Riding the carousel: Examining the intersectionality of students' identities and student's lifeload as factors impacting their attendance and engagement behaviours.

Helen Kirby-Hawkins, Manchester Metropolitan University, h.kirby-hawkins@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Students more than ever are having to prioritise their time and finances. They are often juggling paid employment, caring responsibilities, and other commitments alongside their studies. Rising costs of living, such as household bills, rail travel and childcare for example are all playing into the decision-making of students and whether they can afford the time or money to attend.

This research surfaces dependent factors such as the student's salient identity in each situation and their present "lifeload," acknowledging these are both fluid and changeable, to offer some insight into the decision-making process. Four composite case studies are presented in this paper which highlight the key findings. The narratives depict a slightly chaotic struggle for students to accommodate university into an already complex and demanding lifeload. This combined with a powerful desire to maintain a sense of connectedness to their homes, families, and authentic selves. They acknowledge an evident distance from the student role (occupying outsider status) as they choose to enact their salient identities, which are not the student identity, in decisions pertaining to university attendance. This manifests as prioritising time-limited commitments such as collecting children from school or undertaking paid work that conflict with university timings. The findings highlight the divergence in the non-traditional student group and the practical decision-making process students employ when trying to balance their competing identities and making authentic choices aligned with their identities. The study poses questions for institutions as to whether more can be done to accommodate students in this position, acknowledging the student role may not be the default or dominant identity these individuals occupy.

Keywords: Student Engagement, Attendance, Identity, Lifeload, Non-traditional student

Introduction and Context

The shaping of student attendance behaviours to align with normative student engagement practices is at odds with the origins of academia. One which is about developing a scholarly mindset, developing criticality and students being autonomous in their thinking and decision making. University is about coming of age and celebrating their autonomy as adult learners whereby they 'have the right to manage their time as they see fit- even if it means missing class' (Feldman 2013:1). Post COVID institutions have encouraged back to campus activities based on the feedback that students value in person learning and want to be back on campus. This is partially supported by the findings of the Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves & Hewitt 2021). In this survey 57% of students said they would prefer to learn mostly in-

person; however, this still leaves 43% of the surveyed students who would prefer online or hybrid learning experiences. Also, the evidence paints a different picture, the footfall on campuses has been lower than pre-pandemic levels (William 2021) and universities are reporting student engagement and attendance is much lower than expected. The academic perspective is also interesting. Times Higher Education (Williams 2022) conducted a survey of academics which found that 76% of respondents reported seeing lower numbers of attending students. Views were divided as to whether blended learning should be scrapped in favour of an in-person, on-campus experience that was being encouraged by the government at the time. Some respondents stated attendance should be mandatory and online recordings of lectures removed, whereas others noted a blended approach had enabled students to balance university against paid employment or other commitments (Williams 2021). Williams also noted that the way students engage with university has fundamentally changed and is being compounded by a cost-of-living crisis.

This paper discusses the findings of a project which encouraged students to talk about things that had influenced their attendance and engagement at university during 2021/22 whilst constructing an identity map of things that were important to them. Through this exercise, students noted their identity was multifaceted and the student identity was one of several different identities they occupied simultaneously as part of their whole identity. They also noted certain identities were more important to them and that they deprioritized university attendance to deal with other commitments related to these other identities. All students acknowledged that balancing these competing demands was a struggle and that their engagement with university had negatively suffered due to these other commitments.

For the purposes of the paper, two key definitions are offered for identity and lifeload.

Identity is defined as an individual's sense of self as defined by a set of unique interpersonal characteristics and social roles (APA Dictionary of Psychology 2023). It is a dynamic process of categorizing the world through identification. It involves establishing and signifying relationships of similarity and difference between individuals, collectives, and individuals with collectives (Jenkins 2008). It is not a fixed entity but rather an ever-evolving entity/ collection of entities.

Lifeload refers to 'all the things happening or not happening to you in your life at the moment' (Lau 2018) and encompasses all aspects of your identity. In the context of the student engagement literature, it is the 'sum of all the pressures a student has in their life, including university' (Kahu 2013:767).

The key findings from the research are presented as composite case studies. These are also offered as audio clips to allow the characters to tell their stories These narratives discuss the sense of juggling competing demands, feeling like an outsider, the motivation to accommodate university into an already complex and demanding life load and the desire to maintain a sense of connectedness to their authentic identity.

The student engagement literature routinely accepts the long-established three-dimensional view of student engagement as affective-emotional, cognitive, and behavioural (Fredrick, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004). When speaking about in-classroom student engagement, Reeve & Tseng (2011) introduce agentic engagement as a fourth dimension to redress a gap which they assert accounts for contribution of students to the instruction they receive. This agentic engagement is an appropriate and relevant consideration for the practical decision-making process (Clay & Breslow

2006) students employ when choosing how to engage with university. It is also respectful of the complexity and contextual nature of engagement which O'Sullivan et.al. (2015:23) highlights noting the selective and fluid individual nature of attendance. Research has indicated there are many individual factors and motivators that influence a students' desire to attend, and these differing factors manifest themselves as reasons cited for missing classes (Longhurst 1999, Kottasz 2005, Krause 2005, Arulampalam 2012, Sloan, Manns, Mellor & Jeffries 2020).

Menendez Alvarez-Hevia Lord & Naylor (2021) note the complexity of the lived realities of students' personal lives, discussing the tension and dilemmas students face when navigating their multiple identities. They define the conflictual relationship between the demands of the identity of the students as learners and their other life commitments as 'the student life-attendance clash;' whereby students try to balance their university attendance with their other activities. Absenteeism is in many cases the materialisation of the struggle of some students to find a balance between personal life and university life (Menendez Alvarez-Hevia, D., Lord, J. &Naylor (2021).

Previous research has acknowledged the multi-faceted nature and complexity of student identities (Collier 2000, Kasworm 2010, Patfield et al 2020, Sykes 2021 and Menendez Alvarez-Hevia Lord & Naylor 2021) and that the practical decision-making process students employ is highly individualised (Clay & Breslow 2006). Within the literature it is accepted there is intersectionality between multiple identities amongst students and scholars argue the labels universities use for students are reductive and do not serve to represent them in a meaningful way that captures the complexity and richness of students' lives (McCall 2005, Nguyen &Nguyen 2018, Sykes 2021, and MacDonald 2021). Universities are reliant on normative behavioural markers to mitigate against non-progression and non-completion. This is problematic as it contributes to a culture of presenteeism in Higher Education coined as machine behaviourism (Knox et al 2020) which shapes learner behaviours rather than allowing for student autonomy and authentic engagement. Factors which impact students' ability to align with these normative measures present as reasons for absence. This is indicative of the multiple identities a student occupies and which identity was salient when the decision to not attend was taken. How these reasons manifest themselves is based on situational cues (Lund Dean & Jolley 2012:237); which inform the practical decision-making process (Clay & Breslow 2006) a student completes in these situations.

One theory that may explain this process is social identity theory and based on an identity's prominence and salience will decide whether the behaviours associated with that identity are enacted in any given situation. Whilst identity and engagement are discussed in the literature, no explicit link is drawn between student identities and place identity and the impact these two factors have on student engagement behaviours.

Literature Review

This article aims to provide the reader with a working understanding of the intersectionality of students' various social roles and the salience of these roles as factors that directly influence students' engagement behaviours. This is based on the findings from the research conducted. To complement this, relevant theoretical perspectives and literature are introduced and examined below, considerate of that aim.

Identity

Firstly, we turn to examine the concept of identity from a theoretical standpoint. Identity is a multidimensional and ever-evolving aspect of human capacity that allows individuals to ascribe meaning to things that matter using symbols or ritual experiences. It is an understanding of oneself and others, synthesizing relationships. Symbolic interactionism, as coined by Blumer (2012) and influenced by Mead's (Mead, G.H. & Schubert, C., 1934) philosophy, serves as a framework for studying the identification process. It emphasizes that people act towards things based on the meanings they attribute to them. The self exists in reciprocal relationships with others, giving meaning to both the self and the other. Stryker (1980) further supports this perspective, stating that our knowledge of who we are comes through interaction with others. Individual identities and differences are constructed to a significant extent out of collective identities and membership in social groups (Jenkins, 2008).

A person's social identity is their sense of who they are based on their membership of social groups. A social group is defined as 'a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category' (Stets & Burke 2000:225). Social Identity Theory (SIT) is predicated on roles-behavioural expectations associated with a certain position. Tajfel (1979) explains that individuals undergo a cognitive process of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison to gain membership in social groups. Inclusion in one group implies exclusion from another, establishing an "us versus them" dynamic. The salience of an identity, or the likelihood of it being invoked in various situations, plays a crucial role in this process (Stryker, 1980). Stets & Burke (2000) note that social categories precede individuals, individuals join pre-structured societies and derive their sense of self from the categories to which they belong. They go on to acknowledge that 'each person is a member of a unique combination of social categories; therefore, the set of social identities making up that person is unique' (2000:225) and weighted importance of those identities is also unique, consequently it is extremely difficult to surface the unique combinations that make up people's selves. Acknowledging there are multiple identities that can be selected in any given situation, identity theory addresses the issue of behavioural choices when multiple reasonable options are presented. Two concepts, prominence, and salience are used to explain how the combination of identities within the self influences the enactment of a particular identity in each situation (Brenner et al., 2014). Prominence refers to the ideal self and its subjective sense of worth, while salience is the behavioural enactment of an identity. While prominence may affect salience, the relationship is not

always universal, and salience can also impact prominence. The more prominent and salient an identity becomes, the more likely it is to be enacted (Brenner et al., 2014).

Examining the importance of identity salience and prominence, Laverie and Arnett (2000) found that as individuals become more attached to a particular identity, such as being a sports fan, they seek on to engage in more behaviours when they can enact that identity such as attending games, wearing team clothing and joining social groups with other fans. This connection suggests that the salience and prominence of an identity influence its enactment in various contexts.

Cognizant of Stets & Burke's (2000) remarks about the unique composition of an individual as a multiplicity of discrete identities, which will have varying importance and positioning in the salience hierarchy, which will be situationally affected causing certain behaviours to be enacted. These various identities may comprise of certain roles which have associated responsibilities in the infrastructure of everyday life.

Lifeload

Moving beyond the theoretical framework, the literature introduces the concept of lifeload in relation to student engagement. Lifeload refers to the cumulative pressures and responsibilities a student faces in their life, including their academic pursuits. Kahu (2013) highlights the critical role of lifeload in influencing student engagement, as it manifests in reasons for absence from university. The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the impact of external pressures and lifeload on students' engagement, as disruptions to education have become normalized (Hews et al., 2022). Students often prioritize managing their lifeload over focusing solely on their academic load, which may lead to decisions that do not align with their student identity (Hew et al., 2022).

Students are choosing how to engage with university and being strategic with their time management.

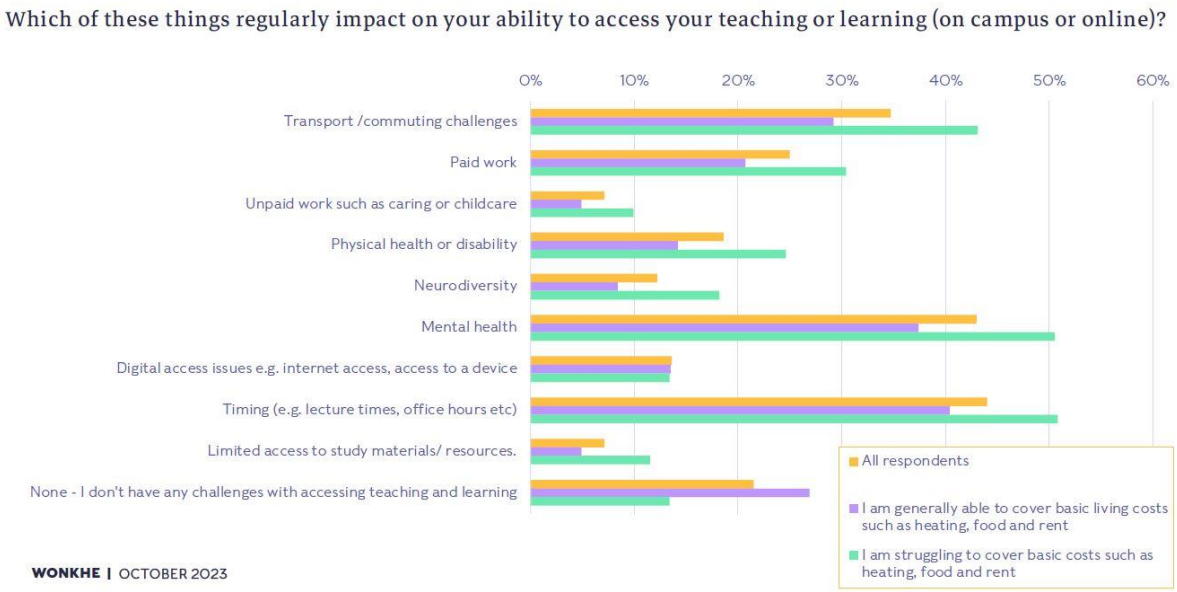

Fig 1. Cost of living and student belonging report. Wonkhe (2023)

This is, however, not a new phenomenon one that fifteen years earlier, Clay and Breslow (2006) reported. In their study they sampled undergraduate students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology about their attitudes towards attending lectures and compiled a mean importance score for several reoccurring factors which can be seen in Fig 2.

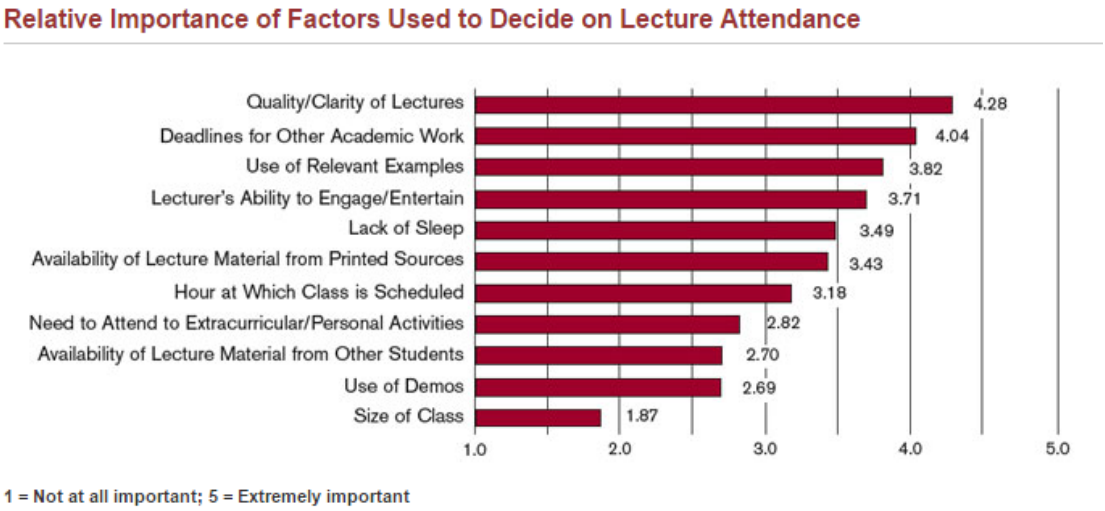

Fig 2. Clay and Breslow's (2006) Relative Importance of Factors Used to Decide on Lecture Attendance.

Both studies demonstrate that students typically use a practical decision-making process' and the score in Clay &Breslow's study represent 'the weight the students place on the numerous factors in their decision-making calculations' (Clay & Breslow 2006). This process is highly personal to the individual and is likely to differ based on cohort, year of student, age, and other responsibilities such as family or employment. These other responsibilities for students have been called their "lifeload" (Kahu 2013). Lifeload is defined as being the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life, including university; and is a critical factor influencing student engagement (Kahu 2013), one which manifests itself in reasons cited for absence from university. The pandemic has been the largest humanising shift in higher education in recent times, normalising the disruption of education for families, pets, and work commitments (Hews et al 2022). Hews et al notes the indivisible connection and reciprocal impact students' personal lives have on their university lives and how student engagement for those students experiencing significant lifeload or external pressures reduces. They also found that students in their study used asynchronous learning as a vehicle for managing lifeload and acknowledged they made decisions which were not aligned with their student identity but as to best manage that lifeload. Hews et al's (2022) concluding remarks that students seemed to prioritise lifeload over learning load, in a way that was at odds with learning, is one of the most significant findings and is something which they argue requires more research. Understanding the complex

interplay of identities within individuals is vital for comprehending the impact of lifeload and identity negotiation on students' decisions and behaviours. By recognizing the nuanced dynamics of identity and acknowledging the diverse life loads of students, institutions can better support their engagement and success.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Choice:

This was a small qualitative study conducted online via Teams recruiting participants from the Faculty of Health & Education at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) during July and August 2022. Twelve interviews were conducted.

Research Setting/Context

Participants were selected from the Faculty of Health and Education (FHE) at MMU. This faculty was chosen due to its higher representation of students from the Northwest, those in POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, as well as first-generation and mature students. Based on available demographical data, this Faculty recruits a higher proportion of students from low participation neighbourhoods compared to the sector average. Additionally, MMU draws over half of its student population from the Northwest of England, an area with some of the most deprived regions. This demographic makeup makes this favourable research setting to increase the likelihood of participants from low socioeconomic backgrounds, less socially mobile and those with multiple identities.

Data Collection Techniques and Process

Potential participants were invited via email, and those who responded and consented were offered interview slots on a first-come, first-served basis. A total of twelve interviews were conducted via Teams between July and August 2022.

Participants were asked to create an identity map using Miro, an online whiteboard tool. This method, inspired by the tactile Ketso board, allowed participants to add photographs, images, words, and phrases using virtual post-it notes. The researcher provided a demonstration, and participants were free to navigate and create their individual identity maps. The use of participant-led research and co-creation of knowledge through dialogic interaction between researcher and participant allows meaningful expression in line with the research topic. This approach breaks down barriers, situates participants as co-researchers, and enables the generation of shared multi-sensory experiences. Conducting semi-structured interviews during the creation of identity maps facilitated natural dialogue and provided opportunities for the researcher to challenge assumptions and explore new avenues of inquiry.

Data Analysis and Presentation:

The data collected comprised of twelve identity maps, sound recordings of interviews, and interview transcripts. The constant comparative method was employed to analyse

the transcripts, involving an iterative process of coding and thematic analysis. Word frequency analysis supplemented the coding process, capturing the frequency of key words and their contextual themes. The findings were presented through composite case studies, allowing for a holistic representation of participants' experiences which were then transformed into narrated stories using regional accents using Narakeet software for presentation. These composite case studies are the researchers' interpretation, and the characters are fictional, weaving together several stories into a character to protect participants anonymity and synthesise common themes together. The storytelling approach was chosen so that the audience of this research could engage with the characters directly to complement the researchers' interpretations, noting the audience may draw other conclusions which are both valid and meaningful.

Ethics:

Ethical approval was obtained from both the University of Winchester and Manchester Metropolitan University, and participants provided informed consent.

FINDINGS

Findings from twelves interviews (conducted between July 2022-August 2022) are presented below as four composite case studies below. Hyperlinks are provided for readers to listen to their stories.

Joseph: The Juggler

Listen here: Joseph

Joseph is a composite of five interviews, four of which were 2nd Year nursing students and one 1st year education student. All interviewees bar one, were commuters from within the Northwest, one interviewee commuted from further afield.

Joseph is a second-year student at MMU. Joseph doesn't live in university accommodation and travels to university from within the Northwest. His family are not in the Northwest but live in the United Kingdom. Joseph is the first in his family to go to university.

Joseph also attends a Placement as part of his course and travels to the Placement. Joseph has had a part-time job but isn't currently working as it's too much on top of everything else and 'will probably pick up some work in Manchester or back home over summer.'

Joseph has several family commitments and speaks about multiple distinct roles he must fulfil. 'I have to do the school run, run errands for my family and fit that around University.' 'Sometimes if unexpected things come up at home, I have to travel back and that's hard as I have to miss uni.'

He describes managing his competing demands in his life as 'tricky' and it feels like 'going round on a carousel.' He also states that the priorities of things that are important to him 'change throughout the year' and 'during the summer you can relax a bit and focus on family and stuff but then it's back to uni in September'.

Joseph is also an active member of his community and must make time for events, he does say that 'sometimes university gets in the way' and 'sometimes I have to explain to lecturers that I cannot attend, need to leave early or step out for a moment' for those other commitments, stating they are extremely important to him and part of who he is. He also acknowledges the conflict and when 'essays are due that just takes over and you don't have much time for anything else.'

Joseph doesn't identify as a "student" and doesn't feel he belongs at university but knows it is necessary to progress in life. Joseph speaks quite openly about the things that make him different to other students and how 'those things are the first things people notice about me' and make judgements based on that.

Joseph 'doesn't know how he manages it all' and 'it just happens.' Joseph is honest about his engagement with university and says, 'he has prioritised time with friends, his other commitments and sports practice over attending University.' He says he tries to go to seminars as they are more important and he gets more out of them, but he sometimes skips lectures as he can 'watch lectures on catch-up later' if they are at unfavourable times; adding that some of his other commitments must be done at certain times, and they are more important than going to uni for a lecture.

Joseph thinks his identity does change depending on the situation that he's in, he says 'it is obvious as the person you are on Placement or at work is not the person, you'd go on a night out with. You present different parts of yourself in different situations and that changes depending where you are'.

Olivia: The Outsider

Listen here: Olivia

Olivia is a composite of two interviews, one of which was a 2nd year student, and one was a 3rd year student who had just finished their course. Both interviewees were commuters from within the Northwest and lived in their own home whilst studying at university. One interviewee moved to the UK from Europe for FE education before attending MMU and intended to return home after completing their studies. Olivia is a final year mature student at MMU and was a student during the pandemic. Olivia lives in the Northwest but outside Manchester and commutes to university. Olivia works alongside her studies and has several hobbies that she talks about enthusiastically- 'it is just part of who I am, it's more than just a hobby, it changed me, when I do this activity, I feel different, like better.' She admits in first and second years she prioritised sports over lectures as she could fit that in later around practice and watch things online in the evenings. Olivia says that 'university was never on my cards,' and it was 'just something I needed to do to get where I wanted to be in life. It was an 'entry requirement to the career I wanted to have.' Prior to university, Olivia had a full-time job that was not fulfilling her. Olivia pursued a 'childhood dream' to go into her chosen career and researched entry routes and universities extensively before picking MMU. 'I did look around the other routes into my chosen career, but university just seemed like the most pragmatic approach to get things done.'

Olivia felt it was not too important to make friends at university as 'university is somewhere you come together for three years then you disperse and do your own thing, it's more important to maintain a connect to your home and maintain that

personal life.' Olivia also says how she enjoyed lockdown and online learning as she 'did not have to commute and bother with small talk and all that other stuff, you could just do the uni stuff around your life and focus on stuff that matters to you.'

Despite this, Olivia has two close friends, who she met through university, one is a mature student, and the other is traditional university age: 'she checks in with me and I check in with her and we help each other with the assignments, and we support each other when it comes to different things… the mature students that I was talking about, she has a habit of disappearing. So, she's in one day on the course and then you won't hear anything from her.'

Olivia has rural roots and does not see herself as a 'city girl' and acknowledges a sense of connection to place and nature. Olivia also acknowledges that her role in her family links to the geography as 'at home that's the only place I'm a daughter/ girlfriend' and that her identity is dynamic and situational. She prides herself on her geographical identity, language, and accent.

'Yeah, I've got a Northern accent and it's obvious where I'm from, but I love it- we're friendly us Northerners.'

'My family's there, my friends are there. my house is there. I, I mean, all my life is there. I mean, yeah, I've built some friendships here and don't get me wrong that's nice, but in the end I wanna go back there and help my parents out and be with them when they're old.'

Melissa: Making mum proud.

Listen here: Melissa

Melissa is a composite of four interviews, two of which were 2nd Year Education students, one final year Social Worker apprentice and one 1st year Nursing student. All interviewees bar one, were commuters from within the Northwest, one interviewee commuted from further afield.

Melissa is first-year mature student. Melissa comes from a single-parent household and lives in her own home with her partner and daughter in Manchester. Melissa did not really want to go to university and is the first in her family to do so. Melissa works in Manchester alongside her studies and volunteers. Melissa wants to make a difference and help others and has had life experiences that informed her choice of study.

'I just struggled a lot, and I got a lot of support and I guess I wanted to just give back what I got and help other people. I remember just feeling like I want to do what you do! I want to be able to tell people that it's OK to have struggled, but don't let that knock you down and stop you doing things, overcoming challenges.'

Melissa speaks about her mum wanting her to be successful and being supportive of her going back to university in later life. Melissa talks about the pressure of doing it for her mum and making her proud. She says her mum begged her to go and asked her to do it for her 'She wanted to do it, as she never did and to prove to my dad that she brought me up well.' Melissa says she did it for her mum but told her 'That's the last thing I do for you, it's my life now and that's it.'

Melissa is clear that her role as mother is her upmost priority and that becoming a parent has altered her identity significantly: ‘you know it changes your identity permanently, you know becoming a mother, there's a part of you that will always be changed by that’. She is clear that her child comes first and that irrespective of whatever she was does that will always be the case.

Melissa speaks openly about the struggle she faces managing competing demands. ‘I feel like I'm. I'm not doing anything well and I'm doing a lot of things, not so well, you know’ and references the pressure of fitting in work, family and study admitting she is just doing the best she can to get through the course. Melissa admits she did not fully appreciate the added burden studying would come with and fitting it in around everything else. Melissa openly admits she is envious of the “traditional” student lifestyle and how she’d love to only be focused on her studies and have time for fun but says the fun of being a student isn’t there for her and she feels very disconnected from the undergraduate lifestyle. She says ‘I literally go in one day a week, so you just don't have the same involvement with, with what's going on? I mean, I always read all the emails we get from the student union, and you know, it just feels like a world away to me.’ She does find comfort in that many of her peers and other mature students feel the same and that ‘you know, we're all like I think we all feel very similar that we just doing the best we can to get through the course.’ She says they have set up a WhatsApp group and chat regularly about their shared experiences which she takes comfort in.

Melissa says she tries her best to keep up with all her university work and has an extremely supportive partner who can help with household duties when she has assignments due but acknowledges her life outside university must continue and that sometimes takes priority leaving less time for study.

Beth: Blending in

Listen here: Beth

Beth is a composite of two interviews, both of which were 2nd year students. Both interviewees lived in Manchester close to university and had part-time jobs. Both moved to Manchester from elsewhere in the UK for university.

Beth is a second-year student. Beth lives in Manchester close to the university and has a part-time job in the city. Beth grew up on the outskirts of Manchester and has a large extended family, in the UK and overseas.

Beth talks about her family having strict traditional values and the girls in generations before her did not go to university but her generation seem to have progressed and ‘do more than the last’, ‘I’m lucky because my parents are pretty chill and supportive, I get to do more than my mum and my aunt, and whilst I’m technically a spinster in my culture my mum is like go get your degree and get married later and just go out and meet someone’.

Beth talks about how university has changed and how, when speaking with her uncle she felt things were different now both as a female, but the fact he studied a different discipline. ‘I was one of the first girls to go to uni, I spoke to my uncle about it, but he went to uni, uh, in a different time and studied something different to me so we, did

not like have a lot in common. He could help me with like what bus to get and what it was like when he was there but it's like not the same now.'

Beth talks about how she does wear traditional clothes but puts a modern twist on them in the UK but when she goes overseas, she conforms to the strict dress code out of respect.

'I'm not 100% traditional. I do things that you aren't supposed to do' For me it's like a spectrum and I try and like find a good balance. But then I also maintain the bits that are important to me- I have sometimes not done those things and I don't feel like me. At home Beth likes to wear cultural clothing, she says if I don't have it on, I don't feel like me, but I will wear converse with it or like a cool hoody just to have my own style.'

Beth must take regular breaks throughout the day and must step out of classes and work at specific times. She says how she speaks to lecturers and her manager and explains the importance of these breaks and most of the time they are supportive and accommodate her, but not always. Sometimes she doesn't manage to take these breaks and it affects her for the rest of the day emotionally.

Beth talks about one friend she has made that is nothing like her and how they just get along due to living in the same place. 'She's really cool, she drinks and has tattoos and piercings and she's nothing like me, everyone is like why you hang out with her and I'm just like, it works'.

Beth acknowledges that lots of communities like hers don't integrate and isolate themselves and how that isn't her experience and how she can't relate to that. 'There are different pockets of my community throughout the UK where it is just that community and no-one else. Like I can't fully integrate with them because I've never lived in an area that's just one type of people and never been to a school that's just had one type of people. So, I can't fully relate to that.' Beth also acknowledges that a lot of her ability to blend various parts together is tied up with place. 'I have always lived in a mixed community with more than just my community, I went to a mixed school, and I think a lot of it is sort of in my geographical location. That's why I'm like that. If I lived somewhere, say Bradford or something, I don't think it'd be like that at all.'

DISCUSSION

The influence of students' understanding of their identity as a student, their salient roles at the time and the hierarchy of other roles they fulfill is evident in the case studies presented.

What it means to be a student

Joseph's comments about not fitting the typical student mould align with the concept of "othering" experienced by non-traditional students, as described by Leathwood and O'Connell (2003). This is complemented by the view presented by Sykes (2021) that there exists an ideological notion of what it means to be a student, against which Joseph and Olivia compare their own experiences. Joseph refers to the aspects that make him different from others and how they are the first things people notice about him. This relates back to the ideas of social comparison and categorization discussed

by Tajfel (1979) and Jenkins (2008), recognizing that in the process of identification, the formation of in-groups and out-groups is inevitable.

Olivia, on the other hand, discusses her disengagement with her student identity, considering it a transient phase in her life. She views university as a temporary gathering place for three years, after which everyone disperses and goes their separate ways. Instead, she prioritizes her existing relationships at home, investing her time and commitment there rather than forming new friendships or relationships at university. Kasworm (2010) emphasizes the demands placed on students in fostering relationships, which can be challenging to fulfill, especially when there are competing adult-role relationships outside of the university. Olivia's comments about prioritizing her personal relationships over her university relationships reflect this perspective. She states that while she has formed some friendships at university, her goal is to return home and support her parents, particularly in their old age. This is consistent with the idea of symbolic attachment to one's place identity and a sense of belonging to home, as discussed by Chow and Healey (2008).

Being a student is a liminal experience, according to Holdsworth (2009), and not an extended period that adults are expected to conform to. Olivia's view of her time as a student being transient aligns with this perspective. Holdsworth further suggests that identifying with the student identity is compressed into a relatively brief time frame. Therefore, if engaging with the student identity does not offer an appropriate level of risk-based reward (Lund Dean & Jolly 2012), it is likely that the student identity will be deprioritized, and a more salient identity will take priority in any given situation of identity conflict. This is especially true if that identity is perceived as being more integral to one’s authentic self.

Despite the sense of "othering" described by all the case study students, there is a positive social identification towards individuals perceived to be like them. Both Olivia and Melissa talk about making friends at university, specifically gravitating towards other mature students or those with similar circumstances. This parallels Orbe's (2008) observations of first-generation students seeking out others who share their experiences to foster a sense of belonging. As attachment to this identity grows, students seek opportunities to enact these identities through their behaviours. Melissa's reference to a WhatsApp group where mature students discuss their shared experiences exemplifies this phenomenon. Kasworm (2010), while examining adult learners, noted that older students who have more life complexities often experience "otherness" in a youth-oriented university environment.

It is worth noting that all four case study students are considered non-traditional students who do not reside in university accommodation and must commute to campus. They have other commitments outside of university that are important to them. These students have more complex life identities and construct various life roles, as described by Kasworm (2010). Melissa, as a mother, prioritizes her role as a parent and considers it one of her primary identities. Joseph, while not a parent, holds significant family responsibilities and balances them with his academic pursuits. Both Joseph and Melissa mention the challenges they face in balancing their multiple roles. This is consistent with the findings of Cross (1981) and Levinson (1978), who argue that individuals experience multiple transitions and role conflicts throughout their lives.

Timings

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on student engagement, challenging the standard operating model most universities have for teaching delivery and driving innovative pedagogy that could be delivered both online and in person. Utilising technology such as Lecture Capture and Microsoft Teams allowed for the rapid pivot to online learning whereby learners could engage synchronously from home or asynchronously at a time that better suited them, without penalty.

Olivia mentions that she prefers asynchronous learning, as it allows her to manage her time better and accommodate her other responsibilities. The flexibility provided by online learning has been a positive factor for some students in balancing their lifeload and learning load. This aligns with the findings of Muthusamy and Abidin (2021), who argue that synchronous and asynchronous learning options can provide opportunities for students to adapt their engagement strategies to their specific circumstances. It may also prove advantageous for students facing financial hardship during the cost-of-living crisis or those with young children who are not at school due to teaching strikes.

Melissa and Joseph both speak of time sensitive commitments and how they must manage their time, stepping out of class or watching things later. This allows them greater flexibility and gives them the ability to manage their time in the way Feldman (2013) discusses, operating on trust rather than strict adherence to normative attendance behaviours.

Furthermore, the decision to prioritize certain activities over university commitments is influenced by situational factors and the salience of different identities. For example, Olivia chooses to prioritize her personal relationships at home over building new relationships at university. Beth, on the other hand, demonstrates agency in making decisions that align with her prominent identities, such as her commitment to her religious community. These findings resonate with the concept of identity salience, as discussed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), and the notion that individuals prioritize and align their behaviours with the identities that are most important to them at a given time.

To summarize, students' engagement with university is shaped by their understanding of being a student, the salience of their identities, the hierarchy of their roles, and the intersection of geography and identity. Non-traditional students often face challenges in balancing their multiple commitments, but they prioritize their studies strategically to succeed. Identity salience and situational factors influence the decision-making process regarding engagement. Recognizing students' agency and accommodating their diverse experiences can lead to more meaningful and successful engagement. Moreover, understanding the dynamics of "othering" and the importance of place and social identification in student experiences can inform universities' efforts to foster a sense of belonging and support non-traditional students.

CONCLUSION

The return to campus after the pandemic has raised concerns about student attendance and engagement, as it has not reached pre-pandemic levels. Students who engage asynchronously due to high lifeload are now considered low-engaging

students requiring intervention, challenging the effectiveness of student engagement monitoring systems. The pandemic has disrupted the machine behaviourism that students were previously trained to comply with, allowing them to prioritize lifeload over learning load. This shift in student engagement has practical implications for universities, which may need to adjust their approaches to meet students where they are.

The research used a participant-led methodology to co-create knowledge, presenting four composite case studies to represent different student identities. These stories highlight the personal decision-making process of students and how they prioritize their lifeload, influencing their engagement with university.

The findings reveal the diversity of non-traditional students and emphasize the significance of identity salience and lifeload prioritization in determining their engagement with university. Non-traditional students, who often have multiple intersecting identities, tend to de-prioritize the student role in favour of other roles. In contrast, traditional students may give higher prominence to the student role, as they have fewer competing identities. Further research is needed to explore this aspect based on the current findings.

The study also demonstrates how students in close geographical proximity to higher education institutions may benefit from an easier transition to higher education one which is less destabilising as they retain their local identity and assimilate the student identity in a familiar place. Some students, like Beth, develop hybrid identities to navigate the displacement felt between the local and student social groups. Geography potentially plays a role in this process, as growing up in an integrated, mixed culture facilitates such identity blending. Research on non-traditional students from diverse cultures could provide valuable insights.

To enhance the student experience and challenge the notion of a singular student experience, efforts should be made to celebrate and normalize diverse ways of being a student. The language used to describe non-traditional students should also be reconsidered to foster inclusivity. Throughout the interviews, all students discussed lifeload and competing priorities, highlighting the challenges faced by non-traditional learners, a community which a growing number of students identify as belonging to.

Initiatives such as short courses with stackable micro credentials and degree apprenticeships offer alternative pathways into higher education, addressing the needs of prospective students who cannot or do not wish to pursue a traditional, on-campus fulltime undergraduate degree. The introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement from 2025 demonstrates an acknowledgement in policy of a need for greater flexibility in Higher Education and how institutions need to do more to make education more widely accessible. Institutions must now examine their enabling process such as course design, timetabling, student engagement practices and assessment to better accommodate all types of students.

Viewing non-traditional students through a lens that appreciates their strengths gained from life experiences can shape how institutions define student cohorts, pedagogy, and student engagement practices. This departure from normative measures of the "ideological student" allows for a more representative model that includes all types of students.

The limitations of the study include self-reported subjective information and the small number of participants from a specific Faculty and geographical region which are unlikely to be representative of the entire student body. Nevertheless, this study provides insights into the lived experiences of students at MMU, highlighting the influence of identities and sense of place on their engagement behaviours.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the changing needs of students, challenges the effectiveness of normative student engagement measures, and highlights the potential benefits of asynchronous learning for students managing multiple commitments and identities. This calls into question assumptions that are built into curriculum design, timetabling and other processes which have for many years been predicated on a certain type of student.

Retaining practices adopted for hybrid learning during the pandemic to compliment face to face delivery may offer flexibility for students with other commitments. To foster greater student belonging and affinity with universities, it is essential to diversify the student experience and move away from a singular idealized student image, instead embracing relatable personas that represent the real experiences of students like Joseph, Olivia, Melissa, and Beth. Universities should strive to meet students where they are in an effort to dispel the dissociation students feel about their own experience being a departure from the ideological student experience. Dispelling the idea of a singular student experience will only truly be possible when institutions process support and cater for all types of students and normative engagement practices are reformed.

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