

*Lost in Transition:  
Student Journeys and Becoming—deliberations for a post-Covid era*

**Abstract**

This paper offers an empathetic perspective of the cultural dynamic of migrant students' first experiences of university, told through the student voice. It focuses on the transition of students into higher education; not always considered as part of the formal curriculum, providing a deeper understanding of students' transition via the cultural context of their higher education experience. While this research took place prior to the covid pandemic it is clear that the emergence from the covid era will make increasing use of virtual learning platforms and transition will not necessarily take place within university buildings. If belonging was a challenge for some students prior to the pandemic, how will institutions support transition for the new pedagogy?

The cultural experiences of first, second and third-generation migrant students have been scantily written about in this context. The paper contributes to current understanding by providing insights gleaned through the narrative accounts of students. Development of agency, belonging and community is framed through an approach that empowers and offers a co-learner frame, achieved through the students' voices, offering narratives of the cultural experience of university.

**Key Words:** transition; belonging; culture; agency.

**Introduction**

*Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.*  
attrib. Albert Einstein

The history of humanity is constructed around the stories that we tell and our lived experiences. We live our lives through our stories which evolve as we retell them, and we learn from the stories that we tell each other (Bamford and Pollard, 2019). Listening to these stories offers a unique perspective by allowing us to 'walk in the shoes' of the students, providing insights into their cultural journeys and a glimpse of the experience. This experience is framed by a shift in perspective that occurs when an individual embarks on a course of *higher* learning. All too often this shift is not fully understood as it is rarely unpacked from the perspective of those to whom it may well be a life-changing shift. This shift is framed both in this paper and in academic discourse as the transition experience. Transition is the first touch point of the curriculum of higher learning. It is important to note, existing research draws from different disciplinary perspectives, such as philosophy, psychology and sociological. Although it is challenging to find a common perspective, the authors' focus in this paper is on the implications for culturally heterogenic backgrounds of students entering UK higher education.

Transition from the Latin word *transitio* is defined as ‘crossing over’ or ‘going across’, the passage from one condition to another. The *higher* education process is inexorably linked to this process of change. While much has been written about the subject in relation to students entering higher education (HE), in this paper we have drawn particularly on the reflections by Downes (2019) concerning the transitions of students from primary to secondary education as they are pertinent to those entering higher education. The process of change here is our concern and the way in which the curriculum can be seen to frame and facilitate that change. Downes highlights concerns around the focus of the transition process stating that:

*Transition concerns tend to treat the child as a fish out of water in the new context, rather than placing greater scrutiny on whether the background river is polluted* (Downes, 2019:1467)

In other words when looking at the transitions that students make, we place focus on a corrective of an individual rather than focusing on the context of the movement across and the environment into which they move.

Transition needs to be heard not through an institutional voice but through the voices of the individuals, in this case HE students, in order to understand their experiences of crossing over (transitioning). In this discussion the overarching context is that the HE classroom is not homogenous but is a heterogeneous space that each student must navigate in their own time. We have focused on the cultural aspects of that space in this paper. This overarching context is additional to the more traditional discourse around transition, which is steeped in the development of subject based cognitive growth. In the contemporary urban HE classroom, students not only bring with them a multitude of cultural dimensions (Bamford and Pollard, 2018) but also work and family commitments that they need to juggle within this transition, as highlighted by Thomas (2019). The multi-dimensional, multi-level transition that students from differing cultural backgrounds undergo have been extensively acknowledged in the work of those such as Jindal-Snape and Reintes (2016). These multi-level, multi-dimensional experiences are different for each student, formed by their expectations, their culture and their opportunities to engage, creating a unique journey for each individual student as they develop a sense of belonging and identity. Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) acknowledge the potential for differentiation of experience in their Education and Life Transitions (ELT) model. Whilst this model is applied specifically to international students we argue that the challenge of differentiation in terms of background can be equally relevant as a model that can be applied to the culturally plural classrooms that we witness in higher education. Jindal-Snape and Rientes (2016) acknowledge that the dynamic transition experiences, which can be both positive and negative can be applied equally to home students. We argue that it is incumbent upon educators to foster inclusive cultures; to do more to reach those students and develop a framework of learning through belonging, and transition. One approach would be to embed within early curricula the positive and negative academic and daily life transitions identified by Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) in the ELT.

As Kift et al (2010:3) acknowledges:

*From multiple starting points all students are on a journey to becoming self-learners.*

These multiple starting points highlight the heterogeneity and the need to formalise a transition pedagogy as part of the curriculum that is tailored to the needs of each and every student.

### *Student Transition*

Despite student transition being an often-discussed concept within HE, Ecclestone *et al* (2010) note that there is no agreed single definition of what constitutes transition. As students arrive at university, they must learn to navigate their way through the new environment, often into a culture that is unfamiliar to them and engage immediately with a curriculum that emphasises subject knowledge but puts less focus on the key transferable skills and community that are important in this heterogeneous environment (van Herpen, 2019). It would benefit academic institutions to acknowledge the need to embed soft skills and a sense of belonging into the early curriculum, scaffolded by the academic knowledge. Transition is not linear nor a one-off event but as Gale and Parker (2014) argue, it is a journey that goes back and forth. The data demonstrates that students' capabilities to manage change through the various challenges of their experiences allows us an insight into the many layers of the transition process. This is a view strongly supported by Gravett *et al* (2020) who argue that current theories on transition fail to acknowledge the complexities and multiplicity of students' lived realities. It is acknowledged however that transition is for most students a tumultuous event and we argue that it is incumbent upon universities to do more to recognise and address these issues (Bamford and Pollard 2019, Krause and Coates, 2008). Transition is therefore something that demands more attention, especially in the 'new world' in which we find ourselves. The ELT model in recognising the positive and negative aspects of academic and daily life transition can be applied to the potential post covid learning landscape. The future learning landscape is likely to add further dimensions to student transition and the learning environment, with the increased engagement with technology. Bamford *et al* (2021) have highlighted both the positive and negative academic and daily life transitions for the learning landscape as a result of the Covid -19 pandemic. Whilst recognising the importance of transition as an aspect of the students' learning journey, conceptualising what we mean by transition is more of a challenge. When we reflect that no one definition of transition exists, the multiple dimensions of the future classroom and curriculum must be framed by the notion that every crossing will ultimately be unique to that student. Ecclestone *et al* (2006) in their summary of existing work, note that there is often a belief amongst many academics that transition exists at an institutional level, or at an individual level, but they argue that true transition occurs when there is a sense of transformation or becoming. It is this sense of becoming that underpins the process of transition that each individual must journey through. Consequently, planning for this in the curriculum only makes sense. Gale and Parker (2014) divide transition into three broad concepts: 'induction', 'development' and 'becoming'; and they argue that curriculum and pedagogy must 'reflect and affirm' identity,

not marginalise it. Current research would suggest that the belonging aspects of becoming, and therefore the transition process, are key to students' desire to remain at university and to succeed (Bamford and Pollard, 2019).

### *Becoming and Transition*

This concept of becoming is argued by some as being at the heart of the HE experience; the shift that each student experiences is more than a subject-based shift and acquisition of subject-based knowledge, that the personal development that is experienced is significant and cultural in its nature. These shifts are often represented by institutions in the form of graduate attributes, but the transition that these attributes require is given less attention. Pring (2004:18) outlines this philosophical position succinctly:

*Education nurtures the distinctly human qualities and capacities, particularly those concerned with knowledge and understanding ... the concept of person presupposes a form of consciousness, a capacity to experience the world, not merely to interact physically with it. That consciousness is shaped by different forms of understanding. These can be ever more refined through learning. Indeed, education aims to introduce the growing mind to forms of understanding which transform and make more intelligible one's view of the world ... one aspect of that understanding of the world is the recognition of other people as persons—that is as centres of consciousness in their own right with the capacity to think, to feel and to experience in the light of those thoughts ... a person with such understandings has the capacity to relate to other persons in a distinctive way—not only as one physical object to another but as one centre of consciousness to another. Persons share a world of meanings, not just a physical world of space and time.*

These views are supported by the work of Krause and Coates (2008) who note the culture shock that many students experience and 'identity reshaping' that the transition provides. They also note that there is often a mismatch between expectation and reality. In the past there has been a body of literature (Tinto, 1987; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Tramonet and Willms, 2010) that has suggested that the students, particularly those deemed to be non-traditional<sup>1</sup>, struggle with transition, as they lack the requisite social and cultural capital and perhaps knowledge of HE. The manner and speed with which students adjust to academic life has been related to social background and the 'fit' of the university. This however emphasises a student deficit model; more recently there is an argument that the deficit lies with the institutions themselves (Bowl, 2001; Downes, 2019). Those who transition well become the 'in group' not the 'out group'; they are able to appreciate the nuances and intonations that make them part of the tribe, part of the university. This transitional success cannot be solely the responsibility of the student; indeed, research has shown that many students, who struggle in some universities, thrive when they move to universities that provide the requisite support

---

<sup>1</sup> In the UK it is recognised that students from diverse backgrounds, or those with carer or work commitments are referred to as non-traditional.

(Bamford and Pollard, 2019). This leads us to consider the institutional deficit model in more detail, particularly in the context of the current literature.

### *Institutional Deficit Model*

The significance of these different student journeys and the need for universities to support the successful transition of its students as part of that journey has been noted by others (Bamford *et al*, 2015). The cultural plurality of the educational space adds an additional dimension to the transition process that individual practitioners seem unable to respond to without an institutional framework. Issues are further compounded when students bring varying levels of preparedness and external pressures into the mix, as many commuter students do (Bamford and Pollard, 2019; Thomas, 2019).

Kift *et al* (2010) examined transition within a large metropolitan university in Australia and they too argued that student retention and engagement should sit at the feet of the institution. They argue for greater institutional engagement activities and a transition pedagogy that acknowledges the external commitments that students may have. These external commitments and individual differences in often complex lives can lead to emotional disconnection, evidenced in feelings of isolation and invisibility on the part of individuals when transition pedagogies are not fully embedded. The community dimension appears to be of a greater import in scaffolding the transitions that students make, particularly in the urban institution where community for students is a much more constructed affair. Students, particularly first year students, described the barriers that many academics created, albeit unintentionally, and the importance of peer support groups (Thomas, 2013, Bamford *et al*, 2015).

Certainly, the importance of social interactions cannot be overemphasized and Lave (1993) reminds us that learning that leads to autonomy and a fuller community life cannot be identified in terms of single identifiable tools such as assigned tasks, but it lies in the relations among individuals, where the social interactions between students are viewed as a fundamental part of the learning process. Such interactions appear to be of particular value when cultural differences are at work (Read *et al*, 2003). This a view is supported by Meeuwisse *et al* (2010) who found that for students from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who are first-generation in HE, the quality of the interactions was strongly indicative of academic progress and success. Bamford *et al* (2015) findings support the embedding of experiential learning activities into the curriculum to build the community dynamic of the curriculum.

As Jones-Devitt (2021) acknowledges the burden of the non-traditional can lead to further effort being required on the part of some. This may be particularly true of those who come from the more non-traditional backgrounds, such as those from migrant family backgrounds, whether that be first, second or third generation migrants, and those who are first in the family into HE. Whilst it is acknowledged that third generation migrant students are regarded as home students, the classification has been included in this way here drawing on research identifying in two London institutions, nearly half of the respondents to a survey (n=393)

were non-native speakers of English (Bamford et al, 2015). Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) identify in their ELT model that language can be a major academic stressor for students. For these groups the transition to university appears tied to success and engagement and yet the cultural discourses within the classroom are largely ignored (Bamford and Pollard 2019). The concern then is that if these cultural aspects are ignored in the classroom they will certainly be overlooked as part of transition. We witnessed this in the student narratives in our research and would argue that culture does indeed impact on transition. This presents a counter view to Bosse (2015) who argues that the experiences are not related to culture *per se*, but to the expectations that students have and how their institutions match these expectations. Our research suggests that this may not be the case and that expectations are framed by cultural background, values, behaviours and norms. A view corroborated by Krause and Coates (2008), who discuss the evident mismatch between expectation and reality which impacts on transition.

The discourse around how institutions can better support students is particularly germane during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Within the UK there has been considerable focus on students ‘fit’ into university. This research hopes to move the debate forward by looking at how universities can fit the student need. Not only providing support for those with caring responsibilities, those considered as ‘commuter students’, and those with family and work commitments. But also, most importantly, those from differing cultural backgrounds and underrepresented groups whose expectations are not framed in the same way.

## **Methodology**

The research explored transition (in its broadest sense) to university through the voices of migrant students and their perspectives of belonging and engagement. With reference to transition we were particularly interested in the experiences of first, second and third generation migrant students, and the implications of those experiences for both students and universities. The research was undertaken in eight pre- and post-<sup>2</sup>1992 universities in London and the North of England and involved students in undergraduate and postgraduate study. The subject areas studied by our student population included Business, Science, Law, Education and Languages.

The universities were selected to ensure that students from a range of different socio-demographics could take part in the study. The proportion of BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) students within the institutions ranges from 63% in the London universities to 22% in universities in the North of England.

We employed a narrative approach as it was felt that this would provide a stronger appreciation of the lived experiences of students, an approach that Goodson and Sikes (2001) define as ‘learning from lives’. This narrative telling allowed us to gain an understanding of

---

<sup>2</sup> This refers to universities that received university status prior to 1992, or to polytechnics and professional colleges that received university status in 1992 or later.

the students' past and present, thereby illustrating how relationships and the overcoming of challenges have impacted on their academic success. Story telling is part of the fabric of human lives, bringing meaning to experiences and supporting the concept of community. A narrative approach gives voice to the journeys these students had been on and it provides us with insights into how their lives are shaped and how they interpret their lives through the telling of stories (Clandinin and Huber, 2005).

Individual interviews were undertaken with 20 students (60% female and 40% male), with interviews taking place over an 18-month period. Students were from a broad mix of ethnic backgrounds with equal distributions from the Europe, the African continent, the Middle East, and South East Asia. Half the students interviewed were undergraduate students spanning foundation programmes through to final year. The remainder were graduate and postgraduate students. The students self-identified in the categories listed above.

All of the interviews were conducted face to face by two researchers, both female and with considerable experience, both personally and professionally, of cultural interactions and dissonance. Interviews were 45–60 minutes in length and unstructured; allowing students to explore their experiences of their HE journeys and the key moments within those journeys. The researchers sought to understand how individual students had experienced HE, the cultural interactions that took place, and the challenges faced inside and outside the classroom as well as the potential benefits that arose from their interactions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Ethical approval was granted through institutional ethics committee as part of a larger project looking at cultural diversity in higher education. The complexity of the interactions that students had with others, and how they perceived themselves and their peers as well as their interactions with their peers and institutions (agency) were themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. This thematic analysis of the data interviews focused on individuals' construction of their reality in order to gain an understanding of that reality. The interview transcripts were systematically analysed by reading and re-reading up to four times in order to draw out themes and establish a narrative. The transcripts were then analysed by the themes and a matrix was drawn up so that the interview responses could be categorised within matrix for ease of access and to enable a picture of the responses to be created. The importance of family, family background and the value family placed on the education they were receiving emerged as themes through the interview process and proved to be an aspect of the agentic process during their transition to university. From our sample of 20 students whom we interviewed, cultural backgrounds could be classified as multidimensional, with social class appearing to be more of a factor in determining successful transition, rather than the self-identifying ethnicity of the interviewees. The quotes from the interviews below have not been altered to ensure that the true voice of the student is heard, accepting that in places there may be some grammatical errors.

## Findings

### *Coming to university*

The overarching theme of ‘coming to university’ can be seen as a cornerstone of the early experience and initial interactions in the higher education landscape. The challenges around developing a sense of belonging and becoming were found to be inexorably linked with those early experiences and varied for individuals and within different institutional contexts. An unhappy experience was often recounted and the impact of that unhappy experience all too evident in the stories we heard. The critique of institutional practice was one of the ways this impact was expressed as seen below:

*... they open the door to students to come here but they have also to put something in place to help those students.* [Student 7, first generation Black African]

We heard from our interviewees about their first experiences of university life, and the sentence above conveys a sentiment that was expressed by many of those we interviewed, their transition to university was unfamiliar and unsupported, with their journey being stilted and sometimes distancing. Kift and Nelson (2005:2) suggest that to enable the ‘inculcation of a sense of belonging’ the day-to-day transactions should be seamless so that students can focus on learning. Our interviews suggested that by and large this was not the case,

*... went two universities. The first university experience after school I went to {name of} University and I ended up dropping out in my first year. Not even after one term ... it wasn't a good fit for me.* [Student 20, second generation Arab]

*It was definitely different. I felt very alone –I didn't feel part of the University.* [Student 9, second generation South East Asian]

The lack of belonging exemplified by these quotes highlights the invisibility and isolation that we witnessed throughout the interviews and was often discussed within the context of an ill-fitting transition. This emphasises the need for institutions to reflect on the early experiences as being part of the curriculum they provide for their learners. While many of the institutions that the students attended had transition policies, the operationalisation of these policies did not appear to be effective from the perspective of the students that we interviewed. This was a common feature of the student narratives. We surmise that this may be attributable to the fact that they sat outside of the core academic delivery and are often managed by student service departments. Downes (2019) supports this finding, arguing that the disconnect between the academic and the decision-making bodies within universities creates an institutional frailty in relation to transition. Some of the students we interviewed also found this to be true.

*You were kind of left, you either taught yourself or you didn't. Not that it was encouraged that they taught how to do it. I feel like this is the lectures, this is what you have, here is the slide and you go and find out how to make the most of that or not.* [Student 20, second generation Arab]



*With higher education they don't have that you want to study then the system is there and you have to follow the system. You have to ... And there was no like ok, you have to come here to work on your writing because this is not your first language. So, there is nothing, you just – if you are here then you have to be ready to follow. [Student 7, first generation Black African]*

This last part, 'if you are here then you have to be ready to follow', perhaps encapsulates the way in which HEIs are not managing the student transition process. However, for some this transition while challenging was empowering:

*No one really prepared you for how independent it is ... No one really tells that at university you're going to get here and it's like 'do this', we're not going to hear much about it, go off and learn it. So that was a big transition, but I like university because when I got here, I was gonna be more confident. [Student 6, second generation South East Asian]*

This expression of confidence and independence is perhaps what educators are seeking to achieve but the process for achieving it is driven by individual acceptance or not. It is not necessarily addressed in an overt and concrete way through institutional transition policies and pedagogical practices.

For a minority of students, transition was a positive experience, however these students' narratives conveyed a sense of change and adaptation that occurred long before they entered university, and they were also those students who were able to engage in the extracurricular activities that universities offered.

*So, I always tell students look you can join a society and we ... society, you can start up your own society and some of them they tend to lean towards that and say ok I'll go and join a society, I'll go join a sports team. And it's really been helpful because once you join a sports team you kind of feel a sense of belonging somewhere. Like ok I'm part of ... of this team, I'm part of the rugby team, I'm part of – so you feel a sense of belonging somewhere so that also helps as well. [Student 4, second generation from Africa]*

But as Thomas (2019) reminds us many commuter students cannot afford the luxury of taking part in extracurricular activities, as they have other commitments outside of university, and yet as the student's narrative confirms such engagement fosters a much greater sense of belonging.

These narratives describe a very lonely and challenging first encounter with higher education, where many students felt that they were left to sink or swim, and more importantly that they did not belong. Those that were able to avail themselves of student societies were able to develop that sense of belonging much earlier but for many of our interviewees this did not occur until the final year at university. There is clearly a need for universities to embed community building aspects into the initial curricular, for without it many students will

struggle to continue with their studies. This community building aspect appears particularly important in a context of the cultural plurality of higher education settings.

### *Cultural Interactions*

Glass and Westmont (2014) contend that belongingness creates a space for students to explore cross-cultural relationships, but this research would argue that it is those cross-cultural relationships that enable students to develop a sense of belonging. By crossing cultural boundaries students no longer feel that the norms and values of their cultural background are dissonant with the culture of the institution, and this minimises the sense of isolation and invisibility that students related to us. Cultural interactions were important to students. Students recognised the importance of communication with those from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds and that this was also important to their sense of community and agency. We found little evidence to demonstrate that these communications were supported and encouraged by institutions. Initially, this need for community was expressed through a need to develop peer support groups, an aspect that has been previously identified in other research (Bamford and Pollard, 2019) and also to create a sense of family.

*And this part you go with the people you met in the first year, go along with them. At some point they become your family and where ... you made that in [Name of University]. So ... that ... was in [Name of University] so [Name of University] has given you that opportunity to meet these great people that hopefully they're going to be my friends for ever. [Student 15, first generation South East Asian]*

A number of students identified within themselves a reluctance to cross cultural boundaries when they started at university, but that as they progressed through their degree they began to interact across cultures.

*I went to a lecture in my fresher's week in my first year because I was just like what shall I do? ...and I remember going up and thinking I need to make friends now, this is the only time. And my instinct was to go to someone who was Asian, and she ended up being one of my friends. So it's just an instinct so I don't really know where that comes from ... [Student 11, first generation South East Asian]*

*I have grown more accepting of difference and I'm ok with it. [Student 10, first generation Arab]*

This latter student went to school in the UK and his comments reinforce the shift that he is making, both in terms of acknowledging that others come from different backgrounds and in terms of the transition that he is making.

This research identified that it was through crossing cultural boundaries that students were able to grow in confidence and to develop a stronger sense of belonging. It was clear however that many students felt their institutions did not promote or facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and felt that this was a deficit within their institutions.

*I think it will just be nice to generally have a conversation to ask someone about things that are different. So, it's kind of like ... what's your ethnicity if you mention something. Like they don't encourage you to talk about the things that are different in your culture. [Student 6, second generation from South East Asia]*

When academics did endeavour to highlight the explicitly diverse nature of the classroom students responded positively appreciating the rich tapestry in which they were learning.

*It's great, it's great because different people from different countries or different cultures and different ways to do things and to see things so having all that in the same class it enriches you. [Student 15, first generation from Europe]*

However, there is another aspect to this discourse as expressed by the student below who felt that the academics should not step in to manage cultural interactions.

*Because it's controlling and it's unnecessary and it's forcing an issue which doesn't need to be forced. And it's raising an issue that doesn't need to be raised, that will sort itself out on its own. I think that. [Student 1, third generation from Europe]*

Those students who were not only able to navigate each other's cultural differences but also the culture of their university, were those who appeared not to suffer the isolation and invisibility discussed earlier. Sometimes that ability to navigate differences was a direct result of their ability to maintain a direct link with their community and the relationships they had already established. This link with their 'other' identity supported transition into HE particularly for commuter students and those experiencing a sense of cultural dissonance.

The transition process was shown to be supported by the acquisition of transferable skills, developed not through teaching but through extracurricular activities, peer-to-peer interactions and meaningful engagement with staff, factors that will differ on an individual student basis. Work undertaken in the field of student wellbeing acknowledges the importance of extra-curricular learning to students' development of belonging and engagement with their learning environment (Bamford and Heugh, 2021). This learning could instead be included in the curriculum to make it accessible to all students, providing a space for students who are often only on campus for timetabled classes enabling them to become part of a learning community.

On the other hand, those students who were in classrooms that fostered cross-cultural discourse and where there was a stronger integration of transition and curriculum design fared far better, developed notions of becoming earlier and where able to make better sense of their own learning. Kift and Nelson (2005) suggest that the curriculum needs to prepare learners for the new environments in which they find themselves. We argue that it is incumbent upon institutions to develop an early curriculum that engages students, and provides cross-cultural dialogue.

### *Confidence, cultural capital and agency*

Concepts of learner confidence, cultural capital and learner identity are not new, as highlighted by those such as Putwain and Sander (2016), Christie *et al* (2007), and Kahu and Nelson (2018). These latter authors advocate that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds display greater levels of self-confidence and are more likely to succeed, suggesting that social capital supports self-efficacy and academic confidence thus supporting better transition. In contrast Christie *et al* (2007) have found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds entering university with a strong sense of learning identity are likely to fare better. Gravett *et al* (2020) argue against a lack of cultural capital being seen as a reason for poor engagement or transition, as this creates a personal deficit model. This issue of the deficit model is one that is gaining more attention as institutions seek to grapple with seemingly poor transitions for some students and seek to understand the factors that are at play. Authors, such as Reay (2004), Luzeckyj, *et al* (2011) have argued that cultural capital or a lack of cultural capital impacts directly on a sense of comfort that individual students may have in any education setting, which can be viewed as seeing students in a deficit context. Our research does not support this perspective and suggests that any potential lack of cultural capital was not a key factor in learners' transition, chiming with the views given by Paul Downes (2019). He argues more strongly that the deficit lies not with the student but within the institution, citing institutional frailty as the heart of the issue. This is supported by our interviewees who clearly understood that transition is an ongoing process where confidence is developed as they navigate through the change. Again, aspects of becoming and belonging feature strongly within the students' narratives.

*Until now, because it made me the person I am today. If you had spoken to me ten years ago, I would have been a different person. ... with strong views and not sure, probably not confident about this. There was confidence in terms of capabilities, but it was kind of scattered – probably not using the right words. So, it gave me that systematic approach, each content, each conversation has got different moods. [Student 12, first generation from Middle East]*

This would suggest that successful transition is not a gap that needs bridging, but more a process of learning and unlearning, echoing the views of Downes (2019)—and that this personal reshaping helps to build identity and confidence.

*So, the thing is, I'm now – I never had a dream, I want to become this, I want to become that but now I want to become a travel journalist, or I want to become ... reporter or an anchor, a presenter. So, I've got dreams now and I'm gonna achieve those goals. So, I think I am becoming more confident, I think I love myself more than I used to. I just used to lay around and now I'm actually out there and doing something productive. I really feel good about it. [Student 14, first generation from South East Asia]*

The same student also felt that studying at university had made her far more self-aware and that she been shaped through this self-reflection.

*So, there are a lot of things that I started to discover about myself ... I love that I am aware of my negative thoughts so that in a way I can rebuild on them and become better. [Student 14, first generation from South East Asia]*

This perspective was not unique to this student but shared by several of our interviewees, particularly those who had not experienced considerable change prior to entering HE. This suggests that the shaping of identity is indeed a feature of strong transition.

This sense of personal discovery underlines the challenges of confidence building and becoming, reinforcing the individuality of the learning journey. How universities can then better support this building of confidence and sense of belonging is not clear. However, the interviewees stressed the importance of curricular that is focused and practical, and enables students to develop into independent learners.

*Professor [name] saved the day because his module of ... was amazing, was challenging, was interesting, was practical. [Student 12, first generation from the Middle East]*

*This is the task, go and find it. Go and find out the answer, go away and find out what to do. I think that makes you more independent. [Student 6, second generation from South East Asia]*

For others the approachability of staff was important and appeared to be strongly linked to building confidence and agency within the teaching setting. Not surprisingly this sense of approachability was most apparent when cohorts and class sizes were small but when the class sizes grew students felt more alone and struggled to find support within the academic maze. These findings resonate with those of Kahu and Picton (2019), who identified that the good tutor supported student engagement and fostered a stronger sense of belonging.

*But a small university like [name of university] itself I think is really good and the teachers are amazing. They are literally amazing. They have really good experiences, and they know how to relate, even if they are telling you that you've got flaws in your assignments or stuff like that, they relate in a way that you will be like oh yeah, I can learn more from that rather than being degraded, like oh my god, I got this wrong, I did that wrong. I think that the teachers are the best part of this University. They make the University, I guess, so yeah. [Student 14, first generation from South East Asia]*

*And that was a big difference for me, moving from being a kid or teenager or young man to a man, there was this transition. It's amazing because it showed as well on a personal level, now you need to take responsibility, now it's your future. The other good thing is they were welcoming as well; I wasn't in the room and I didn't feel awkward. Like I went into the room, there was an introduction, and everyone was welcoming, and it really built up my confidence and really built up my networking skills because I had met up with*

*different people ... external ... I am trusted and all the rest of that.* [Student 4, second generation from Africa]

The sense of belonging is evidenced through the building of agency as this extract below demonstrates:

*I think especially being at uni it helps you, not to find your identity but you can experiment more, and you can express yourself more. And especially because school is a different kind of environment, but university is so big and there are so many different people and there's people that you don't know. So that helps a lot, you can explore more. And especially with the societies, that helps.*

[Student 17, second generation from the Middle East]

The concept of the development of student agency and transition is not new (Larson *et al*, 2020; Gale and Parker, 2011). Agency provides students with the capabilities and skills needed to navigate the change that university throws at them. Christie *et al* (2007) propose that the development of confidence and agency is a social process. While they acknowledge that this agentic process incorporates previous experiences and culture, as well as individual socioeconomic dimensions, they remind us of the emotional aspects of learning and the role HE institutions have in shaping that transition and learning. Heinz (2009) argues that traditional perspectives on transition only reinforce the potential social inequalities that prevail, and that agency provides a more positive perspective. Our findings support the importance of understanding agency in a learning context and the importance of facilitating the development of agency. We would argue that the time taken to develop agency may be linked to background, and a strong transition curriculum ensures the development of agency in all students. However, in a post-Covid world, a challenge remains, as the student narratives emphasise the importance of relationships and networks. How institutions can address this focus in both physical and virtual environment and whether it is truly possible in any effective way in remote teaching environments remains to be seen.

## **Conclusion**

Although there has been considerable research on student transition in HE, particularly around themes of student engagement and belonging, there has been very little around the link between the different cultural backgrounds of students, as identified by the students themselves. The Covid pandemic has further highlighted the need to understand more about the implications of this for institutional practice, particularly in the light of the findings above, where the physicality and relationship aspects of transition appear critically important to the success of individuals' transitional journeys. These first experiences of university appear critical to success for some. This paper has sought to explore transition and culture through the stories of the students themselves, offering important insights into the way in which individuals receive their education and transition into higher education graduates. The discussions of the 'new normal' for higher education surely require educators to understand

more about this transition processes and the impact of successful transition on student agency through curriculum design.

However, whilst we witness important and ongoing discussions around attainment and student background, with transition initiatives playing a role in those discussions, they are all too often framed by what are student deficit models which inevitably have little positive outcome. Students' first experiences of university were in many ways similar despite differing cultural or social backgrounds, with undergraduates finding the initial transition isolating and lacking in clear signposting, whilst postgraduate students tended to find the landscape more familiar. This feature of isolation as an aspect of the transition experience remains a feature of the undergraduate experience, despite the discourse around belonging now having become so prominent in the language of HE that it often features in institutional strategies. The concern is that a move to more technology based learning post-Covid could embed this isolation. Our research indicates that the experience of isolation remains an unexplained phenomenon of transition for students. Students perceive that their institutions have an expectation of understanding the key aspects of transition, but for the students we spoke to their experiences were that these aspects were often not fully explained. This potentially reinforces the sense of invisibility and lack of agency that students felt during the transition stages of their journey through university. The development of agency appeared significant to our respondents and this agency was often developed through the relationships that were developed with others.

The approachability of staff, the accessibility of the learning support services and the sense of community within peer groups, were the relationships that were seen to be essential to successful transition. Once agency was developed the isolation and invisibility no longer played a role in the experience as the individual had transitioned to their higher education environment. It is noteworthy that the lack of agency was experienced most markedly by those students studying at commuter universities and particularly those in larger class sizes who found it the hardest to navigate through the obstacles they encountered.

Much of the current discourse tends to narratives that suggest an over reliance on a deficit model towards students. In order to avoid creating such a deficit narrative there needs to be more of an onus put on the institution as a whole, rather than a focus being on the individual student and the relationships that they may or may not develop with individual members of staff. O'Donnell *et al* (2015) stress the need for an holistic approach, asserting that transition requires an integrated learning methodology which enables a broadening of the area of study. They highlight the importance of a curriculum that places emphasis on interconnectivity and global challenges. It is not sufficient for institutions to have some staff who are perceived as approachable and who provide support to their students, the institution itself must surely need to be perceived as approachable. We frame our perspectives of transition strategy through Downes' analogy (2019) and consider that perhaps the pond that we are asking the student to thrive in is polluted. Institutions need to ensure that transition and induction policies are fully embedded within the academic and support frameworks (Kift and Nelson, 2005), providing

curricula that develop confidence, building a sense of identity and enabling fish to climb trees.

## References

- Bamford, J., Djebbour, Y. & Pollard, L. (2015). I'll do this no matter if I have to fight the world! *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 9(3), pp.140-158.
- Bamford, J., Guiver, J.W., Torkington, K., & Ugur, L., (2021) When will it go back to normal? AMPS Conference, Online Education :Teaching in a Time of Change, April 2021
- Bamford, J. & Heugh, S. (2021). Enhancing student wellbeing and student belonging in university through a gamification approach to rewarding and recognising extracurricular activities. In Turner, S., and Kalawsky, K., SEDA Special: Establishing a Wellbeing Equilibrium, SEDA Publications (In Press)
- Bamford, J. & Pollard, L. (2018). Developing relationality and student belonging: The need for building cosmopolitan engagement in undergraduate communities. *London Review of Education*, 16(2), pp.214-227.
- Bamford, J. & Pollard, L. (2019). *Cultural Journeys in Higher Education: Student Voices and Narratives*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Bosse, E., (2015). Exploring the role of student diversity for the first-year experience. *Zeitschrift für Hochschulentwicklung*, 10(4), pp.45-66.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Vol. 4). Sage
- Bowl, M. (2001). Experiencing the barriers: Non-traditional students entering higher education. *Research papers in Education*, 16(2), pp.141-160. Dean, T., 1989. Multicultural classrooms, monocultural teachers. *College Composition and Communication*, 40(1), pp.23-37.
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J. & McCune, V. (2007). 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': learning to be a university student, online papers archived by the Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh.
- Clandinin, D.J. & Huber, M. (2005) Shifting stories to live by. In *Teacher professional development in changing conditions* (pp. 43-59). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Downes, P. (2019), Transition as a displacement from more fundamental system concerns: Distinguishing four different meanings of transition in education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(14), pp.1465-1476.
- Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G. & Hughes, M (2010). Transitions in the lifecourse. The role of identity, agency and structure In: Ecclestone, K, G Biesta & M Hughes (eds) *Transitions and Learning through the Lifecourse*. Abingdon: Routledge



Ecclestone, K., Blackmore, T., Biesta, G., Colley, H. & Hughes, M., (2006). October. Lost in transition: managing change and becoming through education and work. In *Nottingham: TLRP Seminar Series 'Transitions through the lifecourse', Seminar* (pp. 12-13).

Gale, T. & Parker, S., (2011). Good practice report: Student transition into higher education.

Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), pp.734-753.

Glass, C.R. & Westmont, C.M. (2014). Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 38, pp.106-119.

Goodson, I.F. & Sikes, P.J. (2001). Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives. *Open University Press*.

Gravett, K., Kinchin, I.M. & Winstone, N.E. (2020). Frailty in transition? Troubling the norms, boundaries and limitations of transition theory and practice. *Higher Education Research & Development*, pp.1-17.

Heinz, W.R. (2009). Structure and agency in transition research. *Journal of education and work*, 22(5), pp.391-404.

van Herpen, S. (2019). A Head Start into Higher Education: How students academically prepare and adjust for a successful transition into university.

Jindal-Snape, D., & Ingram, R. (2013). Understanding and supporting triple transitions of international doctoral students: ELT and SuReCom models. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 1(1), 17-24.

Jindal-Snape, D., & Rienties, B. (2016). Understanding multiple and multi-dimensional transitions of international higher education students: setting the scene (pp. 21-38). Routledge.

Jones-Devitt, S. (2021). The long march to critical pedagogy: and why the journey matters? Inaugural Professorial Lecture, Staffordshire University, <https://youtu.be/MMXaXDIHFJ8>

Kahu, E.R. & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher education research & development*, 37(1), pp.58-71.

Kahu, E.R. & Picton, C. (2019). The benefits of good tutor-student relationships in the first year. *Student Success*, 10(2), pp.23-34.

Kift, S. & Nelson, K. (2005). Beyond curriculum reform: Embedding the transition experience. In *HERDSA Conference 2005* (pp. 225-235). University of Sydney.

Kift, S.M., Nelson, K.J. & Clarke, J.A. (2010). Transition pedagogy: a third generation approach to FYE: a case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), pp.1-20.

Krause, K.L. & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), pp.493-505.

Larsen, A., Horvath, D. & Bridge, C. (2020). 'Get Ready': Improving the transition experience of a diverse first year cohort through building student agency. *Student Success*, 11(2), pp.14-27.

Lave, J. (1993). The practice of learning. I: Chaiklin, S. & J. Lave (red.) Understanding practice. Perspectives on activity and context, pp.3-32.

Luzeckyj, A., Scutter, S., King, S., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to "first in family" student's choices of university and program. A Practice Report.

Meeuwisse, M., Severiens, S.E. & Born, M.P. (2010). Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups. *Research in Higher Education*, 51(6), pp.528-545.

O'Donnell, M., Wallace, M., Melano, A., Lawson, R. & Leinonen, E. (2015). Putting transition at the centre of whole-of-curriculum transformation. 73-79  
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/asdpapers/519>

Pring, R. (2004). *The philosophy of education*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Putwain, D.W. and Sander, P. (2016). Does the confidence of first-year undergraduate students change over time according to achievement goal profile?. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(2), pp.381-398.

Read, B., Archer, L. & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of 'belonging' and 'isolation' at a post-1992 university. *Studies in higher education*, 28(3), pp.261-277.

Reay, D. (2004). Education and cultural capital: The implications of changing trends in education policies. *Cultural trends*, 13(2), 73-86.

Richardson, A., King, S., Garrett, R., & Wrench, A. (2012). Thriving or just surviving? Exploring student strategies for a smoother transition to university. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 3(2). 87-93.

Thomas, L. (2019). 'I am happy just doing the work...'Commuter student engagement in the wider higher education experience. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74:290-303.

Thomas, L. (2013). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(1), pp.4-24.

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. University of Chicago Press, 5801 S. Ellis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637.

Tramonte, L. & Willms, J.D. (2010). Cultural capital and its effects on education outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 29(2), pp.200-213.

Youdell, D. (2003). Identity traps or how black [1] students fail: The interactions between biographical, sub-cultural, and learner identities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(1), pp.3-20.