Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures

Edited by
Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

©2023 Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin (eds). Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapter's authors

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin (eds), *Higher Education for Good: Teaching and Learning Futures*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0363

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at https://archive.org/web

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0363#resources

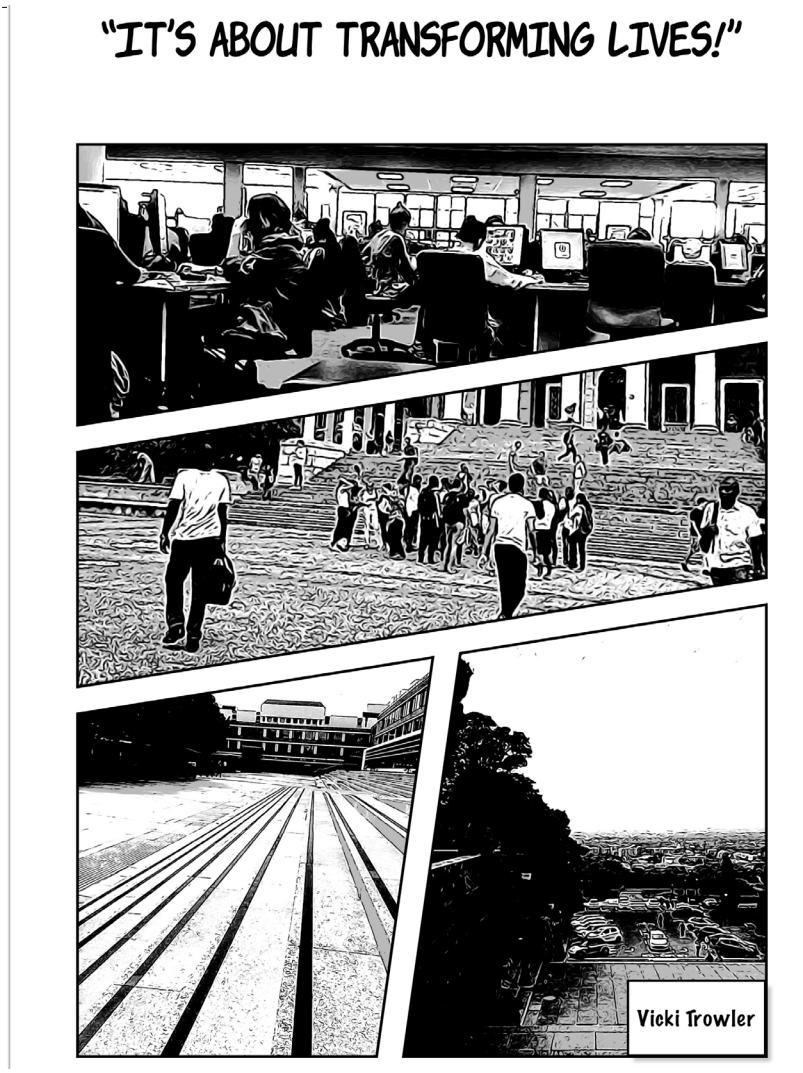
ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-127-6
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-128-3
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-129-0
ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-130-6
ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-132-0
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-133-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0363

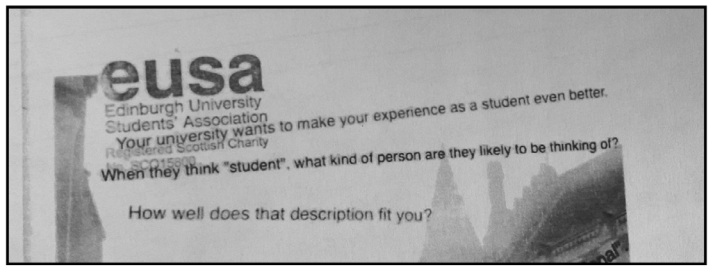
Cover image: George Sfougaras, *Hope*, CC BY-NC-ND
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

26. “It’s about transforming lives!”: Supporting students in post pandemic higher education

Vicki Trowler



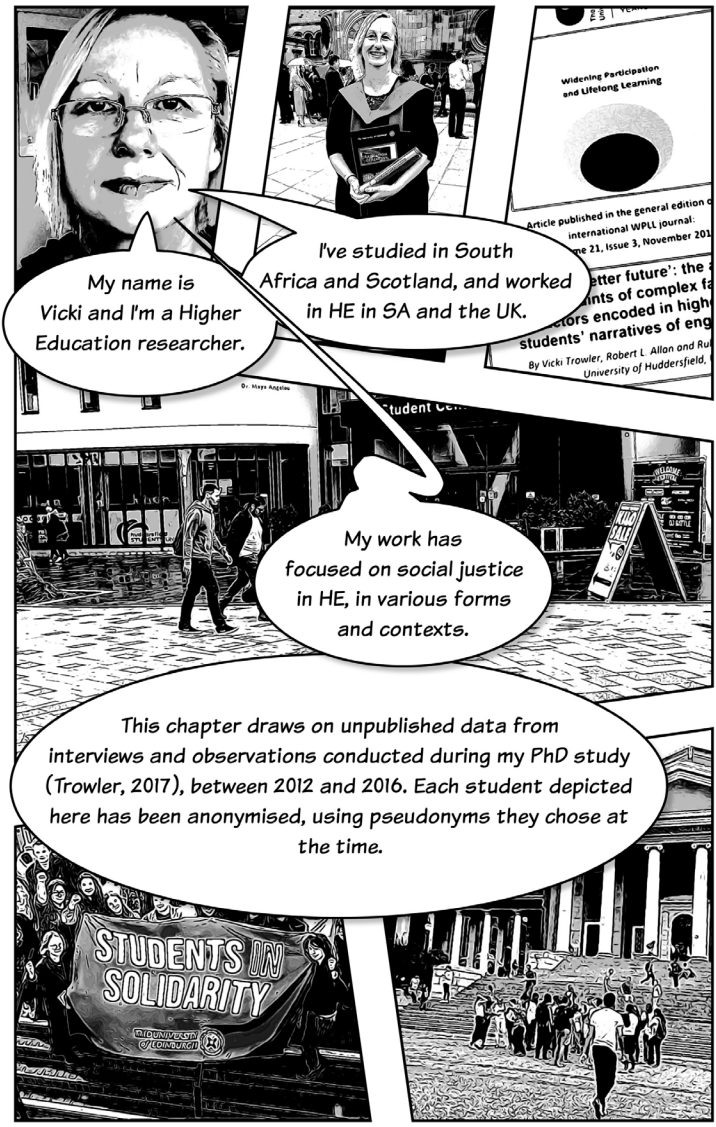
© 2023 V. Trowler, CC BY-NC 4.0
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0363.26



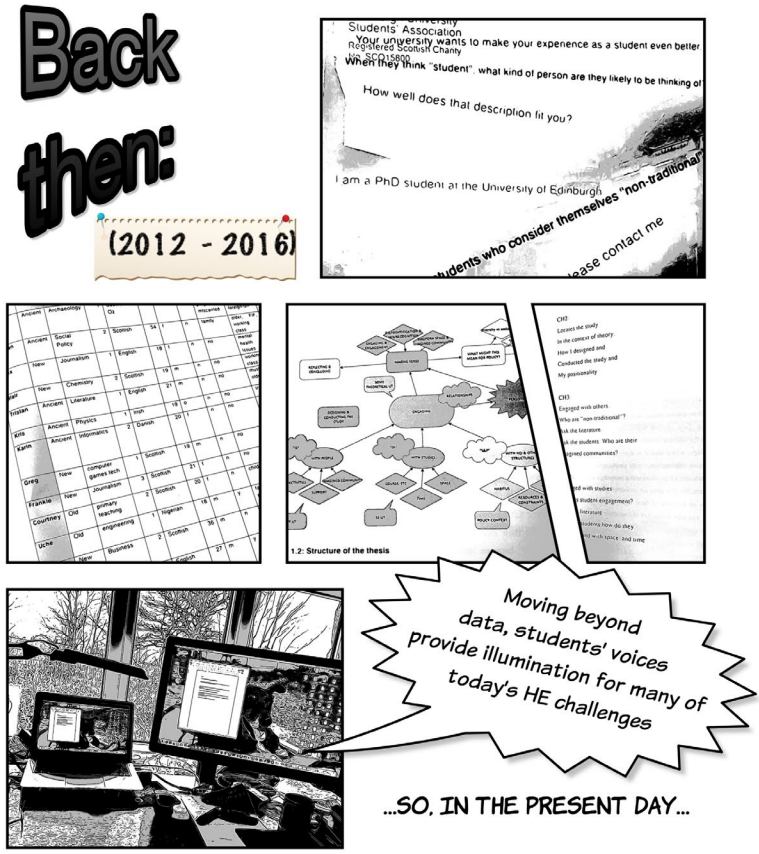
"When one thinks of 'a student', what springs to mind is often a young person from within the country, entering university directly from school with the appropriate school-leaving qualifications; this imagined student has no job or other responsibilities to distract them from their studies, no dependents or extended family to care for, and no disabilities. They identify unproblematically with the gender they were assigned at birth, and this predisposes them to select an appropriate programme of study and to participate in stereotypical student pursuits..." (Trowler, 2017.)

My PhD study challenged those assumptions. I enlisted 23 volunteers who were studying at universities in Scotland, who self-identified as "non-traditional" in their own study contexts, to explore how they perceived their own engagement as well as their universities' attempts to engage them, and tracked them over the course of a calendar year. Reasons for volunteering included age, socio-economic background, nationality/ ethnicity / "race", religion, caring responsibilities, gender, first-in-family to participate in HE, LGBTQIA+ identities , disability status, family estrangement, care experience, and non-standard entry qualifications - with students seldom presenting only a single reason.

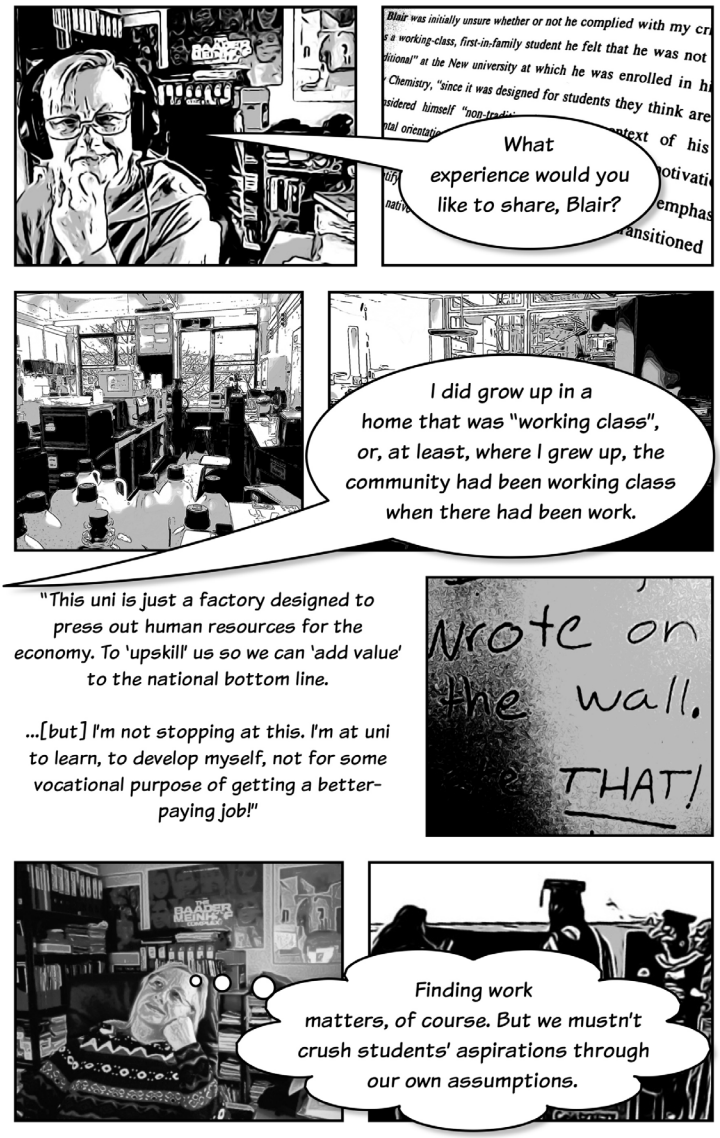
This chapter revisits unpublished data from my PhD study, bringing it into conversation with current concerns to reflect on what makes HE "good?" When is HE "good?" How might we, working or studying in HE, help to ensure that it stays (or becomes) "good" - when there are so many challenges. Pseudonyms used in this chapter were chosen by the participants at the time, and images and objects used (e.g. the smiley mask chosen by Alex, or the meeting minutes covered in food chosen by Courtney) were selected by participants to characterise their engagement with their universities. To those students, and others I've interviewed and worked with since, my ongoing gratitude.

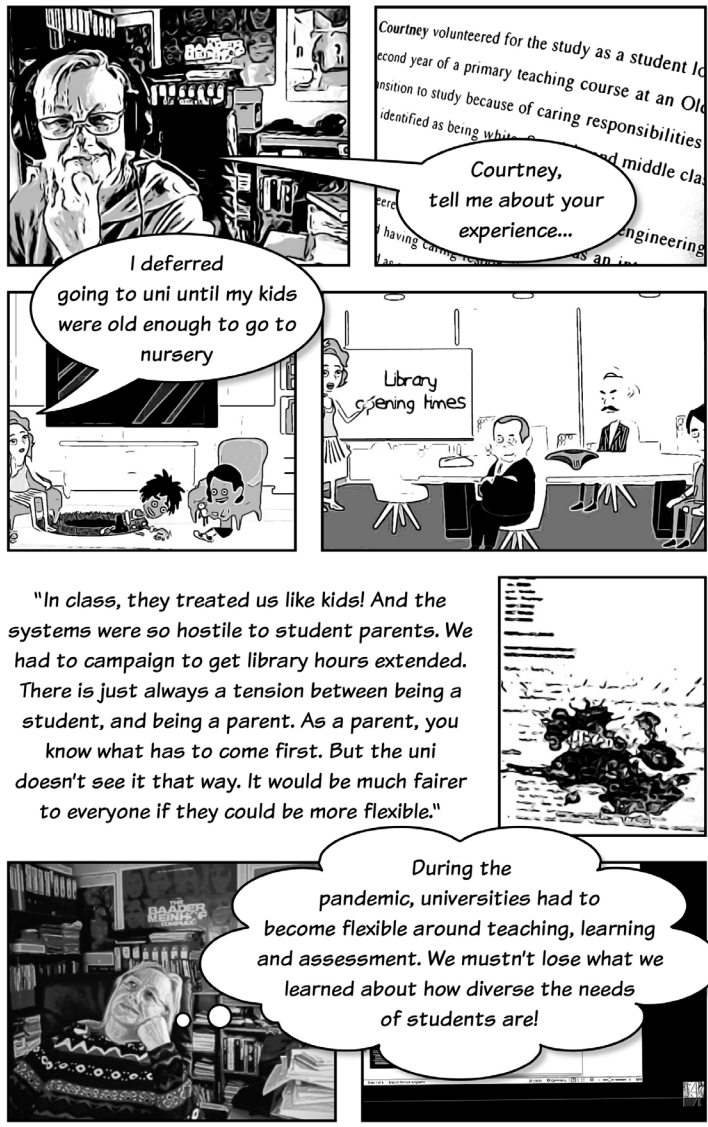

My name is Vicki and I'm a Higher Education researcher.
I've studied in South Africa and Scotland, and worked in HE in SA and the UK.
Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning
My work has focused on social justice in HE, in various forms and contexts.
This chapter draws on unpublished data from interviews and observations conducted during my PhD study (Trowler, 2017), between 2012 and 2016. Each student depicted here has been anonymised, using pseudonyms they chose at the time.
STUDENTS IN SOLIDARITY

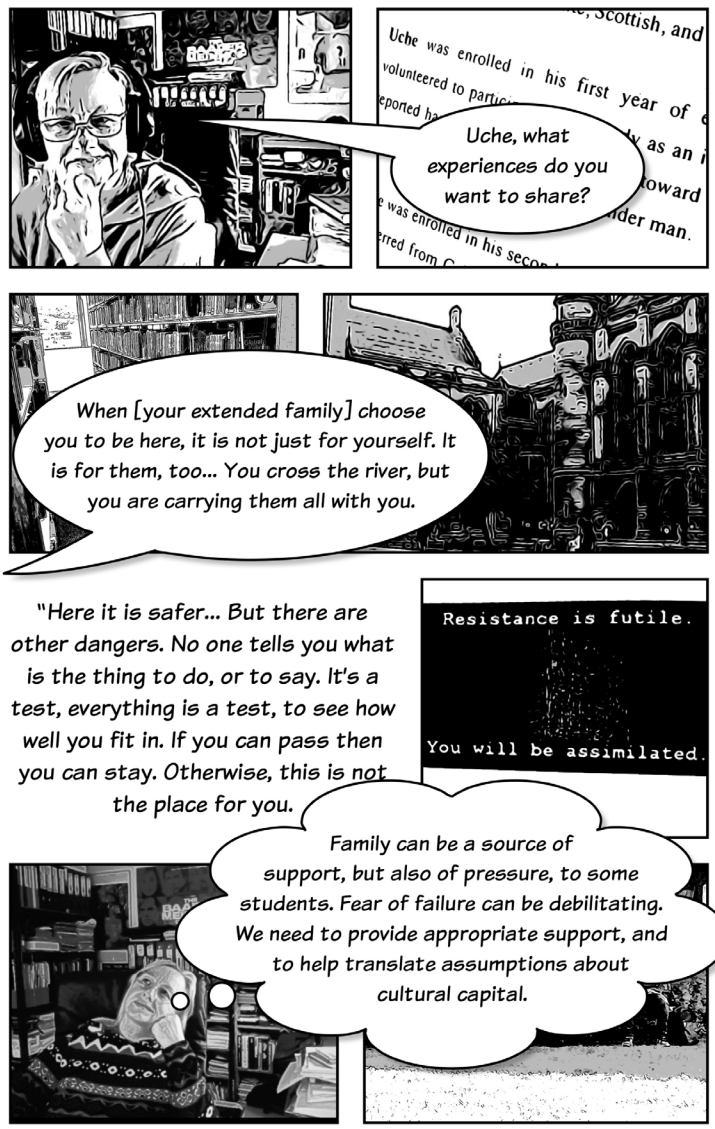
Students volunteered to participate in the study in response to posters in student areas on campuses in Scotland, seeking students who identified as "non-traditional" in their study contexts. The focus of the study was on student engagement, but conversations ranged widely. This chapter will bring their reflections on how universities could better meet the needs of students like themselves, into conversation with the post-pandemic HE landscape.

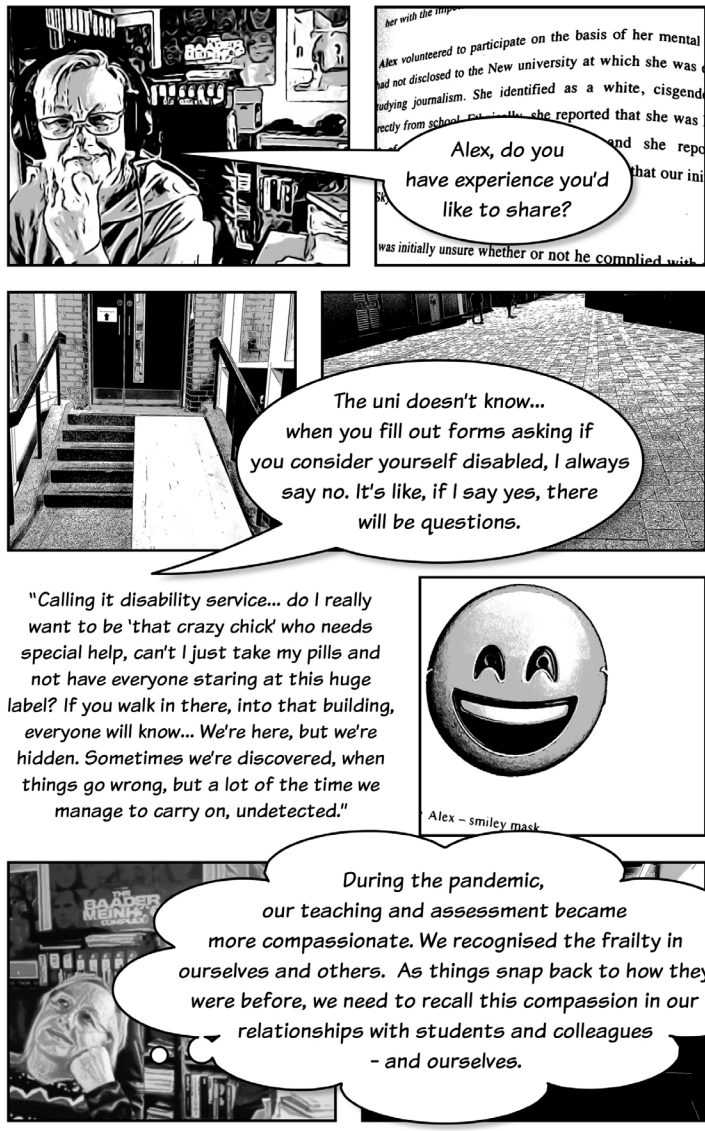


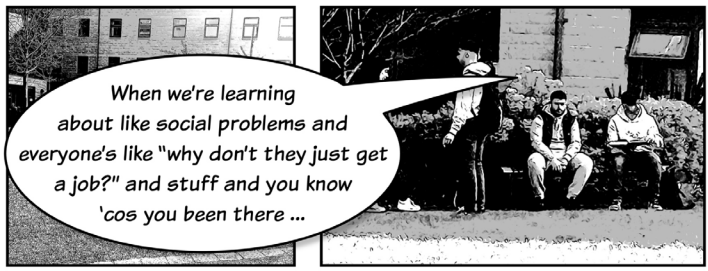
Yumna was enrolled in her first year in a design course at a
described herself ethnically as "British" [though from a Black /
(BME) background] and volunteered to participate in the study sinc
her HE participation "non-traditional" in the following ways: a
mmigrant parents, she
om an obs
mily to attend university
ourse that invol
i.e. forbidden
mily, though, w
hrough her studies
ent indirectly
Yumna, what would you like to share about your experience?
The assumptions... the stereotypes. It's like they're not seeing me, they just see the veil. And then I'm either an object of pity, or an object of fear.
"There's an assumption that I'm not serious about my studies, that I just want a degree so I can get a better husband. And that because I dress modestly, I don't have opinions to share, so I never get asked in class. I'm quite shy, so I'm not going to shout out, like some, but it would be nice to be asked sometimes. And for people to listen properly when I speak, not assume what I'm going to say."
Some of the techniques we used during remote teaching allowed anonymity and facilitated participation. We mustn't lose that!
How are you feeling right now?


Blair was initially unsure whether or not he complied with my cr
s a working-class, first-in-family student he felt that he was not
ditional" at the New university at which he was enrolled in hi
Chemistry, "since it was designed for students they think are
sidered himself "non-tradi
ntal orientati
ntext of his
otivati
emphas
ransitioned
What experience would you like to share, Blair?
I did grow up in a home that was "working class", or, at least, where I grew up, the community had been working class when there had been work.
"This uni is just a factory designed to press out human resources for the economy. To 'upskill' us so we can 'add value' to the national bottom line.
...[but] I'm not stopping at this. I'm at uni to learn, to develop myself, not for some vocational purpose of getting a better-paying job!"
Wrote on the wall. THAT!
Finding work matters, of course. But we mustn't crush students' aspirations through our own assumptions.

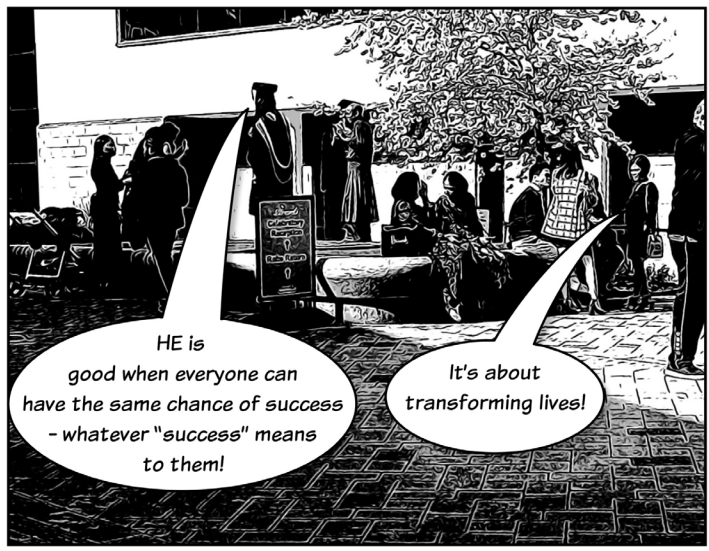

Courtney volunteered for the study as a student lo
econd year of a primary teaching course at an Old
nsition to study because of caring responsibilities
identified as being white
Courtney, tell me about your experience...
I deferred going to uni until my kids were old enough to go to nursery
Library opening times
"In class, they treated us like kids! And the systems were so hostile to student parents. We had to campaign to get library hours extended. There is just always a tension between being a student, and being a parent. As a parent, you know what has to come first. But the uni doesn't see it that way. It would be much fairer to everyone if they could be more flexible."
During the pandemic, universities had to become flexible around teaching, learning and assessment. We mustn't lose what we learned about how diverse the needs of students are!


Uche was enrolled in his first year of
Uche, what experiences do you want to share?
When [your extended family] choose you to be here, it is not just for yourself. It is for them, too... You cross the river, but you are carrying them all with you.
"Here it is safer... But there are other dangers. No one tells you what is the thing to do, or to say. It's a test, everything is a test, to see how well you fit in. If you can pass then you can stay. Otherwise, this is not the place for you.
Resistance is futile.
You will be assimilated.
Family can be a source of support, but also of pressure, to some students. Fear of failure can be debilitating. We need to provide appropriate support, and to help translate assumptions about cultural capital.


Alex, do you have experience you'd like to share?
Alex volunteered to participate on the basis of her mental
was initially unsure whether or not he complied
The uni doesn't know... when you fill out forms asking if you consider yourself disabled, I always say no. It's like, if I say yes, there will be questions.
"Calling it disability service... do I really want to be 'that crazy chick' who needs special help, can't I just take my pills and not have everyone staring at this huge label? If you walk in there, into that building, everyone will know... We're here, but we're hidden. Sometimes we're discovered, when things go wrong, but a lot of the time we manage to carry on, undetected."
Alex – smiley mask
During the pandemic, our teaching and assessment became more compassionate. We recognised the frailty in ourselves and others. As things snap back to how they were before, we need to recall this compassion in our relationships with students and colleagues – and ourselves.



"In a sense you can't really go home, once you've left. You can visit, but the place you visit isn't really "home", not because it's changed, but you have. What you think is home now isn't that. It's something else, somewhere else. Or maybe... someplace you haven't gone yet, some place you still have to create."


HE is good when everyone can have the same chance of success - whatever "success" means to them!
It's about transforming lives!

References

Eringfeld, S. (2021). Higher education and its post-coronial future: Utopian hopes and dystopian fears at Cambridge University during Covid-19. *Studies in Higher Education, 46*(1), 146-157. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1859681

Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Peters, M. A., Rizvi, F., McCulloch, G., Gibbs, P., Gorur, R., Hong, M., Hwang,Y., Zipin, L., Brennan, M., Robertson, S., Quay, J., Malbon, J., Taglietti, D., Barnett, R., Chengbing, W., McLaren, P., Apple, R., Papastephanou, M., Burbules, N., Jackson, L., Jalote, P., Kalantzis, M., Cope, B., Fataar, A., Conroy, J., Misiaszek, G., Biesta, G., Jandrić, P., Choo, S., Apple, M., Stone, L., Tierney, R., Tesar, M., Besley,T. & Misiaszek, L. (2020). Reimagining the new pedagogical possibilities for universities post-Covid-19. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 54*(6), 717-760. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1777655

Trowler, V. (2017). *Nomads in contested landscapes: Reframing student engagement and non-traditionality in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh].

Trowler, V., Allan, R. L., & Din, R. R. (2019). "To secure a better future": The affordances and constraints of complex familial and social factors encoded in higher education students' narratives of engagement. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 21*(3), 81-98. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.21.3.81