

## **The Paradox of student support policies: The experiences of students who care for children while studying**

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In United Kingdom (UK) higher education, different groups of students have moved into and out of the focus of policy and practice, under the headings of widening participation (WP) and the *Equality Act 2010*. This often-changing focus has the potential to lead to inequitable experiences for those students who do not fit into any of the traditional student typologies, and the policies designed and alleged to support them. This can mean that policies focussed on 'support' can have a paradoxical effect on some groups in their implementation, I suggest in this article that Students who Care for Children while Studying (CCS students), are an example of such a group.

In this article I present the stories of two CCS students, trying to engage in student support policies, from an institutional ethnographic study (Smith 2006) over two academic years, at a research-intensive UK University, with 16 CCS student participants in total. Here I look specifically at their accounts of 'activating' (Smith 2002) institutional policies to support them, and observing the fractures between policy intent, appearance and experience which start to emerge. I discuss how these stories suggest the experiences of CCS students can be complex, variable and related to individual personal circumstances. Yet three recurrent themes are presented across my study epitomised in the activation of policy. Firstly, CCS students experience 'othering', whereby their difference from other students is made clear through a range of behaviours toward their needs as carers. Secondly, CCS students experience 'individualisation', which frames these students as being in deficit and personally responsible for the barriers they face due to their 'choice' to be both students and carer. Thirdly this 'othering' and 'individualisation' leads to 'passing' behaviours, whereby students seek to or are actively encouraged to hide their caring status, conforming to a more institutionally-accepted homogeneous conception of 'students and their needs'.

Concluding the analysis of these themes through a Fraserian lens of 'recognition' (1997, 2001, 2003), I suggest that the principal cause of inequity in the CCS student experience, at this institution, is a cultural misrecognition of their right to be students because of their caring status, which is captured in this article through the accounts of the 'activation' of policies which are paradoxically meant to enable and support their success in higher education.

**Keywords:** higher education; care; students who care for children; policy

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## Introduction

This article presents a small excerpt of data collected as part of a wider study into the experiences of CCS students (Dent 2020). The history, or autobiography (Miller 1995), of the need for this research came from very early in my career in higher education, working as a manager in a faculty student support office at a research-intensive UK University. I have written elsewhere (Dent 2020, p. 1–5) of my reflections on this work, but the specific theme relevant to this article is the notion that appeared of ‘who’ was considered entitled to support within the academy. At the time, and in part spurred on by my own experiences, I had considered higher education in the UK to be an inclusive space, inducted as I was into higher education, a dyslexic student, from a low-income household and during a political period where widening participation (henceforth WP) policy embraced me. But my direct experience of working in student support suggested that some students were considered more ‘worthy’ of support than others, and that policy could be mobilised to support *or* hinder students based on staff and their personal interpretations of complex concepts such as what ‘widening participation’ meant. This is a pattern which others have also identified in literature (Stevenson, Clegg & Lefever 2010).

This article therefore focuses on this issue of appearance and reality between written policy and the lived experience of putting this into practice. First, I set the context by considering how students have been framed as the beneficiaries of policies in WP in the UK, suggesting that the focal point of WP policy has contracted and expanded over time to create conditions which lack clarity and consistency. I suggest this can lead to paradoxes in terms of the extent to which support for students is realised by all. Following this I go on to discuss the specific methodological approach I took to studying this phenomena, institutional ethnography (Smith 2002, 2005, 2006) and the role ‘texts’ (Smith, 2002, p. 45), and their ‘activation’ (Smith 2005, p. 108; Smith & Turner 2014, pp. 6, 9), can play in exploring these potential paradoxes. As an example of this I then go on to share two stories from my study, Claire’s and Rebecca’s stories, who utilise the texts of a mitigating circumstances form and a student parent policy, respectively.

Concluding this paper I analyse these stories through a Fraserian lens of ‘recognition’ (1997, 2001, 2003) to suggest that the principal cause of inequity in the CCS student experience, at this institution, is a cultural misrecognition of their right to be students because of their caring status.

## Students as policy beneficiaries

A significant challenge to the successful achievement of widening participation policy in higher education has been the lack of clarity sometimes present around who the beneficiaries of a particular policy are, and, accordingly, what a particular policy is thus seeking to achieve. I consciously use the term beneficiaries here because, as I will go on to explore, the pejorative terminology such as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘target groups’ can be just as problematic as the lack of clarity around what a particular policy is seeking to achieve.

Burke has also highlighted this point with her reflection on the etymology of the term ‘widening’, which encompasses expanding and deepening participation rather than ‘simply increasing access to, and participation in, higher education’ (Burke 2013, p. 35). Burke’s interpretation of the social injustices that widening participation seeks to rectify are complex, deeply ingrained and multifaceted, leading her to suggest ‘it is not enough to identify patterns of under-representation or to develop “quick-fix” solutions to “lift barriers”’ (Burke 2013, p. 35). Burke’s interpretation of widening participation assumes a shared understanding of WP as a project of social justice (Burke 2013, p. 35), when, in fact, in some policy justice is foregone in favour of terms such as fairness, which itself is subjective and evolves across the policy.

In the UK, while some sense of ‘widening’ existed previously, such as through expansion of places and night schools, the term was explicitly coined in the Dearing Report in 1997, which in some ways, represents the genesis of an issue in implementation and policy which continues today. While Dearing did discuss ‘widening’ participation, the focus was on a limited number of named beneficiaries around issues of access for these core groups of: first in family to go to university, women, mature/part-time students, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities (NCIHE 1997, pp. 102–107). This implies a focussed approach which could be resolved by developing “‘quick-fix” solutions to “lift barriers”” (Burke 2013, p. 35).

The lack of coherence around who WP policy was actually seeking to reach would be further compounded by the inability for the implementation activities to have a consistent consensus around who their beneficiaries were. For instance, Aimhigher would be the immediate national policy intervention that evolved in the later 1990s and early 2000s and sought to put the outcome of the Dearing report into practice. Yet Aimhigher led to more diversity in terms of WP beneficiaries (McCaig & Bowers-Brown 2007; McCaig, Stevens & Bowers-Brown 2008). In a review of the project, McCaig et al. (2008) identified the groups considered as under-represented to include:

young people from neighbourhoods with lower than average HE participation; people from lower socio-economic groups; people living in deprived geographical areas, including deprived rural and coastal areas; people whose family have no previous experience of HE; young people in care; minority ethnic groups or sub-groups that are under-represented in HE generally or in certain types of institution or subject; other groups currently under-represented in certain subject areas or institutions; people with disabilities. (McCaig et al. 2008 p. 2)

While this list marked an expansion of the previous target groups and demonstrated an explicit strategic move to increase and diversify participation, Aimhigher also entailed a contraction in some ways by focusing more on more on school-leavers and moving away from the mature and part-time students, advocated by Dearing (McCaig et al. 2008).

When introducing variable fees for England, the government was keen to ensure that they did not deter applicants in ‘under represented groups’ from entering higher education for financial reasons (Office for Fair Access [OFFA] 2016a). As a result OFFA was established to monitor, and universities would be required to write annual Access Agreements, which would need approval by OFFA’s Director of Fair Access if they sought to charge higher than the baseline fee (at the time, £1,250 per annum), capped to a maximum £3,000. OFFA expanded again the focus of ‘who’ the beneficiaries of policy would be by introducing new groups such as ‘care leavers; carers; people estranged from their families; people from gypsy and traveller communities; refugees; students with mental health problems, Specific Learning Difficulties and/or who are on the autism spectrum’ (OFFA 2016b). This in some ways broadened the list outside of the smaller homogeneous beneficiaries of WP initially introduced in Dearing, but contracted the Aimhigher list. Access Agreements appeared to reinforce institutions ‘market positionality’ (McCaig 2010, pp. 8–9) through the kinds of students (school-leaver age, ‘young’ applicants) they admitted rather than invoking real change.

The previous decade up to the present day would also see an expansion and contraction of ‘who’ is meant to benefit from UK WP policy. In 2010 the incoming coalition government decided to close Aimhigher the following year as part of the government’s rapid austerity measures (BBC

News 2010). This would be framed by a narrative that universities were now better placed to ‘make much faster progress on social mobility’ (BBC News 2010). The advent of the Office for Students (OFS), which absorbed OFFA, has also further compounded this, as WP work became focused on a smaller group of beneficiaries, such as underrepresented groups in terms of POLAR (the participation of local areas), low Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), degree outcome gaps between white and black students, and disabled students (OFS 2018a, OFS 2018b, p. 4).

The contractions within WP policy of activity and beneficiaries is beset by two fundamental issues evidenced in existing research, which further show the absence of a shared understanding of ‘who’ the beneficiaries of WP policy are or should be. The first issue is an increasingly small and homogenised understanding of ‘who’ the beneficiaries of WP are, positioning these students as ‘new’ or ‘non-traditional’ in a way which inherently marked their difference and problematised these students, surrounding them with a deficit discourse compared to their more accepted ‘traditional student’ peers (Trowler 2015). The second issue is inherently linked to the first and to the absence of intersectionality, as, by contracting the scope of WP interventions and the target beneficiaries, while returning control of such activity to universities through Access Agreements assumes that universities are guardians of diversity and not deeply classed and racialised spaces.

Research consistently proves that universities are not beacons of diversity, for instance Burke highlights how groups of WP students become problematised, as applicants are compared to an ‘ideal (imaginary) student-subject of policy discourse’ which ‘is constructed in relation to middle-class and white racialized norms and values’ (Burke 2013, p. 57). WP groups, therefore, become relocated as the problem ‘in terms of the ways those individuals or groups are seen to be “lacking”’ (e.g. the right kind of attitudes, values and/or aspirations)’ (Burke 2013, p. 37). Furthermore, Archer and Leathwood highlight the way in which students, particularly women and ethnic minorities, experience ‘underlying feelings of deficit’ which can come from the negotiation of academic cultures which construct the norm in terms which are male, white, and middle class (Archer & Leathwood 2003, p. 190–1). Thus, these non-traditional students become disadvantaged by ‘institutional cultures which position them as “other”’ (Archer & Leathwood 2003, p. 191). The direct impact of this on students is seen also in research by Bowl (2001), who shows that the barriers ‘non-traditional’ students face mean they become “frustrated participants”: who have battled, often with little support, to find an educational and career direction’ (Bowl 2001, p.152).

It is within this context then that I posit that appearance and reality in policy can be allowed to form paradoxes; on the one hand a policy or narrative can be presented of a positive supportive environment for ‘all’ students, protected, or reinforced, by the naming of some specific beneficiaries. However, the absence of a shared conception of widening participation, or its beneficiaries make it difficult to know if progress has been made and creates ambiguity at a local level around what should be done, with whom and why. As Stevenson, Clegg & Lefever (2010) observe in their institutional case study, ambiguity around the meaning of WP left staff to ‘fall back on their own repertoires of values and meaning-making’ in their work with students (Stevenson et al. 2010, p. 112). In this context, staff continued or defended practices which might lack evidence of effectiveness in WP by drawing on their own interpretation of ambiguous institutional terminology like diversity, inclusion or equality – equating all of those with WP. Staff in universities have also been seen to view WP as a pre-entry activity and assume that students can be ‘left to it’ once at university (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead 2008, p. 176; Stevenson et al. 2010, p. 112). Both of these scenarios have the potential to explain how gaps may emerge in the appearance and reality of policy but require up-close methodologies

which consider the potential paradoxes which emerge as specific groups of students are seen, or not, as beneficiaries of policies designed to support students.

### **Policy vs lived experience: Methodological considerations**

In exploring the questions of ‘who’ WP policies seek to reach as beneficiaries I focused on Students who Care for Children (CCS students) while studying. In this article I present the stories of two CCS students, Claire and Rebecca, trying to engage in student support policies, from an institutional ethnographic study (Smith 2006) over two academic years at a research-intensive UK University, which has 16 CCS student participants in total. I chose this group because of my direct lived experience of working with them and seeing members of this group struggle to fit into the policy definitions created for them, due to barriers unique to them and their individual circumstances.

Apart from the brief period mentioned above when OFFA introduced ‘carers’ in the broader sense there was little or no explicit recognition of CCS students as a benefactor of WP policy. CCS students’ ability to benefit from the WP policy would therefore be contingent on how they ‘fitted’ into the one of the other categories of ‘beneficiary’, which may in some ways also exclude them, such as the growing focus on ‘young’ ‘full-time’ ‘school leavers’ as discussed above. Yet while some CCS students may benefit from WP policy, there are several unique barriers to themselves as carers which such a policy may not address. This has been researched and discussed by myself (Dent, 2020) and others (Brooks 2012; Moreau 2016), but include issues such as: ‘time and space to study’, ‘financial issues’ and the ‘inaccessibility of institutional norms and practices’ (Dent 2020, p. 61).

While the first part of this article focused on a macro policy perspective to understand how some groups may fall between the gaps of these policies, it is important to consider the localised lived experience. I suggest therefore that looking at the up-close experiences of a group who do not neatly fit into a particular beneficiary group is a useful way of understanding and making visible these gaps so they can be remedied in an informed way, and that institutional ethnography is a useful approach with which to do this.

For the institutional ethnographer, people are at the centre of how knowledge about an institution is brought to life. An institution such as a university does not exist without people going about their ‘everyday/everynight’ lives (Smith 2002, p. 18) and bringing the institution to life through social interaction. Many individual institutional ethnography studies differ from each other in terms of methods and the variety of issues they engage with, including: immigration policy (Nichols 2008), elementary schools (Smith 2006) and management accountant practices in universities (McCoy 2014). In fact, many institutional ethnography studies feature methods and techniques which may not typically be found in other forms of ethnography; these include interviews (Smith 2002, p. 26), which form a core part of the methods used in many institutional ethnography studies.

Institutional ethnographers, thus, value the adoption of a standpoint in data collection in the case of my research CCS Students, and use this standpoint perspective to document and understand the creation of social exchanges within an institution. This concept of standpoint as ‘the design of a subject position in institutional ethnography creates a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge’ (Smith 2005, p. 10).

Through this standpoint, I am seeking to capture ‘the language in which people speak of what they know how to do, of their experience, and of how they get things done’ (Smith 2002, p. 22). To achieve this, institutional ethnography introduces the concept of work. Here, work is understood as the standpoint participants’ experience of living their ‘everyday/night’ lives. The institutional ethnography concept of work is conceptually deeper than merely the tasks that the participant goes about in their employment. By conceiving of work as the standpoint participants’ experience of how they go about their lives, I am, as an institutional ethnographer, seeking to understand how the institutional setting shapes this work.

Concepts that inform the institutional ethnography approach is the role of texts and their activation in the standpoint participants’ accounts of their work, in order to understand the extra-local decision-making. The institution in institutional ethnography is a mechanism for coordinating and constructing people’s activities by developing ‘forms of consciousness – knowledge, information, facts, administrative and legal rules [...] that override individuals’ perspectives’ (Smith 2002, pp. 22–23), which are borne out in the institution through texts. Texts include any material ‘in a form that enables replication (paper/print, film, electronic, and so on) of what is written, drawn or otherwise reproduced’ (Smith 2002, p. 45).

In my study, five texts appeared in CCS students’ accounts of their work: applications forms and admissions; email mailing lists; websites; mitigation forms; and student parent policy. The first three were peppered across participants’ accounts in greater frequency of mentions but these texts did not serve as a core part of a critical event for these participants. The latter two texts – mitigation forms and student parent policy – are only the subject of three participants’ accounts, but these texts form a cornerstone of their experience discussed in rich detail, and hence I have focussed on these in this article.

Interviews and focus groups were a primary form of data collection in my study, conducted in a conversational style, which sought to gain rich data about these students’ experiences. I focused on understanding texts from the standpoint participants when they appeared in their interview narratives and became activated in their accounts of their experience of the work of being a CCS student. I discussed the texts which appeared in the students’ accounts with them, focusing on the principle that texts which are activated in the standpoint participants’ experiences are those which carry power and influence over these experiences. I consciously did not seek to find texts within the institution, separate from the students accounts of activated texts, which could influence these students’ experiences but were not present within them.

In this context, the text is subject to activation (Smith 2005, p. 108; Smith & Turner 2014, pp. 6, 9), this is characteristic of the belief that texts are not significant on their own but are brought to life by the standpoint participants and other actors in their work (Smith 2006, p. 67; Smith & Turner 2014, pp. 5–7). Accordingly, the text should be understood and incorporated by the researcher as part of people’s experiences, as ‘they enter into and play their part in the ongoing sequences of action coordinating them with action going on at other places or at other times’ (Smith & Turner 2014, p. 5). It is here then that texts are seen as a site of power; their introduction into one setting from another demonstrates the potential ‘extra-local decision making’ (Smith 2006, p. 3), as power is attempted to be exerted from a different time and space through the contents of the text. For example, this could be considered when trying to understand and link how a Vice-Chancellor’s power and work, could or does manifest via policy written by them in a different time and place to the events of the students day-to-day lived experience.

A critique could be levelled at the role and value institutional ethnography places on texts and their activation, by the suggestion that policy could exist which influences students' experiences in ways that are not directly present in the standpoint. However, I would counter this interpretation from two angles. Firstly, Burke and McManus' accounts of Arts admissions policies provide rich empirical evidence that equality policies which may not be in direct sight of students, embodied in consistent applicant interview forms, can be activated in deeply subjective ways counter-intuitive to the principles the policies seek to establish (Burke & McManus 2011). Secondly, this way of understanding policy aligns with other interpretations such as those of Ball, who suggests that policy is the subject of 'ad hocery' and is constantly 'contested and changing, always in a state of 'becoming', of 'was' and 'never was' and 'not quite' (Ball 1993, p. 11), and he, therefore, claims that policies and the discourses around them cannot be separated.

To give credence in research to a policy which is not activated by analysing it can, at best, over-emphasize the significance of the policy and, at worst, lead to victim-blaming by suggesting that it is the victim's fault for not activating the policy in their experiences. It is these complex and problematic distributions of power and policy within institutions which institutional ethnography seeks to make visible. While existing research establishes the nature of some of the support for CCS students (Moreau 2016; Smith & Wayman 2009), it is through the exploration of activation that we can seek to comprehend the effects of these identified policies in the daily lives of these students – which can be missing in existing research.

The standpoint stories I share below were collected from Claire and Rebecca (pseudonyms) during the 2013/14 and 2014/15 academic years at one institution, a traditional research university based in the North of England – called in this study the North University. While the North University had held a traditional faculty and schools structure, possessing a degree of federal autonomy, there had been greater centralisation in the university in recent years, and the prominence of centrally run and controlled 'student support' services had grown. The structures at this university allowed support to be both centrally and locally coordinated. Claire's story includes a text which is an example of local coordination – a form from within a school to seek support, while Rebecca's focusses around a centrally produced policy document.

### **Claire's story: Mitigating circumstances forms**

Claire was a medical student coming to the end of her studies, but her journey had not always been a smooth one, having entered university unsure of her suitability as a student because of her demographic background: a BME student and first in family to go to university.

On entering the first year of study, Claire needed to pay her own fees because she was re-entering undergraduate study, having previously studied for a year elsewhere and, on top of her caring responsibilities, worked part-time as a locum nurse at weekends. While Claire looks back on this and reflects that she should have asked for help sooner, suggesting she did not having remembered her anxiety at applying for university, and being keen not to be 'linked to the ideas that I might be a difficult student' (Claire, Health PhD, one child). Being perceived as a difficult student was a motif which permeated Claire's account, and she frequently referred to how she had been vindicated in not disclosing her caring status earlier because, even once admitted, her position still felt precarious. As Claire reflected:

One thing I've learnt over the five years, is that you kind of just tolerate this kind of stuff, and keep your mouth shut, because it's not necessarily particularly easy but I don't think it would be particularly difficult to get

rid of a difficult student, so I think if you have problems it's not worth the adverse publicity. (Claire, Health PhD, one child)

These views, however, were shaped by her experience in navigating the formal processes of support.

Claire's formal request for placement mitigation came at the prompting of her department, who sent out an email to all students. Claire perceived this task as simple, and one she did quickly: 'Just fill in your form express your preferences and let us know. You will be given priority if you've got a valid reason and can give us evidence...' (Claire, Health PhD, one child). Despite her caring responsibilities being known to the department via her personal tutor, she completed the application in some detail, including evidence such as birth certificates and school registration letters, and was confident in her suitability for the support offered when submitting the application.

After submitting the application, Claire received no formal acknowledgement until her placement allocations were confirmed weeks later, and she found out that she had not received adaptations to her placements or any justification. As Claire recalls:

I didn't get an email back, but I just assumed that I'd filled the form in, sent it back and done what was expected, or needed from me. But then when I got my placements they were actually the most far away regions possible, so obviously I started panicking, and I contacted the lady who had received all these forms and had started to do all the allocations, didn't get a reply... (Claire, Health PhD, one child)

When Claire did receive her placement allocations, each one of them was more than 30 miles from the main campus. Claire panicked and tried to explain to the administrator that: 'I can't even travel there, because they were expecting me to be in [Another Northern City] for one placement, for 9.00 o'clock, and so I'd be battling the rush hour traffic' (Claire, Health PhD, one child).

Having only received short emails saying that the matter would be investigated, Claire followed these up with further emails which got no response, until Claire then received a referral to a formal disciplinary process for her attitude. As Claire recalls:

[The administrator responsible] actually reported me to the university for bullying and harassment [...] but the reality was that she refused to answer my emails. (Claire, Health PhD, one child)

For Claire this was a distortion of the panic she felt about her concerns, as she became framed as a 'difficult' student, reinforcing her earlier concerns. Claire recounts:

I didn't send lots of bullying and harassing emails, I sent about three emails, but she sent me back like a one-word reply, or one sentence saying I'll look into it, without actually addressing the distress in my emails. And I was like I've got these placements, I'm really worried. (Claire, Health PhD, one child)



As Claire's case moved to the Head of School as a formal disciplinary matter, she is further framed as in deficit in a complex way, symptomatic of shifting the blame for any difficulties on to the individual student and away from the institution. In entering this disciplinary process, the HoS acknowledged Claire's point of view on events, agreeing with her that she had followed the process as laid out in the documents and providing recognition to her claim for consideration. However, in reaching a decision about the best way forward, the issue became framed not as one for the institution to resolve (such as through providing the placement adjustment) but for Claire to resolve as an individual. As Claire recounts, the Head of School 'said to me that they can't be seen to support students at the expense of the support for their administrative staff' (Claire, Health PhD, one child).

Following this, the Head of School sought to mentor Claire into understanding how she could take responsibility and apologise for the issues and inconvenience caused. As Claire recounts:

he basically said there's ways of apologising in the NHS, as a doctor, there's ways of apologising without accepting any responsibility or liability. And he said you need to apologise, even when you're not in the wrong, and to me that was basically saying to me that I believe you and support you, but you need to be quite diplomatic about this. (Claire, Health PhD, one child)

What is more troubling is the way Claire internalises the Head of School's advice, accepting it as supportive – 'I'm glad I learnt that lesson then, rather than in the future' (Claire, Health PhD, one child) – and, in so doing, accepting institutional inequalities as personal failures, as Brooks (2012, p. 242) has seen in other CCS students' experiences.

A complex sense of injustice emerges at the end of Claire's story, as she reveals how students who did not have caring responsibilities did receive adjustments to their placements through this mitigation process. Claire recounted how Steve, a friend who did not have any caring responsibilities, submitted mitigation on this basis:

I found out that one student, Steve, who doesn't have any children, or caring responsibilities, but he thought he'd try his luck and fill out one of the forms anyway [...] and so lo and behold he was actually given a [City where North University is based] placement. (Claire, Health PhD, one child)

Her reaction to this is frustration, both with the institution – 'I'm glad he did [...] but if his form was listened to, why wasn't somebody else's, especially when they fit the criteria to be considered' (Claire, Health PhD, one child) – and with herself. Claire's 'caring status' intersects her timescape and prevents her from seeking support with her case: 'I haven't spent any time on campus, other than what's required of me. So, in terms of making appointments in the student's union and so on' (Claire, Health PhD, one child). This creates a potent dichotomy where Claire attributes fault both with the institution but only, and perhaps primarily, with herself, for the inequity she experiences.

### **Rebecca's story: The student support policy**

Rebecca, a student in a health department with one child, had specifically selected the North University because of its Student Parent Policy, despite the difficulty she had in finding it – in the end, through informal online forums. The desire to find the policy had been informed by her experience of being pregnant while an undergraduate at a university in the south of England. At that university, policy had been positively and proactively mobilised:

They met me right at the beginning, and showed me the courses and the modules and how timetables worked, and they had given me e-learning support, once he was ill for a couple of weeks, and they would give me extensions [...] They were open and let me finish the course tailored to my needs. (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child)

Once Rebecca had started at the North University, her experience had been markedly different for over a year and had only recently started to change, as ‘they didn’t even know about the Student Parent Policy until I mentioned it, so now they’ve updated their policies, and only now are they saying to me, ‘OK what do you need?’’ (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child).

The first experience of staff being unaware of the policy came when Rebecca needed to unexpectedly pick her son up from school because he was sick, which swiftly became a disciplinary matter at the university, as practical exercises in this lesson were an assessed part of the programme. As Rebecca recalls:

I had to pick my son up from pre-school because he was ill and there was no one who could pick him up. And so I [...] ended up getting an official school level warning, and I had a meeting with this professor, and she yelled at me about it and I said this was the situation, and I didn’t know it was progression and I can give you evidence to show that I had to pick him up because he was not well, and they weren’t having it at all. (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child)

The speed with which this escalated surprised Rebecca and echoes Claire’s story. Unlike Claire, however, Rebecca was not even given any superficial acknowledgement of the correctness of her actions due to her caring responsibilities. There was no retraction at this point from the disciplinary process, and, despite Rebecca’s provision of evidence and citation of the Student Parent Policy, she was threatened by being reminded: “‘We have the power to get you kicked out’ that’s what one of them told me’ (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child). While Rebecca had objectively deviated from the academic requirements of the programme by missing a progression component, the flexible approach, promoted in the policy, was not taken. Instead, a cluster of ‘resit’ exams were put in place in August, where Rebecca’s marks would be capped at a pass, in a fashion which, to Rebecca, betrayed the spirit of the policy and penalised her for her caring status, thereby informing Rebecca’s sense of ‘otherness’ and approach to future requests for support.

This incident made Rebecca hyper-aware of her precarious position. The consequences were that Rebecca was keen to follow processes laid out for all students quite strictly in any subsequent case of needing support. However, she grew frustrated when this did not seem to make a difference in terms of gaining support or credit for her conformity. Rebecca describes these feelings, using an example orientated around her own health needs:

if you miss anything you have to put it online, in advance, so I'd put a description up of I'm going to an operation, and I submitted evidence from the Hospital, so they should have been aware of it [...] they just ignored it basically. (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child)

This lack of support, which Rebecca associated as being connected to her status as a difficult student because of her caring status, meant that Rebecca's sense of entitlement to support and recognition as a carer became eroded, despite the basis of this entitlement coming in the form of the Student Parent Policy. As Rebecca explained: 'I just thought they'd been so unsupportive then what's the point of even submitting [requests for support] if they are going to turn it down anyway, and I'd just be in more trouble than I'm already in' (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child). Rebecca's circumstances worsened during this academic year, when she became pregnant and experienced severe medical complications. Her actions and decisions became informed by the previous approach staff in the institution had taken toward her, which meant she framed her options as being a conflict between continuing her studies or having a second child. This choice was fundamentally life-changing for Rebecca, but the response it received within the institution only served to provide further evidence of the lack of support or acknowledgment of Rebecca as a carer for children, as she recalls:

at the same time, I found out I was pregnant, again, and they wouldn't let me sit my exams as a first attempt in August. And so, based on my experience I ended up having an abortion. Which had an awful lot of complications as well, like a molar pregnancy scare, and they just weren't supportive of me at all, the whole time I had the operations. And they said that when I mentioned that I'm you know going through all this, they said that's your own fault, that's your own problem. (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child)

While Rebecca did start to receive more support at the point of participating in the research, this support was informal and not driven directly by the Student Parent Policy, making it precarious and not actually marking a change by the department to recognise Rebecca's caring status or CCS students more widely. As a result of the turbulent and distressing circumstances around Rebecca's abortion, she started a supportive friendship with one of the professor's personal assistants while trying to navigate requests for support. This support was in no way formal, and this member of staff had no formal role in the university to provide student support and did not work in a student support office. However, she became a vital personal advocate for Rebecca. For instance, not only was she 'warm and so supportive' to Rebecca but 'as soon as I started talking to her she kind of spoke to that professor and told her to back off, and handled that situation for me, and I go and see her regularly now as sort of like a course councillor' (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child). This became a consistent role which Rebecca drew on constantly at the time of being interviewed, explaining how this member of staff talked on Rebecca's behalf: 'she has been there to resolve the issue without me having to really get involved' (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child).

If the personal assistant, who supports Rebecca was not there to support her or if there was a change in staff, it is unlikely that this support would remain in place. Rebecca highlights she is aware her 'course councillor' is in a minority and is the only one preventing Rebecca from being in 'trouble' because of the complexity of juggling her studies with caring responsibilities:

She's the only one I think who is on the student's side, and I only go to her if I have a problem, she'll kind of sort things out for me without having to get into trouble. (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child)

While Rebecca did talk of a development of the Student Parent Policy becoming a more visible entity within the department at the end of her studies, she remained clear that the department was 'so very closed minded' and 'not willing to change' (Rebecca, Health PhD, one child), meaning it is unclear whether these developments will significantly improve the experiences of CCS students in this department.

### **Conclusion: The paradoxes of student support policy**

The stories of Claire and Rebecca are complex but shed light on the relationship students can have with the policies which are designed to support them, principally focused around how the texts are brought to life in their lived experience. It can be helpful to seek to understand how this comes about utilising Fraser's (1997, 2001, 2003), theories of recognition. For Fraser social injustices are constructed in terms which are not morally or ethically defined but conceived in terms of status and resolving the status subordination through 'the status model' (Fraser 2001). For Fraser, status 'represents an order of intersubjective subordination derived from institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute some members of society as less than full members of society' (Fraser 2003, p. 49). In understanding CCS students' status, Fraser would suggest the need to establish if the patterns of 'intersubjective subordination [are] is derived from institutionalised patterns of cultural value' (Fraser 2003, p. 49).

Evidence of such subordination and cultural value can be seen in activation of texts in the accounts of Claire and Rebecca. For instance, these accounts of students' textually-mediated experiences reflect on both their experiences and the institutional culture, as these experiences are mediated and shaped by extra-local decision making within the institution as a text is written and disseminated from elsewhere within the wider institution. Within the analysis of the critical incidents in Claire and Rebecca's stories, the activation of mitigation forms and the Student Parent Policy, these accounts bring together the earlier presentations in this thesis of 'othering' (Archer & Leathwood 2005; Burke 2013; Reay 2001) and 'individualisation' (Burke 2013, p. 37; O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts & Harwood 2016; Smit 2012) but more prominently demonstrate the active encouragement within the institution of CCS students by staff to 'pass' (Leary 1999; Sanchez & Schlossberg 2001). While 'passing' can be a positive affirmative experience and some CCS students may seek to 'pass', the extent to which this is the case depends on the political and social context and impetus to 'pass'. When the conditions require 'passing', this becomes evidence of status subordination, which I would suggest is the case to varying degrees in these two students' stories.

For instance, both Claire and Rebecca become subject to formal disciplinary procedures because of their inability to 'pass' and fit in with the homogeneous rules and processes around placements and absence, respectively. These stories are compounded with open aggression from the placement administrator for Claire, who accuses her of bullying, and from the Head of School in Rebecca's case, who screams at her. While in both cases the outcomes are shaped by finding ways in which the students can more easily 'fit' within the homogeneous processes and operations of the university – in Claire's case, through apologising and, in Rebecca's case, by finding a 'lone wolf' advocate who sorts out any subsequent issues for her. These stories are peppered by the recurrent patterns of 'othering' and 'individualisation' which lead up to these most extreme demonstrations of encouraging CCS students to 'pass'. These patterns are present across the student data in my wider study, and the most troubling thing about them is their

pervasiveness, which suggests a culture permeating the institution, and, under the right set of circumstances, could potentially see any of the CCS students subjected to the same treatment as Claire and Rebecca.

To avoid philosophical schizophrenia, Fraser adds to the status model by suggesting that judgements in this model apply the principle of participatory parity. Fraser argues that:

To redress the injustice, requires a politics of recognition, to be sure, but this no longer means identity politics [...] rather, it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognised party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with other members (Fraser 2001, p. 24)

The idea of participatory parity does not support the promotion of traits from a culturally subordinate group, as an ethical judgement might suggest, or the extension of rights to a culturally subordinate group, as a moral judgement might. Instead, the question of judgement becomes about what is needed, through either material 'redistribution', or cultural recognition – which Fraser refers to as 'perspectival dualism', to support a subordinated group to participate fully in society, through de-institutionalising 'patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it' (Fraser 2001, p. 25).

While there are indications that some students would benefit from interventions which would redistribute resources toward them, the cultural misrecognition and status subordination through 'othering', 'individualisation' and 'passing' are key to the inequity these CCS students experience, seen in the accounts of Claire and Rebecca. There are, for example, policies and facilities available to them, 'distributed to them', yet what the activation of texts highlights is the paradox that exists from the cultural values of staff within the institution, which do not recognise them as suitable benefactors. This makes one of the principal causes of inequity in the CCS student experience at this institution a cultural misrecognition of their right to be students because of their caring status, and the mechanism with which their full participatory status can be restored should be focused around achieving cultural recognition.

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