Bioscience students' first year perspectives through video diaries: home, family and student transitions.

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Abstract

The first year experiences of students are viewed as important in contributing to retention, overall academic success and student satisfaction. As such there is an increased focus on students' experiences of their first weeks at university. In this paper we describe some findings from a video-diary project through which bioscience students commented on any aspects of their experiences that were significant during their first year. This paper provides the first reflection specifically on the social transitions experienced by bioscience students, showing that their transition to university is not a step change, or even necessarily a linear process but, as noted by Holdsworth (2006) should be considered as a series of fragmented transitions. In their diaries, the bioscience students commented upon the process of becoming integrated as part of the university community including the establishment of friendship groups and their changing relationships with the families. There is also exploration of their changing perspectives as the end of term is approached and some of the difficulties of re-adapting to home life. For the bioscience students there are perceived issues around the scheduling and amount of contact hours compared with their peers from other subjects and also the timing of the first semester examinations. However, the modes of delivery also facilitate integration through the levels of peer-to-peer contact and student-staff contact that typify biological sciences programmes.

Introduction

The student experience of higher education is a topic of increasing interest and concern across the sector, in particular regarding the first year of study and the inter-relationships between the concomitant academic and social transitions. This is not a new topic, for example Harvey *et al.* (2006) published an extensive review of the literature covering several decades, however, institutional pressures in terms of retention, student success and employability and the increasing investment in higher education by the students themselves are bringing the student experience evermore under the spotlight and changing the nature of that experience. In recognition of this, higher education institutions (HEIs) are investing increasing efforts in supporting the processes of transition during the first semester, particularly during the initial days/weeks through activities such as pre-arrival orientations, induction activities and mentoring schemes etc. (Gardner *et al.*, 2001; Schnell *et al.*, 2003; Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Hultberg *et al.*, 2008). Linked to this, the institutional concerns focus a research agenda that tends to be dominated by a managerial approach linking specific practices and interventions, through institutional support mechanisms, with impact outcomes (Palmer *et al.*, 2009).

The first weeks at university are a period of significant change with social and emotional upheavals (Wilcox *et al.* 2005), indeed for a significant number of students, they may be leaving home and moving apart from their families for the first time in their lives. Thus, the transitions specifically are 'about students negotiating between the old life they have left behind (family, home and friends) and the new life

they have ahead of them' (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). The idea of leaving home for the first time remains central to many students' imaginings of the student experience and as an integral aspect of the rite of passage of going to university (Holdsworth, 2006). In the latter respect, Tinto, in analysing the factors linked to student departure, directly correlates transition to university as a rite of passage with three identifiable stages: separation, transition and incorporation (Tinto, 1988). Separation involves a varying degree of dissociation with friendship groups, school/college and home life. The degree of the separation from these communities will depend to some extent on geographical separation. As a contrast, consider the student who remains in the family home with, at the other extreme, the international student who may have travelled several thousand miles and who cannot go home for a short break such as a weekend during term time, or possibly for the shorter vacations. The realisation of that separation, though, may be significantly mitigated by the use of a range of communications, such as video links, or social media such as Facebook™.

During the transition stage, students are literally located in a transition in which they have dissociated from their old communities but are yet to become integrated in the community of the university. This may be reflected in a sense of not belonging within the university environment (Solomon, 2007) or of being in a 'betwixt space' (Palmer *et al.*, 2009) between home and university. For some students this period of not belonging may pose significant problems, impacting on students' engagement with the learning experience and can lead to withdrawal from the university (Astin, 1984; Cutrona, 1982; Tinto, 1988; Osterman, 2000). Indeed, Wilcox and co-authors argue that successful social and academic integration require equal emphasis in retention strategies (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). The third stage, incorporation (Tinto, 1988),

represents the process by which students become integrated within the structures of the institution and become members of the community, thereby developing a sense of belonging to the institution (Kuh and Love, 2000). It is therefore significant that the overall transition to university is not a step change, and not even always a linear process, but rather such transitions need to be viewed as being fragmented and not necessarily smooth and unidirectional (Holdsworth, 2006).

As indicated, there has been significant research into students' transitions into higher education which has provided detailed insights. The approaches for most of these have involved questionnaires, surveys and structured focus groups and interviews. Even where there have also been free-form responses, the themes and approaches may reflect the concerns and emphases of the institution (Moffat, 1989). In the present study, we report on some of the outcomes of using a video-diary approach to exploring the student experience. This is a novel longitudinal study that has tracked cohorts of bioscience students throughout their years of undergraduate study at a traditional UK university, a key feature of the approach adopted here being that the students were not given any instruction regarding the range of topics on which they should comment, only that they should reflect on matters that were of importance to them at the time. In this report we are focusing on the social transitions of the first year with the aim of exploring the perceptions of bioscience students not just during the first few weeks, which are commonly regarded as the transition period, but through into the second semester thereby allowing consideration of a longitudinal transition which incorporates different stages of student experience. Furthermore, through the use of free-form video diaries, the student voice is more freely and

personally structured, not being directed by the preconceptions and concerns of the institution (Green *et al.*, 2009).

Methodology

A total of 64 students studying biological sciences at the University of Leicester in the UK have participated in this study, with cohorts of about 20 students being recruited in each of the three academic years from 2007-08 to 2009-10. Although the programmes allow significant choice in later stages, the students follow common structures in the first year and so have similar academic frameworks. The project protocols were approved by the University's local ethics committee.

The students were contacted by letter prior to commencing their university studies that set out the nature of the study and invited the students to volunteer for the study. There was an almost 50:50 balance between males and females in the study group, although this was not a direct reflection of the overall undergraduate population in the biosciences at Leicester, which is approximately two-thirds female in composition. Fifty-eight of the students were UK nationals and only five were local to Leicester.

Within the first two weeks of the start of the first year of study, each participant was given a small, hand-held video camera and asked to submit a five minute video diary on a weekly basis. During each cohort's second semester this was reduced to 2 - 3 weeks. The students were not given any guidance regarding the topic of the diaries other than that they should focus on any aspect, positive or negative, of their

experiences as students that were important to them at the time. This approach was adopted to try to avoid any staff bias affecting the focus of the students' reflections. The participating students were also invited to attend focus groups, three times a year, to allow the research team to follow-up on specific issues. With the project requiring significant time and long-term commitment it is perhaps unsurprising that there was some attrition, however, 45 of the students were still active participants by the end of their first year of study.

The avoidance of staff bias was further reinforced in that the students engaged only with the research assistants working on the project, both when submitting their diaries and when participating in the focus groups. The processing of the diaries was also undertaken by the research assistants who encoded the clips using NVivo™ software to allow identification of a range of themes arising from the diaries.

In this report we explore the ways in which students reflect on the social aspects of university life in their first months of study. As Green *et al* (2009) observed, there are three strengths to the use of video diaries: firstly, as discussed above, it provides an insight into the first year experience from the students' perspective rather than that of the institution. Secondly the diary offers an immediate, or relatively so, record of the students' experiences and feelings, thereby mitigating one of the problems of questionnaires (etc.) that provide a retrospective snapshot of events and rely on memories of events that may have occurred weeks previously. The third aspect is that the free-form video diary offers a much wider perspective on student life, including that beyond the boundaries of the university. The students' names in this paper are fictional.

The first semester – halls and friendships

The first few weeks at university represent a time of great social and emotional upheaval for many incoming first-year students. As noted above, the majority of students involved in the video diary project were not locally resident and so were leaving behind a place they called home. The reflections of Jonathan at the end of his first semester illustrate the strong links held by some students between the notion of home and important relationships:

The hardest aspect of leaving home to come to university was leaving my friends and family behind for the first time because this is my first time away from home for an extended period of time.

However, this contrasts with Peter's views at the same time:

I just wanted to get away from my school because I absolutely hated it....I was dying to get to Uni so I could spread my wings and be independent. That's what I really wanted to do and yeah Uni is brilliant. I really like it here and I can actually cook for myself now.

Likewise, John's reflections illustrate the extent to which his sense of freedom from home ties is closely linked to the social aspects of university life and a broader perspective of friendships per se:

I don't really miss home. I don't understand how people miss people. When I'm here I'm with my uni friends and I'm having a brilliant time and then when I'm at home, I'm with my home friends having a brilliant time. I don't really

miss my family. I spent 18 years with them. I can be away from them now quite happily. I'm not worried about them.

For many students on the project the process of adapting to new surroundings was dominated by a perceived need to engage with a key symbol of university life, that of living in halls. For example, 11 of the 14 members of the first cohort of students lived in catered or self-catering university accommodation. Indeed, several students explicitly recognised that living in halls was a key part of the first-year university experience:

Most people go into halls to start with, it's recommended.

...living in halls is part of the Uni experience that I didn't want to miss out on.

or as another student put it, *'that's where 1st years are'*, reflecting Holdsworth's (2006) assertion that students continue to engage with historically-constituted stereotypes of what it means to be a 'typical student.'

This perception is also reflected in the views of Sam, a local student who chose to live in halls even though the university accommodation was in the same residential area of the city as her family home. Sam felt that moving into 'halls' enabled her to, *'do' the university experience*. The physical distance between halls and her parent's home, therefore, was of less relevance to Sam than her ability to view herself and, perhaps, be viewed as a typical student living in halls. Like many of the non-home students Sam also viewed movement into halls as a basis to both integrate into university life and explore her independence. The contrasting perspective was noted by Sajjad, who was local and still lived at home:

I come in for lectures and sometimes stay to go to the library to finish some work. But mainly I go home... I have made a few new friends but not as many. It doesn't matter too much.

However, for some students, living at home could lead to a sense of exclusion:

...there definitely is a divide like, because I'm at home and everyone's here.

This distinction is reflected in Christie's (2009) observations of students living at home who distinguished between being a 'student' and their identities as 'day students' for whom the university experience was often only one part of their lives. Indeed, Thomas (2002) observed that students who did not live in student accommodation were more likely to feel marginalised and found it harder to make friends and Pike and Kuh (2005) concluded that low levels of engagement may be directly related to living off-campus, particularly during the early stages of a programme.

For most students, making friends was viewed as central to the process of integration. In ways that echoes Carsten's (2004) understanding of the role of sharing food in building social relations, for example, several students felt that catered accommodation facilitated integration as a result of the sociable aspects of eating together at meal times:

...we all go down to eat together so it's really sociable.

This sociable aspect was similarly reflected in the accounts of students living in self-catered accommodation where there were shared kitchen facilities, but also where students could shut out the external distractions:

We have a kitchen and most of the time we stay there if you want to talk to each other. If you want to study you go back to your room and shut the door.

The development of friendships is very important in facilitating a sense of belonging at university (Eder and McCabe, 2004; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005) and in the provision of support networks during hard times (Brooks, 2007). For example, Simon had considered leaving the University during the first semester because he was unable to establish intimate friendships with his peers. In the sample of students studied by Wilcox and co-workers (2005), three-quarters of those who withdrew commented on having had difficulties making friends. Simon reflected on these experiences in a focus group towards the end of the second semester, *"I had a lot of trouble fitting in in the first term, going between social groups. There was nobody here I actually liked or got on with."* The only reason he did not leave at the time, he pointed out, was that he was 'too lazy' to engage with the effort and further adjustment required to change university.

Simon's understanding of 'fitting in' at University offers important insights into the ways in which students respond to ideals of what it means to be a "typical student" (Holdsworth 2006: 500). The student demographic in the UK may be diversifying but it does not follow, as a 1994 Group policy report suggests, that, "the image of the 'traditional student' is no longer applicable" (Kay *et al.*, 2007). Several students compared themselves with a historically-constituted image of a young middle-class student who socialises on an excessive scale and drinks large amounts of alcohol. Sam, for example, may have moved into halls in her home town 'to do the Uni experience' but she initially found it hard to adjust to university life because, in her words, she was, *"not really much of a going out person."* In a focus group in the second semester four students, including Simon, spoke of the 'pressure' of trying to

fit in or resist the traditional and ongoing image of a drinking, partying student. As he explained:

It's always the hardest, when you're the one person in the group who doesn't drink alcohol (another student in the group agrees). Last night I was drinking nothing but Red Bull and they're going, "have some beer, have some wine, straight JD, get trashed." Noo! Red Bull! They kind of pressure you into it ...

Jin, the overseas Chinese student on the project, liked to drink but could not afford to do this very often. He commented on how this impacted on his ability to build friendships in halls:

I do drink but I can't go out every night because alcohol is expensive. I dunno, all my flatmates have their pressure for study. They go out every day, every night. I can't join them every day, just a few times, two or three times a month, so I can't get on very well with them. They are good friends at the flats but I can't join them. I don't spend too much time with them, going out drinking and stuff so 'just good friends' can't go further.

For students who drink little or feel the pressure of not drinking enough alcohol, universities, "are not always comfortable places to be" (Asmar, 2005). This is especially the case for religiously devout students and/or students from non-drinking ethnic minority backgrounds (Asmar, 2005). Rabeea, for example, spoke of the pressure of studying in an environment where alcohol was so highly valued. This pressure, as she described it, was nevertheless offset by the fact that her friends,

who also tended to come from ethnic minority backgrounds, did not drink alcohol. Her comments again highlight the importance of friends in building a sense of belonging and helping students to settle during the first year at university. Rabeea's transition from home to university was also facilitated by the fact that she lived at home, with her parents in Leicester. She spoke, in this sense, of the importance of family being near to her, in terms of helping her adjust and 'get used' to her new life at university.

The developing integration highlighted a contrast between long-standing friendships from home and the newly-established friendships of university that was drawn out by a number of the students in different ways, reflecting Tinto's description of the second stage of transition (Tinto, 1988). For example, Rachael commented that:

You miss your friends. It's like you have friends here but they're not like real friends yet.It's really unsettling. I mean I know lots of people here but it's not the same as knowing everyone back home.

Social media, though, enable students to maintain regular, extensive contacts with their different friendship groups:

I was speaking to all my friends from home on Facebook...we've got like a big thread that all of us write on so it goes like all term...so we can all see what everyone's doing, it's really nice actually...

Friendships also bring with them distractions for students living at home or in halls which they recognised they needed to manage. For example, the comments of the two local students, Sajjad, who was still living at home:

...finding a quiet place to work can sometimes be hard. Other distractions like all my friends are still in Leicester because a few of them are taking gap years. So I have just been going out with them.

and Sam, who had specifically moved into halls:

There are different distractions in halls compared to at home because it's always noisy. When I'm in I keep my door open so people can come and socialise a bit from the other flats. But it then gets difficult to work.

The need to integrate and make friends could create a tension between social activities and work:

When you're in halls I think the problem is you're living away from home and lonely and you just go out and see what everyone else is doing. It's not distraction as such it's more cutting into your time.

and other distractions are also present:

It's like living at home - you've got your telly to get distracted by.(living in halls) is to make new friends in the 1st year.

Parental Ties and Involvement

John's distinction between friends and family and home and university (above) nevertheless obfuscates the extent to which the lives of many students, living away from home, are still influenced by their parents. As the first term progressed, particularly moving towards the end of the term when the students were getting tired, many of those who were living away from home felt the pull of parental ties and also the linked attraction of the comforts of home. Rachael commented that:

All the excitement's gone. Fresher's was amazing and it just feels like you're on a massive come down now of how amazing everything was and now it's just like gone. You want to go home. You miss your mum....

In the case of Rebecca this desire to go home after a tiring semester is explicitly linked to a yearning to be 'looked after' by her mother:

Ah, I just need a break. I know it's not meant to be a break but... it really is. No more waking up at 7.30, making sure I get to lectures on time (sneeze). I just want to go home. I miss my Mum. I'm sick of washing up. I'm sick of doing my washing, having clothes that aren't ironed (huff). 12, 13 weeks is a long time and I've only been home twice.

Like many students on the project, Rebecca's understanding of 'home' also extends beyond relationships with parents. In an earlier video diary Rebecca associated home with pre-university friends, her dog and the comfort of her own bed. The students often linked home with symbolic associations of comfort or warmth, in terms of imaginings of their own bed, home cooking and pets.

The following conversation between two students in a focus group illustrates how the influence of parents in the student experience also extends beyond the direct social ties to more practical aspects:

Simon: I went home this weekend and it was all yeah go and see my friends but my Dad was like 'stop, before you go out let's talk about your budget!'

Ruth: Oh no, I've had one of those too.

Simon: *He was like physically blocking the door and walked me to the computer, sat down and did a budget. Now I know that in theory I should be spending about £3 on food a day, and something else and something else. It was like if you stick to this, by the end of this term you'll have like £30 in the bank.*

Almost all the students involved in the project were dependent, to varying degrees, on financial contributions from their parents. As in the discussion above, this can impact in very direct ways, but there are also more indirect connections made, for example, Grace's comments, following the arrival of a letter of congratulations from the department based on the success of her 1st semester examinations:

I knew I'd got a first class but didn't know I was going to get a letter. Always good. I'm going to send it to my parents. Maybe they will send me money, woo hoo! So that was nice. Makes you feel good ...

Through visits to family homes during term time, telephone contact and the use of 'continuity anchors' such as frozen batches of Mum's home cooking, students were capable of feeling an important sense of attachment to parents at various, ongoing points of the first semester and several students spoke of the benefits of living 'not too far' from their home town or city.

According to Frank Furedi, the influence of parents in the contemporary student experience extends beyond financial concerns. Parents 'interfere,' he suggests, because they struggle to 'let go' of their children (cited in Curtis 2008). It is parents, in other words, that wish to delay their children's yearnings for independence. The

majority of students involved in the project, however, were able to simultaneously value a sense of freedom at university and appreciate both the financial *and* emotional support provided by parents. Their sense of identity, in other words, was situational (Linger 2001). Students viewed themselves as young, independent adults in relationships with friends at university, but considered themselves as young, dependent adults in terms of relations with their parents.

This can also lead to institutional categorisation of students being misleading, not always matching students' perceptions of their relationship with or sense of real and imagined distance from their family home. For example, Amira who, although she was a registered international student from India, actually chose her university on the basis of her parents moving to the city. She valued living with them during her studies, especially during the fasting month of Ramadan or Ramzan:

It's been good having Ramzan here with my family 'cos I think it wouldn't have been that good if I'd been living in halls or say in another house with my uni mates. I don't even have to do that, look for houses, where to live in the 2nd year, so that's good!

The Christmas and New Year holidays

During the first semester many students arrive at university and view 'living in halls' as a basis to integrate into university life, make good friends and through this explore a sense of (shared) freedom in the absence of parental ties. Yet at the same time students value these kinship ties and feel an on-going attachment to parents during

their studies in ways that may also defy their categorisation as home, non-home or international students.

By the end of the first semester these feelings are intensified, with many students looking forward to the opportunity to 'step back' from university life. As reflected by Rebecca above, several students on the project spoke of feeling drained at the end of the first semester in which the new challenges of adjusting to new learning and teaching methods, managing finances, cooking and dealing with various emotional highs and lows are all experienced in the space of a few weeks. For students taking modules in biological sciences there is the perceived additional challenge, when compared to hall friends taking arts or humanities courses, of extensive contact hours with lecturers, tutors and demonstrators, an aspect that was commented on by several of the students and all those participating in the focus groups. In reality, the timetable for these 1st year bioscience students includes between two to three times the number of contact hours as experienced by their peers following arts and humanities programmes, which is similar to the figures reported nationally (Bekhradnia, 2012). Project members were also acutely aware of a discipline-specific student experience which manifested itself in 'early starts', typically having four or five mornings a week with a 09:00 start time. When asked about this in the focus groups, all the students noted that there were differences:

...all our classes got underway quite quickly compared to other courses who didn't have starts until 12 or 1. We had 9 o'clock starts so it was difficult to go out initially but you get used to the whole waking up and coming to lectures.

...I have had to stay in a lot lately. Having the 9am lectures stops me going out sometimes.

The students were also very aware, though, of the processes of re-adjustment that would be needed to re-integrate into home life, as Sam commented:

It's gone so fast. I'm really starting to enjoy Uni though. It's getting really good. I'm sort of looking forward to going back (home) but sort of not. I think it's going to be a big adjustment going back home and then when we come back in January it's going to be an adjustment as well.

At the end of the first semester these yearnings for home may be specifically accentuated by the arrival of Christmas holidays and its association with shared family memories, presents, relaxation and seasonal food and drinks. On returning home, Lisa provided extensive video coverage of her family home with footage of her little sister playing under the Christmas tree and her extended family milling around tables full of food. The family association is also reflected in parental pressures:

Going home for Christmas. I did contemplate staying here actually to get some work done but my parents wouldn't have it. My Mum told me that I definitely can't stay. I don't know... something about wanting me home.

The Christmas and New Year holidays also present students with a fresh dilemma, as they face summative examinations on their return to university. In some cases the task of trying to revise at home is complicated by a student's already established relationship with particular learning spaces and habits. Take Jane's view, in hindsight, of her experience of trying to revise at home:

Seeing all my family and being at home, it's quite distracting. At university I have a set place where I can work, my desk and at the library. Where I can do

revision at home there's not any kind of facility for that 'cos obviously I don't have a desk in my room and it's really difficult being at home, trying to find a quiet place to work. So I think next time I have exams I might come back to uni a bit early. I really haven't got as much revision done as I would like.

Other students similarly spoke of the distraction of being at home at Christmas at a time when they felt they should also be revising. Distractions manifested themselves through both choice and compulsion, the result being that many students struggled to focus on revision during these holidays. These distractions may, in turn, affect confidence at a critical transitional stage in the academic life of students. As Robert explains of his experiences during these holidays:

I had an elaborate plan that I was going to set aside a week for each module. It started well at first. Dunno, just got off track. I meant to do metabolism in the 1st week, biomols in the 2nd and then chemistry in the last. I must have done like 2 days of chemistry. It's just distractions isn't it? I've learnt my lesson though 'cos I don't think it went very well. I think that de-motivates you as well, when you don't finish what you planned to do.

The ability of students to study at home during the vacation may be further compromised by their need to earn money. During the first semester Louise signed up to work at a supermarket in her home town over the holidays. As she explains, the need to work gave her little opportunity to spend quality time with her boyfriend and parents, who were divorced and living apart:

I didn't really get much of a holiday for the first two weeks of the Christmas holiday because I worked from that Saturday that I got home, I had two days

off up to Christmas day, then I had Christmas day and Boxing day off, then I started again and worked every day until New Year. So I was working loads and it's like I wanted to see my boyfriend and my family. I'd go to work, get up at 7 in the morning, be back at like 5 at night, have some dinner, see my Mum and so I didn't get much of a holiday until New Year.

Louise hoped to spend a few nights at her father's house over the holidays but with 'all her things,' as she put it, at her mother's house she felt much more comfortable coming and going from work almost every day from the latter location. Working to this extent also affected her ability to revise for important and impending exams, as she explains:

So up until that point I'd had no time for revision. I know you might say instead of lying in bed and watching TV I could have done revision which is fair enough but I was really tired after working at (the supermarket). It was just really non-stop and I took a couple of days to have a bit of a holiday and that made exams a complete nightmare.

The Second Semester

On returning to university several students recognised that it was much easier settling back into university life than it had been at the start of the first semester. As one student put it, "...it was like falling back into your other life." Through the video diary data and the focus groups held in the second semester it is apparent that students tend to compare their experiences in the first and second semesters, respectively. On these terms the student experience is in fact seen, by students, as a linear process. Developing friendships, adjusting to learning and teaching styles

and feeling settled at university are all viewed as part of an evolving, growing process.

By the second semester students started to feel as though they belong at university, that it is a place they may call a version of home, reflecting Tinto's (1988) third stage of transition: incorporation. This is exemplified by Jonathan's reflections on the second semester:

I see University and home as like two different lives anyway, I have people here and people back home and here is home but home is 'home home'. So it's sort of weird 'cos the more I think about it the more I start to like Leicester 'cos the first time I got here I was like err, 'new city is always strange' but it sort of grows on you after a while like the many trees lining its boulevards.

These views compare markedly with his comment in the 1st semester about how hard it had been to leave friends and family behind at the start of his university career.

Simon, who had considered leaving the University at one point in the first semester, was also much happier in the second semester. As he observed:

The second semester's gone absolutely brilliantly in comparison (to the first semester) so I'll probably just end up staying and making my millions along the way. I've just grown to like Leicester now. It's worth sticking with.

Both Jonathan and Simon speak of Leicester 'growing on you.' For Simon, who had had difficulty making friends to begin with, this sense of Leicester 'growing on him' was facilitated by his role as treasurer of a University Society through which he

found friends and which he described as, “a reject society that’s kind of like me.” Again, we see the importance of friendships in enabling students to develop a sense of belonging at the University. For Simon the second semester has gone brilliantly *in comparison* to the first semester because he has finally developed a social network, albeit outside the ‘traditional’ boundaries of course friends or neighbours in halls.

Jonathan’s ability to feel a sense of belonging at both ‘home home’ and what appears to be his second home at university is built, in important ways, around his ability to ‘have people’ or relationships in both places. When he suggests that ‘home is home home’ he is clearly implying that his parental home represents a primary source of attachment even as he begins to feel more settled in his second semester at university. On these terms, students begin to build multiple attachments and relations at both home and university. Even then, they may continue to have moments in their university life, around holiday periods or a particularly difficult week when they feel a yearning to see their parents and simply be *at home*. Take the emotional view of Adeola, a student of Nigerian background, in her video diary towards the end of her second semester:

Tuesday was kind of boring and yeah I think I slept most of the day away not because I was tired but because, I don’t know, something was missing. That’s why I really really want to go home. The quietness is just killing me slowly and, too much quietness, too much. I mean I’ve been baking recently, which is good. It’s a little thing I do at home a lot. Baked a couple of cakes, baked a nice birthday cake. What else did I do? Went out quite a lot this week. Trying to fill that void. Yes, very very much so. Trying to fill that empty empty home

missing. I didn't think I was the kind of person that would miss home that much but I do, because I'm from a big family so it's weird ... it just sucks to be here. I kind of semi-hate it.

Adeola's attempt to alleviate homesickness through baking highlights the ongoing importance in her life of not only family ties, but her attachments to and memories of spending time in her not so quiet family home. As Hannah's story suggests, this yearning for home and kinship ties may involve more than one person:

I went home last weekend for Mother's Day 'cos I've just got engaged and I think that my Mum really needed me to come home, kind of thing, not just for me even though I get more homesick towards the end of term, but just for her as well.

What is also clear, however, is that contemporary students are capable of building spaces of belonging that transcend the ties of home and their particular university. Through ties to a pre-university friend a home student involved in the project established good friendships with students attending a different university in his home town. For some students their beliefs may facilitate attachments to religious groups that overlap with but extend beyond the boundaries of a single university campus. In the case of Jessica she became involved in a national Christian Fellowship network that involved attending weekend events in different towns. Hannah had extensive involvement in church groups in both her home town and near to her university. She speaks about this as she is about to leave for home again during the Easter holidays:

It's going to be really weird leaving everyone at my church here because I see them two or three times a week at the moment so it's going to be weird to not see them for 3 weeks especially because they are quite a support network for me. Like my friends in the house are really good friends, my main group of friends, but at church it's a real kind of support network in terms of my faith and just kind of what's going on. I lead some groups and stuff; from the student community there's about 50-60 students. It's going to be a bit bizarre going back to my church at home. I love my church at home, it's older people, like people with young families 'cos obviously we were a young family when we joined it.

Hannah's life as a young adult, therefore, is grounded in parental ties, her house friends and two church groups, which involve students but people and families from other walks of life. The ties of and around university are important to her but as she illustrates, she is extremely committed to spending two hours or more on a train to celebrate (her) Mother's day and spend considerable time during semesters attending and leading groups in her new church community.

Conclusions

This is the first study the authors are aware of that allows a longitudinal, individual perspective of the first year student experience and is focused specifically on bioscience students. The longitudinal nature of the project, based on regular submission of undirected video diaries, has provided complex insights into student life in ways that cannot easily be achieved through the application of research methods located in a specific time and place (Green *et al.*, 2009). In particular 'single

response' questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, even if these are repeated at intervals during each year, are prone to imposing particular assumptions on students about *their* student experience. Moffatt's (1989) understanding of the 'formal, adult-sounding ways' of the interviewer partly alludes to the potential imbalance of a research method that is circumscribed by the established promptings, however flexible they may be, of specific research agendas.

The use of portable, hand-held video cameras provides students with a basis to simultaneously establish their own, reflexive research agendas and the spatial boundaries of *their* field site (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). In social anthropology, the notion of a field site has traditionally been associated with an anthropologist's engagement with informants in a specific locale or community (Amit and Rapport, 2002) but in this case it is the students who determine who and what is included in the visual logging of their student experience. The video diaries, in this sense, capture the various emotions, experiences and insights that students are feeling at *particular* moments in *particular* personal and social spaces. In being able to reflect on their experiences, the students are able to project a sense of selfhood and identity to the research team that is not limited by their social status as students. The project represents an example of a student-led multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1998) and thus transcends the methodological limitations of conducting research into the student experience in institutional settings.

In this report, the video diary data illustrates the influence of life away from campus and the role of parents and similar attachments to family homes in shaping student transitions. The current findings of what is an on-going project illustrate the extent to

which these influences enrich and yet complicate life at university. Connections to parents, through the continuity anchors of home cooking, strategies of living close to one's 'home home' and discussions over finances provide students with an important sense of 'rootedness' as they engage with a never ending flow of new experiences, challenges and relationships. The family home, in turn, becomes an important emotional resource during holiday periods, as bioscience students in particular seek to step back from a tiring schedule.

The video diary data offers fresh insights into understandings of student transitions and the specific relationship between social and academic transitions whilst also supporting the previous reports regarding the stages of transition (Tinto, 1988) and the fragmented, non-linear nature of the process of adapting to university life (Holdsworth, 2006).

As the students involved in the project construct oppositional associations of 'independence' and 'dependence' between university and home, so the latter social space becomes viewed as a place to ideally step back from academic commitments. As illustrated in this article, though, there is also a 'distraction' of family life, which may come from parents themselves who expect their children home for Christmas or miss them at particular moments in the social calendar, such as Mother's Day. The ways in which family ties and yearnings for family homes complicate academic transitions involves people who may be placing significant financial resources into their children's education.

What is clear is that it is important for institutions to establish a sense of belonging and consider the whole student experience (Tinto, 2010), not just during the first two or three weeks of the student journey but as a long-term exercise and to be aware of the different pressures impacting on students through their lives outside academic study. As such, the findings of this project can help inform aspects of institutional practice and student support both generically and in specific terms related to the bioscience students. For example, although there is a significant, justified input of support for the initial few weeks of university life, it should also be recognised that there is a progressive dip towards the end of term, as the students are becoming increasingly tired, and that positive contact, for example through student mentors or personal tutors may well provide valuable support. In the context of social support it is important to structure the social events to be more inclusive, for example, by encouraging the establishment of more social activities that are not based around alcohol and also ensuring that the students who are not resident in university accommodation are encouraged to engage more and establish effective friendship groups with the other students.

The bioscience students involved in the study were conscious, to some extent justifiably, of having a higher contact load than their peers in other parts of the university, accompanied by 09:00 starts as standard. As seen from the students' comments, this can impact on their socialising and, in trying to balance these different demands, on their increasing tiredness as the term continues. When the students go home for the Christmas vacation, there is again a conflict, this time between the demands of re-engaging with home life, earning money and revising for the January exams. The timing of these exams has been a frequent source of

debate with staff and the student body regarding whether they should be at the end of the first term, when the diary evidence shows that the students are very tired, or in January when there are issues impacting on the ability to revise amidst the range of other distractions posed by re-integrating in the parental house, re-establishing local friendships and the need to earn money.

Kuh and co-workers (2005) concluded that the effective relationships between students and academic staff are vital to student success, one of the most important elements being the perceived approachability of those staff. The structure of many bioscience programmes supports the development of a closer knit student group as a result of the greater opportunities for interactions between the students and also with members of staff, in particular through practical classes and field work etc. Supporting this observation, the results of a pilot study comparing biological sciences and English students indicated that the bioscientists gave significantly higher ratings to measures of a sense of belonging, such as 'I feel included in my department' and 'There is at least one lecturer in the department I can talk to if I have a problem' (Cashmore and Scott, unpublished data). Therefore, it is important for departments to make the most of these subject-specific opportunities for strengthening the integration of the students and therefore supporting their long-term retention.

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