background, education and economic capitals and that university is a much riskier undertaking for non-traditional students than it is for those from middle class backgrounds. Geena's background, as a 42-year-old women student from a working class family with no history of higher education, did not give access to people who could have helped her. She tried to catch up by attending lectures and so demonstrated commitment and agency but despite this she was unable to integrate. This therefore problematises the emphasis on student commitment in, for example, Tinto's (1975) work which claims that student commitment is key to student integration. Students may be highly committed to university but of itself this is not enough to guarantee integration and so this questions the emphasis placed on individual responsibility by researchers working in the tradition of the student persistence literature discussed in Chapter 2.

Pilar (White Italian, 19, Middle Class) had a different timetable experience from Geena, but one which also left her feeling unsupported. She explained:

> I was given a schedule with two modules at the same time and you think is this right? I was amazed really that I could be given a timetable from the undergraduate centre that made no sense and then you get told that it's your problem and that you need to solve it but ... it was not my problem was it? I was given this timetable which made no sense and then I have to queue for ages to tell them that they have made a mistake and they say 'You'll get a new timetable in 48 hours' and nobody says sorry or gives you the feeling that they care (Interview 1).

Pilar, who had attended the welcome events as well as an open day, felt that the timetable problem was for her to solve just as it was for Geena. This experience of feeling unsupported was also shared by Tobi (Black African, 18, Working Class), who felt that timetable problems had forced him to reflect on his decision to join the university. Tobi explained:

> I had some timetable problems and that was difficult to get sorted. Waiting outside the undergraduate centre. That again made me feel unsure. I was getting texts and calls from my friends at [other] uni[s] and they were having a proper good time, know what I mean? (Interview 1).

Tobi seemed to think that his friends had no problems as they enjoyed a more social transition into their universities, while he was spending his time waiting for answers, which heightened his doubts about choice of university. It seemed that Tobi's friends were happy, while he lacked a sense of security. These three participants, who each gave the impression of feeling marginalised, made sense of their experiences by positioning the university as being unhelpful and uncaring.

Tobi, Pilar and Geena were all first generation students, although from different social classes, who seemed to lack knowledge of the rules of the game (Reay et al, 2009) at university to get their timetabling problems resolved. Tobi and Geena were self-declared working class students with no family habitus of higher education, while Pilar described herself as middle class. Her middle class habitus was culturally specific from her life in Italy, which appeared to provide only limited knowledge of the nuances of life at a UK university. In common with the other non-UK participants, Pilar was attracted to the university by the perceived quality of British higher education, which she thought would enhance her economic capital compared with a degree from an Italian university. Crozier et al (2008) suggest middle class students at university are better prepared for university than working class students due to

advice received from family members and their intensive preparation for higher

education at school which develops their knowledge of the rules of the game. But

being a middle class student is not enough as the experiences of Pilar and other

participants show. Fitting in and belonging is more complex, reflecting institutional

habitus and practices, in particular help, support and guidance. The next section looks

at opportunities for meeting people and making friends in the first weeks at university.

4.5 Opportunities and places to meet people

Social integration is seen as an important element in student belonging

(Christie and Dinham, 1991; Christie et al, 2004), which is enhanced by having

opportunities to meet people and make friends (Thomas, 2002). Research on

'excellent' early experiences and student drop-out by YouthSight (2014) demonstrates

the importance of university-led activities. Their findings show that retention is higher

in those institutions with the greatest opportunities to socialise in the early weeks of

university.

According to Peat et al (2001), who look at factors enhancing the university

experience of first year students:

> the establishment of social networks was beneficial in terms of social and
> academic adjustment, and in some instances indicated that their new
> friendships helped them in their studies and helped address the problems of
> isolation and anxiety (27).

The university in this study promoted itself, in its recruitment literature, as

being a place to meet people and make friends. As part of the recruitment process the

university sought to provide potential students with information based on existing

students' experiences of life at university. One student profiled on the university web

site explained:

> It was a very friendly class, and the differences in culture made our friendships
> and classes more interesting. Coming from a completely different culture, I

felt nervous about socialising in the beginning. But the University not only gave me this invaluable education, but also such a friendly atmosphere that I now enjoy socialising with people from all these different countries (University Course Information, accessed 12 September 2008).

Further, the 'Tips for Success at University' webpage suggests that getting to know people is one of the best ways to succeed.

Not knowing people in such a busy and large environment can be daunting at first. You will get to know other students on your course but you can also make new friends by joining one of the many societies at the University which cater for a specific interest you may have, be it sports, politics, music or art. Work with other students on your course in groups and learn with and from them. Or get support from a more experienced peer. Try to go to as many events as you can at the beginning; it will give you an opportunity to get to know people and to get yourself known (Starting University webpage, accessed 12 September 2008).

Many participants felt that the overloaded nature of Welcome Week had prevented them from meeting people, which was unfortunate as all of the nineteen participants talked about the importance of meeting people and making friends. For example, Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class) explained:

Well, we all need friends, don't we? You need to talk to people and do things with people. Yes, having friends is very important to me. I don't think that I could be here and not have friends. It's obvious that some people struggle to integrate here. You see them on their own a lot and they seem to spend most weekends going home (Interview 1).

It is important to note that the university is not a single campus university but rather a collection of non-integrated teaching and support buildings spread across three London boroughs with the closest student accommodation over two miles from the nearest teaching buildings at the time the study was conducted. This made the university significantly different from campus arrangements where buildings and accommodation are in close, and sometimes integrated, proximity. Amy seemed to talk about what Solomon (2007) describes as a state of liminality where students are caught between the new world of university and their old world of home, with some escaping to the protective familiarity of home at every opportunity. Evelyn (Black

African, 47, Middle Class) had questioned her right to be at university and talked about the protection she obtained from going home to the security of her family after a challenging day at university. At home there were friendly faces but at university she felt isolated with no one to talk to. Evelyn was able to go home every night but the students Amy talked of seemed to be on their own, away from home during the week. Palmer et al (2009) argue that students may suffer from 'friendsickness' when they begin university, as they leave behind their pre-university friends and experience a friendship void in the new field. This seemed to be what happened to some of the participants and was most pronounced for Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class) who left behind his safe and secure college-based network of Turkish friends. Erkan explained:

> I had friends who was Turkish such as me and they would help me (at college) if I didn't understand the way the teacher is talking but not here. Which is a big problem (Interview 1).

Both Palmer et al (2009) and Solomon (2007) maintain that if the void is not filled quickly then transition can be threatened. Evelyn, when asked about the importance of making friends, told me that she would have left if she had not made friends in the early weeks, Amy linked the need to make friends to fitting in and Erkan identified his big problem as the lack of friends in his new field.

The first weeks, thus, seem to be an important time for the formation of friendships. For instance, Velli (White Belgian, 19, No class), who spoke of being lonely at university, told me that not having opportunities to meet people had created a difficult start. It seemed that his lack of friends was the tipping point for Velli in leading him to leave university as he explained that he was not struggling with the course and was comfortable with the modules. Rather the issue for Velli was the limited opportunities to meet people at university. It seemed, therefore, to be the case

that meeting people and forming friendships at university was, for most participants, an important part of developing a sense of belonging. This reflects research highlighting the importance of social integration in enabling students to feel part of university, from the work of Spady (1970) to recent research by Burke et al (2013).

Participants also discussed the places and opportunities for meeting other students. The student union was presented by the university as an accessible place to meet people with the student union web page endorsing the university view of the importance of meeting people:

> There are many chances to participate at life at (name of university), and to meet new people and have a good time. The most important thing is to get involved and make the most of your time here (Student union web site, accessed 5 September 2008).

The onus seemed to be on students to 'get involved' which many participants struggled with. Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class) thought that the social provision was poor and uncompetitive. He explained:

Some of the nights they put on here … I mean I've been to some student unions before, particularly the one in Plymouth. And in order to compete with the clubs and the club nights that happen in the big city, they've got to work their game with the kind of acts they're going to put on there and the kind of people they're going to invite. They need to really think about the venue and think about what's going to attract people (Interview 1).

Andy felt that students living in London would not be excited by university events given the competition available from other venues. This, I suggest, could limit opportunities to meet people. Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class) had also visited the student union and found it to be a place with little activity to hold his interest. Crozier et al (2008) suggest that social activities can be the vehicles which enable students to make friends but they stress that social experiences can vary across educational institutions; while Quinn et al (2005) suggest that decisions to drop out from university can be influenced by the lack of social provision. Quinn et al (2005)

argued that the best social experiences, in terms of making friends, is campus based. When students lived away from the university centre they tended to drift from university in the absence of opportunities to meet people. This could be further exacerbated by perceptions of limited social provision. The student experience of social events at this university appeared to be consistent with Crozier et al's (2008) description of a non-campus university with disappointing social provision, which limited the scope for students to meet people and develop friendships. The campus and non-campus dichotomy did not, however, capture all of the issues with reference to access to social activities as other factors such as living at home; term time work and other commitments can influence student access and usage of social amenities. This tends to be especially pronounced for non-traditional students given funding arrangements. Participants were, however, disappointed by the social provision.

Andy and Ben were comfortable in visiting the university's social spaces but seemed to be unhappy with the social offering from the perspective of its quality. Reay et al (2005) talk of new universities marketing themselves as being accessible but this was challenged by some participants, especially women, who described the student union as being a very masculine space, as discussed below. Thus, the social spaces were seen as unwelcoming by some women students as well as being viewed as poor quality by some men students.

Natalie (White German, 22, Middle Class), also, found the scheduled events to be disappointing and not what she had expected given the information in the prospectus and provided in Welcome Week. As a consequence, Natalie, in common with other students interviewed, did not get involved in social activity at university. Andy described the main events venue as 'dark and dingy' and a place where it was

difficult to talk to people. Other students appeared to agree with this view. Roisin

(White Irish, 19, Working Class) explained:

> The cafeteria downstairs is not that nice and the (entertainment complex) is so
> dark and some people don't drink and so yes we need a place where you can
> go to like socialise but it needs to be okay. Like a common room but with
> things in it (Interview 2).

Pilar (White Italian, 19, Middle Class) spoke about students being lonely due

to the quality of the social facilities. She explained:

> There aren't any social events for them to go to, so they want to socialise and
> they want to make a life for themselves in London, but there isn't anything
> going on. So I do think it's very important and I don't think our uni does
> enough for students, I think people get lost and people get lonely and people
> leave (Interview 1).

Burke (2006) suggests that women from culturally diverse backgrounds do not

enjoy the same social facilities that men do with many participants in this study

voicing similar sentiments. Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) thought that the

social provision was built around men and alcohol. She explained:

> I think that a lot of their social scene is drinking which worries me … just the
> boys and drinking … the young ones in the group talk a lot about drinking
> which worries me. I don't like drinking and worry about them but it seems that
> that is a big part of their social life (Interview 1).

Evelyn's comments portrayed a caring concern but they also emphasised that

the social spaces lacked places where all students, not just men, could meet people in

comfortable surroundings. A similar point is reported in research by the University of

Sussex (2014) on the gendered culture of higher education. Phipps and Young (2013)

suggest that 'lad culture' is having a harmful and negative impact on the educational

experience of women students which is a development also identified in the work of

Dempster and Jackson (2014). The masculinised nature of university is captured by

the alleged behaviour of the London School of Economics rugby club, which

described women students as 'slags', and 'mingers' in a leaflet handed out at a

Fresher's Fair (BBC, 2014). Many women participants in my study described some men students as being forward, persistent and annoying in their attempts to talk to women students in the bars leading many women participants to avoid these spaces. Monique (Black French, 26, Working Class) also thought that the student union was exclusionary as the theme was drinking and only drinking which challenged her sensitivities as both a Muslim and a woman. She explained:

> The student union is a place for drinking but … so no, not like this. A place for all students to be going not for drink alone I think (Interview 1).

Many participants thought that the social provision was based on a particular student type, the White male home (not EU or international) student, and so not consistent with the degree of student diversity found at the university. Students bring different dispositions to university and it seemed as if the majority of the women students in this study had a view of socialising different from what could be constructed as a masculinised approach to social provision on the part of the university. The perception that there was only one type of social activity, drinking alcohol, could be seen as exclusionary leading some students, mainly women, to say that they were not part of university.

4.6 Conclusions

This chapter explored participants' initial expectations of university from the perspectives of pre-entry impressions and post-entry experiences. The pre-entry expectations appeared to reflect the social background of participants with middle class students attending open day events, which allowed them to obtain first-hand information of university that produced very positive expectations. On the other hand, the clearing participants, who were overwhelmingly from working class backgrounds, had at best second-hand information on which to form their expectations, which were

that university would be challenging and difficult. This would suggest that clearing students are particularly vulnerable in the early weeks as confirmed in this study.

Welcome Week was an unsettling experience for the majority of participants, regardless of social class, indicating that belonging is much more about institutional habitus and academic practices than simply being from a particular social grouping. Middle class students such as Amy and Pilar, who had attended open day events, did not experience the 'fish in water' transition sometimes associated with being a traditional student.

The perceived lack of a social welcome during Welcome Week where participants had hoped to meet people and make friends was exacerbated by the limited opportunities to socialise in the early weeks of the first semester. Participants made the point forcibly that friends were important to developing a sense of belonging and their absence could lead to people leaving university. Social spaces were criticised by participants as being unfit for the purpose of meeting people, with a number of women commenting that the spaces were dominated by a masculinised culture of alcohol which they found uncomfortable. The one size fits all approach to socialising was challenged by most participants.

Many participants viewed the early weeks of university as being unsupportive due to the perception that they were on their own, especially if problems arose. This was more pronounced for non-traditional students such as Geena who lacked appropriate capital accumulations to negotiate the new field.

The overwhelming view of the participants at the end of their early weeks was of a university where developing a sense of belonging might be difficult, if not impossible due to the perceived mismatch of expectations and the lived experience of

university. The next chapter examines the importance of support, help and guidance to participants' feelings of being part of university life.

Chapter 5: The role of care in creating a sense of belonging

It looks like a place that does not really care. (Marcia, Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared*).*

5.1 Introduction

Many researchers (Burke, 2006; Burke et al, 2013; Crozier et al, 2008; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Mariskind, 2014) identify the importance of 'care' in helping students to fit in at university with care encapsulating help, support and feedback. Care, which Mariskind (2014) argues is under-researched in higher education, seems to be especially important to non-traditional students (Bandura and Lyons, 2010) compared with their middle class peers given the limited accumulations of capital they bring to university and their consequent lack of familiarity with the new field. Bourdieu (1984) has described the way in which higher education can be socially reproductive in its favouring of students from middle class backgrounds. Care provision could help to make higher education more transformative for working class students by easing their transition into university life.

The theme of care around help, support and guidance runs through this chapter. E-learning as an impersonal experience is discussed in the first section and this is followed by the related issue for participants of being positioned as independent learners at entry. Many participants spoke of feeling that they were on their own. This feeling of isolation also emerged in participants' accounts of contact with teaching staff, the rarity of staff using their names and the lack of feedback. These themes are examined in third, fourth and penultimate sections. The chapter finishes with a concluding section.

5.2 E-learning as an impersonal experience

As discussed in Chapter 3, many researchers, including Pascarella and Terenzini (1977), Tinto (1993) and Stuart et al (2009), suggest that academic integration is of importance as to whether or not students feel that they belong at university, with the pedagogy of their programme likely to be an important part of this integration. This pedagogy is experienced by students through teaching and learning activities, with Booth (1997) arguing that:

> Teaching … requires sensitivity to the student perspective in terms of interests, needs and expectations when constructing an educational environment and academic courses which connect directly with the ways in which students learn (206).

This suggests that the pedagogical practices of the university could play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging. To foreground the discussion on e-learning the section starts with a discussion of the teaching and learning strategy of the university and its impact on the lived experiences of students and their constructions of university life. The university's learning and teaching strategy states that the pedagogic model used:

> moves forward from the previous Learning and Teaching Strategy by foregrounding e-learning as a key element of quality enhancement, to engage and support students by offering them more opportunities to study at place and time of their own choosing … Given the increasingly digitised, distributed and mobile nature of learning in the 21st Century, the University has committed to a blended learning model that integrates best practice electronic and face to face modes of learning and teaching (University Learning and Teaching Strategy).

This strategy of blended learning could be a positive development if it enabled more students, for example those with disabilities, to access higher education. However, a 'place and time of their own choosing' approach could also, potentially, threaten student attendance at university which many researchers, from Tinto (1975) through to Reay et al (2009), see as being important for participant involvement and, thus, for providing opportunities to meet people. It seemed as if the university was

promoting an individualistic and distanced approach to study when the research on student belonging emphasised the importance of face to face contact.

During their first weeks at university students experienced this blended learning pedagogy with its emphasis on e-learning. This was a new experience for the majority of the participants as most had had an exclusive face to face approach to teaching and learning prior to university. The pedagogical approach announced in the above strategy required every module in the university having an online presence to be a repository of information supporting the module. The virtual learning environment (VLE) was, in 2008, a major part of the change to the blended learning pedagogy and as such was a new experience for both students and staff. This is no longer the situation given the emergence of Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social networking but at the time of the interviews few participants had familiarity with e-learning. More recent research, however, has also raised questions about e-learning. Wong (2012) in her research on the e-learning experience of first year students concludes that they prefer face to face contact in lectures and tutorials compared with online learning and that learning is not improved by the use of VLEs, which is consistent with the findings of this study. Lu and Churchill (2012) look at the role of social media on learning engagement concluding that its impact was short-lived and favoured students who already had familiarity with the use of social media in educational settings. Oliver et al (2014) suggest that university students need at least two years of online learning experience at school or college to prepare them for the transition to academic practices using e-learning.

The majority of participants were critical of the amount of e-learning they were exposed to in their first semester at university. First, they felt that there was no introduction on how to navigate the online facility. Secondly, they reported that the

amount of information was overwhelming, poorly presented and lacked a coherent

layout. Thirdly, the students complained that sites lacked uniformity and were, thus,

confusing. Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class) thought that online material:

> should be used more as a secondary system if you're struggling or if you need
> somewhere to source information from, as a secondary system. If you're
> having problems with the way you're being taught and you're really struggling
> then (the online material) can be there to help, that's the way it should be. But
> it shouldn't be the primary learning system in the university … I think that's
> wrong. I mean students come to be inspired by lecturers and interact with
> them (Interview 1).

Ben, in common with other participants, had an expectation that university

would be about having contact and interaction with inspirational lecturers. It seemed

that university had been marketed as possessing high levels of support, which

appeared to be a feature that participants found to be reassuring. The e-learning

strategy seemed to be a challenge to participants' expectations as they had anticipated

university being interactive and not so reliant on VLEs. In addition, participants did

not have the level of pre-entry school or college experience of online learning

suggested by Oliver et al (2014) as being necessary for successful transition into the

e-learning practices of higher education.

Geena (Black British, 42, Working Class), who thought that the online

material was an easy way for teaching staff to avoid having to deal with students

directly, explained:

> I talked to the lecturers for help but all I got was look at (the online material)
> and download it. But I was new to (the online material) and didn't know
> where or how to. So I got behind (Geena, interview 1).

Geena explained that she was scared by computers, which I think reflected her

educational background and was shown in her uncertainty with reference to not

knowing what to do or where to go to secure help and support at university. Geena

had been comfortable using computers at work saying that this was due to the support

and training she had received. So Geena was not really scared by computers but rather the level of support given. As a consequence, she, like other participants, articulated a sense of being lost in the confusion of e-learning. Further, the issue of preparation was, I suggest, related to the fact that the e-learning pedagogy was a completely new venture for the university. Sharrar and Bigatel (2014) argue that moving a face to face course online without losing student engagement is an onerous project involving detailed work if the 'personality' of the pedagogy, that is the features of a face to face encounter, is to be retained.

Participants' comments on their experience of the VLEs suggested that e-learning was not properly developed; lacked consistency and individualised the student in a relationship with a computer screen. It appeared that the university had introduced a strategy without providing appropriate resourcing to retain the personal dimensions valued by the participants. The importance of the personal was articulated by Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class) who had anticipated an experience emphasising teaching. She explained that 'The open day had focused on, emphasised the quality of the teaching and the different approaches taken to assessment. And that excited me' (Interview 1). Again expectations and their impact on habitus were challenged by the interpretations participants gave to the e-learning strategy. It appeared that this strategy was perceived as denying students the accessibility that had been promised. Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class) had also looked forward to a university experience rich in teaching explaining that:

> They take you in and they teach you something no other university could and then by the end of it you'd be this almighty machine ready to take the world on. That's basically how it was marketed to me and that's what I thought I would be coming into (Interview 1).

Andy seemed to think that this unique field of higher education would change his economic capital and his trajectory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Many

participants felt that the university had overplayed the role of teaching in its marketing activity. In addition, they suggested that the emphasis on e-learning had not been conveyed to them and they had been surprised by the subsequent reliance on VLEs. This led them to feel that they were in at the deep end without any support creating feelings of insecurity, panic and disaffection. Chloe (White British, 20, Middle Class), like Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class), appreciated the need to use computers but felt that:

> … having someone actually show me on a screen saying you've got to click on this, you've got to do this, the booklet doesn't tell you how to look in Excel and tell you where the things are. So actually seeing it is so much more beneficial. I think you have to have the computer in front of you and someone showing you (Interview 1).

We again see participants articulating their difficulties when faced with the academic practice of the new field. The issue seemed to be that students felt isolated by e-learning and instead wanted a more social, interactive education which allowed them to ask questions informed by their experiences in their previous fields of school and college. Marcia (Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared), also, saw technology as a substitute for personal contact. She explained:

> I'm not that happy with all the online stuff. I thought that university is about talking, talking and exchanging ideas but a lot of the time it's just look at (the online material). So why go to the lecture and seminar if it's all on the computer? (Interview 2).

For Marcia, the importance of 'going' to class is, again, undermined by the use of VLEs, which appeared to accentuate participants' desire for a social educational experience. Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class), who was one of the participants to leave university during his first year, was also unhappy with the emphasis on e-learning and the lack of contact with staff which had made him 'hate computers and feel lost' (Marcus, Interview 1). Similarly, Roisin (White Irish, 19, Working Class) wanted a personal teaching experience, describing the computer as:

just words and I can't hear what they say or the way they say things. When you come to university you want to see people, the teacher, like at school and not be told 'Look at the website' because we need to see the teacher and interact with them. You can't do that with a computer (Interview 3).

Again Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital seemed to be useful in analysing what participants said about e-learning. Most of the participants tended to have limit knowledge of the new field of higher education. Further, their schooling seemed to be highly supportive which had informed their views on what education should be. The outcome seemed to be that the new field's academic practice was difficult to accommodate to. E-learning seemed to be particularly challenging for non-traditional students such as Geena and Marcus who rejected the e-learning approach, while Chloe and Ben, both from White, middle class backgrounds, recognised the need for e-learning, although they both criticised parts of its pedagogical practice.

Most participants wanted an e-learning pedagogy, which provided support for the teaching rather than appearing to replace it as their biggest fear was being left behind. This was especially true for students who were uncomfortable with computers and felt that they needed more one to one help and less independent learning creating feelings of isolation and being on their own. This was particularly the case for some participants from non-traditional backgrounds who had struggled academically at school, such as Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class) and Sulieman (Black British, 20, Working Class), and who seemed to find the new field and its practices particularly challenging. The learning support offered to them via the online facility simply increased feelings of isolation and not feeling cared for, while the emphasis on computers and on-line work seemed to distance students from staff and the university. Students contrasted the personal relationship, sometimes one to one help, they had experienced at school and college with the instruction to look at the online material at university as an indication that the university did not care.

Marcus, who believed that he had been promised support with his learning, contrasted his positive experience at college with his time at university. He explained:

> At college you got a test every week and it was marked and the tutor sat down with you and went through the test and you were told how to improve and here it's look at the screen and look at (the online material) (Interview 1).

Marcus described his learning experiences at college in terms, which suggested a supportive pedagogy, but university was a completely new experience, which his prior experiences had not prepared him for. The promised help that was a major theme of Welcome Week appeared to be absent when teaching started. Again, it appeared to participants that students were required to fend for themselves.

A number of the participants were non-traditional students, for example Geena, (Black British, 42, Working Class), Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class) and Marcus, who achieved the required entry qualifications but did not possess the cultural capital to allow them to 'swim with the tide' at university. One participant who appeared to swim with the tide of university was Tony (White British, 22, Working Class). However, he also expressed doubts about the emphasis on e-learning.

Tony, who was very positive about the quality of the teaching, felt that e-learning could stop students coming to university. He explained:

> Students just use the place for teaching and don't get involved. They can even avoid lectures with the online stuff. There is a bit of an Open University feel from some students. You can hear them saying that you don't need to come because it's all on Blackboard and that you can do the stuff at home but you need to come. I'm here all the time because I love it and it pays big dividends. You get to see people a lot more and they become friends and you work together and talk in class and sit together in lectures (Interview 2).

Tony's views on attending and getting involved seemed to be influenced by the experience of his eldest brother, who lived at home while studying at university and left during his first year. Tony felt that his brother never really involved himself at university where he had few friends and so limited the time he spent at university to

the minimum. Tony's approach seemed to reflect his brother's experiences and consequently influenced his attitude to university and e-learning. But it is important to recognise that most participants did not have similar experiences to those of Tony with which to inform their habitus.

E-learning appeared to have been an alienating experience for participants in a number of ways. First, participants identified the strategy as a way of reducing personal contact with teachers by increasing impersonal contact with computers. The university argued that their strategy was, in part, to prepare students for employment but many participants viewed it as the university's attempt to cope with large student intakes. Secondly, participants felt that the e-learning strategy, which some, mainly middle class students, viewed as beneficial, was under-resourced in terms of the help they were given. The general view was that too much of their learning was structured around e-learning and participants' narratives were indicative of feeling lost and unsupported when they were forced to confront what they regarded as the impersonal and non-responsive computer screen. Finally, Tony and Amy's (White British, 22, Middle Class) points on the use of VLEs and their impact on attendance and involvement appeared supportive of the university's strategic view that students should be able to study at a time and place of their own choosing. These participants', however, argued that university study was about being at university but VLEs offered an alternative, which the university seemed to encourage. The e-learning strategy appeared to push students away from the institutional setting they had applied to be part of, whether it was the substitution of face to face interaction for the computer screen, reduced opportunities to engage with teachers, or students not being physically required to be at university. The result was that the university was constructed as being uncaring and lacking in personal contact with staff, which was

exacerbated by the assumption that students were independent learners. The manner in which the e-learning strategy of the university was presented to students appeared to make it more difficult for them to develop a sense of belonging as the strategy discouraged attendance and individualised them. The assumption of student being independent learners at entry, made by the university, was challenged by participants and is discussed in the next section.

5.3 Independent learners?

Leathwood (2006) and Reay et al (2009) argue that the pedagogic practices of higher education assume that students are independent learners who will require limited access to, and help from, teaching staff. This assumption appears to play a significant role in Government policy discourses toward higher education with its stress on producing independent learners. The university seemed to have accepted these assumptions in an unproblematised fashion as well but Leathwood (2006), for example, suggests that describing students as independent learners also produces its binary opposite, the dependent learner, and that this is problematic given that the status of the independent learner is highly regarded and something that students would wish to aspire to. Independence in learning is influenced by what students bring to university in terms of social class, schooling and parental attributes. The work of Leathwood (2006) is thus critically important in problematising the concept of the independent learner and its gendered and culturally specific constructions leading her to question the use of such constructions within a mass higher education system. Students not fitting the description of independent learners tend to be, following Leathwood (2006), non-traditional students and women students, which could pose challenging transitions into higher education for these students if universities predicate their academic practices on the assumption that all students are independent

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learners at entry. Leathwood (2006) notes that the working class, Black and ethnic minority students in her study expressed a desire for help and support indicating that they may appear to be dependent as learners even when they clearly led independent lives with reference to family and work obligations. This appeared to be the case with Geena in my study. She had been happy with using computers at work but not at university due to the differing levels of support provided. The issue is the capital endowments students bring to higher education and what these capital endowments imply for adapting to the pedagogic practice of the new field. Gale and Parker (2012) suggest that university induction programmes construct students as moving from dependency to independency in a linear process but argue that students move in random ways which are, thus, unpredictable.

The outcome of being labelled an independent learner is that university can be confusing and different, indeed indifferent to their needs, with the onus on students to manage as independent learners when they are likely to see themselves as primarily people wanting face to face help and guidance, especially during their first year. Many participants felt that they were constructed as independent learners who were required to solve their own problems without being given the necessary help and direction to do so. Reay et al (2009) argue that this is a particular concern for non-traditional students.

This onus on students to become independent learners, which Wingate (2007) argues should be an aim of higher education, might be the way the universities manage increasing enrolment in a resource limited world. Participants, however, seemed to want a more personal relationship with their teachers similar to the type they had enjoyed at school or college. An important issue was the manner in which the university managed the transition to becoming an independent learner. Many

participants gave the impression of being like 'fish out of water' as they were confronted with the pedagogy of the independent learner.

Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class), who left university in his first year, did not believe it was possible for him to be an independent learner during his first year at university. He explained that he 'was not ready for it. Maybe in the second year but not in the first year' (Interview 2). Marcus argued that the demands of being an independent learner were beyond him as he needed help with what being an independent learner meant. He felt that it was too big a jump to make in a very short space of time without any guidance. Marcus contrasted his weekly contact at university with the help he received at school. He explained that he 'needed it (help and support) daily like and not weekly…but if I had been watched then maybe…but if I was shouted at like then it could've helped' (Interview 2).

It could be argued that university is not about being 'watched', which could be Marcus' term for care, but he appeared to find it difficult to manage his independence compared with the hands on approach experienced at school. It is interesting that he seemed to be happy to be watched which appeared to reflect his need for support or to be looked after, perhaps even 'mothered' (Burke et al, 2013). Marcus, like many of the participants, appeared to want a safe, protected space similar to school where he could experiment with attempts at independence. The assumption that students are independent learners is, as Crabtree et al (2007) articulate, problematic. It could be applied to traditional students with accumulations of capital, but applying it to non-traditional students such as Marcus seemed to create transition problems.

The positioning of students as independent learners by the university seemed to create an academic practice where teachers were not given the time within their responsibilities to see students. A result was that this positioning seemed to make

students feel that they were not important and, further, that the university did not care. Participants, especially men, not only wanted quality support but in addition regular contact such as that available at school and college. Leathwood (2006), who looked at independent learning from gender and equity perspectives, noted that young men students tend to struggle with their construction as independent learners compared to women students. This study produced findings which seemed to support those of Leathwood's study. Marcus, for example, felt that university gave him too much freedom. He explained:

> At school you get a planner which needs to be signed by your parent to say that you have done the work and look at your planning and stuff but at university it's just down to you, right? I just didn't get the thing about managing things (Marcus, interview 2).

Marcus seemed to find the freedom of being constructed as an independent learner difficult to negotiate, while Sulieman (Black British, 20, Working Class) expressed his status as a learner who needed help and support, explaining:

> I'm happy being told to do this or that and then doing it but here the teaching ain't about doing things. It seems it's about trying to explain different things but not about doing things. I just like it when you get told to listen to this and then do this (Sulieman, interview 1).

Both of these non-traditional students had found university to be demanding due, perhaps, to their construction as independent learners and used their experiences of school to describe what they needed to be successful in their studies.

Although participants from a middle-class background also expressed concerns over being positioned as independent learners. Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class) suggested that it was difficult to be an independent learner in the first year at university as the transition to becoming an independent learner could be challenging because 'when you first come here you're still very dependent on lots of things, especially those who struggle with the size of the place' (Ben, interview 3).

Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class), who could have perhaps attended a more selective university, constructed herself as a student who was comfortable in the role of an independent learner, which seemed to be associated with her social class and cultural capital. While Amy felt at ease with idea of being an independent learner, she thought that other students might find this positioning difficult. Amy explained:

> A lot of the assessment is given to you and you are expected to get on with it and be independent. I could cope with that but you see some students who struggle with being independent (Amy, interview 3).

Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) thought that men students displayed their dependency, as learners, in their behaviour as 'they were a bit loud to start with but seemed to lose their confidence once they had to do some work. To be challenged maybe?' (Interview 3). Amy suggested that men students struggled with independent learning as 'Some men seem really confident but it's all crap. It's got very little to do with the module. Just what they think and what they think is pretty baseless' (Interview 2). Both of these women could be articulating what Leathwood and Read (2009) describe as the challenges to masculinity men may experience if they show themselves to need help or be 'needy'. Amy and Evelyn also saw some men as dependent learners, usually the young ones, but described what could be seen as a 'performance of independence' before men accepted that they needed help. This performance, often expressed as being loud and opinionated, seemed to be an attempt to mask their dependency, which could have a profound impact on their sense of attachment when their masculinities were challenged. Archer and Yamashita (2003) have described a discourse of 'laddishness', which is class neutral, associated with educational under-achievement by men and this could be at play in the behaviour noted by Amy and Evelyn. It would appear that men, in general, eventually found the idea of independent learning to be challenging and that some men students, as found

in this study as well, engaged in performance or front as a way of trying to hide their needs. To be dependent is not to be masculine as dependency has culturally been associated with women. Some men students found themselves in the difficult position of knowing that they needed help, yet their masculinity overrode this realisation until it was for some too late. Leathwood (2006) suggests that asking for help may involve the fear of being positioned as lacking knowledge. This seemed to be the experience of Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class).

Erkan, a first generation student who left university during his second semester, used the word 'help' repeatedly in interviews to contrast the help he received at college and his need for help at university. It seemed as if the academic culture of his college had created, or encouraged, Erkan to see himself as a dependent learner and that the new field of university, physically and in its academic practices, was a shock. Erkan constructed his time at college as one of enjoyment due to the help, support and guidance shown by his tutors when they appeared to acknowledge his cultural background in a college setting with a high percentage of first generation Turkish students. Erkan's difficulties at university appeared to stem from the fact that:

> the words are the big ones and I have no clue as to their meanings and I am lost in the room if I don't understand it all. It was not so like this at my college but here it is a big problem for me (Interview 1).

Erkan had found a secure place at college where his cultural background was recognised and validated but he now felt lost at university, and seemed to lack the sense of belonging he said he had at college. Erkan had a particular dilemma with being asked to 'analyse' which was one of the big words he struggled with both in its meaning and application. This appeared to be a reflection of his cultural capital where his first language was Turkish which he spoke with family and friends, while only using English in educational settings – something that is not uncommon among

English as a second language students. Youdell (2006) argues that the White middle class 'score highly' for Bourdieu's capitals including linguistic capital, thereby implying that many non-traditional students are at a linguistic disadvantage in middle class fields such as higher education. Read et al (2003) also identify the language of 'academia' as having the potential to disadvantage non-traditional students. Erkan wanted to get help but two things appeared to stop him approaching teaching staff. The first was that he felt that staff would construct him as stupid for not knowing the meaning of certain words and secondly that staff seemed very busy. He described attempts to get help at the end of a class as being 'too late and they (the teachers) rush off to their next class' (Interview 1).

This interview took place in the first six weeks of Erkan starting university but already there was a sense that he felt excluded, and was excluding himself, from help. There was here the appearance of the overworked staff, identified by many participants, and a sense that Erkan felt abandoned. He was wary of approaching staff for help despite admitting that he needed it but at college he was able to secure help as the tutors were aware of his needs and support was built into their pedagogic practice. He explained that 'College was much better. So small and not like this big university' (Interview 1).

Erkan liked college as it was a more personal, intimate and safe place, where he seemed to be in a comfortable field. The use of words like 'big' and small', which a number of other participants utilised, presented a powerful imagery about feeling lost and threatened in one place, the big university, and held and cared for in the small college. The 'small' college was a place where the teaching staff:

> knew that we was Turkish … they would sit us down and go through the work with us as a group and ask if anyone had the right answer and they would go to the board and do the work and if you didn't know then you copied it. They

only asked if you got it right … the tutor would sit with you and go over your English to improve it (Erkan, interviews 1 and 2).

Teaching staff at Erkan's college seemed to have the time to provide individual support based on knowledge of particular student backgrounds. His college experience seemed to possess some of the features of the elite university described in Crozier et al (2008) with staff knowing students who they met in small group settings. Burke et al (2013) offer a potential solution when they conclude that teachers must be given support so that they can better understand the influences of societal inequalities (gender, class and race) on pedagogic relations. This recommendation is more pressing in institutional settings with significant student diversity.

The positioning of students as independent learners on entry appeared to stop some, mainly non-traditional students, developing a sense of belonging. There also appeared to be gender issues with men students in particular struggling with their construction as independent learners. The capital endowments of the traditional participants had helped them to cope with independence in learning, although even some of them found the emphasis on independent learning to be challenging. But not to the extent of the first generation students, such as Erkan and Marcus, who felt that the lack of support, help and guidance implicit in the independent learning strategy had been a factor in their decisions to leave university. Their capital accumulations were, it seemed, tested by the assumption of being independent learners. This seemed to reflect Bourdieu's (1988) description of the experience of working class students in French higher education.

In the next section, I elaborate on personal contact with staff by examining the experiences of participants as they tried to establish relationships with staff outside the classroom.

5.4 Contact with tutors

Contact with teaching staff at university was raised by most participants who, based on their experiences at school and college, wanted more opportunities to talk with teaching staff outside the classroom. The general view was that the desired, and anticipated, contact with teachers at university had not occurred in the way that participants had expected.

Many participants constructed teaching staff as being uncaring in their relationships with students. Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class), for example, thought that there was a lack of access to teaching staff in contrast to his FE college experience. He explained that:

> Lecturers make themselves unavailable to the students outside of office hours. There's not many hours really that you can contact them, there's not many ways at all really (Interview 1).

Andy's view, which was reflective of the majority of participants, portrayed his previous educational experience as supportive, suggesting that he wanted staff to be available and seemed to construct staff at the university as deliberately avoiding contact with students. Chloe (White British, 20, Middle Class), for instance, provided a summary of the dilemma facing many students over access to teaching staff. She explained:

> … the difference mainly I feel is from college to here is … (that) you have to understand that the teacher's not going to have as much time for everyone. So that was the main difference that I saw when I first started … In college you can go in and basically in college the teachers have their own classrooms so if I go into my, if I want to go into my college any time between 9 and 4.30 or 5, and I went to my classroom, unless the teacher was on a break, he or she would be in the classroom (Interview 2).

Chloe contrasted her experiences of moving, both physically and pedagogically, from one field, college, to another field, university, through her contact with teaching staff. There are, of course, differences in the contractual obligations of FE college lecturers compared with those of a university teacher. These differences

are largely due to the research orientation of universities in contrast to the teaching orientation of FE colleges. The different demands placed on university staff, in contrast to FE tutors and school teachers, could mean that they simply do not have sufficient time to provide the help, support and guidance students expect, sometimes on a one-to-one basis. Higher education also, as previously noted, aims to produce independent learners (Wingate, 2007) and expects adult learners to take responsibility for their learning. But the point is assuming that all students are part of a homogeneous mass who can match these expectations on entry. Johnson et al (2000), who examine the different pedagogic approaches taken to PhD supervision, argue that doctoral students are lavished with one to one care in regular meetings, yet these students should be the most independent learners in higher education.

Chloe (White British, 20, Middle Class) was happy to develop contact through emails but she was disappointed by not being able to receive quick replies from teaching staff. Chloe explained:

> I'm on the computer and I'm doing the course work and I have a question. And let's say I can't reach a friend and it's really urgent, then I know that if I email the teacher I'll only get a response 3-4 days later because they only work certain hours or – things like that (Interview 2).

For Andy and Chloe, teachers being available or responsive were indicators of care, an expectation that was mainly informed by their prior learning experiences. Their individual habituses, and their college experiences led to them to view university as uncaring if they did not get help quickly. Expectations were very important for students and they reacted to the disappointment they experienced by positioning teachers as people who avoided contact with students. Chloe seemed to feel that lecturers should at least be available in cyberspace even if they were not as readily available as her college tutors had been. This again showed the importance of what students bring to university in their habituses and their previous experiences

reflecting their understanding of what will be available at university. Participants appeared to expect a smooth trajectory from school and college to university with the latter being based on the type of pedagogic practices experienced at school and college. Interruptions to this trajectory were conceptualised as the university being unsupportive.

Teaching staff were, at the time of the interviews, required to offer two office hours per week but this availability did not seem to match student expectations of what they needed in terms of access to teachers. The issue appeared to be managing student expectations to the reality of university life. Unfortunately, Welcome Week appeared to have given the impression that staff availability was greater than what actually happened in practice. Pilar (White Italian, 19, Middle Class), in offering an explanation as to why access to staff was limited, suggested that teaching staff were over worked because of the large number of students which made it difficult to get the expected contact.

In addition to staff workloads, there may have been other factors at play here. Burke et al (2013) suggest that students want teaching staff to exhibit care but that some teachers can feel threatened if they are positioned as carers as it can diminish their status as academics. Burke et al (2013) argue in their study that institutional focus on a more supportive pedagogy directed to student needs was a response to student retention concerns. This, Burke et al (2013) suggest, threatened the teacher's academic professionalism as it reduced the time available for research activity.

University reflects a different pedagogic practice from school and college due to the importance of research to inform teaching and the associated status of being a research active lecturer. This indicates that 'caring for' or 'mothering', which emphasises the gendered nature of the institutional focus (Mariskind, 2014), requires

staff time and there seems to be insufficient time to be a carer and an academic. It is worth noting, however, that there seemed to be enough time at the elite institution in Crozier et al's (2008) study although differences in the resource funding of different institutions appear to be at play here (Grove, 2014). There appeared to be a clash between the student demanding access to teachers and the realities of the massification of higher education. This seemed to be an inevitable outcome of the impact of widening participation policies for those institutions with large, and increasing intakes, of non-traditional students.

The importance of obtaining access to teachers on an individual basis was a general concern among participants with many complaining that their only contact was as part of large groups of students in which their individual identities were lost. This issue of identity is addressed in the next section.

5.5 Identity – knowing me, knowing you

A separate, but related, theme to that of contact with teachers was that of personal identity at university. Many participants were quite concerned that teachers did not seem to know them as individuals. This again, raised issues of the relational life, which Leathwood and Hey (2009) discuss in terms of interdependence, caring and other-centred behaviour in relationships. Participants thought that their lives at university lacked care when teachers did not use names. As a result, students appeared to feel that they were not being validated and valued as individuals and so lacked distinction from other students. Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class) explained that 'teachers, rarely use your name…It would be easy to feel ignored and lost' (Interview 3).

There was a feeling that by not using names the teacher was forcing the students to be passive when they wished to be active and involved. The teacher was, it

seemed to many of the participants, in a powerful position given that students needed to use her name to ask questions and thus enjoyed a status they lacked. Participants appeared to be talking about distinction: how people gain superiority at the expense of others (Bourdieu, 1984) in the status of being the lecturer who is known by students who remain unknown to the lecturer. However, Pilar wondered if teachers simply had too many students to remember names but the absence of name usage remained an issue. Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class) explained:

> It would be nice if the tutors knew your name and used it. I have only been to one module where the teacher used my name. It makes it personal. It happened at college and school and should be here as well (Interview 3).

The issue of 'name and identity' was not only about teachers knowing the names of students but also about students getting to know each other. Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class) felt that if staff used names in the early weeks of the course, then it would have helped students to get to know each other. He explained:

> Teachers could get to know your name as well and you might be asking a question, or questions that, the other students wanted to ask but didn't like have the confidence to ask. And it might, could, might get students to talk to each other because they know names (Interview 3).

Marcia (Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared) thought that the most enjoyable teaching and learning experiences were to be found in the classes with the chance to talk and get to know each other. She explained:

> That only happens in these seminars when you get the chance to talk. The tutor gets to know you and you get to know them. They know your name which is nice and you feel comfortable in the class. Those sessions have the most students in them (Interview 2).

Both Andy and Marcia suggested that staff using student names was a rare experience but when it happened it had a positive impact on 'belonging' such as attendance and involvement, comfort and interdependence. Marcia thought that if the teacher initiated the talk through the use of names then students had the confidence to

respond. Marcia, for example, contrasted the comfortable feeling when staff used her name with the feeling of disappointment when staff did not use her name or seem to know her. She explained that:

> in the good seminars with the talking and stuff the tutor gets to know you and knows your name and it makes you feel better. So I'm a bit disappointed with them not getting to know us. It would make the place a lot better (Marcia, interview 2).

Students acknowledged that knowing every name was difficult but argued that knowing some names and not others was as bad as not knowing any for those students not acknowledged, or 'othered' through exclusion. Pilar explained:

> You don't get treated like an individual. Just a big group and nobody seems to know your name or anything about you (Interview 3).

School and college memories where staff used students' first names were used to accentuate their absence at university. Names are an important part in peoples' sense of who they are or for their sense of self (Burke, 2006). For participants name use was part of their lives and its absence at university was unsettling, resulting in feelings of separation due to the absence of the relational (Leathwood, 2006). This is not to say that they were necessarily cared for at school, but it appeared that because teachers had used their names they had *felt* cared for. Thus, belonging may be as much about feeling cared for as actually being cared for.

It can be argued that it is unrealistic to expect staff to know all, or the majority, of names, especially in a mass higher education system but this seemed to be important for feeling included and thus part of university. Participants not only wanted their presence validated through the use of first names but also articulated an expectation that they would receive individual feedback as part of the learning process. The importance of feedback as an indicator of care is discussed in the next section.

5.6 Feedback, guidance and support as indicators of care

The provision of feedback was identified by participants as important as they wanted re-assurance that they were making progress in their studies and felt that quick, informal feedback would indicate their level of progress. The National Union of Students (NUS, 2009) present data findings based on student views of life at university showing that the overwhelming majority of students want to receive feedback on work but that only a minority actually receive the desired feedback. This need for feedback is also supported in research by the National Student Survey of 2013 (HEFCE, 2013). The university's approach to feedback was that it should play an important part in student learning and that:

> Formative feedback will be provided during the workshop, online, via email, etc. … Special attention is given in seminars to the development of oral skills, while small group-work facilitates formative feedback from tutor and peers… Formative … (and) summative feedback will be provided. Informal formative feedback will be available throughout the module through the tutorials. (Module web sites, accessed 12 September 2012).

> Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class), who had expected more feedback during his early weeks at university, said that he wanted more involvement from the tutors. Andy explained:

> I'd say more feedback, more opportunities to get work assessed. Rather than thinking you've done a piece of work that's really decent and then realising that it's completely wrong, even though it kind of sounds right to you. I think more feedback, yeah (Interview 1).

Feedback was very important to Andy feeling that he was on the right lines. Many participants viewed feedback in terms of staff giving time to students for individual support and guidance as part of the care they had anticipated receiving at university. Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class) also wanted more feedback but in addition she felt that:

> It needs to be quicker. A lot of students just worry about the coursework and then the exam. But if we had more in class work, which was not part of the mark, and you got feedback then students would know what their position was

and then they could do something about it. Instead, they just worry, it seems to me, and that they stop coming (Interview 3).

Amy seemed to transfer Andy's need for confidence building feedback to a wider group of students who worry about their academic progression. It appeared that the uncertainty could lead to students losing contact and involvement with university. Reay et al (2009), drawing on the Crozier et al (2008) study, argue that successful learner identities are aided by involvement and attendance, with the students in their study in elite settings receiving face to face feedback on a regular basis. The non-traditional students who are confident in their academic ability enjoyed academic integration feeling academically comfortable as they experience regular, detailed feedback in their small, sometimes one to one, tutorial groups. Attendance and academic involvement are not cited as issues faced by these students but the opposite appeared to be the case with many of the non-traditional students at the university in this study.

Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class) explained the different approaches to feedback he had experienced at school and now at university and he felt that university did not provide enough help. Ben explained:

> It's like there's your assignment, go and do it. If you ask for help they say I can't look at drafts. But at school it was do a bit and give it to me and then we can look and see if we can improve it. But here there is a lot of you do it by yourself. But lots of us, me, need some help…I know that we need to be more independent but when you first come here you're still very dependent on lots of things, especially those who struggle (Interview 3).

Ben's comments showed that he was aware of the need to be an independent learner but he seemed to articulate a pedagogic process from dependency to independency in his status as a learner, which will be guided by receiving help and feedback. Again, there was the complexity of independence with students leading

independent lives but struggling with the 'newness' of the academic culture of university.

Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class), who had stopped attending one of his modules by the time of our first interview, articulated a need for tests and support. He explained:

> The tutor should stop and see that we understand before the next lot. Tests … not easy but testing us, like at college. One to one meetings to discuss problems…I'm in a group with people who are struggling. We can't help each other. I'm not a whiz and they isn't either so we just say that it's hard… and I've stopped going to some of the classes. What's the point? I know I will fall and if I get 25 then I will be okay. You can fail two modules as long as you get 25. I might get 25 (Interview 2).

Participants, regardless of social class background wanted more and better feedback, be it formative, informal, to assess their progress. This, I think, reflected a lack of confidence in their abilities as they sought academic reassurance. The outcome of not receiving the anticipated feedback based on their school and college informed dispositions lead to some participants seeing university as an uncaring place. This is how they made sense of the perceived lack of feedback, yet teaching staff could simply not have the time to provide the desired feedback. Unfortunately, the lack of help led some participants to struggle academically, while others felt yet again that they were on their own.

Crozier et al (2008) describe students who express the desire for more feedback and help as being 'fragile learners'. This term suggested that these students, at a post-1992 university similar to the university used in this study, are anxious, lack confidence and want, as a consequence, more opportunities to discuss their work with teachers. These students are directed to use online help or work on their own which is very similar to the experiences of participants in this study. Crozier et al (2008) conclude that some non-traditional students at the post-1992 university construct

themselves as being unworthy of higher education, which again was reproduced in this study. For example, Marcus' narrative that he will fail, and his positioning of himself with the strugglers, appeared to be consistent with the research findings of Crozier et al (2008). This makes it even more important that non-traditional students are supported at university to overcome the unequal distribution of cultural capital in society.

5.7 Conclusions

The chapter analysed the importance of feeling cared in relation to developing a sense of belonging in the lived experiences of participants through the use of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital. The issue of care examined a number of themes such as guidance and support; having student identity validated; receiving individual attention and being able to have personal contact with teachers. The analysis of the university's e-learning strategy emphasised the importance of social relations as a key theme in the nurturing of a sense of belonging. Many participants felt isolated by the pedagogic practices of the university. This discomfort was also reflected in the way the university constructed students as independent learners in an unproblematised manner. This construction appeared to ignore their dispositions. Interestingly, participants did wish to see their individuality validated in their social relations with staff through contact, identity and feedback only for this to be largely unfulfilled. The dominant theme to emerge was the importance of the social to feelings of belonging as participants, especially non-traditional students, struggled to fit into their new field. The next chapter looks at the extent to which participants became involved academically and socially at university.

Chapter 6: Developing a sense of belonging: The importance of involvement

People don't listen to you. It is very frustrating (Marcia, Black Caribbean, 28, No Class declared, interview 2)

A lot of lecturers like to talk and talk (Tony, White British, 22, Working Class, interview 3)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous two chapters to explore the features of university life identified by participants to be of importance in developing a sense of belonging. The first section examines the significance of having opportunities to meet people and establish friendships. Making friends was cited by participants as one of the most important features to the development of a sense of belonging as well as helping students to stay at university. This leads the discussion on to where students were able to meet people. The third section moves the analysis to the importance to students of 'having their say' captured by the concept of 'voice'. The chapter finishes with a concluding section.

6.2 Meeting people and making friends

I discovered that there were other people with the same worries as me and it was a relief (Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class), Interview 1)

This section looks at the importance of having opportunities to meet people and establish friendships. A number of participants argued that it was important to attend on a regular basis to get opportunities to meet people, while other participants maintained that without the care, help and companionship offered by friends they would have left university in the early weeks of their first year. For most participants making friends and building communities were the glue which bonded them to the university, maintaining that having people to talk to and share worries and interests with were important features of being part of university life. This suggests that

students may belong to parts of university life such as friends but not to other parts such as their programme, and that having friends at university can act as compensation for features which challenge sense of belonging.

The importance of meeting people and making friends as part of the transition into higher education has been cited by Thomas (2002), who suggests that the institution bears some responsibility for student social integration into the university by providing opportunities for friendship networks to be established. This was also the case in this study with participants suggesting that it was difficult to meet people through individual effort in the early weeks, as described in Chapter 4. Welcome Week was thought to be too centred on the provision of university information and lacked the social dimension of providing students with opportunities to meet and talk with other students. A common theme was that articulated by Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) who found the university so overwhelming in her first weeks that she had considered leaving. She explained:

> I started to make friends ... well more people to talk with and share my worries with and I discovered that there were other people with the same worries as me and it was a relief, I can tell you (Interview 1).

Evelyn appeared to derive considerable solace from the feeling that she was not on her own but instead part of a group with whom she could talk and share her worries. Again, as in previous chapters, there was a display of uncertainty about participants' right to be at university, which presented itself in the constant worries and concerns that the non-traditional participants expressed about coping with university, reflecting their lack of familiarity with the new field of higher education (Ainley, 2008). Evelyn seemed to construct herself as an isolated individual overwhelmed by difficulties. Without meeting people, Evelyn's feelings of isolation might have continued. The importance of meeting people and making friends

continued to be a major part of Evelyn's narrative of university life in her second and final interviews when she talked about her support group. Osterman (2000) describes informal groups of this type as a desire to establish and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships, while Lynch (2010) conceptualises them as expressions of solidarity. For some of the participants in this study their formation was important to staying at university and also developing a sense of belonging.

Evelyn told me about how she and other women students formed an inclusive group open to all students but some, mainly young men, did not establish themselves as part of the group. This again attends to differences in gender behaviour discussed in previous chapters. Nicol (2008) argues that women form groups in an attempt to overcome confidence issues but it could also be seen as an agentic way to ease transition into the new field. Evelyn explained:

> Men seem to want to be the leaders but the bright ones realise that women have got something to say. Although some of the young men, the 19 year olds, can be a bit full of themselves and once you tell them to behave, they either get involved or can disappear from the group (Interview 3).

Marcia (Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared), while not involved in Evelyn's circle of friends, had also become part of a friendship group with no men in it. She explained:

> Men are a bit strange here and they seem to be younger than us and a bit silly … like they have this freedom at university from when they were at school or whatever and they not seem to know what to do with it. You hear but … not from talking to them and it's a kind of showing off about getting drunk and not doing their work and having to stay up all night and then sometimes not being that bothered about doing the work (Marcia, interview 3).

The positioning of men as younger than women was not actually the case for the university as a whole but could be interpreted as men being perceived to lack maturity and having a tendency to engage in attention seeking behaviour. One factor cited by women participants for the lack of men in friendship groups was their

displays of masculinity such as being loud and aggressive, and wanting to be in charge of decisions. Warin and Dempster (2007) articulate this type of behaviour as attention seeking performance within gendered power relationships. Archer and Leathwood (2003), Burke (2006) and Burke et al (2013) suggest that participation in higher education can pose challenges to masculinity, which was reflected in the narratives of participants in this study.

Although the group described by Evelyn was open to all, there appeared to be tensions in the way women, who were in the majority, felt they were constructed by men. Men, it seemed, naturally assumed that they would be the leaders. This appeared to lead to confrontations as the women asserted themselves. The women students appeared to want to create a self-help group for all but some men decided to abandon this help as it seemed to, from the perspective of women participants, threaten their masculinity. The finding that young men found it difficult to be part of the group could help in understanding why young men participants were, in this study, more likely to talk of not making friends and also were more likely to leave university. This is consistent with the national non-continuation rates in UK higher education (HESA, 2014). The performance of masculinity could be viewed as displays of alienation from and resistance to the pedagogic practices encountered (Burke et al, 2013). The men seemed to be challenged by their new field and appeared to have their dispositions structured by the women's practice of being assertive and taking authority away from them. The outcome was either some men undertaking the difficult task of adapting their habitus to conform to the practice in the new field or not joining the group. Those not joining appeared to want to maintain their existing dispositions.

Monique (Black French, 26, Working Class) felt that young men did not act appropriately in class. She explained:

They are loud … not all, that is not fair to all but there is a strange manner about the men in class. They do not seem to have the correct manner to be here. They walk in late and do not … there is no sorry and then they ask to be told what is … has been happening and they can shout … it is not really the older men but the younger men can be quite silly. It is not all of them but they can tell people that they know more than others but they sometimes are not at class so how? (Interview 2).

Monique highlighted the lack of punctuality, the absence of apology and demands to know what was happening. Again this could be exhibitions of assertive resistance to what they perceived as alienating academic practices. It seemed as if the behaviour of the men related to their need to be forceful through displays of knowledge, and to be dismissive of the views and opinions of women. This could be seen as reproductive of traditional social constructions of gender. The data showed that women talked about men and women, but men did not tend to talk about women. Women, in general, talked positively about other women and tended to be quite curt in their comments on men, especially young men. It seemed that for many of the younger men students, this was one of the first occasions when they had been challenged by women students, especially those older than them such as Evelyn, finding the experience a significant challenge to their habitus.

Geena (Black British, 42, Working Class), who left university during the first year, felt that not being able to meet people was an important factor in her decision to leave. She explained:

I think that it could … might have been different if I had known a few people and got some help from them and to talk to see if they had the same problems (Interview 2).

Both Geena and Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) had found university challenging in the first weeks and identified the importance of sharing experiences as one way they could deal with their worries. Evelyn and Geena, who were non-traditional students, could be constructed as 'fragile learners' (Crozier et al,

2008) who appeared to need help to overcome their anxieties about university and their place in it. The dominant theme was getting help from other students. Evelyn appeared to overcome doubts about her right to be at university through the comfort of the group setting and the resulting increase in her confidence but this was not the situation for Geena. Evelyn felt she was now part of university but Geena had appeared isolated in the university context. Evelyn, who succeeded in getting the help she needed from her group, subsequently described university as 'being a brilliant place' that she eventually came to love, while Geena described university as a lonely experience which was captured by the isolation of her lunchtime experience. She explained 'I would find an empty room and sit there on my own' (Interview 2). Both wanted to meet people to get help but only Evelyn had managed to do this through securing a network of friends. Geena's account of her very difficult start, discussed in Chapter 4, where she lacked access to other students limiting the potential to make friends, seemed to have been a major factor in her decision to leave university.

James et al (2010) suggest that one in seven first year university students do not form friendships and that this has a detrimental impact on their engagement. This study found that the five participants (Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class), Velli (White Belgian, 19, No Class Declared), Sulieman (Black British, 20, Working Class), Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class) and Geena) to leave university during their first year all talked of difficulties in establishing friendships. The four men leavers can also be characterised as having attendance issues which worsened across time. This could also be associated with not having made university friends. While no causation is suggested between attending and leaving university their records of attendance could have created limited opportunities for engagement with other students further reducing the incentive to attend. Tony (White British, 22,

Working Class), influenced by his brother's experience, thought that being at university was important. He explained:

> Students have got to be here a lot but they don't so I would encourage students to stay around more. Look when we have group work it's really difficult to get meetings. We have classes three days a week. But you say 'Can we meet on a free day?' and people say 'But I don't come in on free days' and I think 'Why not?' (Interview 3).

It is necessary to realise that 'free' days may not be actually be free given that students work during term-time. There are also care issues such as Kerry (Black British, 22, Working Class) who had childcare responsibilities. However, for Tony 'being' at university was about getting involved by attending for more than just the classes. This is, I suggest, easier in the setting of a campus and Tony seemed to make this university his 'campus' but his conceptualisation of 'being' at university was conditioned by his particular capital formation based, in part, on his brother's experience. Tony appeared to enter university with a form of first-hand information usually associated with middle class students (Reay et al, 2005), which created a practice of involvement as his dispositions came into contact with the field. Although Tony was a non-traditional student he appeared to have some of the familiarity of university enjoyed by the middle class.

Velli, the 19-year-old Belgian student new to London, decided to live some distance from the university in private rented accommodation in a location his parents considered safer than the areas closer to the university. The result was that travelling to university became an issue and so he tended to minimise his attendance. Many participants gave the impression of having a peripatetic existence given the non-campus arrangement of the university with its very limited student accommodation in contrast to the integrated experience captured by Crozier et al (2008) and Reay et al (2009) drawing on the Crozier et al study in their descriptions of life at campus

universities. This created a different type of experience for students as they were very much on their own and not in a socially integrated setting. This could have had an impact on student perceptions of their place at university. Velli had an expectation that he would make friends at university but this did not happen. He explained:

> I must say that I am a bit lonely here. I have a couple of people to talk with but not such a large number I had had expected in the five weeks. It is quite easy to feel isolated, you know, here … The gym has been a place where I have made some friends but it is not an easy place to talk to other members but I have managed to do this (Velli, interview 1).

Velli's attendance at university was poor, which seemed to support Tony's view that students needed to be at university to be part of it. Velli's poor attendance appeared to stop him getting the opportunities to meet people within the classroom where common 'worries' and interests seemed to be the catalysts for talk to happen, but not making friends could also have limited his attendance. Velli, at 19 years old, could be included among the young men who seemed to struggle to meet people in the classroom, which could be explained by masculinity where their habituses were not conducive to displaying needs. Women participants such as Evelyn and Geena, however, were not afraid to speak of their worries. Some men participants seemed to construct themselves as displaying weakness if they showed their insecurities about university, as they wanted to be portrayed as strong in contrast to the articulation of a desire for care by many of the women participants (Burke, 2006).

Tony and Evelyn both appeared to be comfortable at university, shown by Tony 'being' at university a lot and Evelyn being part of what I describe as a community of students who sat with each other in class and socialised together within university. Gerrard and Billington (2014) in their research on student nurses' sense of belonging identified the importance of group formation in fostering a sense of belonging through social activity which supported and reassured students in their new

environment. In contrast, Velli did not have these attributes as he appeared to spend the minimum amount of time at university, had not made friends within the classroom and lived some distance from university. He appeared to be very removed from life at university, while Tony and Evelyn both seemed to have developed bonding relationships to university. It was no real surprise that Velli felt lonely. Weiss (1987) suggests loneliness can lead to lack of interest and engagement. Similarly, the work of Crozier et al (2008) shows the importance for learner identities of living close to, if not within, the university estate. Campus settings can also be lonely experiences but they can provide greater opportunities to meet people compared to non-campus universities.

Sulieman (Black British, 20, Working Class) lived at home some travelling distance from university and seemed to have experienced liminality (Solomon, 2009) similar to Velli. The concept of liminality suggests that people are neither in one place, university, or another place, home, but rather are caught somewhere in the middle. He explained:

> I live in South London and my mum wants me home quickly. No hanging around uni. She worries about me being on the tube and a long way from home (Interview 1).

Sulieman stated that he, too, had made friends by talking about football and his support for Chelsea and explained that he was confident, at the time of our first interview, that he would be able to fit in at university. He explained:

> I think, like, that I'll be okay. Lots of Somalians are going to uni now. I sees them here. I'll get by (Interview 1).

Sulieman appeared to show the importance of there being students from similar backgrounds so that potential friendships could develop although he never spoke of making friends with other Somalian students. Burke et al (2013) and Reay et al (2001) have shown students often select universities where they expect to find

people from similar backgrounds. Although, Sulieman saw other Somalians he did not appear to become friends with them. Sulieman's account suggested that he was caught between home and university under the influence of his caring mother with his habitus influenced by and reflecting family capital. Usually, family capital soothes student integration into university but that is primarily for middle class students. Sulieman's habitus seemed to reflect his Somalian culture and the importance of family as a source of security. Sulieman's mother worried about him being away from home and so attempted to control the time he spent at university. Like Velli, he had formed friendships outside classroom based on sport related interests. Unlike Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class), Marcia (Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared) and Monique (Black French, 26, Working Class), these two men did not talk about the classroom and meeting people there, yet the three women gave the impression that it was easier to meet people and make friends when the conversations were about the worries of becoming or being a student, rather than topics unrelated to studying. Their conversations seemed to be about them as students, while the young men appeared to engage in talk about non-university interests. This might suggest gendered differences in the way friendships are formed with women students finding it easier to initiate classroom talk of worries over modules and also as more supportive of each other than men, perhaps reflecting femininity (Burke, 2006). The three women appeared to be engaging in talk and friendships, which helped to develop their learner identities as university students, while Sulieman and Velli, I suggest, found it difficult to integrate into life at university as they lacked appropriate social opportunities. Evelyn explained:

> People … want to belong. I was desperate to be able to belong but didn't know how to. I was very lucky, as I've said, with the group and its dynamics (Interview 2).

Burke et al (2013) argue that friendships are a form of 'coping mechanism' and can help students feel that they belong, suggesting that integrating is a social experience requiring involvement with other students. Evelyn's experience seemed to show the importance of meeting people as part of the social integration into university. She did not use the social amenities such as the student union to socialise and meet other students but instead she had a social group built around academic worries. This suggested that the social and the academic can complement each other and do not need to be seen as separate elements of integration. Evelyn's dispositions seemed to be influenced by her worries but friendships allowed her to cope with the new field and its challenges. As Bourdieu (1984) argues practice is the outcome of the interplay between dispositions and field. Further, the work of Crozier et al (2008) show how cultural capital and university setting play important roles in the extent to which students can develop a sense of belonging. The university where this study was conducted, much like the post-1992 university described by Crozier et al (2008), recruited students from non-traditional backgrounds lacking knowledge of the rules of the game. I suggest that university was an obstacle course due to, for example, participants' limited knowledge of university and its academic practices. However, some of the participants adopted an agentic approach to overcome their initial capital disadvantages to enjoy a sense of belonging.

Two other participants who also found the obstacles challenging were Marcus (Black British, 21, Working Class) and Erkan (White Turkish, 19, Working Class), the other students to leave and not establish friendships. Both had attendance issues. Erkan, again like Sulieman, experienced liminality in the demands of his father for him to work in the family shop as well as the security he got from being among Turkish speaking friends, as discussed in Chapter 4, while Marcus found the freedom

of university challenging. He made the decision to leave during the Christmas vacation. Breaks from the routine of university such as vacations are highlighted as a critical time by Yorke and Longden (2008) for students who can feel a lack of involvement with university life. Marcus explained:

> I didn't attend much in December then there was the Christmas thing and the exams in January and I think that I had too much freedom and yeah I think that I stopped. I'm like basically immature I think. At school and college it was all the time but at university it was three days in the semester and not all day. So I got lazy about the importance of being at university. I attended a lot in the early weeks but then I started to miss classes and tried to use the (online) thing from home to keep going but I missed what was being said in class (Marcus, Interview 2).

Marcus seemed to be unprepared for the change from school to university with his educational capital being influenced by the way his attendance was 'controlled' at school. This appeared to make the transition into the new field of higher education demanding given its different academic practices. This type of behaviour prompted a number of women participants to articulate the view that young men students found the freedom of university challenging. Leathwood (2006) also identifies this as a particular issue for young men students. Again, attendance or being at university was prominent in Marcus' explanation of why he left university. The new field's freedom seemed to be a particular issue for Marcus, which prevented him developing the social networks described by Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) and others. Some men did not seem able to cope with the freedom – they liked it, but could not, in contrast to women students, take the responsibility of managing it, seeming to what school/college type experiences where teachers or mothers had 'nagged' them.

It is important to acknowledge sense of belonging can mean, and be, different things to students. Examples of this were provided by Kerry (Black British, 22, Working Class) and Ben (White British, 19, Middle Class), who were amongst the group of seven students in the study who reported not establishing friendships, did not

leave university and both students had good attendance in the first semester at university. Kerry, who is a single mother and worked part-time, wished to make friends at university but accepted that the opportunities would be very limited owing to the demands of childcare, work and study (see also Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Her habitus reflected an instrumental approach to university where she was engaged in a new field to improve her accumulations of capital for the betterment of her daughter. Kerry used the resources of the new field to secure a better further for her daughter and so seemed prepared to sacrifice the social dimensions of university. Kerry's sense of belonging revolved around her relationship with her daughter. She was committed to university but had little sense of belonging to her course in any form apart from the desire to get a degree for the betterment of her family.

Ben, who lived some distance from university, had come to London with a group of friends studying together at another London based institution, rented a flat with them and based his social life around the friends and the social facilities at their university. He had intended to study at the same university as his school friends but he did not get the required A level points and so he secured his university place through the clearing process. Ben's account demonstrated the pull that pre-university friends can exert, with his sense of belonging being to his friends and by extension their university. The narratives of participants such as Kerry, Evelyn and Ben show how complex belonging is and how it is not necessary for all students to completely throw themselves into university life. Some will engage in different ways to different extents to achieve their particular aims such as Kerry's necessarily more instrumental approach. It is also, I think, about maturity and how students deal with the independence of university, which can be especially challenging for young men students (Leathwood, 2006).

Friendships were mainly established within the classroom, which some participants seemed to make their substitute social space. The role of the classroom as the main place where friendships emerged is discussed in the next section.

6.3 The classroom as the meeting place

I was involved from being in the class and knowing the other students and making friends with them. If you are not in the classroom then how can make friends? How can you have a sense of being here if you are not here? It is important to be here ... (Micheline, Mixed Algerian, 21, Middle Class, interview 3).

The university had social spaces where students could meet and make friends but many participants did not find these spaces to be socially appealing, as discussed in Chapter 4. Participants, mainly women, had created their own substitute social space where they could talk and meet people. This substitute space was the classroom with participants making a clear distinction between 'the seminar and workshop classroom' and 'the lecture theatre'. The latter was viewed as a difficult place to initiate friendships due to its formalised rules of silence and looking at the front, while the former was viewed as a less formal space with increased opportunities to meet people.

Burke et al (2013) talk of students, especially non-traditional ones, feeling marginalised in educational settings where teachers conceptualise student participation in terms of silence. This hegemonic behaviour, for Burke et al (2013), on the part of teachers results in an unequal demonstration of power. Participants in this study articulated similar views especially concerning the lecture theatre and, to an extent, seminar rooms if the pedagogic space was monopolised by the teacher.

Many participants were first generation students new to higher education, which meant that higher education rituals such as lectures, big lecture theatres and lecturing style were a completely new, and challenging, experience. Roisin (White

Irish, 19, Working Class) summarised the view of many participants concerning lectures and workshops. She explained:

> The lecture theatre is big and cold and everyone looking at the front and not saying a word and no interaction with lots of people sitting on their own. That doesn't happen in the workshops. If you have a good workshop tutor then she gets the students to know each other every week (Roisin, interview 1).

Roisin used powerful imagery to describe the negativity of 'big and cold' lectures, which she contrasted with the 'good workshop' where students can get to know each other. The use of the word 'big' seemed to convey the perception of threat, while the use of the word 'cold' appeared to give the impression of an unwelcoming place. Soilemetzidis et al (2014) argue, in their survey of student academic experiences at UK universities, that students much prefer small group settings compared with lectures, and this was also the case with many participants in my research. The lecture theatre seemed to be a place that students went to as individuals, remained positioned individually and appeared to leave as individuals. It was striking that the size of some of the university's learning spaces such as the lecture theatres and the library, as mentioned by Tobi (Black African, 18, Working Class) and Velli (White Belgian, 19, No Class Declared), produced negative associations for students. For many participants the size of the university was something they found to be unsettling, reflecting a lack of knowledge of their new field. Size seemed to be used to convey a place where it was easy to feel lost in contrast to actually being lost. Roisin talked in Chapter 4 about her transition experience from primary to senior school in terms suggesting she felt secure and protected at school but these qualities appear absent in the big, impersonal university.

Amy (White British, 22, Middle Class) thought that the lecture theatre was a difficult place to meet people due to its layout, rules and the status of the students as listeners and the lecturer as the talker. She explained:

teaching should be student directed but I feel that for some, not all, lecturers there's an aspect of acting up on the stage and you being passive and them being active and no interaction. A bit like the theatre, eh? So I feel that we get excluded because of the language and the lack of interaction. (Interview 1).

Amy, perhaps as a reflection of her middle class background, linked the lecture theatre to the expected spectator passivity experienced in the setting of staged theatrical productions. She accepted the formal rules of the stage but felt that university should be about being involved in the lecture. Participants were particularly critical of the architecture of the lecture theatre with the raised stage for the teacher and the fixed seating forcing students to look up at the stage. Marcia (Black Caribbean, 28, No Class Declared) was also disappointed by the lecture experience, which she viewed as threatening and unfriendly. Marcia explained:

> The lectures are mainly for listening, so that's not a good place to find people, students, with similar interests. You don't get the opportunity. The lecture theatre, big lecture theatres, are unfriendly and a bit threatening. It's just like the lecturer wants to get you to listen but sometimes, a lot really, if you don't understand and you can't ask a question, then you stop listening. The lectures are way too long. Sometimes two hours and no breaks and no opportunities to ask questions. It's like you shouldn't ask questions. Just be quiet and listen. But you stop listening if you don't understand or you get kind of bored. So the lecture ain't the place to find friends (Interview 2).

This is similar to Amy's views of the theatricality of the lecture where the lecturer spoke from on high as the students listened in silence, highlighting the power relations between lecturer and student. Adapting and assimilating to the hierarchical rituals of the lecture and performance based around the status of the lecturer appeared to reveal lack of familiarity with what university would be like. Read et al (2003) argue that the ritual of the lecture is particularly challenging for non-traditional students due to lack of familiarity with the practices of higher education. Students might be seated next to another student but the purpose of the lecture was for students to listen, not interact and certainly not talk to each other during the 'performance'.

In contrast, participants tended to construct the seminar or workshop as a more informal space where meeting and talking were possible. The role of this place in promoting meeting and talking was very important to Monique (Black French, 26, Working Class), Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) and Marcia. They explained how they made friends:

> By meeting them in class and talking with … to them. And just being here and meeting nice people (Monique, interview 2).

> We used to be the people who came all the time and were in class before the class started. We seat together and would go for tea or … something (Evelyn, interview 3).

> The only real place that I got the chance to make friends was in the seminar and workshop groups (Marcia, interview 3).

These quotes illustrate the importance of meeting people and making friends at university as part of the process of feeling involved and developing a sense of belonging. The dominant feature appeared to be the social interaction taking place between students as they met and then talked. This suggested a social rather than an individual conceptualisation of belonging in contrast to the earlier research of Tinto (1975). The above quotes, accentuating the importance of social belonging, portrayed participants' feelings of being at ease and not experiencing the anxiety of Crozier et al's (2008) 'fragile learners'. Participants seemed to be able to care for each other as they shared worries, discussed work and developed friendships, all of which appeared to promote a sense of belonging.

Students expressed a desire for spaces where they could initiate conversations to connect themselves to other students, if not the institution, in an attempt to meet people. Yorke and Longden (2008) suggest that students can feel isolated in the absences of settings where they can meet people and the above seemed to confirm this. Participants favoured small group settings such as workshops and seminars due

to their relative intimacy compared with lectures, citing the enhanced opportunities to interact provided by such small scale settings. The interaction was not always between the students and the teacher but sometimes within the group of students reducing the need to adapt and assimilate to the hegemonic practices. Participants were fitting in on their own terms and not those of the institution. The lecture was a completely new field not only in terms of its size but also its practices for most participants, whereas small group settings were similar to the old field of school and college in size and practice. This familiarity with the old field seemed to accommodate student dispositions, while the new field of the lecture resulted in discomfort to students' habitus. The seminar/workshop were viewed as a comfortable setting in which to be social, while the lecture was for many participants an isolating and individual experience despite the presence of large numbers of students. In addition to wanting a more social and less individual classroom experience, participants also articulated a desire to be directly involved in the pedagogic practice by having voice. This desire is discussed in the next section.

6.4 Voice – having your say

I like it here because you belong (Chloe, Interview 2).

This section examines the importance to participants of having a role in the pedagogic practice of university through having 'voice' in their learning. Many of the features of university life identified by students as helping them to fit in, and possibly belong, were interconnected. For instance, the issue of identity and being known were, in many ways, associative and connected with the desire to actively participate in learning activities. Participants wanted to have a voice in their learning and not be positioned as passive learners. Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class), in his final interview, explained the importance of voice in the classroom by contrasting when

teachers and students have voice and authority. He explained that 'there was a lot of academic talking by teachers but chances for us to talk were not so great' (Interview 3). Andy positioned academic talk as teacher centred with limited opportunities for students to speak making it harder for students to voice their opinions and get to know each other. White and Carr (2005) argue that students can become disengaged if they feel that the majority of contact time is devoted to academics talking at them. This seemed to have been Andy's perception of lecturers, who he constructed as people who dominate the talk rather than facilitate the discussion. The lack of opportunities to have voice was, thus, a disappointment to Andy. He explained:

> Some of the seminars are more about talking at us and so we don't get to share our experiences with the other students. It makes it quite hard to get to know people (Interview 3).

This again highlighted the importance of having opportunities to meet people and form friendships, which was a constant theme in the narratives of participants. It also emphasised the importance of theorising belonging as a social phenomenon rather than an individual one. Pilar (White Italian, 19, Middle Class), like Andy, was also disappointed by the lack of opportunities for interaction between the tutor and students. For her, the seminar was simply a lecture in a smaller room with fewer students in attendance.

Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) suggested that some students were reluctant to talk in class. She explained that 'There can be a bit of looking down if you say the wrong thing and it can stop you talking' (Evelyn, Interview 2). Participants articulated a sense of hierarchy at university, with students looking up at the lecture stage to listen to the lecturer and feeling that they were looked down at by lecturers. This was something that continued in the seminar room, a place, in its size and

practices, participants thought they were allowed, even encouraged, to share their

views and opinions. Tony (White British, 22, Working Class) explained:

> Some students seem a wee bit frightened by the teacher. Very quiet and they
> attend everything but say nothing in tutorials. If they got nice comments on
> their performance … like 'Good point' or 'Interesting view' then that could
> help (Tony, Interview 3).

Burke et al (2013:4) suggest that pedagogic practices are connected with power

relations manifesting themselves in 'hegemonic dispositions and subjectivities in the

classroom. Thus participation is tied to unequal power relations of class, gender and

race.' Power appeared to be reflected in the way some participants used the term

'looking down' to articulate their sense of lacking validity, perhaps feeling

marginalised. Geena (Black British, 42, Working Class) explained:

> Some of the teachers are good, and try to help, but some of them talk down to
> you (Interview 2).

> Both Evelyn and Geena are women students but the feeling of being trivialised

was also experienced by men students. For instance, Velli (White Belgian, 19, No

class) explained:

> Some teachers talk down to you like you are stupid. I thought it would be like
> a conversation, you know, and I think that other students are of my view
> (Interview 1).

> Velli suggested that there was a power relationship between some teachers and

students (Chanock, 2010) when he had anticipated a conversation although they can

also possess power. I think that he was suggesting that there would be a lack of

judgement and that he would be treated as an equal but Bourdieu (1984:1) suggests

that are 'We are all snobs' in the manner in which distinctions are made. Reay

(2001:339) describes being 'looked down on' as producing feelings of inferiority in

mature students during their visits and interviews at highly selective universities but

this study set in a post-1992 university suggests that this exercise in power can happen

anywhere within the field of higher education, supporting the views of students in Quinn et al's (2005) study that all universities are middle class in their academic practices. Andy (White British, 27, Middle Class) had been worried about how he would be treated at university. He explained:

> I liked college because the tutors were the same as me and there was no looking down at us but ... I didn't want to go to a big university…I thought that there would be a kind of snobbish thing with me not being from the right background...having good A levels and it would be a bit Us and Them kind of thing (Interview 2).

Andy described himself as middle class although his parents were not graduates and he seemed to be particularly relieved that he was not at a 'big' university where he could be positioned and looked down at. Andy was, I think, using the term 'big' to signify the more elite type of university that Reay (2001) discusses in her work, rather than post-1992 institutions. Consequently, Andy thought his cultural capital was more suited to a post-1992 university as he lacked the 'right' background to attend a pre-1992 university. The view that a post-1992 institution is the best place for non-traditional students is a common view among students from non-traditional backgrounds with old universities being positioned as middle class and for the privileged (Read et al, 2003; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Reay et al, 2005).

Participants spoke of university as an impersonal space and one in which the views of students were ignored. The above quotes suggest that students felt marginalised, which is a theme Thomas (2002) has discussed in her work on institutional habitus and is also a theme in the work of Burke et al (2013). These research studies on institutional habitus both make the point that some university settings can be positioned as threatening and uncomfortable by non-traditional students who appear to lack knowledge of how to be 'behave' within the academy - something that is greatly influenced by habitus and cultural capital.

Participants' narratives indicated that they felt isolated and distanced by the way they were spoken to and perhaps othered making it difficult to adapt to the academic practices of higher education. Teaching staff could simply see their role as imparting knowledge given their status as lecturers which is consistent with the writings of Ecclestone, Hayes and Ferudi (2005) criticising what they see as a 'therapeutic' approach but participants seemed to challenge this passive pedagogy and their role as non-participating listeners as it conflicted with their expectations of what university would, and should, be. Again, capital, especially educational, was a dominant feature of the non-alignment of institutional expectations with student expectations. Monique (Black French, 26, Working Class), who preferred workshops to lectures due to the interactive nature of the former, was one of many participants who favoured this method of delivery. Monique explained:

> It is … an intimate way for us to learn. It was new to me and I was worried by being so close to the professor but quickly it was a very good way to get a feel ... to understand the module. In lectures you are thinking to yourself 'Am I understanding of this?' and you have the doubts, okay. But in the workshops you can ask the question. If you have the friends then we can ask together and not to be the only one with the questions. If the workshop is organised in a friendly way by the professor then this can be a good experience I think yes (Monique, interview 3).

Monique disclosed some of her dispositions in the status she gave to the teacher, which seemed to reflect the view common among non-UK participants concerning the perceived superiority of British higher education. The power of the teacher was also manifested by worries of being too close. Perhaps she had anticipated Andy's Us and Them concerns but in her workshop there was a feeling of students being at ease in this friendly social environment where everyone could participate. In the workshop, habitus and field appeared to produce practice in which students enjoyed a sense of engagement and perhaps 'belonging' in relation to the pedagogy. Peat et al (2001), who examined the experience of first year students in

workshops, also found that this type of delivery was valued by students. Their finding was replicated in this study with participants preferring workshops due to their relative informality and the consequent opportunities to talk and feel involved in their learning.

Participants' attitudes toward seminars depended on the formalities required by the teacher. If the seminar was interactive within an informal and relaxed setting, then students felt engaged as opportunities to talk were available. These were places where students could interact, talk to other students, feel valued and become involved in life at university. Alternatively, if the seminar was teacher dominated then students felt that this minimised opportunities to talk which limited their involvement. Involvement was thus an important part of feeling a sense of belonging. Chloe (White British, 20, Middle Class), who preferred the workshop setting, explained:

> People talk in the workshop because you can and you are allowed to and encouraged but not in lectures. You must be quiet. But in workshops we talk and then talk outside and you get to know people with similar interests and friends. And you think that I like it here because you belong (Interview 2).

This quote appeared to provide an apt summary of some of the principal features promoting a sense of student belonging. Although the last sentence in the quote could be read as Chloe feeling a sense of belonging only in the workshop and not elsewhere at university. There was the freedom to engage in academic talk in class, which was encouraged and led to social talk with opportunities to meet people and make friends. The outcome was student satisfaction due to the establishment of a sense of belonging.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the importance to participants of being listened to and having opportunities to talk which many had expected university to offer them. Many of the participants seemed to be unsure of their right to a place at university,

reflecting their habitus of being non-traditional students. The meeting of their habitus with the new field of higher education appeared to exacerbate their positioning of themselves as being unworthy of university and displayed itself in students expressing the need to share their worries. Most looked to the university and its support structures for reassurance but felt that they were on their own. Evelyn (Black African, 47, Middle Class) and other women engaged in forms of agency to overcome their isolation by finding other students to share their worries with. This led to the formation of what I have termed communities of care. Dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity appeared to feature in how support groups evolved and the composition of their memberships. Some men students, primarily young men, seemed to find group membership a threat to their masculinity.

Women appeared to find it easier to make friends than men did, with the classroom being used as the primary place to meet people. This seemed to be a reflection of the problems some men students had with sharing worries, attending university and coping with the independence of university. Many participants articulated a narrative that to be part of university it was important to be at university and a number of men students appeared to distance themselves from university, which limited their opportunities for involvement. As a consequence, they did not experience the coping mechanism of the care communities.

Workshops, and to a lesser extent seminars, were favoured over lectures as they seemed to fit with student habitus in their replication of school and college experiences by providing opportunities for student voice. Lectures, however, were generally perceived as isolating experiences despite being filled with students. Participants felt that the best small group experiences occurred when staff encouraged

'talk' so making it possible to get close(r) to the teacher enhancing opportunities for social interactions between staff and students.

Becoming involved at university is clearly aided by being able to meet people and make friends. The importance of having friends is, among many things, identified as a factor creating a sense of belonging as people form dependencies to each other. Further, friends appear to help students stay the course. Poor and inappropriate social provision as well as a non-campus setting seem to limit opportunities for becoming involved. A pedagogic practice of positioning students as passive learners who are limited in their opportunities to make contributions in class appears to prevent students from being involved.

In the Conclusion, I examine the findings of each chapter and the study's overarching themes. In addition, the contribution and limitations of the study are discussed.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and implications

7.1 Introduction

This study has explored student sense of belonging through the accounts of nineteen first year undergraduate participants at an inner city, post-1992 University using Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus. The aims of the study were to:

- Investigate the extent to which students see themselves as 'belonging' to various dimensions and spaces of higher education such as the university as a whole, their course and friendship networks.

- Explore the importance of 'belonging' in the lives of students and how this may vary, for example, by social class, ethnicity and gender.

- Examine the extent to which 'sense of belonging' contributes toward staying the course.

- Apply a conceptual framework, influenced by Bourdieu, to identify, and theorise, the factors which may help to facilitate, and mitigate against, students developing a sense of 'belonging'.

The next section explores the extent to which the thesis has addressed the research aims. This is followed by a discussion of the contributions and limitations of the study, which leads to the implications of the findings for higher education. Thoughts on the direction future research might pursue are made in the final section.

7.2 Addressing the aims

7.2.1 Investigating the extent to which students see themselves as 'belonging'

This study used a longitudinal, qualitative approach to obtain the accounts of nineteen first year undergraduate students at a post-1992 University. The interviews were carried out at three points in their first year. The resulting data allowed for an investigation into the extent to which students saw themselves as 'belonging'.

The data suggested that many participants had failed to develop a sense of belonging to the institution. However, many possessed a sense of belonging to the

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friends they had made at university. The formations of the friendships, or what I term the 'communities of care', was the participants' response to the perceived lack of support, guidance and help on the part of the university. For many participants, the absence of the development of a sense of belonging began in Welcome Week. This event, which was a major disappointment to most participants, can be viewed as being centred on what Gale and Parker (2012) articulate as an induction process based on the rules and regulations of university. The emphasis on regulations was in contrast to participants' perceived need for a social introduction to university life accentuating opportunities to meet people and make friends. The outcome was that students did not experience the 'belonging' start to university, which Brooman and Darwent (2014) and Youthsight (2014) cite as an important part of feeling welcomed at university. This appeared to lead to the majority of participants feeling that they were on their own. This perception of social isolation (Leathwood and Read, 2008) within the spaces of university continued to be a dominant theme in the narratives of many participants.

Other features of university life such as independent learning and e-learning also made obtaining a sense of belonging a somewhat challenging experience for many participants. Again, the dominant theme to emerge from the accounts of participants was the feeling that they were 'on their own' and it was their responsibility to navigate life at university in the absence of the anticipated help, support and guidance. The majority of participants' felt that they had been promised a supportive environment to aid their learning and that they would have access to help and guidance.

The University had based its Teaching and Learning strategy on the premise that students would be independent learners on entry. The work of Leathwood (2006)

demonstrates the need to be aware of the problematic nature of the concept of independent learning, yet the University based its pedagogic model without seeming to be aware of the challenges it might pose for students. Many participants appeared to feel that independence in learning was a worthy aim but that they were not given sufficient guidance on what it meant to be an independent learner or how to achieve the status. Some participants articulated independent learning as being told to 'go away and do the work'. This again brought to the fore feelings of isolation and being on their own. Most participants, even those who felt comfortable with being positioned as an independent learner, felt that the approach to learning made fitting in at university difficult and further this approach challenged their expectation that university would be a place offering help, support and guidance. This led many participants to view the University as uncaring and not interested in them.

The perception of a lack of care on the part of the University manifested itself in the opinion of many participants in the e-learning theme of the Teaching and Learning strategy. E-learning was foregrounded by the University as a key theme to support and engage students. Participants' view of e-learning was that it was an isolating experience. Their overwhelming expectation of university was that it would be a place of active and involved learning with significant face to face contact with teaching staff. E-learning was viewed by many participants as the institution's way of coping with high student intakes and again accentuated feelings of students being on their own.

The dominant account to emerge from the data was that participants did not see themselves belonging to many dimensions of university life. With respect to the spaces of university life, the most prominent to feature in the accounts of participants

were the lecture theatre and the student union. Both spaces were viewed as negative spaces to develop a sense of belonging.

The student union was a particularly challenging space due to the presence of alcohol and alcohol related behaviour. Many participants objected to the social provision of the institution being based on the assumption that students wanted to drink alcohol. Many participants simply wanted social spaces where they could meet and talk with others students without being positioned as people who needed to drink alcohol. Some Muslim students, especially women, felt that the university's concentration on alcohol themed social spaces excluded them from being able to fit in to the social fabric. This positioning of students as drinkers of alcohol appeared to directly challenge the degree of student diversity found at this inner city institution. Other women participants spoke of the unpleasant nature of the social spaces due to the behaviour of some men students within what might be seen as part of the lad culture within higher education (Warin and Dempster, 2007). Again, there was the perception that the main social spaces where off limits to many students as they seemed to only meet the social needs of people wishing to drink. Many participants thus viewed these spaces as being exclusionary which challenged their ability to fit in to a part of university.

The lecture theatre was another major space of the university that most participants found to be unwelcoming. The lecture theatre was described as being 'big' and 'cold' to convey its unwelcoming nature which was further accentuated by participants' perceptions of its formalised rules of being silent and looking to the front, and sometimes up. It was, for many participants, a highly passive space where students seemed to be looked down on by teachers. Despite the relatively large

numbers of students in attendance especially at the beginning of the semester, many participants felt lonely and isolated in the lecture theatre.

These negative perceptions and feelings of unease were contrasted with positive views on small group spaces such as the tutorial and workshop. Both of these spaces appeared to give students things they needed in order to have a sense of belonging. The most important of these to emerge in participants' accounts was being able to feel involved in their learning as active learners. This seemed to allow students to gain a sense of belonging, which was aided by being able to articulate their views. The extent to which participants felt a sense of belonging appeared to depend on the pedagogic practice of the teacher. If the small group class session replicated the theatricality of the lecture based around the teacher talking and the students listening, then opportunities to fit in and belong were not seen to exist. If, however, students were encouraged to give voice to their views and opinions, then the development of a sense of belonging was possible. This development was aided by the teacher knowing and using student names, which appeared to validate their individuality within a university setting where many positioned themselves as being part of an unknown mass.

Thus the dimensions and spaces of university promoting sense of learning appeared to be the establishment of friendships, opportunities to give voice to their views within small group sessions and being known as an individual. For many of the participants these features were the exception rather than the rule.

7.2.2 The importance of belonging and its variation by factor

For the majority of participants, the development of a sense of belonging was seen as an important part of being at university. A number of participants stated that their perceptions that they were not part of university life had made them consider

leaving university. It is, however, necessary to note that some participants did not see sense of belonging as important due to external factors such as a childcare and living with friends who studied at another university. For these participants university was primarily an exercise in instrumentalism as their sense of belonging lay elsewhere. This demonstrates the complexity of investigating sense of belonging due to normative characteristics, which are bound up in people's subjectivities.

Women participants, in general, tended to articulate the importance of belonging to a greater extent than most men participants did. Although, it is necessary to acknowledge that one of the participants to speak of the importance of having a sense of belonging was a man who based his opinion on his brother's experience of not fitting in at university. It seemed that women in general spoke of the importance of care, whereas men participants wanted help. This, I think, reflects societal constructions of women as the carers bound up in the importance of people feeling that have a place within which they can experience a sense of belonging. This, as discussed above, led to the establishment of communities of care as substitutes for perceptions of the lack of help, support and guidance provided by the university. It appeared that this was the way in which women students developed a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging was to the community and not the university as many felt a sense of alienation from the institution.

Men participants, in general, failed to establish the necessary support to develop sense of belonging. A stumbling block for many, but not all, men was maintaining membership of care groups. These groups were, women participants argued, open to all students but a number of men students struggled in the presence of women taking leadership roles. An outcome was that men students, especially young ones, seemed to be most prone to lacking a sense of belonging. The sample of

nineteen participants is small but it is noteworthy that of the five students to leave university, four were young men. The fifth participant to leave was a mature women student who had a challenging start to university life due to timetable problems which she argued had prevented her from gaining access to other students in small class sessions. The communities of care evolved from students meeting in tutorials and workshops. She had wanted to belong but felt that she never had sufficient opportunities.

For many participants university offered them more independence than they had experienced at school and college. Many men participants spoke of their difficulties in dealing with this independence. A major manifestation of the increased independence for men participants, especially younger ones, was that they did not attend university to the same extent as women. This limited their opportunities to be involved.

In addition, a number of the men participants were from families where their mothers worried about their sons being away from the home environment. The outcome was that the men travelled home as soon as classes finished. This again reduced opportunities to meet people, which appeared to be vital to the establishment of a sense of belonging. The men most affected by this were those from immigrant backgrounds, primarily Black African and Somalian but again the sample is small.

Social class background has been seen as an important factor in who can and who cannot belong at university (Reay et al, 2009) but my data suggested that participants from all social classes could struggle with developing a sense of belonging. Thus, I find not find the 'fish in water' and 'fish out water' dichotomy. For instance, a number of self-defined middle class women participants articulated their unhappiness with Welcome Week and how its organisation had made them feel

unwelcomed. These students could be described as traditional students who would have a sense of entitlement and belonging on entry but they expressed doubts concerning their ability to belong having experienced the induction programme. Participants from non-traditional backgrounds also expressed doubts about their ability to develop a sense of belonging. A key difference between the two groups was that the traditional students seemed to be able to cope with e-learning and independent learning more easily than their non-traditional peers. This seemed to reflect their economic, social and class capital endowments. The non-traditional participants appeared to use prior educational experiences to a greater extent than traditional participants to articulate concerns about fitting in. Many non-traditional participants portrayed school and college as being helpful and supportive which was then used to contrast the lack of support and help at university. Thus, support and help acted as a proxy for being able to belong. The middle class students all wanted help and support as well but, in general, they believed that they could cope but few students, traditional or non-traditional, gave the impression of possessing a sense of belonging to any significant extent.

7.2.3 Sense of belonging and staying the course

Of the nineteen participants five left university and two transferred to other institutions. The remaining twelve students progressed to the second year of study. The five students who left did not appear to develop a sense of belonging and this was also the situation for the two students who transferred. Of the twelve who stayed the course some argued that sense of belonging was important to their progression. This suggests that it is possible to stay the course in the absence of a sense of belonging.

The five students to leave university all struggled to make friends, which this study identifies as an important part of developing a sense of belonging. There are

various reasons that might explain they why did not make friends with the most prominent being that four of the five were clearing students. Clearing students, in the case of this particular university, are generally students who have either failed to enter their selected universities via the University and College Admission Service (UCAS) or made a very late decision to apply for university entrance. In total there were eight clearing students among the nineteen participants. Thus, four stayed the course and four did not.

Clearing students can lack preparation for their university (Youthsight, 2012) as a consequence of the limited time between the A level results and the start of the university year. This was the case with five of the eight who came though clearing. Only one of the five stayed the course with the other four leaving. Of the remaining three clearing students, two stayed the course and one left.

The four clearing students to stay the course all developed a sense of belonging but in different ways. This again exposes the complexities of sense of belonging. First, there was the middle class student who did not get the required A levels to study at his first choice university where his friends also planned to study. The friends did obtain entry. This particular student gained entry to the university used in this study, lived with his friends some distance from this university but close to the university his friends' attended. As a consequence, he socialised with his friends and used their university as his main social space. The outcome was that he developed a sense of belonging to his friends and their university. This sense of belonging appeared to make him pass and progress so that he could continue to live with his friends. He never gave the impression of having any sense of belonging to this university in anyway.

The second student also appeared to lack a sense of belonging to this university. She viewed university as a means to an end, which was to secure a future for her and her daughter. She would have liked to have made friends but making friends was a luxury she could not afford. Her sense of belong was to her daughter.

The third of the four to stay was a Black African student from a non-traditional background who was initially overwhelmed by his new experience of university. Over the course of our three interviews his view of university changed as he made friends, obtained support and passed modules. All three aspects appeared to enhance his sense of belonging, yet in the early weeks he had expressed doubts concerning his place at university.

Finally, the fourth student was heavily influenced by his brother's experience at university, which had persuaded him of the need to be involved at university as much as possible. The outcome was that he developed a strong sense of belonging to the university, his course and friends, which appeared to help him to stay the course. Thus, we have four different sense of belonging experiences that influence staying the course.

One of the four clearing students who left has been discussed above. She attended university for the first time in the first week of teaching and missed Welcome Week. Her disjointed start at university with the timetabling problems seemed to stop her gaining access to people and making friends who might have helped her in solving problems. She did not seem to develop a sense of belonging, which she claimed was a significant part of her decision to leave. Thus, her issue was the failure to establish friendships.

The issue of friends, or rather the lack of them, was also important for sense of belonging for the remaining participants. Two lived some distance from the

university. This limited opportunities to meet people but for different reasons. One of the two lived away from home and felt that travelling to university was time consuming and expensive. Allied to this was the fact that his independence from his parents made it easier for him to miss classes. He wanted to establish friendships, told me that he felt lonely but he never seemed to give himself opportunities to meet people. The second student lacked the independence of the previous student as he was 'controlled' by his mother who wanted him home as soon as possible to assuage her worries. This limited his opportunities to meet people. The last of the four students to leave lived close to the university. He was influenced by his Turkish cultural background to the extent that he wanted to meet Turkish speaking students and felt particularly comfortable by being surrounded by family and Turkish friends from this time at college. His failure to meet other Turkish students was exacerbated by his lack of familiarity with high education. This reflected his social and cultural capital.

At this point in the discussion it is helpful to summarise the above. First, it seems to be the case that the clearing students from non-traditional backgrounds struggled to develop a sense of belonging. The lack of sense of belonging appeared to influence their decisions to leave. Secondly, sense of belonging to the university and its dimensions and spaces is not necessarily a prerequisite for staying the course. This was demonstrated by participants who stayed the course and did not appear to have any particular sense of belonging to this university.

Of the eleven non-clearing participants, ten stayed the course. For some the development of sense of belonging had an impact on their progression but this was not the case for all eleven. Again, it was possible to stay the course in the absence of a sense of belonging.

The impact of sense of belonging on staying the course was most pronounced for women participants who had formed friendship groups as their response to perceptions that the university's help, support and guidance was inadequate. A number of participants, again mainly women, articulated the view that they would have abandoned their studies without the sense of belonging they derived from their respective 'communities of care.' Thus, the sense of belonging was, as previously discussed, to friends they had made at university and who continued to be an important font of comfort across their first year at university.

My research, thus, suggested that fitting in or belonging was not a clear cut issue of social background but instead was based on the situated experiences of participants as they sought help, support and guidance to overcome perceptions of 'being on their own'.

7.2.4 On using Bourdieu, to identify, and theorise, the factors which may help to facilitate, and mitigate against, students developing a sense of 'belonging'.

Bourdieu provides the researcher with a toolkit for analysing situated experiences. My research employed a number of Bourdieu's ideas to develop a conceptual framework with the aim of exploring the factors helping and hindering the development of a sense of belonging. The principal ideas used were habitus, capital, field and the rules of the game. The use of the ideas in the analysis demonstrated the influence of Bourdieu.

People make sense of their world through the manner in which they look at it. This was true of this study where participants attempted to make sense of university according to their habitus. Reay (1998) has argued that working class students can struggle to fit in to life at university due to a mismatch between a habitus dominated by previous dispositions and the new field of higher education with its middle class ways. My research suggests that field clashed with the habituses of the majority of the

participants regardless of social class background. Participants from all backgrounds found regulations and rules to be particularly unsettling. The students were in a field, the world of university, with its academic cultures and practices. The field was completely new for the majority of participants, reflecting their limited cultural capital of the ways of higher education. For a minority of participants, there was some acquaintance with the field. Participants, whatever their accumulations of cultural capital, made sense of the rules and regulations to position the university as one with a high failure rate. This perception appeared to mitigate against the development of a sense of belonging. Other academic practices such as e-learning and independence in learning within the pedagogic approach employed by the university did seem to support Reay's (1998) mismatch view. Many of the participants from non-traditional backgrounds continued to perceive university as uncaring due to believing that they were on their own. A number of participants from traditional backgrounds, while showing empathy with their non-traditional peers, maintained that being positioned as an independent learner confident in the use of computers was something that they were comfortable with.

The perceived theatricality of the lecture was a feature of university mitigating against the establishment of a sense of belonging regardless of social class background. In fact, it was middle class students who were the most critical of this particular pedagogic practice. In contrast, the small group arrangement was favoured by most participants as aiding the development of a sense of belonging but only if the teacher relinquished some of their middle class power in higher education as the conveyor of received knowledge to give students opportunities to voice their views. In the small group sessions students appeared to view the teacher as supportive and helpful. This led many to believe that they were no longer on their own.

Use of the Bourdieu influenced concept of institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002) allowed the study to explore the impact of academic culture and practices. Participants articulated the view that they wanted the provision of social facilities that would provide them with opportunities to meet people and make friends. The institutional habitus with respect to social provision appeared to be based on a culture of students socialising around drinking alcohol. This failed to meet the demands of many students within the diverse student population at this university as it ran counter to their dispositions. This failure could be seen as exclusionary (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) for many of the students, especially women students, and seemed to have mitigated against sense of belonging.

7.3 Contributions and limitations of the study

This section addresses the way in which the study augments an understanding of student sense of belonging as well as discussing limitations inherent to the research.

The qualitative investigation into the accounts of the nineteen participants contributes to an understanding of the importance of help, support and guidance in the development of a sense of belonging. In the absence of the necessary 'care' students from all classes may struggle to connect to their university, faculty and degree course. Students who enter through clearing seem most susceptible to not staying the course, which seems to be explained, in part, by their non-standard transition compared with non-clearing students. This study suggests that all students need an induction, which accentuates opportunities to meet people and make friends while avoiding a 'rules and regulations' based approach to life at university.

Lewis (2003) suggests that longitudinal research can capture processes evolving across time. She maintains that combining longitudinal analysis with

qualitative inquiry permits the researcher to examine evolution in the accounts of participants. This was the case in my study where the longitudinal nature of the analysis provided a richer process of participants' accounts through its potential to examine factors that enhance and mitigate sense of belonging across time. In the absence of the longitudinal approach, the importance of friends and the manner of friendship development could have been missed. Further, the use of three interview points allowed the nineteen participants to be more involved in the creation of the data in the way they made points and asked questions. This sample size, which is common within semi-structured interviews, had the benefit of being workable, especially so given the three stage interview process resulting in fifty-two interviews but the inferences cannot be viewed as generalisable as discussed in the methodology section. The resulting analysis is thus based on a small sample at one post-1992 University.

Another limitation is recognition of the fact that the data was collected in the teaching year 2008/9. This was six years ago and it needs to be acknowledged that some things may have changed with the passage of time. However, many of the key themes of this study, as described below, are at the time of writing still on-going concerns.

The core findings of the study are that student sense of belonging would be enhanced if students felt that they experienced ongoing help and support; were given more opportunities to talk and interact in class; and were acknowledged as individuals. Thomas (2012), who explored what works to improve retention and success in UK higher education, synthesised case study findings over the period 2008-2011 identifying many of the issues identified in this study. For example, Thomas (2012) recognises the importance of induction being an on-going and interactive process while providing opportunities for socialisation to promote friendship

formation. Crawford (2014), in her examination of higher education experiences by different socio-economic groups, also identifies the importance of student support, especially for non-traditional students. Hughes and Smail (2015), who explore student transition into higher education, suggest that universities should give increased attention to social integration. Searle et al (2015) use qualitative research to examine student voice and engagement in higher education suggesting that power and resistance continue to limit opportunities for student involvement in the learning process. O'Brien et al (2014), who research the experience of law degree students in Australia, argue that teaching staff knowing and using students' names 'has potential to humanise the law school experience, build community, and positively impact upon the wellbeing of students and staff' (114).

The most recent National Student Survey (2013/4) for the department used in this study also attends to the on-going nature of many of the issues identified. Many students reported concerns relating to support and help. For instance, timetable clashes and the need to queue for hours to get problems resolved are still concerns. The lack of feedback, which was an issue in my research, is also still an on-going worry. Further, the survey data revealed that students thought that contact with teaching staff was still inadequate. The subject of timely responses to emails by tutors again remained an issue.

It would be unfair to construct the survey as comprising negative comments only as there are many positive ones but the survey does suggest that the university continued to experience the types of issues identified here, attesting to the relevance of this study.

Finally, the University's White Paper outlining the planned strategy for 2015 to 2020 argues that 'We will only admit students with the potential to succeed and

who are likely to persist to the completion of their programme.' This intention does not appear to understand the problematic nature of 'student persistence' with its normalisation of the 'student' as White and middle class, thus ignoring the university's student diversity associated with widening participation initiatives. Further, the admissions policy appears to favour applicants from middle class backgrounds, which is troubling in a world of inequalities.

This study's contribution to knowledge emerged from the longitudinal nature of the study; the value of the theoretical framework used; and the connection identified between social 'integration' and academic learning. The study employed a unique longitudinal approach to capture the accounts of the participants at three different points across their first-year of study. This allowed participants to reflect on their views of life at university as their experiences of university unfolded, and to reflect back, at subsequent interviews, on the ways their experiences and sense of belonging had changed over time. The longitudinal method, for instance, allowed me to use the data from previous interviews to identify issues of importance to particular participants and so ask specific questions of relevance to that interviewee. The theoretical framework, influenced by Bourdieu, was valuable in the way it contributed to the study's findings, especially the critically important role played by 'institutional habitus' in promoting and denying a sense of belonging. This identification of the significance of 'institutional habitus' makes an important contribution to knowledge of 'sense of belonging' within higher education. The study achieved this by shifting the focus of the discussion on to the institution rather than a deficit construction of the student who needs to commit to institutional values in order to belong. Finally, social and academic integration have tended to be viewed as two somewhat separate components of sense of belonging or fitting in. This study, however, suggested that

social 'integration' impacts on, and re-enforces, academic integration. If students are able to meet people and make friends, then this appears to aid academic learning as seen in the experiences of the communities of care discussed in this study

7.5 Implications for higher education

This section presents thoughts on the implications of the study for enhancing student sense of belonging within higher education.

7.5.1 Small(er) group settings

Higher education faces the fact that despite the lecture being a very cost effective method, students feel isolated as individuals compared with the resource intensive small group approach. The research of Crozier et al (2008) suggest that students in general want the type of small group teaching experienced by students in the setting of a highly selective institution. Universities thus need to realise the importance of students progressing to awards against the short-term financial benefits of dealing with massification through large lectures. My study suggested that small group teaching increased the probability of students staying the course in the way it enhanced sense of belonging. It may be necessary that existing pedagogic practices be changed to increase student retention, especially for students for non-traditional backgrounds, by providing them with educational experiences based on small(er) group sessions. There are resource implications but there are cost consequences, lost income and student drop out, of continuing with a pedagogic practice that students find alienating leading to low attendance in many lectures.

7.5.2 Making it easier for students to be known

Participants wanted to be identified as individuals rather than part of a mass of unknown students. They articulated the importance of teachers knowing and using their names to make them feel valued and acknowledged. Teachers have more

opportunities to get to know students' names in small group settings, which again demonstrated linkages between parts of university life promoting feelings of belonging. For instance, many participants described feeling warm and secure when the tutor was able to recognise them by name. Again, universities need to confront the benefits of what small group arrangements can bring to the student experience.

It might also be possible to provide teachers with class lists, using appropriate technology, linking student name with their ID photograph. This would help in overcoming the obvious difficulties of remembering the names of students who are only seen once or twice each week by teaching staff.

7.5.3 Ongoing support

I suggest that students would benefit from having support built into the course programme such as a module, which introduced them to higher education whilst providing them with a place where they could ask questions and seek guidance. Bettinger and Baker (2014) show the benefits of providing students, primarily from non-traditional backgrounds, with information during their first year on how higher education works in terms of time management, self-advocacy and study skills, perhaps what Bourdieu might call 'the rules of the game'. Thomas (2012) argues that access in the absence of ongoing help, support and guidance limits opportunities to belong. This appeared to be the case for a number of participants in my study who might have benefited from ongoing help to solve their problems and so aid engagement.

Further, if support was small group based and encouraged students to give voice to their anxieties, then the help sessions might also produce social interaction encouraging friendship formation.

7.6 Future research

I suggest that it would be beneficial to research the experience of clearing students from non-traditional backgrounds. Baxter and Hatt (2000) argue that the experience of clearing students is under-researched and that conclusion still seems pertinent, while Johnson (2011) reports that clearing students can comprise over thirty per cent of the first year intake of post-1992 institutions. My study found that clearing students were mainly from non-traditional backgrounds with four of the eight clearing students leaving university in their first year. This would suggest that retention is of particular concern for this cohort.

Future research could also examine the pre-entry experience of clearing students and the extent to which they cope with the one size fits all induction process. My research, while based on a small sample, suggests that clearing students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, are most likely to leave university. I suggest that this retention outcome reflects institutional and pedagogic practices, especially a utilitarian approach to induction. If widening participation is to work, then universities need to know how to retain clearing students through bespoke and ongoing transmission.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 The Pilot Study Information Sheet

Appendix 2 Briefing note to staff September 2008

Appendix 3 The Information Sheet of September 2008

Appendix 4 Consent form

Appendix 5 Participant information

Appendix 1 The Pilot Study Information Sheet

A study on the experience of first year students

The purpose of the research is to examine the experience of first year students in the [named department] at the university. The research is for a small pilot study I am conducting as part of my doctoral programme. The research output is a paper on the experience of student during their first year at university.

The interview will last for 30 to 60 minutes and will cover your perceptions of life at university. I am interested to you know your thoughts on the University, your course, teaching, learning, and other aspects of student life. I would like to tape record the interviews and hope that this is agreeable to you.

All information will be confidential and would not be shared with any member of [named University] or any other organisation. Any information I use would not identify you as the source and I am happy to provide you with a copy of the tape recording and a copy of the research output. I will anonymise you in this, and any subsequent, reporting of the study.

The interview can take place at the university or any place convenient for you. In the past students have enjoyed talking about their views on life at university. I would welcome the opportunity to listen to your views on life at university.

Thanks

John

John Curran
0207xxxxxxx
j.curran@xxx.ac.uk

Appendix 2 Briefing note to staff September 2008

Further to our recent conversations and your expression of interest in aiding me, please read the brief on the aims, objectives and rational for the study which is part of my EdD thesis under the supervision of Dr Carole Leathwood in Institute for Policy Studies in Education, London Metropolitan University.

Aims

The aims of the research are to:

- Investigate the extent to which students see themselves as 'belonging' to various dimensions and spaces of higher education such as the university as a whole, their course and friendship networks.

- Explore the importance of 'belonging' in the lives of students and how this may vary, for example, by social class, ethnicity and gender.

- Examine the extent to which 'sense of belonging' contributes toward staying the course.

- Apply a conceptual framework, influenced by Bourdieu, to identify, and theorise, the factors which may help to facilitate, and mitigate against, students developing a sense of 'belonging'.

Objectives

The objectives are to:

- Identify the extent to which perceptions of belonging by class, gender, ethnicity and age may help to explain the student experience, attainment and drop-out

- Analyse possible links between identified factors and perceptions of belonging

- Produce insights which through analogy might inform policy and practice in similar contexts

Rationale

I am interested in examining student perceptions of belonging for a number of reasons. First, my experience of students, as a teacher in UK higher education since 1980, has suggested that belonging is an important issue. I have seen students drop out due to feeling isolated, not cared for and abandoned. Secondly, the widening participation of government has addressed the recruitment aspect, i.e. what happens to students once they enter HE. Thirdly, your university, in common with other post-1992 institutions, has a dropout rate of c.20%. I suggest that research is needed to examine links between dropout rates and feelings of belonging.

The a priori hypothesis is that the greater the sense of belonging, the greater the likelihood of involved membership and the achievement of associated academic outcomes such as progression and award.

Definitions of participation suggest membership, partaking, and involvement in the activity. So participation in higher education could be seen as an act of involved membership. Involved membership could help students to progress and achieve; have a sense of belonging; and develop a presence in the activities, formal and informal, of the institution.   In this research, I intend to look at students' perceptions of participating and belonging at university. A successful policy of deepening participation, which I define as more students from non-traditional backgrounds succeeding at university, may require a sense of belonging on the part of the students.

Your help please

As discussed previously, I wish to interview first year students from within the school. The intention is to interview the students three times – in October, February and May – of their first time. I am aiming for a sample in the twenties and realise that my sampling may well be convenience sampling. I have identified the Business Skills module, which you teach on, as a module allowing me to reach a large number of students in the first weeks of teaching. I would be grateful if you would bring this project to the attention of your students. I have included an information sheet for the students so that they are fully informed. It has details of how they can contact me.

Thanks for your help

John

John Curran

14 September 2008

Appendix 3 The Information Sheet for Participants, September 2008

A study on the experience of first year students

My name is John Curran. I am researching for a degree whose purpose of the research is to examine the experience of first year students in at university. As I wish to look at the experience of first year students it is necessary for me to interview first year students. I would be grateful if you could spare your time to be interviewed.

Aims

The aims of the research are to:

- Investigate the extent to which students see themselves as 'belonging' to various dimensions and spaces of higher education such as the university as a whole, their course and friendship networks.

- Explore the importance of 'belonging' in the lives of students and how this may vary, for example, by social class, ethnicity and gender.

- Examine the extent to which 'sense of belonging' contributes toward staying the course.

- Apply a conceptual framework, influenced by Bourdieu, to identify, and theorise, the factors which may help to facilitate, and mitigate against, students developing a sense of 'belonging'.

Objectives

The objectives are to:

- Identify the extent to which perceptions of belonging by class, gender, ethnicity and age may help to explain the student experience, attainment and drop-out

- Analyse possible links between identified factors and perceptions of belonging

- Produce insights which through analogy might inform policy and practice in similar contexts

To obtain the data for my research I need to interview students on their experiences of life at university. I wish to conduct three interviews with each student so that the first year experience is fully covered. The interviews will be in October, February and May and each interview will last for about 30 minutes and will cover your perceptions of life at university. I am interested to you know your thoughts on the University, your course, teaching, learning, and other aspects of student life. I would like to tape

record the interviews and hope that this is agreeable to you. Recoding the interviews makes it easier for me to generate data by listening to the conversations.

All information will be confidential and would not be shared with any member of your university or any other organisation. Any information I use will not identify you as the source and I am happy to provide you with a copy of the tape recording and a copy of the research output. I will anonymise you in this, and any subsequent, reporting of the study.

The interviews can take place at university or any place convenient for you.
In the past students have enjoyed talking about their views on life at university. I would welcome the opportunity to listen to your views on life at university.

If you wish to leave after one or two interviews, then that this perfectly acceptable. I will not chase you and the decision to be part of the study will be yours alone. If at any stage you feel uncomfortable then you can withdraw. This applies during and between interviews. Further, if at any stage you need to discuss any issues you have with the interviews then you can contact my supervisor, Professor Carole Leathwood, c.leathwood@londonmet.ac.uk

If you are interested in being part of the study, then please contact me. My contact details are given below.

Thank you

John

John Curran
0207xxxxxx
j.curran@xxx.ac.uk

Appendix 4 Consent form

I have read the Information Sheet and am happy for my recorded interview(s) to be used in the generation of data for the study. I understand that I will not be identified in the study. Further, I understand that I can leave the interviews at any stage and that I can discuss any issues with members of the school's senior management.

I can, with I wish, ask for copies of the recorded interviews and the final thesis.

Student name (IN CAPTIALS) …………………………………..

Student signature …………………………………………………

Researcher signature …………………………………………..

Date …………………………………………………………………

Appendix 5 Participant information

Please complete the following to the best you can. All information provided will be confidential.

ABOUT YOU (IN CAPITALS)

NAME…………………………………./NAME IN STUDY…………………..
AGE.....
GENDER………
ETHNICITY……………….
NATIONALITY……………

SOCIAL CLASS – PLEASE SELECT ONE
WORKING CLASS
MIDDLE CLASS
NO CLASS AFILLIATION

DID YOU ENTER THROUGH CLEARING?
YES
NO

TERM TIME ACCOMMODATION
HOME
UNIVERSITY ACCOMMODATION
OTHER

EMPLOYMENT – PLEASE YOUR LAST JOB(S) PRIOR TO ENTERING UNIVERSITY

ABOUT YOUR FAMILY
PARENTS/GUARDIANS – HOW MANY HAVE BEEN TO UNIVERSITY?
NONE
ONE
TWO

EMPLOYMENT – PLEASE LIST YOUR PARENTS/GUARDIANS LAST JOBS(S)

Appendix 6 Transcript of interviews with Andy

Transcript of interview 1 with Andy – 3 November 2008

John

What were your initial expectations of life at university?

Andy

Well … I expected to turn up for lessons, for teachers to be there. I expected to be informed with everything that was going on. I expected to be taking the modules which were up on the website when I signed up. What else did I expect? I expected to have more hard information, I think that's the main problem for me, there's information but you have to kind of find it, it's not just given to you. The website sort of looks quite impressive but it's really difficult to find hard answers to fairly simple questions and the search facility is very poor. Again, it looks good but the reality is something else. Well, that's my view … the university sort of looks impressive at first glance but when you dig a little then it's not so impressive really.

Also, I'd quite like more handouts, more booklets, more information like that. More, I was expecting the classes to be more practical to the course that I'm taking.

John

So what was it that created your expectations? Was it looking at the prospectus, looking at the website before you came, talking to people? Others things please?

Andy

It was a bit of the prospectus, it was a bit of the website which made the university out to be more of a modern go getting business kind of a school.
John

I think you mean (deleted) Street. The one that looks very new?

Andy

(Deleted) Street they used is a very very good looking building, they used that to market the university, and obviously we're in the Northern campus, which is completely different. That was kind of misleading as well.

John

Did you apply before or during clearing please?

Andy

Oh, before clearing … yeah way before. I did lots of research on what I wanted to do when I was at college and this place and the course seemed to fit the bill. So I was even more disappointed because I had a view … a dream of what the uni and the course would be like and it's not turned out that way so far. But it might but I've got big doubts even this early so …

John

So were you disappointed with the reality?

Andy

But I don't mind as much like the look of the building, I mean it would be better if it looked as nice as the posh building, but it's just that adds it all up to the fact that as an organisation and the kind of ...

Then I had to do a report even before it had been covered in class, and this was the first time I had to do a report and it was just like me by myself trying to figure out how am I to report. I even went to the (support) courses and everything, they were helpful but not very helpful. And you're just pretty much by yourself to learn as well.

John

What about the (support) courses please?

Andy

I remember those (support) courses, when we made appointments with them on the internet, they told us that we could actually turn up at so and so time to come and do the introductory courses. We got there, and in some of them they actually told me to go away, they said I wasn't on the records and sort of kicked me back out again.   So they wouldn't even let me sit in for the whole thing, so for the first week ... I had to use my initiative, which I've got no problem with doing at all, but I don't, I feel that we should have been given more guidance at the start as to how to set about doing things.

John

So you would have liked more help at the being of modules?

Andy

Yes … to get us started. It just seemed that it was up to you and that you had to get on with it but … they said that we had the (support courses) but that didn't work as I just said.

John

Do you have any other views based on your expectations and what has happened so far?

Andy

I would say more involvement from the tutors. I'd say more feedback, more opportunities to get work assessed. Rather than thinking you've done a piece of work that's really decent and then realising that it's completely wrong, even though it kind of sounds right to you. I think more feedback, yeah.

John

You seem disappointed by your experience?

Andy

Yeah, that's true.

John

Is there one main reason?

Andy

It's the contact with the teaching staff, really. I think a lot of the lecturers here make themselves unavailable to the students outside of hours. There's not many hours really that you can contact them, there's not many ways at all really. It's difficult to contact them via e-mail if you're having problems. I've stopped various lecturers in the hallway sometimes, after trying to find them all day. And when I have found them, they've told me to make it quick and only let me talk to them as I'm walking down the corridor with them. It's a bit rude and not very helpful, is it? They don't really have any time to actually – or even make arrangements with someone else to talk to you. It's not that difficult, is it, to give some help. It's their job, I think.

John

So you would like to get the opportunity to talk to the teachers and for them to listen?

Andy

Just to show some manners and, like I said, do their job. Just that, I think.

John

Have there been any social aspects to life as a student?

Andy

Like what?

John

Have you got to know any people on your course and in the modules?

Andy

Well in the introduction week we had a marketing seminar where we all got into groups, we did a little project, we'd talk and then the tutor gave us some feedback. It was just like interacting with each other, then with the teacher. And I felt that made me feel like yeah, this is what I want to do, because I'm getting to know people, getting to know ideas. But in the seminars just you sit there and you listen to the tutor, you don't do any discussion. It's just another smaller lecture.

John

So you think that interactive, discussion based seminars would help you to meet people?

Andy

Oh definitely. No question but sitting listening doesn't do anything to help us know each other.

John

What of the general university social life? Any thoughts?

Andy

Not really a great amount of selection really!

John

Do you go to social events?

Andy

I never go.

John

Is there a reason?

Andy

Well, I think probably because there doesn't really seem like a student union here. I see the posters up, vote for this person, vote for that

John

Why do you say that there isn't a student union here?

Andy

Because, well ... Some of the nights they put on there at the (student union) as well, I mean I've been to some student unions before, particularly the one in Plymouth. And in order to compete with the clubs and the club nights that happen in the big city, they've got to work their game with the kind of acts they're going to put on there and the kind of people they're going to invite. They need to really think about the venue and think about what's going to attract people. They've got to make it sizeable enough, they've got to put a name that people have heard of and people actually want to see. Otherwise people are just going to go to the pub and go clubbing elsewhere.

John

The social side of university seems to have let you down. True?

Andy

I think I've been to a few places before and I think this is one of the, personally speaking, this is one of the hardest places I've found to meet people. It's the only halls of residence I've lived in here where people don't really talk to each other a great deal. It's quite difficult to actually meet people. If you're around about the age of 18, I mean I'm a mature student, I'm 27, if you're around about the age of 18, and they put all the 18-year-old people down on the third floor and that's always pretty noisy. But I don't know, just … people seem very rushed, just want to get on with their own thing, they don't seem too interested in interacting too much with what goes on in the university apart from the lectures. So I don't know, I think it could be better.

John

Do you feel part of the university or the course so far please?

Andy

No … not really, the place is a bit distant. I feel that I am on my own in the course. I have my girlfriend with me in the halls but no I'm not as involved as I expected to be so far.

John

Distant … that's an interesting word. What do you mean please?

Andy

There's a lack of atmosphere here. A good atmosphere is where people communicate and you fell part of it and I don't see that here so far.

Transcript of interview 2 with Andy 2 March 2009

John

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed again. Last time you did not seem that happy with aspects of life at university. Is that still the case?

Andy

I'm still unhappy and have decided to leave (university) at the end of this semester. Well I've already kind of like transferred to do my second year at Bucks university, that is regrettable because I've met a lot of people here that I do like, I've made some good friends here and it's a shame that I'm going to have to leave them.

John

Why leave?

Andy

I have really, really spent a lot of time thinking about this, on the one hand I would like to support the university and stick by them and hope that they improve. But on the other hand, I'm aware of how much money I'm borrowing just to get a degree and if I am going to be in that much debt I want to get, I want to have the best quality experience I possibly can for that money if I am to pay that much money back in my life. I don't really think that's too unfair, but like I've said, I've spent a long time thinking about it and I think this is probably the best move.

John

Who have you discussed the transfer with please?

Andy

My girlfriend and … just her really.

John

Not your PAA?

Andy

No.

John

Why?

Andy

Because I went to see her in the … last semester and it was like 'What do you want?' and it was not that … supportive really. A bit like I have to do this job but just to the minimum and was not that interested in me as a person to help.

John

So your expected more from your PAA?

Andy

The PAA thing gets sold to you as this big support thing in induction. If you have problems or need to talk to someone then see your PAA but when you go it's like I can't help you. I felt like it was more that she didn't want to help me and was just going through the motions.

What's the point of making such a big thing about being supportive and then you get that … lots of the others say that the PAA thing is just a waste of time and if you've got a problem then won't bother queuing up or going to the PAA office but try to solve it yourself but that can be very difficult as the information is wrong or not easy to find. I think that makes people think about the place in a pretty bad way.

John

What's disappointed you about the university?

Andy

It's been a combination of a lot of small things and a couple of big things.

John

Such as?

Andy

Namely just no, like I said, no tutor support really. I don't really think that what we do is proper learning, like I said, the modules aren't that relevant to me. Well they are relevant but they could be more relevant to the actual course that we're doing. So obviously if we do Marketing its music, record label marketing and that's been a big aspect of it. There's no on site, in the uni, ways of practising what you learn and I know that it's an academic course, but at the end of the day, we are learning about an industry, it would be nice to have something on campus where we could put that into practice. I've heard of universities doing similar courses where they have their own record labels.

John

Any other things please?

Andy

The constant frustrations, the IT department not working, the fact that some of the lecturers don't seem to be engaging, the constant look on (the module website), I can't be bothered to talk to you kind of attitude. And also the whole thing at the moment with the money, that the university's going through, it makes you think. Because it's not just been one or two things, it's been many things. The thing about having to queue all the time to try and get simple bits of info to help you settle in and get established. I'm a bit assertive but the time you waste is incredible. I heard other students moaning about the queues and the way you get treated … standing in a line for ages and then being told to see your PAA and then the PAA says that they have no power or authority to do things and … well it's really frustrating really.

John

Are you worried by the University's reputation at the moment?

Andy

Oh definitely. It doesn't look good, does it? It kind of makes you think is this the right place to be. If they can't organise the money, then how can they manage the rest of the stuff?

John

Did you think the university was the right place for you back in September?

Andy

Of course. That's why I came here. They take you in and they teach you something no other university could and then by the end of it you'd be this almighty machine ready to take the world on. That's basically how it was marketed to me and that's what I thought I would be coming into.

John

Can you expand on that please?

Andy

I haven't learned anything that blew my mind like wow. And if I did, it was like 2 or 3 times and everything else was just following everything else. And just doing the research myself and learning by myself. I haven't *[inaudible]* if that happened what would happen, think about it. Think about the future how it's going to be or just .... They just say OK yeah, think about it but then OK let's move on. I thought it would be much, much harder than it actually is.

And I thought that this university was the right place as it was an Us and not a Them type place and it would be more like the place I was at and not like Oxford or something.

John

That's very interesting but what do you mean by Us and Them please?

Andy

Well, I liked college because the tutors were the same as me and this was no looking down at us but ... I didn't want to go to a big university. They don't do the subjects I'm interested in away but I thought that there would be a kind of snobbish thing with me no being from the ... having good A levels and it would be a bit Us and Them kind of thing. I just what to learn and not get caught up in not using the right words, the right accent and being from a ... the wrong school and things like that.

John

So you came here (Andy interrupts) ...

Andy

I thought it would be an Us type of place with students and teachers similar to me and like college but I was warned at college about university.

John

How?

Andy

That it would not be as friendly or supportive as college and that even new unis were a bit superior in the way that you get treated and that it can be sort of … well a bit elitist.

John

So you have experienced the Us and Them atmosphere here?

Andy

Oh yeah in the way that some tutors look at you and talk to you.

John

How?

Andy

They can be quite ... well they sort of talk down to you. They can make snide comments about questions and be rude ... it shows, I think, that they feel superior. They know stuff and we don't. It can stop you asking questions as they can make you feel stupid and it kind of … your confidence falls.

John

What could have kept you here?

Andy

Well, in a business school I don't really know, I never had business experience before. But I think more I don't know, more practical experience, like examples in class and analyse how, like a company is developing. Or how has that firm evolved, and actually have that constantly, or have like a long term project that we have to work on.

John

Could you give me an example?

Andy

Yeah, like in Marketing can't we go out and actually have a project and design something to market and get it out there and actually try and get it to work? And in Events can't we actually as part of it, we'll have 50% of it learning the academic side of Events and then 50% of it can't we actually try and organise an event, try and put a gig on and get it out there?

John

What would help to make students feel included?

Andy

A few things.

Better structure of the modules.

Don't lie in the prospectus. And if you do make promises in the prospectus and on the website, deliver them.

And I think if the PAA (Personal Academic Advisor) was available more to you, because make it like, my PAA doesn't even know what's going on with the module structure because it changed from the website to what it's actually going to be this semester. The information is poor if it's online or a person. Nobody seems to take any responsibility for anything and in the end you rely on other students for your information which just causes more problems really.

So if the PAA was actually an expert in that area, it would be much more helpful. So instead of having what you're saying, like a whole area, it would be easier to just have your PAA know everything about you.

John

Do you want to say anything else?

Andy

I came here off my own back really. My parents didn't really have anything to do with it, I moved down here with my girlfriend. But yeah, she was doing Law here, my girlfriend's doing Law, she said her experience is even a lot worse than my one really. She's having a dreadful time over at the Law School there and apparently a lot of the tutors there don't even read or mark the work properly. So she's of the same mind as me, she's going to move, she's either moving universities next year or she's just going to leave and get a full time job. (The University) has got a lot of potential, it just needs to be managed a lot better in my opinion. But students often won't hang

around. Maybe if it was like it was 15 years ago where going to university was free for everyone and all grant funded and stuff, maybe that would be different but students – especially when it comes to money they're very mindful about what they're spending and what they hope to get in return for it.

John

So are you feeling part of the university at present?

Andy

I've made some good friends but the other things that should be part of the total experience have been really not there at all so far. I'm planning to transfer so I have to say that the university has not really captured me. No, I feel, have felt, that I could have be involved more. That's what I expected but …

Transcript of interview 3 with Andy – 27 April 2009

John

Last time we met you said that you were transferring to another university. Is that still the situation?

Andy

Yes. I'm going to Bucks in September.

John

You suggested that [the university] was lacking in the things that you hoped for. Could you say more on that please?

Andy

Well I wanted to be engaged by the teaching staff in all my modules, not some. Not to get me wrong. There is some very good teaching here but some of the teaching is very poor and just doesn't engage us at all really.

John

What do you mean by engage?

Andy

Well, make it meaningful and interesting. It needs to be more than what I could read in the book or get from online stuff and the teacher needs to listen to us. We need to be able to have a conversation. The lectures can be very boring. Just look at what happens to attendance in them. They go from lots at the start to very soon the place is empty. Not empty but big gaps. It must knock the confidence of the teacher but they

just go on with the lecture. Anyway most of the time they are just reading from the PowerPoint. We can do that.

John

So teacher engagement would be a key feature of your perfect experience. What are the other things that would make it better or even perfect?

Andy

The modules need to fit the course. We need to study modules that are relevant to work and employment, so we need to study course modules. Not just modules to make up the eight. A lot of the stuff seems to be filling out the course and not being about or for the course.

There definitely needs to be more tutor support. It would be nice if the tutors knew your name and used it. I have only been to one module where the teacher used my name. It makes it personal. It happened at college and school and should be here as well.

It needs to be more challenging. I think there's a lot of low key stuff just to get people who struggle to pass. We could use an onsite business which we do as part of the course. And there was a lot of academic talking but chances to talk were not so great, I think. The seminars are more about talking at us and so we don't get to share our experiences with the other students. It makes it quite hard to get to know people. I have made friends and that was because of group work. But the friends were picked for me by the tutor. By the way, I hated group work. It's just a random process who you get and can work with but it certainly helped to get to know people.

The place needs one place and not to be so spread out. We were all over the place in the first semester ... The teachers moan about the rooms as well so something needs to be done. That's a pretty strange way to treat new students. It can make you feel that no one cares enough to properly organise the timetable and rooms. You get the big sell in induction and then the reality the following week.

We need a centre. You can go there and there's going to be someone at any time that knows what's going on in that course. So if you can't get through to anyone on the e-mail there will be a receptionist or someone there who knows about the course. It could be a social place as well. But no queuing. That is one thing everyone moans about as well. The big thing that really turns people off the university, in my view anyway, is the queuing and the poor customer service aspect of the experience. You feel like nobody cares which isn't true, I know, but it's degrading to be asked to just stand in a line and wait ages and be told go and see … it should be a really nice place with appointments like a doctor's surgery with leaflets and online help but it creates a really poor image of the university. It's the Business School but would a successful business survive if … it needs to be worked on big time but the staff seem demoralised.

John

Has this semester been a better experience than last semester?

Andy

I passed all my modules with really good grades but you get no feedback on that. At college your tutor would see and say something but not here unfortunately. You're on your own pretty much. This semester has been much the same as last one. You get to know some people and then you get put into different groups even though we're doing the same module. It could be a chance to meet other people but you lose contact. You don't talk in the lecture and the place is a bit part time. People only seem to come for the classes and disappear.

John

Why do you think that people only come for the classes?

Andy

Well, there's not much to keep them here is there? You could sit in the café in Stapleton but it's not cheap and there's no real place for students to go.

John

What about the (Student Union)?

Andy

Have you been there? It's hardly a nice place to go is it? It's dark and dingy, I think that there could be better uses of the money that does get spent really.

John

Do you think that you have belonged at (name of university)?

Andy

Belonged? Like I think I said to you last time I wouldn't be leaving, would I? No I haven't belonged since I got here.

John

It can take time to belong.

Andy

Yeah but we don't have a lot of time. I had to make a quick decision about staying. You look around the place and the halls and you make your decision.

John

Was that your initial decision?

Andy

Well, I had been warned about university by the teachers at college. That it would be less friendly than college and there were right. The place, halls and buildings and feel about the whole place are not that friendly, are they?

John

In what way?

Andy

Well, the tutors need to get to know the students quicker and induction needs to be about us and not all the stuff about the university. I know that there is lots of students here and the staff seem overwhelmed but we are here and look at what is going on. The financial stuff made the place look incompetent, don't you think?

John

So you think that people make quick decisions about university life?

Andy

Yes, look at the drop in students going to lectures after just a few weeks but in other lectures the numbers stayed good because it was interesting. We're not stupid … we know when we're wasting our time and when going to class makes sense.

John

Were you involved in any activities away from your course please?

Andy

Like what?

John

Well … clubs, societies, volunteering? That sort of thing.

Andy

No, not really. I just got on with the modules.

John

Where you aware of clubs and societies and the wider university?

Andy

It's a bit confusing really. There's the (Student Union) but I didn't like it and it seems like there's not one centre. We're at one (campus) and I've never been to the (other) campus, not even met any students (from that campus). It's just so spread out. The halls are not so close either ... a bus ride and nothing goes on in the halls.

John

Did you come here thinking that you would belong here?

Andy

Of course. Why come otherwise? I thought that's where I come from.

John

Sorry? Come from?

Andy

Yeah. This place, the university, will be part of me forever. It will be the thing that people, employers, will want to know about and … yeah I would be part of the place because it would be part of me as a person.