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# 'Becoming Student'- partnerships and voices. Developing a 'relationships for academic success and transformation' model

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# PedRIO Research/ Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme: Final Report

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**Name of key contact (project leader):**

Dr Suanne Gibson

**Department:**

Institute of Education

**Names of other staff involved:**

Dr Melanie Parker, Dr Ciaran O'Sullivan, Andrew Grace (RA)

**Title of project:**

'Becoming Student'- partnerships and voices. Developing a 'relationships for academic success and transformation' model

**Type of project:**

Research study with undergraduate EDST students

**Keywords:**

Student Voice, Widening Participation, Student Experience, Empowerment, Inclusive Pedagogies, Focus Group, Students as Partners, Student Representation, Transformation

**Aims of project:**

- To understand the experiences of 'becoming' and 'being' a student in Higher Education
- To understand and assess pedagogic practices that lead to student transformation
- To research student's changing roles and culture as linked to Higher Education reform alongside questions of academic success, student voice, empowerment and inclusive pedagogies.
- To develop a 'relationships for academic success and transformation' model for use across disciplines at Plymouth University.

**Background/context to project:**

The work connected to outcomes of the HEA Annual Conference discussion on 'Students as Partners' held July 2013. Dr Suanne Gibson provided a think piece entitled: A changing and developing landscape? Students, higher education policy, questions of purpose and impact. Our project linked to the following summary points that emerged:

- Mutual respect and trust
- Changes in power relationships and dynamic
- Empowerment and voice
- Space for students and staff to innovate
- Time to build authentic relationships
- Balancing openness to risk with a duty of care to students and staff
- Must be demonstrated in practice

Recent policy developments have resulted in student learning experiences that are not always positive (Burke, 2013; Morgan, 2013) indicating that students can feel 'disempowered, lack confidence and feel completely unprepared for university study' (Hirst et al, 2004: 70). They particularly struggle to 'decode' new and unfamiliar practices (Gourlay, 2009), experience confusion and mixed messages regarding academic conventions, much of which is implicit or hidden within the curriculum. Rarely do we

explore such experiences with our students, nor do we utilise, beyond formal settings, the peer and linked peer 'resources' that exist in terms of students' critical reflections at key stages of their academic careers. Such engagement is the primary aim of this project.

On the BA (Hons) Education Studies programme at Plymouth University (with over 200 undergraduates), it has become clear through dialogue with students (Gibson and Luxton, 2009; Gibson and Kendall, 2012, Gibson 2012, Seale, Gibson and Haynes and Potter, 2014) that for many, especially those from a wide range of educational backgrounds, many questions remain ill defined.

Without knowing or having some grasp of the answers, student transition and academic progress can be hindered (Gourlay, 2009). Linked to changes in HE policy are changes in learning strategies, from the expository school or college experience, to the requisite independent learning at degree level. This we know is often difficult, fragmented and frequently results in social anxiety (Topham and Russell, 2012). Linking our work to contemporary research, Kahu (2013), suggests when reviewing student engagement there are various 'strands' (p.768) to consider.

Kahu argues a specific element in current need of focused research is that of student emotion, relationships and belonging. She suggests this work be conducted with a narrow population using qualitative methods. We have co-created a qualitative project with a small population of our students and other stakeholders, addressing 'relationships for success' – in particular who, what, where and how, whilst also assessing impact and value of our end product.

#### **Methods used:**

- Sharing Personal Narratives/ art work on the subject of 'Becoming Student'
- Focus Groups
- Literature Review

#### **Results:**

Key findings from the project can be broken down into four key themes based on focus group findings, researcher evidence and academic literature:

1. **Resources or lack of?** - financial survival during studies not so much about the tuition fees but about general day-to-day survival, demands of time between classroom, library work and home/family. Also referenced in work of Saar et al 2014; Palmer et al 2009; James 2013; Giroux 2010; Briggs et al 2012; Ellis 2008 and Christie 2008
2. **Resilience** - the type of student that gets involved in extra-curricular and enrichment activities, and the barriers that must be overcome in order for non-traditional, and sometimes traditional, students to succeed in Higher Education. Also referenced in work of Ahmed and Swain 2006; Seale et al 2014; Merrill 2015; Christie 2008; Brittan and Baxter 1999; O'Shea 2013; David 2009; Caires 2010 and Tinto 1997.
3. **Social networks** - the importance of the group not the pure individual in isolation, about forming new relationships and the breaking-down of older ones. Tensions between family networks and new academic networks. Also referenced in work of Kimura 2014; Ribchester et al 2014; Watson et al 2009 and Gale and Parker 2014.
4. **Perception of student** - addressing the binary of traditional vs. non-traditional and the negative connotations often related to the label 'student' as lazy, not really working, partying etc. Through the literature and focus group findings the issue of

diversity and widening participation, LGBT students, the visible and invisibly 'different' was also raised and draws on the work of Burke (2013) contesting that Widening Participation students are not a threat but more engaged in the University. Additionally found in the work of Kimura (2014) on changing nature of student due to broader cultural influences (this reflects change in numbers of students not drinking alcohol as reflected in the voice of a Focus Group member). Focus Groups also raised issues found in existing literature (Maumner et al 2012; Osbourne et al 2004; Outhred 2011; Kahu 2011) on the question of university not being student centred, the expectations of student and university are very different possibly due to the corporatisation of curriculum (neoliberalism).

**Associated publications:**

- Intended to publish in 'Studies in Higher Education'; first draft to be completed by December 2016

**Dissemination:**

- June 2016 annual BESA conference: paper entitled
- Submitting a paper for publication with 'Studies in Higher Education'
- Intention to create a pedagogic training tool for input on the LTHE qualification
- Future plans incorporate an open-source website for 'Becoming Student' stories to be submitted and shared similar to the LGBT support website RUComingOut.org. This, again, would be reliant on further funding.

**Total project expenditure: TBC-** Final spend still to come out of account (7/9/16)