

Student Withdrawal, Retention and Their Sense of Belonging; Their Experience in Their Words

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Student withdrawal has received increased attention in the context of an expanding and more diverse Higher Education (HE) student population. Students leave University for interconnected, multiple reasons. Some explanations are internal to the University and may include support mechanisms, assessment feedback and quality of teaching and others are external, comprising critical life moments such as bereavement, ill health, financial constraint and domestic responsibilities. It is the complex interaction of these factors that shape students' 'sense of belonging' and identification and experience with a Higher Education learner identity. This article provides insight into the students' experiences of non-continuation in one English University. Wenger's social theory of learning is applied to explore students' perceptions and gain a qualitative understanding regarding their experiences. Student withdrawal involves negotiation between the student and the University and relates to how the student experiences a 'sense of belonging' to University.</i></p>	<p>Article History: <i>Received</i> September, 30, 2018 <i>Accepted</i> August, 30, 2019</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p>Keywords: <i>Withdrawal, Retention, Higher Education, Sense of Belonging</i></p>

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Introduction

Building student belonging and engagement for retention and success has been at the centre of Higher Education (HE) policy discourse during profound sector-wide change in England and across the globe (Masika & Jones, 2016; Thomas, 2012; Trowler, 2010). Student withdrawal is costly to the student and the institution (Simpson, 2005); evidence suggests that a students' 'sense of belonging' alongside their development of a HE learner identity are important considerations when thinking about retention strategies (Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014; Reid, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Recently there has been much interest in the retention of students within the UK context, motivated in part by the government's target to reduce rates of non-completion. Consequently, Universities have wider concerns about the quality of the student experience in the context of expanding diverse, student populations and decreasing resources (Joyce & O'Boyle, 2013; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). When the budgets, curriculums, directives and goals of Universities change so do the experiences of students (Dolhinow, 2017) and thus Universities are increasingly made aware of the social injustices evident within HE and are ever more concerned with implementing inclusive leadership to do something about it (Ryan, 2006). Leadership practices are therefore crucial elements in gearing all educational systems towards inclusive values and bringing about sustainable change to better the educational experiences of all its students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). The research on which this article draws aimed to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complex process of belonging and engagement for HE participation and retention. Social justice in the broader HE context has included a commitment to equitable participation of *all* students and so issues

related to belonging and identity are related to widened University access facilitating a just, competent and diverse student body and graduate workforce who can, in turn, contribute to society (Gair & Baglow, 2018). Findings are drawn from 80 participants' experiences of studying and leaving one English University, using Tinto's model of retention and Wenger's social theory of learning, encapsulated in communities of practice (CoP) perspectives to understand the complex interaction of how a student's 'sense of belonging' is linked to the interaction of individual and institutional factors that shape students HE experiences.

Student Withdrawal

The literature identifies that the reasons students withdraw tend to be multiple and interconnected (Merrill, 2015). Students may withdraw due to a lack of preparedness for HE and an incompatibility between the student and their selected course and institution (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998); because the course or University is not what they expected and a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of HE learning is experienced (Hamshire, Willgoss & Wibberley, 2013). Some struggle academically, with course content and workload. Others may tussle to manage debt, finances, health concerns or bereavements (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Gavin, 2012; Michalski, 2014). The quality of course pre-entry information matters, as do relations with placement mentors (Chambers, Hobson & Tracey, 2010; Gavin, 2012; Hamshire, Wilgoss & Wibberley, 2013; Wray, Aspland & Barrett, 2014), types of learning, teaching and assessment approaches (Tinto, 2002), the nature of relationships between academic staff and students (Thomas, 2002) and the ease with which students establish friendship networks (McGivney, 1996). Issues related to a student's ability to make compatible friends are



related to where a student lives; living in halls for example can act to facilitate social support ties amongst peers during the initial stages of university transition, but this can also present problems for the maintenance of these friendships (Wilcox et al, 2006). Students leave University because they feel isolated, struggle to make friends and have no peer support networks to draw on. Furthermore, if students are not aware of the support available, or feel it is insufficient, their ability to develop a HE learner identity is thwarted (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Merrill, 2015; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Withey, Fox & Hartley, 2014; Wray, Aspland & Barrett, 2014).

Often students will cite personal circumstances as reasons for leaving, which can be difficult to unpack as it can obscure the part that institutional factors play in the students' decision to leave. Students may blame themselves for their inability to cope academically, but the interaction of personal and institutional factors may be more nuanced (Withey, Fox & Hartley, 2014). Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) acknowledge the under-reporting of academic difficulties as reasons for withdrawal. Young, Glogowska and Lockyer (2007) explored the difference between staff and student conceptions of why students withdraw. While many staff tended to suggest factors that locate the issue with the individual student and their deficient abilities, students in contrast were more likely to suggest their experiences on the course and lack of guidance and support from academic staff as key reasons for leaving (Young, Glogowska & Lockyer, 2007).

A multitude of reasons shape a students' decision to withdraw. Students' ability and experience of integrating into the academic and social spheres matter, with successful integration across both of these domains leading to a reduction in the probability of student withdrawal (Beder, 1997). Social and academic support is vital for

effective adjustment into University life and transition into a HE learner identity and that support from peers, tutors and parents all play a different role in developing this connection (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger & Pancer, 2000). Becoming a student involves constructing a new identity and a sense of belonging, as well as developing fresh academic skills (Beder, 1997).

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging has been deemed a universal human need (Maslow, 1954) and is thus vital to mental health (Hagerty, Lynch-Saur, Patusky, Bouwsema & Collier, 1992). Much of the postsecondary belonging literature (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012) builds upon Tinto's (1987) model of student retention which suggests that students leave universities if they fail to become integrated into social and academic life. Tinto's model of integration has been critiqued for emphasising student, rather than institutional responsibility for adaptation, rather the students' sense of belonging should illustrate the interplay between the individual and the institution (Johnson et al, 2007). Within the HE literature, a sense of belonging has been referred to as the "psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007, p. 804). Other literature describes sense of belonging as being fostered specifically through campus involvement. Other research focuses on historically marginalised groups such as students from the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community (Strayhorn, 2012); ethnic minority groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Meeuwse, Severiens & Born, 2010) and students with disabilities (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano & Newman, 2015). Common to the literature is an emphasis on psychological feelings of fitting in, acceptance and support from a group or indeed a University community (Strayhorn, 2012). The



inability to create and maintain positive social bonds may lead to feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Wilcox et al, 2006). Here, we argue that a sense of belonging is indeed an important matter to foster for all students, but that wider hegemonic forces, in addition to University and personal individual motivations and experiences help nurture or diminish it. This article aims to develop understandings regarding the complex processes of belonging and engagement related to student withdrawal and retention. It deliberates on issues related to belonging and the development of a HE learner identity.

Learning and Identity

Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning posits learning as social participation involving active participation with people and practices in social communities, whereby identities are constructed within these communities. Over time the historical practices of learning become a social structure constituting a community of practice (CoP). Conceptually, the theory amalgamates four interconnected learning components to include, *community* – learning as belonging; *practice* – learning by doing; *meaning* – learning by experiencing and *identity* – learning by becoming to characterise social participation as a constructivist socio-cultural process of learning, knowing and being (Masika & Jones, 2015). Thus the concept of a community is a learning organism which can be utilised as a theoretical lens to understand learning as a social process, a procedure whereby the very act of learning transforms our experience and our identity and so the institution and the individual interact to manifest the experience of learning - something which cannot be separated from identity development (Smith, MacGregor, Mathews, & Gabelnick, 2004).

Understanding learning via this frame allows for the importance of sense of belonging to be negated by the individual student and the

institution, while simultaneously linking this sense of community and belonging to the manifestation of a HE learner identity.

The Study

A qualitative research design was adopted to include eighty participants who were interviewed using a semi-structured format, to enable participants to tell their own stories in their own way. Many previous studies have explored notions of 'sense of belonging' among HE students using a quantitative design, utilising survey instruments such as Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership (Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014); or have focused on either undergraduates or postgraduates across specific semesters. This study sought an exploratory, inductive design that pursued in-depth, valid data from any willing participant who had experienced withdrawal or issues with retention in one English University. The University had withdrawal rates in line with expectations according to the benchmarks set by the UK's Office for Students. A relatively large number of students are from working-class backgrounds and approximately 50% commute from their homes, with the remaining students either living away from their UK home or are international in their status. Detailed analysis of withdrawal data, standardised for ethnicity, entrance qualifications, gender, disability and domicile, revealed that students at this University who had undertaken vocational qualifications prior to entry (such as BTEC qualifications rather than 'A' Levels) were more likely to withdraw. These students were more likely to live at home and derive from a Pakistani/Bangladeshi heritage. The University's leadership recognised that it was operating within what Shapiro and Gross (2013) call 'multiple ethical paradigms' in 'turbulent times'. It was



challenged to meet outcomes related to targets regarding student retention and achievement) and was influenced by a neoliberal ethical paradigm focusing on value for money for taxpayers. The University leadership actively sought to support the most vulnerable students and vigorously engage with widening participation (Devlin, 2013). To facilitate this, The University needed a deeper understanding of the factors within its control so it could activate change and better support all students, thus improving student retention was a key strategy.

Fieldwork commenced in March 2017 and concluded in April 2018. Interviews were participant-led; they were arranged at a time and place convenient to the participant. A mixture of opportunistic, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques was used to increase the cohort. Up to 2000 students who had withdrawn from the University between 2015 and 2018 were contacted via telephone, email and/or text message. Large datasets comprised centrally and on an individual school basis were obtained and followed up. In addition to this, key staff, including Personal Tutors, Lecturers, Deans, staff with academic support roles and Student Union Professionals were accessed as gatekeepers in an attempt to keep abreast of the ever changing student population.

Approximately 30 hours was spent 'hanging around' the Student Union, the library and eating and leisure areas with the aim of gathering participants at risk of withdrawing. The sample consisted of those who had left the institution and those who had thought about leaving or had attendance issues during their time at the University. Interviews lasted between fifteen minutes to one-hour and thirty minutes; varying in length depending upon how complex their reasons for leaving were and how quickly they were able to reflect on their experiences. These interviews were participant-led and so the

length of them, as well as where they occurred, were dictated by the participants. Interviews occurred face-to-face at the University, in participant's homes, workplaces or local shopping centre/coffee houses, via skype or email.

Interview questions concerned exploring participants' overall experiences at the University, their course, opinions on staff, peers, available support mechanisms (formal and informal) and general teaching and learning strategies. Participants were also asked about their decision to leave (or to stay) at the University and they were asked to reflect on how they felt about that decision now in retrospect. The overall sample included sixty-four individual interviews, three paired and the remainder were grouped including 3-4 participants. Seventy-five of these interviews were conducted face-to-face, three were interviewed via telephone, one via Skype and one via email.

A total of eighty undergraduate and postgraduate students who had either withdrawn or were at risk of being withdrawn from the University comprised the sample, including 29 males and 51 females; 71 Undergraduates and 9 Postgraduates across seven academic schools. Their ethnic make-up was defined by the participants themselves and included 37 White, 17 Pakistani, 9 British Muslim, 2 Indian, 2 Asian, 1 Bangladeshi British, 1 Black, 1 Black African, 1 Nigerian, 1 Persian, 1 Cypriot, 1 Syrian, 1 Lithuanian, 1 Gambian, 1 Polish, 1 Chinese, 1 from Kuwait and 1 'unknown' ethnic identity. A total of thirty-four had withdrawn and forty-three were at risk of withdrawing, leaving three who had suspended their studies.

Interview data were analysed and key themes identified via Braun and Clark's (2006) open coding technique. Key themes included the students overall 'sense of belonging' which was linked to their 'higher education learner identity' – both of which ultimately shaped



their experiences of the withdrawal or retention process, in terms of how and why they decided to continue (or not) with their University experience.

Students Withdraw for a Variety of Reasons

A number of key themes emerged from the interview data, exemplifying that the reasons students leave University are multiple and inter-connected. The process of non-completion involved negotiation between the student and the institution and comprised how the student experienced a 'sense of belonging' to the University and their transition to a HE learner identity. It is important to note that these findings reflect student perceptions, but also have implications for Higher Education Institutes strategies for widening participation and ensuring all students enjoy a rewarding University experience.

Findings indicate that the key factors for leaving can be grouped into internal factors (structures within the University such as institutional support mechanisms, course availability and content and course population cohort culture) and external (structures outside of the university such as wider financial support policy and more agentic personal and social reasons such as health, domestic responsibility, bereavement and feeling of compatibility with certain courses and institutions). These categories often overlap and interconnect consequently influencing students' decision to leave or indeed stay at University.

Feelings of exclusion, lack of support, isolation and anxiety can be grouped under the students overall 'sense of belonging' to a particular institution. Students' lack of sense of belonging is often directly related to key transition points and identity concerns related to first becoming a University student, periods of prolonged absence

such as holidays and placements and movement from undergraduate to postgraduate status. How a student experiences their shift to a HE learner identity is often related to agentic personal circumstances external to the University and structural support mechanisms, course availability and population cultural make-ups internal to the organisation itself. For most, it is the interaction of these internal and external factors that lead to a student's non-continuation.

Higher Education Learner Identity

First year retention remains a key challenge across the sector (Jones et al, 2017). Reasons for non-continuation are interrelated and complex (Yorke & Longden, 2008) but a student's transition to a HE learner identity features prominently in the interview data as a key indicator for withdrawal. A student's 'sense of belonging' shapes how they view time spent in University, which may be related to their management of study and view of travel time. When students first move into HE they often enjoy, but are somewhat overwhelmed by the level of flexibility and freedom they are afforded. This shift to working in an increased independent way is problematic for some and their adaptability may be dependent upon the student's cultural background and personal circumstances. Students may consequently struggle academically.

Mohamed Asif, a twenty-six-year-old British Muslim accountant and finance student, was withdrawn due to academic failure. During his interview he illustrated how he enjoyed the independence of study time, but also found this challenging in terms of keeping him motivated to attend lectures, study autonomously and improve his chances of academic progress.



MA: At first it was different because it was a new place with new people and the work is different from what you did at school and college (...) We had days off sometimes which I never had in school or college so we don't come in five days a week (...) Sometimes there used to be a lesson in the morning and then there would be a big gap and then a lesson from three 'till five.

(Interview 07/02/2018)

Many students cited feelings of 'lack of support' as key reasons for their withdrawal, lack of academic progress and consistent attendance. Such feelings were heightened during key transition periods such as entering HE in the first instance like Mohammad indicates above or during placement or after long term breaks such as embarking upon a new academic term or year. Successful movement to a HE learner identity is partly dependent upon the students' ability to work independently, but (may also be eased by having consistent and flexible support mechanisms in place). Some students did not find the various support systems that existed sufficient, particularly when they were used to having closer supervision in schools and colleges, where teachers would actively pursue students who missed small amounts of teaching, or appeared to be disengaging. They had to negotiate, develop and manage different CoP's, different ways of working with different people to help cultivate their HE Learner Identity.

Support Mechanisms

Internal formal support mechanisms may include how well students relate to academic and support staff, how well informed they are about available support structures, and how students view assessment feedback and keep abreast of their academic standing and attendance levels. Informal support mechanisms in the form of peer group networks are also key, with some students relying on these over

and above any formal support mechanisms set up by the University. Feelings of belonging are shaped by a student's ability to feel integrated, engage with other students, make friends and form good productive relations with staff.

Shai Ahmed, a male British Bangladeshi student, withdrew during the first year from a Law degree. He cited the quick turnaround of academic staff and consequent lack of classroom management as key reasons for his departure. Shai describes feeling a 'lack of support' from the University in terms of not effectively tracking his progress when he returned from a three-week period of absence due to illness. He also did not appreciate the change in staff members making it difficult to catch-up and follow different schemes of work taught in different ways.

He also cites poor classroom management as an issue, with some staff struggling to discipline disruptive students. A culmination of these factors left him feeling unsettled and contributed to his feelings of exclusion. He describes struggling to make friends and felt that the few he did make, consequently withdrew due to the lack of support they also felt. Together, these factors further exacerbated and increased his desire to withdraw.

SA: Different tutors kept coming in and they were bringing in their own material, and you'd always fall back. You'd go forward, you'd take two steps on and you'd take one step back, that's how it, sorry one step forward, two steps back. It was a bit disruptive.

LR: Tell me about your friends at the University. So, you know, did you make friends easily?

SA: No. Do you know what it is? That was one of the most, hardest thing I had to do, because everyone was so isolated on my course it's like no one wanted to do anything with each other. And during the course a lot of problems did go through, like there was, at the time there was this app out. I forgot what it was



called, but it's like everyone will get into the app and they'll start taking pictures and they start texting and they'll make fun of other people, other teachers. It was very anonymous so no one knows who's talking (...) And that was a concern. It was a concern for everyone because basically they were taking the mick out of your tutors (...) It was an app which everyone just, as soon as they sign up everyone's in that chat and you can just talk. It's like a group chat but no one says who's who on that group chat (...) Everyone's on their own, it's like they don't disclose who's who (...) It went on for a month until one of the tutors found out (...) But they didn't put a complete stop to it, people carried on with it.

LR: And did you struggle making friends?

SA: (...) I was close with about two or three when I started but them two or three just dropped out. They dropped out within the first term.

LR: What was the population like on your course?

SA: I came across a few Asians and their personality was different. It was all about the swag, it was all about coming late, it was all about messing around, doing your work late, give in your assignment late. So I kind of thought to myself, I don't know which world I've landed myself in (...) I'm not going to take nothing away, I mean the concept of the course was very interesting. If I had the support at the time and if I had a good crowd around me I would go, I would definitely carry on with it, but it was the crowd thing and it was the fact that teachers kept on changing.

(Interview 21/07/2017)

Teaching quality, classroom management, course content, assessment procedures and quality of feedback all matter to students, but their relations with staff and peers and sense of belonging attributed to the course cohort can also all shape students' progress and their feelings of connectedness with a CoP. Many of these themes can be understood under the broader theme of 'support mechanisms' which can be formal and/or informal. If the student feels these are lacking they are more likely to withdraw. Indeed, sometimes it is the students' peer group networks that increase their 'sense of belonging'

and keep them motivated to succeed and complete their studies. In Shai's instance, the student appeared to have difficulty finding a group of friends with whom he could identify both culturally and academically with having a negative impact on his overall sense of belonging and ability to interact, contribute to and develop a community he felt a part of. Diversely, Kayley, a Masters student, below indicates the positive impact peer group networks can have helping to facilitate a CoP, whereby learning is viewed as a social practice involving active participation with other people, in this case peers, to help solidify Kayley's Master student identity, helping her to recognise her feelings and experiences were alike to others within that community that she and her peers actively developed and contributed to (Wenger, 2009).

KL: If we didn't have each other I would have left by now.
(Focus group 31/01/2018)

Issues of learning and HE identity development are related to a student's sense of belonging. What students do at University and how they experience it shapes how they become a HE learner and engage (or not) with the University CoP's (Wenger, 1998, 2009). Thus a CoP plays a vital role in nurturing a sense of belonging and engaging students in learning. Students may feel a sense of belonging (or not) to the University itself, the course and/or discipline, their peers and their tutors, thus emphasising the importance of belonging and the relation this has to identity and ultimate student retention and academic success (Tinto, 2003; Wenger, 2009). Overall students want to feel a part of something, learn together and have a positive experience at University and so University leadership needs to take on board the importance of a student's sense of belonging in order to facilitate the student's engagement and encourage their feeling a part



of the Higher Education Institute if they want to increase student retention – something which may be viewed somewhat as a challenge in the current societal climate (Shapiro & Gross, 2007).

There is rarely one defining moment that leads to student withdrawal, rather a culmination of interacting internal and external factors shape student withdrawal. Although Mohammad withdrew due to ‘academic failure’, the interview revealed that he did not feel comfortable with his choice of course. He attributed his academic struggle to lack of his own application. However, he also described feeling uncomfortable approaching support and academic staff about his personal issues, this consequently had a negative effect on his progress. It is also notable that systems devised to be consistent and fair (such as requiring students to identify problems before poor results come out, to ensure claims are genuine) are not always understood in good time.

MA: I think the course was not meant to be for me. At first I did want to be an accountant but when I started studying I lost a bit of interest. The course just wasn't for me. I don't really know how to say it (...) I didn't really speak to anyone. I tried to speak to my tutors after the results and I think they told me even before that that I was not in a good place because of my grades (...) I was sad because I wasted that one year and I really wanted to stay on at uni and get a degree. I wasn't really that happy (...) I spoke to Student Support because during my exams I had my first cousin diagnosed with a blood cancer so I used to visit him at Hospital because we knew that he was going to pass away. And I got a bit sad about the state he was in. So when the exams came I couldn't concentrate that well. I tried to explain, but there was nothing they could do about it. I did bring in some evidence from the hospital but it didn't work (...) I didn't want to speak about it then so when my cousin passed away and I knew that I hadn't done well in my exams, then I told them about what had gone on. I should have spoken to someone at the right time but I didn't do that. (Interview 07/02/2018)

Tinto's model on student retention (Tinto 1975, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998) considers the educational institution to consist of an academic system (related to academic progress) and a social system (related to informal peer group relations, engagement in extra curricula activities and interaction with support and academic staff). Tinto's model postulates that the more the student integrates and thus feels a part of the institution within the academic and social communities related to the university, the greater the likelihood of persistence (Meeuwisse, Severiens & Born, 2010). These ideas can be related to the student's 'sense of belonging' and ease of movement into a HE learner identity. Key transitions such as when a student first starts university, like Mohammad previously described, are vulnerable periods whereby ones 'lack of sense of belonging' may be heightened. Experiences concerning personal bereavement (an external reason for withdrawal) and the feeling of not being able to access formal support structures (such as those offered by the institution) and informal ones (in the form of peer group support) enhance a student's feeling of anxiety, isolation, lack of support and sometimes self-blame. Most students interviewed experienced a mixture of internal and external factors that lead to their ultimate withdrawal. Thus there needs to be a negotiation between themselves as learners and the institution itself. Few students attributed their withdrawal solely to internal reasons and fewer still described purely external factors as the sole determining factor for their non-continuation.

Personal Circumstances

The main external reasons for withdrawing included bereavement, health (mental and physical), reasons related to family/domestic responsibility and lack of finance. Sole external reasons for withdrawing are harder for the institution to effectively



manage since it is the students' life outside the University that acts as a barrier to their academic progress and retention. An example of which can be found in Sally Ram's interview, a 38-year-old White female who withdrew from a Youth and Community course due to family issues.

LR: How did you feel about the University?

SR: Overall extremely pleasant. Really, really enjoyed my time here, loved the tutors, the organisation, things like that were very well organised, the classes were well-structured and I couldn't really fault that side of it at all. And, yeah, I'm quite sorry that I left but I just couldn't carry on (...) I liked the tutors, you know, I liked all the tutors that we had (...) I even enjoyed the huge amount of reading that you had to do.

LR: Was there anything that you didn't like?

SR: Not really, no. I think one thing I would find is that coming back as a mature student is quite hard (...) it's hard to find your place within a group, because they're predominantly younger students, but saying that I actually came with a lady who was on my access course and there were other mature students there (...) but again I actually found that that added to it because there was such a mixture of people that everyone brought something to the mix.

LR: What was your relationship with tutors like?

SR: They were supportive and with hindsight I wish I'd have kind of gone to my own tutor first, but it wasn't, I didn't really make, I know it sounds silly, a conscious decision to go (...) I came in one morning and just thought, I can't carry on like this, and found myself at the wellbeing clinic (...) The reason why I left was because my husband had trouble with a gambling addiction (...) And he was actually having counselling for that and when I left the access course that was when things came to light, but over the summer things started getting easier. He was getting counselling and everything else, and I did discuss it with my tutor at college and she said 'no, carry on the road that you're doing, don't leave it a year', you know, 'just carry on and see how it goes', but I actually wish now I'd have taken a year out because I think with me being here and not realising how much support he needed as well, because he was trying to play it

down, he actually regressed and went backwards and ended up in suicide watch. Which is why I left. And it got to the point where, like I said, it wasn't a conscious decision. I came in one morning stressed, anxious. I knew that I'd got a placement to do as well, so that, as well as everything else, and I hadn't said anything to anybody here, thinking it would calm down or sort itself out. And I think it just pushed me over the edge.

(Interview 30/06/2017)

Anybody under such intense circumstances would struggle to progress and continue with their studies regardless of the institutions formal structures of support and positive relations with staff and peers. Tragic personal issues do occur and prevent students from continuing with their studies and although there is some indication here about wanting to talk sooner to someone, overall Sally felt as though her personal circumstances outweighed her ability to study. Interestingly though, the financial barrier in terms of re-engaging despite her comfortable standing previous to her husband's recognised gambling addiction did seem to act as a barrier for her re-engaging with HE at a later stage in life.

Financial Barriers

External HE financial shifts mean student debt acts as a real barrier to engage and re-engage once one has withdrawn. As Ismal Halm, a twenty-two-year-old Pakistani male, who withdrew from a Tourism course in favour of a job working in tourism outlines:

LR: Well do you think you'll go back to studying at all?

IH: Probably not, no. It's just the fees as well, like I don't see the point in doing it because it's just like, I wouldn't recommend anyone to go to University to be honest because it's just like, it's just all the fees and like all the money that you have to pay and get in debt practically all your life anyway, and it's just ridiculous what they do to people.

(Interview 10/07/2017)



Part of a student's decision to withdraw is linked to other options available to them outside of the University, some of which may be viewed by the student as a more financially viable pathway that serves them just as well in terms of career development.

Valuing Time

External financial pressures do act as a barrier to some students' retention as some juggle family, work and/or study responsibilities, but many described this as a major concern about re-engaging with their studies once they had already withdrawn. How the student values time spent inside and outside of the University impacts upon their overall sense of belonging either easing or impinging upon their journey to a HE learner identity.

Norman Cannon, a White twenty-one-year-old who withdrew from Journalism, describes this tension below. Having a strong work ethic and desire to become financially independent impacted how he viewed his sense of belonging and time spent in University. Students who juggle work, study and maybe family responsibilities have to choose how to best utilise their time, and sometimes University and study time are not prioritised. How Norman viewed 'time' was crucial: time to get to and from campus, time to fit in his studies around work, time to do his own thing and relax. He experienced time at University slowly in comparison to his time outside of it and valued his time outside of the University more highly when compared to his time spent within it.

NC: In the end I was like weighing up these options, from do I quit my job and continue or do I leave and get a job? And probably the nail in the coffin was the fact that I wasn't going to pass my second year and I didn't want to do a fourth year, because I'd have to redo the second year and then do the third, and I didn't, that's something I just didn't really want to do at all (...) I were struggling to

get the stuff done. So, a lot of it is with that course particularly, it's going out into the field, and I couldn't manage that. It was even more difficult for me because as I say we had to use cameras. I had to come to Uni', get the equipment, we could only keep it until a certain point when I had to bring it back, like the next day. And because I live far way and it takes me about an hour roughly to get here, or more, doing that was difficult.

(Interview 12/06/2017)

Understanding the Student Demographic

Understanding the student demographic matters so that individualised tailored support systems can be put into place to help retain 'at risk' students. This study indicated that in this sample, males, particularly those from a Pakistani background are less likely to seek support from their institution or indeed their family or friends. This has direct implications for how they manage periods of turbulence during their studies.

Abdul Ira, a 20-year-old Pakistani male repeated his second year of studying Law and had by his own admission 'very low attendance'. Abdul, like other students regardless of their ethnicity or gender found the transition period between the first year and second year 'a bit of a shock' and also had a car accident which effected his attendance and ability to sit exams, meaning he had to re-sit his second year of study. He had recently been to Pakistan for over a month during semester time to care for a sick grandmother; this had also affected his attendance but his absence was authorised. Abdul depicts a sense of 'lack of belonging' related to his need to re-integrate himself into a new year group upon his return and discusses not conferring with or even contacting his Personal Tutor. Like many other Pakistani males interviewed during this study, he felt he needed to deal with such issues alone.



AI: *I don't think I chat to people this year as much as I did last year, but the majority of my friends are in their third year and there is only a couple of us in the second year and I think that is why it might have affected my attendance this year. My actual attendance is pretty low, but that is because my grandmother has not been well so during the first semester I was abroad and I think I've made three visits in the past six months (...) I'm redoing my second year but I've done the bulk of it last year and the stuff that I'm resitting is because last year I wasn't feeling too well during my exam period so I didn't take the exams. So I'm just resitting the exams from two modules.*

LR: *Do you have a Personal Tutor that you talk to?*

AI: *I do but he's changed this year and I haven't seen him. I had Molly last year and she was lovely but this year it's changed.*

LR: *Do you think you need that kind of support?*

AI: *Probably.*

LR: *So have you seen your Personal Tutor at all this year?*

AI: *No. I've spent most of the first semester abroad but I might pop in soon just to show my face so that he knows who I am.*

LR: *Have you made new friends?*

AI: *Right now I just come into Uni' and get on with my work because I still have my friends outside Uni', but in Uni' I've got a couple that I chat to and that is it. I'm quite good by myself, so I don't really mind not having friends here (...) From first year to second year there is a big jump and I was taken back by the workload because it is a lot more but, apart from that, it's been fine and I've been doing well in my coursework and it is just the exams that I need to get. Last year I was off ill for about a month before my exams and I knew I wouldn't be able to do my best so I extended to July and I wasn't well in July so I have to re-sit two exams.*

LR: *Do you think that was the right decision for you?*

AI: *Now I kind of regret it because it feels as though I've wasted a year, but if I had taken the exams I wouldn't have done my best and I would have probably just come out with passes and I know I am capable of better than a pass. Hopefully in the long run it will work out.*

LR: *Did you feel supported in your decisions by people at home and here?*

AI: *I don't think I spoke to anybody here actually. I might have spoken to my family and they said I should do what was best for me.*

LR: *So you just put a request in without speaking to anybody.*

AI: *Yeah.*

LR: *And did anybody come to ask you about that?*

AI: *No.*

LR: *Why didn't you talk to anybody at the University?*

AI: *I don't know. I just thought it would be the best thing for me.*

LR: *Any advice about student withdrawal that might be of help to us?*

AI: *I think students should speak to their Personal Tutor before making a decision. That was the mistake I made because I had a good Personal Tutor who would be quite understanding about it.*

LR: *So why didn't you go?*

AI: *I honestly don't know. Probably I might have been a bit shy to speak to her about it but, looking back, I should have spoken to her about it.*

(Interview 29/01/2018)

Abdul like many other students experienced a number of interacting factors that led to his turbulent HE experience, some of which were external to the University itself. Abdul demonstrates perseverance in his motivation to succeed and complete his degree, despite the fact that he seems to have accessed little support from within the University, regardless of his relations with tutors. There is evidence from those interviewed for this study that males, especially those from a Pakistani background struggled to seek support from the institution and sometimes from their peers, many described feeling a sense of family responsibility that sometimes directed them away from their studies. Being able to cope on your own and sort out your own personal issues were common themes evident amongst such men.

Some ethnic minority and international students reported a struggle they experienced when trying to form good formal relationships with their tutors and fellow students. Some of this was



related to the fact that the demographic they were used to interacting with differed from their previous educational experiences. Alina, a twenty-one-year-old Indian student explains below how she grappled with the University student demographic, but later felt integrated after finding where she liked to be and who she liked to spend time with.

A: My school was quite dominated by white people and coming from an Asian background – but I wasn't always comfortable hanging around with Asians – but when I came here I was, like, wow! And I wasn't quite sure if I liked the course or not and I wasn't even sure if I liked uni altogether.

This in turn may have had a negative impact on Alina's overall sense of belonging to the University and sustained academic progress. For some, a physical detachment from the institution occurred. In Abdul's case this meant leaving the country for three prolonged periods during his studies and consequently disengaging from his CoP (Wenger, 2009). For Alina, this meant a drop in attendance, but by being able to nurture her own CoP via her peers and boyfriend she remained at the University, found friends and a comfortable space to be, interact and develop her HE learner identity.

A: I started to come up here to the Student Union a bit more and met more people and stuff like that and met new friends and it got better. But I still wasn't sure about the course itself because it was a big transition and I wasn't sure if I could do it. I guess my boyfriend did help because he said I should stay.

Alina was learning and becoming part of a CoP via her social participation whereby she 'met more people' and had the help of her boyfriend (Masika & Jones, 2015). By relating with others, she was engaged with a social process whereby her sense of belonging and HE learner identity were intertwined and ultimately led to her remaining at the University to complete her studies. Understanding learning and feelings of acceptance via this frame allows for the importance of sense of belonging to be negated by the individual student and the

institution, while simultaneously linking this sense of community and belonging to the manifestation of a HE learner identity.

Conclusion

There is rarely one defining moment that leads to student withdrawal from University; rather students withdraw for a variety of inter-related reasons. Some of these are internal to the University and are related to quality of teaching, assessment feedback, consistent accurate communication and support mechanisms and others are external and include critical life moments such as bereavement, ill health, financial constraints and domestic responsibilities. Using Tinto's model of retention and Wenger's social theory of learning allows for an understanding that it is the complex interaction of these factors that lead to a student's 'sense of belonging' and identification and experience with a HE learner identity that ultimately shapes their withdrawal. Most students interviewed in this study experienced a mixture of internal and external factors that lead to their non-continuation. Less attributed solely internal reasons and fewer still described purely external factors as the determining factor for their non-continuation.

Certain transition periods such as becoming a University student, moving from an undergraduate to a postgraduate identity and returning after placement and prolonged non-teaching/contact periods intensify a student's sense of not belonging. Males, especially those from a Pakistani background are especially vulnerable to trying to cope on their own and often neglect gaining available institutional support. Such findings reflect national research which suggests that some groups of students (namely those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and working-class backgrounds) are more likely to



withdraw and find it more difficult to identify with University, develop a student CoP, seek help if needed and ultimately shape a strong sense of belonging to the University. Whilst the University researched in this instance here has a particular demographic – one with significant ethnic minority groups and working-class students, it is a demographic found in other Higher Education Institutions and as such, although not universally generalizable, findings may be relevant to other institutions working with similar demographics.

Findings highlight the need for Higher Education Institutions to develop student CoP, and actively cultivate a strong sense of belonging need to be present and nurtured by a range of University provisions, that may include academic and extra curricula activities via face-to-face or virtual means. In a climate of decreasing staff resources and dealing with large numbers of students (Rowley, 2003), HE Institutions need to consider how they may better integrate an increasingly diverse student population as the importance of belonging remains paramount to students' success.

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