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**Title** Who are 'WE?': Exploring the construction of the student identity at a post-1992 university  
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### **Who are 'WE?': Exploring the construction of the student identity at a post-1992 university**

Organisational identity is believed to be key to corporate branding in general and in university branding in particular (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009). As Steiner and his colleagues (2012, p. 402) argue “[f]or newer universities in particular, it has become all the more important to build distinct identity profiles and reputations” in order to recruit students, high-calibre faculty members and administrators as well as to differentiate themselves from rival institutions (Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Post-1992 institutions attract a larger proportion of ‘non-traditional’ students in terms of class, ethnic background and maturity (Read et al., 2003). For this reason, post-1992 universities seem to target the ‘non-traditional’ student market by transmitting “strong brand images, which alleged that their universities were ideal places for people with characteristics of this type” (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009, p. 28). However, the projection of such brand images might deter other groups from applying to these institutions (Ali-Choudhury et al., *ibid.*)

In this paper we explore how the ‘organisational identity’ of the University of the West of England (UWE) is experienced by ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ students and recent graduates (what do they perceive, feel and think about their university?). The data come from the examination of material from the UWE marketing campaigns from 2008 until now, as well as interview data from the Paired Peers project, a qualitative longitudinal study (2010-2017) of a cohort of students at Bristol's two universities from the start of their university careers to their first steps into the labour market.

Content analysis of the marketing materials are used to explore how student identities are constructed. Narrative accounts from interviews with UWE undergraduates are then used to examine the extent to which the students identify with the ‘official’ branded identities. We present a continuum of three dominant narrative accounts amongst the participants:

- The **UWE Student** stories (strong identification)
- The **I’m here for the degree** stories (weaker, even ‘neutral’ identification)
- The **I don’t fit in** stories (dis-identification)

We then offer some conclusions regarding the branding of the university, and suggestions as to how it may impact both undergraduate recruitment, and the experience of students who come to the university.

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