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Managing and supporting student diversity in higher education

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In the 21st century many countries have expressed a need to increase the level of education of their populations in order to compete in the knowledge economies of the future. This means increasing access to higher education for a greater percentage of the population, often driven by new educational policies. But regardless of whether these decisions are based on economic necessity or social consciousness, the end result is more inclusive education: education systems that are open to wider segments of the local population, as well as attractive to a growing pool of globally mobile international students. The result is that universities have to be prepared to support increasing numbers of students who do not fit the 'traditional' definition of university students as middle class young people with a strong, often urban, secondary education.

Many different factors can impact a student's smooth transition into higher education, including age, health, socio-economic status, rural vs. urban background, language, family experience with university, ethnicity, gender, etc. But whatever makes them 'non-traditional', institutions of higher education must acknowledge the range of issues that learners are facing and provide the support and guidance necessary to help them succeed at the university.

This book provides detailed, longitudinal case studies of students who faced various challenges coming into higher education. Out of the in-depth interviews with the students, the authors have identified what practices helped, or impeded, the students' journeys to complete higher education, both in terms of support services that were available, and of their interactions with faculty.

The students were studying at Monash University in Australia, and they were interviewed at three points during their program: at the beginning (about their routes into higher education), during their programs (about how they were managing), and at the end (reflection on their experiences).

All the students were enrolled in the same course, but some were studying on campus, and some were studying off-campus. While a few of the highlighted issues were directly related to the challenges of distance education, most of the lessons learned deal with the learning process and support that universities should offer to any student, so they apply across the board.

For academic support staff and faculty at universities in the Gulf and the Middle East, the book contains valuable insights about what more we could be doing to support our students. While the majority of our students might fit the age range of 'traditional' students, some of the other factors which classify students as 'non-traditional' in the West – first generation university, international, studying in a second or third language, coming from less affluent or rural backgrounds, etc – definitely apply in this region, and the challenges they can create for students entering higher education are exactly what the support services of the institution should be designed to help students manage and overcome.

The book is divided into three sections: the first part focuses on providing background for the current state of educational policy, review of literature and context for the study; the second part presents the case studies; and the third part offers a summary and identifies strategies for supporting students.

Chapter 1: Context

The first chapter presents an overview of current international trends in education, theoretical underpinnings of social inclusion in education, strategies to improve retention, and the importance of student participation (student voice) in the research for better informed decision-making.

Much of the focus on inclusive education has been in geographic areas with a long history of higher education, so the book includes a review of literature and current government policies in countries in Europe and North America, along with the UK and Australia. Although the term 'social inclusion' is often used, which suggests social justice and a humanistic rationale for increased access to higher education, the reality is that the drivers are often economic: countries see the economic benefit of a more educated workforce, as well as attracting a greater number of international students to their universities in an increasing globalized world economy. With new education policies, universities are facing increasing pressure to attract, and retain, an increasingly diverse student population.

But even if the main drivers are economic, the concept of social inclusion has a strong tradition in education, from Maslow's self-actualising persons (1970) to Paolo Freire's critical social theory (1972), where education is a dialogue between two people which leads to increased knowledge and understanding for both parties.

One challenge for the Middle East region is that much of the research about what students need, and impediments to student success, is based on Western universities. Much more concrete data is needed in this region to identify, and respond to, the needs of learners here.

In considering the question of how students from diverse backgrounds succeed in higher education, Devlin et al (2012) identify six areas of focus for teaching staff, but these would also apply for any administrative or professional staff in the university who work in areas of student support:

1. knowing and respecting students;
2. offering students flexibility, variety and choice;
3. conveying expectations clearly, using accessible language;
4. scaffolding students' learning;
5. being available and approachable to guide student learning; and
6. engaging in reflective practice.

While this list might be based on the research and experiences of those in an Australian university, it must surely resonate with faculty who are teaching in universities in the Gulf region, and it certainly aligns with feedback from student satisfaction surveys that have been conducted at Zayed University and other institutions in the UAE, looking at what factors promote a better university experience.

The particular design of this research study relied on full engagement and participation by the student subjects. If the goal is to implement practices meant to ensure student success, then the voice of the students themselves is vital. University policies and practices are not something that should be done 'to' students, but something that should emerge based on the needs and experiences of students themselves, as co-participants in the research.

Chapters 2-6: Case Studies

The students are presented in five groups according to shared factors (first in family to attend university, failed in previous attempt at university, international students, mature students, personal transformations achieved through higher education). The chapters present each individual's experiences in quite a lot of detail, with much of the information quoted directly from the interviews, so the reader has a very personal insight into what challenges these learners faced, how they viewed themselves as learners, what types of support from the university they might have valued, and how they were finally able to achieve success. At the end of each chapter, there is a short list of discussion questions which provide an excellent place to start thinking about how each individual faculty or staff, as well as academic units, might try to address some of the challenges faced by students.

Chapter 2 – *Finding the way to higher education: Miranda and Rochelle*

These students were from rural areas, and were the first in their families to attend university. This obviously can result in a lack of understanding of expectations of the university and, as we see with these two students, sometimes a long path through various courses and programs before eventual success at university.

Chapter 3 – *This time it's different: Sesh and Shannon*

These students were also from rural areas, but these were students who were unsuccessful in their first attempt at university (for different reasons), then later returned to higher education. The end result of their previous experience was a clearer sense of direction the second time around, but their stories serve to identify some of the factors which can cause students to leave university.

Chapter 4 – *The international experience: Lam and Zelin*

These students were both international students, with the consequent challenges of language, culture and different approaches to teaching and learning. This chapter is particularly relevant for institutions in the Gulf, where students are often studying in a second language and/or come from various countries, teachers come from different countries than their students, etc.

One critical issue which these students identified was the difference in the methods of teaching; they both felt they needed more time to process the course material (cognitively and linguistically) and meet the expectations of faculty than other students, but given adequate time, they could do this successfully.

Chapter 5 – *Coming to education later in life: Alex Carole and Virginia*

These students were mature age students, entering higher education after their children were grown. Both had limited access to education when young, then were supported in later endeavors by university-educated husbands.

Both these students were driven by their personal experiences, sense of social justice and determination to achieve a goal. However, they also had insecurities and could feel intimidated by younger learners. Importantly for mature age students, they want to be treated with respect and are often balancing many responsibilities, so it is sometimes necessary to make allowances or allow flexibility. However, in return they have a greater sense of drive and purpose and, perhaps surprisingly, they were more likely than traditional age students to seek assistance from support staff.

Chapter 6 – *Finding my voice at last: Lillian, Marie and Harriet*

The final group of case studies were also mature age students, but their stories represent the transformative nature of higher education. Attending university is not simply about a piece of paper: higher education can provide a sense of self-worth, confidence and career opportunities that students had not even considered.

Whatever the family, health, socio-economic, etc circumstances that might limit a student's sense of self-worth, higher education has the potential to empower learners and change their lives. This should be the aspiration we have for every student.

Chapter 7: Summary

The case studies serve to highlight that many higher education services today still seem to be geared towards the 'traditional' definition of university student. However, many students worldwide no longer fit this definition, and in the context of the Gulf and Middle East, perhaps the majority of students are what would be considered 'non-traditional' elsewhere. So universities must consider strategies that will support improved success for all students, not just one group.

In most of the case studies, the support services of the university were rarely accessed by the students: support more often came from family, friends and the workplace. This would suggest that these services need to be more visible, and faculty and staff need to be more active in identifying, then reaching out to, those students who could benefit. Also, the responsibility of supporting students lies with faculty as well as support staff: it is not 'someone else's' job.

The overall factors for success that were identified are:

- benefit of peer learning / interaction;

- practical focus of learning activities, with real world relevance, including work placement;

- importance of feedback and encouragement from faculty, early in the course to clarify expectations, then regularly throughout, with suggestions for improvement;

- flexibility in study options, as well as accommodation from faculty in course assignments;

- since support is often sought from faculty, not from support services outside the classroom, faculty need to be aware of services that are available and guide students as appropriate.

Clearly the specific circumstances of some of the case studies might not apply to all students or all universities, but many students in this region fit the label of 'non-traditional'; they are often first generation university students, they are studying in a second (or third) language, they have often not had high quality secondary preparation for university, they come from a range of socio-economic levels, they come from both rural and urban backgrounds, etc. So in fact even those who are entering university directly from secondary school still do not fit the western definition of 'traditional' university student; therefore, the lessons that might be learned from these students' reflections on what university practices helped them succeed give us an opportunity to reflect on what we do – as faculty, as student support professionals, as administrators – to help ensure the greatest academic success for the greatest number of students.

These case studies also highlight the need for similar types of research in the Middle East region, to learn from students themselves about the obstacles they face when entering higher education, what sort of support is most beneficial for them, and what impact higher education has on their lives after they leave university.

While at first glance the book might seem to have limited relevance for faculty teaching in institutions in the Gulf region with somewhat homogenous student populations, in reality there is a lot to be learned from these students' stories, and the questions at the end of each chapter about what we are doing to help our students succeed in an increasingly competitive and globalized world are important for all of us to consider. I would highly recommend the book for both new and seasoned faculty and staff; all of us should be concerned about the many challenges that our students are facing, and what each of us can do to help them achieve their potential.

References

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