

Powerful transformations: The experiences of higher education teaching staff who were first-generation university students

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Abstract

Historically, a university education has been seen primarily as a route for the middle classes to achieve professional qualifications while structural barriers have served to restrict entry to individuals from particular demographics. First-generation students (FGS), often with low socio-economic backgrounds, face multiple barriers to Higher Education (HE) and are less likely than their more advantaged peers to apply, be accepted or to complete their studies. FGS who become HE lecturers are examples of those who were able to overcome their disadvantages and who, by choosing to stay within academia, demonstrate successful assimilation into a university setting. Examination of the experiences and perspectives of HE lecturers who had been FGS provides an opportunity to understand the factors that supported the retention of these individuals in HE and could inform recommendations for future widening participation strategies. This study utilised an online qualitative survey to explore the experiences of 14 teaching staff in HE who had been FGS. Participants were invited to reflect on their time as a student and how this influenced their teaching practices. Data were thematically analysed resulting in three main themes: (i) forging a different path, (ii) institutional support and (iii) transformational futures. Academic and pastoral support from lecturers helped to reduce feelings of imposter syndrome and could be critical for retention. The FGS academics drew on their lived experiences to be relatable to their students and to create an

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inclusive, more egalitarian teaching environment. This paper recommends that universities should actively involve first-generation academics and students in shaping policies on teaching, support services and widening participation.

KEYWORDS

First-generation student, higher education, support, transformative, widening participation

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses how first-generation university students who become academics overcome structural and cultural barriers in higher education, and how their lived experiences shape more inclusive teaching practices, student support and widening participation strategies aimed at improving belonging and retention.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper shows that academics from first-generation backgrounds seek to transform higher education by using their lived experience to challenge exclusionary norms, support a sense of belonging for their students, and reshape teaching and institutional practices to promote retention and widening participation.

INTRODUCTION

Brook and Michell (2012) argue that educators who were first-generation students (FGS), that is those whose parents/carers had not attended university, represent the ultimate success story in terms of transition, assimilation and attainment. For FGS, feeling out of place or incongruous in the institution is an important factor (Brook & Michell, 2012; Clayton et al., 2009) and one which can limit their ability to engage with their studies. Those who find higher education (HE) less accessible due to financial, cultural or institutional reasons are more likely to feel out of place and leave their programme early (Cotton et al., 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wong, 2018). Researchers have identified emotional factors such as homesickness, loneliness and isolation as key issues which can contribute to attrition (Wilcox et al., 2005; Williams and Roberts, 2023). Feeling a sense of belonging is essential for finding one's place at university (Russell & Jarvis, 2019). Thus, university educators who were FGS exemplify students who felt so 'at home' in HE that they never left. While such individuals could provide significant insights into their own experience of transition and their route to success which could be used to support current students, there is little acknowledgement of this in the literature. Indeed, much research into retention is quantitative in nature. Cotton et al. (2017) argue that students from comparable demographics sometimes have markedly different experiences at university, thus a one-size-fits-all approach to retention is limited in its ability to reach all the necessary student groups and a nuanced perspective is needed. Academic staff who were FGS offer a unique but under-explored perspective on student

support and experience-informed pastoral care of students (Rickett & Morris, 2020). This article goes some way to address this gap in the literature as understanding the experiences of this successful group could support widening participation and inform future policies for reducing student attrition.

Contextualising widening participation

Although the UK government's aim to widen access to HE to 50% of young people by 2010 has now been reached (Lambrechts, 2020), the increase in the number of students entering HE has not been consistent across the board. The percentage of those from certain groups, such as those from lower socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, has not increased by as much as those coming from more advantaged areas (Montacute & Cullinane, 2023). In 2023, for example, less than 25% of 18-year-olds from areas with low participation in HE were accepted for undergraduate study (Universities UK, 2025). Furthermore, young people who received free school meals—a marker for lower SES—are the second least likely of all groups to attend university (Crew, 2021).

Yet, while institutions are invested in strategies to support a widening participation agenda (Office for Students, 2023), tuition fees have become prohibitive. Many students will experience a shortfall between a student loan and significantly increased living costs, necessitating paid employment alongside their studies (Hordósy et al., 2018). FGS are more likely to face significant or multiple obstacles to study due to external commitments such as parenting and caring obligations (Christie et al., 2005) and the need to work alongside studying (Ang et al., 2019).

Research has shown that for many disadvantaged and ethnic minority students, the traditional notion of leaving home to go to university is not a reality (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Hubble et al., 2020). In 2018/2019 'commuter students', those who live at home and commute to university, accounted for 37% of full-time students in the United Kingdom (Hubble et al., 2020). Geographical location and social mobility are correlated as graduation from particular institutions is regarded more favourably by potential employers, thus those who do not leave home may be disadvantaged further (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Montacute & Cullinane, 2023). As mature learners are more likely to be commuter students, regional inequalities in HE will have a greater impact on this group (Office for Students, 2021). With fees and fears of debt the most cited reasons why people in the United Kingdom are deterred from studying at university (Skinner et al., 2023), the UK HE landscape represents a paradox where the ability to widen access is stifled by significant financial barriers.

University entry is determined by prior attainment with more prestigious institutions setting higher requirements; however, social and educational inequalities result in disproportionate representation in HE (Woodward, 2020). Capable students theoretically have access to any institution, yet the hierarchical nature of institutions in the UK coupled with intense competition for places means that students from lower SES groups are effectively funnelled into 'diluted' versions of university, those which are less focused on the 'knowledge economy' and more 'tied to a learning society' (Archer, 2007, p. 639; Gazeley & Aynsley, 2012). Such stratification does little to support meaningful social mobility; rather, it simply mirrors deeply embedded class-based hierarchy in society more broadly (Tight, 2012). It is argued that narratives which ignore class when considering access to university also ignore the important disparities in the experience of HE for students from diverse backgrounds (Reay et al., 2009, 2010). Office for Students (2018) identifies significant disparities in outcomes for students from widening participation backgrounds both during and after study, suggesting that HE cannot entirely mitigate entrenched social inequalities (MacFarlane, 2018; Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019; Tight, 2012). Thus, while widening access plans may increase the number

of lower-income students having the opportunity to study at university, there is significant work to be done to ensure equality of outcome throughout their course.

Social mobility and the move to teaching

Numbers of working-class academics are increasing (Rickett & Morris, 2020; Wakeling & Savage, 2015); however, their experiences are most frequently cited anecdotally and to highlight persistent class prejudice in academia (Crew, 2021; McKenzie, 2015; Warnock, 2016). While Gofen describes FGS as 'the realization of social mobility' (Gofen, 2009, p. 104), it would be naïve to suggest that successful working-class students simply become confident, middle-class graduates. Deep-rooted inequalities in academia result in 'impostor syndrome' for those who do not conform to dominant constructions of academics as white, male and middle-class (Blyth et al., 2018; Burnell Reilly, 2024; Warnock, 2016). Thus, feelings of 'unbelonging' can be characteristic of the careers of working-class academics (Archer, 2008; Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2021; Rickett & Morris, 2020) and can lead to exploitation and overwork as academics try to assuage 'survivor guilt' (Warnock, 2016). Class-based microaggressions, stereotypes and the devaluation of work done by perceived 'outsiders' remain prevalent, and more so for women or people of colour who are doubly disadvantaged (Crew, 2021; McKenzie, 2015; Warnock, 2016).

The persistence of 'unbelonging' suggests that even the most academically successful working-class students are not entirely assimilated into established university culture (Crew, 2021). Furthermore, it underlines the complexity inherent in class or race assimilation which can sometimes leave a legacy of 'unbelonging' in both the old and the new life. Forsyth et al. (2022) describe the need for 'shape-shifting' in order to fit into both spaces. As Lubrano writes, 'I now live a middle-class life...but I was born blue-collar' (2004, p. 1) describing himself as a 'straddler' (2), living between two worlds while simultaneously alienated from both.

Some scholars have suggested that working-class academics take a different approach to their teaching compared to middle-class contemporaries (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2021; Rickett & Morris, 2020). This might include using assessment forms beyond traditional essays or exams and incorporating co-creation into modules to foster inclusion (Crew, 2021). In some cases, academics undertook significant emotional labour to support students alongside teaching course content (Rickett & Morris, 2020). These strategies can positively impact learning and student support in multiple ways. For example, such staff may enable students to retain a connection to the familiar while transitioning into a new environment (Shukie 2020 cited in Crew, 2021). They may represent the successful amalgamation of identities (whether this is the lived reality or not) which could serve to moderate the pain associated with giving up an established identity. They may exemplify social mobility and the erosion of cultural limitations, and they may facilitate a less intimidating atmosphere for those who feel they do not belong (Ferguson, 2019). A more nuanced and in-depth examination of the ways in which class identity influences teaching practice is necessary to understand how this might be operationalised to promote inclusivity and contribute to the under-explored areas in the literature. Therefore, this article explores the impact of FGS experiences and support structures on subsequent pedagogical practices in HE.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In HE, access to institutional knowledge can shape how university is experienced but this is not available to all students equally. This study utilises Bourdieu's concept of social capital (Bourdieu, 2010), that is access to resources and relationships which facilitate shared identity

and belonging in a specific environment. We use social capital to examine the experiences of academics who were FGS students and to consider what constituted critical factors in their success. While Bourdieu is focused on the importance of social capital structurally, this work seeks to understand how it is experienced by individuals. This research explores how participants reflect on and interpret their relationships, recognise support and construct meanings around belonging and disadvantage within the university context. Rather than treat social capital as a fixed asset that individuals have or do not have, we were interested in how individuals perceive their access to social capital as they become more embedded and experienced in a field.

This aligns with qualitative methods which take a constructivist epistemological approach and value individual experience, perception and understanding as being productive of knowledge. Rather than aiming to uncover 'fixed' objective truths, this research is underpinned by an ontological standpoint that considers reality to be subjective and context-bound. Thus, it was important to allow participants to 'talk about the subject within their own frames of reference' (May, 2001, p. 124) to discern how participants interpret their experiences in order to make meaning from them. This process identified how underlying discourses affected the perception of choices available to a respondent (Mason, 2011) within the influence of institutional power and implicit regulations and constraints which impinge upon an individual. Questions were designed to enable participants to retain control over what and how much they shared, and to allow participants to use their own words to construct their narrative (Tuckman & Harper, 2012).

The study was designed to meet the following research aims:

- a. To explore the experiences of first-generation students who go on to become university teaching staff
- b. To examine the process of 'finding one's place' and the factors that support students to do this successfully
- c. To make recommendations as to future strategies to support first-generation students to develop a sense of belonging at university

Setting and participants

Eligibility for participation in this research was twofold; (i) participants were teaching staff currently working at a UK HE institution and (ii) that they had been an undergraduate FGS. First-generation status offered an umbrella which would include participants who had encountered different or multiple barriers to HE. This was preferable to terminology such as 'working-class' as this would exclude those who do not self-identify as such and which is often understood as synonymous with financial status. Class is contested and subjective for individuals (Elley, 2011) and classed identity can be sensitive, particularly in academia (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2021).

Fourteen individuals (five male and nine female), who all identified as white, participated in the study. Eight participants spoke about being mature students, five participants were parents when they attended university and one participant had been an international student. Five of the eleven respondents who left school after 1980 had been eligible for free school meals. All participants had completed first degrees in 'post-1992' universities, that is, UK polytechnics which received university status in 1992. Current institution of employment was not collected. Responses for their year of graduation covered the period of 1991 to 2020. Year of graduation was an important variable for this work given the attention to widening participation which may have benefitted participants who had graduated most recently. Given the high proportion of participants who had been mature students, year of graduation is not indicative of participant age.

Data collection

This study received ethical approval from the University Ethics Review Board (reference number 014118). Data were collected using a qualitative online survey, the link to which was circulated via email/Microsoft Teams to teaching staff at the authors' institution and through wider networks. This method allowed participants to complete the survey voluntarily, privately and in their own time. It also safeguarded the anonymity of those taking part and removed any discomfort they might face in sharing personal information face-to-face in an interview or focus group. This was important as some participants were likely to be colleagues. At the start of the survey, participants were provided with an information sheet and gave informed consent before being able to access the questions. Demographic data were collected for gender identity, ethnic identity, disability status, eligibility for free school meals in childhood, year of graduation and number of years teaching in HE. A further fifteen broad, open questions explored the participants' experiences as an undergraduate and as a lecturer in HE, including the support they received as students and the impact of student experiences on subsequent teaching practices. All participants answered all questions, albeit with varying degrees of detail.

While the data presented here represent a small sample, the study was exploratory in nature and subject to time constraints. While data saturation had not been reached, it was felt that the data were rich and key insights had been gathered. This leaves scope for further, larger scale work in this area.

Data analysis

Data were subject to thematic analysis in line with the framework set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) and following the philosophy that themes are actively constructed by researchers' engagement and interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Both authors graduated from post-1992 universities. Williams was a FGS while Gambles was not, and both frames of reference have informed the analysis. Encompassing both perspectives worked to improve reflexive awareness and enhance the depth of interpretation.

Both authors familiarised themselves with the raw data by reading responses multiple times in order to gain broad understandings of participant perspectives. Coding followed an inductive approach and was iterative, involving multiple passes through the data and continuous review and adjustment to ensure codes reflected the data. Initial coding was conducted by authors independently before being refined and organised collaboratively. Codes were then collated into preliminary themes and agreed by both researchers to support inter-coder reliability and subsequent credibility of findings (Miles et al., 2014).

Both authors worked together to generate and name three broad themes, revisiting the data several times to ensure themes encapsulated key insights. These form the basis of this article's findings—(i) forging a new path, (ii) institutional support and (iii) transformational futures. Representative quotes are utilised to increase transparency of analysis and provide evidence for author interpretations.

Limitations

While the data presented here offers insight, there are limitations. The small sample size means that findings should not be considered generalisable though they may still inform future research in this area. The use of an online survey, while convenient, did not allow for follow

up opportunities as non-anonymous data collection tools do; therefore, potentially interesting but unanticipated insights could not be explored further. Engagement with the survey was also varied, with some very sparse responses and some much more detailed and in depth.

RESULTS

Quotes presented in this section are appended with participant gender and year of graduation for context.

Flying solo: Forging a different path

As FGS, many participants had been parents and/or mature students, which influenced their motivations for studying.

I was a young mother who felt at a dead end in regard to employment so I decided to go back into education, so me and my child could have a better life
(female, 2020)

I was pregnant and wanted to make sure that I had the skillset to move into a career focused role that would give me stability...
(female, 2016a)

This meant starting their degree programme from a very different place in life to the 'typical students' in their cohort.

I worked 21 hours and was a single parent of two children so I wasn't really there to be messing around
(female, 2004)

I was a little older than my peers. I determined that I was there to study so I sometimes felt a little out of sync with most students for whom social life was more, or equally important to studying
(female, 2006)

For some, university attendance was 'high stakes' and was envisaged as a solution to adverse life circumstances.

...it was a big gamble to give up a job and go to university, when I had so many responsibilities
(male, 2002a)

It was my ticket out of my old life. I had moved into an endangered women's hostel to get away from my family.... University gave me three years of financial independence, a home, and a voice to explore the inequalities I had faced
(female, 2016b)

Participants reported varying levels of support from partners or family members, often related to a lack of understanding.

My partner was supportive. My parents did not really understand what I was doing

(male, 2007)

They supported it but didn't really understand 'what' I was studying

(male, 2002b)

Not really, no one really got what I was doing. I was very much flying solo

(female, 2004)

This reinforced the feeling of deviating from an established path.

They could not understand why I did not just get a job and work my way up the ladder. The majority of my family left education after school and worked in factory jobs

(female, 2020)

My husband did not want me educated

(female, 2007)

Participants described complex, often simultaneous feelings of blending in and standing out at university. Blending in was not the same as feeling a sense of belonging, however, and feeling fraudulent or an imposter was mentioned frequently.

Totally blended but felt like a fraud. Felt like I didn't deserve to be there

(female, 1991)

I was unsure what to expect and being a mature student, I initially felt like an imposter. I cried for the first 2 weeks thinking leaving my job to return to full time study was a huge mistake

(female, 2007)

Feelings of 'unbelonging' were sometimes connected to class or circumstance differences.

I felt like I stood out amongst some of the real 'true' middle-class. I remember in a seminar we had to say what we had done over Easter. I said I went to Blackpool to get drunk, and a middle-class student (very modestly, to be fair) said she climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with her mother! What a contrast! I also never knew about gap years abroad and gaining experience, none of that was offered in my schools—so I felt left out of that experience

(male, 2002b)

I suppose I blended in a sense, but I was pregnant in my second year with my second child and I did feel like a sore thumb then

(female, 2020)

This theme considers motivations for starting out at university and some of the challenges of fitting in. The next theme outlines the factors that helped participants persevere with their studies.

Institutional support

The support provided by an institution to help FGS is an important factor in their experience of university. Participants in this study described teaching staff as their main source of support.

...academic staff was incredibly supportive in general
(female, 2006)

I always went to the same few lecturers if I needed anything as I knew they cared and would listen
(female, 2016b)

I also used to go to lecturers direct and ask for 1-2-1 chats and they all would happily give me that time
(female, 2020)

For some of the respondents, these supportive relationships with lecturers were crucial for sticking with their studies.

I was provided a great amount of pastoral support ...by my Programme Leader that truly saw me through to the completion of my degree. That is something that is stuck with me...
(female, 2017)

I did receive support from lecturers who encouraged me to remain
(female, 2007)

For others, this represented a first time of being encouraged and believed in.

It was not until I studied at the [University] that I had continuous support from staff members who really believed in my ability to achieve. This was extremely influential for me and I believe this helped me to achieve
(female, 2018)

When participants reported engaging with a personal tutor or counselling service, this was generally described positively although most respondents had not accessed this service.

I did [see a personal tutor] regularly and found this very helpful as it gave me a safe space to talk with someone about the difficulties I was having
(female 2016a)

There was additional academic support available but I didn't use this. I don't think I made myself familiar enough with the available sources and often this would leave me struggling
(female, 2018)

For some participants, student life was synonymous with socialising which helped them develop a sense of belonging. In this way, accommodation, campus facilities and the Student Union constituted parts of the institution which fostered connection.

Student life was exactly what I expected, 3 days in University, a great social/night life, living on campus and feeling a part of a community

(female, 2017)

Yet for those who had additional responsibilities, there were barriers to participating in the social side of HE, leaving them at a disadvantage.

I didn't feel like Freshers' week and the clubs and societies had scope to accommodate the realities of being a student parent. Timings were difficult to manage due to childcare and after the first few weeks of trying it just felt like wasted effort as I wasn't able to really get involved with the clubs and bond with others within them

(female, 2016)

Those around me it seemed like they had the typical student life of going out drinking... but for me it was, go to university, pick up my baby and go home and study

(female, 2020)

In examining the institutional sources of support, this theme highlights barriers to access and the significant effect of positive support for FGS from academic staff. Thus, while institutions often focus on social activities to build belonging and make friends, these do not work for all students, particularly those with family responsibilities.

Transformational futures

The reality of university far exceeded most respondents' original expectations. Initial pragmatic motivations for improved career prospects and financial security had led to unanticipated freedoms and opportunities for development across personal and professional domains. For the majority of respondents, university was considered a transformative experience.

I believe university completely changed me in many ways... I transformed as a person...It helped me to grasp a wider view of the world, systems, people, cultures and I became more open minded because of this

(female, 2018)

OMG transformative! Changed my whole life!

(female, 1991)

For some participants, this development was profound and continued after graduation.

University gave me so much confidence. I had always doubted my abilities before then, I did not suspect dyslexia at that moment in my life so I had a lot of doubts regarding intelligence as a direct result of school. Having graduated I had the confidence to develop and grow, which I struggled with prior to university

(male, 2002a)

It changed my life. It is why I am now an academic

(female, 2006)

...honestly life changing

(female, 2016b)

Beyond learning course content, for some HE facilitated the processes of 'finding oneself' or of personal betterment as they gained in confidence and developed positive traits and skills which they valued.

Hugely changed me... I found myself in my early stages. I made friends from around the world, and some best friends for life

(male, 2002b)

I became more aware of my personal experiences and what I was living

(female, 2007)

University definitely morphed my confidence, and provided me with skills and abilities to network, communicate academically, and be able to promote myself

(female, 2017)

The routes for respondents moving from student to academia were not all linear or planned.

It [teaching] was never the plan!

(female, 2016b)

Teaching was never in my plan...Teaching came to me accidentally but I am pleased it did

(female, 2018)

For some, future careers were directly linked to the positive and inspirational examples set by lecturers who had taught them. Participants who viewed themselves as transformed by university, expressed the desire to support the transformation of their own students.

I just loved watching certain members of staff teach—and seeing the students in amazement. I knew I wanted to help others but did not know how, so I spoke to a member of staff, and they mentioned teaching and it clicked

(female, 2020)

Because I was lucky to have very supportive tutors during my undergraduate studies, I aspire to be like them. I aspire to care and to retain a sense of empathy with students despite the everyday pressures in our field

(female, 2006)

Negative experiences as a student also informed how participants behaved towards their own students.

I had failed an assignment due to issues that would now be associated with dyslexia, the tutor told me she was going to check with other lecturers to see if they believed I was intelligent enough to complete the resubmission...as a result of this I ensure that I do not make students feel the way I did on that day

(male, 2002a)

[as a student] I was afraid to ask for help and guidance. I didn't feel worthy so tried to stay under the radar. In my time as an academic I tried to address common issues/misconceptions, so a student didn't have to ask the question
(female, 1991)

Participants used their own experience as FGS to guide their support for students, understanding the challenges of HE but also the benefits.

I get it much more, as I have probably been through it all myself...I always like to lend a listening ear—I know what many are going through, I have been in their shoes
(male, 2002b)

I would say my student experience is the first thing on my mind when I consider student situations
(male, 2007)

Participants described using their experience as FGS to guide their support for students, drawing on their identity and lived experiences to be relatable, and to embody positive examples of the transformational effect of HE. This was supported by participants' reflections on the feedback they have received from students on their academic and pastoral support.

I can relate my story of being a working class academic, of working part time and raising two children on my own—to show that it can be done, you do belong here and that your university experience is what you make it... I think I am an example of someone from a non-traditional academic background who has been through what they are, I believe this goes a long way in developing a rapport with students
(female, 2004)

I have always been very candid with students about my background in terms of being a previous [subject] student at the University and the first in my family to attend University. Being open about the challenges I experienced as a student parent seems to have created a relational connection with students who often come to me to discuss their difficulties as they feel I can relate
(female, 2016a)

Participants shared a variety of pedagogical strategies used to develop an inclusive classroom culture.

I aim to make the teaching materials and information accessible for students of all abilities and I always aim to provide extra support where needed. I try to remove barriers from teaching and learning to ensure that students are getting the most from their experience
(female, 2018)

I think having access to resources and materials well in advance of lectures is something I ensure as I know that gave me confidence to learn if I was prepared ahead of seminars. Also, making myself available for questions and to address concerns is a key part of my role
(female, 2007)

This was supported by participants' reflections on the feedback they have received from students on their academic and pastoral support.

I particularly get positive feedback from students from similar backgrounds to mine, one student told me at the beginning of the year that she would not be 'here' (uni) without the support she received from me

(male, 2002a)

This theme demonstrates the perception of university as transformational and the ongoing positive influences for these participants including how their experiences have informed their pedagogical strategies. It is perhaps unsurprising that those who felt transformed by university would want to 'stay in that space' and use their experiences and skills to support others.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented here offer an insight into the perspectives of FGS who become academics. There was a strong sense of participants forging a new path, one which deviated from the established routes expected and understood by family. Previous research suggests that family support plays a significant part in the continuation of FGS (Clayton et al., 2009; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Moore et al., 2013) particularly in the development of resilience (Cotton et al., 2017; Wong, 2018). In line with work by O'Shea et al. (2024), support from family was not a unifying trait of participants in this research as they recounted varying degrees of familial encouragement. For some, a sense of parental pride in the achievements of the student being first in the family to go to university was offset by a lack of understanding of the realities of university life, the subject or what benefit it would bring. This positions some students in a liminal space, feeling they have changed their worldview and outgrown the social capital provided by their family background but they do not truly belong in the new environment as they have yet to accumulate the social capital required for this new field (Bourdieu, 2010; Lubrano, 2004). It is worth noting that in the literature, support from family is most often centred on parental influence (Moore et al., 2013) yet for mature students in this research, a significant source of support and encouragement was a partner or their own children. Children were also motivation, and the desire to improve their lives and provide a good example was powerful (O'Shea et al., 2024).

The majority of FGS in this study were parents or mature students, groups that face a number of barriers to participation in HE. Mature students are more likely to be individuals with families or caring responsibilities or with significant external commitments alongside university (Ang et al., 2019; Christie, 2007; Christie et al., 2005; Hubble & Bolton, 2021; Smith, 2018) and in this research were particularly likely to feel disconnected from others who were living the typical student social life. For mature students, university study came steeped in responsibility and, to a certain extent, sacrifice. Participants described leaving secure employment in order to study, attending night classes to be eligible to apply for a degree, accruing debt or being financially dependent and/or being away from their children. This finding was also reported by Burnell Reilly (2024) who highlighted the requirement for motivation and strength of character for working-class academics to overcome difficulties and reach their position. This imbues the pursuit of HE with 'risk' which works to change how it is experienced. Thus, mature students were disinclined to 'mess around' which left them 'out of sync' with other members of the cohort, creating an additional barrier to fitting in. The disparity in academic effort between working-class students and the more laidback,

privileged students has previously been highlighted by Reay et al. (2009) and this was evidenced here, particularly for mature students for whom HE was high stakes.

Family support was not guaranteed for the participants here, thus academic staff were a significant factor in the perseverance of students. Institutional support for FGS was discussed in the findings but was less important to most of the participants. While there is evidence to suggest that FGS benefit from enhanced support from a personal tutor (Du Plessis & Benecke, 2011), the majority of participants had not had support from a personal academic tutor, even those who had graduated within the last decade. While there is currently an increased research focus on the provision of pastoral support (Wakelin, 2021), this does not appear to translate into the majority of lived experiences. FGS face particular challenges when integrating into HE that require bespoke intervention. This demonstrates the need for staff to get to know students, to ask what works for them and provide individualised and person-centred support. Further research in this area would be enhanced by the collection of wider demographic information on FGS academics which could be used to create intersectional perspectives and understand the sources of support and barriers to HE faced by different marginalised groups to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. This could be supported with students' socio-economic status being included within the equality, diversity and inclusion data monitoring by universities.

Despite the lack of personal tutor provision, academic staff were a significant source of support for the participants during their time at university (Moore et al., 2013). This suggests that the approach of tutors is key for the retention of students who may see academics more regularly than a personal tutor. Being a FGS gave participants an insight into the issues faced by new students and, having been through some of these issues themselves, gave staff greater confidence to support their students. While FGS heritage may be seen as creating a pedagogical advantage (Crew, 2021), this is indicative of the additional emotional labour often performed by working-class academics (Bechard & Gragg, 2020; Rickett & Morris, 2020).

Previous research suggests that the development of a sense of belonging is crucial for new students (Russell & Jarvis, 2019) and the inability to successfully transition and feel 'at home' is a key factor in student attrition (Clayton et al., 2009). Transition into university was not always easy for the participants as many struggled not knowing how things worked or became keenly aware of cultural disparities between themselves and others which impacted their assimilation. Accordingly, Bourdieu (2010) argued that transition into a new field can be hampered by an individual's habitus—the internalised boundary which denotes the familiar, comfortable and appropriate—and requires the accrual and operationalisation of particular social and cultural capital. Such capital may not always be available to those from non-traditional backgrounds and FGS may be disadvantaged by a misunderstanding of the social norms of the new field (Gevertz, 2014) or a lack of social connections (O'Shea, 2016; Todman, 2020). Although in these instances, educational institutions become important sites for the transmission of such knowledge, some researchers have warned about the dangers of prioritising knowledge of the privileged culture/attributing only certain types of knowledge with legitimacy and instead advocate for greater inclusivity (Mansell, 2019; O'Shea, 2016; Todman, 2020).

Some participants spoke of doubts from lecturers, teachers/educators or themselves about their intelligence and capabilities, and researchers have highlighted how a sense of 'unbelonging' and feelings of being a fraud may be linked to past negative experiences at school (Burnell Reilly, 2024; Hewartson & Tissa, 2022). It has been proposed that access to academic FGS role models via social networks and in educational institutions may improve student outcomes and reduce feelings of 'unbelonging' and imposterism among FGS (Baars et al., 2016; Burnell Reilly, 2024; Crew, 2021; Laiduc et al., 2021; Lee & Maynard, 2017). Indeed, many of the study participants share details of their FGS heritage

with their students, with the intention of breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of belonging.

For the majority of participants, university was an eye-opening experience, offering space for transformation and creating possibilities rather than limitations. In Brook and Michell (2012) working-class students recognised the potential for transformation at university more readily than those from more privileged backgrounds, seeing HE as a route into a more middle-class existence. Yet, in this work, participants primarily described their development on a personal level, citing the empowerment and confidence that come with education, the changed worldview and the ability to effect change. Similarly, in Burnell Reilly's (2024) auto-ethnographical recounts from FGS academics, reference is made to their significant distinctive ('unique and profound') experiences. These transformations extended far beyond 'riding the class elevator' (Brook & Michell, 2012, 595) as some participants disclosed profound experiences of freedom and empowerment through education, and a process of becoming the kind of person they aspired to be. While it would be naïve to say that university study did not result in any social mobility, no participant in this research described changing class identity or increased socio-economic status as a benefit of HE, suggesting that even when this was a primary motivation, ultimately it was not the most important outcome of studying for a degree. Rather, these students have become tutors that work to transform the landscape of HE from the inside—removing barriers, defying stigma and challenging the notion that university is the preserve of the middle classes.

HE was deemed transformative for the participants and their experience as FGS was felt to have positively impacted on the support they were able to offer as tutors (Lee & Maynard, 2017). The presence of FGS academics and their unique perspective was felt to make university more accessible to widening participation students, more inclusive of diverse groups and in some ways, a more caring and person-centred environment. While participants in Forsyth et al. (2022) constructed a deficit model, in one case likening FGS status to having a disability, the FGS academics represented here drew on their own success stories to perpetuate a more positive and enabling discourse. Participants in this research were often motivated to teach due to their own experiences as students and this affected both their pedagogical practice and their pastoral care of students. In congruence with research presented by Crew (2021), Ferguson (2019) and Lee and Maynard (2017), staff felt their own background was reflected in their ability to be relatable to students, to 'speak normally' and to be approachable. This was felt to be crucial in building rapport and providing a route to acquire the necessary social capital for success in HE. Difficult experiences as students were recognised as important in knowing what not to do and helped participants develop more inclusive and accessible education. For some, their background could be used to provide encouragement for their students and be a visible example of success (Crew, 2021; Ferguson, 2019), providing a unique perspective to teaching and learning (Brook & Michell, 2012; Rickett & Morris, 2020). Participants in Forsyth et al. shared a commitment to inclusive practice for FGS but 'seemed unable to visualise their own place in actions to make it happen' (2022: unpaginated). The participants here did the opposite, expressing individual responsibility for the success of their FGS and taking pride in their ability to transform students' lives the way their own lives had been transformed. While this is undoubtedly positive, the assimilation of FGS into university should not be reliant solely on the additional labour provided by academics with similar lived experience.

Some commentators note that being working-class, female and an academic is still a troubled identity and that academia remains a site of class-based discrimination for teaching staff from non-traditional backgrounds (McKenzie, 2015). While participants in this research were not asked explicitly about their class identity, four responses identified the participant as working-class. This was viewed positively and there were no references in any of the responses to class-based prejudice. The importance of feeling included in their degree

programme and having strong relationships between FGS and faculty staff were credited as important features for mature students' sense of belonging particularly (Crawford et al., 2022; Gill, 2021). Teaching staff could play a role by taking an approach to taught classes which foregrounds social interaction and group work. This is particularly important for students who may be excluded from social activities such as mature students or those with children/ family commitments.

CONCLUSION

Social mobility is often cited as a positive outcome for widening participation of students, but this was not important for the participants in this research. The findings show that, while students, participants recognised that being FGS made them different from others and they bring this awareness to their work with students now. While many participants were transformed in powerful ways by studying at university, many endeavoured to hold on to their cultural identity and subsequently worked mindfully to make things better for future students from similar backgrounds. The benefits that this experience brought to their teaching and pastoral support were strongly felt and reflected in student feedback. While university was experienced as life-changing, this did not mean a wholehearted subscription to the inherently middle-class norms prevalent in higher education—rather it provided an opportunity to contest this and strive to create a more inclusive space. This can only be positive in fostering that sense of belonging for future widening participation students.

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I confirm that the research presented in this article was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethical issues and in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

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No potential conflict of interest was identified by the authors.

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AI tools were not used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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