**Learner identities in undergraduates: a case study**

**Abstract**

*Background*
This paper examines the idea of learner identity of marketing undergraduates in the light of the widening participation agenda and identifies the challenges faced by those who enter HE by non-traditional routes.

*Purpose*
The research investigates the links between marketing students' learner identities and their socio-economic backgrounds, previous experience of education and subject choice. It is hypothesised that marketing students, having selected a degree in a specific business discipline, are aware of employability issues and may be committed to their learning, leading to stronger learning identities than those evidenced in the literature about similar post-1992 universities.

*Sample*
The sample is all undergraduate marketing students at a University in England (the pseudonym UE is used throughout). The total available population was 135 and, of these, 99 completed the questionnaire. Non-UK students were excluded from the sample and one part-time student was excluded. This resulted in a total of 83 completed questionnaires for analysis. A sample of six self-selected students participated in follow-up interviews.

*Design and methods*
The primary research consists of a questionnaire administered to undergraduate marketing students and follow-up semi-structured interviews with a small number of students. The interviews examined issues in more depth and sought individual narratives of educational experience, with particular regard to the study of marketing and future employment and examined whether subject choice was in any way affected by previous educational experience, family background or ideas about employability.

*Results*
Links between learner identity and socio-economic background, educational experience and subject choice are shown. Nearly half the sample is shown to have positive learner identities but no link was found between subject choice and students' thoughts on employability.

*Conclusions*
One should not presume students at lower-ranked universities to have poor learner identities as they may just be different, given their backgrounds and expectations, or actually be very strong. One should not presume that students of business disciplines are necessarily more focused on employability than other students.

**Keywords**: Learner identity, higher education, widening participation

**Introduction**

This small exploratory study was conducted at a university in England, hereafter referred to using the pseudonym UE. UE has no widening participation policy as it feels the majority of its students come to the university from backgrounds not considered to be 'traditional' for HE study. The university's Access Statement for the UK's Office For Fair Access (OFFA) states that UE has outperformed benchmarks relating to recruiting students from state schools and although marginally below the benchmark for participation from lower socio-economic groups, attracts good numbers of students from low-participation neighbourhoods. Widening participation has become 'mainstream' (Thomas, 2012).

Given that many of the students are, therefore, likely to have come from socio-economic and/or educational backgrounds commonly associated with widening participation, one might expect that they do not have strong learner identities. The literature shows that those from non-traditional backgrounds have problems with learner identities and may struggle to adapt to a university environment with all its related expectations (see Reay *et al*., 2009 for example), even given the range of financial and academic support services that are in place. Given the importance of progression, retention and completion, both for students and for institutions, it is crucial that those with weak learner identities are supported appropriately to help them adapt and cope. This may mean developing specific support mechanisms for these students to help reinforce their sense of themselves as learners so that they feel they 'fit in' with the university context.

A fuller understanding of the challenges faced by students with weak learner identities and of how to help those students develop stronger senses of themselves as learners may enhance students' chances of success (although it should be recognised that an individual with a strong learner identity is not necessarily a good learner).

**Methodology**

The aim of the research was to examine learner identities of undergraduates from non-traditional (widening participation) backgrounds in a defined setting. The objectives were to:

1. identify what is meant by 'weak' or 'strong' learner identity and common problems faced by those with weak learner identities
2. identify common factors in undergraduate marketing students' learner identities
3. establish whether there is a link between strength of learner identity, socio-economic and/or educational background and subject choice

The research consisted of a literature review, analysis of existing datasets and primary research with undergraduate marketing students. It was hypothesised that marketing students, having selected a degree in a specific business discipline, are aware of employability issues and may be committed to their learning, leading to stronger learner identities than those evidenced in the literature about similar post-1992 universities. This hypothesis was based on an assumption that those students who have chosen a degree subject allied to a specific career may have thought about the end result of their study and may have a more deliberate approach to employability.

The primary research consisted of a questionnaire administered to all undergraduate marketing students in 2012. The total available population was 135 and, of these, 99 completed the questionnaire. Non-UK students were excluded from the sample (for example, a cohort from Spain on a one-year top-up course studying only one marketing module) and

one part-time student was excluded. This resulted in a total of 83 completed questionnaires for analysis. Quantitative results were summarised, described and analysed using MS Excel.

Follow-up semi-structured interviews with six self-selected students (two students from each year) examined issues in more depth and sought individual narratives of educational experience, with particular regard to the study of marketing and future employment. The interviews examined whether subject choice was in any way affected by previous educational experience, family background or ideas about employability.

The research was approved by the Faculty's research ethics committee and all participants were provided with information about the project prior to taking part. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and each signed a consent form prior to taking part.

As this is a small case study, there is no intention to extrapolate wider meaning for UK universities. Rather, this case-study information adds to the growing body of knowledge about learner identity by providing specific examples from a defined group.

**Literature review**

*Widening Participation and learner identity*

The Widening Participation (WP) agenda came about under Blair's Labour government of 1997–2002, with the aim of making HE more accessible to those groups in society to whom it had been traditionally inaccessible for a range of reasons. A notable effect of the WP agenda has been that higher education institutions (HEIs) have seen an increase in learners from non-traditional backgrounds, although some argue that 'children from poor backgrounds remain far less likely to go to university than more advantaged children' (David *et al.*, 2008, p.12). The traditional learner who leaves secondary education with A levels – described by Holley *et al.* (2006) as 'a homogenous group of privileged middle class 18 year olds drawn from the top seven per cent of homes' – has been joined by learners from many different educational backgrounds with a range of entrance qualifications and from a range of socio-economic circumstances.

Discourse on WP has become muddied over time as phrases such as 'widening access', 'fair access' and 'social mobility' have been used alongside and sometimes instead of WP. This has led to a confused understanding of the specifics but a good general understanding of the wider purpose of the WP agenda (Butcher *et al.*, 2012). Jones (2010) argues that it is not helpful to label students from WP backgrounds or to position them as having certain characteristics, as this can lead to policy decisions and strategies that do not take individual circumstances into account. This goes some way to explaining the complex picture painted in the current research. Butcher *et al.*'s (2012) research with senior figures in two UK universities supports this and 'detected in the discourse of "widening participation" an outdated, dangerous and self-defeating deficit model labelling a low-achieving limited aspiration learner' (p.68). It seems that the intentions of WP are sound but that the descriptors and labels need to be updated to reflect a more complex, heterogeneic picture in which WP is now mainstream in many universities (Action on Access, 2009).

*What is a 'learner identity'?*

While the traditional learner may have seen university as the next logical step and may clearly identify himself/herself as a learner or as a student, many others may have more difficulty in establishing an identity that 'works' in HE.

Much of the work on learner identity has been done in the primary and secondary sectors of education. For example, the Centre for Learner Identity Studies (CLIS) at Edgehill University held its first annual conference in 2009 and uses a broad model of learner identity based on six bases: gender, generation, place, social class, ethnicity and spirituality/religion. The theory is that these bases – these socio-cultural aspects of individuals' experiences – affect one's subjective experience of being a learner.

Some researchers disagree with the CLIS definition of learner identity. In her recent PhD thesis completed at the University of Barcelona Fal (2010) holds that the CLIS model is 'erroneous' as it describes multiple social identities rather than using a definition that is based purely on the activity of learning. Fal uses a definition of identity coined by Bernstein and Solomon (1999, p.272) as the starting point for defining learner identity: '… resources for constructing belonging, recognition of self and others, and context management (what I am, where, with whom and when)'. The idea of 'belonging' is important to learner identity and is seen in others' work, such as that of Reay *et al*. (2009), who put the case very strongly that learner identity is linked to whether one feels one fits in or stands out and Solomon (2007) who relates the idea of learner identity to communities of practice.

A slightly different idea has been put forward by Kolb and Kolb (2009) in their discussion on the concept of 'learning identity'. They hold that 'people with a learning identity see themselves as learners, seek and engage life experiences with a learning attitude and believe in their ability to learn'. This describes one's whole identity as a learner rather than part of one's identity being that of a learner.

In a field still finding its way with definitions and concepts, it is important to be clear what is meant by 'learner identity' in the present study. As the majority of the literature uses definitions of the type put forward by CLIS and as this study is concerned with the socio-cultural factors that have helped to shape how individuals feel about themselves as learners, the study uses the following definition of 'learner identity':

> 'Learner identity' is how an individual feels about himself/herself as a learner and the extent to which he/she describes himself/herself as a 'learner'. This may be affected by a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as personal motivation, a sense of belonging, support and encouragement from others and previous experiences of education.

This definition of LI is probably closest to that used by Hewitt *et al*. (2010) who tell of the transformation experienced by women refugees and asylum seekers who described themselves in terms of isolation, loss of confidence and feelings of negativity' (p.96) but who developed a new more confidence sense of themselves as learners through the Bridges Programmes in Glasgow.

'Traditional' learners may feel they are learners first and foremost, identifying their learning as the most important part of their lives at that time. These would typically be those learners who go straight from secondary education into HE, feeling that this is the natural and obvious route to take. Learners coming to HE from non-traditional routes may have quite different learner identities. Reay *et al*. (2009) found that students from non-traditional entry routes are 'relatively unprepared for the university experience and lacked a sense of entitlement' (p.3) and that the strength of learner identity was linked to where the student lived – at home, on campus or in university accommodation. Other factors identified by Reay *et al*.'s research as affecting learner identity were institutional habitus and social class.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds may consider themselves parents, carers, workers or employers, for example, as well as being learners. The dominant part of their identity will depend on how they prioritise the demands of a complex lifestyle. A strong learner identity would be typified by an individual describing themselves first and foremost as a learner (or possibly as a student), while a weaker learning identity would be typified by an individual describing themselves in some other role first and foremost, with learning taking at least second place in their priorities. At present there is no definitive scale for measuring learner identity and the strength of it has been assessed to date in only very general terms by researchers. The present study may help to inform future research that seeks to construct a scale by which to measure the strength of learner identity.

*Challenges and obstacles for students from non-traditional routes*

Much of the research concerns the difference in experience and/or identity between middle-class 'traditional' students and working-class non-traditional students (TLRP, 2008). Challenges may usefully be split into those the learner must overcome before entering HE and those that he/she faces once enrolled at a university. Three types of barrier to participation are identified by Gorard *et al*. (2006) in their review of research on WP: situational, institutional and dispositional.

Examples of situational barriers are the cost and time needed for participation. Institutional barriers include admissions procedures, lack of HEI flexibility and the timing and/or scale of provision. Dispositional barriers include a lack of motivation and a poor attitude to learning, which may be caused by a lack of suitable opportunities or poor previous experiences of education.

The non-traditional learner's lack of motivation is by far the most important barrier, as it is perceived by some that it is easier to get a job than to go into HE (Gorard *et al*., 2006). This may be because 'self-identity in Britain may be more strongly linked to a job than it is in other countries' (Bynner, 1998). If this is the case, then there could be a significant effect on learner identity. With the rises in tuition fees (Vasagar and Shepherd, 2010), the political sphere and the media are more concerned than ever that a degree should lead to a good job. If it is seen not to do so by potential learners, it is easy to see why they do not indulge in HE. (The effect of this focus on HE's importance solely as a route to a 'good' job is a subject for discussion elsewhere.)

The barriers to HE start to have an impact long before an individual contemplates applying for a place. Poor experiences at school are often cited as significant (Gorard *et al*., 2006; HoC Public Accounts Committee, 2009; Johnston and Merrill, 2004) as are ethnicity, gender, place of residence and socio-economic status (HoC PAC, 2009). Parental education has been shown to have a notable effect (HEFCE, 2010) and to have a greater impact than family income (Thomas, 2006), which is often used as an indicator of socio-economic status. These factors work together to help individuals form opinions that will affect future decisions.

Feeling you are 'the odd one out' if you want to go to university can also be a barrier if you are the first in the family or the only one in your school class  to do so (Reay *et al*., 2009). Students whose immediate family and friends have no experience of HE may be wholly unprepared for the transition from school and may lack the cultural capital of their student peers, leading to the potential for social isolation (Thomas, 2006).

There is a problem, too, with a lack of access to information and/or knowledge that the information is there to be had (Gorard *et al*., 2006; HoC PAC, 2009; Thomas, 2006). The combination of these factors makes it difficult for those from some non-traditional groups to contemplate HE.

The barriers once one is in HE have been defined in part by Reay *et al*. (2009) as 'fitting in or standing out' and concern coming to terms with a middle-class university environment. The transition from school to HE can be difficult for all learners and the problems and challenges of retention in HE are well documented (Jones, 2008). Drawing on evidence from seven UK initiatives designed to improve retention, Thomas (2012/13) notes that students need to feel that they 'belong' – this is more difficult for the who have no guidance from parents with experience of HE and/or who have had poor experiences at school. A sense of belonging is recognised as important for successful transition to HE and for a satisfying experience (Chapman, 2012/13), which could be linked to improved retention. Thomas' (2012/13) review found that pre-entry activities, induction and early engagement are important factors in developing a sense of belonging, although students do not necessarily recognise the importance unless the activities have a clear academic purpose.

While universities have a range of services to help various groups such as those with disabilities or international students, they cannot cater for every group in this way and it would be insensitive in some ways to do so. Even when specialist and other services are available, students may still opt to seek help from friends rather than from the 'official channels', perhaps because previous experience has taught them not to expect help from an educational institution or its employees (Holley *et al*., 2006).

There is some evidence that learners apply to universities where they feel they will be comfortable with the institutional habitus (Reay *et al*., 2009; Crozier *et al*., 2008; Thomas, 2012/13). This may mean that they fit in socially rather than academically, presenting a further obstacle – in order to fit in academically they may have to pretend to be less motivated or less bright than they truly are (Reay *et al*., 2009). Johnston and Merrill (2004) found that some students developed new identities when entering HE – for example, one student said she now thought of herself as 'Jane' rather than 'mum' (p.5). It is heartening to know that there are success stories as well as difficulties in terms of identity for non-traditional students (see also Hewitt et al., 2010).

**UE student population statistics**

Data from UE's statistics unit for 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 shows an increase in overall student numbers, the number of undergraduates and the number of full-time students. The most recent figures show that 87% of the students at UE are from England and many (49%) are from the local area. The large majority of students is white (86%) and about 10% are disabled.

The postcode areas on which the 'local' area is based are for the region of England where UE is based. This gives a clue to the socio-economic background of the students. Data from the Office for National Statistics (2003) based on the Labour Force Survey show that 28% of the population in the region is in the lower social grades (D and E) compared to the national average of 25% (social grades defined by ONS, 2011). These facts do not demonstrate a link to the socio-economic status of UE's intake from this area, but it is reasonable to postulate that the 65% of students from the local area in 2009/10 are drawn from backgrounds likely to be less affluent or advantaged than the national average.

The age of students at UE also indicate that routes into HE have not been 'traditional' for many. Only 32% are aged 21 or under, indicating that less than a third of students have come straight to university from school. While some of the remaining 68% of students are postgraduates, it is worth noting that postgraduates make up only 17% of the population. This would seem to indicate that the majority of undergraduate students have not come to university through the traditional route.

Data submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency in 2010–11 describing marketing students at UE (those on single honours marketing and joint honours undergraduate marketing programmes) shows 42% aged 18–20, indicating a traditional route to HE for this group. The majority are older, indicating a non-traditional route consistent with WP. However, only 20% are from a low-participation area and 35% are from a low socio-economic group. The data for marketing students as a group seems, therefore, to be at odds with the data for UE in general. Fewer of these students are typical of those from WP backgrounds and may be more likely to have stronger learner identities.

It is not clear why marketing students should have fewer WP characteristics than expected for students at UE. This may be because the subject appeals to a particular kind of student. Marketing is not studied at A level except as part of business studies, so it is something of an unknown quantity for applicants. More research on the backgrounds of students and their reasons for subject choice would be illuminating and could usefully be pursued in future research.

**Summary of results**

The results paint a complex picture. While the overall intake of UE is indicative of students from WP backgrounds, the students studying marketing have more complicated characteristics. The socio-demographic data gives a mix of WP and non-WP characteristics, making it difficult to define the whole group as from WP backgrounds. This complexity should be borne in mind when reading the results and discussion that follows, as the research objectives were formulated based on the assumption that marketing students would have similar characteristics to other UE students and, therefore, come from WP backgrounds.

*Socio-demographic data*

The majority of students in the sample (67%) were aged under 21, showing a likelihood that they had come straight from school. This was confirmed by answers to the question about their route to HE, which showed that 75% (61/81 respondents) had come straight to university after school. A significant number, however, were older, indicating a non-traditional route to HE consistent with the WP agenda. The majority reported their parents'/guardians' occupations to be either professional/managerial or skilled worker/technical, indicating that their socio-economic backgrounds are not necessarily consistent with the groups usually associated with widening participation (PG1: 65/80, 81%; PG2 48/71, 68%). Approximately half (51%) were the first in their family to go to university. Unfortunately, a large number (34) did not respond to the question about their home postcode, but the most common postcodes reported by those who did answer showed a preponderance of homes close to the university and 39% of respondents sharing the same postcode as the university. This localism is also reflected in the number who live at home with their parents (43%).

The socio-demographic profile of the questionnaire respondents shows a mix of WP and non-WP characteristics, with fewer students than expected fitting the WP profile, given the university's OFFA statement.

*Experience of school*

In order to assess students' experience of school, each answer was scored '1' then the positive, neutral and negative responses were totalled for each student. The negative and neutral responses were then deducted from the positive responses to give an overall figure. If this figure was less than 0 this showed an overall negative experience of school. If the score was 0 or over, the response was deemed to be positive. For the purposes of this analysis, scores of 5 and over were deemed to show a *very* positive experience of school. All respondents answered this question, with 14% showing an overall negative experience of school and 86% showing a positive experience. 39% scored 5 or more, showing a very positive experience.

This generally positive experience of school is not characteristic of WP students. However, it should be remembered that those who had a very poor experience of school may not progress to university.

*Employability*

Only 54% of respondents chose a marketing degree because they felt the potential job prospects were good. The two more popular responses were that they were interested in the subject (80%) and that they thought it would be fun/interesting (69%).

The majority of the students in the sample were in either full- or part-time paid employment (57%) with a further 6% reporting that they worked as volunteers, were self-employed or were carers. This may indicate that the students feel they should be working either to gain experience in order to improve their employability or that they wish to reduce the amount of borrowing they do through earning their own money.

*What's important to you right now?*

Eight students did not respond or gave inconclusive answers, so the sample for this question was 75. Twenty-eight respondents (37%) ranked their university studies as their first priority and a further 29 (39%) ranked it second, giving a total of 76% who ranked this as first or second. The next most popular response was 'my family', with 25 respondents (33%) ranking this as most important and a total of 38 (51%) ranking it first or second. The only other notable response was for 'planning my future career', in which 22 respondents (29%) ranked this as third most important. In order to determine whether respondents felt their learning was more important to them right now than other aspects of their lives the responses were grouped into three categories (see Table 1).

[Table 1 near here]

If a respondent gave two or more responses in one category they were assigned that orientation. For example, if a respondent ranked 'my university studies' as 1, 'my family' as 2 and 'my job' as 3, they were assigned the 'work/family' orientation regardless of the fact that their top choice was in another category. This categorisation gave the results shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

A clear majority of respondents (47/75) have an education orientation. Of the 47 students with an education orientation, 19 (40%) ranked two of the education responses as 1 and 2, showing

a strong education orientation. Seven respondents (15% of the 47 with an education orientation) ranked all three of the education responses in their top three, showing a very strong education orientation.

There is a caveat to these responses – students completing this questionnaire for a lecturer may feel obliged to rank educational responses highly, so there may be some bias in the results. The risk of bias was reduced as far as possible through anonymity of response and the promise of confidentiality.

*Approach to learning*

Respondents were asked to tick all the boxes that described how they approached their learning, e.g. 'I attend all the lectures' and 'I do just enough to get by'. There were 12 items that indicated a positive approach to learning and 9 that indicated a negative approach.

As a minimum we may expect students to attend all lectures and seminars and yet only 76% and 73%, respectively, report that they attend. These and 'I discuss my subject with friends' at 73% were the top answers. While there were many positive responses, 43% reported that they fit university work in round other things.

In order to determine an overall score for each respondent's approach to learning, the positive responses and negative responses for each student were totalled then the negative total was deducted from the positive total to give an overall score. The total maximum score was 12 (all 12 positive items selected and no negative items selected) and the minimum score was -9 (all 9 negative and no positive items selected). Scores over 0 showed an overall positive approach to learning while scores of less than 0 showed a negative approach. Scores of 6 and over were deemed to show a *very* positive approach to learning. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of overall scores ranging from the lowest recorded (-7) to the highest recorded (12).

[Figure 1 near here]

Sixty-eight respondents (82%) have a positive approach to learning, with an overall score of 1 or more, while 27 (33%) could be said to have a very positive approach, with an overall score of 6 or more. It is fair to assume that those with a positive approach to learning are likely to have a good sense of themselves as learners. It should be noted, however, that a positive approach to learning is only one factor that may be linked to LI and other factors such as confidence and personal motivation may also have, an impact, although they are not part of this study.

Of the 28 students who ranked their university studies as most important the clear majority (89%) showed a positive approach to learning, with 11 (39%) showing a very positive approach to learning. A link here could be expected, but perhaps it is surprising that not *all* the group had a positive approach.

Of the 25 students who ranked their university studies as most important and showed a positive approach to learning, 21 (84%) had shown a positive experience of school, with 9 students (36%) showing a very positive experience of school. It should be noted that these 9 students represent only 11% of the total sample of 83 students.

*Establishing learner identity*

For the purposes of this study a learner identity has been defined as 'how an individual feels about himself/herself as a learner and the extent to which he/she describes himself/herself as a learner'. The questions used to determine learner identity were those concerning approach to learning and education orientation. A learner identity is therefore defined by having an education orientation and a positive approach to learning. Those with an education orientation and a *very* positive approach to learning could be described as having a *strong* learner identity.

Of the 47 students with an education orientation, 40 (85% of this group; 48% of the total sample) also had a positive approach to learning (a score of 1 or more) and 15 (32% of this group; 18% of the total sample) had a very positive approach. Using the definitions above it can be concluded that nearly half the students in the sample have positive learner identities. This low figure is perhaps what might be expected of UE, given its OFFA statement referred to earlier, yet it is not what might be expected of the sample, which has several characteristics not associated with widening participation, such as the clear majority coming straight to university from A levels and parents'/guardians' occupations indicating a higher socio-economic group.

The common behaviours reported by those with a strong learner identity were that they attended all lectures (100% of those with strong LI), attended all the seminars, discussed their subject with friends/other students and paced themselves so they could complete assignments without having to rush (all 87%). In terms of what is important to them right now, 87% ranked their university studies as most or second most important. Four of those with strong learner identities ranked their family as most important, perhaps indicating an ability to manage different priorities.

**Discussion**

Factors known to affect learner identity outlined in the literature review are personal motivation, a sense of belonging, support and encouragement from others and a positive experience of school. The discussion will consider these factors.

Those with a strong learner identity had generally had a positive experience of school, with 60% reporting that they had found it interesting and had had lots of friends. More than half (53%) said they had supportive parents and teachers and that school had been fun. These figures compare favourably with the figures for the same group (see Table 3). The blue highlight indicates the higher score for each factor. This finding is consistent with the literature on learner identity.

[Table 3 near here]

It is interesting that while those with strong learner identities generally had a good experience of school, they nevertheless scored more highly than the total sample for some of the 'negative' factors, with 33% finding school repetitive and 20% saying it made them want to leave education. One could speculate that a negative experience at school does not necessarily deter those with strong learner identities – it may be that they blame factors other than themselves for the experience. The current project does not investigate these issues, and they would reward further study.

*Socio-economic background*

Using the occupation of parents/guardians as an indication of socio-economic background, it was shown that those with strong learner identities tended to come from the higher socio-economic groups. Each of the occupation categories was scored to give each respondent a

potential maximum total of 10 (see Table 4). Ten of the 14 (71%) respondents in this group scored 8 or more, showing both parents/guardians from the higher socio-economic groups. Again, this is consistent with the literature. However, it should be noted that of the 166 parents/guardians whose occupations were given by all 83 respondents 68% were from the higher socio-economic groups, showing that there is little difference between the whole group and those with strong learner identities.

[Table 4 near here]

*Learner identity and fitting in*

Those with positive learner identities (47 students) felt that they fitted in about the same socially (66%), academically (53%) and in terms of family background (38%) as the feeling of the whole group. Those with strong learner identities score more highly than those with positive learner identities, and appear to feel that they fit in better socially (93%), academically (80%) and in terms of family background (60%) than the feeling of the whole group.

*Learner identity and belonging*

Those with positive learner identities show no strong involvement in the life of the university. With the exception of socialising with friends (70% of 47 students) the only involvement worthy of reporting is attendance at university events (26%). Only 15% are in a sports team and only 13% are members of clubs or societies. Of those who selected three or more involvement activities, 8 live in halls or shared housing while 2 live at home with their parents. While these numbers are very small, they do perhaps indicate that students are more likely to be involved in the life of the university if they are living away from home and near the university. Those with very strong learner identities show similar levels of involvement and a roughly equal split of living at home with parents or away from home.

*Summary*

Common factors in strong learner identities have been identified and the findings are generally consistent with the literature. A link between strong learner identity and other factors such as socio-economic background, educational experience, personal motivation (through approach to learning) and support from others has been demonstrated.

**Employability and subject choice**

The fact that the majority of the group felt that the job prospects were good with a marketing degree and that the majority were also in employment perhaps indicates that they have considered employability, whether consciously or not. It is interesting that although many of the students work, the clear majority have an education orientation rather than a work/family orientation (see below).

While more than half the total sample (54%) chose a marketing course because the job prospects were good, only 40% of those with strong learner identities chose the course for this reason. The top reason for choosing a marketing course for those with strong learner identities was that they were interested in the subject (93%). This would seem to suggest that there is no strong link between subject choice and students' thoughts on employability, but that those with a strong LI have a stronger interest in the subject than others. This indicates a link between LI and subject choice.

**Summary and discussion of interview data**

The last question in the questionnaire asked respondents if they would be happy to be interviewed. Of those who volunteered, two were selected at random from each year of students, resulting in six interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore issues pertinent to the research objectives using the following prompts as starting points:

1. Tell me about your family background.
2. Tell me about your experience of school.
3. Why did you decide to come to university?
4. Why did you decide to study marketing?
5. Tell me about your life as a student.
6. How important is your learning as part of your life now?
7. What do you think affects your experience of being a learner?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add about how you feel about learning at university?
9. Do you have any questions about the research?

A coding frame based on themes emerging from the literature and the questionnaire results was used to analyse the qualitative data from the interviews. The coding frame was used manually to sort interviewees' responses under three categories related to the research objectives:

    1. Background and context
        • Widening participation indicators
        • Experience of education
        • Support from parents/teachers
    2. Importance of learning
    3. Subject choice/employability

*Background and context information*

The six interviewees' backgrounds are generally consistent with WP indicators – four out of six represent the first generation in their family to go into HE and most parents' occupations are indicative of lower socio-economic groups (the one exception being a lawyer). All parents were described as supportive and some as proud. Two students feel they are pushed to do better by their parents while one feels pressured to succeed as he is the only one of his generation that has not gone straight into a job from school. Three describe friendly or supportive school teachers, one is ambivalent ('some of the teachers were OK, some not') and one did not feel supported at all: 'my school made me feel really, like, bad about myself and that I had kinda failed'.

The mixed response is not surprising in a small sample but may nevertheless be indicative of the larger sample's experience. It is difficult to draw a common theme with regard to support from school based on these results but it is interesting to note that only 55% of the total sample indicated that they had had supportive teachers in response to the questionnaire.

Four of the six reported good experiences of school, and having a large number of friends emerged as an important part of that experience. The other two interviewees described bad

experiences at school, characterised by a lack of support. The mixed response is generally consistent with questionnaire responses.

The background and context information about the six interviewees indicates that they are generally representative of the whole sample, so it is fair to generalise their responses about learning, employability and subject choice to the rest of the group. The interviews sought to elicit information about students' thoughts on (1) themselves as learners and (2) employability and subject choice.

*The students as learners*

All six students had a good sense of themselves as learners, saying that they enjoyed learning and that it was an important part of their lives.

Interviewee 1 enjoyed learning at school, especially when it 'mattered'. He does not want to 'waste time' at university, as he did not come straight from school and feels older than his peers. Learning is 'very important' to him. Interviewee 3 felt she had 'outgrown' school and looked forward to university. She describes herself as 'curious about the world' and says learning is a 'really important, like a huge, huge aspect of my life, even though I work as well at the same time, studying [is] always paramount'. She wants to do well for herself and for her parents – she wants them to be proud as she's the first one who has gone to university.

It is telling that in discussing how they feel about their learning these interviewees refer to aspects of their non-traditional status as students – starting study later than usual, working part time and being the first generation to go into HE.

Interviewee 2 enjoyed doing well at school and although she did not know what to expect at university, 'the moment came I did kind of understand the importance of it and I was trying hard to, because obviously I wanted to keep up'. She finds it hard to juggle priorities at university and feels social pressure to go out – to fit in (Reay *et al*., 2009) rather than study. She dedicates time to her work and wants to do well: 'I really want to, you know, be the best. Or one of the best!' Interviewee 4 describes as 'the best days ever' – she attended a private school, which is not consistent with the rest of her background, which is in keeping with other WP characteristics. She enjoys learning and new experiences and feels she would not have learned if she had stayed at home rather than going to university. She feels she needs to 'get it [education] all out of the way' and 'learn as much as you can' while at university. Although she considers learning an important part of her life, her family comes first she would leave university immediately if she were needed at home.

These accounts (and that of interviewee 3) tell of the different priorities juggled by these students – not just priorities at university, but work and home life, too. It is interesting that they identify themselves as learners and have strong learner identities in spite of these WP characteristics.

Interviewee 5 has always enjoyed education and learning and describes her learning as 'very important'. She would love to go on to a masters qualification but says 'I'll have to get a job and save up and everything and then maybe I'll be able to do it'. This student has a clear WP background and had a mixed experience of school, so her very strong learner identity may considered unusual.

Interviewee 6 enjoyed learning at school and enjoyed reading round subjects and doing the 'extra learning'. Learning is top of his priorities at the moment – 'it's just a massive part of

everything I do … learning is all based around pretty much my everyday life'. He describes himself as 'inquisitive' and says he thinks he will never stop learning. Learning defines how he is as a person – this is reminiscent of Kolb and Kolb's (2009) definition of 'learning identity'. He also preferred the teaching and learning methods at university as he had found that 'in the sixth form you get given everything … whereas this way [at university] there's lots of extra outside thinking'. It seems that although some students feel they are unprepared for university (Thomas, 2006; Reay *et al.*, 2006), this student relished the challenge.

It is interesting that all six interviewees enjoyed learning, despite their non-traditional backgrounds and mixed experiences of school. It seems that while school experience is an important factor in forming LI, there are other factors at work that have not been tested here, such as confidence, personal motivation to learn or succeed, determination and other psychological and personality traits.

*Employability and subject choice*

All six interviewees had considered employability issues – all have had work experience of some sort, ranging from short placements and voluntary work to continued part-time employment. One was looking forward to a year-long placement, which she described as 'crucial' to her employment prospects. Several have thought about employers' knowledge and skills requirements and some intend to research potential careers before they begin their final year at university.

However, there was little evidence for a link between students' thoughts about employability and their choice of marketing as a degree subject. Although four had thought about careers before making their choice, only two of these said it truly influenced their decision – interviewee 1 had initially wanted to be a journalist but chose marketing because he thought he would have better job prospects and interviewee 4 said the fact that her family had its own business meant that she would 'sway towards business' subjects (marketing had also been recommended by her sixth form tutor). Interviewees 2, 3, 5 and 6 all chose marketing because they enjoyed the subject as part of previous study and had achieved good results. Interviewee 3 is 'curious about the world and like what happens in like brands and advertising and the sort of psychology around it', while interviewee 5 enjoyed analysing the meaning in advertising with her mum and interviewee 6 is 'intrigued by the deeper reasons why customers do certain things'.

It seems that the taster of marketing included in high school level qualifications is enough to whet the appetite of these students, and it is interest, engagement and success that leads to subject choice rather than thoughts of later employability. Indeed, interviewee 6 said he would rather study a subject he enjoyed than a subject that might lead to a better job. It is also clear from these results that parents influence students' choices, as seen in Thomas (2006).

The interviewees' narratives strongly reflected the questionnaire results – students at UE choose marketing because they believe it will be interesting or fun or because they feel they have a general aptitude for the subject.

**Limitations to this study**

There are always limitations to small case studies. The sample has already been noted as complex – in a university with a general population that is characterised by students from non-traditional routes to HE, the questionnaire sample shows fewer of these characteristics, with the clear majority coming straight to university from school and parents'/guardians'

occupations indicating a higher socio-economic group. The interviewees, by contrast, drawn at random from the questionnaire sample, are more characteristic of students from WP backgrounds.

There is also the potential for bias in the responses. While every effort was made to ensure that participants were able to speak freely through assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, it may be the case that they gave answers that they felt a tutor might want to hear. It may also be the case that only those who felt confident as learners volunteered for the interview phase of the research.

Finally, this is a snapshot of the position in only one university and should not be extrapolated to the wider UK universities sector – it would be useful to repeat the study elsewhere to improve the reliability of the results.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

This study aimed to investigate the idea of learner identity of marketing undergraduates in the light of the widening participation agenda and to identify the challenges faced by those who enter HE by non-traditional routes. The research investigated the links between marketing students' learner identities and their socio-economic backgrounds, previous experience of education and subject choice. The hypothesis was put forward that students who had chosen the vocational business discipline of marketing may be aware of employability issues and may be committed to their learning, leading to stronger learner identities than those evidenced in the literature about similar post-1992 universities.

The hypothesis has been disproved – students at UE did not choose marketing because they think it will lead to a future job or career and neither do employability issues affect their subject choice. The results do not differ from those found at other HE institutions in research by, for example, Reay *et al*. (2009), showing that marketing students do not necessarily have a stronger learner identity as a result of their subject choice. The objectives of the research have been reached, with the data showing clear links between learner identity and socio-economic factors, support from parents/teachers and experience at school; this is consistent with the literature.

Nearly half of those who participated in the research were found to have positive learner identities using a definition based on their approach to learning and their experience at school. Common factors in students' learner identities were identified as having an education orientation including at least two of three factors (my university studies, enjoying my time as a student and planning my future career) ranked as most important right now and having had a positive experience of school. The common behaviours reported by those with a strong learner identity indicated that they were well engaged with their learning.

No conclusive link was found between students' thoughts on employability and their subject choice but there was some evidence for a link between strong learner identity and marketing as a subject choice. This requires further investigation to be proved in a more robust manner.

From these results it is possible to conclude that one should not presume all cohorts of students at universities that recruit students from WP backgrounds to have poor learner identities as they may actually be very strong and one should not presume that students of business disciplines are necessarily more focused on employability than other students.

Nearly half of the students in this study were found to have positive learner identities and 18% were found to have very strong learner identities. However, many did not and this is a

concern. A large number were not engaged with the life of the university in any way other than socialising with their friends and were juggling priorities and dealing with issues of which teaching and support staff may be unaware. If it were possible early in a student's first year at university to discover how comfortable they felt with their identity as a learner it might help teaching and support staff to understand and support students in ways that are appropriate to their situation. It is hoped that this project will encourage others to consider these issues in a more methodical manner when planning their learning, teaching and assessment strategies (as many surely already do), rather than making assumptions that may be inaccurate. Future research could usefully track the development of LI and students' thoughts on employability over time, as the present study provides only a snapshot in one university and the findings should not be extrapolated to all UK universities.

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*NB UE HESA return is not referenced in order to preserve anonymity*

**Table 1** Assigning an orientation

| Orientation | What's important right now? |
|---|---|
| Education | My university studies |
|  | Enjoying my time as a student |
|  | Planning my future career |
| Work/family | My family |
|  | My job |
|  | My caring responsibilities |
| Social | My social life |
|  | My hobby |
|  | Sport |

**Table 2** Students' orientations

| Orientation | No. respondents | % respondents |
|---|---|---|
| Education | 47 | 63% |
| Work/family | 13 | 17% |
| Social | 3 | 4% |
| No overall orientation | 12 | 16% |
| **Total** | **75** | **100** |

**Table 3** Students' experience of school

|  |  | % of those with strong LI reporting these factors | % of the total sample reporting these factors |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Had supportive teachers | 53 | 55 |
|  | Had lots of friends | 60 | 55 |
|  | Interesting | 60 | 53 |
|  | Fun | 53 | 51 |
|  | Had support from parents | 53 | 49 |
|  | Challenging | 33 | 41 |
|  | Made me want to learn more | 33 | 39 |
|  | Motivating | 33 | 29 |
|  | Involved in sports teams | 40 | 28 |
|  | Made me feel clever | 27 | 25 |
|  | Involved in clubs/societies | 40 | 25 |
|  | Exciting | 20 | 22 |
|  | Other (parties) | 0 | 1 |
| Neutral | Hard work | 47 | 40 |
|  | Found work easy | 13 | 17 |
| Negative | Repetitive | 33 | 30 |
|  | Dull/boring | 13 | 22 |
|  | Made me want to leave education | 20 | 18 |
|  | Demotivating | 13 | 10 |
|  | Made me feel stupid | 0 | 8 |
|  | Lonely | 0 | 5 |

**Table 4** Parents'/guardians' (PG) occupations

| Occupation of PG 1 | Respondent number (those with strong LI) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **14** | **55** | **56** | **59** | **61** | **64** | **68** | **69** | **74** | **76** | **77** | **78** | **79** | **82** | **83** |
| Professional managerial (5) | | | | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | | | | | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Skilled worker/ technical (4) | 4 | | | | | | | | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | | | |
| Unskilled worker/ manual (3) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Home maker (1) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Unemployed (1) | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Unable to work (1) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| DNR (0) | | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| *Occupation of PG 2* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Professional/ managerial (5) | | | | 5 | | 5 | | | 5 | | 5 | 5 | | | |
| Skilled worker/ technical (4) | 4 | | 4 | | 4 | | | 4 | | 4 | | | 4 | | |
| Unskilled worker/ manual (3) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Home maker (1) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Unemployed (1) | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Unable to work (1) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| DNR (0) | | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Total scores** | **8** | **0** | **5** | **10** | **9** | **10** | **6** | **9** | **9** | **8** | **9** | **9** | **9** | **6** | **6** |

**Figure 1** Frequency of scores for approach to learning