Abstract
This paper examines some of the ways in which first year undergraduate students’ living
arrangements impact on their experience of university. Using data from the UK
ESRC/TLRP ‘Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference’ project, we
explore the range of living arrangements which students may opt for, consider the reasons
for their choice of particular living arrangements and discuss how these arrangements
facilitate or constrain their engagement with and orientation to university life and study.
The paper then draws out the implications for universities and lecturers.

Introduction
Much has been written about the ways in which students’ socio-economic and cultural
backgrounds determine the nature and extent of their participation in an increasingly
stratified U.K. higher education system (Archer and Leathwood 2003; Reay et al. 2005;
Gorard et al. 2006). As the numbers undertaking university-level study increase, so the
arrangements for combining life and study are also diversifying. This in turn is likely to
impact on students’ identity – how they define themselves in relation to others and to
their studies - and on what it means to be a university student.

For example, the evidence suggests that whilst some school leavers are still taking the
more ‘traditional’ option of leaving home to live and study at university in another area
of the country, an increasing number of young UK students are opting to study at a local
university and to remain living in their family home rather than moving away from home
to study (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005). Other school-leavers may opt for a local
university but decide to live on campus, or independently, while for some mature
students there may not be a choice, since family commitments are likely to dominate
decision-making around university choice and living arrangements (Bowl 2003). In
countries whose universities are established on the U.K. model (for example New
Zealand and Australia) the picture has historically been more mixed than in the U.K.,
with a larger proportion of students (Stuart et al 2005) going to their local university. It is
not uncommon in New Zealand, for example, for groups of classmates to leave school
and go to their local university together, thereby maintaining previous patterns of
friendship and classroom relationships. There seems to be an implicit assumption in the
UK that the historical norm for undergraduate living arrangements is still intact – i.e. that
the majority of ‘traditional’ (middle-class students) attend pre-92 university away from
their home area, whilst only in post-92 universities, and among ‘non-traditional’ students
is this pattern breaking down. However, the evidence which we have collected, whilst
supporting this view in part, suggests a rather more complex picture.

In order to explore the impact of living arrangements on student experience this paper
draws primarily on data collected in the course of a larger ESRC-funded study, Learning
and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference which examines the multiple factors
influencing academic engagement in the context of widening participation in higher
education\(^1\). Whilst the project as a whole focuses on both teacher and student perceptions
of university, this paper focuses on undergraduate student perspectives, utilising data
gathered from students enrolled in their first year of university study. The paper examines
the factors which determine choice of living arrangements (recognising that choice might,
in itself, be constrained). It then discusses the impact of different living arrangements on
students’ learning experiences at university, and some of the other factors which emerged
as influencing integration with or alienation from university life and study. Finally, it
suggests some implications for practice to respond to these differences in living
arrangements and ensure that students with diverse needs and commitments are treated
equitably and enabled to engage fully with university study.

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\(^1\) In our study, we have utilised a concept of academic engagement which attempts to incorporate
approaches to learning, ways of knowing and personal and structurally formed orientations to academic
study. The student who is ‘academically engaged’ is intellectually, socially and personally involved in
learning that has meaningful outcomes for them.
Context for the paper: the literature of student participation and experience

The context within which UK students learn in higher education today has been shaped by the changing socio-political landscape and particularly by government policy to widen and increase participation (DfES 2003). Attempts to widen access have led to an increase in the number of undergraduate enrolments (Scheutz and Slowey 2000), some changes in the composition of the student population (DfES 2003) and a greater variety of entry routes into higher education (Slowey 2000). These changes are likely to influence students’ expectations and experiences of university study as well as presenting challenges for those whose role it is to support students in their studies and, in particular, for university teachers.

Research which explores the ways in which students experience learning and teaching at university has tended to focus on particular student groups - for example, those from working class backgrounds, from some minority ethnic backgrounds, mature students and students with disabilities (Weil 1986; Reay 1998(a)(b); Leathwood and Hutchings 2003; Parr 2000; Bowl 2003). A number of these studies draw on the work of Bourdieu in assessing the impact of different holdings of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) and family, cultural and institutional habitus (Bourdieu 1990) on the ways in which individuals experience the university environment. In particular, Reay (1998a, 1998b) and Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) have explored how family habitus may shape individual choices about entry into different types of higher education. Bowl (2003) has discussed how institutional habitus, as expressed through the norms and expectations of universities and their staff may alienate and exclude some students.
Research on student identity\(^2\) also reveals how a student’s sense of identity is likely to influence decisions around university participation (Ball et al 2000; Archer et al 2007) and how participation in higher education impacts on identity (Archer and Leathwood 2003). In relation to class identity, Read et al (2003) argue that the predominantly middle class culture of higher education is both alien to working class participants and also serves to alienate them from their own communities. The literature on student choice-making, entry to and learning at university reveals the potential for variations in students’ experience based on their different socio-political, institutional, curricular and personal contexts (Ball 2003).

In deciding to undertake university study, there are also choices to be made about how to combine study with other aspects of life. And whilst the pattern of the past may have been that university marked a significant break for the 18-year old student: moving away from home, becoming independent from family and focused largely on university life and study, the pattern today appears somewhat less clear cut. First, intending students may have a range of choices (or lack of choices) about living arrangements – they may opt for halls of residence or independent living with university peers, or because of considerations of cost or convenience, they may choose to remain in the family home, and for mature students with children (Bowl 2003) university choice is likely to be dictated by a need for continuity in existing family and living arrangements. In addition to these considerations, the desire to maintain links with friends and family, or to become independent from family, and the need to combine full- or part-time work with study are issues for students and are likely to affect their orientation to and engagement with university study. The implications of this range of choices for students’ orientations to university life and study and for the ways in which universities operate are considered in this paper.

\(^2\) We have found Wenger’s (1998) conceptualization of identity helpful in theorising around the data we have been analysing in the project. According to Wenger, we define who we are in a number of ways, including by ‘negotiated experience’ – how we experience ourselves through participation, by ‘community membership’ and by ‘learning trajectory’. Wenger’s concept of identity as a ‘nexus of multi-membership’ provides a framework for seeing how both university teachers and students reconcile different or even conflicting demands.
**Focus for the paper**

The research project from which this paper draws its data is an ongoing Economic and Social Research Council Teaching and Learning Research Programme (ESRC/TLRP) funded research project: *Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference*, which began in 2006. The aim of the project overall is to research some of the implications of widening participation in English higher education. The project is exploring students’ and teachers’ conceptions of learning and teaching, knowledge and knowing across two universities (one pre-and one post-1992) and a range of subject disciplines. Its aim is to develop strategies to improve academic engagement and participation, to create more inclusive learning environments and to inform the development of policy and practice in university teaching. Fundamental to the project has been a desire to explore the dynamics of academic engagement using a framework which seeks to integrate theories of differentials in social, economic and cultural capital, (Bourdieu 1997), theories of individual, family and institutional habitus Bourdieu 1990; Bowl 2003; Reay 1998(a),(b); Reay et al 2005) with approaches to learning theories (Marton and Saljo 1976a, 1976b) and theories of knowing (Belenky et al 1997). The focus of enquiry with particular relevance to this paper was first year undergraduates’ conceptions of themselves as university students.

**Methodology and research design**

We wanted to gather data from students which could be used to inform university teachers about undergraduate perspectives on university life and learning and enable them to reflect on and develop their own practice in response to these perspectives. As practitioners working within universities, we were concerned to minimise the extent to which we imposed our own preconceptions on what students might have to say. For this reason, we opted for qualitative data collection methods and an approach to data collection and analysis which, as far as possible, allowed themes to emerge from our data, rather than being imposed by us in advance. The data gathering methods used included open-ended questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews with first year undergraduate students.
The data on which the discussion in this paper is based were collected from undergraduates in their first term, studying a range of academic subjects, at one pre- and one post-92 university. The academic subject areas selected represented a range across the Arts and Sciences. Within this range, university teachers were identified, who were undertaking programmes of staff development, and who expressed an interest in developing their practice in response to the changing size and composition of the university undergraduate population. Student volunteers were drawn from the teaching groups of these cooperating university lecturers. The student participants were from a range of socio-economic, age and ethnic backgrounds and had come to university via a variety of academic and vocational entry routes. Data were collected from responses to 289 open-ended questionnaires, through focus group discussions with 102 students and through individual semi-structured interviews with 26 students. We explored with these new university students how they had made decisions about their course of study and university living arrangements and how they were experiencing life and study in their first few weeks at university. We then followed up with individual interviews with student volunteers who had earlier taken part in whole group classroom observations which we had undertaken with cooperating teachers. For the questionnaire data a coding scheme was designed based on the themes emerging from the data and against the theoretical framework outlined above and the data were then analysed using NVIVO. For the purposes of this paper, the data from in-depth interviews were analysed by examining and comparing emerging themes.

The next section of this paper focuses on some of the themes about students’ living arrangements and how they arrived at decisions about where to study and live and how to combine their studies with other aspects of their lives. We present the data in two ways: first, we focus on some of the broad general themes which emerged from the questionnaire data; second, using the data from in-depth interviews, we take a closer look at the complex factors taken into account in the decision-making of individual students. What was particularly striking was the diversity of circumstances, motivations and priorities articulated by the students. This has led us to question the notion of ‘traditional’ or ‘non-traditional’ student which has been dominant in discussion of widening
participation. It is also leading us to consider the relationship between structural factors and individual dispositions in shaping decisions of this nature.

**General trends from questionnaire data**

When the questionnaire data were analysed, some stark differences were apparent in the student profiles of the two universities. The data suggest that the students at the post-1992 university, when compared to their pre-1992 university counterparts were:

- more likely to live at home than in a hall of residence;
- more likely to be mature students with a gap between leaving school and university entrance
- more likely to have studied a qualification other than ‘A’ levels prior to entry to university
- less likely to have chosen their university as a first choice;

These variations, which were apparent between two universities within the same geographical region, challenge the stereotype of the standard or ‘traditional’ student experience, and seem to confirm the notion of stratification between pre- and post-1992 universities (Reay et al 2005) since students appeared to be entering different types of universities from different academic backgrounds and with different personal and academic orientations to study which, in turn, influenced their decisions about how they combined life and study.

Through the open-ended questionnaires we asked students to describe how their living arrangements impacted on their studies. Approximately half the students reported that living arrangements had little or no impact on their orientation to study. Amongst those students who did report an impact, the split between positive and negative impacts was about equal. Where an impact was reported, these could be described under two broad headings – practical and emotional. Practical impacts included ease of physical access to university (as influenced, for example by the availability of transport or the convenience of study timetables) or domestic, work or childcare responsibilities or support. Emotional impacts included pre-existing friendship groups or the support of close family ties. These practical considerations helped to shape the way in which students chose to attend particular lectures and classes, as well as the way in which they felt able to engage in
student networks and social events. The emotional impacts appeared to be important in influencing students’ perceptions of themselves in relation to other students and their sense of integration with university life and their student peers.

**Themes from the interview data: four profiles**

A more detailed analysis of the qualitative data enables an exploration of difference and diversity at the level of the personal, and challenges some of the stereotypes embodied in the notions of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ student. It reveals a rather more complex picture than that of the pre- and post-92 university dichotomy which emerges from the questionnaire data. From our 26 in depth interviews, we have selected to present data from four – not because of their typicality, but because they challenge the notion of the ‘typical’ university student and reveal the role of personal agency, shaped by family and personal expectations and aspirations in shaping decision-making. All student names have been changed to protect anonymity.

**Student one: Clare**

Clare was eighteen years old and was studying history at the pre-1992 university. She was living in a student hall of residence. She described herself as black British. Clare chose to study history because of a strong desire to teach black history in ‘supplementary schools’ in her local community. For Clare as a school pupil, supplementary schooling had supported her educational progress in a culturally appropriate way outside the school setting and had helped to inspire her educationally and develop her sense of herself as a learner. She wanted to share her knowledge and experiences with others. In particular, she was keen to explore her own identity:

> I want to know more about where my family is from, and my history, because my history here just goes to 1960’s and then that’s it really, and then it is somewhere else. So I want to investigate it further. I want to know what they don’t teach me at school other than slavery or Malcolm X. I want to know it and embrace it and teach others that this is where we are from and we should be proud of it.

Clare had moved away from her family home in London but returned every weekend to be with her family and to do her part-time job. She recognised that the experience of moving away had led her to a growing sense of independence, and yet she was experiencing some distance between herself and some of her university peers:

> We are strangers, except for the few people you may be friends with, they are all strangers. In school you could easily ask your friends, in uni it’s more like “It is your problem” So you’ve got to find it out by yourself.
In her interview, Clare talked at length about her passionate feelings for her subject of study but she felt that the course she was taking was not allowing her the flexibility to pursue her particular interests.

Clare also described feeling somewhat isolated from and conspicuous among her fellow students:

*I am used to a more mixed environment and talking as a black female, you feel like you are by yourself. If I was in London and the ethnic make-up was all white or all Asian I still would be able to go home to my family and feel - you know - but, culturally [here] I feel a little bit isolated. I think that’s probably the best thing to describe it.*

...*When I am in a lecture room, I realize that I’m one of the only black faces, and simple things like some teachers know my name like that [clicked fingers].*

Having chosen to study at this particular university because it was situated in a multicultural city and because of her expectation that she would be taught by specialists in black history, Clare was disappointed by the reality of her experience:

*The actual university itself is not like much of the city, where there are a lot of black people around, a lot of Asian people around, but in the actual university there are not. It is quite different; you make up quite a small percentage.*

She described feeling that she did not belong to the stereotypical student life of alcohol and late night partying. She felt that she was isolated culturally and financially from her peers and that her experience was markedly different from theirs:

*Just culturally, what Uni is about, what they do, the outside activities. Not so much how things are taught because you know, it doesn’t matter how you teach things, it is each individual student. But even financially not that you can make general assumptions but, you know if you’ve got less money, it’s harder. Like, you know my parents’ background; you have to get through, and that sort of thing. I just feel like it is a different experience.*

After several weeks trying to settle in to her new environment, Clare decided to seek a transfer to a university closer to home so that she could live back with her family.

**Student two: Sam**

Sam was twenty-two, described herself as white British and was studying nursing at the same pre-1992 university as Clare. She lived in the family home. Before enrolling on her nursing course, Sam had taken and gained a computing degree at another local university and so had some previous experience of university life. Her interest in a medical or caring career was a consequence of caring for her disabled mother. She described how she spent time in a hospital environment and this prompted her to take an interest in a career in nursing. For Sam, this and a period when she herself was diagnosed as being mentally ill provided a practical link between her own experience and her chosen field of study. Neither of her parents had been to university, but a brother had attended the same university that Sam was now attending. Having been in higher education before, Sam
expressed the view that her prior undergraduate experience had helped her to manage her studies more effectively than her course peers:

*I know about independent study and all that, and you can see the others struggling with the idea of it. I think they are still in school mode – getting everything fed to them.*

However, she described feeling at a disadvantage because it was several years since she had studied biology at school. She felt that this ‘gap’ in her knowledge put her at a disadvantage.

Sam had developed good social networks with her fellow students and her involvement in wider university activities, particularly the university mountain biking club. She was happy not to be living in a hall of residence, arguing that she benefited from the support her mother was able to offer her and that living in the family home gave her a secure base from which to participate in other activities:

*No, I don’t think I’d be able to handle being in halls, I think that it would be too much being in halls as well. I like going home and I’ve got the support of my family especially my mom. We’re really, really close. She helped me through all my problems and I know I can go back home to her and its like a bit of stability in the crazy life which I’ve got at the moment!*

Sam talked about her friends from school and her previous course, noting that although she had maintained those relationships, they were not as close as they had been. She talked positively about her relationship with her new friends on the nursing course. She described how she had been concerned that, as a mature student, she might feel isolated and alone, but that meeting up with other students who had not come straight from school had helped her to feel more at home:

*I felt a bit awkward being older than everybody. Most people who come in are only eighteen, nineteen and I’m twenty two! But I was quite relieved when I met Kirsty and Arabelle. They have both done degrees before. But that was only really a worry for the first few days. After we settled in, I mean a lot of my friends were only eighteen, and you don’t see age being a problem.*

Sam was positive about the friendships she had made on her course. She described their shared sense of identity as future professionals. Working towards a common professional goal, seemed to encourage her and her student colleagues to help each other in their studies.

**Student three: Ruth**

Ruth was twenty-five years old and described herself as white British. She was studying biosciences at the post-1992 university in this study. Prior to attending university she had worked as a retail assistant, but had grown disillusioned with this work and wanted to ‘use her brain’. She enrolled on an access to science course at her local further education college with the aim of becoming a marine biologist. Following a positive experience on the access course she decided to take a bioscience degree because this would offer a broader spectrum of work opportunities than marine biology. Ruth decided to move away from home to study, recognising her need to live independently from her parents:
I’ve moved out of home and moved into the halls of residence, so I’ve become a lot more independent which is something that I really needed to do…and I suppose I’ve got a bit more confident and I just love being away from home.

Ruth saw moving away to university as a way of establishing her much sought-after independence, and living in a hall of residence enabled her to achieve this on a limited budget. The alternative for her would have been to continue in a low paid job, with little prospect of earning a wage high enough to support herself living independently outside the family home.

But, no, I think this is the only way that I’m going to move out of home in the next three years because I couldn’t afford to while I was working, so I just really wanted to do it, but I just love it.

For Ruth, moving away from the family home was not necessarily about cutting links with her family. She still maintained her part-time employment in her home town and this meant that she stayed with her family at weekends. She felt that the relationship she had with her parents was stronger as a result of the changes she had made.

Ruth spoke enthusiastically about her experience on the access course, the support she had received from her fellow students and the shared learning that they had participated in. At university she had encountered some resistance from her fellow students to this kind of shared learning, with fear of plagiarism being seen as a reason not to work together. Ruth was acutely aware when she began her course at university that the friendships she would make were unlikely to be as strong as those she had found on the access course:

It’s quite difficult because most of them are in the lecture theatre so you don’t really get the chance to chat and say hello, but we do speak to people, but at college because there was only eight of us, it was a lot easier to forge friendships straight away.

Ruth later moved out of her hall of residence, finding them too noisy and disruptive. She moved into a shared house with some friends. For her, the hall of residence did not provide her with the social structures that she felt would help her in her studies.

Student four: Gurdeep

Gurdeep was nineteen years old, described himself as being of Indian descent, and was studying business at a post-1992 university. He was the first in his family to go into higher education and came to university having gained ‘A’ levels and an AVCE (vocational) qualification at a state school, local to the university he entered. He chose to study business at university because he had studied it since he was in year ten at school and he thought ‘Why give up now?’ Despite having been offered places at other universities, Gurdeep chose to enrol at a local university. He lived in his family home and worked in his local supermarket for sixteen hours a week. Gurdeep said that his choice of university was governed mainly by financial considerations. He also had friends studying there and moving away to live in expensive accommodation elsewhere was not an option for him:
One of [the considerations] was the costs mainly. I mean, you have to take a loan out for your £3,000 for tuition fees and then you are going to be struggling, if you went away. I mean, living costs, plus most of my family is here anyway, in Wolverhampton, so I thought it’s just better to go here.

Gurdeep described moments of doubt about his decision, noting that he had met people who had gone further afield to study and this had caused him to think whether he was ‘missing out’ by not moving away. However, for him, there were other reasons for staying at home in that this arrangement provided him with support and practical help to make his busy life easier:

You do meet other people from Coventry or Leicester, and they’ve all come here and they’re family stress-free, but when you think about them, they’re always there, saying, I’ve got to go out and get some food. We can just go home and my Mum will make it for me.

In addition to working at the supermarket, Gurdeep was also expected to shoulder some domestic burdens at home because his father was a long-distance lorry driver. Despite these responsibilities, he nevertheless managed to maintain contact with his friends from before he went to university and made some friends in his new environment:

….. you are always going to make friends, but they can be a distraction as well. So the people that we’ve made friends with are literally because we’ve connected, when we’ve talked about assignments and that. So automatically, people just started socialising and everybody just got to know each other.

In his interview, Gurdeep talked at length about how he interacted with other students on his course, to discuss work and in particular assignments. He felt confident in making those connections, not just in his immediate year group, but also across student years:

But a year above us, we still know some people who did this course as well, and we asked their opinions about how they approached this assignment, so I like that.

In describing his friends at university, Gurdeep said he felt most comfortable around people that he feels are ‘the same’ as him, including sharing an ethnic identity:

They’re just like one of us. They come from sixth form. Generally they’re family-happy, trying to study and in debt...most of them are Asian.

For Gurdeep, whose parents had not been to university, how Gurdeep behaved at university was ‘a mystery’. In his interview, Gurdeep gave the impression that he was two different people – at home and at university:

My parents think that I have two faces. I mean, I’m different at home, and I’m different at university – that’s how they think. They think I’m still a childish person at university, but I’m not. At home, I’m still the same.

Part of Gurdeep’s motivation to carry on at university related to his being the first member of his family to go to university. He described the pride his family took in his education and how important it was to him to succeed:

No, none of my family’s really been to university, apart from my cousins..... They want me to keep going further .... Because I want to see my family happy, so, that is one reason I’m always doing my work and want to get where I want to get to.
These four students’ stories illustrate some of the variations in educational background, career objectives, family circumstances, responsibilities and expectations as well as variations in personal motivations to study and demonstrate aspects of the complex nature of diversity in higher education that the project is aiming to address.

**Discussion**

Discussion of diversity and difference in higher education has tended to focus on specific (often single) dimensions – class, gender, age and/or ‘race’. The picture which begins to emerge from our analysis of both the questionnaire data and our more detailed qualitative exploration of students’ choice of living and study arrangements is certainly one of diversity and difference. However, the different choices which students make, mediated by economic, personal and social considerations reveal diversity as more complex than is often portrayed. Choice (if indeed there is a ‘choice’) of living arrangements may affect orientation to study. However, there is no simple relationship between choice of living arrangements and the sense of either integration or isolation a student is likely to feel at university.

The questionnaire data revealed a range of living arrangements: younger students remaining in the parental home, mature students (with or without dependents) remaining in their own home, students opting for a local university or students leaving their home area to study and choosing a hall of residence and finally, (but in smaller numbers) first year undergraduate students opting for independent living or shared accommodation with university peers or others.

The four student case studies drawn from the interview data help to illustrate the range of orientations to university life and study that present themselves. Whilst there are differences in patterns of arrangements and orientations across different types of university the pre-and the post-1992, there is clearly no ‘typical’ student, even within the stratified university system. The themes which emerge challenge the notion of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ student and the case studies illustrate the complexity of decision making that students undertake about how they are to engage in university life.
‘Home or away?’ is one of the first considerations for intending university students. Gurdeep’s family income and responsibilities dictated his ‘choice’; moving into independent accommodation away from the family home was not a serious option. He was aware that he might be missing out on peer support and the social benefits to be gained in moving away from home to live in university or independent accommodation. However, he also argued that there was a potential benefit for his engagement with his university studies, in that he could rely on his mother to provide practical domestic support. He felt he could avoid some of the ‘distractions’ of university social life, without seeming overly concerned about being isolated from his fellow students. Sam had both practical and emotional reasons for remaining in her family home. Whilst she wanted to be able to continue to care for her mother, she also felt the benefit of family support which she gained from living at home. However, this did not appear to be at the cost of integration into university life and study – she appeared well linked in, both with her subject peer group and with wider activity-based university networks.

For those who do decide to live away from home, other considerations come into play – whether to opt for hall of residence or more independent sharing arrangements. Here, the need for the peer friendships and support which seemed to be offered by sharing living accommodation with other students was compatible with another perceived need - to become independent through moving away from the immediate family. Halls of residence may meet these needs. Goldscheider and DaVanzo (1986) have discussed the concept of semi-autonomous living arrangements in the context of student halls of residence, arguing that halls provide a kind of half-way house, by means of which students can leave home emotionally and physically, but are protected from the full weight of adult responsibilities by their parents’ ongoing support from a distance, as well as the semi-institutional nature of university halls of residence. Ruth seems to typify this type of arrangement, although in the end, the benefits of living in a hall of residence were outweighed by her need to avoid the disruption to her studies which was brought about by sharing with a number of other students.
For Clare, moving away from home and into hall of residence was the only realistic option, given her determination to study in a subject area which interested and motivated her. However, to move into a university hall of residence did not imply integration into university social life and culture. Both Clare and Ruth experienced a sense of isolation in halls of residence – which eventually made them consider moving out, and in the case of Clare was an aspect of her decision to move to a university closer to home. Sam and Gurdeep discussed the likelihood that they would feel isolated as a result of living in the family home, but in reality this feeling of detachment seemed to exist for Clare and Ruth as well. Living in a hall of residence was certainly no guarantee of building good social networks or fostering a sense of belonging.

Living arrangements do not seem to be the only factor determining the extent to which a student feels integrated with or isolated from university life and study. The case studies suggest that there are other factors at play: the need to give or receive family or community support, the degree of identification with course of study, clarity about potential gains from study and the extent of interaction with other students.

Sam clearly identifies with her course of study, and is also clear about why she wants to train as a nurse. This sense of ‘fit’ is reinforced by the esprit de corps which her nursing course encourages through the use of group activities. Other nursing students interviewed for this study described learning activities which they were expected to undertake in small groups, independently of their lecturer, which had given them the impetus to get together outside class to share their learning. These sessions were mentioned as offering a good opportunity for forging peer links. Clare, on the other hand, strongly identified with an aspect of her chosen area of study and also had a clear motivation for studying in relation to her future career ambitions. However, her sense of integration was weakened, both by her disappointment at the reality of her course and by the way in which she felt ‘set apart’ from her student peers by reason of different economic status, and ‘singled out’ by her teachers because of her minority status as a black woman. Living in a hall of residence appeared to do little to mitigate her isolation.
Ruth was positively motivated toward her subject of study; she also saw university as her only realistic route to independence. She subsequently moved out of hall and into independent living arrangements. And whilst her interaction with other students was not as productive as she had experienced on her access course, she had a realistic view of what she could expect from student peers. Her motivation towards independence seemed to over-ride her need for peer support. Gurdeep’s identification with his course of study was less clearly focused; his choice of course was determined by his past study rather than his future orientation. However, he demonstrated a degree of confidence and common identity in his relationships with other students.

From the evidence of four case studies, the impact of these different arrangements is by no means straightforward. It appears possible for students (such as Sam) to feel fully engaged with both social and academic aspects of university life, whilst living away from university. Equally, it is quite possible for students (like Clare), who have clear motivations for and positive orientations towards, their field of study to feel socially alienated from the atmosphere of a hall of residence and culturally isolated in the university classroom.

Reconciling structural constraints and personal choices in student life
Choice about living arrangements appears to be based primarily on economic circumstances, and structural (particularly socio-economic) circumstances clearly seem to influence decision-making in relation to type of university attended. However, there is clear evidence that individual agency is also at play and the interplay between social structural position, family habitus and individual motivations is not necessarily as straightforward as it might appear. Family considerations - such as the desire for support, or independence from, family and community can mediate such decision-making. And whilst living arrangements may impact on students’ engagement with university life and study, with practical, social and personal implications, the ways in which they impact cannot be simply explained – university-based living arrangements do not necessarily mean integration into university life and study.
Tentatively, the evidence suggests a number of things. First, a need to reject the ‘traditional’ stereotype of an undergraduate as a young person without responsibilities enjoying a frantic social life, away from the constraints of parental control. Second, a need to recognise that ‘diversity’ in university education is not merely an issue of class, gender, age and ethnicity, but includes diversity in individuals’ prior educational experiences, orientations to and motivations for studying. Third, the data also indicate that university-based social networks, recognised in the literature (Tinto 1993) as being important to student adaptation to university study, are not necessarily formed through students being more university based in terms of living arrangements. However, there does seem to be some evidence (particularly in relation to courses where students are also training to develop professional identity) that links forged between course members by means of teacher initiated group activities can help students to feel a sense of integration – whether or not they are campus-based.

The bigger picture emerging from the data seems to confirm the stratification of choices, determined by differentials in economic, social, symbolic, cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997). And whilst such holdings may be translated into habitus (Bourdieu 1990) which involve assumptions about what place a student should be taking up, at which university they should study, and to what extent they should feel integrated simultaneously into both home and university life and expectations, they are not fatalistically determined. Nor do individual students necessarily see their individual choice making in terms of structural constraints or exclusionary practices.

**Implications for practice**

In the ESRC/TLRP study: *Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference* we are working towards identifying the implications for practice arising from research into university students’ and teachers’ backgrounds, identities and conceptions and their expectations of university life and study. This paper has looked at the emerging themes from just a small area of the research, exploring undergraduate students’ choices about living arrangements. Tentatively, we draw three conclusions for practice, and in particular for the practice of university teachers. First, practitioners need consciously to
develop a more complex view of the nature of diversity in the undergraduate population. Teaching for diversity, is not simply a question of recognising and taking into account the more or less visible and structural aspects of difference in the classroom – age, ethnicity, gender and (less visibly) class. Teaching for diversity also involves recognising that new undergraduates’ differing educational backgrounds will differently shape their confidence in and expectations of themselves as undergraduates. It also involves understanding that students will not necessarily be campus-focused: that their family, community and work lives are likely to be as important to them as their university lives – and that experiences of family, work and community life are relevant to them - supporting and sometimes, conflicting with their academic lives.

Second, it is clear that the old discourses and stereotypes of the undergraduate as carefree, young and coming to university for a social, as much as an academic experience (Bourgeois et al 1999) are not well-founded. Indeed, for some students, these manifestations of university life (particularly in halls of residence) can be isolating and alienating. Conversely, the stereotype of the ‘widening participation’ or ‘non-traditional’ student (Slowey 2000) as mature, vocationally-focused and home-based, does not hold, in that individual students’ motivations for opting for certain courses, at particular universities are complex and mediated by individual, as well as social factors. It is therefore important to challenge the discourse around the ‘non-traditional’ student, and possibly some of our assumptions about the degree and nature of diversity in the classroom.

Third, it cannot be assumed that students’ peer based study networks will develop through spontaneous social contact – in the lecture theatre, student union or hall of residence. Indeed there seems to be evidence that this is unlikely, given the diversity in students’ living arrangements, family and work commitments. However, social networks seem to be highly valued in sustaining and supporting undergraduates in their studies. This suggests to us that, notwithstanding the pressures on university teachers brought about by increased student numbers, larger classes and heavy teaching loads, small group
work in the early days of university study, can provide valuable friendship and academic support links for students – whether they opt to live at home or move away to study.

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