Students' self-reported barriers to success: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of first-generation and non-traditional students on an undergraduate Primary Education Studies degree in London

Poppy Gibson

The Open University

Abstract

Supporting adults on their learning journey through further education (FE) and higher education (HE) involves understanding that each learner may come with complex needs and external factors that may hinder their educational success; however, sometimes the barriers may come from within the learners themselves. Impostor syndrome – especially for students who are first generation into university or for 'non-traditional' students returning to education after a career break or raising a family – can be one such barrier to education.

This small-scale study, intended to improve understanding of their perceived barriers to learning, interviewed eleven students who were 'first-generation' and/or 'non-traditional' students on an undergraduate Primary Education Studies degree at a university in London, England. Individual interviews were conducted face to face on campus. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to offer insight into the lived experiences of the participants. This case study considers strategies and interventions that may be employed in both FE and HE settings to help increase student engagement, retention and success, while also nurturing student wellbeing. The author suggests that, although data were gathered from HE students, the findings and interventions are applicable and transferable to FE students.

Keywords: education, barriers, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), further education, higher education

Introduction

Research into the wellbeing of students shows that, when students are academically and emotionally supported, we may see improved 'performance, motivation, optimism, and empathy' (dos Santos Boni *et al*., 2018, p.85). It is essential that further education (FE) and higher education (HE) institutions consider support strategies to engage students in active participation and successful completion of their courses. Students, owing to self-doubt, may suffer from 'impostor syndrome' (IS) and educators must first recognise that this feeling may be present if they are to help dissolve it.

If we look deeper into the mental health of students at university, there is a link between high levels of academic stress owing to study and assignment pressures and the probability of mental health issues (Córdova Olivera *et al*., 2023). Research conducted with students found that they

were more likely than non-students to experience depression, anxiety and stress (Farfán-Latorre *et al*., 2023); it is vital, therefore, for educational institutions to consider how inclusive and supportive practices may help to nurture the wellbeing of the students in their care. Statistics show that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, university students were flagged as a 'vulnerable group' for mental health disorders, with reports that one in five students suffered impaired mental health (Kohls *et al*., 2023).

If we look more closely at the challenges facing and the mental health of first-generation and non-traditional students, we can see that there may be additional barriers to learning and success.

- First-generation students are those whose parents or carers have not completed a bachelor's degree, meaning that they are the first in their immediate family to attend university.
- Non-traditional students are those who enrol at university later in life or attend part time while working or raising a family; this means that they may encounter such challenges as balancing work and school, experiencing financial constraints or adapting to a different learning environment, sometimes after an extended period out of the classroom.

The challenges confronting first-generation and non-traditional university students may adversely affect their mental health and academic success. With limited exposure to HE in their background, these students may be more susceptible to feelings of isolation and impostor syndrome. Financial constraints, the need to balance work and family responsibilities and having to navigate unfamiliar academic environments may contribute to increased stress and anxiety. Additionally, a lack of understanding of university resources and support systems may hinder their progress. In a recent study, Beckwith (2023) found four themes arising as barriers facing non-traditional students: family; support; generational gaps, and community. The numbers of non-traditional students in HE are increasing and we must seek better understanding of their experiences and needs rather than see their status in terms of a 'discourse of deficit' (Gungadurdoss-Ramjaun, 2023). Recognising and addressing these challenges is crucial to fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. This study aimed to gather further insight into these lived experiences.

Student support strategies

Supporting adults on their learning journey through FE and HE involves understanding that learners may come with complex needs and external factors that may hinder their educational success; however, sometimes the barriers may come from within the learners themselves. Impostor syndrome, especially for students who are first generation into university or are returning to education after a career break or raising a family, is one such barrier, for there is a strong correlation between impostor syndrome and stress in first-generation students (Holden *et al*., 2024). The more students feel that they are impostors, academically and socially, the less likely they are to have a sense of belonging and personal wellbeing (Dao *et al*., 2024) and we must therefore gather students' lived experiences to help understand why they feel like impostors and

thus determine how we can help them to navigate the essential first steps into their study with confidence and enjoyment.

Method

The setting for this study was a university in London, England. This study conducted semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with eleven students self-reporting their current feelings on their university experience. Participants were recruited by means of an email sent to all students on the accelerated Primary Education Studies degree. This degree does not have 'qualified teacher status' attached to it and therefore offers insight into learners who had chosen the sector (namely primary education) for their course of study, but had, interestingly, not chosen a vocational qualification with its essential teaching element. All participants identified as 'first-generation', 'non-traditional' or both.

This degree is a two-year programme; participants in the study could be from either year one or year two and so could be working at levels 4, 5 or 6. This allowed for a more comprehensive overview of barriers that might be felt than would have research into only one level of study. While the researcher does not claim that these findings are generalisable to other contexts, there are certainly transferable deductions to be made.

Students could take part in an interview either online or in person on campus; all students elected to have a face-to-face interview with the researcher. Extracts from the interviews are woven into this short paper to help illustrate the students' experiences.

The interviews were semi-structured and, in an effort to limit anxiety, students received the questions in advance and by email. Each interview, lasting about half an hour, was recorded on an audio recording app. Ethical approval was obtained from the university before recruitment took place and participants signed a consent form at the start of their interview, being made aware that they could withdraw at any time and avoid any questions if they so wished. There was no financial incentive for participants; they had just an opportunity to share their experiences and have their voices heard.

Analysis

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to offer insight into the lived experiences of eleven undergraduate students at the university referred to above. IPA is a qualitative approach which aims to provide detailed examination of personal lived experience – producing an account of which experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions – and it recognises that this is an interpretative endeavour as humans are sense-making organisms. It is explicitly idiographic in its commitment to examining the detailed experience of each case in turn, prior to the move to more general claims. IPA is a particularly useful methodology for examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

The sole researcher transcribed each of the interviews and, owing to the small sample size, coded the data by hand (as opposed to applying software such as NVivo). The researcher identifies as an interpretivist and thus used IPA as the best-fit methodology. The data gathering and analysis followed these steps:

1. interviews;
2. transcription of interviews;
3. first round of coding: identifying patterns, key words, shared feelings or issues;
4. second round of coding: drawing together superordinate and subordinate themes.

Many emotions, challenges and questions arose within the narratives, including 'discipline', and the quest to 'show others' their unrealised potential. Four key superordinate themes were drawn out from the eleven interviews:

- playing multiple roles: several other roles to play, alongside being a student, such as parent/carer/worker;
- neurodiversity: being neurodiverse and finding difficulty in engaging with subject content;
- uncertainty: lack of clear future pathway post graduation;
- lack of confidence: student impostor syndrome.

Evaluation

In this short paper, the four themes and strategies for intervention are provided for the reader.The strategies for intervention build on provision already in practice on other courses at the institution or are linked to literature to help the reader see the positive impact such strategies could have. This brief case study also touches on how these barriers interact with each other or with external factors, such as institutional structures or social environments, to offer better understanding of the challenges students face.

Barrier 1: several other roles to play, alongside that of being a student, such as parent/carer/worker

'Welcome to adult life!' - Ed, first-year student

'It feels like a juggling act… like all the things I'm trying to do are these balls in the air, like my studies, my family, helping with my little brother, my job, keeping fit… but instead of juggling balls, they're bowling balls!' - Nusrat, first-year student

Many students may be playing several roles and have multiple outputs for their time and energy. In addition to being students, they may be parents, carers or employees. The best way that we can support them is by ensuring that staff, especially any pastoral or personal development tutors, are aware of the students' situations. Personal development tutors are staff members trained to

offer support and, when deployed well, can contribute significantly to student engagement with learning (McFarlane, 2016).

Suggested intervention: personal one-to-one introductory meeting between students and their personal tutor during induction fortnight, to build emotional attachments and allow personal tutors to be more aware of each individual's situation.

Barrier 2: struggling with the transition from college/previous study to level 4 work and being neurodivergent.

'Maybe more of a spotlight can be put onto that transition from college: how to study, how to learn' - Levi, first-year student

'It's like my mind is fizzing with all the things I need to do, and I know what I need to do, but I just can't quite seem to get it done. My tutor breaking the assessment task down into smaller steps helped me figure out what I needed to do.' - Jolene, first-year student

Neurodivergent conditions such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can often be undiagnosed; it may be only when the level and intensity of academic work increases that there will be signs that point towards these conditions. In the first instance, it is best to get students to speak to their local GP, who will be able to discuss with them the best course of action or refer them to a charity specialising in autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)/ADHD assessments.

These are some signs to look out for in neurodivergent (and undiagnosed) students:

- struggling with dissemination of texts: articles, journals, textbooks;
- lack of focus/concentration on their work;
- poor time-management skills: in handing in or in completion of work;
- social skills: working in a group, verbal presentations, communicating effectively with others.

For neurodivergent students, having a well-supported environment that allows for good distractions may be effective in helping them maintain focus on the task at hand. This could be letting the student play music via headphones or have something to fidget with in order to assist concentration. Additionally, when asking neurodivergent students questions, it is important to give extra time – to process the question and repeat it – or to give an alternative format to the question, as they may not understand what is being asked of them. Always be clear, concise and direct with questions or with any exercise you set for your students. Institutions must aim to implement a system-wide approach to promote and foster inclusion of neurodivergent students and staff (Dwyer *et al*., 2023).

Suggested intervention: to promote any study skills materials that the setting can offer to students and to look to build these into personal tutor-group sessions with students to aid transition

between FE and HE settings as appropriate; to collaborate with any study skills staff or support tutors; to co-teach sessions together to show a united front to students and ensure students are referred to any other support services, such as the disability team; to utilise any additional resources, such as software, to help with reading and writing.

Barrier 3: lack of a clear future pathway, post graduation

'I don't know what I want to do yet… my parents said I should go to uni, I'm the first one out of my family… but I'm not quite sure what will come next' - Evie, first-year student

'I might be a teacher, but maybe I want to do something with speech and language therapy. But I have also been thinking about maybe opening my own nursery' - Jolene, first-year student

'I know I've signed up for a teaching degree, but I've actually thought I might go into social work after this' - Mia, first-year student

It is sometimes difficult to keep students engaged with their studies when they lose sight of the bigger picture and their intrinsic motivation to study wanes. Some of them may enrol on HE degrees without being sure what they want to do after they graduate. In a recent study of university students, only 27% had defined career aspirations post-graduation, while 67% were unsure (Thiem *et al*., 2024).

Suggested intervention: to run ambition/inspiration coaching sessions during induction fortnight at HE – where students can consider pathways and goals from the very start of the degree – to drive engagement and help keep them focused; to liaise with the careers teams and allow opportunities for students to reflect on and reassess their career goals and aspirations.

Barrier 4: Student impostor syndrome: not feeling 'worthy' of their place on a programme/amongst peers

'Uni is like alphabet soup…hot water…things are in the mix…we all share similar stories and experiences.

Maybe I don't fit just yet… but I'm still part of that.' - Rachel, first-year student

'Am I good enough? If they can do it, I can do it!' - Callum, first-year student

Students who experience impostor syndrome are often unaware of the support available to help guide them through this. Students are more likely to experience this in the first year/term of study and a session on 'impostor syndrome' and where to get help would be beneficial. Maftei *et al.* (2021) suggest that this also leads to major anxiety, as students worry about the image they are presenting in the classroom.

It is therefore in our best interests as providers to facilitate interventions for students if necessary and provide a clear pathway in terms of the programme; we must also help them to understand where and when to get help when experiencing such challenges as 'impostor syndrome'.

Suggested intervention: consideration of more formative feedback opportunities, from both tutors and peers, to build confidence and self-efficacy, as well as peer bonds; also to create study groups for students, either face to face or on online platforms, where students can share feelings and experiences with their peers as well as offer each other support with their studies.

Conclusion and next steps

The key implication for practice is that it is vital educators take time to get to know their students through induction activities, personal development tutor conversations and active learning and discussion in the classroom. Employing interventions, such as the ones suggested in this paper, may lead to better student retention, wellbeing and success through students' feeling further valued and included at personal, faculty and institutional levels. Interventions could be evaluated through student feedback, a key part of any intervention.

Regarding next steps, as themes are drawn from the data, plans are already being finalised for a bi-phase to this project; this will aim to institute the suggested interventions that have been drawn up in response to identified barriers to success arising from the students' narratives. It is hoped to explore more voices of first-generation and non-traditional students through further studies and in different contexts, such as with cohorts of students on distance-learning programmes, which would offer opportunity for comparison between barriers to students on campus and in online contexts. It is also hoped that research into and comparative analysis of FE and HE experiences will lead to a clear focus on how to ease the transition through these phases.

The conclusion to be drawn from this IPA analysis is that the strongest a) internal and b) external factors influencing engagement come respectively from the intrinsic motivation of students themselves (stronger when they visualise a clear goal or pathway, such as training to be a teacher) and the emotional investment (by being available, approachable and empathetic) of tutors and staff generally to help support students' transition from college, previous study or employment.

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