

An exploration of identity, motivations and concerns of non-traditional students at different stages of higher education

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Non-traditional students are increasingly making up a larger part of the student body and can include students from various groupings, for example, differentiated by ethnicity, socio-economic class (SEC), disability, residential location or age. The aim of this initial exploratory study was to investigate whether and how the motivations, identity and concerns of different types of non-traditional psychology students differed from each other. Previous research has either investigated all types of non-traditional students together with no breakdown according to specific category, or focused on one category (e.g. mature versus non-mature students). A questionnaire was sent to a cross-sectional sample of pre-University, first-year, second-year, third-year and graduate students to collect mainly qualitative data. Questions addressed a number of areas: motivation to go to University; post-University aspirations; identity; and student concerns. There were interesting gender differences with regard to the motivations to go to University; with males more likely to give reasons relating to intrinsic factors and females stating extrinsic factors, supporting previous research. The findings relating to identity showed that mature students were more negative in their self-descriptions, but for second-year and third-year students, mature students were more likely to indicate changes to their identity since joining University. It will be interesting in the next stage of planned research to track changes in identity over time; as this study provides just a snapshot at each stage of the degree. The findings showed that student concerns frequently related to the reason for their being classified as a non-traditional student. For example: financial concerns were more often stated by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and mature students were more concerned about academic issues, while non-mature students expressed more social concerns. Although these initial observations require further exploration with a larger sample, they are discussed with regard to their implications for the level and type of pastoral support available to different types of non-traditional students. This study is the first stage of a longitudinal project, and further work suggested from these results will be investigated over the remaining two years of the project. For example, students participating in this study will be tracked, a further group of traditional-entry students will be recruited for comparison and further measures will be collected relating to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Background and definitions

GOVERNMENTS, HEIs, researchers and admissions tutors have used a variety of terms and definitions to label, describe and categorise students from non-traditional backgrounds. Ijima-Hall (1997) provides an early definition of diversity, which has been used in much of the academic literature on student individual differences. He includes differences such as age, colour, ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical, mental and emotional ability, race, religion, language, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. While

Zinciewicz and Trapp (2004) define 'under-represented groups' as, 'those with no family history of HE experience, from low participation neighbourhoods, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities' (p.5).

The term Widening Participation (WP) has also been used in research and Government reports. Again, this term covers policies with different foci, for example, the HEA focuses on attracting 'minority and under-represented groups', other policies 'widen the diversity of the student popula-

tion' (Zinciewicz & Trapp, 2004), and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2009) focuses on 'improving access to HE'. The latest HESA figures (from 2007/08, but published in 2009) use three indicators for WP, which are compared for entry qualifications and degree subject:

1. the percentage of entrants who attended a school or college in the state sector;
2. the percentage of entrants who were returned with National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories 4 to 7; and
3. the percentage of entrants whose home area (as denoted by their postcode) is known to have a low proportion of 18- and 19-year-olds in higher education.

In addition, the HESA summary tables differentiate between young and mature WP students. Mature students are those who are aged 21 and over at 30 September of the academic year in which they enrol. Also, there are separate tables for those students in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).

A criticism of much of the research on WP is that it focuses on one grouping of students and while it is very useful for highlighting the specific issues for each group, it is difficult to compare groups as different contexts and samples are used. For further consideration of the issues facing individual groupings, readers are referred to the following excellent reviews: the role of ethnicity (Richardson, 2008); state school and private school pupils (Smith & Naylor, 2005); disabled compared to non-disabled students (Craig & Zinkiewicz, 2010); socio-economic class as a factor in entry to HE (Quinn et al., 2005), and the issues facing mature students (Walters, 2000). In contrast to this focussed research, other research considers all students classified as non-traditional together as a homogenous group and does not differentiate between categories. To address this, our research will identify similarities and differences between categories of non-traditional student.

A recent report from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2009) reviewed progress on WP and highlighted that the number of students going to university from lower socio-economic groups had risen by nearly 10,000 from 2002/03, to nearly 63,700 in 2007/08. Similarly, HESA (2009) show that state school entrants have increased from 81 per cent in 1997/98 to 87 per cent in 2007/08; and participation from those coming from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) rose from 11.4 per cent in 2002/03 to 13.5 per cent in 2005/06. The report noted that to achieve the participation target of 50 per cent of 18- to 30-year-olds experiencing HE, Universities need to 'draw more mature students into the system ... and parents with young children' (p.26). However, the support for the increasing numbers of such non-traditional entrants is not mentioned and it would be expected that they have differing needs, although this has not been researched. Fewer than 60 per cent of entrants are now 'traditional' students, i.e. those coming straight from school with A/AS levels and studying full-time. Other bodies have been more critical and shown that participation targets have not been met for a number of groups (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009). Despite many documents promoting WP policies, institutions are free to develop their own policies. Many HEIs have impressive and ambitious policies, but unless funding is available, in practice, many activities will only occur on a small scale. HEFCE (2003) clearly state that funding is the main incentive for change at the institutional level; noting, for example, the post-code premium.

Motivation to go to university

The motivation for students to apply to university varies between disciplines; with technical subjects (e.g. Computing) attracting more students who are motivated to achieve a degree as a means to move to the next stage of their career, while the Social Sciences attract more students who

have less materialistic motivations (Taylor, 2008). For example, History was shown to attract those with a genuine interest and where the career route was less formalised. Other research has shown that those from a lower SEC background are more likely to study vocational subjects. As a discipline, Psychology attracts many non-traditional entrants; more than other disciplines regarding age but fewer students from the BME classification, (Zinkiewicz & Trapp, 2004). Maras et al. (2007) found that WP pupils in a secondary school viewed material gain rather than intrinsic value as the main motivation to go to university. During the last 10 years there has been a strong emphasis in UK Government strategy (2005–2009) to raise the aspirations of all to attend HEIs, especially focusing on those from low SEC. A number of programmes (e.g. AimHigher) have been shown to successfully raise aspirations (e.g. Hatt et al., 2008). However, a recent report focusing on the impact of policies on students' aspirations has shown that while aspirations are raised, this is not matched by opportunity (Higher Ambitions, 2009).

Murphy and Roopchand (2003) found higher levels of intrinsic motivation and self-esteem in mature students, compared to traditional students. Walters (2000) looks at the motivations, expectations and outcomes for mature students attending university. They related motivation to specific life events that lead to a desire to enrol at university and label this 'redundancy' (e.g. of one's current skills or role). 'Redundancy' was shown to be triggered by a life event (such as retirement, divorce, children leaving home, etc.) and this led to a re-evaluation of one's life, followed by actively seeking change.

Different stages of the student 'life cycle'

According to Zinkiewicz and Trapp (2004), the student life-cycle model has been 'adopted by almost all HEIs as a framework for WP activities' (p.10). Clearly different support is required at each stage. Pre-entry

activities include aspiration-raising activities and initiatives that bridge the gap between acceptance of a university place and arrival at the university (Keenan, 2008). Admission and first term/semester activities have been developed to support students during their transition from FE to HE. However, there is little support or routine monitoring as non-traditional students move through the course, and very little focused post-university support.

There has been much effort on encouraging non-traditional students to enter HE, for example, a number of 'special admissions' schemes exist where the Government encourages HEIs to use 'contextual' data for students from non-traditional backgrounds that take into account adversity and recognise the potential to succeed. For example, the University of Leeds gives special consideration for students who satisfy certain criteria, for example, if they are the first generation in their family to enter HE, in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance and at a school where fewer than 60 per cent of pupils achieve five 'A' to 'C' GCSE passes. In such cases, lower grades can be offered where a potential to succeed is shown in the application or interview. However, attracting students from low income backgrounds is not enough; support is needed throughout the degree as it is likely that such students are more likely to need to work longer hours in paid employment to supplement their student loan. This was highlighted by Lansdown (2009) who researched the problems when students tried to juggle work and study.

It may be that non-traditional students need different learning and teaching support. Coogan and Pawson (2008) evaluate the use of debating as an aid to encourage non-traditional students to participate. They argue that a different approach to learning and teaching is required for 'less traditional' students, to encourage them to participate and engage in learning. They suggest using nontraditional means of assessment, to which their often less academic

backgrounds are better suited in the early stages of their studies.

Also, at the final stage of the HE experience (approaching and after graduation), most WP activities review final destinations, rather than providing real support in employability. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009) advised that those who deliver careers education should do so impartially, with respect to non-traditional students. However, perhaps we need to go further than this, for example, for careers staff to offer positive encouragement and specialist advisors for non-traditional students to highlight their specific abilities and skills (e.g. mature and experienced approach to life).

This research will explore developmental changes; a criticism of previous research is that it has often been conducted on static samples (providing a snapshot of current experiences) or it has observed pre- and post- scores, for example, entrance levels and final degree classification with no measurements in-between. This reflects the current interest in learning and teaching research and practice on the process of transition (e.g. it was the key theme for the British Psychological Society's Psychology of Education Conference in 2009). Recent research has evaluated transition for all involved in academia: from academic staff (Reybold & Alamia, 2008), to school pupils' transition to university (Harley et al., 2007), to the transition of adult students into HE (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). A study by Pithers & Holland (2007) investigated how student expectations changed over the course of a degree, although they did not look at non-traditional students. Pithers and Holland surveyed two students groups: one in the first year and the other group in their last year of study. The results showed that students in both groups had similar expectations of their lecturers, with both seeing subject matter expertise as the key factor in their expectations of university teachers, while grading assessment fairly, keeping learners interested and showing enthusiasm

for subject matter content rated highly with both groups. There were, however, some differences between the groups mostly concerning issues such as structuring the learning process, supporting learners and directing learners.

Identity and self-confidence

The majority of the research in this area comes from evaluations of the way that FE and HE change mature students; in terms of improved confidence, increased self-esteem and sense of self-belief. For example, Walters (2000) discussed the motivation for learning for mature students and found that most were motivated by a desire to change their self-concept and improve self-esteem, which she terms regeneration. She highlights the ways that this regeneration crosses over to other areas of their lives.

Mercer and Saunders (2004) investigated the process of growth and development within a mature student population. They argue that previous research has been simplistic in viewing changes to confidence, 'rarely is space dedicated to a discourse about the processes involved in negotiating them'. Their research goes on to draw from life span psychology to explore the role and nature of conflict which they propose is an inevitable and necessary part of the process.

Aims and objectives of the research programme and this study

This three-year research programme was prompted by the increasing numbers of non-traditional students applying to and joining university and a realisation that different types of non-traditional students have different needs (and that they may need different support systems to address those needs). This first study of the research programme, reported here, aims to explore motivations and concerns depending on how students were defined as non-traditional. Previous research analysing measures of added value (which involves comparing pre-university entry grades with final degree classification) shows that non-traditional

students change the most and receive most 'added-value'. However, there is no research which identifies the way that non-traditional students change over the 'student life cycle' Therefore, this study will start to explore developmental changes in identity. Much of the work in the area of identity is qualitative (e.g. Britton & Baxter, 1999) and it is proposed here that this is the most appropriate method for exploring issues relating to identity, however, quantitative measures may be used in the later stages of the research programme to allow some statistical analyses.

Method

Design

A questionnaire was designed to collect mainly qualitative data regarding three areas of interest. The questionnaire was sent to a cross-sectional sample of pre-university, first year, second year, third year and graduate students known to be non-traditional.

Materials

The questionnaire was designed to explore the key issues raised in the literature review. Following the collection of biographic data (on age, gender and nationality), the questionnaire was divided into three sections: motivation, identity and student concerns. The first section on motivation and post-degree expectations asked students why they wanted to come to university and what they thought they would be doing a year after graduating. There were two items addressing identity in the second section: the first item asked students to describe themselves in around 100 words, with the advice 'try to provide a rounded picture of everything that you are'; a second item asked, 'How have you changed during your time at university?'. Finally, a section on student concerns included items that addressed: prior concerns; current year concerns and potential future concerns regarding the next year; and also asked whether any of the student's concerns were realised. The majority of questions were open-ended questions to enable qualitative thematic analysis. The questions were

customised for each year group to ensure the wording was relevant to their year of study.

Participants

Sampling was opportunistic and participants were invited to take part based on their being classed as a non-traditional student on the information on enrolment forms. Individual invitations were sent to: applicants who had accepted a university place for the coming year; current learners; and graduates from the previous year. Forty-two students completed the questionnaire: 34 per cent male and 66 per cent female. Most of the research on mature students focuses on females returning to study, rather than males (e.g. Coburn, 2005) and although, gender differences are not a specific concern of this study, the data will also be analysed for gender differences within categories. The breakdown according to non-traditional classifications is as follows:

No family history of HE experience	15
Low participation neighbourhood (LPN) ..	12
Black and minority ethnic groups (BME) ..	3
Mature students (over 21)	25

Although the BME group is very small (and most analyses were not possible), this is similar to the national proportion (between two per cent to 40 per cent of students at UK HEIs). Mature students were over-represented in this sample (61 per cent here, while nationally mature students make up only 30 per cent of the student population).

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in this study via e-mail. A questionnaire was attached and paper copies were placed in an easily accessible place to allow anonymous completion. Completed questionnaires were submitted via an assignment box or returned to the researchers or to an administrator. Different methods were used to encourage participation; previous research has indicated equivalent responses from paper and online completion of questionnaires.

Results

The data are presented within three areas: motivation and aspirations; identity and change, and student concerns. Thematic analysis, a widely used approach to qualitative analysis was used. Thematic analysis treats participants' accounts as a resource for finding out about their perceptions and experiences and is based on identifying themes from textual material, often using a coding scheme. Two stages of thematic analysis were used: the initial stage used themes identified by the literature and a second iteration identified sub-themes, combined themes or introduced additional themes arising from the initial review of the text. From this analysis, frequency tables were produced. The data was then further explored using cross-tabulations to identify differences and similarities in responses between students of different non-traditional categories.

Area 1: Motivation and aspirations

Thematic analysis regarding motivation to apply to/go to university

Responses to an open-ended question were content-analysed initially for indications of intrinsic/extrinsic factors, which had been highlighted in the literature review. Themes from a second iteration separated specific and general dimensions of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and these are defined in Table 1. The remaining responses, initially

categorised as 'other', were further subdivided at the second iteration into: enjoy topic, automatic progression from A/AS levels, and desire to move away from home.

Observations across non-traditional categories

Mature students were equally likely to identify extrinsic as intrinsic motivation, while those students who were under 21 were more likely to identify extrinsic motivations. Female students were equally likely to identify extrinsic as intrinsic motivation, while males were more likely to identify extrinsic motivations. There were no differences between students at different stages of the student life-cycle.

Thematic analysis regarding post-degree aspirations

Participants were asked to indicate what they thought they would be doing after graduating and these were categorised as shown in Table 2.

Observations across non-traditional categories

Of those students planning to go on to further study or training, there was a higher proportion of females and there were less mature students (based on that predicted by proportions). Students from LPN and non-LPN categories were equally as likely to aspire to further training or study. However, there was a difference in that 35 per cent of the non-LPN students indicated that they

Table 1: Summary of thematic analysis regarding motivation to join University.

Motivation	Example areas	Frequency
Intrinsic general	Understand more about people, experience University lifestyle/ life experience and to widen social group	28
Intrinsic specific	Develop self	6
Extrinsic general	Better job/career prospects	23
Extrinsic specific	Pre-requisite/training for specified job/career	17
Other	Desire to move away from home	2
	Automatic progression from A levels	2
	Enjoy topic	7

Table 2: Summary of thematic analysis of post-degree aspirations.

Post-graduation predicted activity	Frequency
Working in an area unrelated to degree	5
Working in an area related to degree	10
Temporary job to save money for further study	2
Further study/training	18
Teaching	1
Travelling	1

would be working in a relevant job (compared to only 10 per cent LPN students). There were no differences across the categories: no family history of HE and stage of degree. The low number of students indicating that they would be travelling could be due to travelling being planned during the year following graduation, i.e. students would have returned from travelling one year from graduation.

Area 2: Identity and change

Thematic analysis regarding identity descriptions
Participants were asked to write a short paragraph to describe them self, i.e. an identity statement. Responses were content-analysed, initially for indications of negative, neutral and positive indicators, which had been highlighted in the literature review. Themes

from a second iteration further categorised the negative, neutral and positive categories into whether they related to social identity or personal identity, producing a total of six categories as shown in Table 3.

Observations across non-traditional categories

The majority of descriptions of self focused on personal identity and although the different categories of non-traditional background were explored, there were no differences. With regard to those identity descriptions containing social identities, the majority (larger than expected) were from mature students, also those from families with no HE history. While there were no differences between males and females, females described social identity in terms of family, while males described this in terms of

Table 3: Summary of thematic analysis of identity descriptions.

Self description	Frequency	Examples
Social identity: positive	15	'Love playing football ... for Uni team' 'Mother to two girls, looking forward to grandchildren'
Social identity: negative	7	'Born into family too busy running family business so deprived of education opportunities'
Social identity: neutral	8	'I'm a big Chelsea fan' 'I run my own therapy business'
Personal identity: positive	147	'I'm warm hearted' 'I am good, kind and generous'
Personal identity: negative	31	'I am very impatient' 'I can be bossy'
Personal identity: neutral	4	'I like peace and quiet'

work and activities. Fourteen participants gave descriptions containing negative factors (SI and PI together) and the majority of these (more than expected) were from mature students ($N=12$) and from ethnic minorities ($N=2$). There were no differences for gender, stage of degree and LPN categories.

Thematic analysis regarding perceived changes while at university

Participants were asked to indicate how they had changed during their time at university. In addition to acquiring general and specific skills, many participants noted deeper changes to their identity. In total, there were 44 positive indications of identity change as indicated in Table 4.

Observations across non-traditional categories

Mature students indicated the most perceived change to identity (more than would be expected based on proportions), in line with the literature. Students from LPN and those with no family history of HE perceived less changes to their identity; this was in contrast to previous research. There were no differences for stage of degree.

Area 3: Student concerns

The initial content analysis divided concerns into those related to social or academic factors, as these were the two key factors identified as important in the literature (see examples provided in Table 5). However, a second iteration identified many concerns outside of social or academic, which were categorised as ‘other’ (e.g. move away from home, managing money, parking, etc.).

Observations across non-traditional categories

Further analysis revealed that mature students were more likely to express academic concerns, compared to students of traditional entry age (who expressed more social concerns). Examples of comments from mature learners included:

- ‘being a mature adult is a worry, will I fit in, how will people see me?’*
- ‘I would not be treated as an intelligent adult but lumped in with the 18-year-olds.’*
- ‘loads of scary 18-year-olds.’*
- ‘uni will neglect older people.’*

Also, one international learner commented that their concern was ‘integration with English students’.

Table 4: Summary of thematic analysis regarding identity change.

How identity changed	Frequency	Examples
No change	3	
General self-development/ confidence	21	‘Enhance my self-esteem’ ‘I understand more about who I am’
Specific self-development/ confidence	8	‘I have become more articulate’ ‘My confidence levels for speaking/presenting’
Enhanced learning/ intelligence/knowledge	5	‘I’m smarter than I thought’ ‘My intelligence levels have grown’
Worldlier (meeting new types of people, new knowledge)	6	‘widened experiences and horizons’ ‘Better understanding of diversity of people’
Independence	4	‘I’ve become much more independent’
Negative effects	3	‘After degree became very arrogant/one-sided’ ‘I have become more separate’

Table 5: Summary of thematic analysis regarding student concerns.

Concerns	Frequency	Examples
Social	14	'Scared of not making friends' 'Worried about meeting new people and making friends'
Academic	34	'Would staff be approachable' 'How much course work would there be' 'Whether i'm clever enough' 'Will I succeed?'
Other	29	Move away from home = 3 Managing money = 10 Travel to University/parking = 3 Manage balance between work/social/family = 8 Accommodation = 1 Stress/health = 1 Language = 2 Neglect older people = 1

When asked whether their concerns were realised, eight students replied yes and six no, and although these figures are similar, the types of response were interesting for those who indicated yes.

Mature learners:

'Concerned about learning computers ... yes – was a nightmare.'

'Lack of lectures was my biggest fear ... I find independent learning q hard.'

'I went feeling unprepared ... wish I had done foundation ... I would have had less to catch up on ... I had to learn how to write essays again.'

'Coping with stress ... yes – workload is stressful.'

LPN learners:

'Terrified of coming to uni because of social aspect.'

'I probably will make some friends eventually, but I am a shy person ...'

'I was concerned I wouldn't make friends ... I just don't have many friends here.'

'Social concerns (fitting-in and making friends) was realised a little.'

International learner:

'Learning in a second language ... language is still limiting me.'

Discussion

The study has revealed some interesting differences in identity, motivations and concerns between students, however the sample was very small and was not equally distributed across year groups or classifications, therefore further work to confirm the validity and reliability of the data is required. At a practical level, if these findings are confirmed in later studies, this could have important implications for the support that can be offered to students, based upon their individual differences. In terms of the research aims, the results have helped to direct further questions for the next stage of the research project. Future research for each area of interest will now be highlighted below and planned ways forward will be summarised in the last section of this discussion.

Motivation and aspirations

With regard to the motivations to go to university, there were some interesting gender differences: with males more likely to give reasons relating to intrinsic factors and females stating extrinsic factors, supporting previous research. Again in support of previous research (e.g. Murphy & Roopchand, 2003), students under 21 were more likely to identify extrinsic factors (than

intrinsic) and mature students were equally likely to give extrinsic as intrinsic factors. It would be interesting to explore intrinsic and extrinsic motivation further using quantitative measures, and also to examine changes in motivation as a result of the changing economic climate.

With regard to aspirations, more females than males and more of the non-mature students indicated going on to further study. A surprising finding was that more of the students from LPN indicated that they thought they would be working in a job unrelated to Psychology. A recent report on raising young people's HE aspirations (BIS, 2009) highlights the impacts of teacher's attitudes on students' ambitions and aspirations. Similarly, it is likely that lecturer's attitudes could impact upon students' post-graduate ambitions. Research is needed to investigate this further.

Identity and change

The findings relating to identity showed that mature and ethnic students were more likely to give negative self-descriptions, which is worrying and will be followed-up in later focus groups. Mature students and those from families with no previous HE experience were more likely to give social identifications, while students under 21 focussed on their personal identity; which supports previous research from life-span psychology (e.g. Mercer & Saunders, 2004).

The results regarding the perceived changes to identity were encouraging, with an overwhelming majority of students reporting positive changes. In line with previous research, mature students were more likely to indicate changes to their identity since joining university (Walters, 2000). But in contrast to previous research, students from LPN and students with no family experience of HE showed less perceived changes. This study provides just a snapshot at each stage of the degree. However, changes to identity over time will be possible in the next stage of the research if the same participants are happy to take part.

Concerns

The majority of student concerns were related to academic issues, rather than social issues. However, there were also a wide variety of 'other' concerns, with most relating to finance or managing the work-life balance. In terms of financial support for Universities to support non-traditional students, practice varies between institutions but for many the initial support is not continued. Various programmes support the progression of disadvantaged gifted learners from school to HE, but there appears to be a need to strengthen the support that universities provide for these learners throughout the degree, and not just through financial support in the form of bursaries. Recommendations developing from this study will be highlighted in a brief report to the university Widening Access unit.

Frequently, student's concerns were related to their reason for being classified as a non-traditional student. For example, financial concerns were more often stated by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, supporting previous research (Quinn et al., 2005). Mature students were concerned about academic issues (the mechanics of learning, rather than the topic or material), while younger students expressed social concerns. Interestingly, students from LPN expressed more social concerns, for example, relating to confidence, which will be explored further in the next stage of research by using a quantitative measure, such as the Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale (Sander & Sanders, 2009).

If supported by later research, using a larger and representative sample, the findings can be used to help provide the level and type of pastoral support necessary to address these concerns of non-traditional students. For example, the link between concerns and the student's non-traditional category suggests a move towards more individualised support, rather than providing similar pastoral support for all students. In addition, it would be useful to track students throughout their degree, to identify and

address problems early and thus enhance student experience and reduce attrition. Potentially, personal tutors may require specific training in the different needs and concerns of non-traditional students. A good level of reflective information was provided on the questionnaires by students and it may be that a similar type of questionnaire could be completed prior to pastoral support tutorials (with respect to confidentiality and ethical issues), to enable a more useful and rich discussion. For the next academic year, a trial online support system is being set-up, based on the questions used in this questionnaire and an evaluation from tutors and students will be conducted after one term.

Further research

The study reported here is the first stage of a longitudinal research programme and achieved the aim to be exploratory. A revised questionnaire has been developed based on the findings of this study. New questions relate to: longer-term aspirations (in five years time), ways in which pastoral and academic support was sought and if not why not; and structured responses to identity questions to allow the responses to be related to social identity theory. All questions in this study have been included again in the revised questionnaire to enable comparison between these participants and a larger sample; with the survey taking place at the same time in the academic year to ensure a similar context. Also, Stage 1 participants have been invited to complete the questionnaire again one year on, so the data will enable us to compare responses within participants over time (especially to track developmental changes in identity). In addition, a group of traditional entry students will be recruited to enable a comparison of responses with non-traditional entry

students. Stage 2 will involve participants complete a series of pedagogic measures, to assess the changes and impacts for traditional entry and non-traditional entry students quantitatively. One measure has already been highlighted in the Discussion (to assess academic confidence), but other measures currently being considered include those to measure extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and a learning styles questionnaire. A further aim for the next stage of the research is to identify possible barriers to seeking help for student concerns. Although, many of the student concerns were realised, few participants mentioned social or academic support systems or mediating and coping factors; these will be explored in focus groups and further questions.

In conclusion, this exploratory study shows that there are qualitative differences in the type of motivations, the way identity changes and the types of concerns of different types of non-traditional psychology students. The next stage of the research will build upon these findings and extend the understanding of the way traditional and non-traditional students experience HE.

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