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Exploring the Journey of Equine Degree Students in the UK

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Equine Degree Students and their journey through Higher Education (HE) in the UK have been vastly underrepresented in current research despite there being 30 providers offering over 140 courses, and UCAS (2021) reporting over 16,000 applications for these courses. Courses attract students from many backgrounds, providing a feasible route through HE for students who may otherwise not have considered HE.

The aim of this research was to understand the main enabling factors and challenges equine degree students experienced on their HE journeys.

Eight students from different courses and backgrounds completed semi-structured interviews based on Tinto's (2012) conditions for student success, reflecting on expectations, assessment and feedback, support and involvement. Thematic analysis revealed that the strongest protectant against dropout was a shared passion for the subject area and the personal growth students experienced on their journeys, supported by peers academically and socially.

Full paper

In the UK, there are 30 providers offering over 140 equine higher education (HE) courses (UCAS, 2023), with UCAS (2021) reporting over 16,000 applications equine degree applications. The university in this research reported that 42% of students belonged to underrepresented groups targeted in their access and participation plan 2020-21 to 20245/25 (Greening, 2020), which is a relatively high proportion compared to other universities, illustrating the range of backgrounds equine degrees appeal to. Students sharing these characteristics are often referred to as "disadvantaged" or "non-traditional" in

research and policy texts. Trowler (2015) described the grouping of characteristics as "non-traditional" as characteristics "included by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic they possess in common" (p. 297).

Therefore, institutional action targeting "non-traditional" students without recognising the diversity within this group runs a high risk of "perpetuating their outsider expectations and lower chances of success", [leading to a] "self-fulfilling prophecy of academic self-doubt" (Gulley, 2021; p.5). With the diverse nature of the student body at this provider, and the underrepresentation of equine degree students in the UK within the research literature, the aim was to understand how equine degree students experienced their degree journey, and whether there were common protective factors against dropping out of HE.

Eight students from different courses and backgrounds completed semi-structured interviews retrospectively in the final term of their degrees (Table 1). The interviews were structured based on Tinto's (2012) conditions for student success (figure 1) with prompts for each of the four areas. All participants provided written informed consent prior to the interviews, and ongoing consent was confirmed throughout the interview process (Klykken, 2022). The thematic analysis involved a hybrid coding approach.

Table 1: Informant characteristics and interview durations

Name (interview duration in h:min:sec)	Age Group	Entry Qualification	Break between school and university	Family HE Experience	Description of self
Catherine (39.47)	21-25	A level	1 year	Father	Student
Danny (1:05.41)	21-25	BTEC	3 years	Father	Student
Edward (42.34)	21-25	BTEC	No	Mother	Ethnic Minority Student

Jodie (1:24.41)	31-35	Other	5 years	Parents, siblings	Mature Student
Lucy (48:03)	31-33	BTEC	7 years	Mother, Siblings, Husband	Non-traditional student
Molly (49:46)	18-20	Baccalaureate	No	Parents	Traditional student
Olivia (46:15)	18-20	Baccalaureate	No	Father, Siblings	Student
Penny (52.40)	21-25	Access to HE	No	None	First-in-Family

Figure 1: Tinto's conditions of student success and areas of overlap (based on Tinto, 2012)

Equine students brought passion for horses with them to HE, whether they were actively competing, riding for leisure, or looking to "make a change for better welfare" (Danny). Their passion was mirrored in teaching activities, assessments, and informal conversations with academic staff. Serin (2017) highlighted passion for the subject as something that students "deeply excited about ideas that change our world, and [...] interest in the potentials and dilemmas of [...] people who come to class" (p.60). The shared passion for horses fostered the intrinsic motivation of equine students, enhancing belonging for equine students, hence providing a protective factor against drop out and fostering a sense of community. Equine degrees could be equated to other vocational degrees in the context of passion, but research considering the aim to become drivers of change have been shown in nursing students (Halperin & Regev, 2021).
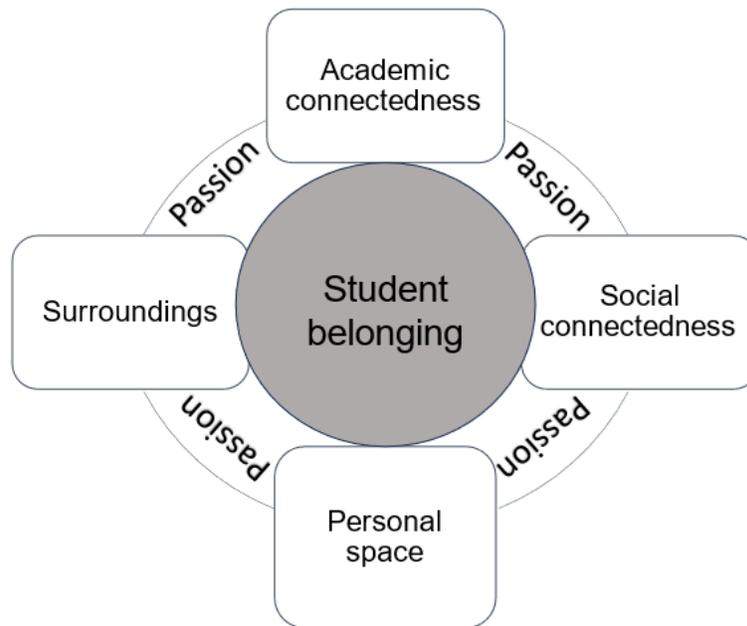
Figure 3: Passion as "the glue" for the equine degree students

In relation to Tinto's conditions for student success, there were many parallels to the wider research on student transition, assessment and feedback and persistence (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2023; Kinsella *et al*, 2022), although a gap between students who would be deemed traditional and "non-traditional" was not as evident as shown for other universities (e.g. Veidemane *et al*, 2021; McTaggart, 2016; Mallman & Lee, 2016). Tutor and peer-support were the most effective support mechanism, with family support having positive impact where parents believed in their children and supported them emotionally. Adverse impacts of parental influences arose from a lack of parental interest and dismissal, limited understanding of university demands and parental pressure to complete the degree, but interestingly these developed higher levels of self-reliance, ability to critically reflect on experiences and stronger abilities to show self-compassion, self-acceptance, and pride in their achievements.

Contrary to the "structural and cultural factors hat ignite access and success for students from "non-traditional" backgrounds that need to be addressed" (Thomas & Hovdhaugen, 2023; p.106) on nursing programmes, equine degrees already attract a large number of previously underrepresented groups,   providing an alternative research insight of interest to providers of vocational degree, building on the novel insights shown here.