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# **A (re)negotiation of identity: from ‘mature student’ to ‘novice academic’**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of an investigation in the first year experience of mature students. The research focuses on the identity shift that these students underwent throughout the year and problematises the construct of ‘student’. Semi-structured interviews were used at key points throughout the academic year. The research employs communities of practice as a framework for identity shift. The students in this research engaged in the learning aspect of student identity but some felt alienated and marginalised by the predominant discourse of student social life. The paper concludes with the argument that mature students align themselves with the community of practice of ‘academia’ and therefore form a position of ‘novice academic’ rather than ‘student’. The study aims to contribute to the debate that universities may need to change some practices in order to improve the experience of mature students, which will become an increasingly important demographic group as the number of school leavers drops.

## **Key Terms**

Mature students; non-traditional students; student experience; identity; communities of practice.

## **Introduction**

Attracting and retaining mature students in UK higher education is going to be increasingly important as future demographic movements indicate a decline in the number of school leavers (Bekhradnia, 2007). The opportunities offered by higher education to non-traditional students are well documented but it can also be associated with risk; financially, socially and on a more personal level with a potential change of identity. For mature students this risk can be significant and high stakes, often impacting on other family members. University can be a daunting experience for many students and this can be compounded by a large gap in education or a poor schooling experience.

All students need to gain a sense of belonging to both higher education and to their institution in order to have a successful transition and a satisfying experience. This belonging can be framed in terms of habitus (Thomas, 2002) or dimensions of affinity (Jones, 2010). Engagement in their subject discipline is an important feature of this experience and can vary considerably across a student cohort. A shift in identity can come about from the learning experience as students become more confident, more academically aware and gain a sense of empowerment. This paper looks at how the mature students in this research have positioned their identities in terms of their prior experience, in particular the workplace, previous educational experiences and family life. The discussion moves on to analyse how the mature students have (re)negotiated their identities in relation to the younger students and the institution, and how the mature students are perceived as ‘different’. Wenger’s (1998) concepts of

engagement, imagination and alignment will be used to frame identity construction within a community of practice with particular focus on how this enables the students to 'fit in' and 'belong'.

## Research Study

The research was carried out at a small university in the North of England. Eight students from a variety of disciplines were interviewed at five points in their first year of undergraduate study. The students were full time and in the minority on their course. Other research projects have looked at mature students who are in the majority (Chapman, Parmer and Trotter, 2007) and those in part time higher education (Kember et al, 2000). Both of these scenarios offer a different, often more tailored, experience to the full time route. Whilst it needs to be acknowledged that this is a small scale research project, the findings are worthy of wider application and discussion.

The eight students in the study were:

- (1) Andy: Studying Business, in his 30s, has had a successful career as a retail manager. Suffered a disability in previous job so taking a career break. Married with one child. Applied to university very late, lives off campus.
- (2) Beccy: Studying Business, in her 30s, runs a very successful local business. Married with one child. Applied very late, lives off campus.
- (3) Charlie: Studying English Secondary Teaching, in late 20s. Had successful previous career. Single, chose to live on campus. Spent 6 months teaching in Africa prior to starting course in UK.
- (4) Debbie: Studying English and Creative Writing, in late 20s. Single mum with one child. Did an access course the previous year at a local further education college to prepare for higher education. Lives off campus.
- (5) Eleanor: Studying History Secondary Teaching, in late 40s. Housewife with three children. Did an access course the previous year at a local further education college to prepare for higher education. Lives off campus.
- (6) Frances: Studying Art and Creative Writing, early 50s. Poor previous experience of higher education. Did two short courses to prepare, one on-line, the other at a local adult education college. Lives off campus.

- (7) Gaynor: Studying Child and Young Person Studies and Social Science, late 20s. Previous successful career. Single mum with one child. Lives off campus.
- (8) Harry: Studying English and Creative Writing, in his 30s, previous successful career. Single, chose to live on campus. Did an access course in the previous year at a local further education college to prepare for higher education.

## The first steps

A number of studies have been carried out into what motivates mature students to go into higher education. McGivney (1992) analysed the motivations of unemployed adults to see what factors encouraged them to embark on an education course. She found three main motivating variables: the economic context (the state of the labour market), the social context (the attitudes and expectations of different socio-economic groups), and finally the educational context (the extent and nature of available educational options). Therefore if the conditions and timing were conducive for individuals, then they were more likely to engage in the education process. Jenkins, Jones & Ward (2001) found a wide range of motivations in their study and categorised them as hedonistic, pragmatic or fatalistic (Jenkins, Jones and Ward, 2001:152). They looked at the long-term benefits of higher education on a relatively homogeneous student cohort and found that they were very divergent. The conclusions they reached were that teaching and learning should take account of the difference in students' lived experiences, and whilst students may appear to be a homogeneous grouping they are very wide-ranging and varied.

Mature students have many different reasons why they have decided to embark on a university course; six categories were identified by Osbourne et al (2004). These are:

- (a) Delayed 'traditional' students
- (b) Late starters who have had a life-transforming event and need a new start
- (c) Single parents
- (d) Careerist – those in employment seeking to upgrade skills
- (e) Escapees – those in employment but wanting to change career
- (f) Personal growers

These different reasons for starting a course will affect motivation. The early school experience is another factor for motivation as for some of the categories identified above; prior educational experiences may have been negative.

Davey and Jamieson (2003) conducted a comparative analysis of early school leavers in the UK and New Zealand who had started a higher education course. Their aim was to ascertain what motivation and common factors were present to enable these

students to participate. These early school leavers are defined as those who left with no formal qualifications at age 15 or 16 in New Zealand, and 16 in the UK. They used Gorard et al's (1998) concept of educational trajectories which argued that, amongst other factors, early school experience sets the educational path for later life (see also Walker et al, 2004). In the Davey and Jamieson (2003) study, three types of early school leavers were found; those who left even though they were academically able, those who left and were uncertain about their academic abilities, (Bowl, 2001:152 called these *frustrated participants*), and finally those who wanted to leave school in order to be independent and earn a living. The motivations for re-entering the academic environment were different for the three groups. The first group was motivated by an interest in learning and would typically have engaged with various night classes and pre-degree courses to build up their qualification profile. The second group is motivated by family transitions, i.e. the children have left home or they need to re-enter the work environment. The final group is motivated by a maturity that comes from a gap in education and may need higher qualifications in their workplace. Crossan et al (2003) looked at a group of both participants and non-participants who had entered higher education as mature students. They concluded that learner identities and trajectories are non-linear, with education often used as a pathway for a career change or after a career break. This learning career is often associated with clear goals (c.w. the careerist category in Osbourne et al, 2004 above). The students in this research study fit into these categories in one form or another, with a number of them, unsurprisingly, straddling more than one.

Identity is central to discussions about education and learning. The impact that learning has on the self and the process of change that occurs as a result of that learning is an essential theme of this research. Gee (2000) considered that identity formation is unstable, changing according to time and context. For this research the initial identity construction and subsequent (re) negotiation of their identity rests on the concept of what it means to be a 'student' and the journey of 'becoming a student'. Their identities on entering higher education can be positioned in terms of their previous experience. For this study the focus was primarily concerned with previous educational, work and general experience that the students felt had an important role to play in their next phase of their life.

## Identity and prior educational experience

All students enter university with experience of education, be it positive or negative: the difference for mature students is the gap in terms of time lag. For this student group the gap was, at the shortest 10 years and at the longest 35 years. Due to this time lag the mature students in this group described entering higher education as 'a new step' or a 'fresh start', placing a distance between this experience and previous schooling.

The mature students in this study all suffered, to a greater or lesser degree, from Imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). This can lead to at best, a feeling of lack

of entitlement but at worst a fear of exposure. This has been described as being at university *under false pretences* (Sinclair, 2005:13).

They said:

*Initially I thought uni would be really scary, full of loads of people who knew what they were doing because obviously most of the students come from their A levels (Beccy)*

*I was expecting it to be hard work, to meet lots of clever people who are much cleverer than me; to be fun but not necessarily for me but fun for everyone else and to be the oldest one. I knew I'd be the oldest one (Eleanor)*

It was by overcoming the fears associated with imposter syndrome, by acquiring academic skills and academic confidence that these students felt they were validated and belonged in higher education. This correlates with the research on non-participation with the idea (particularly in the literature on working class adults) that higher education is 'not for the likes of me' (Archer et al, 2003; Reay et al, 2001; Reay et al, 2002; Reay et al, 2009; Wilson, 1997; Tett, 2004 and Fuller & Paton, 2007).

Initially all the students were concerned about their academic ability, expecting everyone else to be *cleverer than them*. However, this position changed throughout the year, indeed the position was almost reversed.

Three of the students highlighted their previous schooling as an issue and the negativity associated with it had delayed their decision to engage with higher education.

Gaynor's previous educational experience was poor and she left school uncertain about her academic abilities, indeed convinced that she did not have any. She was, as Bowl (2001) termed, a frustrated participant. Her prior educational experience was tainted by an institutional failure to recognise dyslexia and so, on diagnosis at university, the way that Gaynor felt about both her previous schooling and her capabilities changed considerably. She said:

*It's brilliant. Just that knowledge that my past education was always a big thing – I always thought I'd missed out on something because of me but it wasn't. Just went to a bad school with poor teachers. I wasn't allowed to do certain GCSE subjects because I was thick.*

The knowledge that her poor school experience was not due to her being *thick* enabled Gaynor to enjoy education, possibly for the first time.

Beccy also overcame a poor schooling experience, but not because of any undiagnosed condition, rather a disinterested attitude on her part and a subsequent disengagement from education. She said:

*I don't work now like I used to at school. I just detested anything to do with school, wouldn't do anything outside of school like homework or revision. School was just that 9-3 thing you had to do. I did much better at*

*exams then because they were quick and I didn't want to do any coursework.*

Once Beccy had made the personal decision to re-engage with education, she was determined and driven. Her work ethic, gained from running her business, was transferred to her pursuit of a degree and approached in much the same way. She was, in Osbourne et al's (2004) terminology a 'late starter'.

Debbie positioned her identity in relation to previous attempts to study. She was an early school-leaver even though academically able, she had previously tried to re-enter education on a number of occasions, a 'delayed traditional student'. She said:

*I felt like a student straight away. It was such a big step. Last year [on her access course] because I was working as well, I didn't see myself as a student although it took up more of my time than work. When I finished work in October and started here it was like, yep I'm now a student. I feel it's a major achievement. I've wanted to do it for years, since I left school I thought I'll go back sometime and do that. I've tried a few times to do that, done one or two courses, when I was 18, I tried to go back and do GCSE Maths but it wasn't a good experience. Then I signed up for an A level law course cos it was relevant to work but that trickled away as well. So it's always been in the back of my mind. I'm proud of being a student.*

This attempt to participate in education was far more serious. This was not an 'added on' night class, this had been planned with an access course and was now part of a new (re)negotiation of her eventual identity as a teacher. Her identity (re) negotiation was shift and without self-doubt. Her pride in being a student is a sentiment shared by Gaynor and Harry, and is a crucial element of a rapid identity shift.

## Identity and prior work experience

Out of the eight students in this research, four (Gaynor, Andy, Charlie and Harry) had given up well-paid jobs to participate in higher education. Of these four, Harry was embarking on a total career change doing a teaching degree. However, Andy, Charlie and Gaynor constructed their current identity in relation to their previous jobs. All three of them had previously relevant jobs to their degree choice, which to them meant that their prior experience could be useful to their learning. They had practical knowledge but lacked the theoretical underpinning. All had got as far as they could in their career but now needed an academic qualification to progress further. Andy, moved from being a retail manager to a business student. He positioned himself in management hierarchy terms. He said:

*As daft as it sounds, you are working for someone else now. My lecturer is my boss at the moment and I haven't had that for 16 years. It's really weird; I've gone back to being the employee and working for someone.*

Charlie also positioned himself in relation to his prior career as a journalist. He said:

*When I went to Ireland I knew nobody and in 10 years I was writing for their biggest newspaper. I don't want to lose that, in terms of what I'd learnt, the practical strengths and talents which I've taken into this course. It's funny, now I'm a student, all that doesn't matter, but it does to me – it makes up me.*

These two students felt that their experience was useful to them and they could apply the theory to practice. However, not all prior workplace experience was welcomed in the classroom either by the younger students or by the academic staff. Gaynor, for example, felt that her experience was ignored in the classroom in one of her subject choice. Interestingly this was the subject that was most closely connected to her previous job. During the year she dis-engaged from this subject, finding herself drawn more fully to those modules where she was able to bring her prior work experience and knowledge into the classroom.

A number of students felt that their experience was belittled or underutilised, as they were treated as a *clean slate*. There may have been good reason for this in terms of integration within the whole student group but this can also be seen as a wasted opportunity. Whilst it can be challenging to teach *post-experience* learners alongside *pre-experience* learners, the mature students can bring with them a wealth of practical knowledge and currency that could *and should* be used as a resource. However, this can lead to problems with the younger students as discussed more fully below.

## Identity and prior life experience

Two of the students constructed their identities in relation to their families and previous life experiences. Frances saw 'becoming' a student as a way of claiming an identity. She said:

*I'd say I'm a student at the moment. I'm also trained as a flower therapist but I've always had a problem with not having a profession. I feel that some people think 'what is she doing at university at her age?' but some of my family feel I'm an amazing intellectual.*

*My husband is a student too so it helps to identify with him, we are both taking this risk at the same time. He's going into teaching though so he's got a profession. But I'm still a student and I sometimes wonder why I'm doing it but I talk myself round.*

Frances struggled with her identity as she did not have a clear end goal in mind when embarking on her degree choice. As she had no career path she expressed doubts on a number of occasions in the interviews as to why she was engaging in education *at her age*. In the above quotation she had a sense of inferiority about not having a



profession and positioned herself relative to her husband who was studying for a professional, vocational teaching degree.

Eleanor's identity as a person grew throughout the first year as her empowerment and self-belief increased. Whilst Eleanor had the encouragement of her children and could see herself at the end goal as a teacher, she struggled initially to describe herself as a student. She said:

*I'm a mother, a housewife  
Am I a student teacher? Actually I would say that...yeah, actually I suppose...My first inclination would be to say I'm a mum, I'm a housewife, but actually I do describe myself as a student, and then they'll ask what do you do and I'll say, 'Oh, I'm training to be a teacher' and I must admit, that's a nice feeling, and everybody's dead impressed.*

When constructing and (re)negotiating their identities as 'students', most of the mature students in this study had mixed feelings and felt 'different' or 'outside' the main student body. This 'othering' is discussed in terms of the mature students positioning themselves as 'other', the mature students being 'othered' by the younger students and finally the mature students being 'othered' by the institution. This difficulty by the students to comfortably use the word 'student' to describe themselves leads to a need to rethink the terminology and the connotation associated within. The term '**novice academic**' offers a different perspective giving credence to the notion of a serious learner within the community of practice of academia.

### Mature students as 'othered'

When asked to describe themselves, a few of the students were happy to be recognised as students but immediately distanced themselves from the main student body and positioned themselves as 'other'.

At the end of the first semester, Andy said:

*Do I see myself as a student? Ummm strange question... no... not really...no...ummm....that is a strange question... I don't know really...well...you've got to I suppose because I am a student but I don't see myself as 'one of the students'*

*I'm also a non-drinker so again, people are saying do you want to come out for a drink...this body brace puts me off, going out like this. Because I'm not a drinker and most of the students are, it puts me off, socialising wise.*

Andy, here, linked the notion of *student* with *drinker* which is a stereotypical construct of one of the features of 'being a student'. He felt he was alienated from the student group by the fact that he was teetotal. In an earlier interview he had described the younger students as the *Students' Union culture*, positioning himself away from

the Students' Union drinking culture. By the end of the academic year, Andy was happier to describe himself as a student but still felt he had to qualify it. He said:

*I'd say I'm doing a course at University. I'm wanting to come out of this, having had an accident on my back, with some positiveness and I'm working towards a better job and to do that I'm having to do some form of education. I don't say I'm a student and then not follow it with something. I have to justify it at my age. Unless it was a complete career change, which it isn't because I'm still doing something I was doing anyway. If I wanted to be a nurse or a teacher I wouldn't have to explain it but I do because I've been doing business for 17 years.*

Andy's difficulty here was that, by doing a Business degree, he did not have sufficient distance from his previous career in management, and therefore struggled with the idea of taking time away from a career to become a student. In the interviews he constantly justified why he was at university and positioned his reasons as a reaction to his temporary disability.

Charlie had a much clearer identity structure as his teaching course was a complete career change and profession. He did, however, have similar feelings to Andy in that he positioned himself away from the younger students. He said:

*I'm a student, an aspiring teacher and a former journalist. I'm happy to describe myself as a student but I'd move away quickly from the body of students. I need to qualify it.  
I can own up to being a student but I don't feel it. I can admit to it but it doesn't feel like me. I recognise that I don't fit the average stereotype of a student but there's variety in every walk of life.*

Of the eight mature students in this research, only Charlie and Andy 'othered' themselves in this way. A more common response was the acknowledgement that the younger students saw the mature students as 'different'.

For most of the student group, the difference between themselves and the younger students manifested itself mostly in the teaching and learning experience, in particular in seminars. Initially the students were intimidated by the perception that they would be 'exposed' academically, a key feature of Imposter syndrome. As the year progressed though, they found this not to be the case. Whilst bringing their work experience into the classroom can provide a useful context to theoretical discussions in seminars, Andy recognised the drawbacks. He said:

*Sometimes I think people get fed up with us [himself and Beccy] because we're keen. I think they could learn from us, from our experiences but actually I think they just get annoyed.*

Harry, Charlie, Debbie and Frances had similar experiences to each other in their English seminars. Harry said:

*The lecturers value mature students in seminars. It's always, apart from one or two younger students, it's always the mature students that speak. The lecturers always look in our direction. I don't mind, I enjoy sharing my views. I'm there to get the best mark I can so I don't care if they think I'm a swot.*

This is similar to a comment that Gaynor made about the younger students thinking she was a *geek*. The mature students initially thought *everybody would be cleverer than they are* (Eleanor) and that the *place would be full of brainy people* (Beccy). So this alienation from the younger students because the mature students are considered to be clever and hard-working is a reversal of expectations. This image and perception of them by other students and lecturers helped the mature students overcome their Imposter syndrome and to shape their identity as **novice academics**.

Frances said:

*Seminar discussions are better with other mature students; they take it seriously and want to work out what the tutor wants and what you need to do for the subject. The younger students do the least possible to get by, they don't connect and realise that you have to work here too. The mature students do the background reading, the younger ones aren't prepared – they just wait for us to speak.*

Many younger students, in their first year, adopt a strategic approach to their learning. Living away from home, managing on a budget, socialising and forming new friendships may be a distraction from their studies. If they are aiming to 'just pass' the year, Mann (2001) argued that this alienates those younger students from the subject discipline. Therefore, by engaging in the subject community of practice, and preparing for classroom activities, the mature students found themselves alienated from the younger students. This can become a vicious circle of alienation from the larger student body but deepening engagement with the community of practice.

Frances also had 'othering' issues in her Art class, as she had timetable problems, which led to a clash with one of her Art sessions and English. This led to problems throughout the year. She said:

*The clash meant we had to leave the group in Art and go to English. They carried on doing groupy things, mainly lots of young people clustering round each other. The young people asked for more group work – but to me that showed their insecurities – not wanting to be individuals. I felt we missed out on what was happening in the group. I feel like they think I'm a person on the edge. That was unexpected, that people at that age would be like in a playground at school.*

However, not all the reactions to the mature students were negative. Some of the group felt that they had been occasionally positioned, by other younger students, as having an advisory role.

For example, Andy said:

*Here I would say I was a student. But I'm looked on as someone who could help others; a few have come to see me. People have come up to me with gripes and said 'How do you think I should tackle this?' or 'I don't think I can get my assignment in, what do you reckon I should do?' I don't just see myself as a student but as a member of a peer group who can help.*

*I'm fitting in as a student...ooh I now have to be called a student don't I? No, I'm fitting in and enjoying it.*

Charlie also acknowledged this and said that his peers sometimes asked him for advice. Eleanor and Gaynor both said that younger students wanted to work with them on group work.

All of the students acknowledged that it was not the entire student body from which they were alienated but a significant majority. A small number of younger students were as driven and motivated as they were, and often these were the younger students that the mature group could bond with and form friendships.

Some of the students also felt that mature students were 'othered' by the institution. In particular, they felt 'othered' by the Students' Union during the induction period, when the focus was on integrating and engaging with the main new student body.

During the induction period the focus from the institution and, in particular the Students' Union, was on bringing the new students together to help with their socialisation and integration into their subjects and into the student body. All the students said that they felt excluded from the sections of induction that the Students' Union organised as the main focus for their events surrounded alcohol.

Beccy said:

*It comes more at Freshers, there's nothing really for older students, it's all very centred for the youngsters and I suppose there's not a huge sense of belonging from that.*

Some of the students also expressed disappointed at their treatment from the institution. Eleanor felt this most with the lack of flexibility and consideration seemingly her biggest concern. She said:

*They seem to want to welcome mature students but I didn't feel we were welcomed perhaps as much as...the provision isn't there for mature students and their responsibilities that I thought there would be. That has been the biggest let down. We do feel let down by that and that wasn't the expectation we had. There could easily be the flexibility there by putting all the mature students in say, two or three groups and putting the timetable together to be better for mature students, rather than spreading us very thinly through all the groups and there being no provision for the fact that mature students do have other responsibilities and that a three hour gap in the middle of the day for a lesson that runs 4 – 6pm is no*

*good when you've got children, be them 6 or 16. It's no good really. It's very hard and it puts people off.*

Eleanor's experience concurred with Alsop (2008), who urged the sector as a whole to broaden policies to deal with issues such as childcare. Debbie also experienced problems with lectures being cancelled at short notice. This was a nuisance for all students and sometimes unavoidable, but becomes expensive when you still have to pay for childcare. Timetabling issues were often a concern for many students who have to fit around work commitments as well around their taught classes. Davies and Williams (2005) found a similar result in that their student sample felt that institutions were designed with the younger students in mind.

Harry reckoned it was just a question of numbers:

*Things are geared towards the younger students mainly because there are more of them.*

Whilst courses may need to be managed in such a way to benefit most students, changes can be as simple as ensuring a number of mature students are placed together in the same group so that they can gain from the sense of belonging and peer-group support that the younger students experience. For the mature students, any sense of belonging and validity to participate in higher education needs to come from a level of engagement within the subject discipline and integration with the community of practice. Wenger's (1998) three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination and alignment can help frame this process.

## Engagement

Engagement requires the students to feel an affinity with their subject discipline and be in a position to access the practices, persons and artefacts of the community of practice. This acquisition of academic practice and self-efficacy offers the participant the ability to share in the academic discourse. For the mature students in this study, the level of engagement with both the chosen course and the subject discipline encouraged their belonging to a community of practice. The inward trajectory from the legitimate periphery of the community to the centre, and full participation, contributes to the sense of belonging and to overcoming imposter syndrome.

All the students found a 'love of learning' at some level on their courses. Even if their transitions were complicated, with their experience compromised in some way, they all spoke with enthusiasm about an aspect of their learning. Gaynor, whose course did not live up to her expectations, used the year to gain academic skills such as researching and essay writing, particularly useful for her following her dyslexia diagnosis. As the year progressed she found herself frustrated with the strategic learners. She said:

*Aarrgghh, we only need 40%, I hear it every assignment, every lecture. No! That's not what I'm here for, I want to learn.*

In terms of raising self-belief and self-esteem, Eleanor's experience was successful due to her exposure to a wide variety of subject areas on the primary teaching curriculum. She said:

*I'm not as thick as I thought I was. You know, I can do other things. There are other things I do like, I can do other things. I did the English and thought. Gosh, I never knew that. I'm quite good and I'd love to learn more.*

All the students spoke about enjoying the wider reading, and the process of research for coursework assignments. Many of them discussed spending their free time in the library studying. Harry said:

*The last three months I've been like a sponge, absorbing it all. I spend most of my free time in the library whereas when I first started I only spent a little time there.*

The students also engaged with the management side of their courses as all but one of them volunteered to become course representatives. Andy, in particular, saw this as a way of networking with members of the senior academic team in much the same way as he had done in business.

## Imagination

Imagination requires the student to expand their identities to include other perspectives, to look beyond the academic life to where they want to be in the future. Many mature students are driven and have a clear career focus. They can demonstrate this mode and see this part of their lives as a stepping stone to a new identity.

Most of the mature students could see themselves at the end of their degrees, mainly because they had fixed goals and a clear focus about what their degree meant for them in terms of both career progression and personal development. Out of the eight, five stated that they were aiming for a first class degree. The other three were aiming for an upper second. Frances thought she *was a B person*. Debbie spoke about an upper second as being a *good degree* and that anything lower would be considered a *run of the mill degree* and a *waste of money*. Andy was of the same opinion saying:

*If it looked like I was going to get a 2:2 I probably wouldn't bother with the third year.*

Some of these students also needed to create a professional identity as they were on teaching degrees. Their identity construction is multi-layered with a personal identity with all its nuanced layers meshing and often clashing with a professional identity. This is what Warin terms 'identity dissonance' (Warin et al, 2006:237). Interestingly Charlie said that he felt most like a student when he was on placement. This was not in the sense of novice but a more negative

feeling of trainee or apprentice. However, he was only in the first year of a three year degree, with many more intensive and demanding placements ahead, so his identity shift from trainee teacher to professional will perhaps be more gradual than he would like.

Frances also felt an identity dissonance between the various subjects studied but instead of constructing further identities she suffered from a 'loss' of identity in her Art subject. She said:

*In Art you get a lot a negative feedback so it's easy to lose confidence in your own work. Our 'core us' has been shaken. I was talking to a third year and they said 'It's funny watching your first years. In the second and third year you'll just tell them [the academic staff] to go away!*

Mann (2001) looked at potential areas where students can feel alienated in higher education and found that:

*The estrangement of the individual student from their own creative and autonomous self as a learner is replaced by a compliant self unable to access the vitality of their creative self, and acquiescing to the demand and prescriptions of their course requirements. (Mann, 2001:13)*

For Frances, it was not her identity as a student that she struggled with, it was her identity as an artist. However, after being reassured from a final year student, she felt her artist identity would return.

## Alignment

Alignment requires the students to join together to form new communities of practice. Alignment crosses existing boundaries, and encourages participants to form multiple memberships and straddle groups. Some of the students in this research were studying a combination of disciplines. This can produce synergy and enhancement (such as with creative writing and English Literature) that can help with academic literacy and improve writing. As Kogan (2000) stated, the discipline is where the academic identity flourishes and is therefore an important feature of gaining the sense of belonging and participation. A few of the students were able to join societies that enhanced their learning, the English Society for example. But others, such as Debbie, were unable to join due to external commitments. These extra-curricular activities are often where the mature student misses out. Beccy acknowledged this when she said:

*There's nothing really for older students, it's all very centred for the youngsters. I suppose there's not a huge sense of belonging to the university and I suppose there still isn't, after a year. I'd probably say I'm quite stood back from it. I come here to do my lessons and then go off and have another life outside so I feel a bit apart. It's obviously easier to go back home and to go back to work and the people you know because that's actually what you know.*

Whilst Beccy has a strong support group outside of the institution, social integration is an important part of retention. In terms of her experience, academically Beccy's transition was successful but socially it could have been richer.

## Conclusion

By the end of their first year, all the students were able to describe themselves as students. However, for some the description still needed to be qualified with either a link to a future career direction or with a distinction from the main student body. The separation away from the younger students transmits from both directions, the mature students 'other' themselves and the younger students 'other' the mature students. This dislocation is borne out of a difference in attitudes to studying. Mature students are, on the whole, far more serious in their approach to their work and see the younger students in a strategic learner role – doing just enough to get by, particularly in the first year. The mature students also felt that the younger students saw them as *geeks* and *swots*. Whilst this distinction is not along age lines per se, all the mature students put themselves in the more studious category.

This research identifies the need to locate an alternative definition of 'mature student' which I propose is novice academic. Novice academic as a discourse has all the positive attitudes of being a 'scholar' but not the negative assumptions of being a 'student'. The mature students can identify with and want to become novice academics. They take their studies seriously and engage in their subject community of practice. The (re)negotiation of their identity can therefore bypass student and instead focus on novice academic. This reclassification also addresses 'imposter syndrome' as it gives credit to prior experience and recognises the need for the community of practice to shift away from one which contains the main student body to one which has academic staff centrally as the expert academic.

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