



This paper is taken from

*The Experience of Citizenship
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

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Read, B., Archer, M., and Leathwood, C. (2004) Experiences of community, 'belonging' and exclusion amongst 'non-traditional' higher education students in the UK, in Ross, A. (ed) The Experience of Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 101 - 108

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Experiences of community, ‘belonging’ and exclusion amongst ‘non-traditional’ higher education students in the UK¹

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This paper focuses on some of the explicitly stated goals of universities in the UK in relation to ‘citizenship’, ‘community’ and widening participation, and examines how, in contrast academic culture itself can serve to undermine such goals in relation to students’ own perceptions of community and belonging at university.

Universities, citizenship and community

Barnett (2000) and others have noted how universities worldwide are increasingly formulating and presenting an institutional ‘ethos’ or overarching ‘purpose’. Alongside the dual purposes of the production and teaching of knowledge, and the equipping of students with skills to be utilised in the arena of work, Barnett notes another linked purpose that is often implicitly or explicitly alluded to: higher education as an arena for the promotion of ‘democracy, justice, citizenship and community’ (Barnett, 2000, p 50).

Government rhetoric in the UK is increasingly espousing the view that higher education can play a major role in improving the social and cultural wellbeing of local communities and the nation as a whole. Higher education institutions are presented in this discourse as ‘citizens’ themselves – on an institutional scale – with particular duties to perform. For example, the influential 1997 Dearing Report states:

Higher education is fundamental to the social, economic and cultural health of the nation....part of its task will be to accept a duty of care for the wellbeing of our democratic civilization, based on respect for the individual and respect by the individual for the conventions and laws which provide the basis of a civilised society (Dearing 1997, para. 8, quoted in Archer *et al.*, 2003).

Thus the university is not only encouraged to work to develop ‘civilised’ values in individual students: the university is also cast as a giant citizen *itself*, situated within a community and working for its good.

Many universities in the UK allude to this role in ‘mission statements’ and website information; for example the University of Leeds states in its introductory webpage ‘The University of Leeds is an integral part of the local community, making a major contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of the city and region ...’ (University of Leeds website). Similarly Bristol University’s ‘Vision Statement’, also available online, states:

¹ This paper is a development of another previously published article (Read *et al.* 2003).

We will transfer ... knowledge to the wider community, in order to enhance quality of life and to strengthen both the local and national economy....we have a duty to our students and to society to fulfil our mission, and, in doing so, make a positive impact on peoples' lives (Bristol University 'Vision Statement', Bristol University website).

In such websites there is a clear emphasis on social responsibility and conducting affairs in a 'socially aware' manner, for example Cranfield University's website: 'We are aware that we have a role to manage what we do in a socially responsible and ethical way and to demonstrate this role openly to the public' (Cranfield University website). This is echoed by the 'Corporate Aims and Objectives' listed on the website of Coventry University: 'Aim 3: To sustain the highest standards of service and reputation, based on core values and responsible citizenship' (Coventry University website).

Part of the role of 'institutional citizen' – especially according to the websites of 'new' universities in the UK (i.e. those given university status in 1992) - is a commitment to widening participation for students in their local communities. The University of Central England proclaims:

Diverse students, diverse community: UCE, located at the heart of a multifaceted and dynamic region, reaches out to everyone who can benefit [from] it, regardless of social, economic, cultural and ethnic differences ... We aim to be a good neighbour to [those] who live near us, to play an active part in provision of services in improving the local environment (University of Central England, mission statement, UCE website).

One of the ways they play an active role, they go on to mention, is through encouraging and supporting widening participation initiatives designed to increase the proportion of 'non-traditional' students from the local community.

Many universities also mention their student body as a community in itself; Bristol University describes its staff and students as 'a thriving international community dedicated to learning, discovery and enterprise' (Bristol University website).

How do students themselves feel about their university? How important is a 'sense of community' and is this achieved? The rest of this paper focuses on a number of students who can be described as 'non-traditional' in terms of class, age and ethnicity, and their experiences at an urban university in the UK with a high proportion of such 'non-traditional' students whose 'mission statement' explicitly states its concern to meet the needs of its local communities, as well as local industries, professions and trades.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper comes from a project entitled 'Social Class and Widening Participation in HE', conducted by Alistair Ross, Merryn Hutchings, Carole Leathwood, Louise Archer and others at the Institute for Policy Studies in Education,

London Metropolitan University (see Archer *et al.*, 2003). The data derives from 17 focus groups from this study, conducted with a total of 85 first year undergraduates (51 women, 34 men; 30% White British, 20% Asian, 20% Black African, Caribbean, 27% European and other, predominantly from working class backgrounds. The university concerned has been given the pseudonym 'Capital University'.

Choosing university: 'non-traditional' students and the importance of 'belonging'

A desire for 'belonging' at university is repeatedly articulated in the interviews conducted for this project. A number of students discussed ways in which they challenged the dominant discourses of students such as themselves as being 'other', by actively choosing to place themselves at a university where they would be one of many 'like them'. For example, the majority of mature respondents voiced fears of being socially and academically inadequate (they had been 'out' of studying for longer) in comparison to younger students. Thus they chose to study in an environment in which mature students' specific needs are catered for, without reducing them to 'special cases', in order to reduce feelings of 'otherness'. For example, Joseph, a 23-year old white English student, noted how the inclusion of a significant number of mature students at Capital University minimised the prevalent conception of the 'normal' student as one dictated by age: 'I didn't want to go to a place where I was the only sort of mature student where everyone else is 18 and just left home'. Similarly, Mike, a 35-year old white English/Irish student, said that the number of mature students at Capital University was 'quite important for me 'cause I was frightened of being, you know --- sort of out on a limb as an older person'.

The notion of choosing Capital University in order to 'belong' was expressed most often by 'mature' students, but it was also found in the dialogues of a number of other 'non-traditional' students, including minority ethnic students. For example, Chandra transferred to Capital University from a university on the south coast specifically because the lack of ethnic diversity at the south coast university made her feel 'isolated':

There are more black people in here than are in there, and you're like isolated from the others and they look at you because they're not like Londoners. I don't know I just found that kind of impression so I just decided no this is not for me (Chandra, student, ethnicity not specified, aged 19).

In relation to 'class' background, discussions of 'belonging' by students in the study generally centred on the perceived 'elitism' of other universities, predominantly 'old' universities and Oxford and Cambridge in particular. In contrast, Capital University was seen as somewhere that was 'friendly' and 'unpretentious', somewhere where people who were not from 'elite' backgrounds would feel comfortable (see Read *et al.*, 2003)

Thus we suggest that for a number of so-called 'non-traditional' students, the diversity of the student population at Capital University offers the possibility of a higher education environment where the 'other' can move from the periphery to centre stage - where students from a range of ethnic backgrounds, ages or classes can feel they

'belong'. As one student put it, 'at the end of the day you are going to go somewhere where you are more comfortable' (Kusum: Indian student, aged 19).

However this is not an unproblematic choice – the institutions in the UK where there are a wide variety of 'non-traditional' students are also often those which have less prestige – and therefore by choosing such universities students lose out on the extra 'cultural capital' to be gained by attending a prestigious university (for a fuller discussion of this see Read *et al.*, 2003).

Belongingness and exclusion inside the academy

The final part of this paper deals with students' experiences once they are inside university. They have picked a university where they feel they will 'belong': is this feeling borne out?

A number of the students in the focus groups discussed their sense of 'belonging' and their sense of 'power' in the environment of the university. For some, the existence of a substantial proportion of students 'like them' did indeed give them a greater sense of 'belonging'. Stephanie, a 26-year old white English student, noted 'it is nice to have people around me that are of a similar age'. Ruth, a 20-year old white German student 'thanks God' she didn't go to the same university as a friend on her access course, who was having difficulty as the oldest student in a class consisting predominantly of school-leavers. However, a theme that recurred continuously in the focus groups was a feeling of 'isolation' rather than 'belonging': a feeling that was related to the culture of the academy itself rather than the make-up of the student body.

A number of writers have analysed the 'culture' of academia: ways of thinking and acting that are institutionally dominant. Grant (1997), utilising the work of Foucault, describes how very particular and culturally specific ways of learning and teaching, of being a 'good student', are legitimated by their 'naturalisation': they come to be seen as the only or 'natural' way of thinking or acting. For the new student entering the academy, such practices can seem alien and unsettling, especially for those who lack prior knowledge of university culture through the related experiences of friends or family, and/or those who have already internalised a sense of themselves as 'other'. For many students - 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' - the culture of academia can lead them to feel alienated or isolated, even in institutions where there are significant numbers of students of the same age, class and/or ethnicity. In our study, a significant number of students expressed feelings of confusion and bewilderment at some 'accepted' university practices, and often contrasted them with previous known experiences of learning at school or at further education (FE) colleges.

I think [university is] more or less what I expected but it will take a while to get used to the pace. . . .in college you just had a lecture. Here you have a lecture and seminar, lecture and seminar. It's like you're in a cinema and you have a hundred people around you, and you go into the seminar and there is just a few people. Getting used to the pace is a bit difficult (David: white UK student, under 21).

Moreover, for many respondents, their encounter with the prevalent higher education discourse of students as 'independent learners' came as a considerable shock. Many were surprised at the relative lack of supervision and guidance by lecturers compared to school or FE college.

Whilst students stated that some individual lecturers were especially friendly and approachable, a number pointed out that constraints on lecturers' time and availability and large student numbers led to a sense of distance between lecturer and student.

They also have to struggle to learn the very specific 'language' of academia – a language and way of communicating which theorists such as Bourdieu (1991), Ivanic (1998), Lea and Street (1998) and others have pointed out is also classed, racialised and gendered. In a variety of complex ways such language and forms of communication are more culturally synonymous with the traditional conception of the academic student and staff member as white, middle class and male – and is therefore arguably easier to adopt by such students and staff. A number of students in our study spoke of the difficulties they experienced in learning how to understand and utilise such language, and its contribution to the distance felt between lecturer and student:

- Shan*: I don't think I would want to make much effort to go over [and speak to a lecturer outside class].
- Chyou*: They speak in another language.
- Phillipa*: Exactly.

(Student details kept confidential).

- Paula*: They assume that because you're in university you know, you . . .
- Violet*: That you should know, you know what I'm saying. Because when he's giving the lecture and he's like talking, talking, talking, saying those words and things. I said my God, I don't know what you saying! I'm lost! [laughter]
- Paula*: I think that's another culture shock in a sense, the language. It is a different language, from being at college, from being at school. It is a totally different language.

(Paula: black Caribbean student aged 37; Violet: black Caribbean student aged 38)

Therefore lack of familiarity with academic culture, and the effect of the unequal power relation between lecturer and student, can work to increase students' conceptions of isolation and alienation. The presence of students of similar age, class, gender or ethnicity is not necessarily sufficient to enable them to feel comfortable in the environment of the university, to make them feel that they 'belong'.

Moreover, it can be seen that it is 'non-traditional' students who are most alienated by academic culture itself. As stated above, students who come from backgrounds where

there is little history of participation in higher education can find the culture particularly bewildering, and can lack the support and guidance that comes from having friends or family that have been through the experience of university. Gloria discusses this:

Some of us have been comparing family backgrounds you know and I - well from what I can hear from him you know, because they are teachers who know at times [inaudible] who will still guide you. But there are some people with not the same background, nobody will monitor, nobody will ask you any question you know and that's a tough thing (Gloria, black African student, aged 38).

Therefore, to a certain extent the particular nature of the culture itself, not merely its level of *familiarity*, can work to further alienate the 'non-traditional' student, even in environments such as urban 'new' universities where they are joined by substantial proportions of students 'like them'. For many, the choice of the 'new' university has not actually enabled them to fully belong' in the environment of academia².

Conclusion

In conclusion then, it can be seen that the notion of the university as a type of 'institutional citizen' is quite common in the website information and online 'mission statements' of UK universities – emphasising the social role of the university and its duty to its local, national, and sometimes international community. Part of that duty has been expressed, by some universities, as a mission to widen participation to parts of the local community not 'traditionally' seen as potential students. Some universities – particularly 'post-1992' universities in the UK - are very successful in terms of the recruitment of such 'non-traditional' students, and as we have seen, the diversity of the student body is very important to some 'non-traditional' students who place a high value on feeling that they can 'belong' at a particular institution.

However, despite such diversity in terms of numbers of students, academic culture itself can work to alienate students, particularly non-traditional students, for the culture, language and style of academia is still arguably very white, middle-class and male. There is a need therefore for widening participation initiatives to focus also on 'cultural' aspects of the academy, such as methods and styles of teaching and learning, and also to address the *staff* profile of academic institutions.

One further recommendation might be for provision of more funding for institutions to provide effective long-term support that caters for the differential needs of diverse 'non-traditional' students – indeed *all* students - all the way through their time at university.

Finally, much more needs to be done to challenge the cultural and economic hierarchy that exists between academic institutions themselves, to encourage real efforts amongst

² However, many 'non-traditional' students do refuse to passively accept a position of marginality in the academy, for example challenging accepted ways of speaking, writing, or acting at university (see Read *et al.* 2003).

prestigious universities not fully committed to widening access to their institutions, and to support non-traditional students all the way through their time at university. In such ways universities might be able to better fulfil their stated purpose as socially responsible 'institutional citizens'.

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