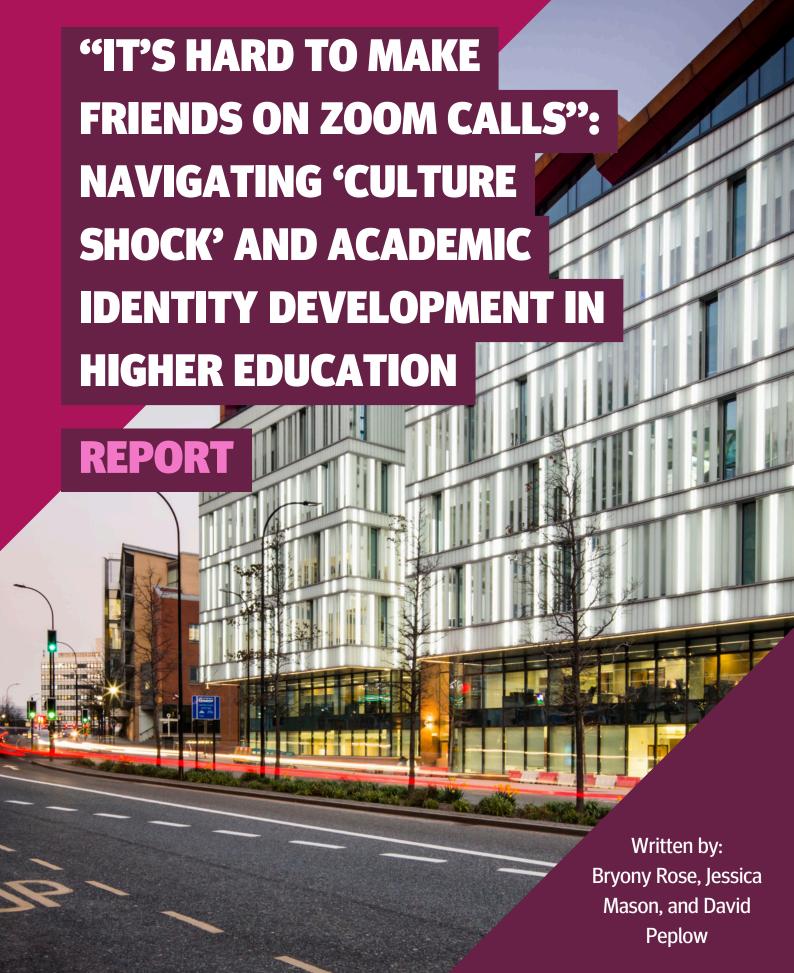# Sheffield Hallam University

"IT'S HARD TO MAKE FRIENDS ON ZOOM CALLS": NAVIGATING 'CULTURE SHOCK' AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

REPORT

Written by:
Bryony Rose, Jessica Mason, and David Peplow

"It's Hard to Make Friends on Zoom Calls": Navigating 'Culture Shock' and Academic Identity Development in Higher Education

Report of a small-scale project

1. Who led on this project?
Bryony Rose, Jessica Mason, and David Peplow.

2. When did it take place?
The project took place in 2023.

3. Which stage(s) of the student lifecycle did it relate to (if any)?
Success (e.g. retention and attainment).

4. What need(s) or issue(s) was this project addressing?
The project examined student academic identity development within a university setting. It focused on the challenges encountered by students at university and explored how these had an impact on their self-esteem, confidence, and academic engagement. Some students grapple with 'culture shock' when beginning higher education, which may lead to feeling disconnected and alienated (Nchindia, 2020; Reay, 2001; Reay et al., 2009; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). The project explored the journeys that students undertook and the barriers that they experienced. The project also identified good practices and strategies aimed at supporting students to develop a confident academic identity.

5. What question(s) was the project attempting to address?
The project aimed to address the following questions:
- To what extent, and in what ways, have students experienced 'culture shock' at university?
- What strategies have participants employed to navigate culture shock and develop a positive academic identity?
- What strategies do participants feel staff have used to support students to develop a positive academic identity?

6. What was the evaluation/research methodology used?
Ethical approval for the project was granted by Sheffield Hallam University. The project collected data using focus groups and questionnaires, which took place between May and August 2023. Firstly, two online semi-structured focus groups with students were arranged. Invitations were sent to approximately 200 students from all years of undergraduate degree courses within the University's Department of Humanities. Two

participants attended the first focus group, and none attended the second. Following this, an online questionnaire was developed, consisting of 14 questions which fell into one of four question categories: preparing for university, culture expectations, culture shock, and problem resolution. Only two participants completed the questionnaire. A replication study would be beneficial to ensure consistency and confidence in the findings. The data from the focus groups were transcribed, thematic analysis was then applied on all data collected, and grouped into the following themes: digital spaces, expectations, and time. The data collected was also triangulated by examining practices and recommendations identified in other literature.

7. What learning, findings and/or recommendations can be shared?

a) Theme: Digital spaces

Data gathered indicated that participants collectively experienced similar concerns and stresses within the university's digital spaces. For example, being unaware that a large portion of their course would be held online, which was in part due to COVID:

> "Everything was online which was a bit of a shock." (FG/survey respondent)

> "We were told everything will be online and now you're in this room for months and months on end and you're just stressed on anxious on top of the academic stress." (FG/survey respondent)

For some, this led to difficulties in forging new relationships within a digital environment:

> "I sort of struggled to fit into friendship groups. I eventually got there but it took a bit of time." (FG/survey respondent)

> "It's hard to make friends on Zoom calls when no one has their cameras on and no one really speaks." (FG/survey respondent)

> "I feel like I've missed out on quite a big part of my university experience." (FG/survey respondent)

Other research has highlighted that the switch to online learning due to COVID had a negative impact on students (Bird et al., 2022). Literature has also indicated that students' development of friendships with peers and relations with staff, regardless of whether in-person or online, are critical during their academic journey (Lamere & Kennedy, 2020). This emphasises the role of friendships and the social dimensions of university life in enhancing students' experiences. In this study, when discussing strategies and potential improvements to support students, participants highlighted

that staff should avoid assuming students possess prior proficiency in using technology and specific platforms.

To overcome challenges relating to digital spaces, previous research has found supporting practices and recommendations which can be adopted by the university:

- When designing courses, allocate time and promote opportunities for interactions and networking to take place between students, as well as interactions between students and staff (Lamere & Kennedy, 2020).
- Universities invest in staff development programmes for effective digital teaching methods (Mercader, 2019).
- Ensuring accessible, user-friendly, and well-maintained digital platforms for students and faculty (Wisdom, 2020).
- Universities facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration to leverage technology for innovative teaching approaches (van der Rijst et al., 2018).

b) Theme: Expectations
The study observed that participants held inaccurate or negative expectations about university life before their arrival. For example:

> "I thought it was going to be this strict environment with like exams all the time." (FG/survey respondent)

> "I thought it was gonna be quite strict." (FG/survey respondent)

According to the participants, various sources contributed to these misconceptions, including secondary educators, networking events like career days and career advisors from further education institutions like colleges and sixth-forms. The university may consider implementing targeted communication strategies aimed at prospective and new students to dismiss erroneous perceptions of university life. By addressing these expectations, students can commence their university journey with a positive outlook and with an understanding of what university live entails. According to Hassel and Ridout (2018), new students' inaccurate perceptions of university and higher education may negatively impact their academic performance and contribute to distress and withdrawal.

Supporting practices which can be adopted by the university include:

- Exploring students' expectations within the course provides an opportunity to debunk negative beliefs and expectations of higher education, university and the course, for example, about assessments (Naylor et al., 2021).

- Fraser and Killen (2003) found that, by informing students of the factors that may influence their academic success, universities can provide a foundation for managing student expectations.
- Communicating and building rapport with students in the early stages of university can make them aware of the support that is available at university (Money et al., 2017).

c) Theme: Time and workload

During data collection, the importance of having ample time emerged as a significant contributing factor to the cultivation of academic identity. Participants voiced the following concerns:

> "My workload got quite a lot during my last semester and I had to quit my job." (FG/survey respondent)

> "I know people who have had problems getting to know people/become familiar with course because they had to work a lot outside of course sessions." (FG/survey respondent)

A lack of time was associated with a negative impact for students trying to develop a sense of belonging and an academic identity. Students might have to selectively choose which university activities that they engage with.

In relation to time constraints, the study and literature suggested:

- Staff should use available technologies to deliver some learning and teaching sessions and support students via online messaging, and meetings for individuals and groups where possible, which could eliminate travel time and costs for students that occur when they travel on campus.
- The university and staff should ensure that services and resources provide students with continuous access and support. These may be in the form of pre-recorded support videos that students can use at any time or providing instruction manuals, e-books, or counselling services land support with careers advice (Allen & Farber, 2018; Elmahdi et al., 2018).
- The university and staff could: embed flexibility into the design of courses – content and delivery (online and in-person learning); clearly communicate information about assessments and deadlines; ensure that assessments are spread out appropriately; support students to 'realise the expectations and requirements for their own learning'; and capture feedback from students to understand their needs (Thornby et al., 2023).

8. What were the limitations of the project?

While the study offered insights into the experiences of students navigating university life, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Out of 200 invitations to students, only four participants took part, which limits the generalisability of the findings. However, this was an internal project with a small amount of funding, which meant that there was limited capacity to recruit students. Another limitation was that the focus group lasted one hour, which limited the contributions of participants.

9. Acknowledgements

10. References

Allen, J., & Farber, S. (2018). How time-use and transportation barriers limit on-campus participation of university students. *Travel Behaviour and Society, 13,* 174–182. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tbs.2018.08.003

Anyim, W. O. (2020). Students' perception of electronic resources, usefulness and enhancement strategies for effective distance learning programme. *Electronic Research Journal of Engineering, Computer and Applied Sciences*, *2*(1), 104-116.

Bird, K. A., Castleman, B. L., & Lohner, G. (2022). Negative Impacts From the Shift to Online Learning During the COVID-19 Crisis: Evidence From a Statewide Community College System. *AERA Open, 8,* 233285842210812. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221081220

Elmahdi, I., Al-Hattami, A., & Fawzi, H. (2018). Using Technology for Formative Assessment to Improve Students' Learning. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET, 17*(2), 182-188.

Fraser, W. J., & Killen, R. (2003). Factors influencing academic success or failure of first-year and senior university students: do education students and lecturers perceive things differently?. *South African Journal of Education*, *23*(4), 254-263.

Hassel, S., & Ridout, N. (2018). An Investigation of First-Year Students' and Lecturers' Expectations of University Education. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02218

Lamere, A. T., & Kennedy, K. T. (2020). Examining the Effect of Personal Classroom Friendships with Online Learning. *World Journal of Education and Humanities*, *2*(3), 61. https://doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v2n3p61

Mercader, C. Resistances to use digital technologies in university teachers. *Aula Abierta*, *48*(2), 167-174.

Money, J., Nixon, S., Tracy, F., Hennessy, C., Ball, E., & Dinning, T. (2017). Undergraduate student expectations of university in the United Kingdom: What really matters to them? *Cogent Education, 4*(1), 1301855. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2017.1301855

Naylor, R., Bird, F. L., & Butler, N. E. (2021). Academic expectations among university students and staff: addressing the role of psychological contracts and social norms. *Higher Education, 82*(5), 847–863. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00668- 2

Nchindia, C. A. (2020). Black and Ethnic Minority Academics' Perspectives on Intercultural Interaction in UK Universities: Beyond Racialization. *International Journal of Education, 12*(4), 49. https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v12i4.17790

Reay, D. (2001). Finding or losing yourself?: working-class relationships to education. *Journal of Education Policy, 16*(4), 333–346. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930117164

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). 'Strangers in Paradise'? *Sociology, 43*(6), 1103–1121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509345700

Thornby, K.-A., Brazeau, G. A., & Chen, A. M. H. (2023). Reducing Student Workload Through Curricular Efficiency. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 87*(8), 100015. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajpe.2022.12.002

van der Rijst, R., Baggen, Y., & Sjoer, E. (2018). University teachers' learning paths during technological innovation in education. *International Journal for Academic Development, 24*(1), 7–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144x.2018.1500916

Wentworth, P. A., & Peterson, B. E. (2001). Crossing the line: Case studies of identity development in first-generation college women. *Journal of Adult Development*, *8*, 9-21.