

Supporting Students



Fig. 5.1 'Role Models'

INTRODUCTION

Universities have well-established student support systems to meet the personal and academic needs of their students. For instance, central university student departments provide career guidance, housing services, study skills, child care, financial aid, as well as advice regarding housing (Dhillon et al. 2008: 1). Alongside this, students are appointed a personal tutor for one-to-one guidance on personal issues, as well as academic support. When I asked respondents what they, as working-class academics, ‘bring’ to academia over three quarters of the interviewees (n. 75) referred to the pastoral care and academic support they were able to provide. Providing student support is of course not just particular to working-class academics, but their experiences of inhabiting “two distinct cultures” (Bridges 2017: 70), means that were particularly useful in helping students to navigate academia. Interviewees also gave examples of the navigational and social/familial they brought to academia.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

It’s useful to pause here to place this discussion in the generation where attempts to tackle the eliteness of a university education have occupied a prominent position on the HE agenda (McDonough and Fann 2007). Since the publication of the ‘Kennedy Report’ in 1997, policies to widen participation have been adopted to address the under-representation of specific cohorts in higher education, e.g. those from disadvantaged backgrounds, some from ethnic minorities, people with a disability, and women. If we take the Access to HE route as an example of widening participation in action, we can see this policy has been successful. In 2018/19, nearly 24,000 students entered HE via this route: 56 per cent of these students were over the age of 25, 31 per cent were from an ethnic minority background while almost one quarter (23 per cent) of Access to HE learners were from a disadvantaged area (The Quality Assurance Agency 2019). But for many, equitable opportunities remain restricted. For instance, while its important to not treat BME students as a homogenous group, those from BME backgrounds are more likely to be the first in family to access higher education, come from deprived areas and areas of low HE participation. And while more people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds than ever are entering university, levels are still low in comparison to people from advantaged backgrounds (Stevenson et al. 2019).

At the time of writing 57 per cent of all HE students were female in 2018/19 (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2019). Females are also more likely than men to enter university, across a range of subjects and institutions, but there remains a gender gap in terms of entry into STEM i.e. Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects (STEM Women 2019). To address these issues, respondents drew upon their social/familial (knowledge through kinship) and navigational (skills and abilities to navigate social institutions) capital to support potential students into HE.

Role Models

Studies have repeatedly shown that entry into STEM subjects is gendered (see Makarova et al. 2019; Botella et al. 2019). But a number of respondents, most notably Pat saw this was a class issue too:

My family were rather conservative. When I was a little girl I was discouraged from dressing up like a scientist in a white lab coat, and of course boys could not study nursing simply because they were boys. My friends from affluent backgrounds appeared to have less gender segregation, but working-class boys and girls, like me seemed to have their choices constrained. This meant I was pushed towards nursing as opposed to being the scientist I wanted to be. I didn't see anyone like me working as a scientist.

Research supports this. For instance, a study by Gorard (2008) provided evidence that if a student received free school meals (FSM) (a measure of disadvantage based on students' family income) they were less likely to study STEM subjects post-16). Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003), using data from the British Birth Cohort Study, reported that a student's social class was a factor in entering the elite fields of medicine and law. Although Codirol McMaster (2017) found that it was the educational level of parents that influenced subject studied. Those more likely to study STEM A Level had fathers with a degree, and mothers without a degree. While at degree level, students whose mothers have a degree were most likely to study arts and humanities. Women in Science, Technology and Engineering (WISE), a campaign group created to increase representation in STEM subject's state that one way to counter these attitudes is the use of appropriate role models to inspire young people to consider entry into STEM subjects (Macdonald 2018). Jane, a biological scientist agreed,

talking of how she would readily volunteer at primary schools in her community as a female STEM role model:

Having someone from my background would have been a source of motivation/inspiration and would have made it easier for me to consider a career in the Sciences. I love going to schools as girls especially will say I want to be like you.

This example of a ‘family member’ serving as a role model or mentor, is an example of navigational capital as they can share personal experiences that provide insight into their own strategies for navigating academia. These kin relationships demonstrate a commitment to community well-being (familial/social capital),¹ and provides the critical inspiration and encouragement to persist (aspirational capital) needed for people from disadvantaged communities to consider such roles.

The need for STEM role models for BME cohorts was an additional point made by a number of respondents. While 2019 data shows that the percentage of BME undergraduates in STEM is generally similar to the national average, the physical sciences have a much lower proportion of BME undergraduates (16 percent). Statistics vary across individual UK HEIs, so much so that in some university departments, BME students maybe one of very few in their academic cohort (Pridmore and Lalemi 2019). This often continues into employment as statistics by The Campaign for Science & Engineering (CaSE) (2014) report that BME men are 28 per cent less likely to work in STEM compared with White men. Although interestingly, BME women are more likely, than white women, to be in STEM occupations. One way of encouraging higher BME participation in STEM is to increase the number of BME guest lecturers. Corinne reported being invited to contribute to a panel discussion on careers in stem

A number of women came up afterwards and said it was nice to see someone ‘like me’ on the panel.

As many BME ‘groups’ are still underrepresented in academic and scientific professions (Chautard and Hann 2019), this is often reflected in the composition of keynote speakers or representation of conference panels. Bruce (2018) discussed her experience of being asked to speak at a panel discussion of ‘minorities and justice’. This was problematic as while her ethnicity is Roma, the remaining panel members and audience were

white. She finished her conference presentation with questions for the audience: “Who is missing from the conference? Why are they missing? What is the action that you are going to take to contribute to the redesign?” (para 17). These are questions we should ask ourselves if we find ourselves in yet another all-white panel. But for BME respondents this was not just a ‘STEM issue’. Casey, speaking from her experience as a student who, at times, felt a sense of isolation amongst their white peers, mentioned:

I know how important it is to have a visible presence of BME staff members so I am always happy to be that presence at open days, at school events.

Two respondents with a disability saw disabled role models in HE as vital to create a sense of belonging, both for students and academics, but also to combat the “subtle bigotry of low expectation” (Nash 2014: 19). But both acknowledged that some may not want to emphasise their disability or be “shoe-horned into the disability champion role” (Martin 2017: 26).

Sources of Information

Despite substantial improvements in HE participation among students from disadvantaged backgrounds in recent years, Anders (2012), found that in comparison to students with higher incomes, students from economically disadvantaged families, apply to university less often, and to Russell Group universities even more so—this is after controlling for attainment. Statistics from UCAS (2016) demonstrate the latter most starkly, showing that over half (57 per cent) of young people from disadvantaged areas reported that they did not consider making an application to any of the higher tariff providers listed in the survey, with the most popular reason given was that they were concerned that the entry grades were too high.

Wyness (2017) noted that institutional barriers, such as the admissions process can be a deterrent for some students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they may lack the information, advice and guidance (IAG) needed in the university application process. Respondents had first-hand knowledge of this.

I went to the open day to support my friend. University wasn't for 'the likes of me!' But as I listened I realised I was interested in what the lecturer had to say.

That was the extent of my understanding before I signed up to do my degree. Luckily it worked out, and I loved my degree but it makes me realise how some students know little about university and where to look for information. [Amy]

UCAS reports there is a dissatisfaction with the generic IAG that is provided by schools and colleges, and the feeling remains that teachers target a narrow group of young people who are already considering HE (UCAS 2016). Middle-class families pass on their cultural, economic and social advantages to enable their children to succeed in the educational system, whereas working-class families, who face economic constraints, may not have this, more elite knowledge (Li and Qiu 2018). Wyness (2017) cites personal statements as being a barrier to entry for those from disadvantaged backgrounds as they may have less support in preparing these statements (p. 3). Lynn saw it as her ‘role’ to support students in this way:

I run a monthly drop in at a local community centre where I talk about university, help them choose courses and write personal statements. It's only right that I pass it on this knowledge.

Here, working class academics such as Lynn are able to use their own resources and skills (Harper 2008; Liou et al. 2009 cited in Ako-Asare 2015) in order to help them to support potential students into their desired educational pathway (navigational capital). This was also an example of familial/social capital as it showed a commitment to community well-being. Emma also provided encouragement and emotional support to members of her community that were considering university. She reported that this ‘hands on’ guidance was the most effective means to help NTS manage the process of entering university (Wyness 2017: 4) as they could ask: “*what they think are stupid questions and talk about their concerns*” [Emma].

Having IAG is especially useful for those students considering entering elite institutions as data from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2014) indicates that the most advantaged 20 per cent of young people were 6.3 times more likely to enter the more selective English HE institutions than the most disadvantaged 40 per cent. An important factor in supporting applications to HE, and in particular, elite universities, is knowing others of a similar background in HE e.g. social/familial capital. Joy, felt that one of the many advantages she brought to academia was the ability to provide helpful IAG to others “like her”

It can be difficult being a black woman in a very white institution, dealing with the microaggressions and it can be isolating it can be at times. But, I'm sorry to sound grand, I have a higher purpose. I'm not just here for myself, I can be a role model for the community but also be on hand to give useful information. I get asked questions about finance, about what job they can get, but sadly, if they are considering a top university, I'm constantly asked 'will I fit in here?'

This is a common concern. Reay et al.'s (2010) case study of 27 working-class students across four UK higher education institutions found for some students, class differences remained “lurking in the background” (p. 113). My respondent Diane described how it was simple things like having a conversation with students at an open day that could help those from a working-class background feel like that they could fit in. Tim, mentioned an experience, also at an open day, that highlighted why an intersectional understanding of class was so vital:

I asked him was he ok as he seemed to hang back a bit. He, the student, said— I'm alright, I'm working out if this is 'me'. I told him I felt the same when at first. That seemed to put him at ease so I carried on describing how I came to the open day by myself as I didn't want anyone in my family that I was considering this until I had decided if I could do it. We then talked about what made him feel like this. He said—They are posh and white mate. I laughed at that and said that—yeah I got him, but there is so much a university can give you, and that it needed people like him so that it wasn't always posh and white.

Tim and Joy's examples are further reasons why when we discuss class, we should always take into account how other aspects of one's identity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, etc.) combine to create unique modes of exclusion. As Tim goes onto say:

We should be concerned if our programmes are only favoured by men, or if our open days are not well attended by people with disabilities.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

In 2018 a new universities regulator the Office for Students (OfS), came into force. One aim of the OfS was to support students from under-represented backgrounds while at university. Working class students can have a mixed experience (OfS 2020). Lehmann (2012) and Wong (2018)

found that working-class students can be highly successful. But others such as, Collier and Morgan (2008) noted that first-generation college students' lack of cultural capital meant they were 'unprepared' for university. Binns (2019) mentioned that some of her interviewees talked of their empathy for working-class learners, which "increased the rapport that they had with such students" (p. 113). One method of student support provided by interviewees, was to help students, not just those from non-traditional backgrounds, build a professional identity.

I pause briefly here as when analysing the data for this chapter, I was reminded of Le Court (2006) who asked whether we were pushing the 'alienation narrative' that suggests students of working class heritage can only succeed if they develop a middle-class habitus"? My thought then, as it is now, is can such students become 'professionals' without accepting the social hierarchies in which they developed these skills? O'Dair (2003) sees this as being a simple binary choice: "either assimilate or give up" (cited in Le Court 2006: 32). I disagree. The previous chapter has shown that the presence of the working classes in professional occupations means that students don't have to accept that there is only 'one way to be a professional'. As I will discuss in the next chapter, a working class academic pedagogy means that students can "explore their cultural conflicts, [and] question their subordinate social construction" (Ferretti 1999: 71). Anyway, I digress...

Constructing a Professional Identity

Identity is a dynamic construct, constantly negotiated as people engage with people and opportunities (Skott 2019). Throughout their time in university, it is assumed that students are embarking on a journey to become professionals. I say assumed as the Department of Education found that 22.3 per cent of English graduates were in low/medium paid employment. My respondents were very aware of both the pitfalls, and the transition from the 'uneducated working classes' to an academic.

Forming a professional identity is complex, full of challenges. But it is clearly an advantage, for some students, to have someone like me, working as a lecturer.

[Geoff: a teaching fellow in Criminology at a traditional institution]

Before the advent of widening participation, a degree would have been a symbol of the cultural competence and codified knowledge suitable for a professional qualification. But a degree no longer holds the same academic capital it used to, and holding such a qualification no longer entitles one to the same income possibilities previously afforded to graduates. Although other forms of capital are still useful for gaining graduate employment. For instance, a graduate of an elite institution (cultural capital) who cultivates their illustrious alumni network (social capital) is likely to find professional employment. Professional roles are prestigious, have a degree of privilege² (Slay and Smith 2011), and, in the main, are for the privileged. Some of my respondents, tired of this, saw themselves as agents of change, as Joy said:

We get educated, but the same people are the teachers, in the judiciary, civil servants etc. We need to be the example of change, and the support they need. Our students need the help we never got.

I will expand on this some more in the next chapter.

Professional identities differ according to the profession, for instance social workers develop a professional identity as they internalize the knowledge, skills, values and mission of the social work profession (Holter 2018). As graduate professions have expanded from traditional graduate roles such as medicine, law and teaching to include niche, or new graduate roles such as physiotherapy or retail management (Elias and Purcell 2004), universities have been required to help students to develop employability skills as a way of developing a professional skillset. But the focus on employability skills is not politically neutral “The pressure on universities to deliver employable students perpetuates a market-based solution which does not sufficiently address fairness, affordability or labour market congestion” (Tholen and Brown 2017: 13). Respondents agreed, noting that employability skills alone are not enough when there are labour market inequalities:

A focus on the individual e.g. employability skills is fine if there was the same interest towards the very obvious inequalities faced among graduates. [Cal]

Academics in my study used two key methods to support their students to construct a professional identity.

Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Baumeister and Leary (1995) talk of the ‘belongingness hypothesis’, where “human beings have a drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). In higher education a sense of belonging is a key factor in student success. Goodenow (1993) described how in an educational environments this sense of belonging can mean that students are accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting (p. 25). As already discussed in this book, most academics who took part in this study had not always, or still did not feel a sense of belonging as academics, as their family background (or classed intersections of their identities) differed from many of those already in the academy. As such, many respondents talked of wanting to be as welcoming as possible to students who might not traditionally ‘fit in’:

I almost left academia on a number of occasions. Simple things would have changed that, so if I can help other students I will. [Jessie]

Most of the methods advocated by my respondents were fairly mainstream: weekly meet ups, extensive childcare, IAG sessions. But comments from two respondents stood out:

Once a term I arrange for us to have cake and coffee in the class and we chat. It brings up lots of different areas of interest and also gives the students a chance to talk to me on a different level. My evaluation is fantastic as one thing they always say is they get to know me a little in that one lesson. [Elaine]

I have quite a supportive and caring learning environment as I hold one-off coffee mornings with my students. This is not part of the module, but I run it when I can see there is a gap in the timetable ... we (about 20 students) go for a coffee, my treat. [Jane]

On a personal level I know how well these initiatives can work. I often meet students in the café for pastoral care issues as my office is near a corridor and I worry about the student being heard talking about something personal. But also, I’m known to be around for a coffee before my lecture starts. This has been a great opportunity to chat with students about what they love about the courses they are doing, but more importantly, about the things that they hate. It was over one of these chats in a café that the idea for this book was born!

Promoting Role Models for Their Students

This section links back to the discussion earlier in this chapter where my respondents mentioned that a ‘visible’ presence can encourage students to consider university, or to study typically male-dominated subjects such as STEM, or even be useful for students feeling out of place at open days. Respondents went on to note the importance of class visibility and its intersections among academic staff members. Kaziboni and Uys (2015) supports this, noting that adult role models sharing the same class, sex, ethnicity etc. with their students can boost their academic performance. The main message from my respondents was that they were very visible role models.

I see my job now as trying to transform the lives of those who are like me, so first-generation students, students who don't have social capital to get the better turn out of life. [Pamela, a senior lecturer in English Literature at a post 1992 institution]

We've got to smash the cycle of new students from disadvantaged backgrounds coming here, particularly to my institution [Oxford], and not seeing a reflection of who they are. We must stand out as being working class academics. [Jeremy, a postdoctoral researcher in Geography at a traditional institution]

Discussions about class visibility, and therefore being role models, did not just focus on members of staff, respondents also talked of how they would ensure that invited speakers included people from a variety of backgrounds.

I organise the employability seminars. I thought here is a chance to make sure we hear from diverse voices. I've brought in Kerry Hudson, Akala, Darren McGarvey, Kit de Waal. But also, importantly, local people in professional employment. [Jane, a researcher in Biological Science at a Russell Group institution]

Joy, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution, talked of a more overt way of supporting working-class students, and other disadvantaged groups. She designed a module that gave the students the opportunity to be a role model in poor-performing schools or local community centres in deprived areas felt that this took the notion of employability further as it could not only help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop skills, but it may also pay dividends for the

young students who come into contact with these student role models. As Burgess et al. (2017) found, an inspirational talk or interaction from a current student can increase the chance of applications to university.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS BEYOND HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

Widening participation goes far beyond ensuring non-traditional student ‘get-in’ and ‘stay-in’ higher education. The ‘third phase’ of widening participation (Gaskell and Lingwood 2019: 2) is about ensuring students are not limited by further hurdles beyond graduation, and about reducing uneven opportunities for graduates from non-traditional academic backgrounds. Different institutions offer different services. The Careers Service at the University of Oxford offers careers guidance, access to careers events for alumni throughout their careers. Whereas the University of Reading provides a service for up to 18 months after graduation. Whereas the University of Liverpool offers support such as discounts on hotels and holiday accommodation and access to free online journals and library access for an unspecified time. Beyond providing references, only one respondent, Paula mentioned trying to provide additional support, beyond graduation:

As Head of School I set aside money in the budget for a few simple but effective measures, for instance we have a separate school only website that keeps graduates in contact with us, and we regularly advertise jobs and we have an autumn term drop in where lecturers meet up with former students. But I know I should be doing more.

The lack of support for graduates beyond graduation opens up a conversation regarding what can working class academics do to support their students? A discussion for the final chapter.

NOTES

1. As like Ako-Asare (2015), the literature shows a deep overlap between examples of social capital and familial capital, so throughout these two types of capital are analysed together.
2. Although, we should note Witz’s (1992) feminist analysis that professions are key features of patriarchal societies where the gendered activities of caring and support, originally intra-familial roles, developed last century into paid occupations in health and social care, but also underpin the nature of

academic administration roles such as pastoral care, student support etc. Those professions without that gendered element tend to be more prestigious.

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