

# *Commuting, transitions and belonging: the experiences of students living at home in their first year at university*

**Helen Pokorny, Debbie Holley & Suzanne Kane**

## **Higher Education**

The International Journal of Higher Education Research

ISSN 0018-1560

High Educ

DOI 10.1007/s10734-016-0063-3



**Your article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution license which allows users to read, copy, distribute and make derivative works, as long as the author of the original work is cited. You may self-archive this article on your own website, an institutional repository or funder's repository and make it publicly available immediately.**

# Commuting, transitions and belonging: the experiences of students living at home in their first year at university

Helen Pokorny<sup>1</sup> · Debbie Holley<sup>2</sup> · Suzanne Kane<sup>3</sup>

© The Author(s) 2016. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

**Abstract** In this study, our cross-case analysis of students' lives challenges the conventional home–university model of transition and highlights the importance of acknowledging the influence of this complex symbiotic relationship for students who attend university and live at home. We argue that as with stay-at-home holidays, or “staycations”, which are of such crucial importance to the tourism industry, so stay-at-home students or commuter students are vital to higher education and the term utilised here is “stayeducation”. Through the narratives of “stayeducation” students, we see how family and community aspects of students' lives are far more significant than previously realised, and our study suggests that these heavily influence the development of a student *sense of belonging*. Drawing upon biographical narrative method, this paper introduces three first-year Business and Economics students enrolled at different universities in London and explores their journeys through their transition through home, school and early university life. Ways in which key themes play out in the transition stories of our students and the challenges and obstacles for the individual are drawn out through the cross-case analysis. Findings support the existing literature around gender, class and identity; however, new insights into the importance, for these students, of family, friendships and community are presented. Our work has implications for academic staff, those writing institutional policies, and argues for the creation of different spaces within which students can integrate into their new environment.

**Keywords** Student transition · Sense of belonging · Biographical narrative · Commuter students · Student retention

---

✉ Helen Pokorny  
h.pokorny@westminster.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Leadership and Professional Development, Westminster Business School, University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS, UK

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Excellence in Learning, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK

<sup>3</sup> Salford Business School, University of Salford, Salford, Greater Manchester, UK

## Introduction

In our study (Kane et al. 2014), of student sense of belonging across three London universities it was estimated that 10–15 % of first-year students failed to develop a sense of belonging when engaging with university life and that these students were most at risk of dropout. The quantitative survey ( $n = 1346$ ) left a key question unanswered—what was happening in the lives of students as they transitioned from home to university? In particular, our study was interested in those who remained living in the family home whilst at university as they formed a large proportion of our sample. Stay-at-home students are a valuable part of the undergraduate population. Just as stay-at-home holidays, or “staycations” are important to the tourism industry, so stay-at-home students are vital to higher education, and the term utilised here is “stayeducation”. In the UK, around 25 % of students remain in their family home; a trend replicated widely across international contexts (Wojtas 2014); and set to rise in the UK to 50 % by 2020 (Taylor 2011). This paper argues that considering *sense of belonging* specifically in relation to “stayeducation” students has particular implications for policy and practice.

We start with a review of *sense of belonging* literature through the lens of students who remain at home during their studies; discuss the research design and biographical method; provide insights into individual student experiences, before drawing upon Wengraf’s (2001) cross-case analysis method of comparing and contrasting three, rather than two, cases, offering extra richness and depth to the findings. We suggest that developing a *student sense of belonging* has complex and nuanced facets when student narratives are considered. We conclude with some closing thoughts as to how individual academics and institutions can reframe their thinking in relation to the “stayeducation” student.

## Literature

Studies of student sense of belonging (ssob) are closely aligned with the work of Tinto (1975) and concepts of academic and social engagement. Thomas (2012) noted that between 33 % and 42 % of UK HE students consider withdrawing during their first year, and studies of ssob are linked with strategies relating to persistence, dropout rates and successful retention. Studies of ssob draw on both psychological and sociological factors to explore the concept at the individual level and from the social perspective (Thomas 2012).

Sense of belonging has been specifically considered in relation to class, gender and ethnicity (Read et al. 2003; Haussmann et al. 2009). Factors of culture, self-perception and career focus were identified in many studies (Hassanien and Barber 2007; Kember et al. 2010), along with the significance of “culturally relevant curricula” (Clycq et al. 2014, 813), and support to “level the playing field” in relation to student transition for all groups (Nelson et al. 2012, 83). Important perennial aspects of teaching and group belonging feature highly (Levett-Jones et al. 2008; Pym and Kapp 2013) along with “closer interpersonal relationships” related to smaller classes (Harfitt and Tsui 2015, 853); and staff–student engagement (Shoderu et al. 2012) educational delivery and transition strategies (Braxton et al. 2000; Collings 2014). Kuh et al. (2008) provide insights into the relationship between ssob and student engagement. Relationships feature strongly in the literature about student belonging. Hoffman et al. (2002) identified three main categories of factors related to a sense of belonging (1) empathetic tutors and understanding, (2) perceived peer support and (3) perceived classroom comfort.

We are particularly interested in exploring *sense of belonging* within the context of students living at home with parents or in private accommodation with other family members. A recent report suggested this group is often overlooked in relation to specific institutional policies and practices (NUS 2015). The international literature often refers to these students as *commuter students* with its connotations of distance and travel experienced by many, but not all, “stayededucation” students. Some literature suggests that such students focus on the importance of academic achievement over social integration (Grayson 2003).

Khambhaita and Bhopal (2015) report that changes to funding leading to increased student debt, mirrored around the world, has accompanied a rise in the numbers of UK students remaining in the family home. Additionally, Asian female students are more likely to remain in the family home than White females due to cultural differences in attitudes to living alone. Surveys report that many “stayededucation” students feel their social life suffers and their choice of university is limited (Sanders 2001). Case (2008, 327) also suggests that “many non-traditional students also experience a degree of alienation from their own background culture”. In addition, we note potential aspects of the “London Effect”. Since the late 1990s disadvantaged (low income) pupils attending inner London schools have reached greater levels of achievement than previously known (Ladd and Fiske 2016, 1). Improvements have been recognised at both primary and secondary levels of education. A number of potential variables have been considered in regard to these situational changes. Whilst the “London Effect” in this context relates to schools rather than universities, the link between primary, secondary and tertiary level education cannot be discounted. Two of the participants reported in this research were educated at primary and secondary level in London. Whilst we recognise the possibility of potential links, specific exploration of these is not within the remit of the research presented here. Morgan-Tamosunas (2012) has also suggested that for universities in the capital, “There is a London factor...many attending...live at home in the Greater London area, which means long travel times and a culture of students coming to classes and then leaving, which makes it “very difficult” to develop a sense of community in the university” (THE, April 26, 2012). This issue has been raised with respect to “stayededucation” students in other international urban contexts (Biddix 2015; Clark 2006).

De Beer et al. (2009) highlighted considerations around the nature of the home environment and how conducive that environment might be (or might not be) to supporting study. They suggested that living at home and lengthy commuting time contributed to a lack of *sense of belonging*. They noted that well-functioning student residences extend the academic environment and facilitate the interaction of students across courses, subject disciplines and across levels of study. This is supported by Cotton and Wilson (2006, 488) who note that “the college experience...does not end when class is dismissed”, however, it does end for those who have to make a quick exit to begin their journey home. Counter-intuitively Haussmann et al. (2009) found that having more parental support was associated with a more rapid decline in ssob. They suggest that students who are more connected to their parents could have greater ties to their home lives than to their new university life. They also note that all of the variables that pertained to ssob at the start of the year were quite social in nature and that the relationship between *sense of belonging* and social interactions exists at the beginning of the year rather than developing over time; hence, interventions to support the development of ssob have to be put in place quickly as making friends is key to developing a *sense of belonging*.

Consequently, Lefever (2012) notes the importance of providing opportunity for social engagement in campus environments, whilst Stuart et al. (2011a) found that those students living at home participated less in social groups and activities at university but continued to participate in extracurricular activities in the home environment. Yorke and Longden (2008) have also examined the impacts of commuting on engagement and belonging pointing to a negative impact on social integration for commuter students.

Aspects of living and social spaces also feature in this literature. Dixon and Durrheim (2004) specifically highlight the physical environment and its relationship to our sense of self. Chow and Healy (2008, 367) have written about the transitions made by students leaving home to study at university and the importance of this process as one of “conscious discontinuity” which refers to the way in which “a separation from a previous environment and a movement towards a new environment is said to mark a new stage in one’s life or an emerging identity”. They argue that a sense of place and attachment emerges from the involvement of people and place and relationships between people. Students in Chow and Healy’s (2008) research focussed very much on the development of new social relationships students made through university living accommodation and physical living spaces as key to their sense of belonging in this new university space. Wilcox et al. (2006) also point to the importance of social relationships developed through university residential accommodation in relation to student retention. In Chow and Healy’s work, home provided an anchor, but relationships with family and friends at home changed and became less important to the *sense of belonging* at university. Brooman and Darwent (2014) point to the importance of old friends for students remaining at home who experienced a lower *sense of belonging* than those living in university accommodation.

Thus, the literature suggests that our “stayeducation” students experience the process of going to university differently to those living in university accommodation in their first year of study and that there may be tensions as independence and new identities may be harder to forge for those remaining in the home environment.

## Research design

In the UK Higher Education sector, most institutions are either prestigious research-intensive universities (pre-1992) or newer (post-1992) vocationally focused universities. Our cross-case analysis comprises Business and Economics students from two post-1992 institutions (students Kuura and Paola) and a single pre-1992 institution (Isi). This offers an interesting perspective on the context within which the participants are studying. Case studies of a phenomenological nature offer us a window into the lived life. In this study, we are interested in how students narrate their experiences of belonging, the meaning they ascribe to their narrations and the insights these offer. Similarly, Stuart et al. (2011b) used a life history approach to investigate how social and cultural educational experiences affected student engagement with their university. Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was our selected approach, as this method has been successfully used to draw out the stories or narratives from interviewees’ lives (Wengraf 2001, 2004). BNIM is noted as providing educational research with a “powerful methodology for capturing lived situations and experiences through narrative interviewing” (Smith 2012, 3).

## Method

Participants were initially contacted through the distribution of a questionnaire which asked for volunteers who would be willing to take part in research interviews. Arrangements were made to meet with the volunteers, each of whom lived at home, and record their individual interviews. Full ethical procedures were undertaken within the participating universities, and names have been changed to preserve anonymity of subjects. The interviewees were not known to the researchers. The interview protocols were guided by the BNIM process, and a primary question, known as the Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN), was developed for use in the interviews. This question was framed as follows:

I would like you to tell me about the events in your life when you felt that you really belonged and did not belong. This might include your university experiences, or not.

The interviewer then refrained from speaking, which creates the space for the participant's voice to be privileged (Smith 2012). What was of interest to us is what the interviewee selected to share, and the way in which their individual story was portrayed. The interviewers then prompted interviewees to talk further about Particular Incident Narratives (PINs) by reflecting back, for elaboration, key incidents in the participant's own words. Interviews were between 1 and 2 hours in length. Nine original interviews were fully transcribed and coded using the BNIM text sort method—DARNE (Description, Argumentation, Report, Narrative, Evaluation). Each narrative was analysed to highlight the key areas of the lived life first by individual researchers and then by interpretive panels (teams of three co-researchers). The methodology selected is ideographic and concerned with a thorough and systematic understanding of how phenomena have been understood from the perspective of particular people in a particular context. In adherence to the principles of BNIM, three interviews were selected in this phased approach and utilised for an initial cross-case analysis, which, as Wengraf suggests, is most powerful when constructed as a triptych. Below we present this cross-case analysis selected because of the clarity with which it illustrates some of the key reflections upon the home/university transition that may be seen to have wider implications whilst locating these in the details of the particular cases (Table 1).

**Table 1** Personal, institutional and accommodation details

Name	Age	Gender	Marital status	Type of institution	Living accommodation
Isi	19	Male	Single	Pre-1992	Family home with parents and siblings
Paola	27	Female	Married	Post-1992	Family home with husband
Kuura	18	Female	Single	Post-1992	Family home with parents and siblings



## Isi: pre-1992 research-intensive university

Isi is a young working-class Asian man. He has a sharp and combative narrative style. His life history unfolds trauma and drug misuse resulting in hospital admission. University is a way of escaping his past life, and reinventing himself, as well as a strategy for avoiding the local gym, where his troubles began. Isi's focus on reinvention is an important step. He is looking for new spaces to inhabit; however, this is difficult as he still needs to live at home.

He works at mediating this escape by joining societies and taking on prestigious work placements in environments which he considers exclusive and elitist and achieves a degree of acceptance but not without personal struggle: "I'm the only minority there... it's different for me". However, when he gets to university he does not share his working-class home environment with fellow students.

They don't know I'm from a council estate but they never make me feel like it but it's just you get that inner feeling, it's just instinct. It's something you can't control...It's not something coming directly to you, it's just something that you developed inside yourself from coming from such a poor background and building yourself up to here.

He alludes to tensions within his family and refers to them in a somewhat disconnected sense as, "Yes, have a discussion but they always think they know better than me it's like you just can't debate with these people". He contrasts his own role and position in the family with that of his sister who is undertaking a medical degree. He talks about the sister being given both emotional and financial support by the family, and he clearly would welcome the emotional support himself but is unable to acknowledge this need. "You can tell medicine is hard but support me... my degree is hard as well". He returns to the location of his home many times in the interview.

You should see my area, I literally come from a council estate so literally, you could just tell straight away that meeting people with such high class and stuff like that it's going to be tough for me to fit in.

He particularly values support from paternalistic authority figures especially male role models. They are significant in that they open doors for him introducing him to new ideas and experiences outside of his immediate environment. His aspirations have been raised, and he is now attending a prestigious university, despite the tensions this raises in him. On the one hand, he offers bravado talking about how well he "fronts" his peers, yet he acknowledges he is trying to fit in, "Not to the level that you can be close to them but just to an extent that you can have, just a social chit chat".

Much of this narrative reflects contradictory arguments which highlight his desire for acceptance, positioned against concerns about his socio-economic status. The narrative presents a strong sense of *inauthenticity* and *othering*. This has been highlighted previously (Read et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2010) in relation to working-class students in prestigious institutions. It is perhaps more acute for students who remain in their home environment whilst studying. Some like Isi may lack a sense of belonging both at home and at university during this period of transition.



### Paola: post-1992 university

Paola is a 27-year-old, Brazilian woman. She is married and now living in the UK in privately rented accommodation. She frequently labels herself as a mature student. “I’m 27 which is here considered a mature student. So actually I’m trying to put all my efforts into university because by the time I finish, I am 30 already”.

Her previous *big city* living experience was in her home country of Brazil. “As I said, I’m from Brazil where people are all friendly and welcoming and here I think people are very cold”. Her decision to study at this London University was made on limited information, based in large part on its location in the prestigious square mile area in the financial district. She decided to go to university after working in the city. Her friends were not able to help her much with which university to attend, and it was after she arrived that she found she was in a university low in the league tables. She has concerns about this. Her expectations of university life did not include the possibility of peers whom she perceives are less interested in academic achievement than herself and this poses social and psychological barriers.

So they are really not interested...you see the girls around looking at the bags and they want to buy bags and shoes. I’ve been into that already you know. I’ve lived that already and now I am more focused.

There is a strong sense of not belonging and not fitting in with the younger, peer group. She is also unsure of where she is in terms of the status of the institution and therefore whether she should see herself as belonging. There is a real sense of dissonance between her hopes and aspirations from her degree. Some of this appears to be subsumed in her perception about the university’s reputation “I heard that it’s not a very good university. It’s not one of the top ten, top twenty, top fifty or even top hundred. So I did think of transferring to another university but it was a bit difficult, kind of starting everything over again”.

Her mature student narrative is preoccupied with a sense of *not belonging* and *othering*. Studies of belonging often suggest that “fitting in” (Reay et al. 2010, 117) is a key criterion leading students to select a university with supposedly like-minded people, but Paola had no preconceptions about the university fit. Her narrative does not extend beyond the time she has spent at university in the UK, and there is only a passing mention of her husband and friends. She appears to find the academic culture bewildering and to lack support and guidance that comes from residing in a context where friends and family are familiar with the HE system.

### Kuura: post-1992 university

Kuura is a young female of African/Gambian parents. She presents as very articulate and self-assured, with clear views on her academic journey/career plans:

Well, I knew that whatever I wanted to do in the future, I expected to get paid a lot of money for it and I knew that without my degree, it would be very difficult to get there.

She came from an inner city London school with low levels of academic attainment.

So when people hear about that school, they don't really expect anything good out of that place. I got like 5 A stars, 6 As and 2 Es. And nobody believed me, even my brother was like - you little liar, you couldn't have got that.

Her hard work was rewarded at a ceremony to mark the achievements of students in the borough.

I was there because I was on a gifted and talented programme that was trying to encourage you to go into higher education.... It was strange, it's like I wasn't supposed to be there, like XXX school usually isn't on that list and all of a sudden it's there, and you stand out too much.

Throughout her narrative, she repeatedly highlights issues of class and the poor educational standards of her secondary education. Her friends from school “hung around doing nothing”, and Kuura was “too serious” to fit in and have fun with her peers. Despite her excellent grades, Kuura elects to attend a post-1992 institution of lower status than others for which she was qualified. Similarly, Reay et al. (2010, 112) report student's experience “characterised by continuity rather than the change and transformation of working-class habitus in the more elite universities”. For Kuura, having the family relationships embedded within the institution is key—her brother had attended this university. Home is very important to her. Her view of the world is based on a solid foundation of family support and belonging. One can see how Kuura's desire to fit in and avoid the feeling of *othering* she had experienced at the award ceremony has shaped her choice of university (Read et al. 2003).

## Cross-case analysis

A cross-case analysis provides for the opportunity to consider emerging themes from both shared and opposing perspectives, highlighting the similarities and differences in the ways in which phenomena are perceived (Table 2).

**Table 2** Case analysis

Case	Similarities of	Contrasted with
A	Kuura and Paola	Isi
B	Kuura and Isi	Paola
C	Paola and Isi	Kuura

The three cases are presented below:

### Case analysis A: similarities of Kuura and Paola contrasted with Isi

#### *Belonging and family*

Our two female participants appear to have been limited in their selection of university by lack of pre-entry knowledge and guidance. Both relied heavily on those around them in informing their choices and one can see the influence of their home environment in their narratives.

Paola's perception of a top Business School was that it would be located in the financial heart of the city where international financial institutions have their base. She makes her decision with regard to the university's proximity in terms of this perception and discussions with her work acquaintances, despite acknowledging their lack of knowledge. She considers the location of the university to signify symbolic capital (de Beer et al. 2009), and interestingly, she feels a greater *sense of belonging* when her modules are based at the city-centre site than when they are a shorter commuting distance for her in a more urban site of the same university. Paola considers herself to have "very few friends" at university. She differentiates between the types of students on the different campuses. Her preference for the city campus is linked with the ideal of shared interests with like-minded people, she suggest that "on the city campus I found more people like me". Paola often reflects on her life in Brazil. Her family in Brazil are still an important part of her psyche. Everything here is measured against her home in Brazil with which she is so familiar.

One can also see the influence of family in Kuura's narrative of university choice. When asked, why this university? She responds with "Well my brother came here!" and explains that her father wanted her to do the same computing course as her brother. She resisted and was finally persuaded to do an accounting degree by her father, and she agreed despite her initial reluctance and comments—"I started to despair because I used to hate maths". We learn through her narrative that she has excellent matriculation grades. Her horizons appear to be constrained by the expectations of her family (Reay et al. 2001). We note the primary influences on her choices are the male members of her family, and her narration places her female relations in terms of social activities.

Whilst both women talk about the importance of independence, their independence is framed by their cultural and social context. They share a desire for the warmth of family life. Kuura in the present and Paola echoing back to her Brazilian roots. These influences militate against them making positive choices that would build future opportunities and develop cultural capital. Kuura sees her university as replicating the familiarity and comfort of her family. When she visits she notes, "It was cosy, really small, everything was together". Paola is disappointed with her choice. She considers that Brazil is "friendly" which is not how she feels about her university experience. Both women are very engaged with their studies but exhibit different manifestations of belonging. What unites them is a sense of their unexplored potential and "little lives"—lives that might have been different had they made different choices.

In contrast, Isi despite a chaotic and confused life history and working-class roots has a strong sense of life and expectations. He has sought out good mentoring, support and guidance in terms of his university selection and future career. He is keen to draw a line under his "council estate" upbringing. Unlike the female students, he rejects his background considering it to be a barrier to future opportunities and preferring to engage with those he considers to be located in a higher social class. He now draws upon positive role

models to position himself carefully in terms of building the cultural capital to succeed in the city. We can see this through his narrations of choice in his spare time (cf Young Conservative Political Party, City work placement) and the attachments he makes to male role models in education. The prolonged “work of acquisition” (Bourdieu 1983, 244) towards qualifications is seen by Isi to link with access to prestigious groups, which are not available via his family and community networks. He acknowledges poor past lifestyle choices and is pained by the realisation that if he goes back to his old friends and his roots he will be unable to fulfil his ambitions for a “big life”. He is determined to meaningfully engage with all the opportunities that HE offers.

The importance of transition as a shared experience with peers (Koljaticm and Kuh 2001) and the importance of new friendships can be seen in all three cases, contrary to what might be expected (Grayson 2003). In the case of Kuura, her ongoing affective engagement with, and support for, others provides her with integration of her sense of self, family and community which in turn provides her with a strong sense of belonging at university. Paola feels the loss of home and family, which can relate to the sense of loss of attachment to a community when entering higher education. Isi experiences conflict and appears to feel that because he is living at home it will be difficult for him to move on in his life in the way that he thinks his contemporaries at university will when following their career objectives.

## Case analysis B: similarities of Kuura and Isi contrasted with Paola

### *Belonging and friendships/community*

This cross-case analysis brings to the fore issues of community and friendships as well as highlighting insecurities about social status linked to physical living spaces. Both Kuura and Isi are Londoners, come from working-class backgrounds and live on council estates. This influences their daily lives in terms of school, community and friendships—all have contributed to their choices but in very different ways.

Kuura attended a failing school with fights and regular police visits. Her parents react to this by discouraging school friendships that they see as unsuitable. She moulds and fits in with family expectations and spends her time at school studying. She is identified as being gifted and talented but this isolates her from her peers even more.

Both Kuura and Isi share an acute awareness of social class. This can be seen from Kuura’s discomfort at the public prize giving for the gifted and talented scheme. Such potential anxieties of students are suggested as particularly important in the early transition period to the university environment (Gibney et al. 2011). When starting at university, Isi does not mention his council estate origins to any of his new friends. As such, Kuura and Isi allow “conservation of the social order [to be] decisively reinforced” (Bourdieu 1984, 473). University is a real turning point for both our interviewees. Both are keen to make friends but their background plays out in very different ways. For Kuura, her new friends are multi-cultural, take an inclusive approach and understand the cultural expectations of her family. They are prepared to come and spend time in the family home, and this effort is rewarded as her family start to agree to her becoming more independent and allow her to go out socially. Thus, she extends her support network beyond the family. Isi by contrast sees his new friends as a way of building networks for the future. He says he is keen to make friends but does not want to get tied into one particular group. He is very aware of the social status of the contexts within which he makes friends and keeps them separate from his home background.

Paola has no discussion of close friends in her narrative. She feels she is at the *wrong* university and is unhappy with her choice. She finds it difficult to relate to the young people on her course. They seem to her to be less goal oriented and present a mismatch or “poorness of fit” with her own ambitions, which poses social and psychological barriers (de Beer et al. 2009, 189). Kember et al. (2008) suggest that personal aims and socially shared motivations in line with peers are important for students’ *sense of belonging*. Transition to a different social and cultural environment can have profound significance, and research suggests that social relationships with fellow students that are considered to be like minded are key to an individual’s *sense of belonging* (Haussmann et al. 2009).

Despite his lack of *sense of belonging*, Isi locates himself firmly in the university environment to the exclusion of his community, following the path of “disengagement of academia from society” (Brown-Luthango 2013, 312). He is happy with this demarcation in his journey to a city career. For Paola, the studying is a step to get her where she wants to go. Both are very aspirational, but in terms of their university choice, Isi has made a more informed choice. In terms of *sense of belonging* to their course/programme of study, they could both be described as remote—like islands, not connected to anyone or any community; however, they are both fully engaged with their studies. Kuura, by way of contrast, feels both a *sense of belonging* and is fully engaged with her course and her university friends and is hugely proud of being at university. Her narration is one where her university life tumbles out and mixes with her home and community life.

### Case analysis C: similarities of Paola and Isi contrasted with Kuura

#### *Belonging and ethnic boundaries*

Paola and Isi both talk about ethnic segregation; and they both experience some difficulties in occupying their university environments. When Isi narrates his university experience, he expresses tension and a continuous awareness of cultural, ethnic and class distinctions/boundaries. His university is a prestigious research-intensive institution. On his course, he has an ethnically mixed student cohort.

You see XXX, all of them lot downstairs, little group there, and then you see the little Asian group in the front and then you see all of them, XXX and all of them lot in the back. It’s like you see them clusters consistently, you see that and then you’ve got all the Chinese at the front. You see them clusters...People don’t interact, people don’t get to know each other’s culture, people don’t get to know each other. If the college don’t push it forward, how are people going to get to know each other, you just don’t.

Similarly, Paola’s feelings of alienation from groups on the basis of ethnicity reflect feelings of isolation “lots of black people talking to other black people and Muslims talking to Muslims and there was me, and you don’t feel [part of] any group and you try to talk to someone, they look at you as if ‘you don’t belong to us’”.

By contrast, Kuura is comfortable and integrated into the multicultural environment. “So when we’re working together you can actually feel like they’re on the same wavelength as you. So that’s what I particularly like and feel a sense of belonging when I do teamwork with those people”.

Dixon and Durrheim (2004, 459) state the notion of belonging, as a “group response” with ethnic and racial factors relating to “our space, their space” and the concept of “insiders and outsiders”, which the students relate when describing university locations where they do not naturally fit in. Isi’s perception of some university areas as places for

other ethnic groups suggests that he perceives himself to be in a segregated environment (Reay et al. 2010). Hurtado et al. (2007, 857) state the importance of “cross-racial interactions” for higher *sense of belonging* on campus.

## Discussion

The BNIM method illuminates the complex and hidden world of the individual which has profound implications for their experience of transition. This shifts our perceptions as to the influences impacting on student belonging and offers an additional lens through which to consider early engagement strategies with our wider student body. Here, the home/university interface becomes foregrounded and is seen to be nuanced and complex. Our cross-case analysis highlights in hitherto unseen ways the influence of our students’ wider context on their *sense of belonging*. Unlike those students studied by Chow and Healey (2008), for “stayeducation” students, university living accommodation is not a source of community contact and friendships, which provide the important social support needed to engender a *sense of belonging*. What is of particular interest are the similarities and differences identified through the narratives, the tensions that emerge and how the students talk about resolving those tensions. From the individual narratives, it has been possible to show how the emergent themes play out in different ways for these “stayeducation” students. So, for example, we can see that Isi and Paola have failed to establish the social relationships that are key to developing belonging and which can be essential for persistence (Haussmann et al. 2009), whereas Kuura successfully integrates her new friendship groups into her family life.

Interestingly, the importance of old friends (Brooman and Darwent 2014) is contested. Contrary to what might be expected, for Isi and Kuura, friendships made in their local community (in the gym for Isi and at school for Kuura) were problematic. Paola makes little mention of her family and friends in the UK but instead feels distanced from her family and friendship support networks at *home* in Brazil. Kuura successfully integrates her new friends into her family home extending her support network despite her “stayeducation” status. Isi wishes to extend his social network at university but is keen to separate his friends from his community and family. Paola seeks *like-minded* friends in her new environment who can help her to resolve the conflict she feels about being in the *wrong* type of university and alleviate her sense of social suspension. Rather than maintaining and prioritising old friends, all three were seeking new social relationships at university.

Hurtado et al. (2007) state the importance of cross-racial interactions for developing a higher sense of belonging on campus. Isi and Paola both perceive their environment as segregated and see this as a barrier to making new friends. Through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), one can see also the influence of class, age and gender on their social relationships. Kuura experiences no such segregation as she finds herself in an environment with like-minded people for the first time in her education. The constraints of commuting across London (Morgan-Tamosunas 2012; Yorke and Longden 2008) did not feature in these stories of belonging but there was a focus in the students narratives on the importance of relationships forged (or not) in the curriculum rather than through extracurricular activities.

Rich information made available through these in-depth interviews has highlighted factors such as friends, family and community as points of reference which pervade the student experience. Everything they experience is coloured by the life they lived before, which they

continue to return to at the end of each day. As such, the student journey does not begin when crossing the university threshold and many important ideas, conversations and decisions (to which educators and educational managers are not privy) have already been made.

Our study confirms the importance of factors, such as social class, gender and cultural capital on selection of university. The observation is that of a capitalist education system which supports class inequalities. Students who enter into such systems, with little or no inherited cultural capital, may find education an alienating experience. We can also see how family, friends and community impact on ssob for our students, playing out in different aspects of the home/university relationships. One particular emergent factor for “stayeducation” students is the importance of developing friendships in new contexts, which can be difficult in the absence of shared living spaces (Chow and Healey 2008). This suggests a reframing of contemporary thinking about *sense of belonging* and transition to encompass a set of relationships, often ignored, which to our “stayeducation” students are significant: relationships with home, family and community. The term “stayeducation” perhaps better captures some of the nuances of these relationships than the term “commuter students” with its connotations of physical distance and travel. For our students, the important distance between home and university was sociocultural and emotional rather than geographic.

## Conclusion

Isi comments:

You can adjust yourself to the [university] environment but there’s only so much you can do ... because you have to go back to your old environment from where you came initially and where you spend most of your life...So getting used to [university] will be tough...

In the current environment, where increasingly students stay at home to study implications arising from this study suggest that universities need to be more responsive to home and community factors. This response needs to be set within an institutional policy framework unconstrained by a set of discourses that perpetuate inequalities, thus enabling all students to develop a *sense of belonging*. For example, such policy implications could inform discussions around recruitment, induction, estates and learning and teaching. This could lead to a reframing of the classroom and university space as one in which affords “stayeducation” students opportunities to develop new social relationships and support, similar to those living on campus. It adds a fourth category to Hoffman et al. (2002) factors related to a *sense of belonging*, social relationships, albeit that these relationships play out in different ways as illustrated by our student narratives. A number of crucial factors relate to facilitating social opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom and in supporting new students to integrate into the diverse student community. In practical terms, we envisage engaging student communities, for example, using social media to develop “stayeducation” student groups to support our potential students prior to the start of their course; providing a shared sense of pride in the institution, focussing on developing an inclusive curriculum as a space for making friends as well as for learning, offering different opportunities for students to connect with other students in their local community; sensitive timetabling keeping cohorts together after induction; promoting extra- and co-curricular activities congruent with commuting and creating social spaces for “stayeducation” students to relax together. The authors acknowledge that many of these initiatives



and further developments are utilised in many institutions around the world (Biddix 2015; Wojtas 2014). This underlines the ongoing requirement of knowledge sharing and the dissemination of good practice with the worldwide HE community.

## Limitations of the work

Our small-scale study has highlighted the need for further investigations of these reframed *commuter student* relationships considered through the lens of family, friends and associations of cultural capital. A number of limitations apply to the study. Interviewees were self-selecting, and the interviews only relate to three London institutions. However, it was possible to complete full analyses for each interviewee and to undertake cross-case analysis as guided by the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method. It would be useful to extend the work to different settings. This paper challenges the assumption that “stayed-education” students have a secure *sense of belonging* in their home environment with friendships and affiliations that pull them back into the community (NUS 2015). This may be the case for some but our narratives show a different picture. Our research thus far suggests that, for “stayed-education” students in particular, the student journey extends beyond the institutional context and begins long before any HE influences come into play.

**Acknowledgments** We would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on the paper.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

## References

- Biddix, J. P. (2015). *Understanding and addressing commuter student needs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bourdieu, P. (1983). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction*. Oxon: Routledge Classics.
- Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Shaw-Sullivan, A. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(5), 569–590.
- Brooman, S., & Darwent, S. (2014). Measuring the beginning: A quantitative study of the transition to higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(9), 1523–1541.
- Brown-Luthango, M. (2013). Community-university engagement: The Philippi CityLab in Cape Town and the challenges of collaboration across boundaries. *Higher Education*, 65(3), 309–324.
- Case, J. M. (2008). Alienation and engagement: Development of an alternative theoretical framework for understanding student learning. *Higher Education*, 55(3), 321–332.
- Chow, K., & Healey, M. (2008). Place attachment and place identity: First-year undergraduates making the transition from home to university. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 28(4), 362–372.
- Clark, M. R. (2006). Challenges and best practices on urban commuter campuses. *About Campus*, 11(3), 2–8.
- Clycq, N., Ward Nouwen, M. A., & Vandenbroucke, A. (2014). Meritocracy, deficit thinking and the invisibility of the system: Discourses on educational success and failure. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(5), 796–819.
- Collings, R. (2014). The impact of peer mentoring on levels of student wellbeing, integration and retention: a controlled comparative evaluation of residential students in UK higher education. *Higher Education*, 68(6), 927–942.

- Cotton, S. R., & Wilson, B. (2006). Student-faculty Interactions: Dynamics and Determinants. *Higher Education*, 51(4), 487–519.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167.
- de Beer, J., Smith, U., & Jansen, C. (2009). Situated' in a separated campus—Students' sense of belonging and academic performance: A case study of the experiences of students during a higher education merger. *Education as Change*, 13(1), 167–194.
- Dixon, J., & Durrheim, K. (2004). Dislocating identity: Desegregation and the transformation of place. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 24(4), 455–473.
- Gibney, A., Moore, N., Murphy, F., & O'Sullivan, S. (2011). The first semester of university life; 'will I be able to manage it at all?'. *Higher Education*, 62(3), 351–366.
- Grayson, J. P. (2003). The consequences of early adjustment to university. *Higher Education*, 46(4), 411–429.
- Harfitt, G. J., & Tsui, A. B. M. (2015). An examination of class size reduction on teaching and learning processes: A theoretical perspective. *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(5), 845–865.
- Hassanien, A., & Barber, A. (2007). An evaluation of student induction in higher education. *International Journal of Management Education*, 6(3), 35–43.
- Haussmann, L., Ye, F., Ward Schofield, J., & Woods, R. (2009). Sense of belonging and persistence in White and African American first-year students. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(7), 649–669.
- Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2002). Investigating sense of belonging in first year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 4(3), 227–256.
- Hurtado, S., Han, J., Saenz, V., Espinosa, L., Cabrera, N., & Cerna, O. (2007). Predicting transition and adjustment to college: Biomedical and behavioral science aspirants' and minority students' first year of college. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 841–887.
- Kane, S., Chalcraft, D., & Volpe, G. (2014). Notions of belonging: First year, first semester higher education students enrolled on business or economics degree programmes. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 12(2), 193–201.
- Kember, D., Ho, A., & Hong, C. (2008). The importance of establishing relevance in motivating student learning. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 9(3), 249–263.
- Kember, D., Ho, A., & Hong, C. (2010). Initial motivational orientation of students enrolling in undergraduate degrees. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(3), 263–276.
- Khambhaita, P., & Bhopa, K. (2015). Home or away? The significance of ethnicity, class and attainment in the housing choices of female university students. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 18(4), 535–566.
- Koljaticm, M., & Kuh, J. D. (2001). A longitudinal assessment of college student engagement in good practices in undergraduate education. *Higher Education*, 42(3), 351–371.
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540–563.
- Ladd, H. F., & Fiske, E. B. (2016). *Educational success in two London boroughs: Lessons for the U.S. Brown Center on Education Policy*. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/educational-success-in-two-london-boroughs-lessons-for-the-u-s/>. Accessed September 12, 2016.
- Lefever, R. (2012). Exploring student understandings of belonging on campus. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 4(2), 126–141.
- Levett-Jones, T., Lathlean, J., Higgins, I., & McMillan, M. (2008). Staff-student relationships and their impact on nursing students, belongingness and learning. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(2), 316–324.
- Morgan-Tamosunas, R. (2012, April). Dundee tops THE Student Experience Survey as fees put focus on 'value for money'. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/dundee-tops-the-student-experience-survey-as-fees-put-focus-on-value-for-money/419771.article>. Accessed 21 Sept 2016.
- Nelson, K. J., Quinn, C., Marrington, A., & Clarke, J. A. (2012). Good practice for enhancing the engagement of commencing students. *Higher Education*, 63(1), 83–96.
- NUS (2015). Reaching home: Policy and practice for students living in the parental home. *National Union of Students*. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/reaching-home>. Accessed September 12, 2016.
- Pym, J., & Kapp, R. (2013). Harnessing agency: Towards a learning model for undergraduate students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(2), 272–284.
- Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of 'belonging and isolation at a post-1992 university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(3), 261–277.
- Reay, D., Croziers, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out' working class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124.

- Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M., & Ball, S. J. (2001). Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, race and the higher education process. *Sociology*, 35(4), 855–874.
- Sanders, C. (2001). *What keeps a student home? The times higher education supplement*, March 23. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/analysis-what-keeps-a-student-home/158288.article>. Accessed August 28, 2016.
- Shoderu, R., Kane, S., Husbands, D., & Holley, D. (2012). Developing a sense of belonging: Findings from a three institution study, with implications for BME students and staff engagement. *Compass: The Journal of and Teaching at the University of Greenwich Learning*, 3(5), 67–74.
- Smith, K. (2012). Exploring flying faculty teaching experiences: Motivations, challenges, and opportunities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(1), 117–134.
- Stuart, M., Lido, C., & Morgan, J. (2011a). Personal stories: How students' social and cultural life histories interact with the field of higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 30(4), 489–508.
- Stuart, M., Lido, C., Morgan, J., Solomon, L., & May, S. (2011b). The impact of engagement with extra-curricular activities on the student experience and graduate outcomes for widening participation populations. *Active Learning*, 12(3), 203–215.
- Taylor, R. (2011). University cities thrive on students. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2011/apr/18/university-cities-students>. Accessed September 12, 2016.
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the what works? Student retention and success programme*. <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-final-report-what>. Accessed September 12, 2016.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.
- Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing: Biographic narrative and semi-structured method*. London: Sage Publications.
- Wengraf, T. (2004). Boundaries and relationships in homelessness work: Lola, an agency manager. *Forum: Qualitative social research*. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/658/1424>. Accessed September 12, 2016.
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2006). It was nothing to do with the university it was just the people: The role of social support in the first year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707–722.
- Wojtas, O. (2014). *Making sure the locals feel part of the community*. In Times Higher Education, Student Experience Survey 2014 supplement 25–26.
- Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2008). *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK Report*. Higher Education Academy. <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/first-year-experience-higher-education-uk-report-phase-1-project-higher-education-academy>. Accessed September 12, 2016.