Rethinking ‘belonging’
for part-time students in HE

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context

• research into part-time, mature undergraduates and retention strategy in English HE

• multiple case study: 4 English HEIs delivering face-to-face part-time provision (2014-15)

• the discourse of ‘belonging’ in retention literature and institutional approaches – a dominant but problematic narrative
retention and belonging

• What Works (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2012)
  
  • *a sense of belonging is … critical to both retention and success’* (p10)
  
  • institutions should *actively nurture a culture of belonging* in academic and social spheres (p71)
  
  • *choosing to continue to live in the family home rather than with their student peers … combining part-time study with employment … postponing entering HE and studying as mature students. … all of these factors make it more difficult for student to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE* (p5)

• Tinto’s (1975) influential model of student integration - congruency
practices of ‘belonging’ in HE

• social/sports/enrichment/voluntary activities
• presence on campus/outside contact hours
• recognised and validated in literature, websites, strategy
• ‘typical’ student, assumptions about engagement with HE
a problematic discourse?

• uniform and universal discourse of ‘belonging’ is based on dominant idea of HE student as full-time, young, time-rich, residential…

• part-time students highly diverse: age, gender, ethnicity, educational background, qualification aim, employment/parental/caring status

• non-traditional, women returners, second chance, WP, the ‘odd’ programmes …

• a highly instrumental approach to HE, which corresponds with a devaluing of social aspects of an HE experience, reflected in comments about ‘not needing more friends’ (What Works, 2012)

• part-time students’ difference and absence viewed as problematic
part-time retention - and peripherality

- disparity between part-time/full-time retention statistics

- 33% of part-time, first degree entrants withdrew from their course prior to completion of the equivalent of the first year of study, compared to 8.6% of full-time students. (Rose-Adams, 2012:12)

- programme clusters, twilight/weekend contact hours, infill

- declining markets/numbers – part-time crisis, ‘tragedy’

- who belongs and to what?
alternative narratives of ‘belonging’?

• identity
  • conditions of belonging: the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on the back of a recognition …of shared characteristics (Hall, 2000:16) - ‘belonging’ as excluding/exclusive

• power
  • defining ‘difference’ – strategies, discourses
  • positioning of ‘different’ groups as ‘other’
  • assumption/negotiation of belonging

• space
  • the spaces of HE – the HE sector, individual providers (HEIs)
  • how/what space is occupied, who is visible? – campus, social space, disciplinary spaces
Bourdieu – belonging as relational

• ‘thinking tools’: habitus, capital and field

• problematise belonging as a relational concept in structured social space of HE

• ie: ‘belonging’ results from relations between student dispositions (habitus), their cultural capital and how this positions them in the field of HE

• part-time, mature students – fish out of water?

• institutional habitus: *students whose habitus is at odds with that of their higher education institution may feel that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, and they may be more inclined to withdraw early* (Thomas, 2002).
Brah – the dynamics of diaspora

- asks *not simply who travels but when, how and under what circumstances?*

- **power** — regimes of power operate to differentiate one group from another (*relational positioning*)

- **identity** – identities are multiple: *a multiplicity of subject positions* (1996:123),

- **space** – ideas of journey, displacement and home, the complexity of inhabiting contested space, negotiation
Massey: space, time, place

- **space** - the product of social relations shaped by power, relational not finite

- **activity space** - a device for thinking about ‘spatial networks of links and activities … HE, HEIs

- within each activity space there is a **geography of power**

- **place** - a meeting up of histories

- potential for negotiation and multiple versions of belonging?
theory into practice

• how are case study HEIs positioned in the field of HE?

• what is the geography of power within the HEI?

• how does ‘retention’ function as strategy and practice within the institution? Who/what is seen as problematic?

• how are part-time, mature undergraduates positioned within the institution?

• what spaces/places do part-time, mature students occupy/create for learning and sociality?

• (how) is belonging defined, experienced, imagined? By the institution? By staff? By students?
mapping belonging

• student workshop exercise with campus map map
• capture spatial dimensions of PTM ‘belonging’
rethinking retention and belonging

- interrogating ‘belonging’ in relation to part-time, mature undergraduates through ideas of power, identity and space/place:
  - identity as multiple, fluid, complex
  - spatial dimensions of identity and belonging
  - HEIs as diverse, with potential for multiple versions of belonging, some more powerful than others
  - diversity and complexity are counter-intuitive to universal statements of belonging
  - belonging - a continually renegotiated process

- dimensions of belonging – to capture negotiated, complex process of student persistence
discussion points?

• how is your institution positioned in the field of HE?

• what is the geography of power within your HEI?

• how does ‘retention’ function as strategy and practice within your institution? Who/what is seen as problematic?

• how are part-time, mature undergraduates positioned within your institution

• what spaces/places do part-time, mature students occupy/create for learning and sociality

• (how) is belonging defined, experienced, imagined? By the institution? By staff? By students?