Most universities now have programmes and activities to ease students in as they transition into higher education. Successful transition into university life and studies reduces the likelihood of students withdrawing and supports greater academic success (e.g. Thomas, 2012) and ensures that students have the 'personal intimate feeling of 'being at home' in a place' (Antonsich, 2010 p.644). Recent work by, for example, Holton (2015) has highlighted the importance of the friendships that are formed by students living in university halls of residence, as one of the shared spaces (the lecture theatre, student bars or clubs etc.) where students interact. Maunder (2017, p.11) noted that students forming 'meaningful social connections with their peers from the outset' improves students' transition into higher education and their overall outcomes. At the same time, the importance of being an active and accepted member of their course is also important (Thomas, 2012]).

This paper draws together the experiences of first year students from four UK universities to explore some of the challenges they face when they start at university and how they manage them. One objective of the study was to explore the friendships and relationships they form and how these impact on their sense of belonging. We were particularly interested in hearing their stories about their experiences prior to coming to university, their first few weeks as new undergraduates and their reflections as they came to the end of their first year. To ensure consistency of approach, a semi-structured interview guide was used, covering a range of topics but allowing flexibility to explore any of the students' responses in more detail if appropriate. The individual interviews took place in each university in October/November and again in April/May. Interviews were recorded for later transcription and anonymization.

This study is enriched by its interdisciplinary approach. The fact that students are on different programmes within each institution (pharmacy, business, media and linguistics), has provided insights into both the common and varied sorts of social and academic interactions they have. Students were recruited through opportunity sampling by visiting lectures, explaining the project and inviting participation. Full ethics approval was received and students were provided with detailed information about the project, including issues of confidentiality and their right to withdraw.

Findings

The findings of this study compare students' experiences and perceptions at the beginning and end of their first year. Their first few weeks are exciting, challenging and complex as they seek to make sense of new surroundings, new routines, new people and a new 'self' . This combination of place/time/people/self provides a framework for understanding how they develop and establish themselves as students. Through focusing on their development of friendships and relationships, a rich picture emerges of how they cope with and make sense of all the new activities and experiences within their first few weeks and also how they negotiate their way through this over the course of their first year. Students felt reassured that they could make new friends in new places, which boosted their confidence to step out and take on new challenges.

By the end of their first year, these students are much more confident about their friendship groups – "*I have now made friends for life. Those I am going to invite to my wedding*" (Charlie: Bournemouth). At the same time, they are much more accepting of the challenges of

working with a diverse range of students as part of group coursework and aware of their own style and skills in working as part of a team of 'class mates' rather than 'social mates'. Whilst students acknowledge that "*group work makes the course feel friendlier – more people you know and can just talk to*" (Jamie: Nottingham) it also requires them to navigate through 'difficult' relationships where their skills of communication, leadership and compromise need to be developed. This was particularly evidence amongst media students where group work from the outset requires them to produce short films or documentaries. Here, students are allocated a specific role (director, producer, camera operator etc.) and expected to take responsibility for all aspects of that role. Working with fellow students who had disengaged, or lacked motivation or interest, presented significant challenges to other group members. Developing new skills of negotiation, leadership, compromise and mediation was initially challenging to these students. However, by the time of the second interview, they were able to reflect back on how their own confidence and ability to manage such groups had improved.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature around the importance of 'belonging' as part of the overall student experience. It highlights the prominence of new friendships and relationships as an integral part of 'feeling at home' at university. As students gain confidence from new friendships formed at the beginning of the year, new routines, spaces and approaches to teaching and learning can be more easily embraced. Later, even though friendship groups may change, the depth of friendship increases which in turn appears to give them the self-assurance to deal with difficult, impaired or 'spoiled' relationships (Duck and Wood, 1995) which may occur in different spaces (the classroom, hall of residence etc.), at different times and in different social or academic contexts.

As Cook and Rushton (2008) and others have noted, this strengthens the call for an extended induction period for all first year students, to acknowledge the progressive adjustment period. A framework of place/time/people/self would ensure that such activities resonated with the students' own experiences, expectations and challenges. This would allow students to reflect on the process of settling into their course and wider university life. Feeling 'at home' at university and able to work effectively with others, together with a robust friendship base, can develop the 'belonging-me' to the 'being-me' student.

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