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Relationships Matter: the Views of College Entrants to an Ancient Scottish University

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that higher education in the UK is under pressure. As successive government's policies have reinforced the idea that higher education is a market like any other, with students as consumers of packages of education, so the pedagogical relationships upon which education have been centred are stretched to breaking-point. But are relationships between staff and students really in jeopardy? This article will report on a longitudinal study of the experiences of students who entered directly from Scotland's colleges into one ancient Scottish university. These students were followed through their degree programmes and a year after graduation using repeated questionnaires and interviews. In addition, a sub-sample has recently been interviewed ten years after the start of their studies. The research demonstrates that good relationships between staff and students and between students and their peers continue to matter, and that they are central to students' well-being and success at university.

INTRODUCTION

Scotland is rightly proud of its longstanding tradition of respect for education in general and higher education (HE) in particular. Most recent statistics show that 54.7% of school leavers went into HE in 2012-13. This figure (known as the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate, or HEIPR) is said to be 'consistently higher' than the rate in England, although the trends over time are 'similar'. The global figure of 54.7%, is, however, highly misleading, because it masks a number of significant differences across gender, age, locality, ethnicity and socio-economic background. Just as importantly, it hides the reality that 21% of students undertaking HE courses in Scotland attended a further education (FE) college; only 32.1% were studying at a higher education institution (HEI) in Scotland, while another 1.6% were studying at an HEI outside Scotland.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC)'s annual report on widening access, *Learning for All*, provides more detailed information. The ninth report (published in March 2015) confirms that higher education is highly stratified, although there

has been an increase in the proportion of mature students from the most deprived areas entering universities and non-white students are more likely to attend universities than FE colleges. Nevertheless, socio-economic background continues to dictate participation in HE across the board. The overall proportion of young and mature entrants from the most deprived areas continues to be significantly less than the proportion of young and mature students from less deprived areas. Most critically for our study, those who live in deprived areas are more likely to study in FE colleges, while those from more affluent areas are more likely to participate in the university sector. But deprivation does not only affect the kind of institution in which a student chooses to study; it also has a profound impact on students' experience of HE. Thus students from deprived areas with lower prior attainment and mature entrants remain the most likely groups to discontinue their studies in university, with entrants from the 20% most deprived areas having a 4% lower retention rate than the average student (SFC, 2015).

This paper is underpinned by a premise, demonstrated by successive studies of HE (for example Thomas, 2002; Thompson, 2011) that relationships matter; not only this, that they have a profound impact on the quality of students' experience in HE. We explore this idea further by reporting on findings from a longitudinal study of student experience based on the case study of one ancient university in Scotland. We begin with a brief outline of the research context and methodology. We then present the views of the 45 students who took part in the initial research, before recounting the reflections of the 15 students who were interviewed 10 years later. The findings are then located in a broader discussion of policy and research in relation to student experience and relationships. We end by concluding that it was good relationships with staff and peers that helped students through the good and bad times, and mitigated any difficulties that they may have had, both academic and social.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The research project discussed in this paper is unusual for two main reasons. Firstly, it was a longitudinal study, unlike most research into student experience, which relies on one-off, 'snapshot' studies. Secondly, the research was located in a highly prestigious, research-intensive university in Scotland; the students who took part had come to university from FE colleges with Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) as qualifications for entry as part of a widening participation initiative that was launched in 2004. This is noteworthy not only because the university such HN qualifications as 'non-standard', but also that such qualifications had been accepted by other HEIs in the UK for many years, with some students even entering directly into second and third years of degree programmes (Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2009). The research project was initiated as part of a deliberate undertaking on the university's part to find out how this new cohort of students fared over time; the researchers were all university 'insiders' with a commitment to widening participation and valuing the student experience.

The study began in 2004 with 35 students; another 10 were recruited the following year, in order to give a greater breadth of degree programmes being

undertaken. Of the 45 students, 38 were women and 7 were men; 35 were mature students when they came to university (21 years of age and over); 37 were 'first in family' to HE. The study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The interviews and questionnaires were completed in the week before academic studies began; at the end of the first semester/beginning of second semester; then again on an annual basis until graduation and one year afterwards. In addition, an attempt was made in 2015 to contact the whole cohort ten years after they had come to university and, of the 16 we were able to contact, 15 were willing to be interviewed, 13 of whom had completed the degree programmes on which they had initially registered. In these interviews, the informants reflected back on their whole experience and any impact that their studies had had on their subsequent personal and professional lives.

All the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed and were initially sorted with the NUD-IST software. Our subsequent analysis of the transcripts employed the constant comparative method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each data item was given equal attention in the coding process; themes were checked against each other and back to the original data set; themes were independently checked by two researchers to ensure that they were internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive. This method of analysis has the advantage of giving a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables. The quotations selected for this paper are those that represented significant constructs that appeared across the range of students. Each student was allocated an identifying number and this is used to attribute quotes to individuals.

Before turning to the findings, it is important to acknowledge that the early findings (from 2004 and 2005) are, of course, over ten years old. This means that they cannot be seen as indicative of student experience at this university today, because there have been significant changes to policy and practice in the last 10 years. Some changes have come about as a consequence of changes in the student profile, with greater diversity in the student cohort as a whole (Croxford *et al.*, 2013). Others have come in the wake of the arrival of the National Student Survey in 2005. Universities across the UK have had to take on board the views of this annual gathering of students' opinions on the quality of their courses; 'enhancing the student experience' has become a rallying call across the HE sector in the UK, with new concern being shown for key issues such as student support and feedback (see Flint, *et al.*, 2009; Haggard, 2009). This university has introduced a number of reforms in light of the NSS, including changes to the student support system. In spite of the passage of time and the institutional changes that have taken place, our study sheds light on some persistent themes that emerge both in wider research literature and in our own continuing experience of working with students in HE today.

FINDINGS

Relationships in FE

Almost all the students in our original sample were able to identify the value of good relationships with staff in FE colleges where: 'anything you wanted to know ... you could call the tutors up or you could go in. ... They were always available'

(22). Students were particularly appreciative of the help they could expect if they were struggling with an assignment: 'you could put in a draft copy ... and you could get pointers but equally, you could go along to somebody and say, look I'm really struggling' (25). Moreover, support was readily available from peers because students were expected to share their knowledge: 'my classmates supported me and I supported them. If I researched something I'd photocopy it and give it out' (07).

Some students, however, felt that they had been over-supported in college. As one said, 'You're sort of petted at college' (01) and a few were concerned that relationships with staff could mean that they were not able to be objective in their assessment. Student 16 expressed this most forcefully. She said, 'In college, I felt there was a lot of favouritism.... I preferred not to get to know my lecturers [because] I wanted my grade to reflect my work. Some of the people in the class ... would negotiate grades. I think that goes against the whole system of what the education system is about' (16). These, however, were minority views, and nearly all of the students appreciated the care and support they had received from the staff in helping them to succeed.

COMING TO HE

Coming to university was a shock at many levels. Inevitably, students brought their previous experience of learning at college with them and, although they were prepared for some differences, their knowledge was still vague and the adjustment was greater than they anticipated. Because the class sizes were much larger at university, the opportunity to be 'known' by a teacher or tutor seemed far less. For example, as one student said:

All the lecturers [in college] made a point of learning everyone's name in the first week. Even student services would recognise us by name. There was always someone to go and (...) speak to. [The University] feels so much bigger (...) it's all spread out and there are people everywhere. [In] college ... you'd recognise people in the corridors, but here it's not like that (13).

In addition, many students talked about not knowing what to expect in terms of support and were concerned that 'there was not a lot of help compared with college' (13). Accessing support was seen as difficult because 'you didn't actually know any of them ... [so] it was just like a number on a door' (25) and this meant that: 'some people are really afraid to go and see a lecturer' (64).

Difficulties in approaching staff meant that for many students, it was imperative that they built relationships with their peers first, because 'you learn from each other' (37) and 'it helps you to understand' (22). Peers thus acted as collective mediators between students and staff, as students checked out what they thought was meant with each other before asking their tutors, so that they were more likely 'to get the answer you're looking for' (13). Gradually over the course of their first year, as students and staff got to know one another better, students felt more able to access tutors direct. As student 07 said, 'staff weren't as stand-offish as I thought they would be'.

Such preconceptions led students to be hugely grateful when a tutor made them feel as if they believed in them, or even said 'you've got a PhD in you' (03). Student 37 said that she had had the University 'on this pedestal' but found it was 'much more achievable and friendly' than she had expected. She attributed this directly to the Programme Director, who also did a lot of the classroom teaching. As she explained:

'I think our tutor, the guy who set up the [...] course, he's all about equality and opportunities for everyone in the community so that really helped'. He made it just that little bit easier and manageable'.

Another student agreed. She said: 'he got you all keyed up and enthusiastic. He gave you the confidence to share your ideas and everything' (41). From their repeated accounts, it is clear that this Programme Director gave students a voice; he allowed them to speak and to be heard in a space from which they thought previously that they had been excluded.

Students also spoke about the inspiration that some staff members were to them. Those staff members were passionate about their subjects and about learning, and they communicated this commitment to the students who, in turn, valued what they were being taught and so their studies as a whole. Students told us that once they had developed the confidence to proactively seek out information and support, they found staff very helpful 'in terms of accessing formation ... Even if I couldn't find anything, just go and ask, and people would point me in the right direction' (29). Student 44 agreed, saying that 'if you found the right people to answer the questions, there was enough support, you know, to point me in the right direction'.

In contrast, Student 44 was angry that she was advised to transfer to another university after problems with one course which she had failed. She subsequently got support and reassurance from a Teaching Fellow who told her 'everything is fine'. As she said, he took the time to look up her academic results online, and realised that all her other marks had been B's. He went as far as to say 'it's just a bit of crap', and she was able to continue her studies.

SURVIVING IN HE

Amongst the students who completed their degrees, relationships with academic staff proved of fundamental importance. One student expressed this as: 'that general kind of feeling about people caring for you' (41) that helped students to continue with their studies. A significant percentage of the original cohort were students with complicated lives outside of their studies, and they had come to university as mature students who often had work and family responsibilities over and above the expectations of their degree programmes. In some degree programmes, these previous life and work experiences were regarded as advantages so the staff were 'pretty well tuned into mature students coming back' (60) and trying to make the degree 'that little bit easier and manageable' (37) around these commitments. In other cases, students had protracted transitions that meant needing to take time out and suspend their studies for a period. A supportive academic was central to this decision, as one student outlines:

My youngest daughter went completely off the rails (...) I'd passed the first semester and then the second semester (...) the first three essays I had extensions on them all and x [name of BSc Programme Director] said at the time, 'You're going to struggle. You're just going to constantly be playing catch up. You've got to think about it'. The staff at the time were supportive of me taking the year out, sorting out my daughter and then coming back, And then when I did (...) well, I passed everything else after that, so it was the best decision (12).

Relationships with peers were also critical to students' survival in HE. The student above was initially anxious about what it would be like to join a new group of students whom she didn't know. She said she was delighted to find the new group enormously supportive: 'I think I was very lucky. I skipped a year which was half of one year and half of the next year. So I been part of one cohort that I didn't feel particularly included in, and then when I joined a year later, I think it's just luck the people you end up with. And I think it was a very, very supportive cohort' (12).

Friends were, of course, not just important for socialising. They were also a key part of learning to working together in a collaborative partnership. Student 36 explained that a group of students travelled together from [...] to university , and so they became a natural study group: '... because we used to do a lot of things in groups, we did a lot of presentations in groups, so naturally I went with the girls who lived in [...] because we travelled together as well. So that was great, having them, even outwith...' She still meets regularly with these students and the friendship group continues to be a supportive space for their professional development: "we meet up quite regularly, yeah [...] we do, you know, speak to each other about what work we're doing and we do discuss, you know, lots of different aspects of our job, we're all in education so that's really useful as well' (36).

Other students, too, mentioned the importance of working together in groups. As student 39 said, 'we still had our own wee community with our own students, we'd take ourselves off to the pub at night after the class and we'd have, you know, we'd get study groups going together'. This student noted that for her, studying in groups, and forming this community of learners, was the real stuff of her 'university experience', albeit it one that she recognised as very different to the university experience of many traditional undergraduates. Group learning was also important for student 41, who affirmed:

'it was a really good experience. The group work especially. And I think having a wee group over in [...] that was able to, you know, you were able to help each other sort of thing'. Looked as assignments together: 'and it was kind of like when at times you thought no I can't do this anymore. We kind of geed each other along like a support group. It was like a wee support group we had.'

LEAVING HE

Of the 15 former students who had taken part in the original study, many told us how significant it was for them that they were able to make 'friends for life' (36) As the follow-up interviews demonstrated, 'I definitely made friends that I still keep in touch with' (02); similarly student 41 said that she had retained a group

of friends from her degree programme, and had recently had a weekend away with them.

Leaving university also allowed some students, as graduates, to form different kinds of relationships with teaching staff and with the university more generally. Inevitably, some had broken ties with the university and had had no further contact after they left (this was particularly the case for the student whom we interviewed who had left university after only one year). But for others, graduation meant that they were able to develop new, more reciprocal relationships with teaching staff, whom they increasingly came to see as their peers as they moved forward with their professional careers and, sometimes, as they undertook further studies. One student (04) recounted how pleased she had been the first time to be invited to come into class to tell the current students about her work; she has now gone on to undertake practice teaching training and is supporting students on the work placements. Another student (number 24) works as a professional adviser, while a third (38) is enrolled on a part-time PhD programme at this university.

For those who left university without completing their studies, their experiences were, not surprisingly, much less positive. Student 13, who left University after one year with a Certificate in HE, felt that staff could and should have done more to support her, and she left university feeling 'a bit of a failure'. She said that her confidence had been dealt a severe blow, but that on reflection, she realised that she could have done more to ask for help when she was struggling. She had subsequently enrolled at another university and passed her Honours degree. This was, in no small measure, because of the good, supportive relationships she had with tutors, who, she said, were much more responsive and approachable.

There will, of course, be other stories of disappointment that we have not been able to access in the follow-up study. Of the original 45 students in our cohort, 10 did not complete their intended degree programmes, although one, as noted above, finished with a Certificate in Higher Education. Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that 6.7% of students dropped out of university after a year in 2011/12; the retention rate for this university was 93.8% in 2012-13. Our non-completion rate was significantly higher than this, reflecting the additional challenges faced by non-traditional entrants to HE.

DISCUSSION

A Good Practice Guide to Learning Relationships in Higher Education, published by the Higher Education Academy in 2011, begins as follows:

The notion of learning relationships is implicit in the historic philosophic and educational theme of dialogic (as opposed to didactic) learning. A rich tradition from Socrates, Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget and onwards has emphasised the role of teacher as promoter of questions and exchange within the context of a learning relationship. The quality of such relationships is therefore of interest (Thompson, 2011).

Our starting-point in this wider discussion is that the quality of learning relationships is not only 'of interest', it is vital, the core of the learning experience for all students, as we will now unpack further.

One of our most interesting findings – and one that came as a surprise to the research team – was that students had mixed feelings about support. They wanted good relationships with staff; they wanted help and support, but they wanted it on their terms. For this reason, some were critical of what they saw as too much support and guidance they had received at FE college. They found this infantilising, and said that it did not help to prepare them for the world of university. Scanlon *et al* (2007) argue that individuals use their previous experiences of learning and teaching and interactions with staff and peers to form their connections to the university. When these earlier experiences are perceived to be very different, it can be highly disorientating. At least some of the students in our study felt that too much had been done for them in college, and that this had led them to have rather unrealistic expectations at university, accompanied by a real sense of culture shock. Other students, in contrast, had low expectations of support at university, and were pleased to find that teaching staff were not as 'stand-offish' as they had thought they might be.

The phrase 'stand-offish' deserves further consideration. The work of Bourdieu (1986) has been influential in drawing attention to the ways that universities sustain and reproduce middle-class values, and in so doing, alienate working-class students. Socio-economic background has a huge impact on participation and retention in higher education and a great deal of research has detailed its effects on particular groups (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2010; Thomas, 2002). 'Non-traditional' entrants to HE, in Bourdieu's terms, lack the social and cultural capital that allows them to settle easily into the more middle-class habitus of the university. Academics therefore have a key role to play in acting as bridges to those students, showing them that their experience is valued and respected. Our findings highlight the individuals who managed to achieve this, in spite of the wider institutional environment, which continued, for at least some students, to be alien. Interestingly, what students have told us is that it does not have to be the course leader who makes a difference for them, as long as they feel cared for by someone; another human being is interested in them and their lives.

Regardless of their backgrounds, students want to be treated as individuals and 'individual contact is crucial in enabling students to identify their own strategies for growth and to find their own way to a new identity' (Biggs *et al.*, 2012, p. 18). This anticipates the second theme in our findings. Students understood and accepted that they were responsible for their learning; that they needed to be proactive in asking for help and in sharing when they were in difficulty; if they did not, the outcome was, as in the case of Student 13, academic failure. But relationships do not operate in only one direction. Research (for example, Beard *et al.*, 2007; Tinto, 1975) has shown that student success is heavily dependent on social integration and the affective dimensions of their engagement with higher education. Positive relationships with staff enable students to gain both self-confidence and motivation, and their work improves but this is dependent on 'students feel[ing] that staff believe in them, and care about the outcomes of their studying' (Thomas, 2002, p. 432). As Shin

(2002, p. 123) points out, students need to feel that staff are both 'available' (that is, 'what is needed or desired is obtainable upon request') and 'connected' (that is, 'that a reciprocal relationship exists' between the staff member and the student). More recent research into the personal tutor relationship in HE (Stephen, *et al*, 2008) affirms that such 'connectedness' with the personal tutor is critical for students, and yet it is increasingly difficult to sustain in the context of mass HE. As a result, teaching staff have to rely on students being realistic about the demands they make in order that they achieve a balance between the need to be responsive and their own need not to be swamped.

Our research has also confirmed the importance of relationships with peers: peers were the first 'go-to' when students were uncertain what was expected of them; they were also essential when approaching assessment tasks that were unfamiliar. Research has shown that belonging to a thriving peer group and learning community can spur a continuing commitment and thus contribute to success at university (Hughes, 2010; James, 2000). Likewise, Brooks (2007, p. 689) found that, 'Friends enabled students to be more confident about their own identity' whilst Warmington, (2002, p. 590) found that peer 'support networks constituted [both] personal and academic networking that produced mutual support predicated upon shared experiences'. Harding and Thompson (2011) conclude that students' relationships with both staff and their peers were key factors in them achieving their goals and completing their academic programme.

A final theme that merits attention is that of diversity. Most of the students whom we interviewed acknowledged that finding people like themselves – mature students with caring responsibilities – was fundamental to their success at university. Thomas (2002) in a study of student retention in HE suggests that one of the best ways that a university can increase student retention is to widen the student group, so that 'non-traditional' students do not feel like 'fish out of water'. On this note, Student 12 said, 'I think there's such a diverse group of people at x university. You know, it didn't matter if your hair was peacock blue or leopard print, or whatever, nobody batted an eyelid. If you all sat in the bar, you all sat in the bar, sort of thing.' It was this seeming lack of conformity that allowed her to find herself, and her own cohort, within the wider institutional community. Thomas argues that when universities are more inclusive and accepting of difference, students will find greater acceptance and respect for their own practices and knowledge, and so be more likely to persist in HE.

CONCLUSION

The high non-completion rate of this cohort of 'non-traditional' students remains a cause for concern for this HEI. Furthermore, our study has affirmed the centrality of good relationships (with staff and with peers) for all students' survival and success in HE. Students told us that they were hugely grateful to have an academic teacher that was interested in them; they felt 'lucky' to find themselves in a supportive cohort. We now conclude that is imperative that HEIs structure the learning environment in ways that foster and support relationships. In a 'study skills' textbook targeted at PhD students, Rugg and Petre (2004, p. 44) argue that although there is no single 'right' student or supervisor, the relationship must 'work' all the same, and may need to be 'worked at'. They go on to indicate a

number of possible roles which may be required, but are likely to be invisible to students, summarised below:

- specific technical support (with library or software; training in critical reading);
- broader intellectual support (help with intellectual skills);
- administrative support (finding funds and other resources);
- management (providing a structure through meetings, deadlines and goals); and
- personal support (career advice, counselling and emotional support) (p. 46).

While focused on PhD student supervision, we believe that all students will benefit from attention to these different, overlapping roles. This does not mean that all academics have to counsel students or that all students require counselling (also see Cree, 2012). But the HEI needs to have systems in place to ensure that these supports are available, if and when they are needed. And students need to have the confidence to believe that someone *cares* what happens to them. As Tronto writes, ‘... caring is not simply a cerebral concern, or a character trait, but the concern of living, active humans engaged in the processes of everyday living. Care is both a practice and a disposition’ (1993, p. 104).

HEIs have, over the last ten years or so, made concerted efforts to widen access; they now need to give equal attention to confronting their obligations to the students to whom they offer places, acknowledging that those from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds may require more support than their more affluent peers (see also Putnam, interviewed in *Times Higher Education*, 29/10/15). Improving relationships then has to be more than a cynical attempt to improve NSS figures, or to increase student retention for its own sake; instead it must be about reminding universities about their duties, to citizens and to the community.

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