

## *Belonging: Blurring the Boundaries*

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores Whitchurch's (2008) notion of the 'third space' in the context of articulating students from Further Education to Higher Education. This research appropriates the term 'third space' and applies it to the emergent territory occupied by college students 'crossing the boundary' to university. The concept of the 'third space' allows us to explore the notion of belonging in relation to direct entrants seeking to establish their role in the unfamiliar zone between college and university. Research examines the implications for college students of this 'blurring of boundaries' and how they establish a sense of belonging and creditability in the university context. Empirical research makes use of focus groups involving articulating students from Further Education directly into the third year of an adjacent degree course to determine if and why a 'sense of belonging' is important, what affect it has on performance, and to establish barriers to, and strategies for, successful boundary crossing from college to university. As Whitchurch highlighted secondment, mentoring and study leave as influential in the success of the unbounded professional, this paper proposes that interventions can be carried out to increase the sense of belonging and likely success of articulating students, notably, drop-in lectures, tutorial support (from HE academic staff), guest lectures and open days. This research is particularly relevant as the Scottish Government aims to remove barriers to widening access and participation in Higher Education. Research findings can inform best practice approach at universities, enhance the experience of articulating student, guide policy makers and aid knowledge transfer.

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## **Introduction**

This paper explores Whitchurch's (2008) notion of the 'third space' in the context of articulating students from Further Education to Higher Education. This research appropriates the term 'third space' and applies it to the emergent territory occupied by college students 'crossing the boundary' to university. This research is particularly relevant as the Scottish Government aims to remove barriers to widening access and participation in Higher Education. Research findings can, therefore, inform best appropriate interventions at universities, enhance the experience of articulating student, guide policy makers and aid knowledge transfer.

This paper begins by presenting an overview of widening access and articulation within the Scottish higher education (HE) system. Articulating students must negotiate a number of barriers when crossing the boundary between college and university and these are explored, initially, through key theoretical concepts and Whitchurch's notion of the 'third space', before proceeding to examine the issues experienced by 'third space' articulating students through empirical research. Conclusions have a dual purpose, adding to the body of knowledge within the field while, also, informing best practice approach for the Associate Student Project (ASP) at Edinburgh Napier University.

## **Context**

The current educational landscape within Scotland has shifted significantly in recent years with a steep change in the area of widening participation in the local market and increased articulation opportunities for students progressing from college to university. For ten years the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has supported articulation of students with HN's to degree study as a method of widening participation and increasing rates of access to university. The students follow the '2+2' model and the four year Scottish degree is achieved with no loss of time as they continue with advance standing in Year Three at university. This model, however, poses significant challenges for HE institutions and the articulating students themselves as they struggle to 'fit-in' and adapt to the new learning environment and academic expectations. Christie et. al state, 'they are expected to be on a par with the cohort they are joining and they have less time to adjust to the learning environment and hence more to lose' (2013). As the Scottish Government aims to remove barriers to widening access and participation in the HE sector, primarily by the removal of fees for local students and ambitious targets for HE institutions, the participation figures were expected to rise. Unfortunately, even with this increased emphasis and investment, participation in higher education in Scotland continues to be the poorest in the whole of the UK (NUS, 2014, p. 5).

In 2013, in order to encourage students to engage in higher education, the SFC introduced additional funded places for students who are known as Associate Students. For the academic year 2013/14 Edinburgh Napier University was awarded funding for an extra 107 places for Associate Students articulating to university for the Third and Fourth Year of a degree programme. These students receive dual enrolment and in effect wear 'two hats' – that of the college student studying for their HND and that of a university student who is working towards Third Year entry. As an institution, Edinburgh Napier University, through The Associate Student Project

(ASP) based in the School of Computing, has introduced targeted learning opportunities to enhance student progression and attainment by addressing barriers to success in the very different HE environment and these will be discussed at a later stage in this paper. Students who cross the boundary from further (FE) to higher education encounter a number of challenges and these will now be engaged with on a theoretical basis.

## **Theoretical Concepts and Framework**

The unique challenges faced by students making the transition from college to university can be understood by exploring a number of theoretical concepts inherent to establishing identity in a new context. The notion of 'transition' itself is a key concept and delineates the period of change experienced by students as they progress from FE to HE. As they make this transition concepts such as 'boundary objects' and 'boundary crossing' become significant (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Star, 2010). Akkerman and Bakker (2011) understand the term 'boundary' as 'sociocultural differences leading to a discontinuity of action or interaction' (p.133). In this paper, the boundaries we refer to are those that are embedded in the divergent delivery systems represented by partner colleges and the University (Edinburgh Napier University). Students in transition are faced with boundaries in two main areas. Firstly, from college to a new university campus - in the physical sense the campus change requires orientation and adaptation to different travel routes, perhaps a new lodging location, changes to library facilities, an alternative method of receiving email and logging into the IT systems, new support infrastructure and, significantly, a new staff and student cohort. Secondly, transitional students are required to adapt to a shift in curriculum from content-led within college, to research-led within the university, and new expectations of independent learning.

Moreover, these different modes of learning can mean that there is a negative perception of articulating students, within the HE context, as ill-equipped in terms of entry requirements and academic grounding. Cohen & Garcia (2014), amongst other academics, argue that these negative stereotypes can have an adverse effect on academic performance and establishing a sense of social 'belonging' in the educational context (see also Zigler & Butterfield, 1968; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Schmader & Johns, 2003). When crossing the boundary from college to university, therefore, students encounter a range of transitional barriers which are logistical, academic and social in nature. As we examine the boundaries and barriers faced by students in transition we can introduce interventions to bridge the gap between FE and HE. The Associate Student Project conceptualises our work with students, making the transition from college to university, as helping them to effectively negotiate these boundaries and to integrate both academically and socially.

Whitchurch's notion of the 'third space' is a useful means of exploring the paradoxes at the heart of transitioning from one manner of working to another (2008). Whitchurch explores professional identity in the HE sector and how the roles of staff have shifted as they appropriate new modes of identity by expanding their remit to accommodate new dimensions of working. Increasingly, professional staff are developing more academic skills, while academic staff are moving towards more project-based work. Thus blurring the traditional boundaries between academic and professional functions in the HE context and creating a new type of 'blended

professional’ (2008, p.4). Whitchurch posits the notion of the ‘third space’ to define and explore the emergent territory occupied by HE staff who fulfil both academic and professional functions. ‘As a result of blurring boundaries between activities, what might be described as *third space* has emerged between professional and academic domains’ (2008, p.7).

This research appropriates the term ‘third space’ and applies it to the undefined area occupied by college students crossing the boundary to university. The concept of the ‘third space’ allows us to explore the barriers which characterise the unfamiliar zone between college and university.

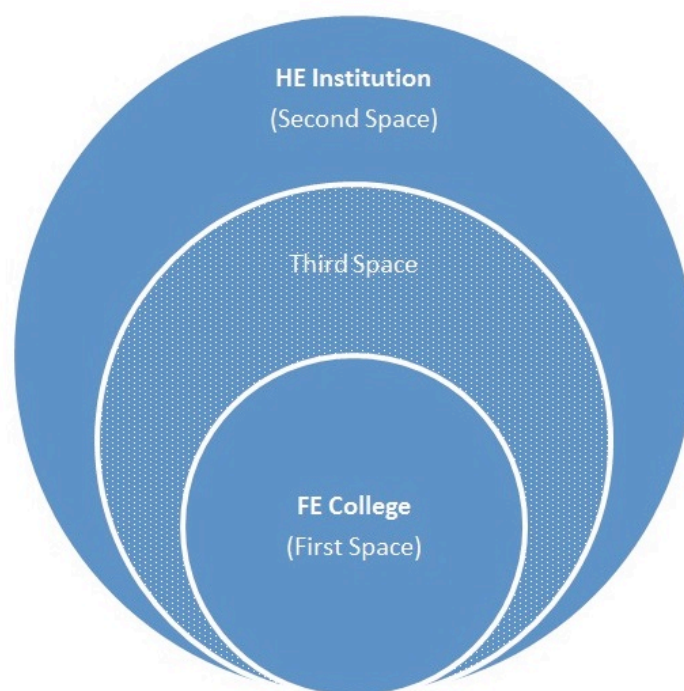


Figure 1 - 'Third Space' students in transition

Figure 1 illustrates the notion of the ‘third space’ and what it means for articulating students. Initially, students begin their academic journey in college where they study for their HND – this is the ‘first space’. During this two year period Edinburgh Napier University has introduced interventions to help ‘blur the boundary’ between FE and HE. Before the introduction of the Associate Student Project in 2013 students crossing the boundary did so with little or no support from the institution. They were expected to adjust academically and socially, integrating seamlessly with the third year cohort, when they made the transition to university – the ‘second space’. We define the notion of the ‘third space’ to be the blurred area between college and university. This space, during transition, exists for an extended period of time from initial application to university, during the Second Year at college, and extending to the end of the first trimester in year three at university – a total time frame of approximately one year. Through empirical research this paper examines the implications for college students of this ‘blurring of boundaries’ and how they are able to establish a sense of belonging and credibility in a university context.

## Methodology

This paper examines the barriers experienced by articulating students who inhabit the 'third space' between college and university. Research explores the following issues that evolve from 'third space' working and, consequently, may impede the success of direct entrants:

- Why is a 'sense of belonging' important?
- What affect does a feeling of 'belonging', or lack of, have on academic performance?
- What are the barriers to successful boundary crossing from college to university?
- How can we overcome these barriers?

A multilateral approach to empirical research is employed including two focus groups, an interview and an anonymous follow-up questionnaire with direct entrants. Each focus group involved five participants, selected by responses from an email sent out to all direct entrants enrolled in Year Three of a Computing degree programme at Edinburgh Napier University. As this study is interested in direct entrants and their experiences of 'third space' working, qualitative methods of data collection are considered most appropriate and focus groups allow us to gather rich perspective on the collective, localised views of the target market (Pickering, 2008, p. 73). Krueger & Casey (2000) propose that this research approach is a dynamic process, which is flexible not standardised, allowing the moderator to follow-up on relevant points of discussion.

However, while there are a range of advantages to the focus group method, in the context of this study, the public nature of the set-up is less conducive to open honest communication about private subjects. Academic and social transitioning can be particularly sensitive topics for students to discuss in front of their peers, particularly if challenges have been experienced. It was, therefore, determined that triangulating research findings with an in depth one-to-interview and a follow-up anonymous questionnaire, undertaken by all eleven direct entrants participating in the study, would offset any methodological limitations.

The questionnaire was based on the PISA 2000 study: 'Student Engagement at School: a Sense of Belonging and Participation'. This study makes use of a questionnaire 'to measure two components of student engagement at school – sense of belonging and participation', with 'participation' referring to 'skipping school, paying attention in class, doing homework' (2000, p. 11). However, while PISA focuses on school students, this research examines the experiences of direct entrants after transitioning from college to university (2000, p. 64). Participants were asked a series of questions to determine views on how well they had integrated socially at university and whether this had any impact on academic performance. Participants responded to questions using a four-point scale, which included: 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'agree' and 'strongly agree'.

Coding was employed as a grounded and systematic data reduction technique for synthesizing insight generated from focus groups and the interview. The raw data was coded, according to the research aims, with a view to determining emerging

patterns and ideas (Basit, 2003). At all times, ethical considerations were a priority and participants were fully cognisant about the aims and outcomes of the study, informed consent was obtained, and student contributions were anonymised to protect the confidentiality of all participants in the study. This multilateral approach to research explores the barriers which define 'third space' working and seeks to determine if and why a 'sense of belonging' is important, what affect it has on performance, and to establish barriers to, and strategies for, successful boundary crossing from college to university. These research questions will now be addressed in relation to findings.

## **Findings**

Whitchurch's concept of the 'third space' allows us to explore the notion of belonging in relation to direct entrants seeking to establish their role in the unfamiliar zone between college and university. Through focus groups, an interview and an anonymous questionnaire, conducted with direct entrants, the following considers the repercussions for articulating students of 'blurring the boundaries' between college and university and how direct entrants are able to achieve a sense of social belonging and academic creditability at university.

### *Why is a 'sense of belonging' important?*

Whitchurch posits that 'A sense of belonging to a particular project or team...has implications for the credibility of individuals in their current roles and for their future career paths' (2008, p. 9). In relation to direct entrants, therefore, after transitioning to university it is paramount to establish a sense of belonging in the new HE context as this has implications on present and future performance. However, the outcome of the anonymous questionnaire, undertaken by all participants in this study, identifies that 44 per cent of direct entrants surveyed feel like they do not 'fit-in' at university.

Although, some responses indicated that 'fitting-in' was not a barrier to achieving at university, one student argues 'I think it's very independent anyway so it doesn't matter if you fit in or not', for some students transitioning into an already established cohort can be challenging. 'I do get on well with people', comments one participant, 'but there are groups that have already formed and been there from first year already. They stick together more and it's harder to infiltrate that'. The implications of feeling like an outsider is encapsulated by the following comment, 'If you feel like you fit in you're not going to think I can't be bothered to go, I'll just stay at home'. Thus suggesting that establishing a sense of belonging has a direct correlation with retention rates and performance.

### *What affect does a feeling of 'belonging', or lack of, have on academic performance?*

A range of studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between 'belonging' and performance. Interestingly, the PISA 2000 study, 'Student Engagement at School: a Sense of Belonging and Participation,' concludes that a 'Students' sense of belonging and participation are not strongly related to each other at the individual level and both of these dimensions of student engagement are only weakly related with literacy performance' (2000, p. 54). The PISA study, therefore, hypothesises that belonging and participation are not intrinsically connected. Conversely, the outcome of the questionnaire conducted with direct entrants contradicts this premise with 64 per cent of students 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing'

with the notion that how well they have fitted-in at University has impacted on their grades.

Indeed, a range of studies would support this idea with Cohen & Garcia concluding that 'a salient social identity can trigger psychological threat and belonging concerns' and these 'can produce persistent performance decrements' (2014: 365; see also Zigler & Butterfield, 1968). This premise is endorsed by one focus group participant who suggests that 'For me, if I came on my own, and didn't know anybody or make connections with anyone it would seriously impact on me staying on'. The benefit of social integration and how it can positively influence academic performance is further illustrated by another student who comments 'I like bouncing ideas of students and staff and having a big group around you to call upon'. Establishing a sense of belonging can, therefore, influence performance but what do direct entrants perceive the barriers are to achieving successful social and academic integration at university?

*What are the barriers to successful boundary crossing from college to university?*

While a small cross-section of respondents determine that the transition from college to university is largely a smooth one, with one individual stating, 'I can't think of any barriers', the students involved in this study broadly divide the transitional challenges they experienced into two main areas: social and academic. In relation to academic barriers, moving from the college curriculum and mode of working, to the university educational environment, was perceived as a challenge with one direct entrant explaining that 'I think coming into third year the demands workwise are a huge jump'.

Aside from potential academic issues, crossing the boundary from college to university has a number of social repercussions. These can be logistical in nature, with one participant stating that, 'The first two or three weeks the direct entrants are very new and we're trying to find out where the toilet is, where the café is and you're aware that there are people more comfortable because they've been there two years'. Campus familiarity is not the only concern for direct entrants but, additionally, the established relationships that university staff have with continuing students, for direct entrants can emphasise, and compound, the feeling of being an outsider. 'You'll hear members of staff referring to continuing students by their first name', says one individual, 'and there's nothing wrong with that because they've been here but it sunk in that these people are known and familiarised with staff and the environment'.

A less tangible barrier for direct entrants to negotiate are negative perceptions. One direct entrant reports that 'When we came [from college] there was a perception that we'd had a 'slacker education' to get to this point, we've not been through the university process'. A range of educational studies have been conducted which explore the effect negative stereotypes and perceptions can have on social and academic integration (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Schmader & Johns, 2003; Cohen & Garcia, 2014). For example, Steele et al, argue that 'a fear of confirming a negative stereotype...can undermine performance by raising stress and increasing mental load' (in Cohen & Garcia, 2014: 365). It is, therefore, vital that this barrier, and any social/academic challenges identified by direct entrants in this study, are responded to by implementing university interventions.

### *How can we overcome these barriers?*

The professionals in Whitchurch's study identify 'secondments, mentoring and study leave' as effective strategies to support 'third space' workers at HE institutions but what do the sample of direct entrants propose could be done to support 'third space' students (2008: 11)? One participant argues that closer curriculum matching for HN's and degree courses could offset any academic challenges felt by Third Year entrants, 'If they made the modules at college more specific towards university than it would have been ok'. According to another individual, more visits from university staff to college sites would be beneficial, with one participant stating that HE staff could 'say this is the course you're going to be doing, this is what you need to know', while another student proposes that 'they [university staff] could see what you'd done and advise you to take a certain course'. Increased university staff engagement, therefore, might facilitate college students to make more informed decisions regarding university course selection and enhance academic preparedness.

In terms of the social barriers that direct entrants experienced, strategies to overcome these challenges focus on creating social bonds at university. One participant suggests that having a key contact to discuss issues with can promote successful boundary crossing, 'The support teacher we had, she said 'any problems come to me'. It takes a huge weight off your shoulders'. Additionally, events organised through Edinburgh Napier University reportedly allowed students to socialise, ask questions and engage with university life. 'The Fresher's Fair that was an eye-opener and really good,' comments one student, 'it gave you an insight into what happens. The open days were also a good help. You met people beforehand and when you started Uni you recognised them'. Moreover, online avenues are another effective method to promote social engagement, one participant states that, 'I do think the Facebook page did help us because we had another line of communication with the people on the course'. Online interaction, through Facebook, can help to create a sense of community in what would otherwise be a disparate group where continuing and articulating students can be predisposed to segregation, finding it difficult to blend in with the existing student cohort (Jenkins et al., 2012). In conclusion, research proposes that social barriers can be overcome by utilising engagement methods such as events, key contacts and social media. The challenges raised by 'third space' students, transitioning from college to university, have informed strategies to identify, and overcome, any barriers to articulation at 'Pre-Entry' and 'Post-Entry' level. The Associate Student Project team, based in The School of Computing, at Edinburgh Napier University is currently working hard to determine and implement best practice in articulation.

### **Recommendations**

The findings presented in this paper represent a small dimension of The Associate Student Project examining best practice in articulation at Edinburgh Napier University. The ASP, through partnership working with colleges, research and evaluation, is developing a new model for articulation which will directly impact on student performance, retention and achievement. The ASP has implemented and developed a number of initiatives to support best practice in student articulation. As a result, all research that is undertaken has a dual purpose - to add to the body of knowledge on articulation but, also, to inform strategies for academic approach.



Whitchurch's notion of 'third space' allows us to understand the barriers experienced by students crossing the boundary from college to university and shapes strategies to support this transition. The 'third space' starts when students consider their next step on the academic ladder: which university should they apply to, which course is suitable, what are their options? At this stage advice from college staff is fundamental to inform university and course selection, alongside university open days and marketing information. At this time 'third space' students consider whether they will 'fit-in' and be accepted into the Third Year cohort – will they belong, are they capable, is it for them, will they be accepted? As the 'third space' journey continues students may visit the university during open day or meet with key members of academic staff and students, during this visit it is of significant importance that students are made to feel welcome and valued in the university context. The focus of the open day should not be on First Year entry as this may alienate the direct entrants and affect their perceived sense of belonging. Once the first trimester at university begins 'third space' students may feel overwhelmed by the academic and social changes and the magnitude of the journey may 'hit home'. It is, therefore, important that there are support measures in place.

The ASP has introduced a series of interventions to support this 'third space' journey. Open days have been tailored to focus on direct entrants alongside First Year entrants, academic staff visit colleges and give guest lectures to orientate students with the research-led curriculum of the HE institution and drop-in lectures allow college students to join in a lecture in a relevant subject and be part of the First Year cohort. All of these interventions are designed to blur the boundary between college and university and enhance the experience and journey of 'third space' students.

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