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A University for All Ages? An exploration of age-stereotyping and unconscious bias and its impact on the student experience.

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Pedagogic Research and Teaching Innovation (PRTI) Award

Final Report 2017

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Title of project: A University for All Ages? An exploration of age-stereotyping and unconscious bias and its impact on the student experience.

Type of project: Case Study

Keywords: HE, unconscious bias, space, age, maturity, materiality

Aims of project:

- To explore aspects of age stereotyping and age related unconscious bias on the multi-age site of Plymouth University campus.
- To investigate ways in which members of the PU community experience and express understandings of age.
- To explore how conceptions and expectations of age are shaped by the informal environment and practices, particularly those practices related to joining and becoming a member of the university community.

Background/context to project:

The University might be considered a space associated with 'being' a certain age, constructed not just with learning in mind but also a space where rites of passage from childhood to adulthood are enacted. Yet these assumptions can be problematic; unconscious age-related bias can result in unintentional discriminatory practice and missed opportunities. For those who do not fit into these aged expectations, there is the potential to feel out of place and excluded.

The project explored and disrupted the notion of time and chronological time in particular. To do this we drew on the concepts of *khronos*, *aion* and *kairis*. *Khronos* is irreversible time; which has a strict order of before, now, after; it is measurable, it is the empirical material from which our narratives are often constructed. The alternative to this linear idea of time might be described as cyclical time, as in the rhythms of bodies and/or seasons. *Aion* refers to time as experience, duration, lived time and non-linear directionality; the continuous present of intimate intensity; it is the time of personal transformation. *Kairos* expresses time as opportunity, 'presencing' and manifestation, it is about timeliness and iterability (Honkanen, 2007; Kennedy and Kohan, 2017). These different concepts helped to guide our interpretations of the data and of expressions of time/age and agelessness.

Methods used:

1. A range of methods was used to generate data over the course of the last year. Firstly a cross-university panel was established to support the project. The panel advised the project team and included members of the Students Union, the University of the Third Age and other services such as cafes and marketing. This was to establish a cross-age university participatory panel to support the research group in planning and developing the project.
2. Ethical approval was given in May 2016.
3. Data collection activities were conducted in induction week, with the help of two graduate student interns. Methods included photographic methods, vox-pop snap interviews and flash surveys.
4. Between January and April 2017 interviews were conducted with key strategic personnel across the university. This included those involved in planning induction week, the Dean of Students and those responsible for the management of shared spaces in the university (the library and food outlets), as well as those in marketing.
5. RA Andy Edwards-Jones undertook a review of the relevant literature.
6. Data was then analysed by the project team using a thematic analysis, linked to different concepts of time.

Results

Preliminary Themes and Observations

Maturity and readiness were key ideas raised by respondents when making sense of and resisting fixed ideas of age. Survey responses included the phrases 'Mature but not old enough', 'Mature but less experienced'; some people felt mature but still a young age and 'mature sooner than I need to be'. The university space contributed to this, making respondents feel both younger and older, depending on the particular space 'Younger' was felt in terms of its association with being institutional or 'school like' whilst at the same time, 'older' was experienced as engagement in the university space, that brings both freedoms and responsibilities. For example: 'I'm 21 but in freshers I feel 18'. Another respondent stated: 'I feel 12'

University, it might be argued, plays a role in 'adulthood', by facilitating, or constructing, the transition into adulthood. Induction week might be considered to be an example of *kairos*, a temporal anchor of student experience, something very visible and tangible to those who participate, and from the outside looking in – a rite of passage. Whilst academic studies such as the degree are strongly linear and chronological narrative, a beginning, middle and end, induction week can be seen as a moment of 'now time'.

We noticed a certain tension between marketing constructs of the prospective, or imagined and 'typical' '18-24' student and the more fluid constructions of age as an embodied experience expressed by students. We have been discussing some of the following issues that arise from differences between the 'imagined' and targeted student and the diversity of actual students and the ways in which they experience age in the university space.

- The young typical 18 year old student – the embodied marketed student – lacks diversity or alternative ideas of age. In the highly competitive HE market we noticed this 'typicality' expressed in for example Fresher's Fair in the photo images we took in the marquee, as well as in images used on the stalls. Active, outdoor, able bodied, white, images seemed to predominate. There were many references to physical activity and partying – seeking to convey ideas of university being a certain kind of fun. These seem to extend to our open days and ways they seek to capture and sell a particular and single story of young age.
- Students and those involved in the provision of student services, such as catering services, expressed greater sense of the plurality of the student body. This was expressed

through articulation of more fluid of concepts of age. In these contexts actual age appeared not to matter. Multiple views of what age meant were expressed highlighting a more pluralist rather than essentialist view of age by students and some student services. This contrasted with the 'targeted' student of those involved in with marketing, who are under pressure to compete and meet targets for recruitment of students.

- Marketing, it might be argued, focus on the imagined/implied student rather than the actual student, creating the potential for disparity and tension.
- Therefore, the single narrative of student life has the potential to neglect the student living from home and those older students.
- There is the potential here for unconscious age as well as conscious bias to impact on student experience.

Provisional conclusion

Attention needs to be given to create a space for discussing disparity between 'targeted-typical' student and diversity of actual students at PU with a view to creating multiple rather than singular narratives of our students, with a view to diminishing unconscious bias and negative impact on student experience.

Associated publications: We are currently writing a methods paper for the journal 'Cultural Studies – critical methodologies' and possibly another within a HE focused journal.

Dissemination:

Methodological Innovations Conference 25th May, 2017

Oxford Materialities and Mobilities planned abstract submission – 8th Jan 2018