Exploring staff perceptions of first-generation students to enhance professional development of academic staff

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ABSTRACT

Supporting students' transition into higher education is often described as essential to enhance their progression and learning experiences, and their ultimate successful completion of their degree. Yet students from non-traditional backgrounds continue to report considerable difficulties in adapting to university life (Hamshire, Forsyth et al., 2018; Laubscher-Kelly, Paxton et al., 2018). Whilst there is a considerable body of research on students' learning experiences, the perspectives of staff working with these students are rarely recorded.

This paper reports on a collaborative project between researchers in the UK and South Africa exploring staff perceptions of first generation students' experiences. Twenty members of staff volunteered to be included in the study at each of the participating institutions, and were invited to reflect on their perceptions and experiences using semi-structured interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed using a thematic approach to identify staff perceptions.

Despite the very different cultural contexts experienced by these students in the two institutions, the staff reported considerable similarities in the challenges they believe students face in integrating into university life. This session will present findings from the project, with a focus on the role of academic professional development. We will also showcase some of the resources developed for professional development during the project as well as offer reflections on future developments and potential wider implications.

BACKGROUND

In both South Africa and the UK, higher education institutions have experienced a significant shift in student populations. Within South Africa the transformation agenda focuses on the need to redress the historical legacy of an unequal system of access (both physical and epistemic) and participation. Higher education is a key driver of 'equity, social justice and democracy' in the state's vision for 2030 (Commission., 2012). In the UK, there has also been rapid expansion with 48% of 17-30 years olds considered likely to participate in UK higher education (HE Analysis Team, 2016), compared with just 3.4% in 1950 (Bolton, 2012).

However, South African higher education institutions face major challenges with student retention, throughput and success. Despite efforts to make higher education equitable to all those who could benefit from it, the retention and success of black and coloured students remains much lower than their white counterparts in South Africa (Council on Higher Education, 2013). And in the UK, our own previous research (Hamshire, Willgoss et al., 2012; Hamshire, Willgoss et al., 2013; Hamshire, Forsyth et al., 2017; Hamshire, Forsyth et al., 2018; Laubscher-Kelly, Paxton et al., 2018) has highlighted that some students who are first in their family to attend university (often known as 'FIFU' or 'first generation' students) feel that they do not belong at university.

The work of Bourdieu in the 1970s and 1980s (for instance, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986) provided a framework for characterising institutional 'habitus' and how it may appear to students who enter higher education without the required cultural capital to benefit from all the perceived advantages of the institution. In an attempt to address this issue, first generation students

have often been problematized as the 'others' who need to change to fit in with the prevailing habitus (Burke, 2008; Burke, 2012; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; O'Shea, 2016).

Our previous research on the experiences of students who are the first in their family to go to university, has demonstrated that academic staff play a key role in shaping the academic environment - particularly the classroom - and thus are key players in creating spaces where all students feel welcome (Hamshire, Forsyth et al., 2017; Hamshire, Forsyth et al., 2018).

This study sought to explore staff perceptions of first generation students to identify their (staff) perceptions and make proposals for challenging commonly-voiced assumptions about students and university life. These proposals are considered in a broader context of diversity and inclusive practice with the intention of developing appropriate academic professional development opportunities and a portfolio of resources.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design; data were collected at both institutions using individual semi-structured interviews. The purpose was to explore staff perceptions of first generation students, including the robustness of these perceptions and the origins of some of these perceptions. The interview schedule was structured around four key themes: defining first generation students, how first generation students experienced university life, what support was available for students, and the needs of first generation students. Follow-up questions, where appropriate, were asked to further explore key topics.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit twenty staff at each of the two institution via internal emails. The staff were from a range of different disciplines across each institution and their job roles ranged from Professor to Student Support Tutor. The number of years they had worked within higher education was between one and twenty.

This project was approved by both the Manchester Metropolitan University ethics committee (Faculty of Health, Psychology & Social Care) and the University of Cape Town, Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) ethics committee. Involvement in the project was voluntary.

RESULTS

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002; Spencer, Ritchie et al., 2013). Two global themes were identified, see Figure 1 below:

Fig.1. Themes identified
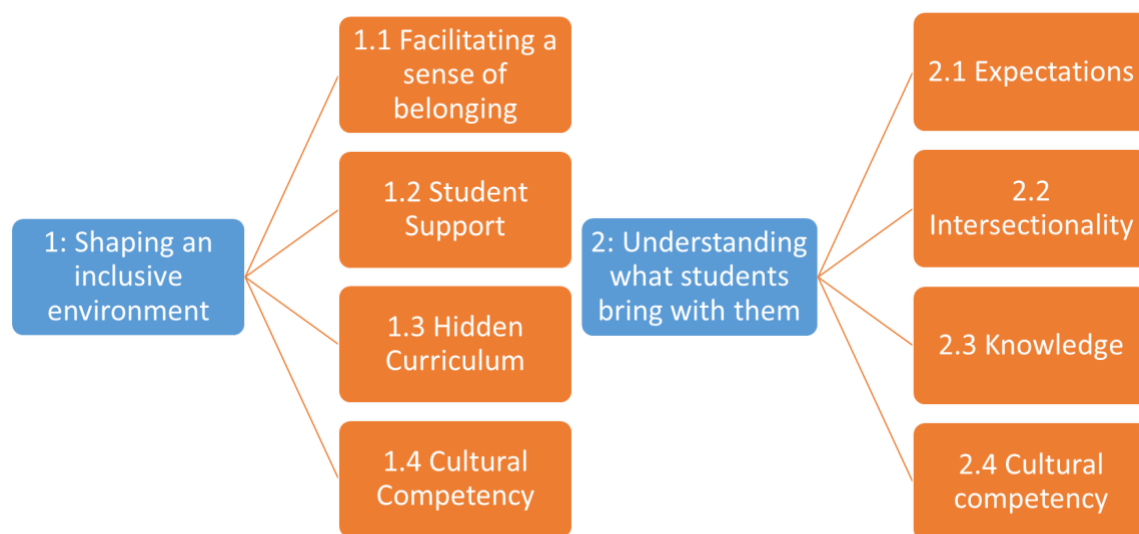
Shaping an inclusive environment

An inclusive learning environment needs to foster a sense of belonging for *all* students; understanding inclusivity is vital for this. Within their interviews the South African (SA) staff commented on how difficult it was for students to '*find a way in*' and that students needed to *'enjoy the opportunity and not be fearful.'*

These comments were echoed across the interviews of the UK staff:

'*That first year is awful. It doesn't matter who you are. Do you know what I mean? If you can keep your head above water in the first year. I think it's sometimes harder for people who've got no idea what's meant to happen.'*

The importance of belonging was a recurring theme, which is essential for creating an inclusive environment, as noted by one of the SA staff below:

'*Very often they are unprepared for the emotional and personal challenges, in how they adapt, how they feel they belong in the institution, how they identify their belonging and the experiences of being a university student'.*

Across both institutions staff were enthusiastic about facilitating a sense of belonging and providing support for learning. However, participants, on the whole, were not aware of any ways that their university specifically targeted first generation students in terms of support. Participants suggested ways that support for first generation students could be improved by making services accessible, clearer and existing supports more consistent:

'*I think, really, the problems I think they'll have is this sort of imposter syndrome and not really understanding how to navigate the whole, complex university system and thinking that, well, maybe this place isn't for me or I'm not good enough and, in some ways, it's issues that we're tackling across the university, you know, across the student population, and, I suppose, raising awareness that, you know, trying to make services clearer, trying to be- to make staff more open and approachable for support, trying to help build support networks.' (UK staff)*

However, they also identified a hidden curriculum that raises barriers for first generation students:

'*There is historically among students a sense of institutional culture being unwelcoming, not being inclusive and many students not feeling welcomed ... You navigate this whole thing on your own as a first generation student. First in your family, coming here, it's a huge challenge.' (SA staff)*

Understanding what students bring with them

All of the staff noted that whilst first generation students did not have a familial history of higher education they had other personal resources and experiences to facilitate their transition to higher education – such as resilience (as often cited by SA staff in interviews). However, within these comments there was also a deficit discourse that focused on what the students lacked, the difficulties they experienced and that *'expectations are often completely unrealistic and ill-informed'* (SA staff). The UK staff also perceived first generation students as having a class divide, working class values and lacking in cultural capital:

'*I see the difference in students in terms of the behaviours that they bring in, things- their confidence, their resilience.'*

'*...because they feel like they're the one person who doesn't really deserve to be there and everyone is smarter than them and I think that that's probably how first-generation students feel – that university isn't for them because, you know, they're surrounded by what- probably more middle-class kids who- from different backgrounds.'*

The pressure and expectation from family was noted as being both a positive and negative experience for students:

'*I think sometimes that expectation that there is from the family that you are the first person to go to university, maybe it creates a push for extra motivation for staying.' (UK staff)*

'If you are the first there is a lot more pressure on you and more is expected of you, and that also impacts on how successful you will be … it is a steep climb for people.' (SA staff)

'I am aware of students that I know come from backgrounds where money might be an issue and they are having to work quite hard. I do have a number of students who work far too many hours in terms of the impact that has on them completing their degree and that is really problematic.' (UK staff)

REFLECTIONS

Students' individual expectations can have a profound impact upon their learning experiences (Ecclestone, Field et al., 2010) and new students usually need time to adapt to the culture of higher education (Wilcox, Winn et al., 2005). Students' personal and academic development is a continuous process throughout their studies, and is influenced by a wide range of social, academic and personal factors (Hamshire, Willgoss et al., 2013). Whilst universities cannot offer bespoke support to each individual student, we need to shift the focus on to how teaching and support staff can scaffold student success and value what first generation students may bring to their programmes, peers and tutors.

All of the staff at both institutions who participated in this research were strongly committed to providing an inclusive environment for first generation students; however, overall, across the dataset, there was a tendency for staff to generalise and make assumptions about students' previous experiences without detailed understanding of students' circumstances. In essence, they sometimes undervalued the skills and knowledge the students brought with them and instead focused on what the students did not have.

There was a remarkable consistency in staff views between the two countries; perhaps this is not surprising in that both universities have a traditional model of higher education, but there are many differences in the educational contexts from which their students come. One striking similarity is the expectation of staff that the first year would be not only challenging, but that institutional culture is 'unwelcoming'. Despite staff commitment to the success of first-generation students, they seemed unable to visualise their own place in actions to make it happen.

In an era of high participation in higher education, most universities are very aware of the challenges of transitioning from compulsory schooling and the need to provide a wide range of resources and support for students. The relative disconnect between staff knowledge of these schemes and the relevance of such support to students' ability to engage with the curriculum and with their peers and tutors was striking. As an outcome of this project the team began to consider how they could provide staff with some agency in changing this situation.

Using the rich data collected in the interviews, and previous work reporting students' views, a set of staff development materials was created. The purpose of these was to provide opportunities for staff to explore their individual responsibilities in creating an inclusive environment in which the second of our themes, understanding what first generation students bring, could be seen as a positive contribution to university life.

These resources are being piloted in a range of workshop situations. It can be difficult to judge the impact of such staff development, as it is likely to be one factor in a range of cultural change activities, but the team will be evaluating changes in staff perceptions in relation to the key themes identified in this research.

SUMMARY

This research has focused on a particular group of students, those who are the first in their family to enter higher education at two universities, one in the UK and one in South Africa. It reflects work on other groups of students described as 'non-traditional.'The main conclusion is that a diverse student population comes to university with wide-ranging educational experiences that may not be easily identified or supported by staff. By providing academic professional development opportunities for staff to gain awareness of the range of different experiences that students bring to higher education, staff may be empowered to work more actively with students to enrich the curriculum and to make

their transition into university a positive experience. In this process, both staff and students need to be open with each other about expectations and challenges.

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