

# What does it mean to be a contemporary higher education student?

## Conference programme and abstracts

**Day 1**

**Thursday 17 June 2021**

**Thursday 13:00 – 13:50**

**Welcome & Keynote**

**Welcome:** *Rachel Brooks (University of Surrey)*

**Keynote:** *Gritt B. Nielsen (Aarhus University)*

**Student activism as productive ‘nagging’? Equality, free speech and alternative spaces for learning**

*We must design our lives and our institutions so that the justice that is compromised remains nagging, in the margin somewhere, in a bracket that does not go away, to pique our souls and goad us into future action (Mansbridge 1996, p. 59).*

In recent years, there has been a marked upsurge in student mobilization to promote social justice and equality at universities in countries like the USA, the UK and Denmark. Students criticize their universities for reproducing norms and practices that systematically marginalise or discriminate against certain bodies and voices in academia. In contrast to the public and sometimes confrontational activism used by students in the USA and the UK, students in Denmark tend to engage in more dialogue-oriented forms of everyday activism that are not explicitly connected to (but still resonate with) larger social movements. In this paper, I use the case of student activism in Denmark as a window onto contemporary negotiations and core frictions around what it means, and should mean, to be a student. Taking the point of departure in different ‘informal’ or ‘open’ letters sent by students in Denmark, I explore the emerging tensions between creating more inclusive and equal spaces for learning, and upholding ideals of academic freedom or free speech. In particular, I show how international debates around identity politics and free speech as well as institutional practices around reputation management and student participation unfortunately often work to discourage important dialogue and exploration of alternative spaces for learning. With inspiration from Mansbridge (1996), I argue that a central task for both students and their institutions is the cultivation of exploratory and critical spaces that can productively ‘nag’ established practices and norms and goad us into future action.

**Thursday 14:00 – 15:15**

**Panel 1: ‘Good’ and ‘ideal’ students**

**How is a ‘good’ student shaped, and what is a ‘good’ student anyway?**

*Adam Tate (Oxford Brookes University)*

This paper offers emergent findings from my doctoral study exploring how the traditional three-year full-time undergraduate student (FTUG) experience is shaped in response to contemporary state restructuring, the subsequent articulations in networks of power influencing students in England’s higher education (HE), and the impact upon behaviours and practices of FTUG students (Morrissey, 2013; Sanchez et al., 2015). My research focuses upon how the role of HE in England, and the roles of those working and studying within it, how that is changing in the light of the reorganisation of funding, fees, student number allocations, and notably Covid-19. This paper explores the change in positioning

of FTUG students, where they are increasingly positioned as consumers whilst simultaneously being subject to a growing number of influences and nudges that act to shape and script student behaviours, and hence the identity of what it means to be a FTUG student.

The paper offers insights to context of how sector ambivalence is experienced and understood by FTUG students, with additional evidence drawn from other stakeholders in the HE ‘network of power’ including staff responsible for assuring the quality of the student provision, teaching staff, and Students’ Union representatives. The research will utilise a corpus to develop a lexicon of language seen being deployed across the HE sector in England, with a focus on external media and internal policy impacting upon/attracting FTUG students. It then will draw upon qualitative data from interviews and group interviews, my methodological approach utilises a Foucauldian post-structuralist biopolitical framework to provide a mapping of ‘where’ and ‘how’ interactions occur within and across the ‘networks of power’ in England’s HE (Foucault, 2010).

In the discussion, the paper will present new empirical knowledge on the reorganisation of HE at a time of state restructuring (both in light of post-Dearing report and, currently, Covid-19), and the intensified concerns about (in)security and sustainability of England’s HE sector. It will also develop a theoretical understanding of how, in times of change, individuals understand their ‘role’ in HE at a moment in time; in particular, how one ‘becomes and knows what it is to be a student’ (Neilsen, 2015). It will present a framing of England’s HE in the Global Knowledge Economy, and what the demands are of Universities in creating certain ‘types’ of graduates.

My paper is therefore a response to calls for a much deeper understanding of what it means to ‘become’ and ‘be’ a FTUG student in the contemporary HE sector in England; and how FTUG student and staff roles are governed, particularly with the reorganisation of funding and fee structures (Gorman, 2012; Ball, 2013). This is therefore an attempt to generate greater awareness of the ethical implications of HE biopolitics and draw light to the ‘networks of power’ involved in the relationship between the state, universities and students.

## **Unpacking the concept of the ‘ideal’ student in higher education**

*Tiffany Chiu (Imperial College London)*

*Billy Wong (University of Reading)*

In this presentation, we will discuss our understanding of the ‘ideal’ student in higher education, a working concept that we argue will promote a more transparent conversation about the explicit, implicit and idealistic expectations of what it means to be a university student. This paper interrogates how the concept of the ideal student is understood, interpreted and recognised, as well as challenged and negotiated by university staff and students. In doing so, expectations of students are made more explicit, which can play a key role in reducing inequalities exacerbated by assumptions. As the global higher education sector moves towards a marketisation that manifests consumer rights and student demands, it is crucial that expectations of university students are clearly communicated between educators and learners, to minimise discrepancies of expectations that can negatively contribute to student experiences and outcomes.

We draw on Max Weber’s (2009) theory of ideal types, which is understood as the mental constructs that we develop to make sense of and comparisons with reality. Weber argued that ideal types are imperative in the functioning and stability of societies because individual members of society can associate their own views and experiences with these ideals, as a point of reference, to further construct, develop and negotiate their social understanding and interactions. For example, ideal types can help us to appreciate and comprehend the roles of schools and teachers, which are constructed and developed over time through lived experiences and reflections, as well as through different ideas, expectations and anticipations about their roles and responsibilities. As such, ideal types can support the functioning of societal normality by being part of the socialisation process that provides us with the

dispositions to interpret, react and respond to the complexities of everyday life occurrences. Conversely, implicit and occluded expectations of students have long disadvantaged those who struggled to understand or 'play' the higher education game, especially students from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds. The concept of the ideal student can potentially reduce the uncertainty that some students may have about what lecturers expect from them, as such unfamiliarity can contribute or exacerbate existing social inequality.

Informed by 33 focus groups with 132 university staff and students, we focus on how the ideal student is perceived, challenged and negotiated. Our data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective which recognises social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced. Further details of the methodology will be presented. In essence, we argue that the ideal student has important conceptual and practical implications for higher education, especially the importance of explicitness and the dangers of presumptions. The concept has the potential to bridge differences and manage expectations between lecturers and students by offering a platform where expectations of university students are elaborated. We conclude with a working definition of the ideal student, which we argue encompasses desirability, imperfection and realism. We will also share some practical implications for learning, teaching and curriculum development in higher education.

### **The ideal student in HE: Mature students' struggles to fit into the norms**

*Andrea F. M. Gregersen and Katia Bill Nielsen (University of Copenhagen)*

Universities and study programmes present students with norms and expectations in relation to the way students should perform in order to be recognised as 'good' students within the specific context. These norms and expectations are conveyed both explicitly and implicitly, for example through the ways teaching and learning is organised as well as the way time schedules are used to structure students' paths through higher education (Ulriksen 2009). In this abstract we investigate how these norms and expectations pose certain challenges to mature students, who due to their age and often different life situations do not fit the norm and expectations of what it means to be 'an ideal student' (Wong & Chiu 2019).

The analysis builds on empirical material from two research projects, both carried out among students at the University of Copenhagen. The analysis includes material from six different study programmes. Data consist of a range of different qualitative methods including ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, video diaries and workshops.

In the analysis one aspect that stood out, was how being a mature student posed specific challenges. An example is first-year student Nina who is in her thirties and thereby above the average age for a first-year student in her programme. She explained that she sometimes felt a bit alienated in the social interactions. She got the impression that her peers viewed her as being in a 'different place' than them and did not expect her to want to participate. In turn, she felt that everyone was "busy making friends and clinging to them". She continued "I have less of a need for that. Which can then backfire, because you feel like lonelier [on campus], because everyone has created such close social groups" (Video diary).

Nina was older than the average student, and did not have the same needs or expectations regarding the social environment. Other students also challenged by the expectations at the programmes were students with kids, who did not have the same opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Consequently, being a mature student posed certain challenges, as these students were viewed differently by their peers and had other priorities.

Across the study programmes, we found that activities taking place in the social and informal sphere of the university played an important role for students. These activities were significant for students' development of study practices, their process of learning to navigate their studies and in finding possible future paths. Furthermore, these social arenas were crucial to the students' identity work and in

creating a sense of belonging within the programmes. In the presentation we will further discuss how the norms and expectations create potential exclusions of mature students, and how it affects their access to learning.

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**Thursday 14:00 – 15:15**

**Panel 2: Students and place**

### **Becoming a university student? Exploring place, affect and possibility in widening participation and higher education decision making**

*Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Emily Danvers (University of Sussex)*

Here we discuss research on experiences of widening participation (WP) interventions through the UK National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), supporting under-represented groups into higher education (HE). WP including NCOP often has particular focus on the decision to go to university, attempting to trigger this decision through intervention. We argue that this decision does not happen in a moment because of a successful WP intervention, but is the slow culmination of messages around who a university student is and how this fits with individuals' perception of themselves and their capabilities (O'Shea 2018).

NCOP focuses on geographical location through postcode as a proxy for disadvantage. Within NCOP there is limited focus on measuring 'success' around young people's thoughts and feelings as they negotiate the possibility of HE, although the importance of place and its relationship to complex classed formations of possibility emerges centrally (Danvers & Hinton-Smith, 2021: 70). Emphasis on aspiration (Hinton-Smith 2012) and capitals (O'Shea 2015) endemic in WP underplays individuals' perception of what is possible for someone like them. Prospective students become positioned as agentic choosers only needing persuading to take opportunities open to them. What remains outside this narrative is what individuals imagine is possible (Sellar & Gale 2011), whether they are able to recognise themselves in the interactions with university students and staff offered through outreach opportunities, and hence whether university could be for them.

From a much larger sample of quantitative and qualitative data, here we draw on insights from focus groups with 76 young people aged 14-19 and 7 individual 'walking interviews' with WP students at their place of FE study. Through this data we identify the hidden importance of affect, the emotional dimension to HE decision-making. We argue that dominant approaches to WP convey 'scant attention being paid to the affective dimensions of transitioning into HE' (Danvers & Hinton-Smith 2021: 69) and do not 'enable attention to other relevant aspects of identity and experiences' (ibid). This includes how prospective and existing students perceive their legitimacy as HE students, temporally and spatially embedded in experienced pasts, presents, (imagined) futures, and wider familial and community contexts. Messages from parents, families, teachers, peer groups, and media inform what individuals believe about themselves and people like them. For example one Year 9 girl explained how she would be nervous of stating where she lived on her UCAS form as this might put universities off offering her a place by positioning her as being someone 'like them' (2021: 69). This represents the importance of 'place and its concurrent histories and connections to formations of class' (Danvers & Hinton-Smith 2021: 69). As young people contemplate becoming a university student, moving away from where they are now both figuratively and geographically, they can be 'haunted' (Gordon 2008) by experienced incongruence of this new student identity with their past lives, drawing them back (Danvers & Hinton-Smith 2021:75).

## References

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## **The remote 'stayer' as higher education student: Challenges to narratives of staying, leaving and studying in small island locations**

*Holly Henderson (University of Nottingham)*

In discussions of remote or rural 'stayers', higher education is understood as a point of transition between staying and leaving, either requiring or offering the opportunity to move from a rural or remote location and gain graduate level qualifications (Theodori and Theodori, 2015). The point of transition is social and temporal as well as geographical, with the undergraduate degree marking a shift into a professional or educational social class, a progression to adulthood and independence, and a geographical relocation (O'Shea et al., 2019). These associations between higher education and rural or remote 'stayers' are based, however, on the geographical inequalities of higher education systems that have seen degree-level education available only in urban centres, thus requiring that students from rural and remote places relocate in order to study. This paper asks how the figure of the stayer is changed by the relatively recent provision of higher education opportunities in some rural and remote contexts.

How are understandings of the role of higher education and the decision to 'stay' in a rural or remote place challenged if it is possible both to 'stay' and to study for an undergraduate degree?

In order to explore this question, the paper presents findings from a multi-sited case study looking at access to and experiences of higher education on small islands with relationships to the UK. While acknowledging the problematic urban-centric positioning of these locations as 'remote', the paper uses the term in commonality with islands studies scholarship (see, for example Alexander, 2016; Royle, 2002) in order to both draw on and challenge shared perceptions of non-urban places and higher education. The student participants in this project were studying for higher education qualifications in small island locations and therefore represent instances in which staying in a remote location was unusually compatible with degree-level study. The paper argues that with its visible boundaries, the small island location exaggerates the distinction between staying and leaving that is fundamental to the definition of the remote 'stayer'.

Using a spatial narrative approach (de Certeau, 1984) to analyse qualitative interviews from the project, the paper identifies three narrative connections made by students between the boundaries of their remote location and higher education. The first describes how the boundary around the island is solidified by the decision to stay for higher education, reinforcing belonging to and possibilities within place. The second focuses on the role of the boundary in sustaining higher education futures against potential threats associated with leaving the island. The third highlights the temporally porous nature of the spatial boundary, being more firmly established in the present in order to enable future mobility.

Each of these findings challenges traditional understandings of the role of higher education in prompting social and geographical transition from remote and rural areas through the figure of the ‘stayer-student’.

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### **Becoming and being a university student: Chinese rural students' struggles for recognition and identity work in urban universities**

*Jiexiu Chen (University College London)*

China's social, economic and political environment has gone through significant changes since the College Entrance Examination was restored in 1977, which marked the beginning of widening higher education access in China and the growing importance of meritocracy in enrolment. Since then, many rural students managed to enter urban universities and change their life trajectories through higher education (Lin and Wu, 2010). However, migrating across layers of structural constraints, such as the stratified higher education system, significant urban-rural inequality, and a strong likelihood of students in rural areas having disadvantaged family backgrounds, those exceptional rural students faced with dramatic transitions and challenges in the field of urban university.

Drawing upon 50 rural students' narratives about their educational trajectories, this research investigated on participants' classed experiences of negotiating their role as a student in the field of urban university. I adopted the life history approach to explore the participants' own perception of self and the social world and to discover 'the inner experience of individuals, how they interpret, understand, and define the world around them' (Faraday and Plummer, 1979, p.776). In terms of the analysis, I applied Bourdieu's conceptual tools, particularly habitus and field, and Sayer's discussion on the moral aspects of class inequality to understand rural students' strategies of transforming their rural habitus in the field of urban university (Bourdieu, 1984, 2000; Sayer, 2005a, 2005b).

I argued that the struggle for recognition was at the center of rural students' experiences of (re)fashioning their rural habitus in accordance with the field of urban university. To be specific, I found participants of this research creatively navigate their transformative journeys through institutional recognition and rural morality. First, the strategy of gaining institutional recognition was widely applied by participants to achieve a sense of self-worth in the novel field of urban university, when they encountered with the devaluation and misrecognition of their cultural capital generated in the field of rural schooling. Specifically, participants of 1980s and 1990s cohort groups employed official identity (urban residential status) and 2000s and 2010s cohorts employed academic/professional qualifications to obtain the sense of recognition. Second, many participants in this research have referred to certain kinds of rural morality to justify their authority to be at university, such as 'diligent', 'hard-working' and 'genuine'. I suggested drawing moral boundaries between urban and rural students was one of the common strategies applied by participants, to gain recognition and the sense of value in the field of urban university. They established solidarity among people with shared moral values

and utilised their rural moralities to negotiate their journey through the university that was generally represented as an urban (middle-class) culture. I emphasised the importance of recognising rural students' capacity of negotiating their own social space in the field of urban university, rather than only viewing them as disadvantaged rural survivors, though I also noticed the hidden injuries and habitus ambivalences that cast an enduring shadow on rural students' mobility journey.

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**Thursday 15:20 – 16:35**

**Panel 3: Wellbeing and disability**

### **Students' experiences of psychosocial problems in higher education: "Climbing Mount Adversity"**

*Trine Wulf-Andersen (Roskilde University)*

This paper focus on students' experiences of psychosocial problems and of how these problems become significant related to ideas of how to be a student of higher education. Over the last decade, the numbers of young people with mental health problems (e.g. stress, anxiety, and depression) have increased considerably in the western countries (Meriläinen & Kuittinen, 2014, Ibrahim et al. 2013, Collins & Mowbray, 2005, Megivern et al. 2003). In the Nordic countries, mental health problems are currently the predominant health concern with respect to young people (Kolouh Söderlund & Lagerkranz 2016). Students of higher education, too, suffer from mental health problems: International research documents that on average one in five students experience some mental health problem during their time of study – some studies even report numbers as high as one in three students (ibid., Storrie et al, 2010).

At the same time, students experiencing psychosocial problems often meet the attitude in educational contexts that, when experiencing this type of problems, they are not suited for university at all; probably they are struggling (partly) because they are not adequately qualified. Experiencing psychosocial problems seems understood as antithetical to prevalent, culturally normative ideas of normal or proper students of higher education.

The paper departs from two students' stories of psychosocial problems, struggles and successes. Their stories and perspectives on who and what, inside and outside of education, have challenged and helped them "climb Mount Adversity" and complete higher education, work as my entry point and exemplary cases (Flyvbjerg 2006) for discussing our general research findings. The presentation captures insights from our broader analyses of students' 'thick descriptions' of inclusion, exclusion and the questioning of their identity as students (Wulf-Andersen & Larsen 2020). I discuss how their experience could be starting point for understanding and imagining students of higher education differently.

The paper's empirical basis is a longitudinal qualitative research project, the Student Life Project (2018–21), following students in Danish higher education with a range of psychosocial problems. Theoretically, the project builds on critical educational research and critical research into mental health. 50 students were followed by the research team over a period of six to eighteen months, in several rounds of in-depth interviewing, exploring students' specific experience of psychosocial problems and educational contexts (current and previous), their broader everyday life, social networks and self-understandings. Furthermore, we have asked students to point out a place of importance to them and

visited the place with them. These visits widen and deepen the field of attention and bring sensuous experience to the fore.

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## **Navigating an ableist space: Politicising the ‘disabled student experience’ in higher education**

*Juuso Henrik Nieminen (University of Eastern Finland)*

As massified higher education (HE) opens its doors to more and more students, HE will need to adapt to the needs of several underrepresented student groups whose access to HE has previously been restricted. One such group is students with disabilities. To understand the inclusion and exclusion processes of these students, earlier studies have largely focused on reporting their experiences (e.g., McKinney & Swartz, 2020). Often, the conclusions align with Madriaga et al.'s study (2010): While many of these experiences are similar to any HE students', students with disabilities face specific barriers during their studies. It is often argued that the 'disabled experience' needs to be 'understood' better to guide inclusive practices; often, empirical studies on these experiences rely on data-driven analysis methods, such as thematic analyses, to highlight the students' own unique experiences (cf. McKinney & Swartz, 2020).

However, as HE as an institution has not been originally designed to include everyone - quite the opposite - issues arise. Dolmage (2017) has coined the term academic ableism to show how modern HE still largely draws on the ideal of normality through inaccessible architecture and teaching practices that frame students with many kinds of disabilities as abnormal. In this presentation, I utilise the concept of ableism to critically examine earlier research on the experiences of students with disabilities in HE, and the role of research in both challenging and maintaining the ableist structures of HE. The presentation draws on a narrative interview study (Nieminen & Pesonen, forthcoming) that sought to understand the experiences of three students with learning disabilities in Finland, where HE strongly builds on the medical accommodation model (Nieminen, 2021). I introduce a sociopolitically oriented narrative analysis as a way to understand both the unique aspects of each students' lived experiences ("data-driven analysis"), and the ableist structures framing such experiences ("theory-driven analysis"). These three students needed to navigate the ableist space of Finnish HE by framing their experiences through the notion of abnormality. It is argued that if the experiences of students with disabilities are not politicised, research might not be able to challenge the ableist structures of HE, leaving initiatives for 'inclusion' fall flat (cf. Nieminen, 2021).



## References

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## **Students against markets. To be or not to be a free education activist in England?**

*Hector Rios-Jara (University College of London)*

Since the tripling of tuition fees in 2010 in English universities, different student campaigns have resisted and criticised the implementation of market-orientated policies in universities. Unlike their international peers, the English student movement has not successfully stopped or reversed market policies (Brooks, 2017; Della Porta, Cini, & Guzman-Concha, 2020). Although the free education campaign has played a significant role in keeping alive the demand for free education and a culture of resistance and opposition to marketisation, that campaign never reached political momentum and broader support (Ríos-Jara, 2019). Most of the research has focused on the causes and consequences of the 2010 wave of student protests, while there is little understanding on what happened with student activists after 2012 and how the free education campaign managed to survive and reinvent itself over the decade (Cini, 2018; Myers, 2017).

Between 2010 and 2019, the Free Education Campaign suffered significant changes in its organisations, strategy, culture, and links with higher education and party politics. The changes inside the campaign reveal the difficulties and constant reinvention that student activists experienced and how political activism has changed in universities over the decade. The paper analyses the clashes and relationship between different profiles and repertoire of organisations and strategies of activists involved in the English free education campaign and how activists interact with university students and the higher education sector between 2010-2019.

Based on qualitative interviews with activists, the paper argues that student activists have developed a distinctive anti-market culture inside universities. This culture is distinguished by liquid and horizontal systems of coordination, pluralist and non-normative environments of participation, a tactical preference for direct action and direct participatory democracy and deep mistrust in institutional forms of political representation. Despite its distinctive culture, Free education activists have remained an isolated and fragmented phenomenon in English universities. After 2011, the campaign and its activists have a low connection with the wider student population and other activists' networks. The campaign also tended to disperse internally, having low ties to higher education institutions and party politics. The paper finishes reflecting on the difficulties that campaigners face fighting for free education in universities, persuading other students to get involved in the campaign and the role that the campaign played in higher education policy over the last decade.

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**Thursday 15:20 – 16:35**

**Panel 4: Student identities and changing experiences**

**Standing out and fitting in: Being a male student in nursing, social work and primary education**

*Lucy Grimshaw, David Littlefair, Sue Jackson & Andrew Melling (Northumbria University)*

Our paper seeks to explore what it is like to be a male undergraduate student in university departments where they form a small minority group. In the UK and elsewhere increased attention is being paid to male students in higher education with regards gender inequalities and segregation; concerns about access and attainment; and a focus on lad cultures and behaviour. Gender inequalities in higher education are nothing new; for centuries women were excluded from higher education institutions but in various countries women now outnumber men at undergraduate level. This inequality varies according to discipline and subject area. It is reversed overall, for example in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) but within STEM subjects men form the minority of students on Psychology, Biology and Nursing courses. However, nursing, education and social work undergraduate courses are overwhelmingly female reflecting the gender segregation in these occupations and the labour market.

This paper discusses the experiences of male students who form a minority group on nursing, social work and primary education undergraduate degree courses in a university in the north of England. We will present initial findings from a research project which aimed to (i) understand the experiences of male undergraduate students; and (ii) examine how we might provide effective support to male students to improve their attainment and satisfaction, reduce attrition and identify potential barriers to recruitment. The paper is based on data collected during focus groups. We will discuss how male students understand themselves as students in relation to gender, class and sexuality throughout the student journey, from access and recruitment; teaching and learning environment on campus and placement; to future career prospects. It examines the gendered processes and practices which impact on male students within higher education outlining how they navigate gender stereotypes and employ emotional labour to build relationships to cope with standing out and to help them fit in.

**What does it mean to be a contemporary higher education nursing student?**

*Helene Snee (Manchester Metropolitan University)*

Universities have been providing nursing education since the late 1950s, although it was not until 2013 that nursing became an all-graduate profession. While widening participation initiatives and policy resources (and in turn, sociological research) have tended to concentrate on groups who may have the potential to attend elite higher education institutions but are under-represented, there are debates over whether academic education, elite or otherwise, should be the priority for nursing careers. Moreover, in contrast to this vision of education as the driver of social mobility, the debates in nursing education consider whether academic requirements are holding back some desirable individuals. Marketization and individualism also pervades nursing education, but it has been incorporated into neoliberal discourse as ‘same but different’. This paper draws on an analysis of recent changes to nursing education policy (Snee, White and Cox 2021) alongside first-hand accounts of newly-qualified nurses

to explore how nursing challenges assumptions about what it means to be a contemporary higher education student and the idea of a common ‘student experience’.

These accounts are drawn from an ongoing project exploring the impact of COVID-19 on nursing education. As might be expected, the COVID-19 outbreak meant that undergraduate pre-registration nursing degrees were disrupted as clinical placements could not be provided and university campuses closed. Students in the final six months of their programme in England were asked to volunteer or ‘opt in’ to support the NHS through working in clinical practice as an ‘Aspirant Nurse’. The nursing degree cohort graduating in 2020/21 not only found themselves in these unprecedented circumstances at the end of their degree, they were also the first to have to pay tuition fees and lose the NHS bursary. Despite this, the student-as-consumer idea was not at the forefront of the participants’ understanding of their education. Their stories also offer insights into how ‘student experience’ is shaped by a range of factors including geography, class and age, and the development of a professional habitus rather than academic identity amongst nursing undergraduates.

### **Changing Spaces and Changing Structures: Evidencing the lived experiences of contemporary students in UK HE**

*Anna Fletcher, Amy Ramdehal, Liz Austen, Helen J Parkin, Teri-Lisa Griffiths & Jill Dickinson  
(Sheffield Hallam University)*

There have been several claims by higher education agencies, organisations, and institutions that they know and understand students’ experiences of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The dominant method of data gathering has been the student survey – see Office for Students, Gravity Assist Report 2021[1], wonkhe/Pearson Expectation Gap Survey 2020/2021[2], JISC Digital Experience Survey 2020/21[3] as examples from the UK HE sector. Mirrored within institutions, this data has often provided contradictory and conflicting perceptions of the transition to online/blended/hybrid teaching and learning. Access to, and the effectiveness of, current approaches has been the primary interest. This paper seeks to provide a deeper exploration of students’ experiences, narrowing the focus to imposed changes in structures and spaces.

This paper explores the lived experiences of contemporary students in one UK Higher Education institution. The paper draws on two institutional research projects: The ‘Digital Day in the Life’ project and the ‘Changing Spaces’ project. Both projects researched students’ lived experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic using creative qualitative methods to encourage reflection. The projects aimed to explore how being a student has changed, practically, emotionally, and conceptually. Both research teams consisted of alumni students, working as Graduate Interns, and academic researchers working in a variety of institutional roles.

The ‘Digital Day in the Life’ project used solicited diaries as a part of the data gathering, asking participants to record daily activities, rather than using unsolicited or pre-existing records. The diaries were then used as data and prompts for focus groups for further exploration and to address any potential bias through inaccurate recall. Students were asked to complete short diary entries over three, three-week periods (in February, March, April 2021) and upload them onto a secure (and well known) VLE platform. The themes for the diaries were: Structure and Timetabling; Engagement; Assessment and Feedback.

The Changing Spaces project explored the experiences of both lecturers and students as they navigated the transitions to the blended teaching and learning environment that was necessitated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Adopting the theoretical framework of sociomateriality, the research drew on a combination of focus groups and interviews, and employed creative photovoice methods, to examine perceptions of the institutional approaches to support the imposed changes at pivotal points during the 19/20 and 20/21 academic year. Key themes included: wellbeing; the student experience; merging home/work/study spaces; technology; and networks.

Triangulated conclusions will address the changing nature of student experiences, with a focus on evidencing the impact of changing institutional policies and practices.

[1] <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/gravity-assist-propelling-higher-education-towards-a-brighter-future/>

[2] <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-expectation-gap-ii-students-hopes-for-learning-and-teaching-in-the-next-normal/>

[3] <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>

**Day 2**

**Friday 18 June 2021**

**Friday 9:30 – 10:45**

**Panel 5: Purposes and possibilities**

**What does higher education mean to contemporary university students?**

*Gregor Schäfe (FernUniversität in Hagen)*

Aims and goals or the ‘mission’ of higher education cannot be viewed as a monolith that goes through times unchanged. The non-academic world, which is home to the research objects and focus of academia changes constantly. And so does higher education itself. Never without context and reciprocal connections to other ‘fields’ (Bourdieu 1977) outside of academia. Different models and systems contest for the dominant position within higher education and its understanding, often resulting in a mixture of different ideas of higher education within one higher education system (e.g. Vabø 2011). Prominently, there are the old Humboldtian idea of higher education, higher education as a vital part to the knowledge economy, and the massification of higher education (Karseth & Solbrekke 2016). In higher education research, these different concepts of higher education are usually researched with respect to governance, teaching, institutional representation, and consequences for the research community. However, this paper wants to shift perspective to the students themselves, often invisible or treated as a passive or negligible factor in studies about higher education’s aims and goals, and their understanding of contemporary higher education: What does higher education mean to contemporary university students? A possible answer to this question will be conceptualized by introducing our current research project about educational strategies among master students in Germany. Our 95 narrative interviews also featured segments on the definition and perception of higher education and my presentation will draw on this data, to give a possible research outline for the above question and preliminary findings. Although the analysis is at its beginning, five preliminary types of understanding of higher education can be roughly outlined: higher education as a) higher vocational training and preparation for an occupation in the future, b) specialization of knowledge and immersion of specific topics of interest, c) development and sharpening of critical thinking, d) personality development, e) groundwork for future personal contributions to society on different levels (regional, national, global). These types represent ideal-types and are more indistinct in reality, but give a good view over the different approaches to higher education among current university students, which is especially interesting in the German case, as its universities were dominated by Humboldtian visions for a long time (Pritchard 2004).

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### **‘I know I have some trauma responses, but it’s not my identity’: Re-scripting deficit discourses of underrepresentation through the narratives of care experienced and estranged higher education students**

*Dr Rosa Marvell and Dr Sam Child (Oxford Brookes University)*

Within higher education research and practice, many dominant narratives about students who have experience of children’s social care or are estranged from key family members highlight significant barriers and challenges that the academy has a responsibility to tackle. Many are familiar refrains in discourses of underrepresentation. This includes foci on:

- Rates of progression into university (Centre for Social Justice, 2019);
- Loneliness and isolation (Harrison, 2017);
- Financial inequality and insecurity (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018);
- High levels of diagnosed mental health conditions (Ellis and Johnson, 2019);
- Degree classification awarding gaps (Office for Students, 2020a; 2020b); and
- Graduate transitions (Rouncefield-Swales and Bland, 2020; Stevenson et al, 2020).

These are persistent and pressing issues for student success and progression. However, as with much discourse concerning underrepresented groups of students, these trends neither fully encompass nor articulate the richness of student university praxis. Despite ‘student voice’ being an apparent stalwart in the academy, questions remain as to whose voices are most and least heard (Arnot et al, 2004), urging us to consider students’ demotic discourses (Baumann, 1996) and valued selfhood constructions (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). This is critical; if students are only offered stories of stigma and struggle, it limits possible horizons of action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

This paper traces complicating discourses through analysis of 11 narrative interviews with care experienced and estranged students studying in a post-1992 UK setting. Critically, many of the resources and strategies highlighted emerged as a result – not in spite – of students’ past experiences. Findings reflect on, inter alia, independence, financial literacy, love for learning, alternative caregiving networks, balancing working-while-studying and professional and academic horizons. In concluding, the paper argues we must prioritise the plural and situated experiences of students (Alcoff, 1991) through methodologies that trouble but can never fully destabilise power relationships (Ellsworth, 1989). By doing so, we can challenging the typologies of students which suggest underrepresented groups are somehow intrinsically lesser and lacking compared to the typified HE learner.

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## **The possibility paradox: Dominant social imaginaries and contemporary student being in Australian higher education**

*Matthew Bunn and Matt Lumb (University of Newcastle)*

Widening participation in higher education is an accelerating policy and funding concern in many western contexts. The imperative for this growth in student participation is variously couched in a language of equity and social justice, and/or nation-state productivity in relation to supposed ‘knowledge economies’, or confections blending and blurring the two.

This paper articulates a proposed paradoxical effect that discourses of choice, agency and opportunity produce as they are taken up in Australian higher education. Drawing on policy texts and recent research, the work details how students in higher education are commonly constructed within dominant social imaginaries as individual agents whom, despite differential histories and experiences of marginalisation and discrimination, navigate relatively neutral institutional conditions or level-playing fields. These ongoing processes work to cloak the effects of class, gender, race and other forms of marginalisation, establishing ‘failures’ as individual deficiencies in a variety of different forms (including deficits in, for example, aspiration, talent and intelligence). Our paper then moves to propose the existence of a paradoxical effect. Through processes of individualisation, the taking up of ‘opportunities’ and the creation of ‘successes’ are positioned as choices made at the level of the individual. As part of an ontological formation, these become the elements of a performative structure and the basis for particular logics of practice. We argue this dynamic is precisely the constraint of possibility for the individual, working as the relational manipulator of the conditions of being, and so setting forth certain ways and kinds of being as acceptable, realistic, and achievable, while inhibiting or obscuring others.

The paper does not present any process of domination as ever complete. Instead, we would contend it is struggled over, contested, and inadvertently mis-practiced. Rather, our paper presents an argument to define trajectories of formation of ‘the student’ within dominant social imaginaries. As part of this articulation - and building on existing work looking at forced perspectives and ontological limits for student being - we make a case for always attempting to apprehend the socially constructed frames that imaginers (including ourselves) bring to these processes in Australian higher education.

**From On-campus to Online: International Students Studying in the UK***Huaping Li (Shanghai Normal University)**Cristina Costa (Durham University)*

The onset of COVID-19 has triggered a quick transition in higher education to online environments. This has had consequences for academic staff, but it also has had real implications for students, many of whom have never experienced online education before. Little is known about students' experiences when their study is unexpectedly migrated online.

The switch to the online university motivated by the global pandemic impacts student groups differently. This presentation focuses on international students and on what happens when their on-campus experience is moved online. Here the focus is dual: while higher education institutions were quick to transfer their teaching online, less concern was placed on re-thinking the student wider experience as a key component of university life. Additionally, the provision of education online encouraged the imagination of students returning 'home' and seeking support in their personal networks. Such assumptions disregard students' investments in their university experience, not only economic, but also social, cultural and emotional. For international students, in particular, this impacts on and sometimes breaks up the relationships and experiences that they have been building prior to the pandemic.

In this regard, and as a response to the conference's theme, this paper explored how international students are (re)imagined in the context of a global health crisis. Drawing on a narrative research approach that has employed Diary research and narrative interviews, as a way to capture the voices of international students themselves, we present preliminary findings of an ongoing project pertaining to the experiences of international students in the context of UK HE. In this presentation, we aim to make participants' voices heard and represented in the new pedagogical space, which might provide implications for building inclusive learning spaces and responsive academic support to this often misrecognised group of students in UK higher education.

**Emotional difficulties: an affective exploration of Swiss international higher education***Gian Hernandez (Universita della Svizzera Italiana)*

Inclusive spaces in education are of utmost importance in institutions that continually reify global inequalities. International higher education literature has often taken visuals as an object of research (Esteria & Shahjahan, 2018; Gathogo & Horton Jr, 2018; Hamid, 2017; Kamola, 2014; Osei-Kofi et al., 2010; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). While this research focuses on inclusion/exclusion from prospective and current international student perspectives, the perspectives of 'domestic' students and administrators are less frequently addressed. Furthermore, the role of emotion in international higher education is commonly relegated to the emotional difficulties of international students' first experiences studying abroad (Hernandez, 2015; Pitts, 2009; Tian & Lowe, 2013; T. Y. Willis, 2015; Woolf, 2015). A critical engagement with emotions in educational contexts is necessary to explore power relations between differently represented subjects at the university (Charteris et al., 2016; Chávez, 2018; Gonzales, 2019; M. Willis & Cromby, 2020).

Affect theory is an appropriate tool to engage with emotional responses to inequity. Affect is embodied meaning-making (Wetherell, 2012), which draws focus to how meaning is discursively made of different types of bodies. Inequality faced by non-White students must be addressed creatively to assuage emotional difficulties (Stein & Andreotti, 2018, 2021). The concept of emotional difficulties entails seeing "things that may be very difficult to confront," forcing individuals to overcome specific emotional

responses to external stimuli (Boler, 1999; Nussbaum, 1996). This paper answers how students' and administrators' emotional difficulties with racial representation are enabled through the affective-discursive environment in Swiss international higher education.

This paper relies on understanding racial meaning-making as predominantly visual (Alcoff, 2005; Nakamura, 2002, 2008). Presenting images commonly found on international study office websites, the author used semi-structured interviews with photo-elicitation techniques (Harper, 2002; Shaw, 2013) to draw out participants' emotional responses to representation for analysis.

The analysis identifies three themes: familiarity, bemusement, and (hostile) indifference. Respondents showed familiarity with international office promotional material; responses included eye-rolling, chuckling, and sighing. The contempt bred by this familiarity developed into bemusement with these commonplace representations, demonstrating a failure to engage with student and administrator participants' emotional lives. Additionally, statements such as "I don't care" or "It doesn't bother me" spoken quickly and dismissively demonstrated a hostile form of indifference to discussing race issues, similar to discomfort in discussion of race in many educational contexts (Leonardo, 2005). These emotional trends shape the affective-discursive landscape of higher education and are an integral part of how students and administrators navigate the complexities of representation of student embodiment. Throughout history, discourses of discomfort, shame, and even fear are responsible for governing political reactions to world events and shaping how individuals and collectives interact (Ahmed, 2013). The findings of this paper highlight the link between the visual body, discourse, and emotions. The findings acknowledge the affective-discursive nature of race in international settings, an important first step in emotionally reckoning with the difficulties of diversity efforts in Switzerland and abroad.

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## **Positions of students who pay fees and students who do not in Finnish university education**

*Raakel Plamper (University of Turku)*

In Finland, as a part of internationalization objectives of higher education and as a new source of funding tuition fees have been suggested time after time starting from 1990's. Generally, equal educational opportunities as a common basic value of Finnish welfare system has been used as a strong argument against the tuition fees. However, in 2017 Finland obliged the higher education institutions to charge tuition fees from students outside of the EU and the EEA. This situation has created two groups in the Finnish higher education system: students who are liable to fees and students who do not have fees. As paying participants of higher education the non-EU students can be positioned and they can position themselves as customers. The aim of this study is to examine how both groups narrate their positions in relation to tuition fees. With narrative position analysis, we aim to identify 1) How the master students position themselves in relation to the situation that other students pay tuition fees and others not?, and 2) How the master students position themselves in relation to the idea of student's position as customer? The data consists of 32 master students' interviews (including 20 non-EU and 12 Finnish students). Preliminary results show that international students liable to fees position themselves often as restricted participants of higher education who distinguish clearly the circumstance-related differences between fee-paying and no-fee students. They are obliged to perform their studies in certain time because of conditions of residence permit and financial reasons when Finnish and other EU students can study with more free timetables and course choices. Again, for many Finnish students the tuition fees are a distant feature of higher education, which is rarely confronted even when studying in international master programme. Yet none of the interviewees positioned themselves as customers per se, there were students in both groups that identified features of customer role in students' daily life of studying.

**Undergraduates' orientations towards higher education: from a "customer" to a "partner"**

*Irina Shcheglova and Natalia Maloshonok (National Research University Higher School of Economics)*

One of the most important tasks for higher education researchers, experts and university administrators is to understand what it means to be a contemporary higher education student and how the university can serve students' needs to the best of their potential (Vrontis et al., 2007). Universities all over the world have been challenged by the pressures of increasing competition for students, a diversification of the student body, ongoing digital revolution and recently pandemic COVID-19 (Marginson, 2016; Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2016; Kromydas, 2017; Agasisti, & Soncin, 2021). In order to attract and retain students, universities follow the principles of one or combine several models of student-university relationships. Just to name a few widely-discussed models: consumerism, student engagement model, student-centered model, and co-production model. Nevertheless, there are a huge amount of conceptual publications discussing the current and ideal student-university relationships, little scholarship examines students orientation to higher education empirically (Budd, 2017).

The study provides some empirical evidence of students' orientation to higher education and investigates to what extent the preferred model of student-university relationships is related to the learning activity of students and their involvement in the academic environment at the university. In the paper (Maloshonok & Shcheglova, 2021), we developed five criteria for comparing student-university models and identified crucial differences of these models: (1) outcomes of higher education; (2) student participation in the educational process; (3) responsibility for learning outcomes; (4) the capacity of students to influence the educational process, courses, and programs; and (5) quality indicators. Based on these criteria we have developed an instrument for measuring students' orientation to student-university models. The study has broader implications for university policymakers as it is not limited to a specific model but it puts various models of student-university relationships in the spotlight.

The web survey using the developed instrument was conducted in spring of 2020 in 5 Russian universities. The sample consists of 1045 responses. According to the results of the survey, the consumerist orientation to higher education is prevailing among Russian students. One-third of students reported that the university should teach students only professional knowledge and skills to prepare them for a specific profession. Almost half of the students (46%) think that instructors should present material in an interactive way, so that students do not get bored. Also, 31% of students are sure that the quality of educational programs can be measured through students and graduates' feedback forms and satisfaction surveys. These attitudes represent a consumerist view on higher education.

According to students' preferences, the instruction-based model was rated as second most preferred model. 31% respondents argue that a student should learn basic theories and concepts in his/her major, and be able to reproduce material transmitted by instructors. Each seventh student thinks that the traditional lectures and seminars are the best way of knowledge dissemination. Only 8% of students highlighted the importance of the role of university in forming the picture of the world. Each tenth student reported that students and instructors should work together to acquire new knowledge. A quarter of students voted for the active participation of students in class and the development of soft skills. Also, there is the interconnection between students' responses about the desired university characteristics and their involvement in the learning process. Students, who argue that the university should teach mostly professional skills and prepare students for a specific profession throughout their life as well as students, who prefer traditional lectures and seminars, less often come to classes unprepared or skip classes compared to other students. In addition, students preferring traditional lectures and seminars less often come to classes unprepared. We can hypothesize that the current state of student-university relationship, which exists in Russian universities, corresponds to the needs of students, who prefer traditional lectures and seminars and want to get prepared for a specific profession rather than require opportunities for a transformative learning.

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## **Students’ representations in media under a debated reform of tuition fees removal in Chilean HE: A Critical Discourse Analysis of newspaper articles**

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*Ekaterina Nemkova (IESEG School of Management, France)*

*Heidi Winklhofer (Nottingham University Business School)*

The representation of the student as a consumer in some marketized Higher Education (HE) systems remains a disputable matter. This article intends to critically assess the representations of HE students identified in newspaper articles from a highly neoliberal context where the HE sector has gone a controversial policy reform of tuition fees removal. The media articles were published in the conservative Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* during the discussion and first years of implementation of this policy (2014 – 2019). In a culture of marketization, partially removing tuition fees in HE has been considered a phenomenon that counters worldwide trends that involve a strong consumerist representation of undergraduate students.

Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) three-dimensional approach is being conducted to determine the effects of discourses in the representation of students in the media coverage of the reform, beyond the well documented representation of student as a consumer. The analysis discloses the dominance of neoliberal discourses in relation to Chilean HE and a confusing public dimension of private HE institutions, hence a rejection to any possibility of free public HE. It also addresses the effects of the discourses in the reconstruction of “us” and dreams of hope for a better society. However, with regards to students, alternative, and rather conflicting, representations are unveiled in the analysis such as students as violent revolutionaries and lobbyists; and private HE students conceptualized as second class and legally excluded citizens.

In conducting this research, this article is hoping to contribute to current theories of marketization in HE and its consequences on the representations of students represented in media articles. Moreover, this research is intended to contribute about students’ constructions and representations from the Global South where little evidence can be currently found. Lastly, little empirical evidence seems to be available from contexts where the state “returns to HE” by financing, what in neoliberal societies has been long considered, a private good and where the relevance of students’ activism and movements were crucial in promoting a reform that eventually will, at least in governmental discourses, tackle social inequalities.

## **Habermas, Foucault, and Neoliberal Activism in Higher Education**

*Cedomir Vuckovic (University of Manchester)*

The colonization of higher education (Habermas, 1987) has witnessed increasingly neoliberal and marketised tendencies penetrate the everyday life of the university (Jutten, 2013). Discourses of productivity, consumerism, and individualism saturate the institution, changing the nature of academic and administrative work (see Geppert and Hollinshead, 2017), and how students experience being a student. However, studenthood is only partly experienced in the university, and students are produced as student-subjects by power and discourse outside interactions that take place in the institution too.

Research on student-activism has failed to recognise this, and I consider the range of neoliberal discourses which vie to produce particular kinds of students, how this has influenced the cultural and social resources available to student-activists within and outside the institution (Poletta, 2004), and what impact this may have on the ways in which contemporary students do activism.

Higher education's neoliberalisation, understood here as a symptom of the colonization of the lifeworld by the system (Habermas, 1984), has made certain strategies of resistance increasingly difficult for students, while simultaneously opening up other avenues of protest (see Binder and Wood, 2013). For a new group of anti-sexual harassment campaigners at a London University, neoliberalism has created new harvestable cultural and social resources for collective action (Jasper, 1997; Poletta, 2004) in the form of neoliberal discourse itself. While higher education students should not be reduced to entirely 'neoliberal subjects' or docile consumerist bodies given the pervasiveness of resistance, this paper nonetheless presents evidence that suggests some student-activists are willing to engage with capitalism, neoliberalism, consumerism and corporate discourse in order to affect change on-campus. These 'resources' are not solely drawn from the institution, however, and student-activism appears to be one way in which researchers may come to understand what the student is in the contemporary university, and how everyday life outside the institution, but central to being a student, influence people's conduct within the university.

This paper brings together Foucault's (1977; 1978) theorising on power and resistance, and Habermas's (1984; 1987) colonization thesis, to discuss findings from an ethnographic project which explored student protest in London and Manchester. Following a newly formed group of anti-sexual harassment campaigners in London, I argue these student-activists engage with and reproduce neoliberal discourses of consumerism, 'branding', and networking in order to, in their words, 'end sexual harassment on university campuses.' This case-study may therefore indicate not only the ways in which some students engage with power and discourse, but how such students understand the most effective way to influence the behaviour of their peers on-campus.

**Friday 10:50 – 12:05**

**Panel 8: Social class and inequalities**

## **We were not like the others: Mobility and stigma at a professional college in western India**

*Leya Mathew (Ahmedabad University)*

This paper analyzes the narratives of those who transferred from a low-status, two-year, vocational diploma program to a prestigious, four-year, professional degree program to examine strategies of mobility and belonging. Firstly, I explore the discursive constitution of the diploma-degree divide along assumptions of merit, and the unusual elasticity of merit. Following, I draw on ethnographic data to present the embodied distinctions of the diploma-degree divide at the pharma college. Though housed in the same building, the diploma program is infrastructurally, academically, and culturally marginalized and those who transfer from diploma to degree within the same college remain outcasts even after they are spatially integrated into the degree classroom. Visibly segregated, they sit, eat, and hang out as a

separate group throughout the three years of their combined program of study. In this context, I explore the stickiness of stigma narrated by D2D (diploma to degree) students from dominant class and caste backgrounds. Their lack of familiarity and unease with stigma is in stark contrast with the naturalization of invisibility narrated by students from marginal class and caste backgrounds. Meanwhile, the affective integration of degree students from reserved categories, that is, historically untouchable and indigenous communities, with the stigmatized D2D group illuminates the contours of stigma as well as the unlikely solidarities that emerge in the margins. Lastly, I focus on the narratives of D2D students who were most fully able to escape stigma. That they were female, upper class, and upper caste; able to mobilize economic and cultural resources strategically; and gained fuller acceptance through the possibilities of heterosexual attraction alerts us to the perverse affordances of patriarchy for mobility and belonging. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2004) and Mary E John's (2013) notions of the stickiness of stigma, I try to tease out where and how stigma sticks and unsticks to different kinds of bodies and the implications of such stigma for personal and national projects of higher education.

### **Non-traditional Students and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Exploring Student Support as Social Network**

*Rille Raaper, Chris Brown & Anna Llewellyn (Durham University)*

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis in higher education (HE). To ensure the ongoing delivery of HE during the pandemic, universities rapidly introduced new practices, including shifts to online learning and teaching and innovative digital communication tools. While such reforms have been welcomed as a means to keep universities 'open', emerging scholarship from a variety of global settings has drawn attention to significant challenges these reforms present. This includes, for instance, the quality of teaching practices that resulted (Mishra et al., 2020; Wahab, 2020), as well as the effects of the pandemic on academics and their workload (Tarman, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020). Within this paper we argue that there is a pressing need to explore students' experiences of Covid-19. To date there has been limited scholarship in this area. Predominantly, this research highlights the effects of the pandemic – and particularly the closure of physical campuses – on students' mental health (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020), their access to resources (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Son et al., 2020) and engagement with online modes of teaching (Erington et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020). This paper aims to augment this emerging scholarship, therefore, by spotlighting support for non-traditional students in the UK. Both Universities UK (2020) and the Sutton Trust (see Montacute, 2020) have raised concerns about the Covid-19 implications on widening participation in UK HE's. Universities UK (2020) also argued that 'cold spots' will increase in terms of lack of support available to disadvantaged students, while demanding that the Government takes actions 'particularly for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who will suffer from prolonged absence from more traditional support' (p.4). Any sector-wide systemic support has been largely absent, making this project even more timely. This qualitative study included 10 interviews with non-traditional students from Durham University, an elite collegiate university in North East England. We apply the term non-traditional student to capture diverse student experiences related to being a first-generation student, from a lower socio-economic background, or a mature student. Our inquiry centres around the following questions: What were the key issues students encountered during the Covid-19 crisis? What support networks did students develop to address these issues? We propose an original approach to student support as comprising social networks that are dynamic, reciprocal and involving a variety of formal/informal actors. Like Wellman (2001, p.228) we argue that (student) communities function in networks, and that these networks of interpersonal ties 'provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity'. When attempting to facilitate student support for academic (learning/coursework) and wellbeing (mental health) purposes, it is therefore essential to consider what support networks students develop to reconcile the temporary loss of the university campus (Raaper & Brown, 2020). The overall aim of our paper is to

increase the sector-wide understanding of how to support non-traditional students in times of crisis and to offer an original conceptual lens through which to explore and develop student support as social networks.

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## **Marginality and invisibility: reflecting on the multiple identities of doctoral students. Disrupting assumptions on age, wealth and class**

*Francesca Bernardi*

Researching and analysing the experiences of Higher Education students are complex and problematic activities and attempting to construct students' identities can produce an aggregate of generalised characteristics, excluding some students from fair and holistic representations while accentuating their invisibility in academic discourse.

Students pursuing postgraduate courses, including doctoral research routes, are amongst those who are often represented as a broadly homogeneous group; with student identities assumed to be emerging from circumstances favourable to responding to the demands and the personal and financial investment that scholarly activities involve. This way, advanced academic scholarship appears to be conditional to having secure social and economic wealth, producing identities that are distant from the experiences of doctoral candidates in less than privileged positions. The omission of these experiences remains largely unchallenged, reproducing exclusions and assumptions around merit, class and financial stability, and reducing the potential and possibilities of representing a diverse range of student identities in research, academia and beyond.

Using a literary metaphor - from Pirandello<sup>1</sup> - as a sociological device, the analysis is an attempt to explore how assumptions and simplistic representations can foreclose opportunities to value the self-made and multiple identities of doctoral students. Unpacking the tensions produced by flattening age, class and financial status, this paper focuses on how characterising a 'singular' doctoral student identity can be counterproductive in two ways: 1) it maintains existing lacunae in the study of doctoral scholarship experiences, limiting the visibility of students whose identities are multiple and bound by societal assumptions; and, 2) it potentially contributes to a discourse of class privilege as an essential principle for the suitability and sustainability of doctoral study.

Doctoral scholarship can constitute a significant financial and personal sacrifice, and for students occupying marginal positions - in the academe and society - poverty and precarity become woven into the experience of negotiating multiple identities, as well as invisibility.

This paper draws on the author's experience of being a doctoral student, at a university in North West England, and the varying degrees of inclusivity, invisibility and marginalisation surrounding the practice of research and the formulation of an academic identity. For example, establishing a sense of belonging appeared to be a high priority at the start of the scholarship period; however, the interference of a dominant doctoral student ideal disrupted both a desire to attempt an assimilation into university life and the disposition to contest it. Encircled by class, age, and gender assumptions, the construction of a typical PhD student identity emerging from the university's discourse, including extra-curricular offerings and support, appeared to reinforce an image of young candidates on financially linear trajectories. It will be argued that these experiences reflect - implicit and overt - societal intolerance towards multiple and diverse identities associated most frequently with exceptionalism and risk.

<sup>1</sup>One, No One and One Hundred Thousand (1926).

## **Friday 12:10 – 13:00**

## **Constructing the European higher education student: Panel session & closing comments**

*Rachel Brooks, Achala Gupta, Anu Lainio (University of Surrey),  
Sazana Jayadeva (University of Cambridge) & Predrag Lažetić (University of Bath)*

There are currently over 35 million students within Europe and yet, to date, we have no clear understanding of the extent to which constructions of 'the student' are shared. Thus, a central aim of this panel session is to investigate how the contemporary higher education student is conceptualised and the extent to which this differs both within nation-states and across them. This is significant given the implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumptions that are made about common understandings of 'the student' across Europe – underpinning, for example, initiatives to increase cross-border educational mobility and the wider development of a European Higher Education Area – and arguments that higher education systems are increasingly converging around an 'Anglo-American' model as a result of massification, marketisation and the pervasiveness of neo-liberal norms (Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012; Moutsios, 2013). It is also significant in relation to exploring the extent to which understandings are shared within a single nation and, particularly, the degree to which there is congruence between the ways in which students are conceptualised within policy texts and by policymakers, and the understandings of other key social actors such as the media, higher education institutions and staff, and students themselves.

In this panel we present findings from the Eurostudents project, a comparative study of what it means to be a higher education student in six European countries (Denmark, England, Ireland, Germany, Poland and Spain). The project was conducted between 2016 and 2020, and explores the following questions: (i) How are understandings of the higher education student produced, shaped and disseminated by (a) policymakers, (b) the media and (c) higher education institutions and staff? (ii) To what extent do these understandings differ within and across European nations? (iii) How do students of different national and

social backgrounds understand the role of the higher education student? (iv) To what extent are their understandings consonant with those produced, shaped and disseminated by policymakers, the media, and higher education institutions and staff?

The panel discusses five prominent ways in which students were conceptualised in our project data: as young people in transition; enthusiastic learners; future workers; stressed and anxious; and a threat or object of criticism. We discuss how each construction was understood by different social actors, and the extent to which such understandings was shared both across and within countries.

**Closing comments:** *Rachel Brooks*