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**Exploring transitions into the undergraduate University world using a student-centred framework**

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***I became a student when I realised who I was.... Exploring transitions into the undergraduate University world using a student-centred framework.***

**Abstract**

This paper presents a small-scale qualitative study, which addressed stories of ‘becoming an undergraduate student’. The work took place in one university in the South West of England and involved 4 researchers, 4 co-researchers (undergraduate students) and 12 students from a Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Stories of ‘becoming student’ were perceived and experienced by the researchers as containing complex histories, intertwined with problematic systemic processes, which combined to create challenging, political and diverse realities for students. There was a consensus amongst the researchers that institutional practices did not work to uncover these lived experiences, nor aim to understand them. The study aimed to gain further insight into what becoming a student entails, how ‘student’ is positioned by the academy and to consider how future practices could make transitions into the student world more visible, shared and understood. The work highlights how processes and experiences of becoming an undergraduate student are wide, varied and complex but there are common matters of concern; issues of resources, the importance of student networks and the impact of external perceptions. The authors suggest that if these aspects of the student world were made more visible and understood, Higher Education (H.E) may be better prepared to support positive student transition, success and overall experience.

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**Introduction:**

The neo-liberal agenda pursued by recent British governments has led to a situation where there are complex paths to university for students (Christie 2008). The attempt to achieve a situation where half of young people go to university has contributed to a reality where *The responsibilities – and risks – of negotiating pathways through the university system rest with young people themselves, and with their families* (Christie, 2008, p.124). This is not just a concern in England. Globally, students are also increasingly being positioned as consumers (Watson, 2013).

Such positioning is not always a conscious practice undertaken by the individual student, academic or institution, but an integral part of a dominant mindset, created by policy changes which tie HE’s rationale to the marketplace. This problematizes the HE space by adding further layers of accountability and scrutiny in terms of academic practice, tutor accountability and assessment of ‘student experience’. In addition, provision for supporting and enabling those students labelled as ‘diverse’ is unsuccessful for many: stories of frustration and failure abound (Quinn, 2013; Gibson, 2015; Gibson et al 2017). This is partly caused by a pathological gaze, which emerges from limited and simplified categorisation practices, ironically tied to equality and widening participation policies.

In addition to feeling a greater expectation to go to university and the individualised culture of consumerism, which dominates the student decision process, many students from lower-class backgrounds lack the ability to draw on a discourse of entitlement, which their middle-class counterparts have. This impacts upon their emotional security (Christie, 2008). Students can thus feel ‘disempowered, lack

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confidence and feel completely unprepared for university study’ (Hirst et al, 2004: 70). They particularly struggle to ‘decode’ new and unfamiliar practice and experience confusion and mixed messages regarding academic conventions; many of which are implicit or hidden within the curriculum (Gourlay, 2009; Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005).

As Sullivan (2001, p.893) suggests, this may be explained in terms of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital: *...cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture within a society, and especially the ability to use and understand ‘educated’ language...the possession of cultural capital varies with social class, yet the education system assumes the possession of cultural capital. This makes it very difficult for lower-class pupils to succeed in the education system.* Bourdieu also suggests (Moore, 2012) that in treating the value of some sorts of capital as greater than others, we may be guilty as a society of ‘symbolic violence’ against those not possessing the more valued forms of capital. Thus, the decision to go to university is a risky one which involves *a personal investment of...cultural capital* (Briggs et al., 2012, p.1). Unsurprisingly then, numerous studies have suggested that students find the transition to university life problematic (Peel, 2000; Sander et al., 2000; Tranter, 2003; Smith & Hopkins, 2005; Longden, 2006).

One way to understand the complexities and tensions in this transition is to move beyond viewing the student within a deficit framework and work from a student-centred perspective. Our study endeavoured to do this using a generic qualitative framework (Kahlke, 2014), which highlighted that students desired more student-centred approaches to enable agency, empowerment and success.

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### **Context**

The researchers were known to one another through their connection as academic colleagues and students. As part of their ontology (teaching, research and management) they had found themselves critically considering the changing dynamics of student identity; needs, expectations, education experiences and academic progression. Such a position has been critically considered by Dall’Alba & Barnacle (2007) where the matter of ontology, as becoming more prominent over epistemology in HE pedagogic concerns, was debated. In sum their position marries with recent widescale HE developments regarding the need to ‘know’ our students in their development, in who they become and where and how they are positioned. The authors’ student-centred approaches in teaching and research regularly brought to the fore insights and awareness of student frustrations and challenges with the University environment. This study stemmed from a desire to address these frustrations and to do so with a critical awareness of external and institutional policy, processes and pressures.

It was clear for the researchers through dialogue with students, (Gibson and Luxton, 2009; Gibson and Kendall, 2012; Gibson 2012; Seale, Gibson and Haynes and Potter, 2014) that for many, especially those from a wide range of educational backgrounds, questions regarding the identity of student, academic writing, academic progression and what the university is remain ill-defined. Without knowing or having some grasp of the answers, student transition and academic progress can be hindered (Gourlay, 2009). Linked to changes in HE policy are changes in learning strategies, from the expository school or college experience, to the requisite independent learning at

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degree level. This is often difficult for students, and where it does occur, it can be fragmented and frequently results in social anxiety, drop out and failure (Topham and Russell, 2012; Quinn 2013). It was the study’s aim to explore these issues with a sample population of current students, as well as to provide an opportunity for other students to be involved in the research as co-researchers.

The choice to focus on the process of transition into the student world was in part guided by Gale & Parker's (2014, p.734) assertion that, of the three types of university transition they describe, ‘becoming’ is the most *theoretically sophisticated* but the least used and *well understood*. They suggest that framing student transition as ‘becoming’ avoids a situation where the university is served at the expense of students, and instead requires the institution itself to consider change or adaptation to assist student transition. Palmer et al (2009) suggest that students are aware that universities’ efforts to improve transitions to becoming student lack insight into the student experience of transition and that this area is under-researched: *it is fair to say that the actual experiences of students entering university have somehow failed to attract the level of academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this transition* (p.38), thus providing further rationale for this study. Gale and Parker (2014) also suggest that little transition work has been done with adult participants and their theorisation of becoming was further useful to us in its positive view of the ‘crises’ that may arise in transitional periods.

## **Methodology**

Our study’s methodology was a two-stage generic qualitative approach (Kahlke, 2014), which entailed very different but complementary stages. The project began by

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drawing on our immediate resource base; the researchers. The group consisted of 4 members of staff (the project researchers) and 4 members of the student body (project co-researchers). The 4 staff members teach on a BA (Hons) programme with one also located in the University’s Learning Development team. In the first stage, each of the 8 research team members immersed themselves in the methodology and epitomised the notion of making experiences visible and shared, by reflecting on difficult or significant events in their own transition into HE. The researchers considered their experiences of transition into HE and ‘becoming an undergraduate student’ via mediums of art, poetry and storytelling to make visible stories which are often hidden or misunderstood. Rarely do we explore such experiences with our students and sharing these stories was a powerful and thought-provoking experience for the researchers and co-researchers (Kahu, 2013). Connected to this, Briggs et al. (2012, p. 9) suggest that *as well as accessing practical information, [students] need person-to-person stories that enable them to envisage managing the difficulties of transition and university attendance and succeeding in a university environment.*

The outputs from this first stage formed the basis for the second stage of the project, providing material to develop key themes (Table 1) to explore within focus groups where the aim was to access stories of becoming student from a wider population. An email call out, including ethics protocol and project information, was sent to undergraduate students on all undergraduate programmes within the University’s Department of Education, two BA Education programmes and one BEd programme. Whilst this was not intentional, 11 of the 12 students who self-selected to become a part of the research could all be positioned as non-traditional or ‘diverse’ in terms of current HE Widening Participation policy and practice. This is interesting, and it could

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be argued these students saw their involvement in the research as a way of voicing their concerns with the practices of the university, as well as an opportunity to further their educational experiences.

**Table 1: Themes to consider and explore in Focus Groups**

- Social Relationships
- Living & Working Environment
- Risk & Danger
- Being Excluded
- Identity

The 12 participants were divided into 2 distinct focus groups (6 participants and 2 researchers in each). The focus groups met three times, the first an initial meeting and clarification session discussing the focus of the project and sharing respondents’ thoughts. Then in focus group 2 and 3 the respondents considered and explored the key themes (Table 1) emerging from the first stage of the study in relation to their experiences of transition and time spent at University.

Thematic data analysis was applied to the data collected and three dominant themes were identified as core to respondents’ experiences and student journey; resources, student networks and external perceptions of ‘student’. These are unpacked in the next three sections, where we use acronyms in bold to denote different respondent voices.

**Theme 1 – Resources:**



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Our participants discussed frequently the resources they accessed in the process of ‘becoming student’. They reflected on the amount of time needed for study, and the demands of balancing this against competing priorities such as family, work and the social aspect of university life; the access they had to the cultural and social capital necessary for becoming student; and the related issue of emotional resources. They also talked in some detail about the financial pressures they felt around having to commit £9,000 a year to a degree, which also impacted on the hours they could work.

**DP** said:

*Can we pay the bills this month, can we do this, can we do that? I’ve had to have hardship bursaries from the university, which is really good. It’s helped me out once or twice...It’s the financial side: it’s a constant challenge.*

Recent studies suggest undergraduate students are becoming more critically astute and forward thinking in matters of course costs, general sustenance and considerations of ‘value for money’ (Neves & Hillman, 2016). In addition, Neves & Hillman (2016, p.13) suggest student satisfaction and experience across the UK have remained strong since increases in fees in 2012, but *student perception of value for money has fallen significantly, from 40% in 2015 to just 37% [in 2016]*. Whilst we would argue that 3% in this context might not be considered ‘significant’, the fact that it is described thus emphasises its importance to the reader. There are indicators that students are judging ‘value for money’ on contact time, extracurricular input, teaching and learning resources, yet it is argued the driver behind this fall can be *explained by the fact that students are incurring much larger debts than in the past even though universities’ teaching income has not increased commensurately* (Neves & Hillman,

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2016, p.14). This is indicative of the transfer of responsibility for paying for university education from state/collective to individual (Christie, 2008; Giroux, 2003, 2010).

O’Shea (2014) suggests that ‘risk’ is a term used more and more in the literature on student transitions and identity formation, perhaps echoing the sense that individuals feel isolated in decisions around the need to support their journey to becoming student, part of the wider agenda to position education as an individual, rather than a collective good. For example, our focus group members shared their concerns about fees with some discussion around ‘value for money’, a typical view expressing that *University is a risk – it’s a risk for everyone when taking on so much debt*. In focus group 2, **KV** said:

*The money puts people off; especially if they work full time and they have to stop working. I didn’t think about the money because I wanted to do it but I can see how it does affect people, especially with children or personal circumstances.*

The other members of focus group 2 also had clear opinions on this. **MOC** agreed with **KV**, saying:

*Having a family, the cost was a big issue. I did an access course but I had to pay for it myself. The cost was a big decision.*

And **DP** developed this to clarify his feelings about financial risks involved:

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*I was similar to KV, the course fees didn't really have much consideration; it's just what I wanted to do...more worr[ying] for me was living cost and sustaining the family.*

Living costs, bills, and family life therefore appeared more pressing to some in terms of day to day existence and where they experienced anxiety, rather than actual course fees.

Another issue was time: views were shared on how and where to make best use of their time, but also wanting to challenge those who think studying for a degree is easy. Regarding the shortage of time, **KV** said:

*I feel like a lot of people have that sort of same experience with university life being looked at as if it is an easy thing to do. Especially when they hear how many hours of lectures we have...but people struggle to understand the extras.*

And **MOC** added:

*This year just gone, I had one weekend in the whole year I didn't do any work. You get out of it what you put in. [It's a question of] making the most of your day and your study time.*

In terms of difficulties in finding the time to work from home, **KV** said:

*In first year I only worked from home and it worked but now it doesn't. I have a desk in my room but I don't really use it. I like to just be out and*

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*away from everything...in somewhere focussed, especially if I have someone else with me working and then have little breaks. That works for me.*

And **DP** added:

*I’m much more focussed when I get on the train and get into the library early. I get a lot more done than in the house...I get distracted.*

These quotes suggest our participants were aware of their need to access a further resource – a physical space or spaces in which to be able to study. Concerns regarding time management, study space, family responsibilities, bills and part time work placed strain on our students’ capacities to engage with their course. This is reflected in other studies: for example, Christie et al (2008, p.576) suggest that their participants had to *draw very tight imagined boundaries between their home life and their university life if they were to succeed in either.*

Osborne et al (2004) note that time commitments for university study caused their participants to feel tension with the demands of their family and home life, and describe a dilemma over whether it was worth spending less time with their family in the immediate future in the hope that study would lead to a better long-term future for the whole family. This is reminiscent of the choice our participants made in terms of a financial commitment to study, which they hoped would ‘pay off’ for them in terms of career enhancement, improved long-term prospects and life satisfaction. Both are clearly risky choices, likely to increase the stress around choosing to become a student

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and the process itself. We suggest that the facility for students to share these worries is vital for them to be better able to cope with them.

The necessary cultural capital to negotiate the ‘world’ of HE was a resource that participants had come to see during their studies as key and something they felt they had lacked before University. They discussed their path to university and the support they received from family to make this decision. **AB** noted:

*I was below average at school at everything, nobody in my family has been to university. We just about got by. Because I was average I feel like I got forgotten about all of the time.*

**BC** made a similar point:

*My family never expected me to go; and they never really ask me about it because they can’t relate, but that doesn’t bother me.*

For other participants, their previous educational experiences provided insights into the differences between studying in a school environment and that of a university. One participant commented that they remember *...not feeling comfortable with the language*. These feelings were shared in Christie et al’s (2008, p.576) study, where *There was a sense amongst many of the respondents that they were not full members of the university*. On the matter of resources, in particular those of time and money, our findings challenge the general view that course fee concerns place a significant strain and barrier on students. In contrast, our work emphasises that student resource

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concerns lie with immediate day to day existence, sustenance, space to study and time to develop the required cultural capital (Moore, 2012). Fees were perceived by our participants as secondary to more immediate resource needs e.g. rent, shopping, bills, childcare. Thus, current financial needs and status were a ‘real’ and immediate barrier as opposed to the longer-term matter of course fee repayment. It may be that further work is needed in considering students’ immediate resource need. This may better prepare universities in addressing successful student experience, academic progression and retention.

## **Theme 2 – The Importance of Student Networks**

Our participants placed significant emphasis on their social student networks and strong relationships with tutors as core in supporting their successful transition into university life and study. Tinto (1997), Palmer *et al.* (2009), and Maunder *et al.* (2013) all note the importance of friendship groups and other social relationships in students’ transitions to university, and the importance to our participants of the social aspect of university life was stressed repeatedly. **MOC** described social relationships as *key over the past three years* and **KV** expressed her surprise at the extent to which making friends had been important to her in her experience of becoming student. Despite Kimura’s (2013) concern that non-traditional students might feel they do not ‘fit in’, we found that relationships were formed by all members of the focus group, regardless of age or background. **AA** said, *...it doesn’t matter what age you are; that hasn’t really affected me at all*. Our students were looking for somewhere to ‘belong’, and were concerned that they would not, but seemed to negotiate that process successfully.

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Maunder et al (2013) note multiple social influences on students from within and outside university, and our participants also described important relationships with family and friends outside university and colleagues within university. Unlike those who were unable to draw on their families’ experiences of Higher Education, **AA** commented that *my supportive family helped me get where I am now* and **AB** shared the view with the researchers *that meeting diverse people is an education in itself*. Furthermore, Christie et al (2008) note that relationships with staff members are equally important, and such relationships were highly valued by our participants. **MOC** said: *Personal relationships with lecturers have been one of the best things about my experience*. Participants attributed a number of benefits to their social relationships:

- Improved mental health;
- Confidence;
- Ability to succeed on one’s course;
- Sharing ideas, helping to plan and write assignments;
- Reassurance;
- Confidence;
- Motivation to work;
- Inspiration;
- Feeling safe and secure in the role of student.

Participants talked about the process of developing a concept of themselves as students, and, as suggested by Briggs et al (2012), interactions with peers were key in this. Participants contrasted their own experiences with their perceptions of an Open University-type model, which they felt would be a much more solitary experience, and expressed feelings that they would have struggled much more with their studies in the absence of a group of like-minded people with whom they had friendships. As the list above suggests, participants did not see social relationships simply in terms of their academic benefits; nor did they see them simply as a social part of university. This emphasis is interesting in the light of Ribchester et al’s (2014) suggestion that social

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capital is important in students' transitions to university. They posit that students benefit from making new friendships when they go to university, but also from maintaining existing friendships from 'outside' university, and one participant felt that a variety of friendship groups helped her university experience – which prompted others in the group to speculate that this variety was less easily accessed by those who spent less time on campus.

As noted in the previous section, our focus group participants also indicated that they were aware of different social groups among their university colleagues, with participants noting differences based on class/wealth, and cultural capital in the form of familiarity with appropriate language and behaviour for university. This did not seem to be so much of a problematic situation as alluded to by Christie et al (2008) and Christie (2009), where non-traditional students felt alienated and/or antagonistic. Our participants were largely mature students and lived at home, but they were aware of social aspects of university that they might be missing when compared with more traditional students living in student accommodation. One participant in particular seemed very conscious of the fact that he was not part of a culture of going out in the evenings and drinking alcohol. More than one participant also mentioned that being in a community of like-minded people was important to them, and helped them form their identity as a student. It is also worth noting that participants did differentiate between themselves and others on the course in another way. They discussed feeling that their fellow students were not as dedicated to the course, and their bewilderment at such behaviour. This may mean that our participants were more 'keen' than their counterparts – more determined to take seriously the challenge of studying for a degree – which must be taken into account when considering findings from this work.



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A similar feeling of separation from ‘traditional’ students was uncovered by Christie et al (2008) and Christie (2009).

Participants also noted increased benefits from spending time with their course-mates in contexts away from the university campus such as field trips, where a sense of camaraderie developed from shared experience, leading to stronger and deeper relationships among students who attended. Importantly for our study, this context was one where participants specifically described their awareness that *they had become or were becoming a student*. Another such situation was the chance to meet and mix with students from second and third years, a situation about which **KV** said *You learn so much from each other*. Both these situations are relatively rare on the course which the majority of our participants studied. Perhaps they should be increased in the future. Participants also noted their course benefitted from being relatively small (a typical cohort might be 55 students per year), which they felt facilitated friendships as it was possible for every student to know everyone else more easily. The quality of the time spent with fellow students may be the key here, as ‘fieldwork’ often includes time not allocated to any activity and allows for social ties to be established and/or strengthened.

Finally, participants’ discussions of the benefits of social relationships also gave a certain amount of insight into their views about what they expected from a university education. This seems to have been a rounded, whole-person experience of development, and certainly not simply a focus on the neo-liberal model of a university degree (Christie, 2009) as a necessary step to further career prospects. **BB** suggested: *It’s about who you meet, how you meet, that makes you an adult*. This

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perception is further evidence of our participants’ feelings that they did not agree with limited, financially-orientated and societal expectations of becoming a student.

### **Theme 3: Perception of student**

Unsurprisingly, given that they were aware the focus of our research was on ‘becoming student’, our participants frequently mentioned their perceptions about what ‘a student’ is. Perhaps in part because of this, their responses illustrate a complex and multilayered conception of ‘student’. As Palmer et al (2009, p.52) note, *...the conditions of...studenthood have been learned long before the entry into university*, and although they told different stories of ‘becoming student’, many of our participants spoke in detail about the preconceptions they held about student life before they came to university, and the factors that they felt had shaped these preconceptions. These preconceptions were clearly important in how they saw themselves as ‘becoming student’ – presumably there was a certain extent to which *‘becoming student’ was meeting a preconceived image of what ‘a student’ was.*

Some participants expressed positive views and remembered excitement at the prospect of time spent studying a subject about which they passionately cared; others said they had looked forward to the experience. Several had been apprehensive about the academic skills they foresaw a need for; **KV** had held the idea that university had an ‘elite’ status and would not be easily accessible to her (Osborne *et al*, 2004). In cases of apprehension about university, participants had limited expectations of their success in studying at HE level: **KV** remembered how she told her family that she did not expect to make friends, and possibly not even complete the course for example, whilst another confided before arriving at university that they might not be away from

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home for long (concerned they would fail early on in their studies). In addition, self-identified ‘mature’ students worried that they would not fit in with what they expected to be younger classmates.

A negative conception of ‘student’ and university was more widespread among our participants than any positive expectations. Some went so far as to express their discomfort at the term ‘student’ itself, saying they did not see themselves as ‘a student’ but they were not able to say why this was; **BB** did note *I don’t like words like ‘student’*. This may be explained by the several assertions made by participants that their social group outside of university (friends and family) held negative ideas about ‘students’, **AB** saying *When you say ‘I’m a student’, people have a negative idea of what that is*. **DP** also told us he was teased about being an ‘eternal student’ – despite having worked for approximately 20 years before going to university. This participant also explained that he thought others saw life at university as *not working*, in contrast with doing a ‘proper job’ and choosing to *live the life of an 18-year-old*. **KV** described her family not understanding how hard she worked at university because they did not appreciate the time she spent on university work outside lectures.

It was not only family and friends who had helped our participants to form their ideas about what they would encounter when ‘becoming student’: several participants mentioned the influence of their experiences from school. One participant said that they were not expected by school staff to get to university, others said similar things about their families’ expectations. However, some participants discussed how they *had* been expected to go to university, but had felt ill-prepared and as though they had

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not made their own conscious choice to apply for university, simply going along with expectations that university was the natural ‘next step’.

These various influences led our participants to hold a complex image of what a ‘student’ was: as Maunder et al (2013, pp.146-7) say, this is down to

*conflicting cultural messages about the image of university which students [draw] on to formulate their expectations – with tensions between the ideas of higher education as elite and studious, and the stereotype of students as idle, inebriated ‘loafers’.*

Christie (2009, p.125) describes the *conflicting and paradoxical feelings of ambivalence and contradiction about ‘fitting in’ to student life*, and makes it clear that students are often taking risks by adopting a ‘student’ identity. The financial risk, as discussed above in Theme 1, is not the only risk taken when choosing to become a student; university staff should be encouraged to recognise that in their students.

Some participants described their ‘becoming student’ as a process where they matured emotionally, and became an adult, noting that this happened *even at my age* (one of the mature students). Another aspect was a realisation or awareness of a defined personal identity, **BA** saying:

*I became a student when I realised who I was...understanding who you are and what it means to be you – that makes you a student.*

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Christie et al (2008) made a similar point – that ‘becoming student’ is partly becoming aware that one is a capable student, although they note that it is often not until some time after one becomes capable that one realises this. Maunder et al (2013, p.149) also suggest that the transition of ‘becoming student’ *contributed to personal changes* for their participants, and note that the identity of ‘student’ was not only about self-image, but was also imposed on their participants *by others such as family members* (p.144) as we also found. Maunder et al’s (2013) nuanced description of the transition process suggests it takes place throughout a student’s university life and is not simply limited to the early period when they are settling into their new identity. Our participants also shared this view, **AA** stating: *becoming a student is a process that happens over a period of time.*

**KV** focused on receiving high marks as an important part of the process of seeing herself as becoming a student. Christie et al (2008) found a similar process at work with their participants: getting something right led to a developing sense of self as a competent learner. Finally, a further element of this ‘picture’ of what our participants saw as ‘becoming student’ was a growing awareness of issues which amounted to a kind of politicisation, or consciencisation (Freire, 1972). This contrasted with what they felt the education system understood as the core purpose of university and becoming student. For example, **AB** said:

*I don’t think schools...encourage people to go for what they enjoy; we are encouraged to go for the monetary value, for jobs etc.*

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Several comments along these lines indicated that our participants were both aware of and opposed to the prevailing neoliberal climate in education and wider policy (Giroux, 2003, 2010; Kimura, 2014). This therefore confirms Kahu’s (2013) recommendation that universities looking to ‘engage’ their students should take an holistic view of HE (Bryson et al, 2009 and Mercer, 2007).

The change they saw in themselves indicated by the way our participants described the process of ‘becoming student’ was, in part, also problematic for them. In one case, a participant stated that their own growing political awareness led to tensions with family members, and another talked of *becoming unknown to each other* with friends they had known before university. Others said that friends seemed jealous of the opportunity to go to university, that they had been ‘disowned’ by a good friend since starting their course, or simply that friends without experience of university could not relate to their experience and/or did not want to talk about it.

This process did work ‘in both directions’, however. That is to say, our participants noted changes in themselves, and could sometimes understand why their ‘old’ friends felt differently about them – feeling themselves becoming different to their friends and family. **KV** described taking the conscious decision not to talk much to her father about her experience at university, because he would not understand and that she accepted this:

*I wouldn’t speak about certain things to [my family] as they wouldn’t understand...My dad...we have basic conversations, but that’s fine – that’s my dad.*

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**KV** also specifically said that she knew she acted differently around her family since going to university and exhibited traits of Watson et al’s (2009) ‘adaptors’, who make an effort to maintain their existing habitus outside HE and simultaneously to fit in to the new ‘field’ of HE. Lynch & O’Neill (1994, in Watson *et al*, 2009) suggest that this is a difficult process, and Christie (2009, p.131) notes that, particularly for ‘non-traditional students’, becoming student may be *inherently paradoxical and contradictory*. Our participants tended to agree – one saying that adjusting to the new field and its impact on the old one took a whole year. **KV**, however, was very matter of fact about ‘being’ differently in her workplace, at home, and at university: she suggested she had found a way to maintain habitus outside university and adapt to a new one *in* university as a student.

Two further points arose on multiple occasions. Participants talked about the importance they attached to being located on the university campus – being at the university physically was equated with being a student, in both groups (Palmer et al, 2009). This is interesting to note when considering the ideas discussed in Theme 2 – that a significant part of becoming a student is the social relationships involved. Clearly, these relationships may be facilitated by attending a shared location, but there may also be significance in our participants feeling like ‘a student’ when they visited a location they associated with being a student. If they assumed different identities, as **KV** seemed to suggest, this may have helped their shifting identity. This has interesting implications for universities’ interactions with their students; as Palmer et al (2009, p.40) note, *...there is a tendency to assume that, because students are at university they...are located within the university boundaries....*

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Finally, our participants were interested in what separated them from their fellow students, suggesting that even their colleagues had different ideas of what ‘becoming student’ would be. Participants in all the focus groups noted that they felt different to their classmates, whether because of age differences, different attitudes to socialising or in their attitude to learning and working on assignments. This self-awareness was developed in one conversation where participants speculated that volunteering to be part of the research was a symptom of their attitude towards university and their perception of ‘student’.

Most noted they were ‘non-traditional’ students: either they did not go to university at 18 years of age or had accessed university via non-traditional routes, e.g. Access Courses. They linked this to their desire to make the most of their time at university. This manifested itself in working hard at learning, prioritising socialising less than some peers and taking opportunities, such as this research project, for a broader and more varied university experience. Many felt that their very deliberate choice to come to university – in the full knowledge that they were taking a financial risk – motivated them to maximise their experience and was part of the same attitude to studying and ‘becoming student’. This again was contrasted in focus group discussion with more traditional students who, they felt, might be at university because they were expected by others to follow such a route. The element of decisive choice was deemed to be very important – their choosing to ‘become student’ in itself leading to a different concept of ‘student’.



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This tension and division of student groups is a common occurrence across the student body: for example, Christie et al (2008) note that their students felt differentiated from their contemporaries by their age and social class. Whilst aspects of the split can be connected to the cultural and financial capital debate (i.e. those who have and take for granted and those who have not and commit themselves fully) there was noted fluidity in terms of our participants’ identities. Students noted how they were able to oscillate between different identities depending on the circumstances, **DP** stating:

*Yeah [you] come to lectures and get assignments in but quite rightly also have a great social life and meet new people.*

All this is helping to construct a more nuanced picture of what ‘a student’ is: not the apparently popular image of lazy, drunken youth; not the policy-driven expectation that getting a degree so one can get a job is the be-all and end-all; not having to attend the inaccessible, elite institutions ‘not for the likes of us’.

## **Conclusion**

To summarise, this paper has presented a study with undergraduate students exploring their insights and experiences of accessing and being a part of the contemporary HE world. We argue that several key lessons can be taken from our study. Firstly, that concerns regarding resources, specifically time and money, whilst a dominant feature in potential students’ considerations of becoming student, seem to be focused more on one’s day to day existence as opposed to the cost of university fees. This was presented as a consideration to be picked up later down the line in one’s graduate working world. Whilst this may stand at odds with dominant and current

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discourse, it is worthwhile considering as a contrasting narrative: the worry of funds for bills and food being a more traditional and long term ‘normalised’ concern of the student world. One may question if much has really changed in this aspect of the student world.

Secondly, the matter of networks and student support for one another was highlighted as a crucial aspect of success when making the transition into the student world. The benefits noted were many, including mental health management, networking contacts, placement support, stronger relationships, heightened determination to succeed and an awareness of how successful networks added significantly to their individual learning, academic progression and transformation. Finally, all of our participants had much to share on how they perceived the role and purpose of student and contrasting with this how others outside the university context, e.g. family, employers and friends, perceived them. They also shared their understandings of what the academy positioned as ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ students and explored the tensions with that process and related practice as represented in WP policy and provision. This aspect of the work emphasised how and where various perceptions and practices can, if viewed critically, bring us to a more nuanced view and understanding of the complex student world and student identities.

We have illustrated how ‘becoming student’ is not as straightforward or as easily understood a process as may be implied in the marketing literature and the general discourse around neoliberal society’s need for graduates. We have shown how our students found certain things, such as resources, networks and getting to grips with varied attitudes and understandings of who and what they are, crucial in terms of their

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progression, success and survival in the academy. We would suggest that the common areas, as highlighted above, are factored into future studies wishing to further understand the phenomena of becoming and being a 'successful' university student in the current complex, ever-changing academy.

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