

Widening participation and a student “success” assemblage: The materialities and mobilities of university

Emma Wainwright  | Anne Chappell  | Ellen McHugh 

Department of Education, Brunel University
London, Uxbridge, United Kingdom

Correspondence

Emma Wainwright, Department of Education,
Brunel University London, Kingston Ln,
London, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, United Kingdom.
Email: emma.wainwright@brunel.ac.uk

Funding information

Brunel University London, Grant/Award Num-
ber: Access and Student Retention grant

Abstract

This paper takes an assemblage approach to extend knowledge and understanding of widening participation (WP) in the United Kingdom. We reflect on the identification and experiences of a WP student population—how this population has been marked out, labelled, and considered through policy and intervention, alongside the materialities and mobilities that shape the lived experiences of these students. Using questionnaire findings, narrative interviews, and photo diaries, it draws on a 12-month study at a London university to explore the factors that have enabled final-year undergraduate students from a WP background to stay the course and complete their programme of studies. Our arguments are shaped by the geographical and educational literatures on materialities and mobilities. We bring these together to sketch out a student success assemblage comprising wide-ranging elements that we frame around identity, support, and resources. Assemblage draws attention to the multiplicity of human/non-human relations that shape student experience and students' capacities for success. Assemblage intersects with university precisely through a focus on experience and, as we suggest, takes on a particular inflexion for students from a WP background. This underpinning ontological basis to studying WP enables us to view the university, student experience, and success as being continually produced and reproduced, and coconstituted between the human and non-human. Universities should attend to student assemblages to better understand the experiences of and support needed by underrepresented groups in higher education.

KEYWORDS

assemblage, materiality, mobility, student experience, university, widening participation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The discussion of any population requires consideration of the embodied and lived body and the body politic. In this paper, we reflect on the identification and experiences of a widening participation (WP)

student population—how this population has been marked out, labelled, and considered through policy and intervention, alongside the materialities and mobilities that shape the lived experiences of these students. Our arguments are shaped by interlinked ideas relating to materialities and mobilities as developed through the geographical

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2019 The Authors. Population, Space and Place published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

and educational literatures. Together, these have led us to take an assemblage approach and sketch out a student “success” assemblage that is shaped and informed by students’ WP backgrounds. As we argue through this paper, thinking about a student success assemblage enables us to better understand the experiences of this population of students and provides an important contribution to our understandings of university experience and WP. We bring the concept of assemblage to debates on WP as a means of attending to the experiences of being a student; assemblage intersects with university precisely through a focus on experience and draws attention to the constitutive human/non-human multiplicity of relations that comprise this experience. As we demonstrate through this paper, this assemblage takes on a particular inflection for students from a WP background.

By assemblage, we mean a “heterogeneous collection of elements” (Wise, 2005: 78) and “collection of connections” (Currier, 2003: 326), and here, we argue that we can determine a student success assemblage, which comprises wide-ranging elements including national HE priorities, institutional policy and practice, support and academic staff, home, family and friends, various university spaces, and the stuff of study, play, and rest. But as Dewsbury (2011, 150) suggests, “the assemblage is less about what it is ... and more about what it can do, what it can affect and bring about”, and for us, it is a focus on the capacities of this assemblage for enabling successful completion of studies. This follows a conceptualisation of assemblage laid out by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) that emphasises what the assemblage makes possible, and in this paper, it is how the assemblage is perceived to enable successful completion of a degree programme. This underpinning ontological basis to studying WP enables us to view the university, student experience, and success as being continually produced and reproduced, and coconstituted between the human and non-human.

In the United Kingdom, WP has been a policy concern for over 50 years, occupying an increasingly prominent position on the HE agenda (Thompson, 2019; Younger, Gascoine, & Menzies, V. and Torgerson, C., 2019). Sustained policy interventions by recent governments have concerned student access, diversity, and retention (Jones & Thomas, 2005). WP is commonly taken to refer to activities and interventions aimed at creating an HE system that “includes all who can benefit from it—including people who might not otherwise view learning as an option, or who may be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers” (Action on Access, 2005). Efforts to increase the population of U.K. HE students from a WP background (Department for Education [DfE], 2017) have emphasised the need to evaluate the effectiveness of WP interventions both in England and internationally (Thomas, 2012). Research commissioned by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to look at whole institution approaches examines the ways WP is being implemented at the institutional level and how this can best be evaluated (Thomas, 2017). OFFA and the Higher Education Funding Council for England developed a national strategy for access and student success that has the laudable though ill-defined and contested vision “that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed” (BIS, 2014: 7; DfE, 2017). An estimated £833.5 million of government

funding has been 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).

An expectation of WP is now mainstreamed in most HE provision (Moore, Sanders, & Higham, 2013). Since 2006, institutions wishing to charge above the basic tuition 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 WP activities in relation to access, student success, progression, and financial support to disadvantaged students entering HE. These “access agreements” allow universities to set their own targets and are monitored and approved by the Office for Students (OFS)¹. Research by think tank Reform demonstrates that, despite this funding, universities are failing to increase participation among disadvantaged groups and recommends that the DfE creates a “more robust” measure of each university’s progress on improving access (Heselwood, 2018).

This is simultaneously linked to a broader and sustained focus on student experience, which is currently and crudely reworked as “satisfaction” and appraised through the National Student Survey (<https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>). This systematic evaluative approach has been critiqued for failing to take account of the complexities that impact upon student responses to satisfaction measures and results in partial and narrow understandings of how students experience university (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). As Holton and Riley (2013: 62) argue, we need to further explore the “where and how” of student life, including the diversity of experiences, which extends beyond these crude metrics. Although it is still not clear which factors are important and what institutions and policymakers should be doing to promote success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; McKendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014), further research is needed to explore students’ understandings and experiences of success (Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018). By focusing on WP students through a lens of assemblage, we attend to this here.

Framed by this HE policy context and language, this paper is based on a research project, funded by and undertaken at Brunel University London, a post-1960s campus-based university based in Uxbridge, West London, which aimed to explore the factors that encourage and enable students from a WP background to stay the course and successfully complete their programme of studies. In our discussion of “success”, it is the factors that have enabled final-year undergraduate students to get to a point of near completion in their studies. The research project set out to explore 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 and the types of support they have drawn on, and policies and practices the university could implement to better support them to increase retention and enhance progression. Through the research, we developed an interest in materiality and mobility and their role in shaping the everyday experiences of students, prompting the following questions: What role does matter, spaces, events, happenings, and relationships have in enabling student “success”? And, how are mobilities and movements—social, conceptual, and physical—central to this? Unlike our initial research project questions, these later questions developed through the research process and data analysis.

The next section outlines our conceptual framings in relation to materialities and mobilities. This is then followed by a focus on the context, approach, and methods of our study. We then draw on different data sets—photo diaries, interview transcripts, and qualitative questionnaire comments—to discuss what we call the student success assemblage and which we figure around the layered and overlaying themes of identity, support, and resources. Recognising and scrutinising this assemblage enable us to have greater insight into the lives of students from a WP background and understand experience and success in renewed ways.

2 | FRAMINGS

2.1 | Materialities, matter, and place

The “turn to matter” has been reflected on across the social sciences and has, in part, been a response to the influence of postmodern and post-structural theory (Fox & Alldred, 2016: 3) that, with a focus on discursive constructions, is argued to give too little consideration to materialities. The recent and sustained interest in and development of “post-human”, “non-human” and “more-than-human” perspectives that focus on our everyday interactions and relations gives more attention to the materialities of our lives (see Fox & Alldred, 2018 for an overview). “New” materialisms have thus emerged as an approach to understanding the social world that explores the power of matter. As a starting point, such approaches argue that it is not only humans that can exert agency but also the non-human or the inanimate matter in our worlds. The non-human as agentic is understood through examining the relationality between matter and people. Here, we consider interactions between matter and students as affective—they bring about effects and are experienced affectively, contributing, or not, to perceived success at university. We can read this as the performative work of materialities (Butler, 1990), with the non-human working to produce the university and its students, and sustain students while at the university. As we highlight through this paper, material things act on and with us in different ways, stretching or hindering our capacities. In this respect, assemblage provides a critical analytical means for understanding the experiences of students.

In the geographical literature and as Cameron (2012: 578) argues, by tracing “things and their stories”, we can explore the “material practices and relations through which ‘things’ matter” and that become productive in generating experiences of place. This approach goes beyond how places are given meaning by individuals, to incorporate how non-human material also generates place-making (Barad, 2007). Holton (2015) suggests that students’ sense of place has been neglected in research on student geographies. Whereas this has been more recently attended to (e.g., Finn, 2017 and Robinson, 2018), we argue that taking a materialities approach can add significantly to our understandings of the diverse spaces that constitute the university and how these spaces of university are experienced, shaping sense of place and student experience.

In the educational literature, Taylor and Ivinson (2013: 655) have argued that a sustained interest in materialities can “encourage us to view education in terms of change, flows, mobilities, multiplicities, assemblages, materialities, and processes”. We strongly agree with this sentiment; thinking about materialities can provide new insights and, importantly, grounds student experience in the everyday through embodied relationships and mobilities. Whereas some research has focused closely on the potential of this for understanding the bounded space of the classroom, as Taylor (2013: 688) asserts the “embodied practices of mattering the classroom”, others are beginning to demonstrate the porosity of educational and learning spaces. For example, Robinson (2018) has taken an assemblage approach to explore “good” learning through a focus on campus spaces beyond classroom encounters, arguing for greater attention to both formal and informal learning spaces to understand student experience. A focus on materialities provides a grounding and emplacement of this research within the university, but this grounding and emplacement are porous and open to the transitions and mobilities that generate, enable, and reproduce this. This is brought about through recurrent movements and mobilities that stretch beyond the university campus. We now focus on these mobilities and sketch their importance to our understanding of student success.

2.2 | Mobilities, movements, and transitions

Waters (2016) discusses how two competing concepts of emplacement and mobilities have emerged in the geographies of education literature. Drawing on this, mobilities are implicit in this paper in two linked ways. First, we can think in terms of social mobility that has been as so eagerly impressed by recent governments and is so closely aligned with WP rhetoric and targets. With recent governments foregrounding individualistic conceptualisations of social mobility, advantage and disadvantage tend to be reproduced through current understandings. Secondly, we can think in terms of the physical and conceptual mobilities of being a university student and “student geographies” (Smith, 2009). By this, we refer to moving into university (whether or not you move to and live at the university), the transitioning into being a university student, and individual or collective daily, weekly, termly mobilities and rhythms of being a student. We reflect on these movements and mobilities in relation to what has become known as the “mobilities paradigm”. Here, we sketch the contribution and role of these interlinked mobilities.

The expansion of HE, participation of “non-traditional” students, and the national strategy of access and student success have been partly encouraged by policy makers’ longstanding commitment to increasing social mobility. A deeply contested concept, most especially in relation to education (Brown, 2013), social mobility is considered a means to address social inequalities and exclusion (Payne, 2012) and has risen up the policy agenda to become embedded in contemporary political discourse:

Social mobility is the outcome that the Government wishes to see: a society becoming less stratified by

socio-economic class. Widening participation to higher education helps to increase social mobility but does not achieve it on its own: employers, schools, colleges, communities and the Government all have roles to play, too (BIS, 2014: 6).

Interest in social mobility has been forcefully generated by governments (Department for Work and Pensions and DfE, 2011; DfE, 2017), and the current Conservative government remains committed to improving “relative intergenerational mobility” and achieving this through the transformation of families, with special emphasis on education (BIS, 2015; May, 2016; DfE, 2017), including HE.

However, academic critique of this government framing has been widespread and detailed, drawing on a range of different theories and contexts to provide a critical evidence base of student experience. Such research has implored the individualist assumptions of social mobility (Hoskins & Barker, 2019) to reframe debate around structural and geographical constraints (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018) and better understand student experiences of higher education (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013).

Related to this, political focus on social mobility is the broader mobilities paradigm that argues that “mobilities need to be examined in their fluid interdependence and not in their separate spheres” (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 212): “all places are tied into at least thin networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place ...” (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Importantly, as Urry (2007) suggests, attention to mobilities and movement enables a focus beyond the self to explore how the world is sensed and experienced, and the geographical literature attends to these movements at a range of scales (see, e.g., Holdsworth, 2009; Hinton, 2011; Perkins & Neumayar, 2014).

Important for our discussion here is the understanding that mobilities are enacted through locality and the (re)arrangements of the materiality of places (Sheller & Urry, 2006). This conceptualisation of mobility is particularly pertinent for better understanding the student experience and the experience of students from a WP background. Student experience is not static and centred solely on university, but is fluid and stretched out, extending beyond university boundaries.

Literature on student experience and mobility has given considerable attention to the initial move or transition into university (see, e.g., Blair, 2017; Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Southall, Watson, & Avery, 2016). What has been given less consideration are the movements and shifts that students are constantly undertaking once at university (Holdsworth, 2009). Mobilities are fluid and incorporate different daily, weekly, and termly rhythms. Finn (2017: 743) has persuasively argued that there is a need to recognise a “broader range of movements, flows, stops, and starts that emerge relationally, emotionally, and temporally as students and graduates move into and through HE”. As she continues, there is a need to explore the everyday encounters and affective experiences of students. With its focus on materialities and mobilities, this paper aims to add to Finn's reflections on broader mobilities through an alertness to the materialities of being a student through a success assemblage that focuses on identity, support, and resources.

3 | UNIVERSITY CONTEXT, PROJECT, AND METHODS

The project from which this paper emerges was undertaken at Brunel University London in 2017–2018 and was aimed at exploring the factors that have enabled and encouraged final-year undergraduate students from a WP background to stay the course. This is set against a backdrop of concerns that WP has focused on access, rather than retention (Thomas, 2017). This project was also intended to take a new lens to questions of attrition and had a strong focus on developing recommendations to further support and retain these students (Chappell, McHugh, & Wainwright, 2018). It was funded by the university's access and student retention fund as part of the university's commitment to WP and demonstration that money is being “well spent” (Harrison & Waller, 2017) through evidence informed understandings of “which approaches and activities have the greatest impact, and why” (BIS, 2014: 9). With the current political climate putting institutions under increasing pressure to demonstrate the value they offer to students, this project is positioned as one example of this at the institutional level.

In 2016, Brunel had a student population of 12,000, 63% of whom were undergraduates. Although there is no agreed sector definition of “widening participation”, for reporting and targeted support purposes, Brunel defines students from a WP background as those with one or both of the following two characteristics: being in receipt of a full maintenance loan for the year (family income less than £25,000) and/or coming from low participation neighbourhoods (defined by POLAR 3, Quantile 1). Under this definition, the WP cohort for 2015–2016 was 40% of the undergraduate home student population. The University also targets activity in relation to inclusion, access, student success, and progression towards the following OFS target groups: black and minority ethnic students; disabled students; first-generation in higher education; looked-after children and care leavers; mature students; students who were in receipt of Pupil Premium² during their schooling. This is reflected in the University's strong and sustained history of WP and the work of the centralised WP Unit³. In addition, the University has funded research focusing on varying characteristics of this student cohort (see Cullen, Barker, and Alldred (2020) on student carers, Wainwright and Watts (2019) on first-in-family students, and Marandet and Wainwright (2010) on student parents). WP has been and continues to be closely tied to the University's strategic plan and imperative of enhancing student experience.

The study took a biographical narrative approach that included quantitative and qualitative elements of data collection. Fieldwork was conducted between February 2017 and January 2018, cut across two final-year undergraduate cohorts of students, and consisted of three main stages. Stage 1 comprised a short online questionnaire survey to explore what has enabled students from a WP background to stay the course and successfully complete their studies. One hundred and forty-three students answered the survey from across all University departments. Stage 2 consisted of in-depth interviews with 15 students (3 male and 12 female) who took part in the online survey and expressed a willingness to be interviewed. Stage 3 consisted of eight of the interviewed students (two male and six female) keeping photo diaries

of what they identified as enabling them to successfully complete their studies. It is the photos from these diaries and the materialities and mobilities that they capture that form the core data used in this paper.

In devising the research project, the inclusion of photo diaries was part of the anticipated outcomes of the study, rather than a method of data collection. Images from the photo diaries, along with interview quotes, were exhibited during the University's HeadStart⁴ week, Welcome week, Care Leavers' week, and Teaching and Learning Symposium as a means of raising awareness of students from a WP background. As a critical note of methodological reflection, it was only after the collection of diaries that we recognised the richness of the images and what they contributed to the research process and findings, and this sparked our interest in assemblage as a useful lens to better understand the lives and experiences of these students. This led us to the now extensive literature on the use of photo elicitation and photo diaries that recognises these as methods that flatten the usual research hierarchies and open up everyday lives that other methods struggle to access. As Harper (2002) explains, photo elicitation enlarges the possibilities of conventional empirical research. In constructing our arguments about the student success assemblage, we draw extensively on these photo diaries. In so doing, we recognise the constructions implicit in the taking and making of photographs, and certainly, some of the photos we draw on here are highly stylised by the student participants. In addition, it is us as researchers with a particular empirical and conceptual focus that are the main interpreters of them (Pink, 2007). As researchers, we were not involved in the image-making process, but are cognisant that the pictures do not necessarily present a "true" and comprehensive picture of participants' lives and experiences; as Back (2009: 474) argues, "photography both portrays the social world and betrays the choices made by the person holding the camera". Nonetheless, the photos have enabled us to build on questionnaire and interview findings and provide insight into the materialities and mobilities of success as experienced by the students themselves and provide an important addition to understanding student experiences.

Participation in the research was voluntary, and the informed consent of all participants was sought prior to participation. All participants were assured that their comments and photos would not be attributable to them and all 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. In line with ethical protocols, in using and presenting data below, we do not identify in words or images any of the research participants. The remainder of this paper discusses the student success assemblage in terms of identity, support, and resources. In thematically splitting the research under these headings, we recognise that they layer on and overlay one another in exploring student experience.

4 | STUDENT SUCCESS ASSEMBLAGE

4.1 | Identity

Part of what constitutes the student success assemblage is the national HE policy context that has driven WP in the United Kingdom

and that we have outlined above. The government has a clear set of goals including doubling the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university by 2020 and increasing the number of black and minority ethnic students going to university by 20% (BIS, 2016). Annual "access agreements" are now used to set out how universities sustain or improve access for underrepresented groups. To charge maximum fees, all universities need an access agreement that is then "signed off" by the OFS. The OFS argues that universities need to better evaluate their activities and share best practice on WP.

Importantly, this policy context marks out and labels students as coming from a WP background and a particular underrepresented group, and universities now collect more detailed data on their student body, assessing their overall presence, and are able to identify and mark out individual students. National policy and institutional strategy documents are an important part of the student success assemblage. They are agentic in term of determining students' very presence at university and then prompting and shaping the support offered to them while they are there. This active process of marking out and labelling is generative of students' awareness of their WP "status" and relation to the university.

This links to broader deployments of assemblage that engage in social and sociomaterial transformations, pointing to the relations between policy and their localised implementation (Allan & Cochrane, 2007). The localisation of national policy imperatives is felt at the institutional level. At Brunel, this is brought into sharp focus through the use of students who are identified and identify as WP ambassadors to encourage others "like them" to think about HE. Such students are also encouraged to become Brunel buddies and Peer Assisted Learning Leaders to work closely with new cohorts of WP students. Some interviewed students were active in these schemes, and they were an important means of mobilising and relaying a student identity. Photo diary image 1 is of the T-shirts worn for these activities at a range of University-wide and WP-specific events and was staged and taken by the student as a means of illustrating the importance of these roles as drivers of their own success. These T-shirts are worn at on- and off-campus events such as HE awareness visits (Years 6–13), master classes (Years 11–13), subject taster days (Years 6–13) and summer schools (Years 8–13).

As Miller (2010, 60) comments, "objects make us, as part of the very same process by which we make them", and this resonates strongly here. The T-shirts mark the individual as a Brunel student and their involvement in these schemes. Moreover, through attendance at WP-specific events, they mark an identity and background, and this was considered a position of particular responsibility:

I am a role model to others in my position who have followed my path to University (questionnaire).

The dressed and uniformed body marks a performed body, identity, and role, and following a performativities logic (Butler, 2010) these T-shirts, worn visibly at WP University events, bring the student identity into being in particular situations and with particular others.

Student interviews communicate the relatedness of undertaking these “ambassador” and “buddy” roles and activities and the affecting of positive change for others:

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).

... students from my socio-economic background, let alone ethnic background, you know I definitely want to tell them a story which they can relate to, I know they'll be able to relate to because it's the same story (interview).

In these narrations of success, the movement and transition implicit in this WP identity is highlighted. The policy context, formation of targets, and university activities are generative of student access and experience. For the students here, this WP-specific context shaped part of their identity and is featured in their narratives of success.

4.2 | Support

Linked to this identity-framed analysis are images of family homes—of bricks and mortar—that featured in students' photo diaries, such as in Image 2.

Spatialised understandings of home recognise it as both material and imagined (Blunt & Dowling, 2006); homes not only are relational places of privatised family life and childhood but also represent a socio-economic context of upbringing. Images of homes and families are accompanied with interview excerpts as students reflected on their supporting and motivating roles:



PHOTO DIARY IMAGE 1 T-shirts.



PHOTO DIARY IMAGE 2 Home.

I think my family ... really motivated me as well because none of my siblings had yet gone to university (interview).

Images and interview excerpts also illustrate the movement from home and family and to university which, in the above example, came from a first-in-family student. Home is a site through which, from moving from and revisiting, student identities and subjectivities are (re)produced. Reflecting on the role of home and family and their particular situatedness was not only an emotional experience of articulating the challenges encountered but also the pride and achievement in this movement to university, as this student recounts:

I'm from a council estate, and it feels kind of nice to be able to say, look what I'm doing with my life (interview).

Home, as a material location and relationality, is an important site through which success is interpreted and was used in student images to represent the support that they had received. Research has shown that familial support enables the immediate transition to university (Finn, 2017). However, it is also vital in sustaining students while there. The lifeworld of the student is linked strongly to home, support from home, and familial relations and reinforces the need to recognise university experience as shaped by relations beyond the university (Robinson, 2018).

Further developing this, the materiality and relationality of peer support both within and beyond study and learning spaces were highlighted. Photo diary image 3 shows the spatially bound halls of residence kitchen—the table, chairs, bottles drunk, and mess created—enabling support through social situations.

Objects, such as those captured in the photograph of the kitchen, are central to producing atmospheres and encounters of support and



PHOTO DIARY IMAGE 3 Halls of residence.

friendship, where experiences can be exchanged. Peer support creates and is created by the materiality of these encounters:

Peer support has been, like it's definitely been very helpful throughout the three years because I suppose you can talk to your family and your friends, but the people on the course actually know what you're all going through, so they understand how demanding it is (interview).

Encounter is a spatially charged concept; it requires a bringing together of different parts into some type of relationship and dialogue. It requires an embodied and physical location and necessitates some sort of presence (Wilson, 2017). The kitchen encounter depicted in image 3 depicts the relationality of peers and friends and the materiality of this space. The copresence of students and the materiality creates this as a space carrying particular meaning in these student narratives of support and success. This perhaps depicts a “typical” or even a “stereotypical” student scene and certainly is not specific to students from a WP background. However, the encounter, tallied with “people ... [who] know what you're all going through” is more pertinent to students who are first in family at university where tacit knowledge of HE at home can be lacking (O'Shea, 2015).

For the “commuter students” who live off campus and remain in the family home (Thomas & Jones, 2017), this materiality is not accessible in the same way and can lead to a sense of struggling to form friendships and find support needed:

I'd say that they [the 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).

With recent research highlighting that these commuter students experience university quite differently and that this is having a negative impact on success and progression (Goddard, 2017; OFS, 2018), universities would benefit from recognising the generative effects of social spaces and their matter for positive student experience and support.

Peer encounter and support at a distance were also significant, and the relationality of this seeped through interview narratives. As the quote below and the linked photo diary image 4 suggest, by opening up a virtual space, technology enables support to operate across space.

I think our class it quite supportive, we have our group texts and if anyone needs help with their assignments everyone's willing to help ... and emotional support ... I think we definitely have given each other a lot of emotional support ... not just as like a little group but as whole class, yeah, we're quite close.

The text messaging and the WhatsApp groups are critical in enabling and maintaining this peer encounter when that bounded space does not exist. Technology has a key relational role of support that can cross daily spatial and temporal constraints.

4.3 | Resources

The very matter of studying and course completion relies on access to resources, for example, work spaces, books, journals, and increasingly the technology—computers, printers, and so on—through which some of these are accessed. In addition, the ability to participate in learning and wider university activities requires a certain level of financial

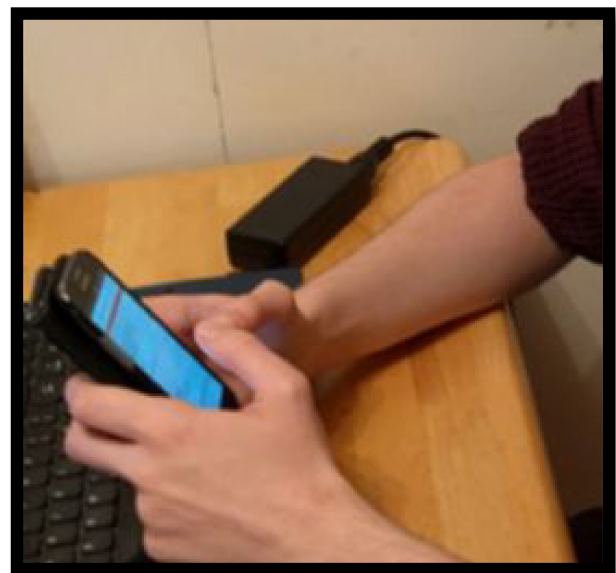


PHOTO DIARY IMAGE 4 Peer support at a distance.

resource. These elements of the student assemblage require attention and scrutiny for what they enable and what, when they are lacking, can hinder.

We begin with a focus on the role of the University's Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS), a well-known and regarded service for many students and which figured extensively in all sets of data, including in a number of student photographs (e.g., in image 5):

The quotes below highlight the role of DDS assessments and the matter that stems from this—the laptop, printer, and scanner—as well as the opportunity to sit down and go through assignments with an advisor:

... and she helped me get a laptop as well, because I didn't have a laptop or anything like that, and a printer and a scanner, and those three things have been incredibly helpful (interview).

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).

The materiality provided through the DDS enables students to have the capacity to complete their studies. For some students, this is matter of course, but not always for those from low-income backgrounds. One of the leading criticisms of post-humanist approaches is that they are “ontologically flat”, that is there is no hierarchy between different constitutive elements of an assemblage. Quinn (2013) argues that inequalities filter through and shape materiality and the assemblage, and we argue this is especially prescient for students from a WP background. The matter of students' lives shapes and is shaped by some characteristics of a WP background and is specific to these students. Social inequalities work through materialities creating or inhibiting capacities for success. This point is reiterated

by students' reflections on finance and the very impact this has on students' everyday material existence:

Ensure every student is financially stable to focus on their studies. Make it a mandatory requirement to ensure every students' financial health (questionnaire).

Lack of finance and families that can support students with their finances is an everyday burden for many in staying and feeling they belong at university, whether in feeding themselves, equipping themselves for study, accessing placements and fieldtrips, or being able to socialise as other students can. This lack of matter can create a sense of fitting in or not and shapes possibilities for staying the course.

The points raised by Quinn (2013) about inequalities and the concern over student finances can be considered more widely in relation to university experience and success. The resources needed for study or, more importantly, the lack of, recurred through the student photo diaries and interviews. Picking up on some of the issues already discussed, rooms, computers, phones, and diaries were among the students' chosen photo images and contribute, in varying degrees, to the capacity for student success.

The study bedroom in halls of residence shown in image 6, with desk, chair, and computer, signals the matter that enables assessments to be completed. This image marks the necessary interaction between student and the matter of study in the bedroom to facilitate completion of assessments. Learning is dependent on these materially embedded spaces and resources; the assemblage of the study room is generative of the work achieved and to be done. Without this study space and the matter that creates it, success is curtailed.

This very physical materiality is coupled with resources such as Blackboard Learn that also are figured in photographs and are essential in the process of producing university work.



PHOTO DIARY IMAGE 5 Disability and Dyslexia Service.



PHOTO DIARY IMAGE 6 Study bedroom.

The actual resources we are given, like our Blackboard and everything, that's really beneficial. Because then you can do as much as, or as little as you want, to actually invest your time into this (interview).

Virtual platforms such as Blackboard Learn enact new learning environments and mark a changing materiality of learning (Edwards, 2012) where geographic proximity disintegrates. They transform the spatialities and temporalities of learning with the immediate corporeal encounter of learning, and support shifted to a relationality based on technology-mediated interactions. This is especially prescient for students who live at a distance or those who, for various reasons though often linked to caring responsibilities, are unable to come to class. With 16% of our survey participants and 5 of the 12 interviewees having caring responsibilities, the importance of virtual learning resources and access to them were critical. However, this access to Blackboard Learn and other e-learning facilities relies on the very presence of and interaction with the matter of technology, as previously discussed.

5 | CONCLUSION

Holton (2019: 2) discusses how, in recent years, student experience has been reimagined in new and exciting ways and how these debates are "crucial for advancing scholarly understanding of how young people approach, interpret, and manage HE". This paper, with its specific focus on materialities and mobilities in relation to students from a WP background, contributes to this imagination. Universities and students' experiences of university are made up of human and non-human agencies that stretch across space, reaching beyond the confines of the bounded campus or university locality. Importantly, when considering student success, there is a need to look beyond final educational outcome to consider success as a relational set of possibilities. This understanding of success encourages an approach that looks at capacities, of what is possible and what can be achieved. As we have argued, a focus on materialities and mobilities through an assemblage approach offers a new perspective to understand student experience.

In a reflection on assemblage and geography, Anderson and McFarlane (2011: 124) question what assemblage "enables us to think and do". By exploring students' sense of what has enabled them to complete their studies—what we have termed a student success assemblage—we reiterate Waters (2016: 6) point that "learning ... is dependent upon various materially embedded assemblages of people and things". Student photo diaries, coupled with interview and questionnaire data as presented and analysed in this paper, have articulated particular elements of this assemblage and have alerted us to the capacities generated through them.

This paper has sketched out an assemblage that draws together a wide range of things, relations, and mobilities: national and institutional policy; peer, familial, and student support; and the stuff of home and university. We recognise that some elements of the assemblage are relevant to many, if not all, students, and not just those from a WP

background. However, other elements, linked to the three analytical frames we use—identity, support, and resources—are very particular to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those defined as WP. The use of photo diaries as a method of data collection and the analysis of images selected, staged, and taken by WP students enable us to showcase what has been important for students themselves in ensuring successful university completion. It enables an exploration of WP student experience through a different lens, one that highlights the underpinning social and spatial dynamics of materialities and mobilities of the university and provides an enhanced understanding of what enables student success. Images of the seemingly mundane and everyday as proffered by the students themselves and thus attention to the seemingly mundane and everyday prompt new considerations of the university experience for students, most especially those from a WP background. Photo diaries, together with qualitative interview and questionnaire material, animate the student experience and reveal a student success assemblage, that is, animates in terms of not only visualising the materiality of student success but also recognising the mobilities, movements, and vibrancy implicit to this.

Student success is in part dependent on this matter and the affects that this matter produces—the relationships, the abilities, the sense of self and others, and the understanding of university. It is the capacities generated through the assemblage that mark this as an important way of looking at student experience. As one student noted: "It's all about people feeling comfortable in their environment" (interview). This is an important sentiment and links together the different elements of the discussed assemblage. The environment is made up of people and things—people and things that are copresent as well as people and things that are distant and even seemingly unrelated. Yet these things create and mediate student success; they enable, or not, students to stay the course.

As has been illustrated here, university should be productively seen as a space of the intersection of multiple and mobile materialities and materialities that extend beyond the university. As student experience or more accurately particular constructions of student experience are upper most in the minds of those in government and university management, attention to these materialities and mobilities of experience is timely. Access and the move into HE are not a sufficient focus and there is a need for sustained research on the everyday experiences of students and what enables them to complete their course of studies. In particular, we need to better consider what this means for attracting students from a WP background into HE; we need to attend to the student assemblage to ensure positive educational experiences at university. We also need to recognise, as highlighted here, that this assemblage is different for different students. What we have discussed here is, in some ways, linked to the specificity of Brunel and its students—which is potentially at odds with students from some other institutions. However, it is important to recognise that a student success assemblage does take on a particular inflection for students from a WP background; it is shaped and informed by students' backgrounds and identities. Adding to what Quinn (2013) has flagged, we need to be cautious of the "flat ontology" espoused by some new materialists to ensure we do recognise

that materialities produce and are produced by structural inequalities, and a focus on WP students alerts us to this.

ENDNOTES

- ¹The Office for Students is the independent regulator of HE in England.
- ²The U.K. Government introduced the Pupil Premium in 2011 to provide additional school funding for those children classed as having a deprived background and those who have been looked after (by a local authority) for more than 6 months (Jarrett & Long, 2014).
- ³Specific strategies aimed at increasing the number of WP students include on-campus activities (HE awareness visits [Years 6–13]), master classes [Years 11–13]; subject taster days [Years 6–13], Summer schools [Years 8–13] and careers fairs [Year 10]) and off-campus activities (HE advice talks for students, parents and community groups, preparation HE workshops, attendance at parents, and options evenings). For current WP students, there are career-mentoring opportunities, a WP student ambassador programme, and a HeadStart programme (see below).
- ⁴HeadStart aims to support students with their transition into studying in HE and is a 3-day induction programme before the main Welcome or Freshers' Week for students who are from WP groups.

ORCID

Emma Wainwright  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6490-7160>

Anne Chappell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6876-2413>

Ellen McHugh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8483-2255>

REFERENCES

- Abrahams, J., & Ingram, N. (2013). The chameleon habitus: Exploring local students' negotiations of multiple fields. *Sociological Research Online*, 18.
- Action on Access (2005). *Widening participation: A rough guide for higher education providers*. HEA: York.
- Allan, J., & Cochrane, A. (2007). Beyond the territorial fix: Regional assemblages, politics and power. *Regional Studies*, 41, 1161–1175.
- Anderson, B., & McFarlane, C. (2011). Assemblage and geography. *Area*, 43, 124–127.
- Back, L. (2009). Portrayal and betrayal: Bourdieu, photography and sociological life. *The Sociological Review*, 57, 471–490.
- Barad, K. (2007). Meeting the universe halfway: Realism and social constructivism without contradiction. In L. Nelson, & J. Nelson (Eds.), *Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science* (pp. 161–194). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Bathmaker, A., Ingram, N., & Waller, R. (2013). Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34, 723–743.
- Blair, A. (2017). "Understanding first-year students" transitions to university: A pilot study with implications for student engagement, assessment, and feedback. *Politics*, 37, 215–228.
- Blunt, A., & Dowling, R. (2006). *Home*. London: Routledge.
- Briggs, A., Clark, J., & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: Understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18, 3–21.
- Brown, P. (2013). Education, opportunity and the prospects for social mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34, 678–700.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2010). Performative Agency, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3, 147–161.
- Cameron, E. (2012). New geographies of story and storytelling. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(5), 573–592.
- Cameron, J. (2010). v. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3, 147–161. Chappell, A., McHugh, E., & Wainwright, E. (2018). *Successful students: The factors that encourage and enable students from a widening participation background to stay the course*. London: Brunel University London.
- Cullen, F., Barker, J., & Alldred, P. in press, 2020 "Trying to keep up": Spatial and temporal rhythms within caring narratives: Examples from women student carer accounts. In J. Parsons, & A. Chappell (Eds.), *Handbook of Auto/Biography*. London: Palgrave.
- Currier, D. (2003). Feminist technological futures. *Feminist Theory*, 4, 321–338.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus*. London: Athlone Press.
- Department for Education (2017). *Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education*. London: Stationery Office.
- Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education (2011). *A new approach to child poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families' lives*. London: Stationery Office.
- 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] (2015). *Fulfilling our potential: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.
- Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] (2016). *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: BIS.
- Dewsbury, J. (2011). The Deleuze-Guattarian assemblage: Plastic habits. *Area*, 43, 148–153.
- Donnelly, M., & Gamsu, S. (2018). Regional structures of feeling? A spatially and socially differentiated analysis of UK student im/mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39, 961–981.
- Edwards, R. (2012) "(Im)mobilities and (dis)locating practices in cyber-education", in R. Brooks, A. Fuller and J. Waters *Changing Spaces of Education: new perspectives on the nature of learning*, London, Routledge, pp. 205–218
- Finn, K. (2017). Multiple, relational and emotional mobilities: Understanding student mobilities in higher education as more than "staying local" and "going away". *British Educational Research Journal*, 43, 743–758.
- Fox, N., & Alldred, P. (2016). *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action*. London: Sage.
- Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2018). New materialism. In P. A. Atkinson, S. Delamont, M. A. Hardy, & M. Williams (Eds.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Methods*. Londo: Sage.
- Goddard, H. (2017). *Understanding Barriers to Engagement for Commuter Students*. London: The Student Engagement Partnership.
- Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17, 13–26.
- Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2017). Success and impact in widening participation: What works and how do we know. *Higher Education Policy*, 30, 141–160.
- Heselwood, L. (2018). *Gaining access: Increasing the participation of disadvantaged students at elite universities*. London: Reform.
- Hinton, D. (2011). "Wales is my home": Higher education aspirations and student mobilities in Wales. *Children's Geographies*, 9, 23–34.
- Holdsworth, C. (2009). "Going away to uni": Mobility, modernity and independence of English higher education students. *Environment and Planning A*, 41, 1849–1864.

- Holton, M. (2015). Adapting relationships with place: Investigating the evolving place attachment and "sense of place" of UK higher education students during a period of intense transition. *Geoforum*, 59, 21–29.
- Holton, M. (2019). Debating the geographies of contemporary higher education students: Diversity, resilience, resistance? *Children's Geographies*, 17, 13–16.
- Holton, M., & Riley, M. (2013). Student geographies: Exploring the diverse geographies of students and Higher Education. *Geography Compass*, 7, 61–74.
- Hoskins, K., & Barker, B. (2019). Social mobility: The potential of a genealogical approach. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45, 238–253.
- Jarrett, T., & Long, R. (2014). *School funding: Pupil Premium*. London: House of Commons Library.
- Jones, R., & Thomas, L. (2005). The 2003 UK government higher education white paper: A critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(5), 615–630.
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37, 58–71.
- Marandet, E., & Wainwright, E. (2010). Invisible experiences: Understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36, 787–805.
- May, T. (2016) Britain, the great meritocracy: Prime Minister's speech, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech> accessed 26.10.18
- McKendry, S., Wright, M., & Stevenson, K. (2014). Why here and why stay? Students' voices on the retention strategies of a widening participation university. *Nurse Education Today*, 34, 872–877. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2013.09.009>
- Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Moore, J., Sanders, J., & 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.
- Office for Students (2018). *Access and participation plan guidance for 2019-20*. London: OFS.
- O'Shea, S. (2015). Filling up the silences—First in family students and university talk in the home. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning Education*, 34, 139–155.
- Payne, G. (2012). A new social mobility: The political redefinition of a sociological problem. *Contemporary Social Science*, 7, 55–71.
- Perkins, R., & Neumayar, E. (2014). Geographies of educational mobilities: Exploring the uneven flows of international students. *The Geographical Journal*, 180, 246–259.
- Picton, C., Kahu, E., & Nelson, K. (2018). "Hardworking, determined and happy": First-year students' understanding and experience of success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37, 1260–1273.
- Pink, S. (2007). *Doing visual ethnography: images, media and representation in research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Quinn, J. (2013). Theorising learning and nature: Post-human possibilities and problems. *Gender and Education*, 25, 738–753.
- Robinson, P. (2018). Learning space in the countryside: University students and the Harper assemblage. *Area*, 50, 274–282.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38, 207–226.
- Smith, D. (2009). "Student geographies", urban restructuring, and the expansion of higher education. *Environment and Planning A*, 41, 1795–1804.
- Southall, J., Watson, H., & Avery, B. (2016). Non-traditional, commuter students and their transition to higher education—A synthesis of recent literature to enhance understanding of their needs. *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, 5, 1–15.
- Taylor, C. (2013). Objects, bodies and space: Gender and embodied practices of mattering in the classroom. *Gender and Education*, 25, 688–703.
- Taylor, C., & Ivinson, G. (2013). Editorial. Material feminisms: New directions for education. *Gender and Education*, 25, 665–670.
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Office for Students.
- Thomas, L. (2017). *Understanding a whole institution approach to widening participation: Final Report*. London: OFFA.
- Thomas, L., & Jones, R. (2017). *Student Engagement in the context of Commuter Students*. London: TSEP.
- Thompson, D. (2019). Widening participation research and practice in the United Kingdom on the twentieth anniversary of the Dearing report, reflections on a changing landscape. *Educational Review*, 71(2), 182–197.
- Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wainwright, E., & Watts, M. 2019 Social mobility in the slipstream: First-generation students' narratives of university participation and family. *Educational Review*.
- Waters, J. (2016). Education unbound? Enlivening debates with a mobilities perspective on learning. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41, 279–298.
- Wilson, H. (2017). On geography and encounter: Bodies, borders and difference. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41, 451–471.
- Wise, J. (2005). Assemblage. In C. Stivale (Ed.), *Gilles Deleuze: key concepts* (pp. 77–87). Durham: Acumen.
- Younger, K., Gascoine, L., & Menzies, V. and Torgerson, C. (2019). A systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43, 742–773.

How to cite this article: Wainwright E, Chappell A, McHugh E. Widening participation and a student "success" assemblage: The materialities and mobilities of university. *Popul Space Place*. 2020;26:e2291. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2291>