



Good Transitions: Lessons from the 'Transitions West Midlands' Project

Subscriber Research Series 2015-16

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In 2014-15, following a call for expressions of interest open to its subscribers, QAA commissioned six small-scale primary research projects intended to encourage collaboration between providers and promote the formation of communities of practice.

This report is one of three on the topic of the **transition experiences of entrants to higher education from increasingly diverse prior educational experiences**. It was submitted to QAA as a joint collaboration by Birmingham City University and Solihull College & University Centre, and written by Amanda French, Michelle Kempson and Alex Kendall.

The reports are not QAA documents, so we have respected the authors' approach in terms of style and presentation. We hope that you will read them with interest.

Other topics in the series are the role of student satisfaction data in quality assurance and enhancement; and an impact study of the guidance documents for higher education providers published by QAA in 2013.

For more information, and to read other reports in the series, visit www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/research

Foreword

Widening participation students experience the transition from Further to Higher Education (HE) in unique ways. Research such as this has the potential to improve the dialogue between Further Education colleges and HE institutions, because this relationship plays an important part in this transition experience. The range of Access initiatives and college-based HE provision that has been developed in recent years, is well placed to aid the transition process; however, there is work to be done to ensure that all widening participation students feel fully equipped to commence university level study. Specifically, this research highlights widening participation students' perceptions about their academic capabilities, their confidence levels, and their ability to negotiate multiple responsibilities whilst completing a programme of study. This knowledge can be used by education providers to broaden their own understanding of the student experience, and to find ways of recognising the skills and experiences that these students bring with them when they enrol onto a HE course.

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Section A: Context

1 Introduction

Transitions West Midlands (TWM) is a collaborative project, funded by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), that brings together staff and students from a group of institutions (further and higher education) who have been working together for the past four years through the *West Midlands Post '92 Research Forum*.

TWM aims to offer new insights into the first-hand experiences of students making the move or preparing to make the move from Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE) within the West Midlands region. The case study approach has enabled us to explore students' expectations of, and reflections on, transition as they move within and between the four participating institutions.

The project was driven by three key questions:

- How do prospective students from under-represented groups in HE understand/perceive their support needs prior to transition?
- How do HE students from under-represented groups self-define the enablers and barriers to effective transition?
- How do HE and FE institutions best support students from under-represented groups as they progress through the various stages of transition from FE to HE?

This report is one of three final outputs of the project and provides a synoptic account of the project and the **Good Transitions** framework tool. **Good Transitions** builds on the evidence base generated by the project to facilitate enquiry-led, context-specific action planning which acknowledges that transition is a complex social practice **requiring a whole community, partnership response**.

The other complementary outputs are a searchable, public access e-resource,¹ a large-scale piece of artwork and a multi-media case study accessible on YouTube. The e-space provides an overview of the project and each of its stages, and includes the outcomes of the mapping activity and materials, templates and activities developed through the project. These resources are free to download for adaptation and use for colleagues wishing to undertake similar work in new contexts. This report provides a summary account of the evidence base produced through the project and the **Good Transitions** framework tool that has been developed as an outcome of the work.

The **Good Transitions** framework tool is intended to support the planning, design and management of 'transitions policy and practice' and will enable development work at institutional, group or individual tutor levels. At the institutional level the framework tool will facilitate evaluation and assessment of the unique qualities and characteristics of approaches to 'Transitions' in the setting to which it is applied, and will support the development of an evidence-based, research informed 'transitions strategy' tailored to the local context and environment. At the group or individual level it will enable teachers to engage reflectively with their personal positioning and development in relation to students' experiences of transition and to appreciate the complex relationship between their own meaning-making about FE and HE and the development of the institutional framing of students' transition experiences. Rather than offering a prescriptive set of guidelines, the framework is a generative tool that builds a context-specific set of responses that can be used as the basis for bespoke, tailored action planning.

1 Available at: <http://transitionswestmidlands.wordpress.com>.

2 Evidence base

TWM has drawn on both secondary and primary sources of evidence. A review of literature in the field provided a context for the work, and an e-survey and focus group data contributed new primary evidence to this specialised field.

2.1 Summary of key literature

There is a rich and continually evolving literature relating to the HE experiences of students from under-represented groups. Here we summarise the key debates that frame our research design, methodology and analysis relating to making choices; motivation; experiencing university; transitioning.

2.1.1 Introduction: making choices

The Bourdieusian concept of 'field' and 'habitus' are useful ways of exploring how choices regarding a university education can be contextualised through individuals' exposure to wider social and cultural discourses around education and learning as well as any particular personal experiences of learning and education of which they may have knowledge. A Bourdieusian field constitutes:

...a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value...(Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989: 44)

Bourdieusian fields often embody rules or taken-for-granted practices that are imposed (without necessarily being explicitly identified) on those who seek to enter or remain within them. They therefore structure social and professional practices by defining (albeit artificially) the range of possible and acceptable actions and behaviours available to those operating within any given field (Grenfell, 2004). Bourdieu (1984) discusses how these regular social practices can become invisible because they are 'obscured by the realities of ordinary sense-experience' (ibid. 22). For example, an individual's identification with a particular type of academic HE institution may be reinforced or marginalised by their previous experiences of learning and membership of educational institutions.

Such personal learning experiences and identification with different educational communities form an individual's 'habitus'. Bourdieu (1985) claims that habitus does not have to mean that individual attitudes and behaviours are wholly predetermined by fixed dominant discourses. Rather, he described how it can be viewed more productively as a 'system of dispositions'. These dispositions emerge out of participation in and exposure to wider social settings and discursive arenas. They are moreover, characterised by a:

...vagueness...the more-or-less, which define(s) one's ordinary relation to the world. (1990: 54)

Within Bourdieu's theory of dispositions, there are potentially limitless individual:

...possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions...(1990: 54)

Reay's (2002) nuanced take on habitus suggests that it can function to exclude some practices as unthinkable, while predisposing individuals towards other 'certain, predictable ways of behaving' (2004: 432). Nash's (2002) school-based research into attainment also suggests ways in which habitus can function like a 'state of mind', made up of 'effective dispositions' (ibid. 46). As Reay points out, therefore, the choices any individual makes are taken within:

...an internalised framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable. (2004: 434)

In this way, one can argue that individual choices about HE are not 'free', rather they can be seen as the product of habitus, which itself is a:

complex, internalised core from which everyday experiences emanate
(Reay, 2004: 435)

2.1.2 Choice of university

Access to HE has consistently been affected by entrenched educational inequalities (Allen & Ainley, 2007; Archer, 2003; Ball, 2008; Burke 2005, Reay et al, 2005) for example the link between lower academic achievement at A Level and lower socio-economic status is well-documented (Ball, 2008; Reay, 2006). Not surprisingly, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's report, Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators, reveals that in the UK young people in affluent areas were five times more likely to go to (any) university than those in poorest areas.

In the light of those figures it is not surprising that any analysis of the socio-economic intake of individual university student populations reveals that participation in HE by non-traditional (NT) students, often described in the sector as widening participation students, has actually been uneven, and even inequitable, across English universities. To be precise, the numbers of NT students differ substantially according to the type of institution, mode of study and type and level of course undertaken (Boliver, 2011; Reay et al, 2005; York & Longton, 2007). For example, the majority of NT students, especially those transitioning into HE from FE, attend 'post-1992' institutions.

The 'post-1992' institutions generally ask for lower entry criteria than the older HE institutions (HEIs) which tend to be more selective. In comparison, the 2012 report Widening Participation in HE, produced by the government department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), revealed that 'the top third of HE Institutions' in England most commonly insist upon achievement of three A Levels at grade A as their entry criteria (2012: 20). According to the report, the estimated progression rate for state school and college pupils to the most selective HEIs was 26% in 2009-10, the same as the previous year. The equivalent progression rate for independent school and college pupils was 65% in 2009-10, which had risen by 3 percentage points since 2008-09 (ibid. 20).

This difference, between the estimated progression rate for state school and college pupils to the most selective HEIs has remained consistent since 2006-07 and has resulted in a concentration of NT students, including those with vocational or professional qualifications, in 'new' post-1992 universities. Therefore, as the BIS report notes:

It remains a question whether this distribution across HEIs constitutes fair access... (ibid. 21).

Student choice in HE is not therefore, and never can be, 'sovereign', as access to many universities is highly competitive; places are over-subscribed and entry is conditional on qualifications gained within a deeply unequal, often distorted school system (Ball, 2006; Chitty, 2002). For example, Jones and Thomas (2005) analyse how dominant discourses around participation in HE often label negatively and limit the experiences of NT students in HE.

2.1.3 Motivation for applying to HE

For many FE students, HE is seen as part of a progression, the 'next step' to achieving 'a higher level' of personal development and knowledge. There is also a strong sense of positive self-identity associated with 'making it' to HE. As 'first generation' HE students, many NT students see themselves as important role models to family members and friends, even though some experience hostility or lack support around their decision to attend university.

In the focus group data collected from FE students in *FE to HE Transitions: Understanding Vocational Learner Experiences in HE*, Final report to: CaSE (Careers and Student Employment), Linking London Lifelong Learning Network (Clark and Holt, 2010) the FE participants emphasise better career prospects as the most significant factor for wishing to attend university.

2.1.4 Experiencing university

Many studies have examined the ways in which individuals' life and previous learning experiences (their habitus), especially those from so-called 'NT' educational backgrounds, can impact on and affect their choice of HE institution. This influence can stem from the now familiar concept of an individual's 'cultural capital' (created, for example, by their parents' educational experiences and expectations for their children). However, another important yet relatively under-theorised influence, as Reay, David and Ball (2001) explore, is the influence that schools and colleges wield over HE choices and expectations. Those institutions attended prior to HE have, Reay (1998) argues, particular institutional habitus. The habitus of these schools and colleges are, moreover, linked and indexed to wider socio-economic and geographical/demographic communities and discourses through schools/colleges shape and inform their pupil/student communities (Reay 1998). For example, school can instil high expectations around academic achievement that inform confidence with regard to applying to elite universities; the reverse of course is also true.

Whatever university individuals decide to attend, there is a wealth of evidence to show that students from NT backgrounds often find the transition from FE to HE difficult, due to worries about money, the need to work, fear of failure and uncertainty about fitting in (Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Reay et al, 2001, 2008, 2009). For NT students HE can often be experienced as a hostile environment which uses unfamiliar language, requiring disorientating practices informed by tacit expectations that many students find bewildering and alien (Askham, 2008). For example, McGivney's (2003) research illustrates the effects of what she calls the 'mystique of unfamiliarity and remoteness' which exemplifies NT students' initial experiences of university academic writing practices. Consequently, many NT students often feel like 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1989).

Some students deliberately chose local universities due to family or financial constraints, which mean that it is difficult for them to move away from home. Christie (2007) and Clayton, Crozier and Reay (2009) explore how living at home is an economically rational decision for many students, especially from NT backgrounds. Importantly, they also explore how staying local is often rooted in individuals' emotional attachments to locally-based networks of family and friends, which often help support established (and successful) patterns of family life, working and studying.

The notion of these local networks may be applied to further research on understanding experiences of learners within HE - not in either 'fitting in' or 'standing out' - but as to how they might negotiate a 'network of intimacy' and the (changing) form those networks may take (Jones, 2010).

For this reason there is evidence to suggest that NT students often choose universities on the basis of feeling that they might fit in better and/or experience what Goodenow (1993) has termed 'belongingness', a key factor in educational achievement. Belongingness refers

to the varied networks of family and friends that NT students remain part of, and draw on, during their time at a local university, in contrast to the experiences of students who move away from home and live independently (and who, more often than not, can rely on financial support from their parents). In comparison, Leese (2010) researching NT students in a post-1992 university found that up to 70% of participants had to balance heavy work commitments with full-time study. Therefore, they spent relatively little time on-campus beyond the absolutely necessary, prioritising face-to-face contact with lecturers in class over less structured or social on campus activity that might be considered not absolutely essential. The ability to manage paid work and academic study effectively played an important part in choosing which university to attend, therefore it helped if they were located reasonably closely together.

2.1.5 Facilitating positive transition experiences

Transition is a contested concept (Gale and Parker, 2012) which plays out very differently for different groups of students. While there is no 'one-size fits all' solution, it is important that both FE and HE work together to create flexible and responsive strategies and effective models of practice which facilitate effective transition (Knox, 2005, Leese, 2010). All transition models need to challenge the 'derogatory discourses' (Burke, 2009; French, 2013) that often inform discussions around widening participation by contextualising some of the ways in which NT students' choices of HE institution and programme are influenced and framed by wider considerations and discourses. This alternative reconceptualisation of transition requires it to be reinterpreted as the means by which first year undergraduates negotiate the 'local spaces' within which they operate as learners and how they exercise 'choices' around their learning in the current knowledge economy of HE (Ball, 1998; Lingard, 2000).

Gale and Parker (2012) in their typology of transition models make the point that for NT students it is their third model, 'transition as becoming' that is the most suited. This is an essentially rhizomic or holistic model which takes account of the students' whole way of life and their experience of negotiating a new institutional education habitus with all its different social practices and expectations (French, 2012). In taking this approach Gale not only explores how entry into HE impacts upon on the identity of the individual engaging it in it but makes the point that the institutions themselves need to acknowledge and make space for:

not just for new kinds of student bodies but also for their embodied knowledges and ways of knowing (Gale 2012).

Gale's (2012) third theory of transition draws on the 'Connectionist pedagogies' discussed in the work of Hockings et al (2010). Their work emphasises the importance of creating collaborative and inclusive spaces, in which students have opportunities to share their often very diverse beliefs, knowledge and experiences when they join HE. Like this project, the institutional strategies proposed are student-centred. They involve the implementation of activities that encourage students to connect their transition and subsequent experiences in HE with the rest of their lives, as carers, parents, community and family members, and employees. It is also a process that is cognisant of their projected identities as graduates and professionals, roles for which they may not have any immediate models in their family or friendship groups. These strategies involve lecturers being culturally aware of the diversity of NT transitioning students as well as acknowledging the importance of their non-academic frames of reference. It is this model of transitioning that our transition framework in the final section seeks to enact.

2.2 E-Survey

An e-survey was undertaken across four partnership institutions, one further education college and three universities. The survey was devised by the project team (see Appendix 1)² and distributed electronically to students through a range of channels, including tutors, social media and the Students' Union, in each institution. The results were managed and analysed centrally by Birmingham City University. The survey closed in July 2015 and 270 students participated, representing a return of 54% of the target sample of 500.

The e-survey was qualitative in nature, inviting students to share their expectations and perceptions of transitioning to HE and, if they had already moved, of the enablers and barriers to effective transition.

2.2.1 Characteristics of the sample group

As mentioned above, 270 students participated in the e-survey before it closed on 17 July 2015; however, due to the limited timeframe of the project and the iterative nature of the project design, nuanced analysis was undertaken in June with a sample size of 244.

Of the total e-survey sample, 82% were female and 18% male. Of these, 5% were studying an FE course in an FE college, 15% were studying an HE course in an FE college and 80% were studying HE in an HE institution. Although the bulk of participants (41%) were aged between 20 and 25, the whole group varied significantly in age from 16-19 (15%) and 50+ (3%). Only 256 participants made a response to question 3, which asked them to self-identify their ethnic group. Those that responded described themselves as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------------|------|
| Arab | 1% |
| Black Caribbean | 2.7% |
| Black British | 3% |
| Mixed or Multiple ethnic group | 4% |
| British Asian | 4% |
| Black African | 5% |
| White | 59% |

Some respondents preferred to use a geo/political identifier such as English (1.5%), British (9%), European (1 respondent), Chinese (3 respondents), Pakistani (5%), Albanian (1 respondent), and while others used religious identifiers, such as Jewish (1 respondent), Hindu (2 respondents). This degree of diversity corresponds with the 2011 census for the region where 42% of respondents self-identified as belonging to an ethnic group other than white (Birmingham.gov.uk: 2014)

2.3 Focus groups

Two semi-structured focus groups and two paired interviews were undertaken to complement the e-survey. In total, 19 students participated in the focus groups, 15 female and four male. They were grouped as follows:

- FE students preparing for next steps into HE or employment
- HE students studying in an FE institution
- HE students who had progressed from FE studying in an HE institution.

The timing of the study over the summer period impacted significantly on HE students' availability to take part in planned focus groups. The research team intend to continue focus group activity beyond the formal schedule of the project so as to enable further nuanced

² The survey is also available to download at:
<https://transitionswestmidlands.wordpress.com/our-survey>.

exploration of the cohort and continue fine-grained analysis of specific groups. This work will form part of the ongoing collaborative work of the *Transitions West Midlands* partnership.

Question prompts (see Appendix 2) were derived from issues emerging from the literature review and early analysis of the e-survey. With the consent of participants, focus group discussions were recorded and then analysed for emergent themes.

The focus group discussion with FE students preparing for next steps into HE or employment was jointly led by a member of the research team and an artist facilitator. This approach enabled participants to draw on a broader range of resources to explore, represent and illustrate their experiences of preparing for transition and to participate actively and collectively in the production of multi-modal empirical material emerging from the session. The collaborative component of this process disrupts the normative expectation that the researcher will lead the flow of a focus group by moving the conversation along at their discretion. This was also a unique opportunity for participants to see a visual record of their conversation as it unfolded, meaning that they were given a constant reminder of the entire process that served to prompt subsequent discussions. The opportunity to think creatively enabled the students to connect to their own assumptions regarding transition to HE, while maintaining a methodological focus on their dialogue.

2.4 Analysis

Analysis of the data generated through the project focus followed a Grounded Theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A Grounded Theory (GT) approach was selected for a number of key practical as well as ontological reasons. Firstly the concurrent data collection, coding and analysis afforded by this method complemented the concurrent pattern of data collection and analysis necessitated by the restricted timeframe of the project. The GT method enabled data analysis to begin as soon as empirical material became available. Secondly, the GT tolerance of data drawn from a wide range of sources, which do not necessarily share a common culture, complemented the complex, multi-institutional character of the study. Finally, the freedom from deference to extant theory afforded by a GT approach and the acceptance of multiple interpretations seemed to provide a useful ontological context for interpreting the data. The approach allowed for the complexities of a multi-institutional project team engaging in multiple layers of interpretation and representation (production, selection, coding, recoding) to be reflexively foregrounded and theory to emerge from the processes of analysis.

Section B: Findings

1 Introduction

1.1 Confidence

It is crucial, in our view, to begin this account of our reading/s of the empirical material amassed through *Transitions West Midlands* with an acknowledgement of the sense of optimism about transition that our participants tended to bring to their discussions and contributions. When asked to rate their confidence levels about moving from FE to HE, 84% of respondents suggested they felt at least quite confident, with 16% feeling very confident. HE students looking back recalled similar feelings, with 85% recalling that they felt quite confident and 21% claiming to have felt very confident. This is not to diminish the concerns of the significant minority, 15% in each case, who reported feeling not at all confident but to emphasise the hopeful resilience that we encountered time and time again through the experience of undertaking this study and to set our discussion in opposition to stereotypes of the NT student that characterise them as 'needy', 'less confident' or more likely to 'fail.' Rather we draw on our evidence base to illuminate the substantial identity work undertaken by our participants, in addition to the practical juggling of multiple roles (student, carer, worker) as they orientate and grapple with the structural relations and social and cultural complexity of 'becoming a student'. This 'third shift', beyond personal responsibilities and study, represents an additional burden of social and psychological endeavour that 'middle class' students whose siblings and parents have degrees and who are following what Bradley et al (2015) call the 'taken for granted pathway' into HE are spared. However, few of the participants in this study seemed to have any meta-thinking tools to hand to help them identify, describe or characterise this 'third shift' work. Instead what they 'took for granted' was an entirely personal, individualised responsibility for success or failure independent of any social, political or cultural narrative of situatedness within structural relations. As such, their identity work, although sometimes burdensome, was not necessarily tactical or strategic. It is this notion of positive identity work, that is to say as active, agentic work, that we hope to address through the outcomes of this project by encouraging teachers and institutions to work positively with NT students to pay self-conscious attention to these issues, to build meta-narratives that ease the burden of the 'third shift' and enable students to build on and value their confidence and resilience and claim ownership of the HE contexts and experiences to which they progress.

1.2 Managing complexity

It was clear from the data that for many participants 'being a student' is one aspect of a complex weight of personal responsibilities and priorities. Many participants, 47%, reported that they worked part-time in addition to their studies. Time spent in paid work varied significantly with, for example, 8% of these working in excess of 20 hours per week, 13% working 11-15 hours and 13% working 6-10 hours per week. Time spent in work also varied considerably between the three groups of students (FE, HE in FE, HE). As table 1 shows, students following FE and HE programmes in college were more likely to work part-time than their university counterparts and were significantly more likely to work longer hours, over 40% of HE in FE students reported working in excess of 16 hours a week, compared with 23% of FE students and 13% of university students, with a staggering 30% undertaking in excess of 20 hours of paid work per week in addition to their course of study.

A significant number of respondents also had caring responsibilities, with 34% reporting that they cared for a child/ren and 6.5% for an adult/s. Those identifying as carers of adults were also more likely to have a part-time job than non-carers or carers with children as table 1 below indicates.

Table 1: Caring and part-time work

| Do you work part-time alongside your studies? | Do you have caring responsibilities? | | | No answer |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|
| | Yes for child/children | Yes for an adult/s | I am not a carer | |
| No I don't have a part-time job | 59.34% | 43.75% | 46.01% | 60.00% |
| Yes 1-5 hours per week | 7.69% | 0.00% | 3.68% | 0.00% |
| Yes 6-10 hours per week | 5.49% | 12.50% | 15.34% | 0.00% |
| Yes 11-15 hours per week | 9.89% | 25.00% | 14.72% | 0.00% |
| Yes 16-20 hours per week | 12.09% | 12.50% | 7.98% | 0.00% |
| 20 hours + per week | 5.49% | 6.25% | 11.66% | 0.00% |
| No answer | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.61% | 40.00% |

Those who identified as carers were generally older than those who did not. However, it was notable that just under 44% of those who reported caring for an adult were in the 20-25 age range.

Table 2: Age profile of carers and non-carers

| Which age group do you fall into? | Do you have caring responsibilities? | | | No answer |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|
| | Yes for child/children | Yes for an adult/s | I am not a carer | |
| 16-19 | 0.00% | 6.25% | 22.09% | 0.00% |
| 20-25 | 14.29% | 43.75% | 55.83% | 40.00% |
| 26-30 | 20.88% | 6.25% | 10.43% | 0.00% |
| 31-35 | 20.88% | 0.00% | 4.91% | 0.00% |
| 36-40 | 21.98% | 6.25% | 1.84% | 0.00% |
| 41-45 | 15.38% | 31.25% | 1.23% | 0.00% |
| 46-50 | 5.49% | 0.00% | 3.07% | 20.00% |
| 50+ | 1.10% | 6.25% | 0.61% | 0.00% |
| No answer | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 40.00% |

Through conversation, participants presented themselves as competent negotiators and time managers, accepting complexity and the necessity of learning to 'juggle' efficiently as an inevitable, sometimes difficult, aspect of their everyday experience as students who needed to work or care as well as study.

It is hard

You have to find your own way through

at the start it's hard, when you're getting a job, you have to get a job and then fit around

you just have to manage it right

[you] prioritise things...think about what you need to do first and what's most important, it's a bit like doing your coursework, what can you do quicker or leave till later...what do you need to do to get the right points to go to university

1.3 Risk

The need to be diagnostic, flexible and adaptable in order to succeed were taken for granted ways of *being* (or *habitus* as discussed above) that students were unselfconscious, non-congratulatory and matter of fact about, hence their surprise at what they saw as the realities of their lives not always being recognised or valued, *'sometimes college forget that we have a life outside college, they see it as just being about coursework'* or *'if I don't work, I don't eat'*, within the prevailing *habitus* of the institutional environment. As such, many students felt the 'risk' of pursuing their studies very keenly, *'you're taking a risk', 'you're betting aren't you...literally it is a gamble', 'if you have children think very carefully.'* It was such moments of dislocation in the narratives that animated the most fervent accounts of struggle beyond the more tangible (physical, practical, emotional) labour of juggling per se as one HE student remarked *'my college made it sound impossible like I wasn't ready, which made me scared. I've fitted in [at university] quite well.'*

We noticed that references to ideas about, and discussions of, 'readiness' permeate participants narratives with 'readiness' a proxy marker, a sort of 'identity tipping point', signalling that the student is primed for successful transition. 'Readiness' seems to represent an idealised meeting point or coming together of institutional and individual *habitus* (students and tutors?) but is simultaneously a site of antagonism and deep felt anxiety *'you need to know that you're ready', 'they think you're ready but what if you're not ready?'* For these participants 'readiness' although an apparently fixed point, a 'something' tangible that one needed to become, remained entirely opaque and elusive, a something ill-defined, externalised and endowed rather than a way of being they might choose to take up or take ownership of (or not).

We have structured our discussion of our empirical material around an exploration of these tensions. We begin with a discussion of students' projections of their own *habitus* and then explore their characterisation of the institutional *habitus* which frames their encounters with their programme of study and patterns their concept-making about HE and their experience of transition within and between institutions.

2 Exploring student habitus

2.1 Negotiating 'life-course' expectations

Participants in both the e-survey and the focus groups were asked what advice they would give to prospective students preparing to make the transition into HE. Their responses suggested that most participants were following what Bradley et al (2015) describe as a 'planning pathway' into HE in that they had engaged thoughtfully and reflectively with their decision to pursue HE. Drawing on their study of HE participation and social class in Bristol, Bradley et al suggest that this pathway is most commonly followed by 'aspirant and academically gifted working class students' and 'highly motivated middle class students'; however, a 'planning pathway' narrative is significantly more pervasive in the TWM material.

Do it for yourself.

Do it for the right reasons.

For the first year I really struggled, but as I got to know the subject more I'm really enjoying it. But just make sure you do it for the right reasons.

This exchange is suggestive of these participants' reflexive engagements with their decision to return to education. For them, the most important factor to consider is the primary motivation behind the decision. This section explores the participants' various motivating

factors with respect to this decision, and considers the impact of that decision on their wider lives.

The focus group participants were asked to consider how the decision to return to education had impacted their wider lives, and how it had changed existing relationships and responsibilities. For several of the participants, the integration of their programme of study into the 'rest of their lives' has had a positive impact on the way in which they relate to their families:

For me it's been great...As much as it's been good for me it's brought me and my kids closer together, which is amazing because they're at the age, I mean my son has left school so he's at college now, but my other two are doing exams and because they see me studying they want to do it, and we're all sitting there studying together.

However, for others the decision to return to education occurred amidst complex domestic situations. The following exchange between several of the HE-in-FE focus group participants highlights how, in some instances, the decision meant significant domestic upheaval:

I actually split up with my boyfriend to come and do this...

I split up with mine as well...

...I was so excited to be doing it [the degree programme]...similar to you guys I was having problems with my relationship and I knew...the whole point of it is...

It's life changing...

...It's life changing, yeah, and you can't underestimate that, and I knew she wouldn't like me doing this...the expectation of the actual work itself, I almost hardly thought about it.

For these participants, the challenge of completing a degree was not compatible with their domestic arrangements at the time, meaning that they had to make difficult choices in order to return to education. Many identify peer support at college or university as being a crucial aspect of their progression through the course because it offers a type of connectivity they do not necessarily find 'outside' of this context. Therefore, in many cases, the process of *becoming* a returning student is engaged with collectively; a transformative group experience that comes to represent the primary way in which the students relate to one another. Peer support is not necessarily considered to be *better*, or more valuable, than an 'outsider's' engagement with their course, but constitutes a distinct form of collective subjectivity for these participants:

I've got more support from peers in college as opposed to...my family

That's where it's been great for me because my parents have been brilliant so...but I mean people are different aren't they?

It's a different type of support isn't it? What you get here to what you get family wise.

People outside of college, they don't know what's going on, so when you're trying to talk to someone about ontology, they don't care about it!

You can't have the same conversations. It's different conversations.

When we were all confused we turned to each other...because we're the only people who know what we're going through. We're all on the same page.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides a means of understanding how these experiences become collectivised for these students. According to Bourdieu, habitus is constituted through a 'process of *recognitions*' between people with shared experiences, as identified here in the participants' accounts of developing peer-support networks. Furthermore, the notion that 'Habitus is socialised subjectivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:126) provides a means of understanding how these participants have developed peer-support networks whereby they share ideas, and support one another's learning:

Our group have actually got a Facebook page, and it's amazing [that] two weeks before a deadline everybody's on there...and that's been really good because you get different people's perspectives.

The academic support received from fellow students appears to strengthen the quality of the support networks developed. These networks are founded upon collective shifts in values and knowledge, which, while having a positive impact on their ability to connect with each other, can also have a transformative impact upon 'outside' relationships with family and friends. Rather than allowing the course to carve out a place for itself within their existing lives, data here suggests a more dynamic relationship between the course and outside relations. In fact, for several of the participants, the course appears to be the more 'constant' aspect of their lives, with other relationships needing to adapt to not only the new logistical aspects of embarking upon a programme of study (time, money, etc), but also in terms of the emotional labour required to sustain outside friendships in their current form:

I think your values change as well don't they? I think your values really shift and then people who don't share the same values, you tend not to interact with.

My friendship groups have moved...some I've took a step back from. Or maybe they've taken step back from me and I just haven't realised that!

Although for many of the participants, pre-study friendships have been redefined, or have dissolved, they communicated the need to prioritise family commitments and financial responsibilities over any desire to relocate geographically in order to study. All of the participants within the FE and HE-in-FE focus groups had selected a local college at which to study. However, several of these students recognise the appeal of relocating:

I'd like to do that [relocate]...but because of having a mortgage and having financial commitments...it would be lovely though.

I think it does help that you live here, but...if you were in a position where you could move away that's an option, or move somewhere, but if you're not in that position it just makes it that little bit more difficult.

See, a lot of students actually choose universities, that whole experience of being away from home, but for mature students it's different isn't it....I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't somewhere local. Because of being rooted and having a daughter and having two cats, you know you're sort of restricted.

This exchange somewhat contradicts Christie's (2007) observation that NT students often opt to attend local colleges or HEIs in order to maintain existing support networks. For these participants, relocating appears to have significant 'pull' factors. However, this is not actualised by these students because of the existing carer and financial responsibilities they have. For others, the experience of the course itself has inspired them to consider re-locating:

I would like to relocate now, now that I know how to manage my time, but initially in the beginning it would have been too much.

For this student, skills acquired while studying her course have equipped her with a new confidence in her ability to relocate. However, many students who took part in this research are challenged within negotiating a complex set of existing discourses surrounding the 'correct' educational career as an older student. Confidence about one's ability to integrate within an HE course later in life, for example, can fluctuate depending upon the quality of support networks and their prior intellectual achievements:

One of the main things is confidence, and you'd think that when you're older and you've had your own business and worked in x, y and z you wouldn't think that confidence was a thing, but it is.

Data from the qualitative component of the questionnaire also evidences perceptions about age, which is viewed by some participants as a barrier to integrating fully into an HE course. However, throughout the questionnaire data, references are made to age as a marker of heightened academic ability. Other participants allude to their own internalised assumptions that there is something unusual, and undesirable, about pursuing a HE qualification later in life:

And I just say to them [her children] don't slack now because you don't want to be doing it at [...] years of age like me

When I go [to university], I'll be older, I'll be an adult, so it's a different age group of people. That's my worry. I'll be going and I'll be about 21.

Before embarking upon an HE course, FE and HE-in-FE participants refer to their ages self-consciously, reflecting assumptions about the 'appropriate' time to begin studying. This highlights an internalisation of 'derogatory discourses' (Burke, 2009; French, 2013) that surround the NT student experience. However, for the HE-in-FE students who are half-way through their degree, anxieties about age seem to dissipate as they recognise that they are not judged by their peers for having returned to education. For these participants, the support and rapport developed with peers on the course (as explored above) appears to have elevated any prior preoccupation they may have had with their age:

The fact that you can do it at any age. As long as you put the effort in and engage.

It's amazing because I mean most of the students are, you know, fifteen or twenty years younger than me, but we've all still been able to pull together, and because you're all studying and doing the same thing, age doesn't...

I haven't thought about people's ages once and it doesn't matter

I hadn't actually thought about my age either.

2.2 Managing multiple responsibilities

A significant theme from the data is the participants' status as adept negotiators. When faced with varying, sometimes conflicting, responsibilities several of the participants evoke metaphors of juggling, and balancing, different commitments when required:

It's [attending college] like putting a different head on it, my learning head hopefully...If I've got to pick the kids up from school and I've got an hour or so before I've got to pick them up...it's a different head and you just switch between it...

Although, as argued by Hutchings & Archer (2001) and Reay et al (2008, 2009) the NT student transition experience is characterised by difficult choices and conflicting responsibilities, several of the participants within this research demonstrate a strong capability to cope with the transition, with anxieties more likely to occur *before* the commencement of their programme of study. Some of the participants do, however, note the difficulties created by managing multiple responsibilities. Specifically, the conflict between paid employment and study time was evident throughout the data:

The only time you can really do work is weekends and evenings.

And if you're working weekends...

and evenings...

You've got no time...but you need the money so it's a bit of a...

These participants manage/negotiate/prioritise work commitments alongside study time. This means finding time to complete coursework outside of working hours. For some, this means sustaining very long working weeks in order to satisfy the demands of their course, while meeting financial responsibilities. When asked whether their college understands the wider responsibilities they manage, these participants report feeling that staff do not always acknowledge the variety of pressures they encounter:

Tutors do not appreciate the step we have made

Teachers in college, they sometimes forget that we have a life outside college. We all have jobs to do and we've got families and they just see it as coursework full stop and they don't see the bigger picture.

Yeah, they don't see that sometimes you might actually go and do family stuff rather than sitting and doing coursework 24/7.

Sometimes the tutors will be like 'well you know you need to put your coursework first', but no, if you're living on your own...

There is also the sense within the questionnaire data that the demands of so-called NT route into HE are not always fully acknowledged by tutors. This acknowledgement is important to several participants because it distinguishes them from the '18 year olds' who transition to university straight from A-levels. Older participants report feeling that they have made a unique decision to come back into education at this point in their life course, but that tutors often make no distinction between them and the younger students. Students within traditional backgrounds appear to sense a 'difference' between themselves and the younger students, and there is the assumption that they have come to the course with existing knowledge that is not always valued. Part of this knowledge is located within these students' accumulation of 'life experience', and their ability to negotiate multiple commitments. During the FE focus group, the participants worked with the artist to develop a metaphor to represent the management of these multiple responsibilities:

We need scales!

On one side you can have coursework, so loads of paper, and then on the other a house...

...and money

...yeah, and money

And a heart

Artist: Why a heart?

Because that represents family and friends...people that you love.

This exercise indicates a feeling of being pulled in multiple directions, all of which are of similar importance. It is also evident from the data that the split attention required by many of the NT students impacts on and redefines their sense of feeling 'like a student'. Unlike the experiences of younger, 'more traditional' students, these complex negotiations made, and wider life commitments, interfere with many of the older participants' abilities to fully relate to a simple 'student' identity:

I don't know if I've felt like a student to be honest. I feel like I'm doing a job, going to work...so I just commit. I just come in when I'm supposed to and try and get the work done when I'm supposed to.

Do you think that's because you've got children as well and your mentality is different?

Probably, yeah.

I've found that my mentality is different to some in my group because of my responsibilities, so I think that's why we approach it differently.

There's just more workload it's just managing your time and balancing things out.

Because you've got more responsibilities. You can't be a proper student.

There is, however, during this focus group some recognition among the participants that their conversation might be perpetuating assumptions about what a 'proper student' is. There is also the sense that they are not quite able to subvert these stereotypes and to confidently embody an 'alternative' student identity that better represents the NT experience. Rather there is often discomfort/tension around the label of 'student' which these participants clearly inhabit, after all they are indubitably students, but which they are grappling with.

2.3 Developing a 'professional identity'

For Bourdieu (1990) an individual's proximity to 'institutional habitus' determines how much personal cultural capital they will accumulate. For some of the FE participants, who have recently completed their level 3 vocational course, their sense of having gained such capital is evident:

You just feel better about yourself knowing that you are a professional person instead of being, not bog-standard, like a blank canvas.

Researcher: People take you more seriously?

Yeah.

However, many of the HE-in-FE participants, whose course is not specifically vocational in nature, but theory and research oriented, appear to relate more holistically to the idea of 'professional identity':

You've been here [in College-based HE] for two years and that's been kind of like building...you know, you've got certain foundations to work from. Next year's where you expand that, and go 'well I want to focus on this area or this area'.

For several of the participants, cultivating a professional identity includes developing their personalities and skills, rather than centering solely on the job they intend to pursue upon completing the course:

It's more about you as a person, and just building to your skill set and your personality. I mean this degree, I think we all agree, it's already had a positive effect on everyone's personality and everyone's character, and the way that you think about things and the way you think about the world, and that's not just something you do in a lecture or in a classroom. You can apply that to your outside life

I haven't really thought much about [a career], well I have but I keep changing my mind. But for me this is more of a personal journey than a professional one. I just feel more grounded now. So if I feel more grounded in myself then I'll be able to make choices where I want to go, and then having a degree to back things up

Instead to going university to a degree to get a job, I'm now looking to continue university to...do what I want to do, and then get a job that suits me

Because I'm older it's always been about the process for me

Contrary to the assumption that a 'professional identity' is confined to a feeling of 'readiness' to enter paid employment (Grealish and Trevitt, 2005), these participants demonstrate that developing these skills is 'not just something you do in a lecture or a classroom'. This alludes to the wider feeling among these participants that what matters is the potential of their chosen programme to enhance their 'lifelong learning', rather than facilitating a 'means to an end'. There is also a feeling that these students have developed a sense of agency in relation to their route through HE, whereby they are recognising the benefits of engaging with the parts of the learning process that they enjoy, rather than focusing on the outcome of their course (the qualification itself). This demonstrates the levels of confidence they have developed; however, these students are half-way through their course at the time of this research, meaning that, for them, the end is not yet 'in sight'. However, for the Early Years students, whose course is vocational in nature and which includes a placement module where they gain direct industry experience, securing a job is not only a priority, but is viewed as urgent.

What is apparent throughout the data, though, is the call for more institutional engagement with the wider biographies of students, in order to fully comprehend the decision they have made to return to education:

Artist: What's the image?

It's like a story really.

Artist: Why is it like a story?

...it's a journey

Just like your diary that you write in everyday, all your life experiences.

2.4 Writing a HE student identity into being

However the everyday familiarity of diary writing evoked here contrasted starkly with students' perceptions of the writing practices of HE which were inflected with the 'mystique of unfamiliarity and remoteness' that McGivney (2003) notices. In response to the e-survey question *what were your biggest concerns, if any, about moving in to HE* one HE student answered simply 'my level of writing'. This conflation of the complex range of writing practices in which HE students might be required to engage into a simple, single notion of something that one can be good or bad at typifies participants concept making about writing in HE despite a recognition that literacy practices are actually multiple and need to be learned. For the further education students quoted below, for example, literacy practices associated with employment and those associated with HE were clearly understood to be distinct from those they were putting to work in college.

They taught us how to do CVs but not applications forms...they don't teach you how to do the personal statement in a job form, it's just like the personal statement for uni but no one taught us how to do it...you have to do it all on your own without any structure or guidance...like if you're applying to HE then you get support...I had to go to careers but you have to sort it

I wanted to go to uni but I didn't know what to do with my personal statement and I just kept putting it off and putting it off and then I didn't do it. It's so important the personal statement...you don't know what to put in it and you've got no structure

We did have a meeting but the person who did it wasn't in and we just literally have a sheet with lines on and a little bit at the top

Participants in our FE focus group clearly struggled with how best to represent their identities in ways that would be recognisable or valuable to the HE institution, about how to match their individual habitus to the institutional habitus of HE, perhaps reflecting the kind of insecurities about 'readiness' discussed above. However, they recognised that these were 'learnable' and potentially within reach given the right levels of support, guidance and encouragement.

3 Exploring institutional habitus

3.1 The 'mystery' of university, and the 'elusive field' of HE

Participants within the FE focus group were asked whether they felt prepared to attend university, and responses here were mixed. Evidently, they had been provided with access to workshop sessions focused on specific skills:

We had people come in and talk, like, careers...so they sort of did help people I think.

However, many of the FE participants communicate a lack of understanding about what to expect from university life:

It's the risk of, if you do it and you only do it for half a year, and here you don't have to pay nothing, but there you lose out on nine thousand pounds...that's why I'm leaving a gap, to make sure...there's no way of doing a trial thing either.

I am nervous about it because everyone says it's going to be different

Pressure

Ball (1998) and Lingard (2000) recognise that a lack of proximity to HE knowledge economies impedes the NT student's access to limitless 'choice' about their HE entry options; a situation that contributes to the subordination of NT experiences in contrast to more 'traditional' routes. Without the necessary information, these FE students feel that the pressure of making the 'correct' choice of university course is solely their responsibility. Bourdieu (1993) recognises that social fields are inter-relative; meaning that the spectrum of dispositions within a field are defined, and shaped, by aspects of other related fields. This provides a means of recognising how the autonomy of a social field requires engagement with other, overlapping fields. However, when the prospect of entering a particular field, when one has no knowledge of the normative structures of that field, a type of 'imagined' or 'hyper real' space is constructed. This suggests that providing FE students with experiences of 'HE life' before they commence their course has the potential to alleviate anxieties. This would enable them to make prior judgements about how to interact authentically (without losing sight of their own values) within the field of HE and how the accumulation of cultural capital within this context might be possible for them.

Several participants communicate an urgency to proceed with the 'next step' of their careers, whether at university or within employment. Narratives of 'risk' and 'pressure' punctuate these accounts, which are linked to the 'mystery' (McGivney) that surrounds the transition to HE. These participants have picked up the idea that University will be 'different', but they have little insight into whether this difference will be experienced positively or negatively. This contributes to the anxiety felt by several participants:

Researcher: Do you think universities understand that pressure [of beginning university]?

I don't know...because we've never had that much dealing with universities, well I know I haven't I've ever spoken to a person from a university and said 'do you know about this pressure that we have from this age?

We've never had anyone from university come in and talk to us have we?

Not really...I think that would have gave us a bit of insight into what uni's like...

See what support is out there for us when we get there.

It would be handy to know, like do they understand deadline pressure, as well as, like, if you're going through family stuff, whether they're going to...it's nice to know the person before you go.

It's knowing what support they provide in different situations...'if you found yourself in this position, we'd offer this kind of support.'

In contrast, the two plus two (two years in college, two years in university) course structure followed by participants in the HE-in-FE focus group seemed to lend itself to an enhanced transition phase. These students had been encouraged to visit the University regularly while still at college and to engage with extracurricular events, resulting in increased confidence in their ability to cope with the forthcoming transition to the HEI:

...I feel quite comfortable about next year and how much support I'll get.

Indeed, the FE participants identify the need for conversations between the college and universities that would demystify the transition to HE. Of particular appeal was the possibility of talking to current HE students about their experiences, and the sense that these conversations would enable a more transparent transition process. When asked what this

would entail, the FE students were enthusiastic about the possibility of current university students coming in to speak with them and answer questions they have about the transition:

I think it would be nice if students from universities come into college and spoke to us.

Yeah that would be good...maybe if you had first year students as well because they're going through it at the time.

Researcher: So what kind of questions would you ask them?

How have you coped?

How do they balance what they do, like whether they work as well?

Is the transition from college to university as big as everyone says it is?

What do you have when you're there from lecturers, stuff like that?

I think it would be nice having that aspect brought into schools and colleges.

Some of these participants appear to be asking for 'myth-busting' opportunities *before* the course begins, and they offer strategies to accomplish this via engagement with current staff and students at HEIs. The gaps in these participants' knowledge of the HEI environment has sparked a negative emotional response centred on an impression that there are 'missing parts', which limit their ability to make sound choices. These participants discuss this in the context of their need to manage multiple responsibilities; a task not helped by this 'missing information'. During the FE focus group, the artist worked with the participants to devise a visual representation of this feeling:

Maybe a jigsaw puzzle

Artist: Why a jigsaw puzzle?

Because you need, like, different pieces to make things work...

Like Jenga...?

'Yeah like Jenga, but it's different you know, Jenga can fall apart, but jigsaw puzzles can't. You either have a certain piece to make it work or you don't.

Without all the necessary pieces of the HE Jigsaw, this participant sees an aspect of risk in the decisions she is making. She wants to avoid things 'falling apart' by choosing the correct career trajectory. This exchange highlights the enormity of the commitment they have made, and the pressure they place upon themselves to make the right career decisions.

The participants then worked with the artist to develop a second image to represent the need to choose the 'correct' course so that they can qualify and secure a job in their chosen field. The students decided upon a 'clock with wings' to signify the urgency they feel to make the 'correct' choices:

You don't want to run out of time...it's all about this flying clock!

The FE students' current lack of engagement with the university environment has led to anxieties about what to expect. However, an area of anxiety identified with both cohorts, and within the qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire, is the anticipation of an increased workload when they commence university level study:

Researcher: How do you think next year will be different?

More in-depth...a bit anxious about that...because the marking criteria changes you're going to have to go more in-depth and extend on what you know obviously.

I think there's going to be a lot less hand-holding.

Yeah, it's more independent isn't it? I think it's going to be a massive difference and I think it might be a bit of a shock to the system.

There's going to be a lot more reading; that's the only thing I've picked up on.

There was here! But I felt quite strongly from a couple of current students that if you don't contribute, if you don't do the reading and you don't contribute in the seminars then a lot of the students won't want you in their group.

It was notable within the data that the HE-in-FE participants, who are already embarking upon the college-based portion of their degree, have also developed a level of confidence in their own academic capabilities:

I expected it to be a lot harder than it was. Not being vain or thinking I'm a brainbox or anything

I don't think it's been as difficult as I thought...as I expected it to be

Likewise, comments from the qualitative component of the questionnaire indicate that HE level study was more enjoyable than was previously anticipated. The gap between prior expectations and the reality of the experience indicates that these students, too, may have internalised wider discourses about how equipped NT students are to complete HE level study. In essence, the experiences of some of the participants dispelled the assumption that studying at this level would be academically and logistically 'hard'. Of course, the aforementioned 'belongingness' (Goodenow, 1993), cultivated via peer-support networks, may have significantly contributed to these perceptions.

3.2 Relating to the institution

Thompson (2002) argues that the values to which HEI institutions subscribe, and the effective absorption of these values by students, has a significant impact on student retention and satisfaction. However, the data here indicates some slippage between the participants' expectations and experiences of the college and university institutions as a whole, and the expectations and experiences of individual staff members:

Researcher: Do you think that the college, or the university you're going to understand the negotiations that you've made?

I think individuals inside the institutions do, but not necessarily the institute as a whole. So if I come in and say 'I can't really do the programme on that day' they're not going to change it for me, they're not going to rearrange everything just for me.

Because they're an institution.

Of course, and you can't really expect them to and you know that to an extent when you sign on, you just hope that there's going to be a little bit of leeway in certain situations.

...because of them being an institution and this whole thing about being more marketwise...a bit like moral blindness, like corporations that don't really give a damn about employees because they don't have time. They're thinking about the money they're making and that sort of thing...but from an emotional point of view, I don't think they do.

There is some ambiguity here about how successful the institution in question has been at responding to the emotional and organisation needs of these students. Repetition of discourses surrounding the marketisation of HEIs and the subsequent impact upon students is evidenced here, with one student arguing that the business-model of the HEI is incompatible with the facilitation of more personal communication responses. The above dialogue also infers a lack of flexibility from the institution that is grounded in the absence of a two-way conversation about when classes run, and the attendance requirements for the participants. Having said this, several of the students already doing a degree (having completed the College-based portion) do recognise that support is there from a broader institutional level:

You look at it and think if I needed help in any area there's a decent enough structure there for that.

Researcher: Will that be different next year? [when they attend an HEI]

Next year it's a university, it's so big that if you need something it's pretty much there. I know a lot of people might not know that, so you can feel a bit uncomfortable, but if you know where it is it's always there for you. There's loads of support channels.

The macro (institutional) perspective appears to indicate that 'support is there'. However, some predict that when they transition to the HEI, engagement with individual tutors might decrease:

I think there might be a little bit less interaction with the tutors as well.

Well if you've got a group of 300 students...it's not physically possible.

However, there are some inconsistencies with how tutors at their current college respond to them:

The tutors that you're close to, they might want to hear everything that you've done, and then you've got certain lecturers that are like 'you know what I'm only here to teach you'

This further highlights the distinction between the participants' relationship to the institutional structure and individual encounters with different tutors. In some instances, inconsistencies with what the institution promises, and what the micro-level exchanges deliver, are evident within the data.

4 Conclusion

In this project participants' experiences of transition have been constructed out of the statements they made about the various HE assumptions, practices and Bourdieusian (disciplinary-based) fields that they have experienced. We have, in this way treated students' sense of personal history, or identity, as the result of countless social interactions and shared practices in different educational settings. This approach views student identities as fluid and liminal, and treats the transition from FE to HE as an important opportunity to

encourage individuals to experiment and 'shape-shift' as they negotiate their progress from one educational setting to another (Gee, 1996).

However, it is important to acknowledge that such 'shape-shifting' is not without its challenges, not only for students but for the staff teaching and supporting them. We argue that staff should recognise and be prepared to discuss with students how their individual 'habitus' shifts and change as they begin to develop new 'identities in practice' (Bartlett and Holland, 2002) as graduates. These graduate identities are enacted and embodied, over time, through their membership of various communities of practices and social relationship. Sometimes developing these new identities involves risk as established certainties and practices have to be left behind or integrated into new ways of doing and thinking. Embracing risk is therefore a necessary component of successful student transition and the further the student is from traditional conceptions of 'students' the greater their personal risk as they traverse and negotiate an often unfamiliar HE landscape.

5 Recommendations

- 1 Successful transition is not only an 'exit' or 'entry point' priority, institutional habitus patterns and frames 'legitimate' or 'preferred' ways of being and doing in an institution throughout a student's career course. As such, supporting good transition is an ongoing job that should scaffold development through to the next stage of a student's life course.
 - 2 Transition to HE is most productively viewed as a dynamic social event deeply imbued with cultural practices and inflected by structural relations. As such there is no 'quick fix' or 'tool kit' that will work successfully for all students in all contexts.
 - 3 Institutional approaches to supporting transition should be process-orientated and enquiry-focused to enable students to take greater ownership of the HE context and to recognise and reconcile their own subject positions as legitimate and valued. This has significant implications for curriculum design; pedagogies; teacher development; and the way we conceptualise the idea of 'the student'.
- **For the curriculum design this will mean** 'mainstreaming' discussions around the significance of transitioning into their induction activities and any later personal development sessions throughout the first year to ensure that all students' experiences of transitioning are acknowledged and valued.
 - **For pedagogy this will mean** paying self-conscious attention to, and exploration of (students and tutors, ideally collaboratively), the differences (and similarities) between ideas (concept making) about, and practical expressions of, teaching and learning and being a teacher or a learner in different institutional contexts. Particular attention should also be paid to the ways in which FE and HE programmes may be differently structured, patterned and assessed and how students are explicitly enabled or taught to make the transition from one to another. In particular, differing perceptions and expectations around 'independent learning' between FE and HE should be explored and debated in order to encourage and support students.
 - **For teacher development this will mean** encouraging and enabling teachers to become 'researchers' of the transition experiences of their students to build local, professional knowledge about what makes transition successful in their context. In particular teachers should be explicitly aware of the 'third shift' work that many NT learners undertake, the life-world complexity that they manage and be sensitive to the fact that they may not be experiencing university in the same way as students who have moved away to study and don't have additional responsibilities. Teachers should also be thoughtful and reflective about how they conceptualise and project meanings about FE, HE and transition and the kinds of definitions that they work with (consciously or unconsciously) in their classrooms to ensure that

they open up new spaces and places for non-traditional students to re-shape, re-make and take ownership of what it (could or should) mean to be a student in HE.

- **For 'the student'** this meta-awareness of the 'becoming' nature of HE involves lecturers acknowledging that transition from FE to HE will initiate changing conceptions of an individual's identity as a learner and student alongside other identities that make up their habitus. Moreover, these changing conceptions may involve uncertainty and adaptation as students 'live out' their transition from FE and HE, not only in terms of how they see themselves, but how others, such as family and friends may see them.
- **For everyone in the community** this means moving from nouns to verbs and accepting that there is no such thing as 'the student' only ways of experiencing life in HE that are deeply social, cultural, material and fluid. Moving beyond 'the student' (the 'post student'?) will enable a move beyond the old and unhelpful binaries of traditional and non-traditional towards more nuanced, sophisticated models that embrace, celebrate and respond more effectively to the ever-divergent needs of a diverse student body.
- **For Institutional planning and strategy** this will mean taking careful account of the 'third shift' work that NT students undertake in relation to transition and provide by default wrap-around structures, processes and support mechanisms that scaffold and enable students to manage this additional load effectively.

Section C: Good Transitions Framework

1 Introduction

The **Good Transitions** framework translates the recommendations of the Transitions West Midlands (TWM) project into a structured 'thinking tool' that can be used in a very practical way to kick-start development and change. By working through the framework, users will be prompted to interrogate and develop aspects of existing practice that have been identified through TWM as having a significant bearing on successful transition for students. The framework will support users to:

- **Explore** existing attitudes and approaches to transition in their own context
- **Engage** the wider college or university community towards better understanding of transitions in their own context
- **Create** new meanings, identities and roles in relation to transition
- **Collaborate** with colleagues, students and partners in the wider education community towards more effective approaches to transition
- **Drive** innovation and implement change.

The framework design is underpinned by an enquiry-based approach, participatory action research (PAR), that encourages inclusive, collaborative and co-constructionist approaches to institutional growth and development. PAR is process orientated and starts with reflexive engagement with the everyday experiences of participants in the college or university community enabling participants to develop, in collaboration with others, grounded descriptions of how student transition 'currently works' in their particular context. This then allows the community to 'work towards change', the next stage of the PAR process, that is distinctive, highly differentiated and tailored very particularly to the needs and aspirations of the institution and the community it serves.

This generative approach, where users are most often in production rather than consumption mode, will ensure that the framework generates outcomes that meet the needs of a broad spectrum of institutions and promotes learning that is responsive to the diverse student groups colleges and universities work with. As such it is 'future-proof', sustainable and highly relevant to a wide range of further and HE institutions concerned with **Good Transitions**.

Part 1 of the framework is designed for use at a macro level by strategic leaders to support development of institutional strategy and policy and Part 2 to be used at a micro level by curriculum leaders and teachers seeking to reflect upon and develop their own practice. To affect impactful change across an institution/partnership both parts should be completed.

Part 1 - Contexts for Good Transitions (Exploring institutional habitus)

1.1 Community

| Theme | Opportunities for reflection and discussion | Response | Action |
|--|--|----------|--------|
| <p>Establishing key principles</p> | <p>How do you currently understand or measure successful transition?</p> <p>Why is it important to you as an institution to improve support for transition? What do you see as the benefits for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • partnerships • institutional performance • the institutional community • individual leaders, staff, students • the wider community served by the institution <p>What are the risks to each of the categories above of doing nothing in relation to developing your current approach to supporting transition?</p> | | |
| <p>Evaluating Transition Partnerships</p> | <p>How does the institution currently work with its sister sector partners to support transition?</p> <p>What sorts of activities does it engage in?</p> <p>For what purposes?</p> <p>How might the boundary between HE/FE be described in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the roles, identities and expectations of teachers? | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the roles, identities and expectations of students? • approaches to teaching and learning (organisation and pedagogies)? • approaches (processes, practices and pedagogies) to assessment? • ways of thinking about literacy? • approaches to student support? <p>How often do tutors from each sector come together to explore this boundary?</p> <p>What differences might this make to students' experiences of transition?</p> | | |
| <p>Developing Good Transition Partnerships</p> | <p>In light of the TWM evidence base, to what extent do issues discussed in the section above have the potential to support or impede good transitions?</p> <p>What new partnership activities could be developed to support more effective 'boundary crossing' - focusing on key areas of teaching/learning/assessment/support - for teachers and students?</p> <p>What policies or processes are currently in place for managing effective transition?</p> <p>What are the key focus of these? To what extent do they facilitate engagement with the key transition issues identified by the TWM project?</p> <p>What attitudes and values underpin them?</p> | | |

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| | How might they need to be expanded or developed to take account of the ideas that you're developing through using this framework? | | |
| 1.2 Institution | | | |
| Theme | Opportunities for reflection and discussion | Response | Action |
| Environments for Transition | <p>What meanings about HE or FE are dominant across the institution? What sort of concepts and ideas do you (collectively) currently make use of to help conceptualise ideas about transition?</p> <p>Are there any gaps between how transition is conceptualised and operationalised?</p> <p>What opportunities are there to discuss and share ideas with colleagues about how transition is conceptualised and operationalised?</p> <p>Do you have a transitions strategy? If so what principles, attitudes and values underpin the strategy?</p> <p>If not do you need one? Who would need to be involved? Inside the institution? Outside the institution?</p> | | |
| 1.3 People | | | |
| Theme | Opportunities for reflection and discussion | Response | Action |
| Teacher/tutor development | What concepts and definitions about FE or HE are teachers working with? | | |

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| | <p>How do teachers/tutors describe their own experiences of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE/FE/schooling? • Transition to HE? • Life course and career progression? <p>In what ways do these inform/shape/pattern their concept making about HE/FE for students?</p> <p>How do teachers construct ideas about 'readiness' through their own teaching and the learning opportunities they provide for students? How appropriate are these ideas? How might they need to evolve or develop?</p> <p>How do tutors work with tutors from their sister sector (HE or FE) at the moment? In what capacity and for what purposes?</p> <p>What opportunities do they have to develop their own thinking/practice and/or make new meanings for and with students and colleagues from their sister sector?</p> <p>How often do they get to work/teach across sector boundaries?</p> | | |
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| Part 2 - Teaching and Learning for Good Transitions (Student habitus) | | | |
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| 2.1 Transition identities | | | |
| Theme | Opportunities for reflection and discussion | Response | Action |
| Starting points | How are prospective students enabled to recognise 'people like themselves' in the | | |

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| | <p>institution? Or to make new spaces and places for 'people like them' in the institution?</p> <p>What opportunities do students have to share their expectations about HE and becoming a student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With tutors/peers before they start their HE programme? • With tutors/peers at induction? <p>Where are students learning journeys and life course aspirations recognised? Shared? Acknowledged? Celebrated? How do they feed in to new learning and development so that students don't feel that they are 'starting again'?</p> <p>To what extent is 'third shift' activity noticed or taken account of? How is it scaffolded and supported?</p> <p>What opportunities do students have to interact with peers with similar career or life course trajectories? Socially? Professionally? Academically?</p> | | |
| <p>Organisation and Management</p> | <p>To what extent are the practical needs of students managing complex responsibilities taken account of?</p> <p>What kinds of flexibility do they need? How might these needs be better accommodated?</p> | | |

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| | What's possible in the short, medium and longer term? | | |
| Curriculum | <p>Where in the curriculum are ideas about institutional habitus explored?</p> <p>What meta-language are students taught to make sense of their own situatedness (how others position them and how they position themselves, for example in relation to different aspects of their identity such as gender, ethnicity, social class etc.) in relation to this particular HE course and how it relates to their longer-term professional aspirations?</p> <p>To what extent are opportunities for discussion of life course aspirations and learning journeys possible within this discipline?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sort of approach might be right for the discipline? • What strategies might work best? What literature exists in the discipline to support this work and what use is made of it? Are there opportunities to produce new knowledge attending to issues about student habitus in this discipline? How could this be taken forward? • How best might this work be embedded in the curriculum? • How is the success of NT students promoted and celebrated in the | | |

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| | discipline? What case studies can you make available? How? | | |
| Personal tutor support | <p>What principles underpin existing models of personal tutoring? To what extent do these take account of ideas about student habitus? Or the 'third shift'?</p> <p>What sort of training do personal tutors undertake to enable them to support effective transition at the individual level?</p> <p>What development might they need to do?</p> <p>How could approaches to personal tutoring take better account of life course stories and learning journeys?</p> | | |
| Peer support | <p>What models of peer support are already in place?</p> <p>To what extent does existing practice take account of issues around identity, habitus and 'third shift' to ensure that new students are supported by peers who have experience of managing similar transition dilemmas?</p> | | |
| Developing Literacies for Transition | To what extent is there awareness that students transitioning from FE to HE may experience forms of academic writing that are unfamiliar to them (especially in their particular discipline?) | | |

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| | <p>How is student support around transitioning to HE academic writing practices discussed and modelled?</p> <p>How are new HE literacies explicitly taught and learned? And how is this embedded in curriculum design in all disciplines?</p> | | |
| 2.2 Risk | | | |
| Describing risk | <p>How are ideas about 'risk' currently conceptualised? What sorts of thinking tools are used to help students and teachers think about 'risk' in relation to the development of a successful student identity?</p> | | |
| Acknowledging risk | <p>What sorts of personal risks are students taking in joining the programme? How do you know?</p> <p>How is good risk analysis and management supported?</p> <p>How is 'failure' discussed, enabled, supported?</p> | | |

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Appendix 1: Focus group questions

General

- 1 There is a real sense of confidence about transitioning from the group of participants who responded to our questionnaire. To what extent does this reflect your experience?
- 2 We did find a gap, however, between expectations and experience in the act of transition. Why do you think that is?
- 3 There is a strong sense in the data of participants negotiating their way towards some form of 'professional identity' - a large number of participants identified this as a goal - why do you think gaining a professional identity is so important?
- 4 How is your professional identity emerging/forming/developing? Why do you think professional identity, becoming professional is so important to people?
- 5 Do you see yourself differently now that you're a student? And do you think other people see you differently?
- 6 Post transition some participants talked about relationships with tutors being different - is this your experience? How different?
- 7 Many participants talked about needing to develop new skills as a learner in relation to balancing workloads, managing time etc. How have your perceptions of being a good learner changed? How well equipped did you feel to make the change?

Questions about locality

- 1 Why did you choose to stay within the West Midlands region? What for you are the advantages or disadvantages of this decision?
- 2 To what extent do friends and family support you in your studies at HE?
- 3 We're wondering whether some universities have a sense of being more 'local'? To what extent does your university feel 'local'? Does it matter?
- 4 How might your experience have been different had you gone outside the region? Or at Solihull outside the institution?
- 5 Thinking about your 'home' university - to what extent did it work hard enough to make you feel like a 'fish in water'? What would you identify as the biggest barrier/enabler?

Questions about work

- 1 We found that a significant number of students didn't work part-time which went against our expectations? Does this reflect your experience? The experience of your peers?

Questions about age/life course

- 1 Some participants talked about age/life stage impacting on experience of study both positively and negatively - how do you think age/life stage impacts on the HE experience?
- 2 How do you feel you've changed?
- 3 Lots of people said they were looking forward to the challenge, is that how you feel, is that your experience?

Concluding question

- 1 Participants gave plenty of advice to 'would be students'. Would you advise anyone to go to University? Why? Why not?

Appendix 2: Information leaflet

Can you help with our research?

This leaflet tells you about our project, which is all about students making the transition from FE to HE. We hope the leaflet will be useful, and we would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Why is this research being done?

We are trying to find out more about local students' experiences of making the move from FE to HE. This research is designed to help us create some useful materials to help future students to make that move smoothly.

Who will be in the project?

We hope to recruit a number of students who have moved from Solihull College to one of the participating local universities:

- Birmingham City University and Solihull College
- Newman University
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of Worcester.

What will happen during the research?

We are gathering information about students' experiences of moving from FE to HE through a mass survey. The survey material will not name anyone in any of the published reports that we expect to flow from this research. Everyone involved will be anonymised.

In addition, we hope to follow up the survey with a number of focus groups which we would like to film. Taking part in a focus group is voluntary. The resulting data will be read by other colleges and universities interested in helping students to make the move from FE to HE.

What questions will be asked?

We will be asking you about your experiences of moving from FE to HE. We are especially interested in finding out what FE colleges and universities can do to make that transition a positive experience.

What will happen to you if you take part in the focus groups?

If you agree, we will record your contribution to the focus group discussion as we intend to use the material for video case studies on the project website.

Could there be problems for you if you take part?

We hope you will enjoy talking to us, but if at any time you want to stop talking, we will stop. If you have any problems with the project, please tell any of the researchers involved in this work, or you can email us at: CRE-research@bcu.ac.uk.

Will doing the research help you?

We hope you will enjoy participating in this project with us. The research will help colleges and universities to put in place strategies and information to support students like you to make a positive transition from FE to HE.

Who will know that you have taken part in the research?

No one will know that you have taken part in the research. Any personal data that you give us will be treated as confidential and will not appear in our final report. Any contributions to the discussion will be reported entirely anonymously and any comments you make during our discussions can be withdrawn at any point should you change your mind about taking part.

Do you have to take part?

You decide if you want to take part and, even if you say 'yes', you can drop out at any time or say that you don't want to answer some questions. You can tell us that you will take part by signing the consent form.

Will you know about the research results?

This project will run for six months and the final report will be available in October 2015. We will keep you updated on the progress of the research throughout the life of the project.

Who is funding the research?

The research is being funded by QAA. The project has been reviewed and approved by the relevant BCU Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for reading this leaflet

For general questions please contact us on: CRE-research@bcu.ac.uk.

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