

Does Identity Influence How Learners Seek Support? Creating Student Habitus

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Abstract

This article presents a research case study of learners attending a university in the North West of England. The University attracts learners of all ages from diverse backgrounds; many fall into the classification of 'non-traditional' students who do not possess the identity associated with those who typically progress to university. Compared to students from middle-class backgrounds, who see progression to University as natural, the paper investigates if students from low participation groups feel that their background influences their university experience. Their perceived social class may direct their friendship groups, and affect engagement with university activities, academic literacy and study skills acquisition; these facets form their habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). For these learners, the support services encountered during their early experiences of university can play a significant part in their retention and long-term outcomes.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the use of support facilities at The University and examine obstacles to their use, investigating the need for support as a secondary aim. The study examines social class, habitus, and learner identity and scrutinises the role these factors play in the acquisition of academic literacy and study skills. It evaluates research into effective academic literacy models and considers what has been implemented in other universities. It offers insight into the individual student learning experience through evaluating how learners identify themselves and how this may impact upon their academic literacy and study skills acquisition. Predominantly qualitative data has been used to investigate the social, economic and educational backgrounds of students and whether students feel prepared when arriving at university. Through a thematic analysis of topics raised during a series of focus groups, the support mechanisms that students have engaged with and possible links between social background and skills competency

have been explored. Conclusions indicate that although many students do successfully engage with the current services on offer at the university, considering perceived identity with an academic literacies approach, may increase engagement and positive outcomes.

Keywords

social class, habitus, learner identity, academic literacy, study skills

Introduction

The removal of barriers to entering Higher Education and the emphasis on widening participation has seen an increase in the number of those from non-traditional backgrounds seeking a University level education. Traditionally, attendance at University has been thought of as the privilege of white, middle or upper class 18 to 24 year olds who have a family background of higher education (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). A review of studies in this area indicates there is no standard definition for the term non-traditional student; (dis)ability, gender, social class, ethnicity, age and family background are all traits that contribute to a student falling within the groups targeted by the increased participation agenda of modern education policy. For the purposes of this study, a non-traditional student has been defined as a learner who has either; entered higher education after their 25th birthday, has a declared disability, is a speaker of English as a second language or is from a socio-economic class not usually associated with attendance at University.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the use of study skills support facilities at a university in the North West of England and to examine any barriers to their implementation. It studies the influence of the current support services upon the development and enhancement of non-traditional students' academic literacy including; writing style, spelling, grammar, punctuation, use of English and referencing. It considers the preparedness of these students from non-traditional backgrounds for the level of studies expected of them and explores if social class and background should be a consideration for learner support services. The study also explores coping mechanisms and preparedness for university among this group of students with a view to improving the mechanisms available to support them.

Tinto (1987) proposes that student withdrawal from courses may serve as an indicator of an educational institutions academic health, as much as the student experience. He considers that variations in learner support policies are necessary for non-traditional students, and suggests that effective retention lies in the institution's commitment to the students in relation to the quality of student interaction and integration into their department or faculty. He argues that content, structure, and evaluation methods for assessment of student retention and departure need to take into account learner background and social identity, along with the use of initial diagnostic assessment information for developing effective skills and retention programs.

Learner Identity

It is the view of the authors that learner identity and social health are vital aspects that Higher Education (HE) tutors need to consider when seeking to improve student support. Learner identity can be conceptualised from a sociocultural perspective as a socially constructed, dynamic product of the social, historical and political contexts of an individual learner's lived experiences. Learner histories are defined in part by their membership of different social groups including: gender, social class, religion, race and even their geographical region (Hall, 2012). Learner identity is linked to social identity which encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social personae. In turn, these are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances (Ochs, 1996). Learners also acquire a second layer of social group memberships developed through their involvement in educational institutions such as academic schools or faculties and social institutions through university clubs or societies. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership (Kelly, 2009). Bourdieu (1984) calls this our 'habitus.' Higher Education students, therefore appear to approach their academic study with the perceptions, knowledge and evaluations associated with their learner identity and habitus. For more non-traditional HE students, learner identity and 'habitus' may therefore affect both their metacognitive skills and academic literacy skills and be of more significance to their retention and academic attainment than student from more traditional backgrounds.

Academic Literacy among non-traditional students

Academic literacy is a key skill which is a required attribute for academic success (in terms of grades). Waters and Waters (1992) argue being academically literate means to be competent in a range of metacognitive skills, such as self-evaluation, self-monitoring and self-management in study, and to be able to apply these skills appropriately in the context of the learners individual discipline. This view is reinforced by Wingate (2015: 6) who states that academic literacy is a 'communicative competence' learners must possess in addition to skills such as critical thinking, reflective writing, reasoning and problem solving, they should be able to use these within an 'academic discourse community' (Swales, 1990: 21). Lillis and Tuck (2016) highlight that rising concerns around academic literacy levels may be linked to the increase in the diverse range of students accessing HE. The initial response to this problem by most teaching staff is remedial action which involves using a deficit model to provide additional teaching around the development of study and writing skills (Lillis, 2001). This model seeks to rectify those who have issues with producing pieces of extended written work by providing additional study skills through coaching or mentoring outside of the taught curriculum. However, it can be argued, that this approach serves to reinforce the elitist perception of university and enforce the perception that those who do not arrive with these skills are seen to be lacking. In addition, by basing success purely on, often lengthy, pieces of written work, the contribution to education that may be gained from the experience of a more diverse student population is ignored by not employing varied assessment techniques.

Recent education policies have encouraged widening participation, for example, since 2012, universities wishing to raise their fees above the basic rate have been required to produce annual access agreements (Office for Fair Access, 2017) and proposals for increased social mobility and student choice (DBIS, 2016). This has opened higher education opportunities to those who may have additional needs due to 'non-traditional' backgrounds; this would include for example, students who have a long-term health or mental health condition or Specific Learning Disability (SpLD) as defined under the 2010 Equality Act, and could subsequently access the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA). This is additional funding enabled them to access the support needed to attend university and which was provided regardless of

background and/or social class. Under this Act students can have a needs assessment and be given non-repayable funding for study related equipment, travel and non-medical help. However, from the 2016-17 academic year, changes were introduced to the DSA system which placed more financial burden on HE providers, who will now have to fund non-medical help at band 1 and 2 (for example, note taking) and Specialist Transcription Services (Johnson, 2015). As a result, state funding will only be provided for equipment and the specialised non-medical help (for example academic work structuring) required at band 3 and 4, which is required by far fewer students. Disability Rights UK (2015) argues that if a student does not arrive at university with the funding that enables them to access the support necessary to attain success, this incentivises the provider to reject the applicant or restricts user choice. Another issue faced by HE providers with a widening participation agenda is the need for support is not just applicable to those with diagnosed SpLD and disabilities, but to students who speak English as a second language (ESOL) or those who may have undeclared or undiagnosed learning needs. Furthermore, other students, such as mature students with work experience, who have good subject awareness and excel in practical application of theory, may struggle to convert this knowledge into high quality written work. These students may not possess the skills necessary for success; in short, they are unable to write in the academic English needed to be successful in the 'essayist literacy' approach to assessment within HE (Lillis and Tuck, 2016: 32).

Compared to middle-class students who see progression to university as natural, students from low participation groups may feel that their background influences upon their university experience. Their perceived social class may be directly linked with their friendship group choices or engagement with social and academic activities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). There are a high proportion of students studying at the university from non-traditional backgrounds. 2013/14 statistics indicate 99% of students are state-schooled, 43% come from the areas most underrepresented in HE, 12% are in receipt of DSA. 82% are from low or non-tariff groups, which are qualifications that are not included in the UCAS tariff, such as Level 3 professional or vocational courses (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014). Effective support mechanisms, which enable students to develop study skills and academic literacy could improve attainment of the non-traditional university

groups, who may not see progression to university as 'natural'. Lillis and Turner (2001) argue that for these students, terminology used by lecturers can make academic writing more complicated and that study skills sessions can demystify the process by explicitly showing the learner how to construct academic written work. The introduction of students originating from different socio-economic, disability, and ethnic backgrounds brings with it a wealth of different experiences. Lillis and Tuck (2016: 33) discuss the need for academic assessment to embrace methods that recognise the identity of students from non-traditional backgrounds and value 'different meaning-making resources, in terms of discourses, languages and language varieties'. The issue of non-traditional backgrounds is being overlooked in HE, this may extend beyond assessment methods, and include a lack of inclusion in the whole HE community (Vignoles and Murray, 2016).

Social diversity in HE and the concept of 'Habitus'

An important theme in the research surrounding literacy in HE is the impact of the social composition of the HE community can have of the sense of belonging felt by the non-traditional students within that community and the concept of education as a form of social transition (Barron and D'annunzio-Green, 2009). The Sutton Trust (Jerrim, 2013) report discusses that those from middle class families are three times more likely to enter one of the leading Russell Group universities compared to their working-class counterparts. Furthermore, those from disadvantaged backgrounds score lower on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reading test and demonstrate less advanced cognitive skills. However, students from state schools who do achieve the entry requirements for Russell Group universities are more inclined to choose to continue their education at post-1992 institutions. The reasons for this are not clear; Byrom (2009: 211) suggests that a contributing factor may be the sense of social belonging felt by the individual or "fit". This idea of 'not belonging' is supported by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) who maintain that access is not restricted by the institutions themselves, but by the attitudes of those who would not have traditionally sought HE because university is not somewhere they belong. Those from the middle classes see educational progression as natural and belong to a habitus Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) which see university as part of their cultural inheritance. Habitus comes about because of the interaction between cultural, economic, symbolic and social backgrounds which, when combined, form a

disposition i.e. a student's inherent qualities of mind, character and view of the world (Reay, 2004). However, habitus is not a fixed state, but one which can transform when exposed to cultural, social, symbolic and economic exchanges within new social spaces or fields (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This suggests that, to enable those from non-traditional backgrounds to be successful in their transition into Higher Education, attention—to helping them negotiate the myriad of new experiences at the early stages of their university life and to learn and adopt the necessary skills to cope. These skills include academic language and literacy, as this enables them to develop a sense of belonging and form a habitus. A key aspect of developing an effective habitus is how non-traditional students view such support and how are they engaging with it?

Exploring Academic Literacy at the University

The purpose of this case study was to gain further insight into the factors that influence acquisition of academic literacy skills to help develop habitus at University and address the following research questions:

- What relationship is there between social background and feeling prepared for HE?
- How does the manner in which support services are being provided contribute to developing a sense of habitus in non-traditional students?

Methodology

An action research approach was adopted in undertaking this research project. This enables a reflective process to be employed within the investigation of existing services on offer to students within a university. This has allowed the researcher to offer recommendations to improve the delivery of study skills support services to enhance student performance and improve retention. This study collected statistical data around student background, awareness and experiences of study skills support services. It collected qualitative data to give a deeper understanding of the quantitative statistics and enabled the researcher to draw more grounded conclusions.

In the 2014/15 academic year, the author carried out a pilot study with a small group of students to examine whether students felt their confidence with study skills had

increased through accessing study skills sessions. For this study, quantitative data was collected via an online questionnaire open between 16th November and 18th December 2015 and distributed using a non-probability snowball sampling method thus encompassing different genders, ethnicities, socio-economic classes and cultures. The period was chosen to ensure first year students would have had sufficient Semester 1 experience to enable them to answer the questions, whilst ensuring that results would be returned and analysed within the timeframe specified for this research project. A link to this was circulated via social media and through email to student academic representatives, clubs and society officers and academic staff requesting that they forward a link onto their peers and students. The questionnaire included an option for students to participate in further research as part of a focus group. In the design and delivery of the research process of this study, the Code of Practice for Ethical Standards in Research involving Human Participants (University of Bolton, 2006) has been referred to and informed consent completed, submitted, authorised, stored and used in accordance with this guidance.

Qualitative data was collected using a free text box at the end of the questionnaire to identify key themes to be used to inform discussion in semi-structured focus groups. Four semi-structured 30-minute focus groups were conducted with between 12 and 15 participants in each. The three prompts below were given, with 10 minutes' discussion allowed for each section.

- How did you feel about your study skills in your first few weeks of your course?
- What study support are you aware of or did you access?
- What might have improved your academic literacy/study skills?

Intervention was minimal during the focus groups and any non-relevant topics of conversation were disregarded in writing up the conversations. A thematic analysis of the transcript was carried out, identifying significant comments, coding them and grouping them together.

Context for Findings

172 valid answers were received, which represented 3% of the student population. Table 1 indicates the number of responses received by gender and age of respondents. The figures indicate there are female respondents than male and 41% of respondents in the research were aged 24 or less. This can be compared to Higher Education Authority (HEA) statistics for the provider which indicates there are 2% more male students and of 67% of students are under 25. There may be several reasons why the figures differ; the statistics from HEA are for 2014/15 or the data collected in this study is a mix of full and part time students, whereas the HEA data refers to full time students only.

	17-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	TOTAL
Male	29	21	9	9	0	68
Female	41	33	19	9	2	104

Table 1: Response by Gender and Age

Table 2 indicates where respondents came from in terms of their level of study and their chosen academic area (school). In terms of representing the whole student body, a high proportion of responses were from the School of Education and Psychology, therefore, this research may be best viewed as a case study of this area.

	ART	BUS	CRT	ENG	EPS	HHS	LAW	SBS	TOTAL
Found	2	4	1	0	11	0	0	2	20
UG 1st	1	1	2	4	17	2	0	5	32
UG 2nd	2	4	5	2	19	2	1	1	36
UG 3rd	2	4	1	2	13	11	1	1	35
PG Taught	1	11	0	0	29	3	0	0	43
PhD	1	3	1	0	1	0	0	0	6
TOTAL	9	27	10	8	89	18	2	9	172

Table 2: Response by School and Study Level

Quantitative data was collected to build up a picture of the socio-economic background of students at the university by asking them their perceived social class

and family economic situation. 26% of participants who declared the occupation of their household's main wage earner are in the NS-SEC Analytic Class 5-7 (such as sales and service occupations); considered to be the less advantaged groups by the UK Government (The Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2015). Table 3 below shows the spread of respondents declared family incomes by NS-SEC group.

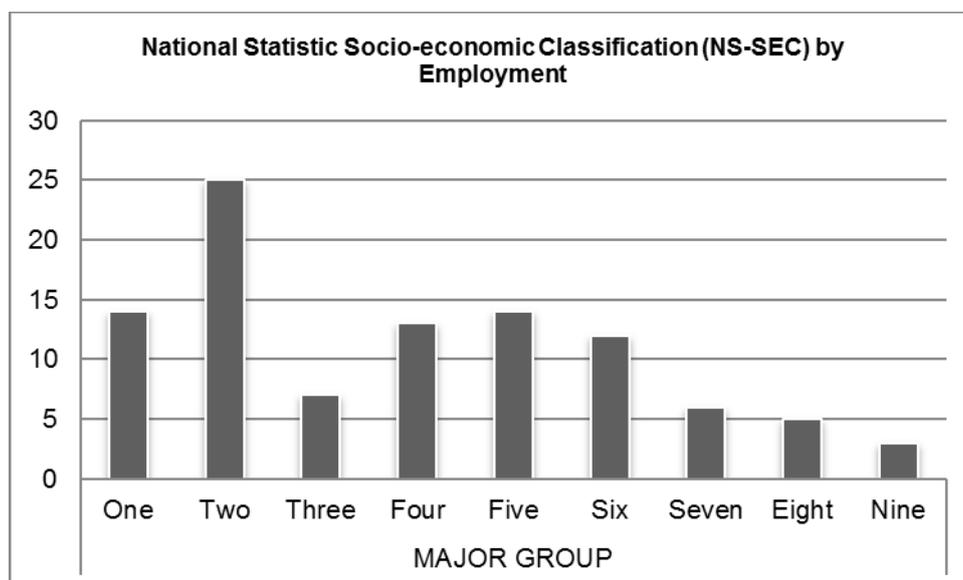


Table 3: NS-SEC Profile of Study Sample Family Backgrounds

This study collected and analysed a range of data to establish if individual or multiple factors indicated a preference for support methods or awareness and engagement with the current offer. Conversations with the student population indicate that some students engage with informal peer assisted study groups, either face to face or via social media, and the evidence gathered in this study intends to establish how commonplace this practice is. The formal mechanisms offered by the university follow the study skills model in the form of non-subject specific workshops on a range of typical skills, such as essay structure, critical thinking, referencing and plagiarism, and are delivered by non-academic staff. More subject specific sessions, which echo elements of Lea and Street's (1998), academic socialisation model are provided by the University's trainee teachers, but the method of delivery is a 'bolt-on' deficit approach. Finally, one to one sessions are available; generic guidance from specialist support staff, subject specific from trainee teachers or peer assisted pastoral support. Although there may be some elements of academic socialisation,

these sessions take the approach of identifying and rectifying a deficit and are done in isolation from the students' formal subject lectures.

Key Findings from Quantitative Data

Despite the evidence that students attending this university in the North West of England come from a diverse range of backgrounds, over two thirds of students felt that their prior experience had sufficiently prepared them for university. One of the University's key targets for development is the improvement of retention figures, however it can be argued that this area is challenging as much remains unknown about the dropout process in HE, research failing to distinguish between drop out due to academic failure, or voluntary withdrawal (Tinto, 1975). Lowe and Cook (2003: 75) identified that often poor retention of students within the first year can be directly linked to the unrealistic expectations developed by students prior to arrival. To address this issue, they suggested improved communication with students in the pre-university period to ensure that they experience 'appropriate academic, attitudinal and social preparation.' The fact that students in this study felt their prior experience had been a good preparation, may be an indication that the teaching and learning methods and course structure at the University already considered to some extent different student backgrounds. It may also indicate that a social constructivist approach is taken to embedding study skills and academic literacy within learning and appropriate scaffolding is being provided to learners (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015) place the community in which the University is located as one of the 15% most deprived areas in England; a factor which is backed up by the statistics obtained during this study. The study offered the choice of seven social classes for participants to choose from (table 4); Elite, Established middle, Technical middle, Affluent worker, Traditional working, Service workers and Precariat (Savage et al., 2013). However, following the questionnaire consultation period, the terms Affluent Worker and Precariat these were changed to 'Professional' and 'Lower' class for clarity. Respondents were also asked to choose one of seven family incomes brackets (table 5). Through examining the declared class and family income, a high number of participants were grouped in the lower three social classes; Traditional working class, Emergent service workers and Precariat (or lower

class) (Savage et al., 2013). It can be argued these are the classes with least advantage; reduced household income or reliant on benefits with moderate or negligible savings, more likely to rent their home or own a home with a value of £127,000 or less. They are also likely to have a more limited social and cultural capital that those in higher social classes and are less likely to be university educated. The importance of social and cultural capital is that it determines position within and ability to influence society or ‘the set of actually usable resources and powers’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 114). However, those who can be classified in the Emergent Workers group, whilst having a low economic rating, are more likely to have a higher level of social and emergent cultural capital and are more likely to be younger and from ethnic minority groups than the other low-income classes (Savage et al., 2013). In considering what impact perceived social class may have, a mean average of 46% (see table 4) of respondents identified themselves as being within the first three classes agreed or strongly agreed that they were happy with their level of study skills. This may indicate a link between socio-economic status and having the necessary levels of academic literacy and study skills to feel able cope with university level studies.

	Precariat (Lower Class)	Emergent service workers	Traditional working class	New affluent workers	Technical middle class	Established middle class	Elite (Upper Class)
% of respondents from each Social Class	43%	44%	52%	59%	45%	62%	75%
Overall responses split by Social Class	17%	12%	17%	22%	6%	23%	3%

Table 4: Students who are happy with their level of study skills by social class (defined by Savage et al., 2013)

Those who come from backgrounds of low income, limited social networks and lack of exposure to cultural experiences may not have acquired the skills necessary for HE. Therefore, those exposed to ‘high’ culture such as visiting museums, theatres and galleries or exposed to a wider range of social contacts are more likely to feel equipped for studying at university. It could be argued that those with the higher levels of social and cultural capital become part of a more education focused Community of Practice (Wenger, 1999) or defined habitus.

	Family Income and Corresponding Social Class						
	Precariat (Lower Class)	Emergent service workers	Traditional working class	New affluent workers	Technical middle class	Established middle class	Elite (Upper Class)
Family Income	£0-8k	£8-15k	£15-25k	£25-30k	£30-40k	£40-65k	£65k +
% of respondents from each Social Class	45%	41%	39%	76%	94%	40%	86%
Overall responses split by Social Class	21%	21%	14%	14%	18%	4%	7%

Table 5: Students who are happy with their level of study skills by economic group

This argument may be reinforced by examining those who are most content with their own level of academic literacy and study skills. The happiest group by economic income were those with family income in the £30-40,000 bracket, with 94% of the respondents in this group agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were happy with their level of study skills and academic literacy (see table 5). In general terms, this income bracket fits with the New Affluent Worker class, defined by Savage et al ., (2013) who are economically secure, socially and culturally aware, with a high level of emergent cultural capital. Where respondents have a family income below £25,000, 42%, representing a mean average of the lowest three income brackets, were happy with their current study skills level (table 5).

Another feature, which links to economic wellbeing and social class, is the consideration of social belonging. For students from the middle classes, university is a 'rite of passage', a stage between living with parents and complete independence and the opportunity to pursue both educational and social experiences. For those from non-traditional backgrounds, they may have to consider other factors; living expenses may necessitate part time work and family commitments may result in being time poor. Although socialising with university friends (habitus formation) is not essential to obtaining a degree, those who miss out on this experience may struggle to form friendship groups which extend their reach into successful learning support mechanisms (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2014)

Key Findings from Qualitative Data

Eight key themes were isolated through thematic analysis, identified in the table below, which also indicates how often the theme occurred. Three of these themes have been considered in detail.

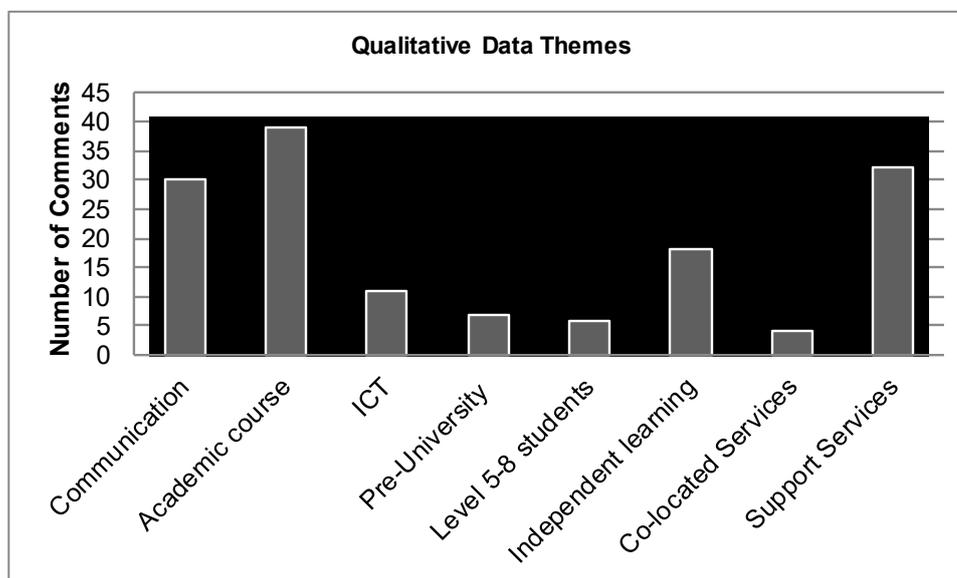


Table 6: Qualitative Data Themes

Communication

Highlighted in students' comments were issues around communication about study support services. There were both positive and negative comments. For some students, the study skills support services were better than they anticipated, particularly those who had studied elsewhere. 'There's lots of availability of help in the University, you get a response in a day or so. Other universities aren't like that.' (Quote F4-13). Those who were less positive about the services drew attention to the fact that either there was too much information given or they had not explicitly been told about the study support services available. 'I think students would feel much better about coming into university if they knew the (study support) services were available.' (Quote F2-34) and 'If I'd heard of it before, I would have used it.' (Quote F2-12).

There is a crossover with other themes here; support services were not promoted as part of their academic course and students were expected to become independent learners without guidance of how to do this. It may be argued that those who emphasised being unaware of the support services available, support the view put

forward by Lowe and Cook (2003) that students are not sufficiently prepared for university life in that they do not appreciate that the onus is upon them to seek out opportunities to develop as independent learners. They also suggest that academic staff may not be sympathetic in their teaching approaches to learners who have yet to develop the skills necessary to becoming independent learners.

Academic course

There were several sub-themes identified within this section: academic staff training, consistency of approach, and timing of interventions. Lea and Street (1998) highlight that embedding skills within the field of study through academic literacy has important benefits for the learner and this is echoed by the thoughts of one student; 'I feel these sessions should be integrated into course contents.' (Quote QQ-6). However, the focus group discussions seemed to indicate that only some subjects incorporated study skills in the course content, overtly at least. 'There doesn't appear to be University wide consistency on this.' (Quote F1-18). It may be that the enculturation of students into the academic discourse is subtle and that students did not identify that they had developed study skills. 'If the university had a set plan for every lecturer to deliver in the first few weeks, then everyone would get the same information.' (Quote F2-28).

Some students identified themselves, or each other, as having study difficulties and felt they did not receive guidance from academic staff to access support. This situation may be compounded further by learners coming from diverse backgrounds, who do not originate from the habitus that sees progression to university as natural (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). As identified by Lea and Street (1998) the adoption of the academic literacy model requires not only buy in from academic staff but a substantial commitment in terms of their time. The comments received via these focus groups are not sufficient to support such an investment without further research, but they may be an indication that more of a partnership approach could be needed between academic and support staff. Whether this is delivery of study skills sessions within the course timetable by support staff or whether it is a move to an academic socialisation model utilising subject specific texts to locate learning, again would require further research. Highlighted by the comments however, is that

some academic staff training in identifying individual need and working more closely with support staff to deliver differentiation in the classroom may be required.

Independent learning

This area has grouped together comments under the general theme of independent learning. Several students mentioned their own levels of confidence either with their academic studies or in general. 'It's like you are left to your own devices.' (Quote QQ-2) and 'There's nothing to help you feel more confident.' (Quote F2-23). This is likely to be because of the widening participation policies may result in students lacking the social and cultural capital that makes them feel they belong within the university community (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Comments relating to feeling alone, not wanting to stand out or just 'getting by' were common. It may also indicate that the teaching and learning processes at the University are not highlighting effectively to students the skills that they have developed. The comment "I guess I've kind of 'bumbled' through," from a third-year participant suggests that the student does not recognise the skills they had developed as they progressed through the course. This theme also links very strongly with the expectations of university; students may expect the support levels to be like those in school and college and feel let down when they are not. This is exemplified by the quote 'We were told about other services and expected to access them ourselves.' (Quote F2 15). Therefore, it may be necessary to stress to students early in the academic course the need to develop self-directed learning habits'

... in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.
(Knowles, 1975: 18)

Limitations of this study

The quantitative data indicates that the study skills support services were not meeting the needs of around 40% of participants in this study. However, on examination of this data, this also appears to be true of the less formal academic

study support systems. As these are student initiated and participation is voluntary, this would raise the questions of why students would continue to access a non-compulsory arrangement if it was not beneficial. This may suggest that the issue lies with the method of data collection. It may be that when participants have not had experience of an individual study support service, instead of answering not applicable, they have instead responded neither agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagreed. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell if this is the case, however, and triangulation of the data supports the findings of this study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study provides the basis for further research to expand research into study skills by advising of the importance of class, learning identity and habitus. It allows the concepts and findings to be advised to other institutions in order to draw findings from a wide range of Higher Education providers and help to consolidate the approaches discussed here. The findings of this study indicate that further research into the support of academic literacy and study skills development at this university are warranted. Introducing early and appropriate interventions that include the concepts described above may contribute to raising attainment levels, reducing student attrition and improving retention. Evaluating the contribution of prior research could be incredibly helpful in formulating the way forward at this university. Wingate (2012) suggests that a key feature of good study support is obtaining a balance between the benefits of integrating literacy teaching into course materials and the time commitment of academic staff needed for this. However, as argued by Gunn et al., (2011) with increasingly diverse university student populations because of the widening participation agenda, integrating study skills into curriculum design and utilising the opportunities offered through online learning are a necessary intervention rather than an optional extra.

That many students in this study felt their prior experience had been a good preparation for higher level academic study may be an indication that the teaching and learning methods and course structure at the University consider different student backgrounds already to some extent. It may also indicate that a social constructivist approach is taken to embedding study skills and academic literacy within learning and appropriate scaffolding is being provided to learners (Vygotsky,

1978). However, the data gathered appears to indicate that there may be links between the social background of the non-traditional students at this university and whether they feel prepared for the level of studies required at HE. Less than half those who considered themselves to be from the lower three classes defined by Savage et al., (2013) and/or from a family where income was less than £25,000 felt happy with their current level of study skills. When exploring how non-traditional students could be equipped with the skills they needed to progress through HE, the focus was very much on communicating services effectively and offering them as part of the academic course. The understanding of becoming an independent learner seemed to be very much an isolated, individual journey rather than one that followed a social constructivist approach. It may be argued that this supports Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) in their argument that the idea of 'not belonging' originates with the non-traditional student. This suggests that greater attention should be paid to those interventions that successfully help learners to become independent and part of the University social habitus.

As identified by this study, the conclusion that a Study Skills Model focussing on supporting students around their academic studies rather than as part of their course is not an approach that has been successful at this university. Identified by Reay et al., (2010: 11) universities, such as this one, where a high proportion of students do not live on campus can lack a learning culture brought about by "institutional habitus" and that there needs to be a balance between social and learner identity. Therefore, engagement needs to begin early in academic life and develop from engaging students when coming into university for lectures. Through adopting an integrated school level approach to addressing academic literacy and study skills using personal tutoring and enhanced personal tutoring, students can be introduced in a structured manner to the habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) needed to be successful in HE

List of Tables

Table 1: Response by Gender and Age

Table 2: Response by School and Study Level

Table 3: NS-SEC Profile of Study Sample Family Backgrounds

Table 4: Students who are happy with their level of study skills by social class.

Table 5: Students who are happy with their level of study skills by economic group.

Table 6: Qualitative Data Themes

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