From adversity to university - the transformational power of a bespoke bridging module to support those affected by homelessness into higher education

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**Abstract** This paper reports the findings of a small-scale project which examines how a bespoke bridging module supported those affected by homelessness into higher education. The module was developed on the premise that a successful widening participation project needs to base learning on the lived experience of the individuals. It aimed to support individuals by valuing their personal experiences and developing academic confidence through shared ownership of learning. The findings draw on qualitative interviews with six participants who took part in the bridging module. All had been affected by homelessness and many were recovering from alcohol and/or drug addiction. A narrative methodological approach was used, drawing on Brown and Gilligan’s Listening Guide (1991), to explore how participants changed throughout the course of the module. Out of the six who took part, five were accepted onto higher education courses. In addition, all experienced multiple personal benefits, including increased confidence, raised aspirations, improvements in mental health, support with recovery from alcohol/and or drug addiction, and new and renewed relationships. It is concluded that a bespoke bridging module can be both powerful and transformational for those who have been affected by homelessness.

**Key words** bridging module, homelessness, widening participation, higher education

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the findings of a small-scale, localised project examining how a bespoke bridging module supported those affected by homelessness into higher education. This research is part of a longitudinal study of the students as they journey through Higher Education and beyond. Pathways out of homelessness are traditionally limited by a fear of social rejection and aspirational as well as economic poverty (Gaillard et al., 2019) This student-centred module aimed to overcome these fears by valuing the individual experiences of participants and developing academic confidence through shared ownership of their learning. Examination of OFFA’s (2017) analysis of HEIs widening participation strategies 2018-2019 reveals that homelessness is not acknowledged as a barrier to accessing higher education. The limited academic research related to homelessness and widening participation focuses on those who became homeless whilst being students, rather than on how those already affected by homelessness can be supported into higher education (Mulrenan et al., 2018). This study contributes to the limited research relating to how an innovative approach can support widening participation in higher education for those who have experienced homelessness.

## Homelessness and educational opportunity

### Homelessness in the UK

The numbers of those experiencing homelessness in the UK have increased significantly in recent years. The Marmot Review (Institute of Health Equity, 2020) states that one in three families are only one pay cheque away from homelessness. Shelter (2018) estimates that over 300,000 people in the UK were homeless in 2018. In January 2020 the government acknowledged the numbers of rough sleepers in England had increased by 141% since 2010 (MHCLG, 2020). Sourcing reliable statistics on homelessness is problematic – those affected by homelessness are a transient population moving in and out of different types of accommodation; numbers are dependent on how homelessness is defined and who gets ‘counted’ (Ravenhill, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2019; Glass Door, 2020). Narrow categories such as ‘rough sleeping’ fail to count categories of homelessness which are less ‘visible’. This research adopts a broad definition which includes: people sleeping rough; homeless people living in hostels, shelters and temporary supported accommodation; statutorily homeless households and ‘hidden homeless’ households – those whose situation is not ‘visible’ either on the streets or in official statistics (Crisis, nd).

### Lived experience of homelessness

Increased private rents, cuts to public services and the problematic introduction of Universal Credit have contributed to an increasingly heterogeneous homeless community consisting of people from wide-ranging socio-economic backgrounds, cultures and professions (LGSCO, 2017). Those experiencing homelessness live in a state of permanent precarity, leaving them vulnerable, unable to access necessary resources and powerless to change or shape their lives (Gaillard et al., 2019). A lack of affiliation to accepted societal structures often leads to a sense of disconnection, social exclusion and invisibility (UNCHS, 2000). This is re-enforced by feelings of placelessness engendered by the physical lack of a home, leaving them ‘without any effective means of orientation,’ (Casey, 2009: xv). The loss of anchor points (Clouston, 2015), caused by the lack of a home, creates a sense of impermanence and rootlessness which creates barriers to civil, economic and social inclusion (Gaillard et al., 2019; Robinson, 2011). This is exacerbated by negative perceptions of homelessness, often meaning that individuals’ citizenship and identity are not legally recognised (Hodgetts et al., 2006). Exclusion from accepted societal structures suggests that those experiencing homelessness often lack a sense of belonging (Wilcock, 1998) or a belief that they have a voice within the communities in which they live (Robinson 2011). Recognised as a response to the psychological and emotional consequences of social exclusion, there is a clear reciprocal association between being homeless and having an increased risk of problematic drug use (Bowden-Jones et al., 2019). Drug use is exacerbated by boredom which is often trauma- and homelessness-related (Gaillard et al., 2019). Over 50% of the deaths amongst the homeless in England and Wales can be attributed to drug use (ONS, 2018). Daily association with drugs and a drug culture means that those who are homeless are particularly vulnerable to ongoing drug use, both as sellers, users and victims of drug-related crimes (Gaillard et al., 2019).

### Causes of Homelessness

Causes of homelessness are multifarious and dynamic, involving individual, interpersonal and structural factors (Didenko and Pankratz, 2007; Feng et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick et al., 2019; Kemp et al., 2006). Homelessness is caused by a complex interweaving of macro, meso and micro factors – which usually include not just affordable housing but also personal crises and a paucity of social support (Ravenhill, 2008). Homelessness is rarely a ‘one-off’ or sudden event, but the cumulative result of traumatic life experiences which often begin in childhood (Ravenshill, 2008). Catalysts to homelessness include adverse childhood experiences, introduction to drugs and alcohol, exposure to crime and/or gangs, personal mental health, loss of job, frequent changes of address, time spent in care, post-traumatic stress disorder and family breakdown (Gaillard et al., 2019; Ravenhill 2008). Robinson (2011: 135) calls this cumulative impact of lived experience the ‘felt dimension’ of homelessness, producing ‘the most profound forms of physical, psychological, and emotional anguish’ that can be experienced. Ravenhill (2008) suggests that the causes of homelessness lie along the continuum between structural factors and individual psychological factors. Gaillard et al. (2019) suggest that the vulnerability experienced by those who are homeless continues throughout their lives - which is compounded by natural hazards and disasters. The Covid-19 pandemic highlights the vulnerability of those experiencing homelessness due to the higher likelihood of chronic respiratory conditions and limited opportunities to self-isolate (Crisis, 2020). It is essential that solutions address the long-term effects of emotional, psychological and physical health issues exacerbated by economic austerity, lack of affordable housing and increasing poverty.

*Widening participation and education*

Widening participation in Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] in England has been a government agenda for decades (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). Schemes are delivered by HEIs aimed at supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and low incomes into higher education by removing barriers and improving access. Despite increases in university tuition fees since 2012, the numbers of students who are disabled or from BAME backgrounds is at a record high (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). However, the proportion of students from low-income families accessing higher education remains low, with a decline in applications from older students and young white male students from the lowest economic backgrounds (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; OfS, 2019a).

Homelessness has a significant impact on education – those affected are more likely to lack basic educational skills and/or qualifications (Digby and Fu, 2017; Luby and Welch, 2006; Rice, 2006; St Mungo’s Broadway, 2014). Associated factors often include disrupted schooling and a lack of engagement with further education and training, resulting in entrapment within low paid and precarious employment with few progression opportunities (Quilgars et al., 2008). Investment in education enhances cultural capital by providing access to skills and credentials which are valued within society (Bourdieu, 1986) – thus increasing employability and access to higher paid jobs (Barker, 2013). Despite the strong link between homelessness and poor educational outcomes, there is little acknowledgement of homelessness as a barrier to accessing higher education, or a need to address this (OFFA, 2017; OfS, 2019b). Overall, government funding for adult education has been significantly reduced, resulting in a decline in student numbers. Additionally, fear of high attrition rates and associated funding issues makes it less likely that further education courses will target those who are homeless (Foster, 2019).

To successfully address access to widening participation, Pitman (2017: 37) argues that it is essential to understand the ‘identity of the student, both in how they understand disadvantage and what they want out of higher education’. Approaches which expect students to fit in with existing structures are often ineffective – an alternative approach is required based on the needs and expectations of the students (Pitman, 2017). Research by St Mungo’s Broadway (2014) found that those who have been affected by homelessness are more likely to disengage from further education due to anxiety about participating in a large group, fear of failure or lack of responsiveness from tutors. They suggest that a flexible learning approach based on learners’ individual goals and interests is more likely to support engagement and lead to positive outcomes. Their research found that courses which are structured and purposeful lead to improvements in individuals’ mental health and reduce harmful behaviours (such as alcohol and drug addiction) as well as providing opportunities to meet with new people and develop self-confidence, trust and motivation. Overall, learning opportunities promoted recovery from homelessness, improvements in health and a bridge into mainstream education. This suggests that a bespoke approach, based on the individual needs and experiences of those affected by homelessness, is more likely to be successful for widening participation than more traditional approaches such as access courses.

Context of the bridging module

The bridging module consisted of 12 weekly three-hour taught sessions and additional one-to-one tutorials, including a ‘research day’. Students for the module were referred by local charities supporting those affected by homelessness and often by drug and alcohol addiction. All were living in forms of supported accommodation funded by the charities. The module tutor was a senior lecturer at the university who had an interest in widening participation using a co-productive, bottom-up approach, basing the academic learning on the lived experiences of the students. Guest lecturers from the university were invited to lead sessions based on the expressed interests of the students. This inter-departmental approach afforded the opportunity for students to connect with the wider university community. The course took place at the university and entry was not dependent on prior skills or knowledge. Once registered, participants gained temporary student status and access to all services available to other students, including a student card. The teaching focused on the development of academic skills based on the lived experience of the participants. There were two assessed assignments – a research essay based on individual areas of interest, and a reflective account based on personal development and learning from the module. Passing the module (20 credits at Level 4) was accepted as non-traditional access to many of the degree courses at the participating university.

## Methodology

The aim of the study is to examine how the bridging module supported students affected by homelessness into higher education. The research was carried out between June 2019 and August 2019. All students who had engaged with the module were invited to take part in an individual semi-structured interview. The research was qualitative and explorative. The research investigated how the students’ academic and personal experience supported their learning within the context of the module. Out of a possible 10 participants, six agreed to be interviewed. All participants were white British, five were male and one was female; their ages ranged from 29 to 45 years old. All had experienced homelessness, and all but one were recovering from alcohol and/or drug addiction.

A psycho-social narrative methodological approach was taken, informed by the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2013) which afforded a way of exploring the ‘self’ as well as how participants positioned themselves in relation to discourses of homelessness and higher education.  Each interview was a collaborative process where the narrative was co-constructed between the two researchers and the participant (Riessman, 2008). Whilst acknowledging that having two interviewers rather than one could be construed as intimidating, the use of two researchers facilitated an openness to different interpretations and multiple meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). To mitigate against any potential negative impact, both interviewers were familiar to the participants, one being the module leader and the other – a guest lecturer on the module. To allow participants to construct narratives which were meaningful to them, a small number of open-ended interview questions were asked which related to their experiences during the module and their future plans. Interviews took place after participants had completed the module, in a private room at the university. Each interview was digitally recorded (audio only) and fully transcribed.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013: 64) highlight the significance of ‘gestalt’ in qualitative research, and emphasise how understanding of the whole text and ‘keeping the whole in mind’ is important throughout the analysis process. In the current study, this was particularly pertinent. Firstly, participants’ stories were complex, and events which had occurred early on often had repercussions or resonance later in life. Secondly, the researchers felt an ethical responsibility in terms of keeping the narratives intact as many of the life stories had already been disrupted and fragmented as a result of adverse life events.

The analytical approach was informed by Brown and Gilligan’s (1991) ‘Listening Guide’. In contrast to more traditional qualitative approaches which focus on thematic analysis, the Listening Guide, through the use of I-poems, accesses ‘meaning in relation to self’ by attending to the whole of the narrative (Edwards and Weller, 2012: 204). The framework involves listening to the subject’s story several times in order ‘to hear its complex orchestration, its psychological and political structure’ (Brown and Gilligan, 1991: 45). Each narrative was listened to four times by both researchers. Initial listenings focused on phrases or words which were considered to be particularly significant. Later listenings attended to the multiplicity of participants’ voices through the creation and analysis of I-poems. I-poems are composed by ‘separating each I phrase (subject and verb) from the narrative and listing it in the order of its appearance’ (Gilligan and Eddy, 2017: 78). Listening to the first person voice afforded attention to the different ways participants spoke about themselves and how this shifted over the course of their narrative. Consideration was given to how things were said differently at various points of the narrative, as well as what might have not been said. In the last listening there was a return to the research question with a focus on how the voices informed the inquiry. Paying attention to the participants’ multiple voices enabled an exploration of changes which had occurred through the course of the bridging module.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university at which the researchers were employed. Careful consideration was given to the vulnerability of the students and how reflecting on past events might trigger traumatic memories. To support participants with any issues which might arise, university support services were made available and signposting to further information was provided. To protect participants’ identity pseudonyms have been used.

## Findings

Findings indicate that for all six participants the experience of the bridging module was transformational. As a result of successfully completing the course, four out of the six applied to the University do a BA Hons degree and one applied to do a MA – all five were accepted onto their respective courses. The analysis revealed multi-faceted transformations in terms of understandings of the ‘self’. For many there was a sense of ‘before’ and ‘after’, as well as ongoing changes and transformations which were still in progress. Although each participant’s experience was unique, there were strong narrative threads common to all which have been discussed under the following sub-headings: building and rebuilding relationships; ‘a way into’ and ‘a way back’; hope and aspiration; confidence; recovery.

## Building and rebuilding relationships

For all participants, the inter-supportive relationships which developed during the module were key and provided a strong contrast to the isolation they had felt whilst homeless. These related to the relationships which developed between group members, between the module leader and group members, and the rebuilding of relationships with family members.

*Group relationships and support*

Many of the participants talked about the support and help afforded within the group – for Linda:

‘there was a real sort of group atmosphere…we did help each other …yea it was good, it was nice.’

For Brian the socialisation of attending the course with others with similar lived experiences was an important benefit in helping him to overcome the social anxiety which had increasingly defined him throughout his experience of homelessness:

‘it’s obviously served an important role in allowing me to get used to being around other people …I could relate to them because they’ve been through similar situations […] ..a year ago I had literally nothing I had no connections I knew no one ..no one had my back […] the fact that I’ve been given so many opportunities to connect with people that can help move my life forward […] and that started with the bridging module.’

This sense of developing connections and friendships with others, of the emotional safety that can be created and the trust that can be developed by being part of a group who have shared similar life experiences is re-iterated by Sam.

‘I’ve just had to rely on myself my whole life […] It’s quite a thing, knowing that you’re not alone.’

*Role of the module coordinator – a ‘parent’*

For many of the participants the breakdown in parental relationships in childhood was a contributing factor to homelessness. The negative impact of the breakdown in parental relationship is particularly strong in Sam’s interview but was common to all participants:

‘I just come home to all my bags packed at the front door and my mum said, you’re moving out.’

Whilst the student/lecturer relationship was professionally boundaried, her perceived role as a caring ‘parent’ was important for many of the participants. The fact that someone they did not know was prepared to invest time and effort to support them created a reciprocal relationship where they felt that failing to complete would be letting her down. For example, Sam comments that when struggling with completion of his assignment:

‘I can’t let (her) down, I got to do this. That was my main reason…’

### Rebuilding relationships with family

An unexpected finding of the research was that for some participants past, broken relationships with family were restored during the course of the module, which was the case for Linda, Sam and Daniel. The first person that both Sam and Daniel phoned on the day they completed the module were their mums:

‘It was a massive achievement...And showing people, my mum and stuff’.

It is possible that the positive relationship with the module leader and others in the group created the potential for past, broken relationships to be ‘fixed’.

### ‘A way into’ and ‘a way back’

For many of the participants, the module presented more than a way of accessing education – it was also ‘a way back’ to something which had been lost, or a ‘way into’ accessing a life from which they had previously been excluded. Several of the participants had experienced disruption to their education early on in life, resulting in few or no qualifications. As a teenager, Brian had to move out of his home to live with his father. As a consequence, he did not complete his final school exams. For Brian access to higher education presented a way into ‘adult life’:

‘I never had access to sort of adult life.... I think university is mostly people’s first taste of that ..that freedom and stuff like that being able to sort of forge your own path.’

He associates university with being treated like an adult, becoming independent and being accepted:

‘I didn’t sit there at like …16..17 years old with my parents and go right I need to think about getting a driver’s license […] its being forced to kind of organise myself before I go into university has given me an opportunity to kind of think about getting all that stuff together and getting on top of it so that I can actually be a normal person with a normal life.’

For Brian personal identification and parental guidance are equated with leading a normal life. Such skills and credentials are likely to equip Brian with increased opportunities for employability through enhancing his access to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

For some participants the module provided ‘a way back’ in terms of recovering something which they had lost. Orlando had already been to university, but left his degree course due to mental health problems and addiction.

‘it gave me the opportunity to prove to myself that given the right circumstances and given the right conditions I could have done alright [yer] you know if I hadn’t been in active addiction you know erm and all the mental health problems that came with it then maybe my life would have been different’.

The module enabled Orlando to reframe his previous experiences and recognise that his mental health and addiction were significant barriers to completing his degree as opposed to his academic ability.

### Confidence

Many of the participants experienced a lack of confidence associated with their academic abilities. This was particularly evident for Steve whose regret about not finishing the course and how hard he found the course were strong threads throughout his narrative:

‘I was very negative …’

‘I think I made it as hard as I’d fucking could ..’

‘so I wouldn’t find it easy’

Despite Steve’s regret about not completing the module the experience afforded him new confidence in his ability to learn new skills. The pride in learning how to use a computer is reflected in the use of positive verbs in his I-poem:

‘I’ve got computer skills’

‘I couldn’t even turn on a computer before’

‘I done the course you know.. now I can’

‘I can type and stuff like that’

‘I know it sounds silly’

‘I’ve never done before’.

It is arguable that acquiring computer skills contributed to Steve successfully finding employment after he left the course.

### Being bullied

For Linda, the link between education and lack of confidence is not the result of a lack of belief in her academic ability but of her lived-experience of feeling like an outsider and being bullied at school. She is left with a sense of lost potential.

‘I was bullied…it was a really terrible time for me.. . I’ve always wondered, thought what would have happened if I’d got on well in school’.

The bridging module provided her with the opportunity to re-frame her relationship with formal education. She re-engages with the learning she had missed out on and is surprised by the power this has to restore self-belief through the sense of purpose she gains.

  ‘I have meaning and a purpose’

 ‘I have something I’m working towards’

  ‘I feel like I’m worthy’

  ‘I’m going to achieve things’

Academic work and achievement are linked to a sense of worthiness which allows her to replace her belief that everything she does keeps ‘going wrong’, with a belief that she has the potential to be successful.

## Hope and aspiration

### From ‘something to do’ to ‘broadening horizons’

The bridging module was not something that participants had been purposely searching for – it was an unexpected opportunity which had arisen as a result of the university’s connection with local charities for those affected by homelessness. Most participants talked about how at first they had no particular expectations of the module – it was simply ‘something to do’, to occupy their time. For Orlando is was:

‘Just the opportunity to …get busy really …to start … you know sort of no ambition of where it would go or what it would do but just to sort of …’

Orlando reflects on how over time this changed and the module provided a sense of hope and possibilities:

‘there was something there to grab hold of you know and run with it... you know everything else had fallen away really’.

Orlando’s choice of language – ‘run with it’ -– creates a sense of propelling motion, transporting him away from the things which he had lost.  Later in the interview he talks about how the bridging module was the fulfilment of a ‘dream’:

‘I used to sit on a bar stool and dream about is actually within my grasp ...do you know what I mean? […] yer it sort of opened…it sort of broaden my horizon considerably’.

 For Orlando the module gave him a sense of purpose and direction which went far beyond his initial expectations.

### From ‘lost hope’ to ‘reignited hope’

For others the bridging module gave them a sense of hope, of recovering something which they had lost. ‘Hope’ is a word which dominates Sam’s narrative. The importance of the bridging module is clear from the language used where the verbs move from the past tense when he talks about his drug addiction and homelessness, to the present and future when he talks about the bridging module. What stands out from the I-poem is how often he uses the word ‘just’, at the beginning: ‘I just used to go to school’, ‘I just come home’, ‘I just started drinking’, ‘I just didn’t think’, ‘I just walked round’ suggesting an impulsivity and a sense of purposelessness. As the poem moves into discussion of the module, his relationship with his partner and his plans for the future, ‘just’, almost disappears and is replaced with verbs of reflection, action and hope: “I have,” “I am,” ‘I think’, ‘I’d like’, ‘I mean’. There is a sense that participation in the bridging module has re-framed his future, giving him a purpose and helping him to curb the impulsivity which has led to actions which he regretted in the past.

‘The last thing I want to be doing is sticking a needle in my arm’.

‘I’ve got lots of different goals.’

‘there will be a massive change in me,’

‘it’s going to happen’.

## Recovery

Of the six participants, four were recovering from addiction, living in a rehabilitation house. The other two had both used drugs in their past. All six had been affected by mental health issues linked to their lived experience of homelessness and their drug use. Each participant talked about how the bridging module played a role in their journey towards recovery.

For Brian and Linda, the module helped them to cope with their mental health issues. Brian talks about the way in which attending the module with other people who had similar experiences to his own helped him to overcome his social anxiety. Linda sees education and learning as part of a process of combatting depression:

‘the biggest benefit is learning stuff. I find it really helps with depression’.

For Sam, the bridging module and his path to recovery are inextricably linked – it is not only a bridge into Higher Education but a bridge between his past life as an addict and his re-framed future as a recovering addict and university student.

‘not having an academic background to where I am today is...the transfer it was so quick and quite, well difficult at times, but quite an easy experience through help and guidance and knowing that you can rely on people’.

The fact that the module was run at the university is seen to be essential to the recovery process, allowing members of the group to re-enter society and move into a future they had previously believed themselves to be excluded from:

‘it helps you blend back into the community, rather than if you are stuck in your own place, or in a rehab, or a hostel, wherever it is, you’re not getting out, you need to get out and socialise and start a new life really’. (Sam)

Daniel perceives the potential longevity of the impact of the bridging module as its key strength:

‘Once we’ve left the recovery services... we can start building our lives, this is something that’s more tangible that we are going to take with us…being prospective university students now, undergraduates, that’s something that when they went into recovery, they didn’t expect to get’.

He explains how the bridging module provides an opportunity to think beyond the rehabilitation setting, providing them with an opportunity to make concrete plans for moving on into the next stage of their life as students at a university.

## Discussion

Overall, the bridging module was successful in supporting widening participation into higher education – five out of the six participants applied and were accepted onto degree programmes at the university. Of perhaps equal importance was how the bridging module contributed to changes in other aspects of the participants lives, including: building relationships, improvements in mental health, increased confidence, higher aspirations and supporting recovery from addiction.

The module provided a way of addressing the isolation, disconnection and social exclusion often experienced by a lack of affiliation (UNCHS, 2000). Evident within all of the participants’ narratives were their struggles with lost hope, failure, rejection, social isolation and self-dependence, which formed part of their lived experience of homelessness and addiction. The importance of inter-supportive relationships between the students and the role of the module facilitator was key in creating a sense of belonging and emotional safety within the group. The unexpected finding of how, during the bridging module, participants reconnected and rebuilt relationships outside of the group suggests that the impact of the bridging module for these students went far beyond the immediacy of the group.

Disrupted schooling and a lack of engagement with further education and training is often the experience for those affected by homelessness (Quilgars et al., 2006). Four of the six participants had no or few qualifications. For them, the bridging module provided ‘a way back’ to the place where their relationship with education fell apart. For the five participants who completed, the bridging module afforded them access onto graduate courses at the university. The bridging module, thereby, became not only a bridge into higher education but a way back into formal education from which they had been previously excluded – providing a sense of re-acceptance and belonging.

St Mungo’s Broadway (2014) found that educational courses for people affected by homelessness builds self-confidence, trust and motivation for those who have negative experiences of education. The findings for the current study were cognisant of this – suggesting that for these participants the bespoke bridging module was an effective way of ameliorating the impact of past negative experiences of education including bullying. Many of the participants struggled with a lack of confidence in their academic abilities when they started the module – including concerns about poor memory associated with drug addiction. The bridging module provided participants with an opportunity to re-frame and re-construct their relationship with education and themselves as successful learners.

A state of permanent precarity is commonly associated with homelessness and leaves those affected feeling vulnerable, unable to access necessary resources and powerless to change or shape their lives (Gaillard et al., 2019). All participants had experienced such feelings to a greater or lesser extent. In keeping with this sense of powerlessness, many had low expectations of the bridging module and the opportunities it might afford – viewing it as something merely to occupy their time. Over the course of the module, there was a shift for many towards experiencing a greater sense of direction, purpose and hope for the future. This was associated with going to university but also in terms of recovery from drug and/or alcohol addiction.

There is a strong association between homelessness and alcohol and/or drug addiction and personal mental health issues (Ravenhill, 2008). Addiction can be both a cause and a consequence of homelessness (Robinson, 2011; Gaillard, et al., 2019; Bowden-Jones et al., 2019). All six participants had been affected by drug and/or alcohol addiction and mental health issues in different ways. For many, their rehabilitation and recovery were inextricably linked to the bridging module – with the course providing a bridge not only into higher education but also supporting recovery.

## Conclusion

Overall, the learning approach based on individual needs and experiences provided participants with an opportunity which went far beyond reconstructing themselves as capable, able and successful learners; it also helped them to draw a line under their past and look forward to a future they had never conceived of. The bridging module represented ‘a way back’ and ‘a way into’ education, but of equal significance were the ways in which it supported recovery, improved mental health and provided participants with a sense of acceptance and belonging. For many the sense of perpetual precarity reduced as hope was reignited. It is recognised that this study is small-scale and that experiences were particular to those students who took part in the bridging module – nevertheless it makes an important contribution to understanding how a bespoke bridging module can make a significant difference in supporting widening participation for those affected by homelessness. It also highlights the need for similar approaches to be trialled in other higher education institutions and for further research to contribute to the limited existing evidence.

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