



Brunel
University
London

**Successful Students:
Exploring the factors that encourage and enable
students from a widening participation
background to stay the course**

Brunel University London

July 2018

Research Team
Dr Anne Chappell
Dr Ellen McHugh
Dr Emma Wainwright

Copyright © 2018 Anne Chappell, Ellen McHugh and Emma Wainwright

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9781908549402

Printed by Brunel University London.

First printed edition 2018

Publisher: Brunel University London
Kingston Lane
Uxbridge
UB8 3PH
www.brunel.ac.uk

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Acknowledgments | 5 |
| Foreword..... | 6 |
| Executive Summary..... | 7 |
| Recommendations..... | 8 |
| Introduction | 10 |
| Rationale for the Research | 10 |
| Research Aims | 10 |
| Brunel University London..... | 11 |
| Context..... | 12 |
| The Research..... | 13 |
| Stage 1..... | 13 |
| Stage 2..... | 14 |
| Findings | 16 |
| 1. Reasons for staying the course and being successful | 16 |
| i. Personal motivation to do well and be successful | 16 |
| ii. Support from family, friends and peers | 17 |
| iii. Support from personal tutors, lecturers, and University staff | 19 |
| 2. University Support and Services | 21 |
| i. The Counselling Service..... | 21 |
| ii. The Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) | 22 |
| iii. Widening Participation Office and HeadStart..... | 23 |
| iv. Workplace Mentors, Placements, and Mentoring | 25 |
| v. Student-to-Student Learning and Peer Mentoring | 26 |
| 3. Issues and Difficulties..... | 27 |
| i. Inconsistent Support at Different Stages of the Degree Programme..... | 28 |
| ii. Lack of Knowledge and Information about University Services and Support | 28 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| iii. Lack of Understanding and Support from Personal Tutors and Other Academic Staff | 30 |
| iv. Feelings of isolation and not belonging | 31 |
| v. Timetabling | 32 |
| vi. Lack of physical and social spaces on campus | 34 |
| Recommendations | 36 |
| i. Timetabling | 36 |
| ii. Create more social and study places and spaces on campus..... | 36 |
| iii. Student-to-student learning and peer mentoring..... | 36 |
| iv. Workplace mentoring..... | 36 |
| v. Staff development and induction..... | 36 |
| vi. Student information | 36 |
| vii. Personal Tutor and the personal tutorial system..... | 37 |
| viii. Student support | 37 |
| ix. Signposting across the student lifecycle | 37 |
| x. Sharing good practice..... | 37 |
| Dissemination of Findings | 38 |
| Dissemination to date..... | 38 |
| Future dissemination | 38 |
| References | 39 |
| Appendices | 41 |
| Appendix 1: The Photographic Exhibition..... | 41 |
| Appendix 2: Questionnaire | 44 |
| Appendix 3: Interview Guide | 50 |
| Appendix 4: Information for Participants and Consent..... | 53 |

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the students who gave their time to be involved in this research project.

Thanks to staff across the University for assistance with sending out emails to final year undergraduate students.

Particular thanks to the Widening Participation Office for supporting our research and offering useful insights into students from a widening participation background.

This research was funded by the 'Access and Student Success Fund' (2016), Brunel University London.

Foreword

One of the major issues that universities face in the UK is to ensure that all students have an equal chance of success, independent of their social or financial background. While the 'attainment gap' at Brunel University London experienced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds is less than at many similar institutions, it is unacceptable that a student's chance of success can be determined by factors such as ethnicity and parental income.

This is an important study as it looked not only at the issues faced by students from a widening participation background but, more importantly, at those factors that had a positive impact on their studies and that contributed to students' success. This gives a rich and rounded picture of why some students succeed and others do not. It leads to a series of very practical recommendations.

While this research was carried out in the context of Brunel University London, many of the findings and recommendations will be applicable to other universities. I am pleased that the University was able to support this research, and thank Anne Chappell, Ellen McHugh and Emma Wainwright for their dedication and hard work and for the insight that they have given to a subject that is of vital importance to both Brunel and the UK Higher Education sector.



Andrew JT George MBE

Deputy Vice Chancellor (Strategic Projects and Global Engagement)

Executive Summary

While there is a growing body of knowledge on why students from a widening participation background drop out of university and the barriers they face, there is a need to better understand what enables and encourages these students to stay at university and successfully complete their studies. With the current emphasis on attrition rates and retention, this research is timely in taking a different approach. This research was undertaken to explore the factors that enable students from a widening participation background to stay the course and finish their studies. We use the term 'successful student' to denote a student that is near completion of their degree programme. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, research was conducted with final year undergraduate students at Brunel University London.

The research investigates the following issues:

- The factors that students understand to have had a positive impact on their ability to complete their studies;
- The issues they have faced while at Brunel University London and the types of support they have drawn on;
- Policies and practices the University could implement to better support these students and increase retention rates and enhance progression.

The research was undertaken between February 2017 and January 2018 with two final year cohorts and involved two phases of primary data collection. The primary data collection involved an online survey open to final year undergraduate students from a widening participation background followed by in-depth interviews with a selection of students. All students who were interviewed were also invited to keep a photographic diary and take part in a student film.

Participating students came from across all three Colleges at Brunel: College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences; College of Engineering, Design and Physical Sciences and College of Health and Life Sciences.

This report details the context of the study, the research methods used, and key findings and recommendations for Brunel and the wider higher education sector. Key findings and recommendations are summarised here:

Key Findings

- Feeling part of a community where students experience positive relationships with their friends, peers and tutors facilitates a sense of belonging which is critical to the successful completion of studies.
- Support of family and friends is especially important for students over the course of their degree programme. Where this is lacking, the support offered by academic and support services becomes more significant.

- Students are largely positive about University services that are specifically designed to support the needs of students from under-represented backgrounds.
- The following sources of support are instrumental to degree completion: University services such as academic support, welfare and counselling; personal and academic tutors; work-place mentors; peer-buddies, peer role models, and family and friends.
- Students are generally happy with the support they receive from the University. They feel it is important that support service provision and access processes are consistent and student-friendly across the degree lifecycle, and that personal tutors make regular efforts to 'reach out' to tutees and engage them throughout the student journey.
- It is important for the University to consider how they signpost different services to students and to ensure that communication is clear and consistent across the degree lifecycle within the institution.
- The University can do more to ensure there is flexibility with timetabling, particularly in terms of making the timetable available earlier and avoiding timetabling lectures at the very start and end of the day. This is especially important for those with childcare and other caring responsibilities.
- More social spaces and places available on campus where students can meet, interact, study and relax with friends and form friendships away from commercial settings and environments.

Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations:

- Work towards providing the timetable at an earlier stage of the academic year to allow students with outside commitments to plan more effectively.
- Offer a greater variety of study and social spaces where students can meet, interact and form friendships in order to facilitate increased student engagement, inclusion and belonging on campus.
- Enhance students' confidence-building skills through the further development of peer learning and mentoring.
- Develop and extend the work-place mentoring programme for all students from a widening participation background.
- Provide staff development and induction activities to support wider staff engagement in widening participation. This would help ensure that the

University is adopting a 'whole institution approach' to widening participation as advocated by the Office of Fair Access (OFFA, 2017).

- Better systems in place to share information about students with staff to provide a foundation for the building of relationships to enable the provision of individualised support.
- Review the role of the Personal Tutor, the personal tutorial system, and tutorial expectations to ensure there is consistency across the University. More tailored support and guidance from staff would further enhance the student experience, facilitate student engagement and belonging, and improve the retention of students.
- Review of student support to ensure that there is consistency of provision across, and ease of access to, services.
- Better signposting of available support and services that makes it easy for students to identify and access across the student lifecycle.
- Develop a mechanism to share good practice across the University so that staff can learn from each other to enhance their work with all students.

Introduction

This study was funded by the Access and Student Success Fund at Brunel University London. Its aim was to explore what encourages and enables students from a widening participation background to complete their course of study and to develop recommendations and guidelines in order to support and retain these students.

Rationale for the Research

While there is a substantial literature on why students from a widening participation background drop out of university and the barriers they face, there is a need to better understand what encourages and enables these students to stay at university and complete their studies.

Widening participation in higher education is a key strategic priority for the government which has set out two clear goals: to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009, and to increase the number of black and minority (BME) students going to university by 20% by 2020 (BIS, 2016). Similarly, there is a need for institutions to demonstrate money is well spent within the widening participation strategy (Harrison and Waller, 2017) and to “understand which approaches and activities have the greatest impact, and why” (BIS, 2014: 9).

Research Aims

Given the success of widening participation at Brunel, an evidence-base is needed to elucidate what encourages and enables students from a widening participation background to complete their degrees (Budd, 2016). By focusing on the student life cycle, this project set out to explore final year undergraduate retrospective narratives. Students were given the opportunity to reflect upon what had enabled and encouraged them to complete their studies drawing on the personal, institutional and structural dimensions of their lives (Chappell, Ernest, Ludhra and Mendick, 2014).

The research set out to investigate:

- The factors that students understand to have had a positive impact on their ability to complete their studies;
- The issues they have faced while at Brunel University London and the types of support they have drawn on;
- Policies and practices the University could implement to better support these students and increase retention rates and enhance progression.

Brunel University London

Brunel University London has a very diverse student population. The total student population is approximately 12,000. 62.9% are undergraduates. Over 35% of the University's current undergraduate students are in receipt of a Full Maintenance Grant and 62% are BME (Brunel University London, 2016).

Although there is no agreed sector definition of 'widening participation', for reporting and targeted support purposes, Brunel defines students from a widening participation background as those with one or more of the following characteristics:

- Being in receipt of a full maintenance loan for the year (income less than £25,000)
- Students from low participation neighbourhoods (defined by POLAR 3, Quantile 1)

Under this definition, the widening participation cohort at Brunel for 2015-2016 was 40% of the student population.

Brunel also targets activity in relation to inclusion, access, student success and progression towards the following Office for Fair Access (OFFA) Target groups:

- Black and minority ethnic students
- Disabled students
- First-generation Higher Education
- Looked-after children and care leavers
- Mature students
- Students who were in receipt of Pupil Premium during their schooling.

Context

Widening participation in higher education is a government driven initiative to increase the number of students from under-represented groups participating in higher education. As a result of this government drive, a culture of widening participation which embraces access, retention and success has become strongly embedded in the mainstream of most higher education providers (Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013). Since 2006, institutions wishing to charge above the basic fee (currently £6,165 a year) for full-time undergraduate programmes are required to set out in their 'Access Agreements' how they will undertake their own widening participation activities in relation to access, student success, progression and financial support to disadvantaged students entering higher education. These 'Access Agreements' allow universities to set their own targets and are monitored and approved by OFFA.

The last two decades have seen a substantial expansion in participation in higher education and much progress has been made in relation to widening access. The proportion of entrants from the most disadvantaged areas increased from 15.8% in 2007-2008 to 25.3% in 2015-2017 (OFFA, 2017). An estimated £833.5 million is earmarked to be spent on supporting access, student success and progression under access agreements in 2017-2018, rising to £860.1 million in 2018-2019 (OFFA, 2017).

In addition to this, there has been an increasing emphasis placed upon evaluation to determine the effectiveness of widening participation interventions both in England and internationally (Thomas, 2012). Recent research commissioned by the OFFA to look at a whole institution approach to widening participation examines the ways in which it is being implemented by institutions and how it can be evaluated (Thomas, 2017).

The government remains committed to widening participation with the need for universities to remain confident that money is being 'well spent' (Harrison and Waller, 2017). The government strategy for widening access argues that it is "essential to understand which approaches and activities have the greatest impact, and why" (BIS, 2014:9). The current political climate is putting institutions under increasing pressure to demonstrate the value they offer to students and potential students.

The Research

This report is based on fieldwork conducted between February 2017 and January 2018 at Brunel University London.

This study took a multi-method approach that included both quantitative and qualitative approaches:

- Stage 1: an online questionnaire survey of 143 students identified as being from widening participation backgrounds;
- Stage 2: 15 in-depth interviews with students identified from the online questionnaire.

Stage 1

Stage 1 comprised a 10-minute online questionnaire survey designed to explore what has enabled students from a widening participation background to stay the course and successfully complete their studies. The online questionnaire, prepared using SurveyMonkey, had a mixture of quantitative and open qualitative questions (Appendix 2). Final year undergraduates were sent a short email with a link to the survey from their departments inviting them to participate in the online survey.

In total, 143 participants answered the survey:

Gender:

- 73% female
- 26% male
- 1% prefer not to say

Age:

- 59.57% 21-24
- 19.86% 17-20
- 9.93% 25-29
- 10.64% 30+

Ethnicity:

- 30.99% White British
- 14.79% White Other
- 13.38% Asian British
- 8.45% Mixed Ethnic origin
- 7.75% Black African
- 7.75% Asian Indian
- 6.34% Asian Other
- 5.63% Black British
- 2.82% Black Caribbean
- 2.11% Other

Highest Qualification prior to the Degree:

- 19.63% BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council)
- 11.21% Access Course
- 1.87% HND (Higher National Diploma)
- 71.96% other qualifications (including predominantly A-Levels; Art Foundation; International Baccalaureate; European A Level equivalence)

Participants fell under the following widening participation characteristics:

- 44% were in receipt of a Full Maintenance Grant
- 16% have caring responsibilities
- 12.6% were/are a 'looked after child'
- 9% were Registered Disabled
- 4.9% have dependent children

Participants came from across all University departments:

- 27.73% Department of Life Sciences
- 12.61% Brunel Business School
- 12.61% Department of Clinical Sciences
- 10.08% Department of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering
- 5.88% Department of Arts and Humanities
- 7.56% Department of Politics, History and Law
- 7.56% Department of Social Sciences, Media and Communications
- 6.72% Department of Computer Science
- 4.20% Department of Economics and Finance
- 2.52% Department of Education
- 0.84% Department of Design
- 0.84% Department of Electronic and Computing Engineering
- 0.84% Department of Mathematics

The study aimed to sample participants from a wide range of disciplines and, in particular, departments identified as having high and low number of widening participation students. Departments were requested to send out an email to their final year undergraduates and invite them to take part in the study. The data collection via questionnaire took place over 12 months.

Stage 2

Stage 2 consisted of in-depth interviews with 15 students who took part in the online survey and expressed a willingness to be interviewed and keep a photo diary. These in-depth interviews took place over the course of 10 months in 2017.

Participants fell under the following widening participation characteristics:

- 12 were in receipt of Full Maintenance Grant
- 2 were Registered Disabled
- 5 were/are a 'looked after child'
- 5 had caring responsibilities

- 2 had dependent children

The interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes and were audio recorded. Participants gave rich and varied accounts of being a student at Brunel University London discussing issues such as their route into university, and their personal motivations behind choosing to study their degree course at Brunel. Participants also gave detailed personal accounts of what they felt had enabled them to stay the course. All participants were given £10 for taking part in the interview and agreeing to keep a photo diary.

Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and the informed consent of all participants was sought prior to participation. All participants who took part in the research were assured that their comments would be treated in confidence and any quotes used would be anonymised. The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University London.

The research analysis drew comparisons between emerging themes from the qualitative and quantitative data sets. In this report, percentages are drawn from the questionnaires and quotes are taken from both the in-depth interviews and open-ended responses in the questionnaires.

Findings

The findings presented in this section are organised by the themes or topics that were identified in the data analysis and the key research questions under investigation. The students in this research highlighted practical concerns as most significant to them as detailed below, and there was no explicit reference to the need to change policy or procedure at Brunel University London except in relation to timetabling and access to counselling. The findings are structured around three key themes: reasons for staying the course and being successful; University support and services; and, issues and difficulties.

1. Reasons for staying the course and being successful

There were three factors identified as enabling and encouraging students to stay the course and complete their degree programmes:

- i. Personal motivation to do well and be successful;
- ii. Support from family, friends and peers;
- iii. Support from personal tutors, lecturers and University services.

i. Personal motivation to do well and be successful

Students overwhelmingly felt their own personal drive and goals had motivated them to apply to university, stay the course and complete their degree programme. 92.66% of survey respondents identified individual factors such as motivation and character as being the main driver to them getting to this point in their studies:

“..it’s just the fact that you know I’ve always seen myself as wanting to get a degree and yeah, so I think, that’s the main thing which has motivated me”. (Interview 4)

For some students, securing rewarding employment once they graduated was a motivating factor:

“Employment rates after qualifying on my course are very high, with a decent starting salary and lots of room for progression. This has been a big motivator”. (Questionnaire)

Furthermore, a number of students felt the factors motivating them to stay the course had changed since they started their final year of study. Reaching the end of their degree programme had given them the opportunity to reflect on their achievements and successes. For many students this period of reflection had resulted in increased confidence and pride in their studies, and a drive to succeed as they moved on to the next stage of their life-course:

“...because I think, I’m from a council estate, and it feels kind of nice to be able to say, look at what I’m doing with my life, if that doesn’t

sound a bit ridiculous. And possibly at the start, that might have been a reason why, a motivator. And now those reasons are less and now it's because I really want to do it for me and not really for anybody else". (Interview 10)

Some students reported their motivations ebbed and flowed over the course of their studies, and could be linked to poor performance or a disappointing assignment grade which often resulted in lost confidence and a lack of overall engagement. Similarly, a failure to thrive in the first year of their degree programme or questioning their decision to go to university resulted in lost confidence and decreased levels of engagement and motivation:

"I think initially I was very motivated when I started, but as I got into it I just, like I wasn't sure whether it was for me, so I know that quite a few times I doubted it and I wasn't as motivated, I like didn't do extremely well in my second year because of that as well, because I wasn't as motivated to study". (Interview 4)

However students reported by the time they reached their final year their motivation to do well in their degree and beyond had returned:

But now it's third year, I feel like I'm getting that motivation back because now the graduation's coming, like it's so close, it's....I do feel like it's worth it". (Interview 4)

The emphasis on personal motivation for success is significant and can be explained by broader societal expectations and pressures for the individual to take responsibility for themselves.

ii. Support from family, friends and peers

In addition to personal motivations, students identified family members, friends and peers as being a source of support and an important motivating factor in enabling and encouraging them to stay the course and complete their studies. 78.90% of survey respondents identified support from family, friends and peers as being an enabling factor:

"...I've got tremendous support from my family and friends who you know I think all want the best for me and know that I will enjoy a career in the field that I've got myself mapped out to go into". (Interview 6)

A number of students identified their parents as playing a particularly important role in providing support and encouragement:

"...even though my mum's ill, like we talk every day and stuff, and my dad and grandparents, they're very, very supportive, so I think without them...because even though I know that I'm going to do alright in these modules or whatever, some days you're just like, oh I don't

think I can do it, and without having these people around you, you can really...get through that". (Interview 13)

Many students acknowledged that they had always received support and guidance from their parents and this had continued now they were at university:

"If I think about it, like they [parents] are the ones who pushed for me to make sure that I have good values and I have good morale, so, and good communication skills, to develop that relationship with my lecturers, to develop that relationship with my careers advisor. So it's them, they are the ones, they're the root cause of who I am, all my motivation and my achievements in life". (Interview 9)

Students also identified friends, partners and peers as being an important enabling factor:

"My significant other and other graduates who are in successful careers". (Questionnaire)

"I think there's a lot of people on my course as well, I've made very good friends on my course...and we often do a lot of work together and have group chats and you know talk about all of that. And even while we were on placement last year there was still kind of a Brunel network of chatting and stuff, so I think that's definitely been beneficial, because then I don't just turn up to a lecture and sit on my own and that's it". (Interview 13)

In addition to this, a number of students saw themselves as being a 'role model' to younger siblings, friends and peers from similar backgrounds. This 'role model' status came with responsibilities which included 'setting an example' to younger brothers and sisters by attending university and successfully completing their studies (Wainwright and Watts, 2017). As such, some students felt there was an 'expectation' from parents and family members that they would go to university, do well, and this consequently encouraged and motivated them to stay the course:

"I'd always been interested in higher education from a young age, I've always been pushed in that direction, because I'm the first in my family....to come to university, so it was sort of a requirement to set an example for my brothers and sisters". (Interview 2)

However, while parental and familial support was important to the successful completion of studies, a number of students felt there were limits to parental support, particularly if they were the first in family to go to university:

"They [parents] were certainly supportive in that they were saying, 'yeah, go for it, you can do it', but that's pretty much where it ended, they weren't able to give any practical support of any sort! So I knew they were 100% behind me like emotionally, but that was it really. I

mean when it comes to trying to explain what's going on at university, they just don't understand". (Interview 10)

"Generally friends and peers [give support], family is a bit more challenging to get support from at university because they don't quite understand it. My mum asks me every year if I'm graduating!" (Interview 7)

Where knowledge or support at home is lacking, students rely even further on that provided by the University.

iii. Support from personal tutors, lecturers, and University staff

Students recognised that support from the University, in particular from personal tutors and lecturers, motivated and encouraged them in their studies. 37.61% identified institutional support as being an enabling factor for the completion of their degree programme.

Students identified support from different members of staff in their department as being critical in enabling them to continue and successfully complete their degree programme:

"They [department] were very supportive, very supportive...I suppose that was critical for me being able to continue my studies...my department staff, my personal tutor, some lecturers who I've had a relationship with for a long time...it [support] was impeccable". (Interview 2)

"I had a brilliant tutor in first and second year, who was like, he wasn't overbearing, he was there if I needed him and we got on really well". (Interview 10)

In general, most students were happy with the support they received from personal tutors, lecturers, staff and the wider University community. Students valued the interaction they had with their personal tutors and lecturers, and felt that good relationships with University staff led to increased engagement:

"I have struck up a number of good relationships with academics at Brunel and the career and placement support staff, so I think you know that of course [it] increases engagement". (Interview 3)

Students valued their relationships with tutors and lecturers, especially if they felt staff had made an effort to learn their names, engage and develop a relationship with them:

"...they do genuinely care about building up relationships with people". (Interview 2)

Many students felt that positive student-staff relationships were a vital part of the student experience, and resulted in better outcomes and increased confidence:

“I mean the lecturers themselves are you know forces of the institution. The personal relationships that you have with them do make or break some people. Like I know some of my friends, you know, their personal tutors are like their surrogate parents”. (Interview 2)

“I recently won an award, and it was something where my tutor nominated me for it, and I was like there’s no way on earth I’m ever going to get that, and I won it...and he [personal tutor] was like, I knew you were going to win it hands down! So yeah, a mix of, a lot of supportive people who feel you can achieve your aspirations, as well as a mix of.... I think it’s generally a friendly environment at Brunel, so it’s one of these things where it’s, it doesn’t feel like you’re fighting to get your degree, you’re just, it’s challenging but it’s not like they’re trying to kick you down, they’re actually trying to help you get through it, which is nice”. (Interview 7)

Furthermore, students understood that building a good relationship with their personal tutor and lecturers required them to attend lectures regularly and complete assignments on time. At the same time, there was a feeling among some students that getting a “fantastic” tutor was often down to good luck:

“I think my personal tutor personally has been fantastic. So some people might not have good one, but I’m lucky that I do, so that has been helpful ... And even if I can’t turn up for any reason, they’re more than happy to e-mail me or meet up with me separately or, you know, they’re willing to go the extra mile with me because they know I will go the extra mile”. (Interview 13)

Forming functional staff-student relationships can have many positive outcomes for students. Completing your first assignment at university can be a daunting and nerve-wracking experience. Receiving a low grade and little feedback can have a negative impact on a student’s confidence and self-esteem. Students reported feeling disappointed when they received little or no feedback from their lecturers, and felt it was important that lecturers took the time to provide meaningful and timely feedback as this often resulted in better outcomes and increased engagement:

“I got a bad grade on my coursework and I couldn’t really understand why and it was just, I was feeling awful and I was feeling really down mentally and it was just...so I went to him [personal tutor] and he suggested the counselling service, which I didn’t really know existed, and he [personal tutor] went through the coursework with me and, it kind of helped me understand where to improve in the future. And I think if I didn’t have that support, then it would have made doing the next piece of coursework a lot harder because obviously I didn’t know where I went wrong and things like that, and I was scared it was going to happen again, yeah, so I think that helped a lot. So I think having a nice personal tutor does make a huge difference”. (Interview 4)

In addition to fostering a positive and supportive relationship with tutees, personal tutors can also provide guidance and support by signposting services such as counselling, the Academic Writing and Study Skills team (ASK), the Disability, Dyslexia Service (DDS), Professional Development Centre and referring students who may be struggling personally and academically.

2. University Support and Services

Students reported they were aware of the different services and help available on campus. In general, students were overwhelming positive about the range of services available at Brunel University London, and were happy to use them.

The following services and activities were identified as being popular with students and beneficial to their university experience:

- i. The Counselling Service;
- ii. The Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS);
- iii. Widening Participation Office and Headstart
- iv. Workplace mentors, placements, and mentoring
- v. Student-to-student learning and peer mentoring

i. The Counselling Service

87.96% survey participants claimed they were aware of the counselling service. Students who reported using the counselling service found it to be useful and beneficial:

“The counselling has really helped me in my final year. I suffer from depression and anxiety and my major project has really tested me”.
(Questionnaire)

However there were some students who were highly critical of the process and procedures for requesting and accessing counselling sessions. One student detailed the long-drawn out process of trying to get an appointment:

“...the counselling service hasn't been that great, in my opinion... so I rung them up in the first couple of weeks of uni and they told me that they were too busy to take on more people, which was obviously very frustrating. I phoned them up a few days later and they said I needed to come into the drop-in service, but there was a queue of about six or seven people. And they only accepted one person that day. But they didn't tell anyone, so we just all went in and had to get told ... And they didn't really say anything, I couldn't book an appointment, they didn't give me any information, they just said, try again tomorrow, so I did, and there was three people ahead of me. So I got there forty-five minutes early the next time and there were two people ahead of me. It took me a month of trying to get an

appointment...because I wasn't allowed to book an appointment. I had to go to the drop-in...Physically go, so in the end I went an hour early and managed to get to be the first one in". (Interview 12)

This experience of accessing and using the counselling service caused this student a great deal of distress at a time when her mental health was deteriorating and impacting on her studies.

"...it was awful because then people were queuing up behind me and I knew that they wouldn't get in, which was frustrating for me because ... you know they could have been in a worse situation than I was, I didn't know and it was just horrible. Yeah, so that was a horrible situation.... I haven't been since then, so I don't know if it's improved or what's gone on". (Interview 12)

This is an example of some of the very specific challenges that individual students face. A number of students felt the counselling service was under increasing pressure and at risk of not being able to adequately support students with mental health issues. Similarly, students reported that they had heard there were long waiting times to see a counsellor and, consequently, this put them off using the service:

"I think with the whole counselling thing, the one time that I did sort of consider it as an option, there was an enormous waiting list and their services are seriously in demand, and you know their ability to see to everyone is just not there. So I think perhaps a wider investment in those sort of services would be a good thing that you know would pay off". (Interview 3)

Moreover, students were critical that they were only allocated ten counselling sessions and not seen by the same counsellor.

ii. The Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS)

All students who used the DDS spoke very highly of the service and staff who provided them with support and help with their academic studies and transition to higher education. Individual staff members were singled out for being welcoming, friendly and supportive:

"And they were fantastic, I can't fault them at all, they were always really friendly and...they helped me get extra time and a separate room in my exams". (Interview 12)

In some cases, staff in the DDS had gone out of their way to provide additional support and help to students:

"So outside my course and my family, the biggest one, and I still think the biggest one to date [for staying the course] is the DDS. Because without them, I most certainly wouldn't still be here. Without [name]

specifically in the DDS, I definitely wouldn't be here. She was the one that I spoke to right from day one, and she's still the same person that I see whenever I have problems. She was the one who sorted out my accommodation for me, both first and second year, and between her and the accommodation services this year, we've managed to sort out the creation of disabled studio flats for myself and my partner next year and some of the disabled students on campus". (Interview 11)

Students responded well to the one-to-one support they received from DDS staff members and appreciated the continuity they had seeing the same member of staff every week:

"I thought I'd go for dyslexia screening and that was actually quite positive because I got back the report, they went through it with me from the Dyslexia Service, and then in the first year I would go and see them every week...and I could give them assignments and we'd go over it". (Interview 6)

For many students, the support of the DDS had been a lifeline and allowed them to continue their studies when they had been feeling low, confused and overwhelmed. In some cases, the work of the DDS made students reconsider dropping out during their first term of university:

"At one point I was considering cancelling, but just stopping and not showing up....cancelling my course and unenrolling. And it was speaking to the DDS that actually, not changed my mind but helped me realise that the things that I thought would be problems actually were manageable and they weren't real problems. And so yeah, the DDS played a huge role in that. Speaking on behalf of other students, there are other services that they need which, I don't want to say anything bad against them, but they're not quite up to the same standard as the DDS". (Interview 11)

The DDS is an excellent example of how a university service can have a positive impact on students, their academic success and general well-being. By taking the time to offer a welcoming, friendly, accessible, targeted and consistent service, there is the potential to transform university experience:

"...you get allocated a study skills tutor [through the DDS]. My first year was amazing, she taught me strategies and techniques and they've stayed with me ever since". (Interview 6)

iii. Widening Participation Office and HeadStart

Students spoke very highly of the work of the Widening Participation Office and the support they provided to students at the start and over the course of their degree programme. Overall, students felt that the Widening Participation Office was an excellent resource for advice and signposting different types of university support and services on campus. Students felt that staff were sympathetic,

understood their circumstances and background, and encouraged them to avail of opportunities:

“It’s something as well where I think it helps where the Widening Participation team sort of know where you’re from, so it’s something where they kind of, they kind of get quite excited for you when you’re able to achieve things, and it’s quite nice, it’s kind of like a little family”. (Interview 7)

Students who had participated in HeadStart week spoke very warmly about it and its positive impact on their transition to university:

“I found it [HeadStart] really useful actually because the first week, the week that you come, there’s nobody on campus and you get to like, I think doing the treasure hunt is quite good, because you know your way around, I still don’t know where some buildings are after three years though! So yeah, that was really good. And the academic skills, it was good because even though I’d done an access course, most of...because I hadn’t been to school in years, I had to like read loads of books about academic skills and writing and writing essays that I haven’t done for so long. So I think that the, that one week did really help, just to get an understanding of what is expected of you, and you get to like meet people, other students, you get to meet like other people that work here, so once you do start, you actually, you feel quite confident you know”. (Interview 6)

Participating in HeadStart also facilitated the development of friendships and signposted the different types of available student services at an early stage of their studies.

In some cases, participating in HeadStart had encouraged some students to become Widening Participation and Student Ambassadors during their second and third years of study. Students expressed a desire to ‘give something back’ to the University, and motivate the next-generation of students to stay the course and be successful:

“I thought doing ambassador work would be good because I could share my experiences with other students and motivate them and you know make them think, well if she can do it, I can do it”. (Interview 10)

Students who became Student Ambassadors acknowledged that there were a number of benefits associated with participating in this scheme: increased confidence on campus, extra income and the opportunity to be seen as a ‘role model’:

“I became a Widening Participation ambassador... so during Freshers’ Fair, they were advertising jobs for it, and it was something where I was looking for a job and they said come along, and especially if you’re from Widening Participation and I went, spoke to them about it and it sounded like it was really good work, so I’ve done

work on that for a few years and it's provided me with a bit of extra funding throughout my studies. Yeah, it was paid, but it was work that you kind of wanted to do anyway. So the payment's more of a kind of, more of a secondary sort of thing with it, it's one of these things where the payment helps you as a student who probably doesn't get that much funding from their parents or paid for anything from their parents. So it's kind of, it helps in two areas, because you're also then ... one thing I found is because I was doing that and I was helping these students, I kind of felt like I was a bit of their role model". (Interview 7)

iv. Workplace Mentors, Placements, and Mentoring

Students who took part in the Professional Mentoring Scheme run by the Widening Participation Office spoke very highly about it and the positive outcomes from taking part. Having a mentor was viewed as a worthwhile and dynamic experience. Students felt they benefitted from this experience and often formed very good working relationships with their industry mentors:

"I highly recommend it [mentoring]. It's really useful because I asked for a female in the tech industry and I've got exactly what I wanted. You're learning from these people and they're willing to help you". (Interview 1)

Students recognised the benefits of taking part in the scheme, which allowed them to develop and deepen relationships with senior stakeholders in their chosen industry and profession. It also gave them the opportunity to grow their own connections and networks:

"I've made a number of professional connections. I've really expanded my network through my work related opportunities and they, I've got two mentors off that and they've all been very motivating". (Interview 3)

"I have a mentor now, she works at the Treasury. It's fantastic! Ah...one of the best things the University has done for me". (Interview 2)

In some cases, workplace mentors had helped students apply for internships, industrial placements and graduate scheme jobs. It also gave students an insight into their chosen career which was viewed as a positive and inspiring experience:

"When I did my placement year I was like, okay, so this is where I can end up if I carry on and I keep doing this and I achieve this, then this is where I could end up and it's just quite, quite a nice motivator, being able to see what the light at the end of the tunnel is...a placement definitely was a positive experience and it definitely encouraged me with the part of my degree". (Interview 7)

Similarly, the relationships that students developed with workplace mentors and professionals continued once they returned to their studies. In some cases, it led to further work experience, and assistance with university projects and dissertations:

“So I go back regularly and just talk to them, but it’s not only about the dissertation, they kind of help me with the grad schemes and anything else. And then they extended it [contract] for three months over the summer which was great...and I have the opportunity to go back”. (Interview 13)

Mentors offer an important source of social capital for students from a widening participation background and this is vital for those who do not have easy access to their chosen industry or profession. Mentors are in a position to signpost internships, work experience placements, introduce students to their professional networks and contacts, and provide assistance with interviewing and CV writing. This support is invaluable, and students welcomed the opportunities workplace mentors provided:

“It’s very much both, he advises and supports me on my academic interests and endeavours, as well as my work...workplace thing. So yeah, it’s very much both, all-encompassing sort of support, which is great and for which I’m very grateful”. (Interview 3)

“Like it gave me more people skills and he helped me like search for new opportunities. So that was very, very useful”. (Interview 1)

v. Student-to-Student Learning and Peer Mentoring

In addition to professional mentoring, workplace mentors and student placements, a number of students reported they were peer mentors to year one and two students. Being a peer mentor, a student ambassador or a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) mentor was viewed as a positive experience. 44.95% of respondents reported that mentoring schemes would help students to complete a degree at Brunel.

Students felt that year one students could learn from second and third year students who had successfully navigated the university experience and were on course to successfully complete their degree programmes. Furthermore, a number of students felt that being a peer mentor required them to be a ‘role model’ to current and prospective students:

“... as it reminds me to be a role model for the students who don't think they can do it”. (Questionnaire)

One interviewed student placed great emphasis on the uniqueness of their position to help others who were struggling or finding the transition to university and academic study challenging:

“You know understanding, knowing that I was in their shoes, it’s easier for me to share my experiences, share what I’ve done ...helping them [students] transition onto the course, helping them with the course content and so on, which is great...to be doing this, because it helps [the new student], because knowing me, I didn’t have that at the time [when I started my studies]”. (Interview 1)

There were a number of positive outcomes associated with peer mentoring - increased confidence and the acquisition of new skills. For some students, being a mentor can be an inspiring and motivating experience. This particular student utilised the skills and knowledge she had acquired while studying for her undergraduate computing degree, and developed a learning app to assist PAL mentors and mentees:

“I just sort of told the person that is in charge of it, it would be so great if we had an app that would allow us to communicate with them [students] before the sessions”. (Interview 1)

This student also suggested that the University should encourage student-to-student learning as it can lead to successful outcomes not only for the student being mentored but also for the mentor in terms of acquiring knowledge that can be used in the workplace:

“...student-to-student learning it...it needs to be pushed a little more [by the University] because...when it’s student to student, you’re working with each other. You’re working with each other and this, taking these skills from working with each other, I see with just my PAL students, these skills, I know that I can work [use them], if I go out to industry, I would know how to approach situations, I would know how to communicate properly...I would know how to avoid conflict [because I’ve been a PAL mentor]. (Interview 1)

One other important outcome of student-to-student mentoring is an increased likelihood of fostering a sense of belonging among students. Students who are mentored by fellow students may feel more inclined to seek advice, help and support from their mentors, and this in turn can help create a more welcoming environment in which students feel they are part of a strong and supportive community. This links to research by the Government’s Behavioural Insights Team that has shown that relatable student role models and mentoring can be effective tools to encourage greater investment in education (Burgess, Chande, Dilnot, Kozman, Macmillan and Sanders, 2017).

3. Issues and Difficulties

Though students are overwhelming positive about the support they receive from the University, there were a number of barriers to successful completion of studies:

- i. Inconsistent support at different stages of the degree programme
- ii. Lack of knowledge and information about university services and support
- iii. Lack of understanding and support from personal tutors and other academic staff
- iv. Feelings of isolation and not belonging
- v. Timetabling
- vi. Lack of physical and social spaces on campus

i. Inconsistent Support at Different Stages of the Degree Programme

In terms of support, students felt they needed additional support over the course of their degree programme, particularly in preparation for meeting coursework deadlines (60.92%), during examinations (51.72%), and at the start of the degree programme (34.48%).

Similarly, students who considered dropping out of university during their first or second year felt that support for them during these difficult times was lacking and in some cases non-existent. A number of students reported that they did not know who to approach when deciding whether or not to continue their studies:

“So I was considering dropping out at the beginning of the year...in my first year...it was just awful...when I was losing motivation, I didn't really know who I could go and speak to about that, I feel like it's not clear who you go to when you're thinking about dropping out, the University, support, welfare? It wasn't clear to me, maybe if that had [support] been available to me, you know, if I knew there's someone that's going to give me advice [would have helped]”. (Interview 4)

This was particularly challenging if students did not feel they could approach their personal tutor with their concerns. This was because they had not received support in the past or failed to develop a relationship where they felt comfortable discussing their worries.

In addition, some students felt that support from personal tutors, lecturers and the University was inconsistent at different stages of their studies:

“I'll tell you it's been inconsistent, like I'd say it's [support from staff] been consistently not there...you know like I realise that if something needs to get done, I've got to do it, or like I don't and that's it, I miss out on something, so...but yeah, like institutional support, I wouldn't say I've really recognised that much of anything”. (Interview 14)

ii. Lack of Knowledge and Information about University Services and Support

Students felt that in some instances there was a failure by the University to effectively communicate the different types of services and support available on

campus. As a consequence, students reported that they did not use a number of services because they did not know about them until their final year:

“...it wasn’t made very clear at the start of the degree that you could seek help from librarians, that there’s actually apparently a whole service in place to help people that can’t find stuff or that need additional help, you know, searching. And I didn’t even know that until I think like my third year or something”. (Interview 10)

Students felt the University should do more to ensure that students were aware of the different types of support and services available at all stages of the student lifecycle:

“It’s [communication] essential really because you know you’re trying to concentrate on your degree, you don’t necessarily, if you don’t know that something exists then you don’t know what you’re missing out on, and I think it’s the [University’s] place really to make sure that all the potential beneficiaries actually benefit as opposed to expect, you know the onus being on me to, to find out about something that I don’t know exists”. (Interview 3)

Students suggested a number of ways to improve signposting of services and support:

“...even just a leaflet left in your room at the beginning, when you move in, or an e-mail sent round or just, I don’t know something! Or even lecturers at the beginning of the year saying, in your welcome meetings, you know, here’s our services we offer. I think that would be great”. (Interview 12)

“There’s a lot of services and support out there, which is great, but when they have contact with you, they treat you as if you’re the same as, initially treat you as if you’re the same as every other person. Like there’s lots of things about being [an] individual, you are an individual. And so that’s the only thing that I’d like Brunel to improve on”. (Interview 11)

It is vital that the University looks at how it communicates and raises awareness of the different types of support and services available to students on campus and this needs to start during Induction. Particular attention should be paid to communication at the start of each academic year for each year of entry. It is clear that students appreciate communication in many different forms – from the more traditional methods of leaflets in halls, on notice boards, and announcements in lecture theatres, to digital communication, including email and social media tools such as Twitter and WhatsApp. One advantage of digital communication is that it provides metrics on user engagement which can be used iteratively to tailor messages towards students who need services and support most.

iii. Lack of Understanding and Support from Personal Tutors and Other Academic Staff

While students were overwhelmingly positive about support from personal tutors, there were a number who reported negative experiences with academic staff at different points in their student journey. 22.94% of students reported a lack of understanding and support from staff as a problem since the start of their degree.

A number of students reported that they found it difficult to approach lecturers with their worries, concerns or questions. This was particularly acute for students who had lower confidence or had previously experienced a negative encounter with a member of academic staff which made them less inclined to actively seek help and support:

“...it [support from personal tutors] would have had a big impact on my studies. I had my coursework grades and I wasn’t very happy. I went to my personal tutor and he didn’t help me. I went to my lecturer and he just spoke to me for two minutes”. (Interview 8)

Approaching a personal tutor or lecturer for advice and assignment feedback can be a daunting task for students. As such, a negative encounter can be an upsetting experience resulting in increased feelings of frustration, isolation and disengagement:

“I mean if they [lecturers] don’t care why should I? You know, it kind of gives you that thing of, well they’re not willing to help me, what chance do I have? If I don’t understand it [the lecture] what do I do, you know? So frustrating”. (Interview 12)

For some students there was a sense of disappointment that they had not developed a relationship with their personal tutor. Consequently, there was a sense that lecturers and personal tutors could do more to pro-actively ‘reach out’ and ‘check in’ with their tutees, especially students who lacked confidence or were struggling academically and not attending lectures:

“I’ve seen my personal tutor I think once or twice in the whole three year period that I’ve been at the University. There was no sort of reaching out from her...to her sort of tutees, saying you know come for a check-in or anything like that, which I think would have been nice”. (Interview 3)

At the same time, students recognised that support from academic staff was available but it often required them to be proactive and ask for help. This could however potentially be a problem for students who lack confidence or do not know how to seek and ask for help and support:

“There was a lot of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and all of them were willing to help you. If there weren’t the GTAs, the lecturers will sit down with you. It was a lot of support, as I said, if you knew

how to go and ask for it. If you asked for it, you were given, but if you didn't ask, it was..." (Interview 1)

Students also understood that personal tutors did not always have the time or resources to interact with tutees on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. However, they felt that if personal tutors were not in a position to help, they could inform students of other sources of support within the University:

"...you know what's available needs to be well-documented and well-communicated. And I also think personal tutors should be, and I say this with full knowledge of how over-worked they are, but I really think that they should perhaps make more of an effort to reach out to their tutees...it's about [personal tutors] being familiar with what they could perhaps do [to support students]". (Interview 3)

55.05% of respondents reported that more regular one-to-one contact with their tutor and more support and guidance from staff (49.54%) would help students complete their degree at Brunel.

iv. Feelings of isolation and not belonging

37.61% of respondents reported they had experienced feelings of isolation and not belonging during their degree programme. The transition to university can be a challenging and unsettling time and a number of students reported they found their first year of university particularly difficult. Moving away from home, adjusting to different styles of academic teaching, making friends, fitting in, coping with loneliness and lack of confidence were all areas highlighted by students as being challenges:

"So first year was really rough, second year was getting better and final year I think, yeah, I found I fit now". (Interview 12)

"...it was a big transition actually, it was really hard because [previously at college] you had support, where here [university] you're just left on your own to do the work. And it's quite difficult because it's a different environment of studying and it makes you feel like, it makes you feel isolated, it makes you feel you know, it lowers your confidence because you're like, OK, well everyone is able to cope, why am I not able to cope? Why can't I get the grades? Why can't I understand the work?" (Interview 9)

It is important to note that some students who experienced difficulties at the beginning of their degree programme felt very differently once they received help and support from either their partner, friends or university staff, and reported a sense of belonging and a 'loyalty' to the University in their final year:

"I do [belong] and I think the beginning I was lonely, I didn't join any clubs, I didn't really know anyone and I think getting into the swing of things, but I did. I do feel like I belong here. I think because of friends, clubs, societies, and because, of volunteering and just, I've met so

many people that are amazing and made lifelong friends and that's just, that's been great". (Interview 12)

"Yeah, definitely [belong]. I feel quite loyal to Brunel as well. I don't know whether that's my nature or what's happened while I've been here or anything, but no, I feel quite...I know some of my friends from home, they're like, oh yeah I go here but that's it kind of thing, it's no more than that. But no, I definitely like to say that I've been to Brunel". (Interview 13)

It is becoming increasingly clear that institutions need to look at how they foster a sense of belonging and respond to the different needs of their student population. This is particularly important in the context of increasing numbers of students who choose to live at home and commute to their place of study (Thomas, 2017). In this research, students who commuted to university reported that at times they felt they missed out on the 'campus experience' and the social aspect of living on campus:

"...at first, the first year, I did feel like I was missing out on the campus experience, the whole university ...yeah, the social life bit". (Interview 1)

Fostering a sense of belonging can play a key role for students, including those from a widening participation background, to achieve successful outcomes in higher education (Thomas, 2012). Students who have a strong sense of belonging, feel connected with their peers and staff, and who feel supported, are more likely to complete their degree programme and be successful in their chosen career.

v. Timetabling

One issue that caused a great deal of frustration for students was the issuing of the academic timetable. 63.3% of students felt that receiving the timetable earlier in the year would help them complete their degree. This finding complements previous research by Wainwright and Marandet (2006) where students also identified problems with receiving the timetable only a few weeks before starting their courses.

Students felt that timetabling practices needed to be more flexible especially for students who lived off campus, worked part-time or had familial and caring responsibilities:

"Timetables have been shockingly bad for arranging part-time work around...they change around [and] are unrealistic and are posted far too late". (Questionnaire)

Students spoke about feelings of distress and anxiety waiting for the timetable to be issued. Late release made it impossible for them to plan ahead, arrange childcare or confirm their availability with their employer. Late timetable changes

proved to be a considerable area of frustration for students who combined study with part-time work:

“The short notice of lecture changes and seminars means I have to either miss work or miss essential study time”. (Questionnaire)

“Because we get the timetable I think during freshers’ week, and that’s really like annoying. Because you can’t plan anything, personally or here, you can’t really tell well am I going to do this or anything, so yeah just for me, I just like to organise what I’m going to do”. (Interview 10)

Students felt it was essential the University take on board their issues and concerns about timetabling and its impact on academic and other commitments:

“...I mean it’s just ridiculous actually, sometimes you know you don’t get it until really like the final hour, and that’s not helpful for me...and being able to pre-plan. And again, this all boils down to communication. Communication is key, it really is a crucial enabler of better engaging students, which will lead to their better success”. (Interview 3)

“...maybe something they [Brunel] could improve on, you know getting the timetables out there much quicker, because for people like me who work part-time and stuff and have to give their bosses you know a sufficient amount of time to swap shifts and things like that, I was, that created an issue for me”. (Interview 4)

Some students felt the University failed to adequately acknowledge and understand students’ sometimes complex lives and personal commitments. Previous research by Marandet and Wainwright (2009: 117) has highlighted how timing of lectures can be “perceived as exclusionary” by students with caring responsibilities and that there is often an ‘ambivalence’ about student parents’ inclusion at university. In this research, students with parenting responsibilities felt that timetabled hours at the beginning and end of the day made it extremely difficult to attend:

“...so you get the timetable two or three weeks before the academic term...you get told, this is your timetable going forward, childcare? You need to be giving them [nursery] notice for childcare. You don’t know what your timetable is, so you can’t predict the hours you’re at uni. Nurseries are only open between eight and six, the Brunel timetable runs from eight to eight. So if you organise nursery full-time, you can’t guarantee that you’ll make late lectures”. (Interview 5)

This participant went onto explain the cost implications arising from timetabling issues:

“...at the moment I know that I don’t go to uni Wednesday, I’ve got childcare four days a week..., however, I only have lectures on a

Monday. If I knew about that, then I probably would have tried to reduce one day at least, that would have saved me £175 for that one day". (Interview 5)

vi. Lack of physical and social spaces on campus

Providing more physical spaces on campus where students can meet, interact, form and develop friendships, without needing to spend money was identified as being an important area for development for the University, especially given growing awareness of the challenges faced by students who live off campus (commuter students). 63.30% of survey respondents would like to see a greater variety of study and social spaces on campus:

"I'd say that they [university] need to invest more in their students, in terms of their needs. There needs to be a social building. Where is the common hall? Common room or common hall, these kinds of things". (Questionnaire)

Students felt there was a lack of study and social spaces on campus that allowed students to interact and meet friends for social and academic purposes away from commercial activities:

"Very few places to sit and relax without having to buy something which is a nightmare when you don't live on campus and have to drive in for lectures". (Questionnaire)

"[Brunel needs] a bigger space for off campus students to eat home food/hang out". (Questionnaire)

Previous research (Thomas, 2012) has shown that friendship groups have a positive influence on the overall student experience and students' sense of belonging. T

As highlighted, a lack of social spaces was an important issue for commuter students:

"[there are] inadequate things for students, there's nowhere for, especially those that live off campus, you've got thousands that come in all the time but nowhere for them to socialise". (Questionnaire)

Recent research has shown that commuter students may experience challenges in relation to their engagement beyond the classroom. They can experience a lack of 'place' to spend time, store things, develop friendships and foster a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2017) and this is reflected in findings from this project.

Providing more spaces for social interaction is one area in which the University can help engender belonging. This can have a number of positive outcomes for students in terms of increased engagement with their degree programme, peers, and academic staff:

“I was reading Antonio Gramsci, an Italian philosopher, and he was talking about how university doesn’t allow students and lecturers to engage outside the lecture theatre...there should be other avenues for that [student-lecturer interaction] to happen, you know...lecturers can walk past you in a particular building that students could be congregating and they can come and interact”. (Interview 2)

Spaces for social interaction contribute to increasing overall retention and student success thus reducing attrition and improving student outcomes. It is vital that all students feel they are part of the campus community, and that there is a place for them to relax, socialise and study with others. Social integration is a very powerful factor in helping students stay the course and underpins a ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘engagement with the curriculum’ which has been found to contribute positively to improving retention and success (Thomas, 2012: 49).

Recommendations

From these findings, this report makes the following recommendations about how best to encourage and enable students from a widening participation background to stay the course:

i. Timetabling

Provide the timetable at an earlier stage prior to the start of the academic year to allow students with outside commitments to plan more effectively.

ii. Create more social and study places and spaces on campus

Offer a greater variety of study and social spaces and places where students can meet, interact and form friendships to facilitate student engagement and feelings of inclusion and belonging on campus. Where possible, the University should provide space for students to meet and socialise away from commercial settings. Consideration should also be given to 'commuter students' and their needs, in particular ensuring they have places on campus to meet, interact, store belongings and form friendships.

iii. Student-to-student learning and peer mentoring

Encourage and develop student-to-student learning and peer mentoring as it has the potential to improve the confidence and skills of not only the mentee but also the mentor. In addition, student-to-student learning and mentoring can help develop friendships and a sense of belonging.

iv. Workplace mentoring

Further develop and extend work-place mentoring for all students from a widening participation background. Workplace mentors provide a vital source of social capital for students. Increasing the number of students in the scheme will ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the job market and sustain successful careers.

v. Staff development and induction

Provide staff development and induction activities to support wider staff engagement in widening participation. This would help ensure that the University is adopting a 'whole institution approach' to widening participation as advocated by the Office of Fair Access (OFFA, 2017).

vi. Student information

Enhance systems for making information about students available to staff to provide a foundation for the building of relationships so that individualised support can be effectively provided.

vii. Personal Tutor and the personal tutorial system

Review the role of the Personal Tutor, the personal tutorial system, and tutorial expectations to ensure there is consistency across the University. More tailored support and guidance from staff would further enhance the student experience, facilitate student engagement and belonging, and improve student retention.

viii. Student support

Review of student support to ensure that there is consistency of provision across, and ease of access to, services.

ix. Signposting across the student lifecycle

Improve signposting of available support and services for students across the student lifecycle. Support needs to be clearly defined to ensure that students who lack confidence to seek out help are not disadvantaged. In this instance, we recommend that personal tutors and academic staff are familiar and up to date with available student services and support and are able to signpost students to them.

x. Sharing good practice

Develop a mechanism to share good practice across the University so that staff can learn from each other to enhance their work with all students.

Dissemination of Findings

Dissemination to date

During this 12-month study, the authors presented the 'Successful Students' research project at the following events:

Academic conference presentations:

- British Sociological Association annual conference (2018) Northumbria University
- Mobilities and Materialities in Education conference (2018), Department of Geography, University of Oxford
- Student Retention: Challenges and Innovation conference (2017), Access HE, London

Brunel University London presentations:

- CDEPS Education Day (2017), Brunel University London
- Learning and Teaching Symposium (2017), Brunel University London

To accompany this study, an exhibition was held in the Eastern Gateway Atrium at Brunel University London in September 2017. The exhibition showcased photographs taken by those students who kept a photographic diary of what they felt had encouraged and enabled them to successfully complete their degree programme. Photographs were coupled with quotes from student interviews (Appendix 1).

The exhibition was also presented at the following:

- Care Leavers' Conference, October 2017, Brunel University London
- Learning and Teaching Symposium, April 2018, Brunel University London

A blog piece entitled 'Successful students: exploring the factors that encourage and enable students from a widening participation background to stay the course' was published by the Higher Education Academy.

Future dissemination

The report will be disseminated through a number of channels:

- The report will be circulated across all three Colleges at Brunel University London.
- The report will be circulated to the widening participation community, higher education policy think tanks, charities and the wider university community.
- Three papers will be published in international academic journals.
- The report findings will feature in articles and blog pieces for higher education organisations.
- The authors are presenting the research at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference in September 2018.

References

Brunel University London (2016) *Brunel University London Access Agreement* <https://www.offa.org.uk/agreements/Brunel%20University%20London%201718.pdf> [Accessed 04.05.18]

Budd, R. (2016) Disadvantaged by degrees? How widening participation students are not only hindered in accessing in HE, but also during – and after-university, *Perspectives of Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 21, 111-116

Burgess, S., Chande, R., Dilnot, C., Kozman, E., Macmillan, L. and Sanders, M. (2017) *Role models, mentoring and university applications – evidence from a crossover randomised controlled trial in the United Kingdom, Working Paper*, <http://38r8om2xjhh125mw24492dir.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WP-Working-Paper-Bristol-Mentoring.pdf> [Accessed 04.05.18]

Chappell, A., Ernest, P., Ludhra, G. and Mendick, H. (2014) Explorations in knowing: thinking psychosocially about legitimacy, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 22, 137-156

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] (2014) *National Strategy for access and student success in higher education*, London: BIS

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, London: BIS.

Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2017) Success and impact in widening participation: What works and how do we know, *Higher Education Policy*, 30, 141-160.

Marandet, E. and Wainwright, E. (2009) Discourses of integration and exclusion: equal opportunities for university students with dependent children? *Space and Policy*, 13, 109-125.

Moore, J., Sanders, J and Higham, L. (2013) *Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education*. Report to HEFCE and OFFA by Arc Network, Executive Summary. London: HEFCE

Office for Fair Access (2017) *Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2015-16*. London: OFFA

Thomas, L. (2017) *Understanding a whole institution approach to widening participation: Final Report*. London: OFFA

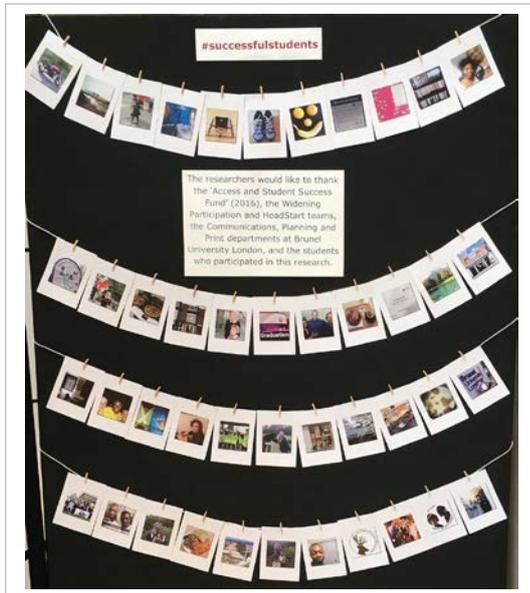
Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation

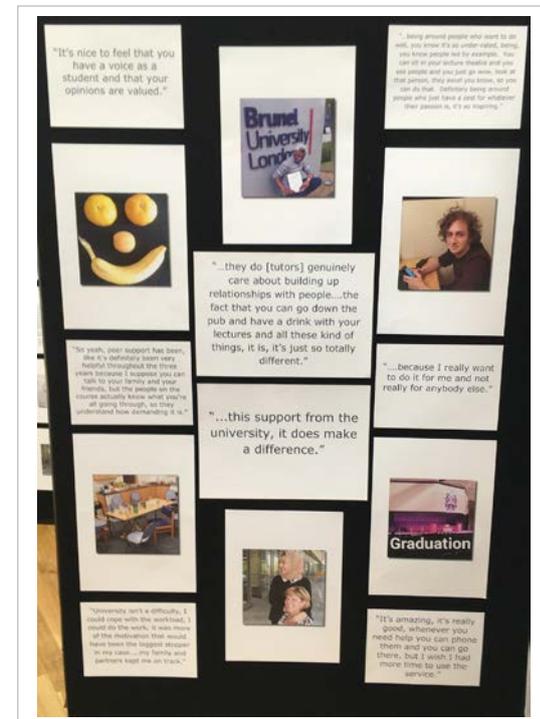
Wainwright, E. and Marandet, E. (2006) *An analysis of the learning needs and experiences of students with dependent children at Brunel University, Final Report for: Learning and Teaching Development Unit*. London: Brunel University.

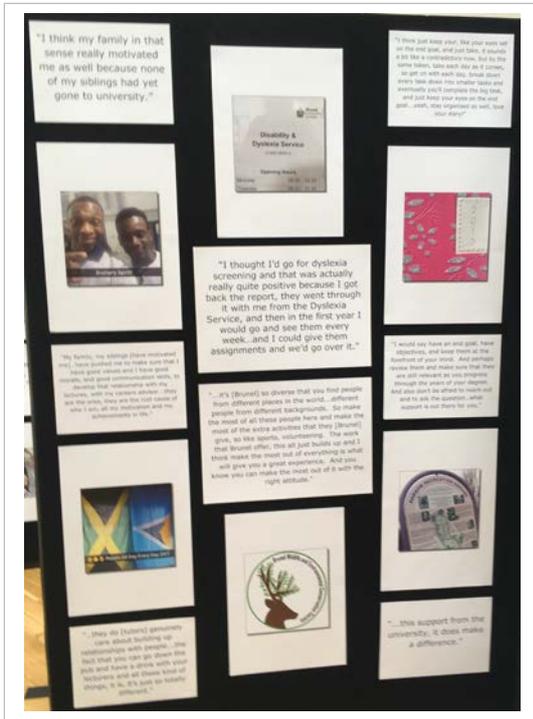
Wainwright, E. and Watts, M. (2017) *Social mobility in the slipstream: university participation and first-generation students' narratives of family*. Working paper. London: Brunel University London.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The Photographic Exhibition







Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Study title: Successful students: exploring the factors that encourage and enable widening participation students to stay the course

Introduction

Dear Student,

Brunel University London is interested in understanding what encourages and enables students with a widening participation (WP) background to stay at university and complete their course of study. This study will focus on the everyday experiences of level 3 WP students at Brunel. The findings of the study will help develop recommendations and guidelines in order to support and retain widening participation students.

Your help in this study is extremely useful. Your responses are voluntary and will be confidential. By pressing submit at the end of the survey you are giving consent to participate.

This survey is being conducted by Brunel University London. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr Ellen McHugh, ellen.mchugh@brunel.ac.uk/ 01895 268977
Thank you for your time.

ABOUT YOU

1. What gender do you identify with?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other (please specify):

2. What is your age?
 - 17-20
 - 21-24
 - 25-29
 - 30+
 - Prefer not to say

3. To which of the following ethnic groups do you consider you belong?
 - White British
 - White Irish
 - White other

- Black British
- Black African
- Black Caribbean
- Black other
- Asian British
- Asian Indian
- Asian Other
- Mixed ethnic group
- Other ethnic group (please specify)

BEFORE GOING TO UNIVERSITY

4. Previous Qualifications. Before coming to Brunel did you do a BTEC, HND or Access Course? (Tick as many as apply)
 - BTEC
 - HND
 - Access Course
 - Other (please specify)
5. Home postcode prior to coming to Brunel?
6. Are you in receipt of a Full Maintenance Grant?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Are You Registered Disabled?
 - Yes
 - No
8. Have you ever been a looked after child?
 - Yes
 - No
9. Have you ever had caring responsibilities?
 - Yes
 - No
10. Do you have any dependent children in the following age groups?
 - None
 - Under 5 years
 - 5-10 years
 - 11-16 years
 - 17 years +
11. Why did you choose to enter higher education? (Tick as many as apply)
 - For the intellectual stimulation
 - To do something for myself
 - Personal interest in the subject

- To get out of the house/away from children
- To be a role model for my children
- To get a well-paid job on graduation
- To help (re)enter the labour market
- To train for a specific career
- To gain a higher qualification
- Other – (please specify):

12. Why did you choose Brunel University? (Tick as many as apply)

- Academic reputation
- Academic facilities
- Other facilities/services (please specify in box below)
- Specific programmes/ course
- Student mix/diversity
- Distance from home
- Other (please specify):

ABOUT YOUR COURSE

13. Are you studying

- Part-time
- Full-time

14. What type of degree are you presently studying?

- BA
- BSc
- BEng
- Other (please specify)

15. Which department do you belong to?

- Brunel Business School
- Department of Arts and Humanities
- Department of Clinical Sciences
- Department of Computer Science
- Department of Design
- Department of Economics and Finance
- Department of Education
- Department of Electronic and Computing Engineering
- Department of Life Sciences
- Department of Mathematics
- Department of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering
- Department of Politics, History and Law
- Department of Social Sciences, Media and Communications

YOUR TIME AT BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

16. Since starting your degree, have you had problems with any of the following? (Tick all that apply)

- Attending classes

- Taking part in fieldtrips/placements
 - Finding time for personal study
 - Using the library
 - Study skills (revision skills, writing skills etc.)
 - Computer/IT skills
 - Balancing paid employment/study
 - Balancing study/domestic responsibilities
 - Lack of understanding/support from staff
 - Feeling isolated/ of not belonging
 - Lack of confidence
 - Lack of motivation
 - Financially supporting your studies
 - Finding (a) childcare place(s)
 - Paying for childcare
 - Other (please specify): _____
- 17.** Have you felt you needed additional support at any of the following times?
(Tick as many as apply)
- Start of degree
 - Examinations
 - Coursework deadlines
 - Beginning of term
 - Student placement
 - Other (please specify)
- 18.** Are you aware of the help that the following services can offer students?
(Tick as many as apply)
- Counselling
 - Access to Learning Fund
 - Library
 - Student Welfare
 - Student Union
 - ASK
 - Chaplaincies
- 19.** What do you feel has enabled and encouraged you to get to this point in your studies?
- Individual factors
 - Motivation, character, etc.
 - Personal support
 - Family, partner, children, friends, peers, etc.
 - Institutional support
 - Staff, university services, etc.
 - Other (please specify)
- 20.** Has anything else had a positive impact on your ability to get to this point in your studies? Please specify:

21. How comfortable would you feel raising any concerns with staff

...in your department?

| | | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Very comfortable | Fairly comfortable | Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable | Fairly uncomfortable | Very uncomfortable |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|

...in other student services?

| | | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Very comfortable | Fairly comfortable | Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable | Fairly uncomfortable | Very uncomfortable |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|

22. What would help students like you to complete a degree at Brunel?
(Tick as many as apply and use the box for additional comments)

- Offering both full-time and part-time degrees
- Information targeted at students with dependent children
- Receiving the timetable earlier in the year
- More flexible course delivery - please specify in box below
- Mentoring scheme
- More welcoming atmosphere for non-traditional students
- Greater variety of study/social spaces on campus
- Support and guidance from staff
- More regular one-to-one contact with tutor
- Advice on study skills and computing/IT skills
- Counselling and confidence building
- On-site childcare
- Financial support with childcare
- Being able to bring children onto campus/into lectures/on fieldtrips etc.
- Other – please specify

23. Do you think more could be done to support students like you?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

24. If you have any additional comments, please use the space below.

25. What are your future plans once you have completed your studies at Brunel University London? (Tick as many as apply)

- Post-graduate study at Brunel University
- Post-graduate study at other university
- Find full-time employment
- Find part-time employment
- Volunteering
- Mentoring
- Travel
- Other (please specify)

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

Thank you for your help.

We are inviting all students to participate in a follow up interview to discuss their experiences at Brunel University London to explore the factors that have contributed to them being able to complete their degree. The interview will take up to 1 hour and will take place either by phone or in person on campus. You will also be invited to complete a photo diary of what has encouraged and enabled you to stay at Brunel. Photos will be used to create an exhibition during the start of the academic year 2017-2018.

All students taking part in the interview and photo diary will be given a £10 voucher.

If you are interested in participating please complete the details section below.

Your details will be treated confidentially by us, and will not be passed on to anyone else. They will only be used for research purposes.

Name:

Telephone No:

Email:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Topic Guide

In-depth interviews with students from WP backgrounds

(Amend as appropriate whether face-to-face or telephone)

All questions to be asked in relation to interviewee's completed questionnaire.

| TOPIC | QUESTIONS |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Introductions and consent form | <p>Introduce self and explain the purpose of the project and aim of interview (i.e. to interview students from a WP background on what has enabled them to get to this point in their studies).</p> <p>Ensure signed consent form and recap on main points.</p> <p>Ask interviewee to introduce themselves Make sure the following information obtained from the questionnaire is correct: demographics/personal details</p> |
| Background to university study | <p>What route did you take in to your degree? PROBE for work, education, access courses etc. Qualifications</p> <p>What motivated you to start your current degree? PROBE for Professional reasons (To get a well-paid job on graduation; To help (re)enter the labour market; To train for a specific career; To gain a higher qualification, etc.) Personal reasons (For the intellectual stimulation; Personal interest in the subject etc.) Family, friends Have these motivations changed since you've started your degree?</p> |
| Choice | <p>Why did you choose Brunel University? PROBE for: Academic reputation Academic facilities Other facilities/services Specific programmes/ course Student mix/diversity</p> |

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <p>Distance from home</p> <p>How did you choose Brunel? PROBE for: Source of information Decision-making process Contact with staff/ visit of the campus</p> <p>How did you choose your degree? PROBE for: Source of information Decision-making process</p> <p>How much choice do you feel you had in university and course?</p> |
| <p>Main question</p> | <p>What do you feel has enabled and encouraged you to get to this point in your studies?</p> <p>PROBE for: Individual factors Motivation, character, etc. Personal support Family, partner, children, friends, peers... Institutional support Staff, university services, etc. Other sources of support</p> <p>Has anything else had a positive impact on your ability to get to this point in your studies?</p> |
| <p>Support offered</p> | <p>Have you had to deal with any specific issues at Brunel that have made studying challenging for you? PROBE for detail only if happy to share</p> <p>Did you seek support from staff in your department? PROBE for details</p> <p>Did you seek support from University services? PROBE for details.</p> <p>How does the support the university offers you compare to that received through other institutions (work, Further Education venue, school, etc.)?</p> |
| <p>Better supporting WP</p> | <p>What could be done to better support students like</p> |

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>students</p> | <p>you to ensure they complete their studies? PROBE for details e.g. Information targeted More flexible course delivery (Peer) Mentoring schemes More welcoming atmosphere for non-traditional students Support and guidance from staff More regular one-to-one contact with tutor Advice on study skills and computing/IT skills Counselling and confidence building Financial support Childcare support</p> <p>What piece of advice would you give to students in your situation? What are your plans? Anything else you would like to say/add? If there is anything that occurs to you over the next few days and weeks, please feel free to contact me.</p> |
| <p>Photographic diary</p> | <p>We are asking all students to keep a photographic diary which entails taking photos of things/ events/ times etc. that depict what has encouraged and enabled them to stay the course.</p> <p>This would involve you taking photos (on your phone) and emailing them to us. Are you happy to do this?</p> <p>Research team to follow up with an email.</p> |
| <p>Student films</p> | <p>To further encourage students from a wide range of backgrounds to come to Brunel, we want to put together a series of student-profile films. Would you be interested in participating in this?</p> |
| <p>Further contact</p> | <p>We will send them an electronic summary of the report.</p> |
| <p>Thank and close</p> | <p>Thank interviewee Give them £10 voucher – get date and signature.</p> |

Appendix 4: Information for Participants and Consent

Study title: Successful students: exploring the factors that encourage and enable widening participation students to stay the course.

Please tick (✓) all boxes below as appropriate, and date and sign as indicated.

| | | |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| A. | I have read and understood the participant information sheet above. I feel clear about what is involved and expected of me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| B. | I understand that my participation is totally voluntary. I also understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and am not obliged to provide any explanation. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| C. | If I do wish to withdraw, I understand that I can choose to withdraw some, or all, of the data collected up to that point. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| D. | I understand that anonymity will be assured in any data collected and that pseudonyms will be used for any reference to individuals, groups or specific locations. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| E. | I confirm that I have been given plenty of opportunities to ask questions, and where questions have been asked they have been answered to my full satisfaction. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| F. | I give my informed consent for recording and transcribing of the research conversations and understand that the data will be stored at Brunel University London under Data Protection regulations for up to 5 years after the study is completed. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| G. | I understand that the findings of this research will be published in journals/books; disseminated through national and international conferences, research seminars, symposia, workshops and media coverage (where relevant); used to inform policy development; used in teaching and course development; and images I share may be included in an exhibition. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| H. | I agree to take part in this study. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | I agree to be involved in the research conversations. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | I agree to share photographs that I take for possible inclusion in an exhibition. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | I agree to participate in a short film. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Participant's full name (PRINT)

Date

Signature

Researcher's name (PRINT)

Date

Signature

Participant's Mobile Number

Participant's Email Address

Copyright © 2018 Anne Chappell, Ellen McHugh and Emma Wainwright

ISBN: 9781908549402