

Going the extra mile: spaces between rhetoric and experience (0148)

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a multiple case study of four English universities investigating dimensions of belonging in higher education for part-time, mature undergraduates. The research combines a Bourdieusian field analysis, Brah's concept of 'diaspora space' and Massey's conceptualisation of space and place, in a borderland analysis (Abes, 2009) to understand the complexity of belonging in contested space. Findings suggest that staff working with part-time, mature undergraduates engage in compensatory behaviour to bridge the gap between an institutional rhetoric of belonging and student experiences of peripherality. In addition, institutional geographies of power (Massey, 2005) position these staff as peripheral within both pre- and post-1992 HE institutions. The findings concur with the claim that the dominant discourse of belonging in HE (Author, 2012) is problematic for such undergraduates, whose multiple identities, cross-cut by age, gender, race and class exclude them from dominant practices of belonging modelled on young, full-time student engagement.

Paper

This paper presents findings from a multiple case study of four English universities investigated dimensions of belonging for part-time, mature undergraduates in English HE. Findings suggest that staff associated with part-time, mature undergraduates in both pre- and post- 1992 universities engage in compensatory behaviour to bridge the gap between an institutional rhetoric of belonging and student experiences of peripherality. It also suggests these staff are themselves positioned as peripheral within the institution. The paper draws on data collected through semi-structured interviews with staff and students at four case study institutions (A, B and C - post-1992 universities and D – a pre-1992 university). Staff interviewees occupied a cross-section of job roles with remits related to retention. The findings raise questions about who 'matters' in English higher education (HE), in a complex contradictory climate of market forces, inclusion and increasingly endangered spaces for part-time, mature undergraduates.

A discourse of 'belonging' is embedded in the UK HE student retention agenda. [Author] states 'a sense of belonging is considered critical to both retention and success' (2012:1) and challenges HE institutions (HEIs) to consider the extent to which 'institutional policies, documents and publications promote the idea that all students belong' (ibid:70). The discourse of 'belonging' is problematic however, in the context of a diverse HE student population and in particular, for part-time, mature undergraduates whose multiple identities, cross-cut by age, gender, race and class, position them on the periphery, restricting access to means of belonging prioritised in institutional rhetoric. Desirable practices of belonging in HE position students who live at home, combine study with employment and enter HE later as in deficit, because these factors 'make it more difficult for student to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE, which can impact on their retention and success' (ibid: 5).

Abes argues against 'the typical paradigmatic categories into which studies are generally categorized' and for uncovering 'the potential of using interdisciplinary theoretical

perspectives in research' (Abes, 2009:142). She argues that a borderland analysis requires the researcher to 'straddle multiple theories using ideas from each to portray a more complete picture of identity... a new theoretical space' (2012:190). This study employs a borderland analysis to interrogate belonging through ideas of space and power. A Bourdieusian analysis of belonging in HE theorises belonging as a relational concept (1990, 1997), as a practice and product of the relations of power embedded in the field of HE, constructed around the privileged identities of the 'typical' or 'authentic' student: young, full-time and residential. Massey's concept of space-time (2005) frames HE as diverse, unfixed and contested, with potential for multiple versions of imagined belonging and Brah's conceptualisation of diaspora (1996) shows belonging to be a complex and continually renegotiated process, shaped by the power relationships inherent in social structures. A borderland analysis values both synergies and productive tensions in interdisciplinary spaces between these three distinct approaches and maps an enriched and dynamic engagement between social, physical and affective spaces.

The case study discovered a rhetoric of belonging in institutional strategies, practices and stories: *We're a middle-sized university with a caring community feel* (Senior Executive, A). *On certain days, if you're wearing something that's university-badged or branded clothing, you'll get a free tea or coffee. It's to increase the sense of community here ... the visible triggers of belonging* (Dean, C). Everyone, it seems, matters:

As an organisation we put emphasis on having an inclusive approach to students ... rather than focusing on a particular target audience and supporting them in a particular way ... our philosophy extends across the entire student population. If we adopt an inclusive approach to students you are trying to create a sense in which they belong. (Senior Executive, B).

Non-differentiation is also typical of measures implemented to improve retention and success rates, including personal tutoring, student support and engagement services. Only one of the cases mention part-time students as a specific group in their retention strategy. For University A, part-time and mature undergraduates integral to their institutional identity: *It's in the lifeblood of this institution to recruit mature and part-time and therefore, it has become second nature to us to make sure that we're set up for them* (Senior Executive, A).

So far, so encouraging. Teaching academics' accounts show however, space exists between the rhetoric of belonging and the experiences of part-time, mature undergraduates. At programme level, knowledge of strategic content is, at best, patchy. I ask programme staff if they're aware of any Faculty or University strategy for retention? *All I hear about is the NSS* (Lecturer, B). *I wouldn't know it in depth if I'm honest. I do know the idea is that we have to pull out all the stops to retain students* (Programme Leader, C). I ask, does the institutional retention strategy address the relevant issues for part-time student retention? *No I don't think so. I think that's top level* (Lecturer, A).

While managerial staff articulate retention in terms of strategic intent and multiple mechanisms, for teaching and support staff it seems, retention is personal:

There's absolutely no way I want to lose any student. We do what we need to do to keep people on board ... there's nothing I can't get around. Retention is high, achievement is higher because I and my colleagues see them as an individual, you need to think about their whole life situation.

Programme Leader, D

Staff boundaries are stretched and porous. A programme leader described supporting a student who had progressed from her programme onto a degree elsewhere in the university.

She was struggling, the only mature student in her year. *She said to me, 'I'm off to the Open University'. I said, 'No you're not! Let's have a meeting!' So I have to scurry over there.* . . . One part-time, mature 'Saturday student' at University B told me:

They'll do Skype, they'll do email, they'll do late night tutorials if that's what we need. They find ways of getting around it which work a lot better for some people than being able to get in. The tutors are really supportive, it's just the wider university system is not geared up for us.

Staff in all HEIs commonly talked of creating protective spaces, 'a village within the big city of the university', of nurturing:

Those of us who choose to teach adult classes ... set up a kind of protective enclave for them. We try to make the hours better, we try to get them in a decent room and keep the room, we try to nurture, we try to plan the sessions around their needs.

Senior Lecturer, C

The implications of these compensatory behaviours are personal: *I make sure I go in to the café ... say hello and have a chat. It normally means I don't end up actually eating ... but at least it's communication* (Programme Leader, C). Teaching twilights and weekends '*raises a whole load of other issues for staff, and sustainability of staff. Where does that stop? Are we all going to be nocturnal creatures scurrying around?*' (Programme Lead, A).

It can be draining ... Every time the phone rings, every time the email goes, every time the door knocks... We just have to bend over backwards really, do anything to get that student through... But if we just go that extra mile and they succeed, then we've done something really good.'

Student Support Officer, D

Meanwhile, an association with part-time students impacts on professional status. *We seem to be lone voices; I've been invited onto a couple of Review Panels and as somebody described it 'Oh you're here to talk about the odd programmes'* (Programme Leader, A).

This experience was reflected in all three post-1992 HEIs.

We're an oddity really in the university ... The students aren't traditional and full-time and a lot of the university is set up for that type of learner and academics teaching that type of learner ... you're having to work round systems that aren't quite right.

Lecturer, B

This brief insight into the peripherality not only of part-time, mature undergraduates but staff working with them indicates the problematic nature of a powerful discourse of belonging in HE for students who do not conform to a 'typical' full-time, young, time-rich model. It suggests that the work of retention, of making part-time, mature students 'matter', takes place at the interface between institution and individual, in the spaces between rhetoric and lived experience.

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