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'It is like school sometimes': friendship and sociality on university campuses and patterns of social inequality

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ABSTRACT

Whilst most social and educational research on friendship focuses on children at school, it remains a crucially important factor for students in higher education – and can play a key role in the maintenance, exacerbation or subversion of dominant forms of social inequalities. This paper explores the complexities of such dynamics in relation to friendship and social life at university, utilising data from an in-depth qualitative study of HE students at a UK campus university. Students stressed the importance of friendship for comfort and a sense of 'belonging'. Nevertheless, students describe the continuation of cliques, hierarchies, and exclusions that are more commonly linked to sociality at school. Despite the conception that friendship is an individual experience, it is very much influenced by social positionings such as gender, class, age, and ethnicity – having significant repercussions for students in relation to happiness and wellbeing at university.

KEYWORDS

Gender; social class; ethnicity; popularity; campus culture; students

The world of 'cliques' and 'in-crowds', of popularity hierarchies and exclusions, is generally viewed as the province of the school playground, rather than the halls and corridors of academe – a world left behind at the school gate, along with our other 'childish things'. Friendship as a dynamic remains under-researched in the social sciences internationally, despite numerous ground-breaking studies, many of them explicitly feminist, arguing forcefully that friendship is political as well as personal (George, 2007; Hey, 1997). What is often dismissed as an individual, personal phenomenon needs to be studied sociologically as a prime arena where social relationship dynamics are fluidly constructed and re-constructed, with complex implications in terms of power and privilege.

As we shall argue here, friendship and social ties remain crucially important for students at university. In empirical studies focusing on young people's perceptions of university in international contexts, the chance to 'make new friends' or expand on existing relationships is often articulated, along with a certain apprehension or nervousness that this won't be achieved (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Finn, 2015; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009). Despite differences in life experience, such concerns are also often articulated by mature students as well as those of school-leaving age, particularly in relation to 'belonging' and fitting in with the student body (Barron & D'Annunzio-Green, 2009; Quinn,

2005; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Reay, 2002). And as we shall see, cliques, subcultures, status hierarchies, and issues around popularity continue to be in evidence in accounts of HE student life. Meanwhile, the ability to ‘win friends and influence people’ at university is increasingly emphasised (see Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009), particularly in online employability sites and social media, as a neoliberal enterprise in ‘improving the self’ in the competitive future world of work.

Utilising data from a qualitative study of students at a campus-based university in the south of England (Burke et al., 2013; Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2017), this paper focuses on the issue of friendship and social relationships at university – relationships constructed and negotiated outside of the formal learning environment of the lecture hall or tutor room.

By doing so we hope to explore the ways in which friendship as a social practice can work to reflect, re-enforce (and occasionally challenge) dominant social patterns of inequality and privilege. Despite the deeply problematic nature of ‘performance measurement’ mechanisms in the sector, measures gauging student opinion such as England’s Teaching Excellence Framework (which may from 2020 be used to designate which HEIs may raise tuition fees above the country’s currently imposed cap) have given added impetus to research in the area of student experience, a focus already of key concern worldwide to policy-makers and practitioners concerned with such issues from the perspective of student well-being and social equity. Our aim in this paper is thus to contribute new knowledge of such complexities in this under-researched area, that can help inform wider understanding of such dynamics within HEIs across different national and international contexts.

Gender, class, ‘race’ and the social dynamics of friendship – at school and beyond

Where social research has focused on friendship, it has tended to concentrate on the friendship dynamics of children and young/‘emerging’ adults. The literature on school-age friendships notes the central importance of such relationships for children, and the ever-present, pressing concern over peer popularity and status (see e.g. Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007; George, 2007; Hey, 1997; Pratt & George, 2005; Read, 2011). This is not surprising, for as well as the crucial (if sometimes complex and uneven) benefit of having friends to provide support and comfort, the capital connected with popularity in the school years is high (as is the threat of ostracism, bullying, and violence associated with its lack). Bourdieu (2000) notes the power of the ‘symbolic capital’ of perceived social worth, the pursuit of status markers that enable a person to be ‘recognised’ as worthwhile, and the misery of the social ‘outsider’. Like all forms of capital, it is unevenly distributed and a source of maintaining or exacerbating privilege and power. Bourdieu describes such recognition as ‘a power over others that derives its existence from others, from their perception and appreciation’ (p. 241). And in the social world of children, Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) note that ‘having a friend is a form of power’ (p. 162). As we shall see, such dynamics by no means disappear once students enter the world of the university, despite the widespread popular conception that ‘adult’ friendships are less intensely felt and prioritised than those of schoolchildren.

In online sites of newspapers and TV stations in the UK, Australia, and elsewhere, there are regular articles at the beginning of the university year geared towards new university

students (or their parents), offering advice and tips. Such articles usually assume the student is of school-leaving age, and invariably include advice on how to make friends, also assuming that this will be a major concern (see, for example, Coughlan, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Price, 2015). Universities often also offer similar advice on their webpages, and some are also keen to advise on the ways that social life at university can enhance a student's future employability. For example, Abertay University's site exclaims 'Joining clubs and student societies gives you another dimension to your student life ... Remember employers like graduates who participate!' The University of Queensland states that 'Joining UQ societies that represent your faculty is also a great way to make friends, create connections and find networking opportunities'. And in a similar vein, Birmingham City University encourages a strategic approach to social connections:

The old saying 'it's not what you know but who you know' is often true. Use every opportunity to build up contacts in your academic, professional and social life who may be able to help you with your future career plans.

Such sites often include an emphasis on the individual student taking responsibility in developing marketable 'skills' and capabilities such as sociability and the development of a 'rapport' with others; self-confidence in communicating in social settings; a 'broadening of horizons' from meeting those deemed as 'different' to you; and the ability to form/maintain 'networks' for career advantage – all presented as ways in which one can be more marketable in career terms and provide relevant knowledge, skills and capacities in the neo-liberal marketplace (May, 2014; Urciuoli, 2008). Whilst there are few constructions of friendship that are completely 'altruistic', the concept often involving complex culturally and historically specific dynamics of mutual obligation and benefit (Hruschka, 2010), the particular discourse of friendship in these sites is markedly explicitly strategic, presenting it as a social relationship that is not driven by any goal of intimacy, mutual affection, pleasure or even mutual comfort, but more an advantageous move in the ongoing neoliberal 'project of self' (Rose, 1999; see Leathwood & Hey, 2009).

However, there are gendered, 'raced' and classed dynamics involved in the making of, maintaining, and utilising, the sort of social connections that are implied in these webpages to be of advantage in the future of the individual graduate (Moreau & Leathwood, 2007; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). Bourdieu influentially discussed how such forms of 'social capital', and the associated symbolic capital of 'social worth', actively work to maintain middle-class advantage and elite privilege (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993, 2000), and the ways in which class imbues the embodied daily presentation of self of an individual and their interactions with others through the notion of the accrued dispositions of habitus. In the example of the 'graduate employability' discourse, the 'soft skills' of communication, social self-confidence, team 'leadership' and 'easy' sociability that are promoted in these webpages as valuable to employers are arguably more comfortably performed by (white) middle- and upper-class students at university, a field that continues to be more complexly negotiated for those from working-class backgrounds (Morley, 2001; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Moreover, feminist reconceptualisations of Bourdieuan theory have highlighted the ways in which the formation of habitus can be highly gendered (Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). For example, whilst self-confidence and the leadership of others are often discursively constructed as

‘masculine’, communication skills have often been discursively constructed as ‘feminine’ – influencing the ways in which such ‘skills’ may be interpreted by others (Blackmore, 1989).

Research of the first-year experience, and perceptions of university by potential students before arrival suggests that students place a high value on social connections in terms of ‘fitting in’ and belonging at university (Bowl, Cooke, & Hockings, 2008; Burke et al., 2017; Read et al., 2003; Tinto, 1993). This has often influenced university choice, particularly for those from historically under-represented backgrounds, concerned that they would feel out of place and in consequence often choosing to attend their local university or institutions perceived as more diverse in preference to ‘elite’ institutions they perceived to contain a student body that would be overwhelmingly white, middle-class, with no caring responsibilities and of school-leaving age (Archer et al., 2003; Ball, Reay, & David, 2002; Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2005, 2010; Moreau, 2016). Such a choice may provide advantages in terms of comfort and belonging yet in terms of the acquisition of capital may work to perpetuate the privilege of those who benefit from the cultural capital associated with the ‘prestige’ of elite institutions and the social capital acquired by elite university networks (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008; Waller, Ingram, & Ward, 2017).

Moreover, a numerical diversity in terms of student body does not necessarily mean a high degree of heterogeneity and diversity in terms of friendship formation and the experience of social mixing once at university. There is a view that people of different backgrounds social and ethnic will gravitate towards each other. Bottero (2005) refers to this as homophily (cited in Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012). However, it is also held that put into the same environment different groups will tend to mix to some extent (Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012). Reay, Crozier, and James (2011) found in their study of the white middle classes and urban comprehensive schools, that whilst in the schools they studied there was a social and in some cases an ethnic mix, there was little evidence of ‘mixing’ such as in terms of friendships outside of school and shared long-term activities. In their case, the parents orchestrated and managed the social mixing but other factors have been shown to impact on and obstruct mixing. Shain (2011) in her study of Muslim school boys in Britain demonstrates how the racialised and classed structures operate to marginalise Muslim boys in school and reinforce the lack of social mixing. Crozier and Davies (2008) also report South Asian students’ concerns about mixing with their white peers out of fear of being physically attacked or verbally abused. The white working class and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students found by Reay et al. (2011) and Crozier, Burke, and Archer (2016) are frequently denigrated as offering little of importance, or value in terms of capital accumulation. Indeed, according to some white middle-class students in our study (Crozier et al., 2016) working class and BAME students were seen as undesirable. Social mixing is therefore not necessarily an option open to certain groups, as such dynamics are a reflection of societal relationships; they are hierarchised and based on relationships of power, as we shall go on to explore in this paper.

Methods

The data in this paper derives from a two-year qualitative study funded by the UK Higher Education Academy: ‘Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies (GaP)’ (for a fuller discussion of the project methodology see Burke et al., 2017). Multiple methods

(individual interviews, focus groups, workshops, and observations) were used to collect data forming a case study of issues relating to gender and student experience at university (both academic and social), at a single 'post-92' campus university in the south of England, which we have named Riverside. The university has a notable gender disparity in terms of student intake related to its focus on Arts and Social Sciences: in 2011–2012, when the study was conducted, approximately 75% of the students at the university were female and 25% male. White students were in the majority overall (61%) although, as with gender, there was a sizeable variation across subject areas. In terms of social class, students from low socio-economic groups at Riverside comprised 35% of the overall population (compared to a national average of 30.7%).

The data used in this paper were derived from the individual interviews, each conducted by one of the six research team members (all women). Sixty-four individual semi-structured interviews with students were conducted, ranging from approximately 45–90 minutes in duration. Reflecting the make-up of the student body, the sample contained more female students than male students – 38 women and 26 men, across a spread of disciplines, and reflecting a spread in terms of age, social class, ethnicity, and location of residence. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule which comprised a number of different thematic areas and indicative questions on issues relating to student experience in a wide range of areas of teaching and learning. Regular 'data discussions' were held at research team meetings in order to discuss the fieldwork process, agree the interview questions (see Creswell & Miller, 2000), and later to discuss and agree on thematic coding areas that were crystalised into 'node' categories for the qualitative data software package 'NVivo'. For reasons of space and focus only a few facets of the data around friendship and social life can be focused on here: for further discussion please see Burke et al. (2013, 2017) and Crozier et al. (2016).

'Hi, my name is this, and what's your name?' the individualised responsibility of friendship

Looking at students' discussion of their views and experiences of university life, it became abundantly clear that friendship and social connection to other students was an important issue for many. Of our sample, 19 students (nearly a third) directly spoke of the importance of friends at university. And despite popular, media and academic studies that argue that close friendship is primarily of importance for girls and women (see discussion in Way, 2013), 7 of these 19 students were men – roughly a third of the women (38) and a third of the men (26) in the study sample. For most of this group, the motivation for developing and maintaining friends was not explicitly discussed, perhaps because the benefits were seemingly self-evident to the participants. However, a number of students directly alluded to the emotional support of friendship, alleviating or mitigating against some of the stresses and pressures of university life.

Universities and their Student Unions organise a wide range of social events and activities for students, with new students particularly targeted with a sustained timetable of activities at the beginning of the academic year (often described in English-language universities as 'Fresher's Week' or 'Orientation Week'). Despite the institutionally sanctioned nature of these activities, a number of participants expressed the opinion that the responsibility is ultimately up to the individual to find the confidence and resilience to introduce themselves and make connections:

I hate being by myself kind of thing. I need people – I always need my friends. [At Fresher's Week] it was like – 'oh my God I don't know anyone'. And I find it kind of odd just going up to someone and saying 'Hi my name is this and what's your name?', I find that really weird. But I know that's how you've got to be in this world and in this life ... Yeah, I've learnt that in university you can't just be quiet. You have to talk to people and that's how it's gonna be in the workplace. (Elina, South Asian/British, young, female, middle-class student, living off-campus)

Whilst some students do talk about the responsibilities of the university in providing events for students to meet each other, a discourse of 'self-reliance' was evident: the conception that it is ultimately up to the individual to be confident and independent enough to be able to make friends. We can see Elina above explicitly making the connection between the perceived value and necessity of these individual qualities both at university and also for the future, in the 'real world' of work. For Elina, developing such qualities is part of the 'work' students need to do over and above the content of their degrees, the work of 'self-improvement' explicitly linked by Rose (1999) and others to neoliberal conceptions of the ideal entrepreneurial, continuously developing self.

The emphasis on making friends down to individual strength of character is repeated by Diana and Michael here below, who also capture the sense of loneliness and isolation that undergraduate students often experience:

When you are in your first year I think [social life is] a really really important thing cause you feel so lonely. 'Cause I had a horrible time last year, 'cause I felt so lonely all the time as I was never with anyone. So, like I think it's a major thing that you need to make friends ... No-one can help you do that. You have to do that yourself. (Diana, White British, young, female student, living off-campus)

You are just left alone [at university], you don't have your friends that you've had for years, through school, and stuff like that. You've got to make new friends, you've got to show a big personality, where some people didn't, when they first went there they were very shy ... they just would fade away in the background ... (Michael, White British, young, male, middle-class student, living on-campus)

Previous work on the dynamics of school friendship has indicated that students themselves – at least the popular students – tend to view individual personality traits (e.g. kindness, friendliness, or quietness, and shyness) as explanations for why someone is popular or not (Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2010; Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011). In this view, lack of social success is down to personal failings that are the responsibility of the individual to try and overcome – rather than a factor relating to wider social judgments or preferences. In the same way, we can see this association infusing discourses around friendship and sociality amongst our university student participants. However, as we have discussed earlier, there are a variety of social structural factors at play in relation to students feeling the 'confidence' and degree of comfort in the social environment of the university in order to make friends and feel a sense of 'belonging'.

'Hi, how you doing? We live on the same floor ...' – living arrangements and implications for friendship and belonging

As we have noted, despite the diversity of student identities, lives and experiences, academic culture often continues to reflect and reinforce a discourse of the student as

typically white, middle-class, able-bodied, without caring responsibilities, and of school-leaving age (Crozier et al., 2008; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Reay et al., 2010). One common construction of the student is of a 'youth' or 'young adult' – someone in a nebulously conceived space of liminality between school/childhood and work/adulthood (Valentine, 2003). Popular depictions of the student as 'young adult' often present students as testing out new levels of independence (sometimes raucously or recklessly, accompanied by copious amounts of alcohol) but still needing the quasi-parental protection of university pastoral and security services to keep students 'in check' (Leathwood & Read, 2009). The discursive construction of the student as middle- or upper-class is nowhere more apparent than the tendency to class behaviour of students as 'letting off steam' that would be cast as much more sinister, menacing and socially threatening if conducted by young people from BME groups, and/or 'NEETs' (young people not in education, employment or training – see Munro & Livingston, 2012).

These 'young adult' students are often popularly pictured as living together in halls of residence, especially in their first year of university (Holdsworth, 2006, 2009; Bowl et al., 2008). In many university and independently produced guides, living in halls is promoted as a great way to mix socially. Indeed, the Complete University Guide recommends cheaper room options without en suites as 'sharing with others ... is a good way to make friends on the way to the bathroom or in the queue for the showers!' (Complete University Guide, online). However, of course, many students do not choose to live, cannot afford, or are not able to gain a place in university accommodation. Many mature students, especially those with caring responsibilities and/or with prolonged experience of living independently, choose (or need to) live off-campus. Moreover, a higher proportion of working-class students and students from some minority ethnic groups tend to live off-campus as well, often having decided upon a local university in order to stay living in the family home (Clayton, Crozier, & Reay, 2009).

The contrast between university life for on-campus and off-campus students was repeatedly remarked upon by our participants:

I think there's like two groups at university. There's a group of students that live on campus or close to uni so they know each other by going to social events at university. Then there's another group of people who come to university from home so they travel into university and I think they're quite disconnected with the university events and they miss out on making those relationships with other students because we don't really find out about those events. (Kalini, British born Asian, young, female, working-class, living off-campus)

To me the advantages of living at home are as I get older I have to chip in on bills but I really don't have to pay for much ... And I always have my family around me so there is no sense of homesickness ... But the problem with living off campus there is less opportunity to socialise. Like I could go to all these bars but because I don't know anyone its very awkward to go there by myself and try and start a conversation. Whereas people who live in halls they might see someone who lives on their floor in the bar and they will strike a conversation with them like 'Hi, how you doing? We live on the same floor ... and then you start like that. (Abdul, Black Caribbean, young, male, middle-/working-class, living off-campus)

This for some students in our study, differences in living arrangements was a key factor remarked upon in relation to making and maintaining friendships – a facet of life experience that may popularly be perceived as down to individual chance or choice, but is actually influenced and constrained by a range of social and institutional factors.

'It is like school sometimes, you know': popularity, friendship cliques, and social identities

As we have seen above, many of the friendship and social dynamics experienced amongst students at Riverside are implicitly classed, racialised and gendered, through a complex web of constraints connected to living arrangements/location, and degree course of study – all of which reflected particular likelihoods of student make-up in relation to class, 'race'/ethnicity and gender. At other points in the interviews, such connections between friendship and social identity were more explicitly made, particularly when discussing the formation and prevalence of 'cliques', and hierarchies of status/recognition of such groups in relation to 'popularity'.

Whilst some students talked about how friendship groups at university were far less intense and excluding than those experienced at school, a number of other students talked about how friendship groups could seem excluding, and centre around gendered, classed and 'racialised' factors similar to that found in the literature to be common in primary and secondary schools (see e.g. Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2012). As we have discussed elsewhere, a number of participants explicitly talked about the prevalence of 'race'/ethnicity as a factor relating to friendship formations and cliques (see Crozier et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2017 for a detailed discussion). Kate, a white African student, felt that one of the key facets of identity that played a role in clique formation and friendship groups was around ethnicity: 'the biggest common factor', discounting gender, and also age, as she felt that most people on her course were of a similar age. Indeed, she pinpointed what she felt to be a 'lack of maturity' as a contributing factor to the development of such exclusions:

It's very very cliquey. It's actually much more like school than a might have expected. There's a lot of students who are 19 or 20, pretty much straight out of school, very very few who've taken a job first or had a gap year or done anything other than come straight from school or college. And I think as a result there's I would say there's a lack of maturity in the group as a whole and I think that's resulted in very cliquey groups and yeah. (Kate, White African, mature, female, middle-class, international student, living off-campus)

Some students also talked about the development of cliques which are intimately tied up with gendered notions of what are 'valued' and 'appropriate' masculine and feminine embodied practices and behaviours. For example, after stating that there were 'tons of cliques' amongst the student body at Riverside, Angelika goes on to describe how she felt such cliques would develop:

In the beginning I think the first week, people split into groups and it was the cliché groups and the pretty girls, and yeah. And then the groups started to mingle by our interests and that's more healthy. But we still have the groups that are typical. Yeah. (Angelika, White European, young, female, middle-class, international student, living on-campus)

Angelika refers here to the link between popular 'cliques' and appearance that has been repeatedly found in school studies (see e.g. Cobbett, 2014; Francis et al., 2012) and satirised in fictional contexts such as the 1995 movie *Clueless* and the 2009–2015 American TV show *Glee*, to the extent that she can 'shorthand' her discussion with the interviewer by labelling such groups the 'cliché groups'. As we have mentioned above, studies of gender and popularity amongst teens and pre-teens have often found that the perceived 'capital' of having

looks or appearance deemed heterosexually attractive is a highly valuable one in terms of moving up status ladders at school, especially for girls. In this way, forms of embodied capital in Bourdieuan terms can be translated into the symbolic capital of being popular, or 'known' (Bourdieu, 2000). Angelika points out the continued prevalence of such groupings at HE, seemingly taking for granted the continuation of 'typical' aspects of such groups including the homosociality common amongst school-age students, and associated with hegemonic or normative performances of gender (see e.g. Bartholomaeus, 2013). It is often noted in the literature that whilst 'prettiness' can often be of prime value for girls in terms of popularity (although not always – see e.g. Jewett, 2005), for boys embodied capital in the form of perceived physical prowess and competence in physical activities such as sport can often be similarly translated into the symbolic capital of popularity. And at Riverside students also mentioned cliques developing in relation to sport:

I've heard people refer to other people as the 'football boys' and 'the cheerleaders' like as if, yeah, and it amazed me 'cause I was like – is this American High School or something. But yeah there are cliques and stuff which is really weird ... There's groups like the rugby boys hang around together so you feel like you can't really get involved with them 'cause they're already got their clique. Same for football boys ... (Greg, Black Caribbean, young, male, working-class student, living on-campus)

Similarly, in the quotation by Susy below we see another perceived attribute linked to popularity at the school level – fashionability – continuing to play a role at university:

Sometimes it can just seem a little bit cliquey ... like, it's Campaigns Week at the minute. It's a popularity contest, that's what I mean by cliquey ... The jobs are difficult, there are some people in the student union, well, most of them, really work their arse off to be honest. And they work really, really hard, and they deserve every penny they get, because it's not a well- paid job, but then, you know, there are certain people who are there because they got voted by all their friends, because they knew everyone in a certain college ... It's like the whole school thing, 'he's got cool trainers, we'll vote for him'. It's a bit like 'OK, I thought we'd all grown up out of this now'. (Susy, White British, young, female, middle-class student, living on-campus)

As we can see then, developing and maintaining friends was far from an individual, personal exercise for our participants. Rather it is an experience that is intimately tied to social identity-formation and positioning, and to the unequal acquisition and development of the symbolic capital of popularity and social status.

Conclusions

The data from the research thus highlights how important forming friendship groups at university is for many students, a theme we did not intentionally set out to explore when we first designed the project but emerged from the students' accounts. Students saw the development of friendships as important for emotional support in the potentially stressful environment of the university, but tended to see the development of such connection as the responsibility of the individual, who is required to draw on individual aptitudes and personality traits such as confidence and extroversion: as Michael states 'you have to show a big personality'.

Nevertheless, despite the conception that friendship is an individual, personal experience, the data indicates that friendship dynamics at university are very much influenced

by social positionings such as gender, class, age, and ethnicity – for example in the greater difficulties faced by off-campus students in terms of social mixing – students who are more likely to be mature, carers, working-class and/or from minority ethnic groups.

The social – and socially unequal – aspects of friendship are highlighted when we look at the dynamics of popularity and the formation of ‘cliques’ at university. As Bourdieu (2000) notes, success in the ‘social’ world translates into the capital associated with being ‘known’, of escaping the desolate state of the ‘stigmatised pariah’ (p. 241). This desired state is unequally accessed, yet has a profound effect in terms of the development of social capital that will work to secure advantage throughout a person’s life in terms of contacts and support – and increasingly in being able to demonstrate marketable ‘skills’ in the world of work. Students indicated an awareness of the market value of social skills and networking as was noted by Elina when she states ‘You have to talk to people and that’s how it’s gonna be in the workplace’.

However, our participants, for the most part, do not directly associate their desire for friendship with the need to create social capital in the strategic sense of being potentially useful for the world of work. In some ways their aims at friendship were more pragmatic in terms of desiring sociability, being socially accepted – and the development of the symbolic capital of popularity/being ‘known’, and the avoidance of isolation. In this paper, we have shown the challenges this process poses and the complexity of friendship-making that faces students with some students less advantaged than others. Given the importance of such dynamics for many students, it is crucial therefore for policy-makers and practitioners in the field of HE – especially those of us with a concern for and duty towards the experience of students outside the formal ‘classroom’ – to understand these complexities, and how they can work to maintain or exacerbate pre-existing patterns of social inequality and privilege. At university, just as in school, friendship matters.

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