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Introduction

As a policy goal, widening participation is increasingly associated with retention and completion. For those who are concerned with equity or social mobility, it makes little sense to recruit new types of student if they do not then qualify for a graduate profession. In its strategic plan, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) states that one of its main strategic aims is to promote 'the opportunity of successful participation in HE to everyone who can benefit from it' (HEFCE, 2009, p. 18). There has also been growing interest in retention among researchers, much of which has centred on the extent to which new students can be helped to integrate into the institution. In the UK, this focus has been increased through a major programme of research and development on retention, jointly funded by HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, much of which has been concerned with 'promoting academic and social integration into the institution to promote a sense of belonging' (Action on Access 2009). We are particularly interested here in the ways in which students feel themselves to be legitimate members of the 'imagined community' of higher education, a concept that we have adapted from Anderson's treatment of nationalisms (Anderson, 1991; see also Quinn, 2010).

This chapter is concerned with the social relationships of non-traditional students. While we are certainly interested in the ways in which these can influence integration into the university community, the paper also explores the ways in which students' networks change through the course of their study. It draws on a research study of retention and non-traditional learners in Scotland, undertaken as part of a wider European research project. Among other things, the project was concerned to identify those factors that can promote retention for non-traditional students, as well as those that inhibit retention. We concentrate in this chapter on the ways in which students' social relationships can help or hinder their integration.

Retention and student integration

Students leave courses early for a variety of reasons. The National Audit Office (NAO) summarised the most commonly cited as personal reasons, lack of integration into the institution, dissatisfaction with course or institution, lack of preparedness, wrong choice of course, financial reasons, and to take up a more attractive opportunity (NAO, 2007, p. 23). In many cases, a combination of different factors influences students' decisions to leave or stay, with different factors having a different weight at different times (Longden 2004). Perhaps the most influential author, and certainly the most frequently cited, is Vincent Tinto. Brian Longden (2004, p. 128) has described Tinto's student integration model as having achieved 'near paradigm status' in the field. It has also been widely adapted for policy purposes, with a particular focus on promoting academic and social integration within higher education (Stolk et al, 2007, p. 58).

Tinto (1975, 1988) treats retention as a process that occurs through the life cycle of studenthood, from pre-university stages through to graduation. In this process, he argues that student interaction with the formal and informal dimensions of the university plays a critical role in shaping decisions on departure or persistence. The process starts with the separation stage, during which students prepare to leave their previous environment (home, school/college), and are largely influenced by personal characteristics such as family background and educational ability. This is then followed by the integration stage, in which students start to identify with the institution, and with the wider community of students (and staff), leading them to re-evaluate their institutional commitment and academic expectations. In Tinto's model, the processes of academic integration and social integration are therefore intertwined, and indeed complement one another.

Hilary McQueen has noted that Tinto's work is itself heavily influenced by Durkheimian notions of social integration (McQueen, 2009, pp. 70-1). While Tinto notes the importance of academic factors in understanding retention and withdrawal, his model also encompasses other aspects of interaction between institution and student, including the degree to which students see themselves as sharing the norms and values that cement a sense of belonging to the community. In particular, Tinto argues that those who experience 'anomie' – that is, a very low sense of integration into the community, or a feeling of not belonging to the wider whole – are most at risk of drop-out. McQueen has further explored the implications of Durkheim's theory to argue that drop-out may also be understood as an egoistic response, where students are so excessively integrated into the community that they place its needs above their own destiny; and that it might be seen as an altruistic act, where students withdraw as a result of high integration into an earlier social network, in the hope of preserving their place in their old social world (McQueen, 2009, pp. 76-9).

While Tinto's work has been widely followed, it has also been subjected to critique. Ozga and Sukhandan (1998) suggest that it is too strongly rooted in the educational culture and institutional structures of the United States, though this argument may be losing force as some European higher education systems are reformed in ways that bring them closer to the American model. Bbbmore Alternative models take a socio-cultural approach to retention, arguing that it is not just institutional factor which influence retention; rather, withdrawal and persistence – and the very language in which they are debated – are part of a much wider and more complex social and cultural picture (Quinn, 2010). Drawing on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu about habitus and cultural capital, researchers in this approach have noted that non-traditional students, shaped in a very different social milieu from that of the university, encounter higher education as a foreign and unsettling environment, in which they feel themselves 'fish out of water' (Reay, David and Ball, 2005, pp. 27-34). In these circumstances, the more pressing question may be why students persist, rather than why they leave.

In both traditions of work, students' social networks emerge as an important factor in understanding students' decisions. Even if Tinto's model is flawed, his work nonetheless encourages us to examine the ways in which non-traditional students can and do negotiate the complex institutional and cultural labyrinths that face any new entrant to higher education institutions, and it draws attention to the ways in which they are (or are not) integrated into a new social world. The socio-cultural approach has tended to emphasise the importance of class, gender and race, and the cultural capital acquired in particular social milieus. The social competences required for academic success, according to Bourdieu, are closely associated with educational level, but he believes they are less likely to be learned consciously, by formal effort, than through the 'unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 28). For Bourdieu, people's social connections are therefore a resource, which provide access to information and skills, as well as to other opportunities.

A small but growing body of literature suggests that social support networks play a role both in promoting and inhibiting integration. Research on family support for higher education participation is well-established, and has shown a wide variety for formal and informal support that students derive from their family connections. Thus Reay's (1998) work on student habitus emphasised the dynamic interplay of family, peer groups and institutional networks in informing young people's choices. Another study took existing 'affinity groups' among students as the basis for group interviews, leading to findings that largely endorsed Reay's original insights (Jones, 2010; see also Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). The most extensive study of family ties to date, based on interviews with network members as well as students themselves, concluded that intergenerational relationships were frequently ambivalent, leading some individuals deliberately to broaden their networks, while leading others to fall back on existing ties (Fuller, Heath and Johnston, 2011).

Similar ambivalence appears to characterise other social ties, such as friendship groups. Drawing on over 120 life history interviews, Mary Stuart (2006) demonstrated that friendship groups could help first-generation students bridge the transition into higher education, particularly where students lacked access to other resources; however, other students found that existing friendships could lock them into identities and positions that ran counter to adopting a more academic disposition. Yet bth

strategies can be risky. Other research has found that students who try to build new ties can be penalised for their disloyalty by their former network, and treated as probationers or incomers by the new group (Warner, Hornsey and Jetten, 2007). Ironically, the more that entering higher education is likely to produce social mobility, the greater the challenge to attempts to maintain existing connections with friends, family and wider community (Jetten et al., 2008).

To date, then, a number of studies have shown that family, institutional networks and peer groups play an important part in students' decision making. As a field of enquiry, though, the role of social networks in student life is still relatively under-developed, and little attention has been paid so far to the ways in which students' networks alter while they are in higher education, nor to the extent to which student agency is a factor in reshaping such networks. Yet these issues are potentially of considerable significance in a society that is characterised by increasing mobility and by an increased probability (perceived and/or real) of transition across and through the life course. They are particularly important in respect of inter-generational social mobility, where higher education entrants are likely to be moving from one socio-cultural milieu to another. In each case, social networks appear to help shape student decisions, and thus affect the outcomes of transitions; yet most research treats social networks as a static property, rather than as dynamic processes that students themselves can reconstruct on a continuing basis as they negotiate a range of educational and other transitions.

The research and its context

Our research was undertaken as part of a European study of access and retention of non-traditional learners in higher education¹. Primarily drawing on life history interviews with a sample of learners and a range of university staff, the project sought to identify factors that limit or promote the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students in becoming, or not, effective learners, with a view to understanding how this process may enable or inhibit completion of higher education. The main focus of the research was on student experiences and how non-traditional learners perceive themselves as students. Using biographical narratives we interviewed different cohorts of students: those in their final year, those who leave but return to study later, those that drop out as well as carrying out two interviews over the course of a year with first or second years. Interviewing those who have dropped out can be challenging and problematic.

Of course, the very language of 'non-traditional' is itself contested. We used the term 'non-traditional adult student' in a simple descriptive sense, to denote those who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation is constrained by structural factors. This includes first generation students, those from lower socio-economic strata and ethnic minority groups, mature students and students with disabilities. The project involved partners from seven countries (England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden). Each partner negotiated access to three types of university, with a view to carrying out research in one highly selective institution; one moderately selective university; and one large public institution. We did not include private

¹ The 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in HE' (RANLHE) project was funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme. Further details are available on:

institutions, as the private sector currently forms a negligible part of the higher education system in Britain.

Our own work took place in three Scottish institutions. Higher education in Scotland has a very long history; the so-called 'ancient universities' are able to trace their roots back to the medieval period. As in many other countries, the system expanded rapidly between the 1960s and the 1990s, but in Scotland there is at least one highly distinctive feature. From the early 1990s, there was a particularly rapid growth in short cycle higher education, in the form of one or two year courses leading to a Higher National Certificate or Higher National Diploma; most short cycle higher education is provided in non-university institutions, and particularly by further education colleges (Gallacher, 2009). Taken out as, e.g. about 5 of the 13 access students were second generation & I think quite a no. of the ECA students were second generation.

As in the other UK nations, access and participation have been widely debated in Scotland. Following the publication in 2005 of its policy review in wider participation, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) developed a programme of initiatives designed to strengthen prospects for students from deprived backgrounds, and identified a set of measures against which to judge progress. This included work on retention and achievement (SFC, 2005). Subsequently, SFC has monitored performance annually. The 2010 monitoring report noted that the proportion of pupils entering from schools in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods has continued to decline, and students from deprived areas are still most likely to discontinue their studies; it also noted that participation in higher education had declined steadily since 2001 (SFC, 2010, p. 47). Against this background, we can grasp the ambivalence of the Scottish Government's claims that on the one hand 'we have made steady progress to widen access' and on the other that widening participation measures 'have not produced the step change in participation that we would have liked' (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 13). Tuition fees featured strongly in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, with most of the main parties affirming the principle of free higher education for full-time undergraduates from Scotland.

Findings: integration and relationships

The students interviewed were, in the main, highly committed to their studies. Even those who had considered leaving, or found themselves under increasing pressures, generally expressed a determination to complete. They also described enjoying their studies; among mature students in particular, there was often a sense of a new purpose and focus to their lives. However, this positive commitment did not necessarily mean that they felt comfortable, or felt an unproblematic sense of belonging, within their institution. Some interviewees expressed a strong sense of belonging to their institution, while others questioned whether they were 'good enough', seeing low grades as an indication that they might not be cut out for university, while high grades might be discounted as flukes or mistakes. Even amongst those who expressed a strong sense of belonging, a sense of underperforming academically could trigger doubts about legitimacy.

This is not to say that the students simply felt that they were somehow being excluded or marginalised. Rather, their sense of belonging was frequently bounded, ambivalent and contingent. One female mature student said that she worried about going 'back to being plain old me again', while a mature male student described himself as 'absolutely terrified now that I've maybe bitten off more than I can chew', before adding that 'I'd rather have that than be lazy about what I'm doing'.

So these students had found ways of negotiating their ambivalent membership of the imagined community of higher education. In doing so, students invariably drew on a range of resources; and among these were their relations with others.

Interviewees described a number of social relations as particularly significant. As well as external networks with family, partners, friends and acquaintances, people referred to peer relations with other students, and also the quality of their relationships with university staff. Such ties provide support of various kinds, emotional as well as material or social, not only in respect of study itself, but also in enabling students to tackle external pressures, from dealing with hardship or finding work to balancing caring responsibilities and navigating such stressful life changes as divorce or bereavement. Such patterns of support are what the social capital literature would lead us to expect, along of course with limitations and constraints that can arise from particular types of network bonds (Field 2008). We explore a number of these issues in turn.

Peer relations

Friendship ties are often critical in helping students develop a sense of legitimacy and belonging within higher education (Stuart 2006). Our sample similarly described peers as providing help through difficult times, particularly in sustaining an individual through periods of self-doubt; in some cases they had been critical to a student's decision to keep going. One, for instance, told us that in her circle 'there were two or three people who – maybe wouldn't be doing a degree today if we hadn't kinnna backed each other up' (Pauline). In a number of cases, though, learners expressed discomfort over what they saw as a tension between their new social networks and the ties they had enjoyed before entering higher education.

Typically, peer friendships were a key to belonging. Some of our sample entered higher education as cohorts from an access course or other similar preparatory programme. Others had made friends at an early stage of their course, whether through social activities, sports or membership of a student society or faith group. Such ties tended to persist through the period of study, and in some cases could be quite durable. As one second year student put it, 'it seemed to be this group of mature students that all just seemed to home in on one another as a support network and we've been friends since our Access course now' (Helena, studying Education). This group of seven women, mostly mature but with one aged 18, also socialised outside university and met during vacations as well as term times. Andrew, another mature student, spoke of 'the fact that we've kind of created a wee community for ourselves amongst the mature students, the ones that did the access especially, are all still in contact, giving support, advice, etc'.

Not all students presented themselves this way. Some male interviewees described themselves as relatively independent of other students. One man expressed a very strong ethnic identity, with strong friendship ties to others from the same ethnic group across Britain and beyond; he had made a few friends at university, 'but not ones that lasted, sort of come by and go away' (Benjamin). He seemed satisfied with this. Another presented himself as competent and at ease within the university, and was frequently uncomfortable with the language of support and help that other interviewees used. As a childless man, he described himself as 'a wee bit alienated' from the

predominantly female students with children he had met on the access course. While he also said that he had found it helpful to meet other mature students informally for chats over coffee and wanted more opportunities to meet mature students on campus, he was at pains to portray himself as independent and not someone who needed support.

Relations with 'traditional students'

Typically, mature students tended to form ties with others who shared their experiences, aspirations and outlook. As one explained, 'It is nice having a network that knows exactly what you're talking about. How you feel as well'. This was less a matter of age per se than of having a sense of shared interests and experiences, and of being able to take some things with granted. But while age in itself was not the primary factor in network formation, age-related experiences and attitudes shaped the way that people made new friends, and in turn the new ties helped to cement age as a salient and visible factor within the university. Something similar seems to have happened with students from minority ethnic backgrounds; two ethnic minority students found themselves primarily tied to networks that were largely ethnically based, which moreover were largely based outside the university. One described how other students tended to assume she was an immigrant and asked her why she had come to Scotland; when they found out she was born here, they tended to lose interest. As a result, she had found herself socialising with overseas students rather than local peers. By contrast, a Polish immigrant student who had lived and worked in Britain for four years before entering university had established extensive friendships among her fellow students, and was spending less time each year visiting her family and friends in Poland.

This process in turn meant that mature students tended to define themselves as 'non-traditional'. Moreover, they often contrasted their university experiences with those of younger students. Frequently mature students believed that they were more highly motivated than younger people, and therefore they saw themselves as working harder and participating more fully in formal studies. Pauline, a mature student taking a degree in Education, kept telling herself 'I think well done, although I know it's happening, it's surreal, it's as if it's not happening'. We can see the interplay of her dispositions as a highly motivated learner, and the new habitus into which she had moved and felt herself an outsider. We can also see how what she described as this 'surreal' experience is connected to the discrepancy between her status as an outsider, who had not pursued the normative route taken by most students: 'I don't think younger, you know, students coming through from school, would be [so thrilled] – cos it would just be next step for them'.

Some of the non-traditional students appeared to adopt a stance of humour and ironic distancing as way of describing what they saw as a dominant student culture. Suzie, a first generation student in her first year of a degree in design, expressed her sense of distance from her fellow students: 'When I came in here, they all looked like stockbrokers. I mean, the girls are so cute and the boys are so smart, I mean it's just so funny'. In this case, the student was saying that she had expected the art college to be a more Bohemian environment, but had been surprised to find that she was closer to this stereotype of the art student than the 'normative' students who seemed – at least superficially – much more conventional than she expected. Stella, who was hoping to become a painter, said that she had not even applied to one of the major providers in this area because of the institution's financial policy, which she found exclusionary: 'it's nae [no] riff raff - nae paupers'. This, however,

may show how difficult it can be to interpret interview transcripts. Suzie laughed as she talked about her confounded expectations, and was talking about *feeling* different, while Stella was solemn and felt excluded by what she saw as the elitist policies of the other institution.

Relations with staff

Relationships with staff were highly significant in students' narratives. Unsurprisingly, helpful, accessible and approachable staff were particularly valued. Perhaps less obviously, warmth, encouragement and reassurance from staff were also significant. At a time when academic workloads and teaching methods in many universities are developing in ways that reduce direct personal contact with students, it is important to stress the importance of direct staff interventions, particularly at those moments, such as the first days of a course or at moments of crisis, when students' self-doubt and uncertainty were highest (see also Clegg and Rowland, 2010, p. 727). One particular (male) academic was singled out frequently at one case study university by students, who described him as warm, caring and encouraging. Such staff helped students feel at ease in their new community. More broadly, students talked about a sense of recognition from staff as an important factor in helping to develop a sense of belonging in the imagined community of higher education (see Fleming, 2011).

Pastoral support, as it is often known, could be particularly important for students when it came from an academic. Students' narratives were full of examples. Some students found themselves facing a critical juncture where they considered dropping out, whether because of struggles with coursework or for other reasons, and approached staff. Some had made it explicit to staff that they were on the verge of dropping out. However, others had approached staff for help at critical points, though without making the significance clear of their concern. One, for example, had simply asked staff about the timetable prior to the start of semester. In the context of feeling overwhelmed by combining study with being the parent of a young child and doing long hours of paid work to make ends meet, and wondering if she should simply give up, staff responsiveness to her query had been 'a massive help'. What at first sight appears a small and trivial issue can, in fact, be of considerable significance for retention.

Alison, an English studies student, had found herself adrift in seminars tutorials where she lacked the linguistic resources deployed by her tutor and some other students, and had seriously considered dropping out. She approached a tutor whom she found approachable about her difficulty in articulating her ideas in tutorials, and the tutor had empathised and alluded to her strengths. This, together with the support of peers and advice from lecturers about writing essays, had contributed to her capacity to keep going. These experiences indicate that by being supportive when students express concerns, or simply responsive to queries, staff may make a contribution to retention without this being made explicit by students – and conversely that unresponsiveness or unconstructive responses may have a more significant negative impact than might be assumed.

Clegg and Rowland, drawing on their study of third year social science students in the UK, characterise such relationships as based less on therapy than on emotional and social capabilities than what they refer to as 'kindness'. Our findings echo their view that 'the affective appears to enhance intellectual achievement' (Clegg and Rowland, 2010, p. 729). We would also add that the achievement of a relationship with academics can have an important symbolic value. Relationships

with staff were particularly important to questions of legitimacy within the institution. The socio-cultural status of academics may well involve a significant degree of stereotyping – just think of the images used to represent lecturers and professors in newspaper cartoons, or the standard clichés of ‘dons’ and ‘boffins’ that circulate in the popular media. Such stereotypes, which may be particularly deeply-rooted for those who have rarely encountered real academics, can sometimes be reinforced rather than challenged by the language, dress codes and performative styles that many academics adopt. In our data, this emerged most commonly in concerns over language. For example, Alison, a particularly unconfident student, found it hard work to understand and use academic language and bridge gaps in her writing skills. She described the process by which she assessed each new academic that took one of her classes: ‘I’ve got to sort of try and suss out my tutor and think, “Right, am I gonnae feel intimidated with them or not”’.

Several other students reported challenges with academics’ language. For Stella, this was a matter of class. She made it clear that she was talking about fellow students as much as staff and was talking about feeling marginalised and alienated within the dominant culture of the institution:

middle class people have a really interesting way of using language where they can say things that might come across that they agree with you or be gentle about things but where the power still remains wi’ them. It’s a really... I dunno how to describe it - you know, no passion - there’s no passion in what they’re saying, and this really cold distant calculated use of the English language that I havenae quite managed to grasp yet – thankfully.

Stella was continuing to resist absorption into what she saw as an alien linguistic style that she saw as incompatible with her identity as a Scot and a member of the working class.

Others, though, treated academic language as something that they needed to learn. One Education student explained how he had been struck by watching a recording of himself, taken as part of a micro-teaching exercise:

you see yourself on video, you never speak how you sound, and I seemed to develop into, whilst I’m speaking in front of children, I don’t know if it’s just children, I’ve been told it’s not, a few friends have said that it’s not just children, you do it when you’re - when you’re speaking to say other people as well, people you don’t know well, people who are in a position of authority and should be in a position of respect . . . and I seem to develop an accent and a way of speaking that is, is from the streets.

The convoluted sentence structure here conveys something of this person’s sense of embarrassment that he ‘seemed to talk in quite a rough kind of accent for some reason’, and he worried that he might ‘come across as being someone who – who -who is maybe dumbing down’. He speculated ‘whether subconsciously I thought I would get more engagement from pupils by speaking like them’. Be that as it may, he worried that his accent might damage his career as a teacher. So he found himself emphasising his working class roots in situations in which others might try to disguise them, and was unsure what to make of this.

For students who were initially intimidated by academics and the preconceptions they had about them, the process of unmasking the stereotype took time. As Sandra put it, at the beginning ‘they were up on a pedestal as professors and fellows and you think [sharp intake of breath] they’re definitely not working-class like the rest of us, they’re definitely upper class. And now, you think “They’re only human”’. This was the counterpart to academic recognition of students’ individuality:

through relations with staff, students also came to see academics as individuals whose respect and regard mattered precisely because they were attainable. In some cases, students passed beyond membership of the imagined community of higher education to an imagined role for themselves as potential future academics. Graham, a mature history student, saw himself as enjoying 'greater acceptance of me, like you know within the University', and speculated that at some point 'in the future, you can see yourself – doing that type of work. I mean, you think to yourself, "Well, jeeze, you know what? Maybe one day I'll write a history book". You know?' Graham had an acute sense of being under-educated and anxiety about his ability to cope with degree-level study, and experienced significant challenges related to his disability. He described this sense of being respected and recognised by university staff as leading to a feeling acceptance by the university and as opening up new aspirations for the future, which in turn kept him going despite the difficulties.

Positive relationships with staff had, then, symbolic, practical and affective value for students. by contributing not only to students' intellectual development, but also to a transformation in their learner identities and a growth in their perceptions of their abilities, such 'kind' relationships fostered persistence and resilience rather than the dependency and inadequacy that Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi (2005) denounce as the by-products of a therapeutic culture. We will examine later some of the practical implications of this finding, after we have explored some of our evidence on the role of partners and family.

Family values – negotiating new roles

Since Willy Russell's inspirational play, *Educating Rita*, it has been commonplace to see education as placing a strain on family life. In the play, Rita finds herself losing touch with the socio-cultural milieu of her mother, and falling out of love with her increasingly hostile husband. More broadly, an earlier study by Field notes that as a result of undergoing educational transitions, during which old ties can lose value or even start to become impediments to further progress, some adult learners decide to reshape their intimate networks (Field 2009). We certainly found cases where people faced challenges from family members, or experienced difficulties combining caring with study. We also found important instances of active family support.

Most of the continuing students told stories of more or less active support from their family of origin. Mothers appear to have played a particularly important role in caring for children, but the study threw up other examples of family support such as help with transport, paying bills and listening sympathetically to tales of woe. Where members of the family of origin were critical, it was either because they thought the student's aspirations were unrealistic (in all cases, this appears to have spurred students to succeed) or because they did not approve of the financial or childcare arrangements (one male and one female student in our sample had experienced such disapproval from a parent). Children themselves were cited by some students, male and female, as an important motivational factor and a source of support.

Partners were cited by some students as very supportive of their participation in higher education. Emotional support and encouragement in times of difficulty (cited especially by female students); financial support; and/or taking on more responsibility for caring for children were sources of help that were crucial to some students' capacity to participate in higher education. Children, too, were cited as an important source of motivation and encouragement for some students.

Most (though not all) of the students in our sample who had childcare responsibilities were female. The minority of males denied that they faced any particular difficulty as a result. For women, though, sustaining university study often meant a renegotiation of responsibilities with partners and other family members. Sandra's narrative illustrates the guilt that this can provoke, and also reminds us that adult women may have multiple caring roles:

I've probably become a bit more selfish to be honest and that's not me at all. . . . I don't know if it *is* being selfish, if it's just trying to rake back some of me that I've let go. I don't feel as though I've been a whole person for so long because – I'm giving bits of me away to everybody... The children have bits of me, my husband has a bit of me, my Mum has lots of me. My Dad doesn't keep well so he has bits of me. My brother's gone through his second divorce and it's always me that he comes to... And I think, 'D'you know, what do I ever do for me? Absolutely bugger all. I do nothing for myself'. And now that I've made the decision to do *this*, I think: 'I think I need all of this back now, I need to reel it all in and I can give you all a little bit. But nobody can have as much as they've had. For another four years anyway. Because I need all of *me* now... to do the course that I'm doing.'"

Sandra was not alone in experiencing conflict between her drive to achieve self-fulfilment through participation in higher education and her socially-defined role in focusing exclusively on the needs of others.

Other female students described difficulties in renegotiating relationships with partners who were reluctant about or opposed to the changes in the division of household labour that were needed to sustain their participation in higher education. For Ellie, who described her husband as having 'kinda been dragged along, a little bit kicking and screaming', negotiating a change in her role – with her children, one of whom has a disability, as well as her husband – had been a significant challenge on top of the academic demands of her course and this combination of pressures had led her to consider dropping out; support from friends at university had been crucial to her ability to keep going at this point. The need to renegotiate relationships with children who had been used to unrestricted availability was also raised by other female students. Shirley, for example, described her husband as very supportive, but was aware that her children were finding it difficult to adapt to her increased study commitments. Guilt and sadness about spending less time with children can be seen as an additional emotional burden of participation in higher education for students who are accustomed to being the main carer:

They enjoy the childcare. But they don't like the fact that they're there. 'Cause their mum hasn't picked them up from school... so we have had a few behavioural issues... It takes time to work through... It is a transition phase: it's different for them, it's different for me, and they haven't got mum – 100% of the time. You know, which my daughter – doesn't like. And – my son isn't so concerned; he deals with it a little better, but I feel guilty that I'm not giving him as much time, especially with his hearing [difficulties].

The accounts of these students indicate, therefore, that as well as being a crucial source of support, relationships with partners and families entail responsibilities that can generate emotional and practical pressures, particularly for female students with children in view of the gendered division of household labour. In such cases, students had developed a degree of emotional resilience that was in turn reinforced by supportive peer relationships, and (in Shirley's case) a supportive partner.

Implications and discussion

Social connections provide an important resource for all students. Our research suggests that they may play a particularly important role in retention for non-traditional students, and particularly those for whom higher education is especially non-normative. This certainly includes mature students, single parents, and students from working class families, who often have to engage in serious identity work in order to see themselves as legitimate members of the imagined community of higher education. This chapter reports the findings from interviews with those who have stayed on at university, rather than those who have left or never entered; among the stayers, social ties provide considerable support. While some of this echoes similar findings from existing research on family and peers, this study has also identified relationships with academic staff as an important feature of student identity formation. It has also noted the symbolic value that relationships with staff can have for students.

Clegg and Rowland (2010) have argued that economic pressures and policy choices in higher education have fostered institutional settings that are increasingly at odds with the 'kind' relationships with staff that we have identified as so important to student integration. While they argue against prescribing or requiring kindness from staff, seeing this as leading to 'a form of performativity through processes of routinisation', there are certainly ways in which institutions can avoid undermining or damaging the conditions which make kind relationships possible. This can include conventional mechanisms for intervention such as reward systems and (dis)incentives of various kinds, as well as more creative approaches to the design of systems and socio-physical spaces within universities. Our main findings, though, lead us to emphasise the critical role of staff in developing 'kind' relations with students. Clegg and Rowland recommend a professionalism based on notions of virtue; we would add that a clear reminder of higher education as a public good might be timely, given increasing policy pressures to view a university education mainly as a private positional good.

Much the same argument applies to the development of peer support among students. The physical design of spaces within the university, support for student societies and associations, and a clear and virtuous definition of higher education as a public good can all help protect the preconditions for meaningful sociable interaction among students inside and outside the classroom. The wicked problem here is the risk of ghettoisation. The tendency for non-normative students to socialise with one another is an understandable one; indeed, it is a specific form of a wider social pattern that is widely recognised in the social capital literature. But this raises the question of whether close bonds between mature students, or student parents, can inhibit the development of ties with younger students. In the social capital literature, it is sometimes suggested that such tendencies come at the cost of broadening horizons, intellectually and socially, that then penalise the non-traditional student both during their studies and when they enter the graduate labour market (Field 2008). Our interviews with younger first generation students suggested that they tended to value interaction with mature students, whom they saw as an educational and affective resource. This suggests that the skillful facilitation of interaction in seminars and tutorials, as well as in informal interactions and generic employability programmes, has a part to play; but this is a difficult domain, and there are obvious risks of unintended consequences from ill-conceived interventions.

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