THE DYNAMICS OF GENDER, ETHNICITY AND SPACE: CONSTRUCTING MEANING AND IDENTITY IN STUDENT TRANSITION.

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The HEA funded research by Yorke and Longden (2008), explored first year undergraduate student experiences of HE, with data collection after 6 months at university. Outlining the importance of 'bending the odds' to ensure student success and the importance of perceived 'value for money' it set the scene for the subsequent HEFCE funded student retention and success report (Thomas, 2012). This body of work emphasised the importance of students experiencing a 'sense of belonging' during their time at university. The importance of identity 'as a student' was reported by Briggs et al. (2012) in relation to the transition to university, and studies on student 'drop-out' (cf Bennet & Kane 2010) clearly pinpoint the first six weeks as the critical period for students at risk.

Drawing upon three biographic life histories of students attending London based Universities; this paper will present a cross-case analysis that draws out emergent themes of transition. The research is part of a mixed methods approach that sought to understand the factors affecting student sense of belonging in three different London HEIs. Seeking to inform approaches to recruitment and retention, our earlier research (Shoderu et al. 2012, Holley et al forthcoming 2014) identified overarching similarities in sense of belonging measures across all three institutions potentially masking important variations that can contribute to a better understanding students experiences of transition in the crucial first weeks of University study.

The work presented here focuses on the biographic life history interviews from three students and provides a rich picture of the influence of individual social context. The approach to interviewing and analysis draws on Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (Wengraf, 2001) through which we sought to construct a narrative in which the present perspective of a situated subjectivity are understood in relation to their past perspectives on past situations. It provides insights into differences and similarities across the individual student's sense of belonging constructing a more nuanced perspective.

Our cross-case analysis found the dynamics of gender, ethnicity and space to be significant, and we offers insights into the complexities of 'being and becoming' that our students narrate in moving between their home/University transitions and adopting a student identity. How these key themes play out in the lives of our interviewees can inform our own understanding of the literature in this area, and a way of theorising our local practices, presenting an emergent model for successful transition.