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First Generation Entry into Higher Education: an international study

Liz Thomas & Jocey Quinn

Maidenhead, England: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 2006, 150pp. ISBN-13: 978-0335217908

Within a relatively short time of around two decades, participation in higher education (HE) has expanded around the world. This is especially the case in the developed countries. In Ireland, for example, the rate of admission has more than doubled over the past 20 years (p.41). Likewise, a similar increase has been experienced in Norway (p.42). This book considers these changes with respect to first generation students (generally defined as those individuals where 'neither parent has had access to a university education and completed a degree', p.50). It is largely based on an analysis of findings from 10 countries (Australia, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK, USA) emerging from a previous large-scale comparative study by the authors (see Thomas & Quinn, 2003). Findings of a UK-wide qualitative study are also included (see Quinn *et al.* 2005). The aim of this second study was to understand 'voluntary drop out' among working class students at four post-1992 universities based in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapters 1 and 8 cover introduction and implications, respectively. The 'middle' six chapters consider the research context and methodology (Chapter 2), the access and success of students from lower socio-economic groups (Chapter 3), the socio-cultural literature on the family in order to conceptualise first generation entry (Chapter 4), parental education (Chapter 5), 'drop outs' (Chapter 6) and national and institutional approaches to providing support to first generation entrants (Chapter 7).

The second chapter on the development of a common language in order to conduct the research is particularly interesting. Three key questions were central to the project: *What is higher education? How is retention defined? Who are the target groups?* The English language was chosen to be the medium for communication within the project, but even defining the terms of the three questions across the 10 countries was found to be problematic. (Note: defining 'first generation' itself can be a formidable task as a student may

not actually be the first in the family to go to university if a sibling has already attended.) With reference to defining HE, for example, decisions had to be made about whether to include shorter, two-year programmes for professional and vocational qualifications in a study of tertiary education.

Likewise, what is meant by student retention? In all, 20 terms were identified by the researchers as referring to student retention; some focused on the student (e.g. 'withdrawal', 'student success', 'drop out', 'failure', 'stop out') while others were concerned with the system (e.g. 'retention', 'graduation rates'). Some terms reflected the cultural context. For example, in Sweden it is quite usual for students to move between institutions, and this movement is captured in national data. (Likewise, in the USA, students change their major (degree subject) on average five times.) Retention rate in Sweden, therefore, refers to the number of students registered after one year, including those who have transferred. In contrast, graduation rate is defined as the number of students who complete their programmes after three or more years of study. As a result, non-completion of an initial 'target qualification is valued rather than perceived as a failure' (p.22).

With reference to the third question, the target groups were agreed as including: 'first generation entrants; students from low socio-economic groups or low income families; students from ethnic minority/foreign backgrounds; and students with disabilities' (p.22). The authors found that defining these four target groups was less problematic than expected, but comparability across the 10 countries did raise some issues. For example, in Croatia, there has only been a relatively recent interest (especially when compared to other countries) in widening participation in tertiary education to disabled students.

This initial need to decide operational definitions, meanings and interpretations at the start of the study in order to develop a common language provides a fascinating insight into conducting research. In my experience, it is a ubiquitous problem in multi-disciplinary research projects, and presumably was exacerbated by the involvement of 10 different countries and cultures. It is surmised that this emphasis and discussion on methodology in the book would be particularly interesting to the (new) educational researcher, and is certainly an added extra of this publication.

A recurrent theme throughout the book is the access and success of students from lower socio-economic groups (defined according to 'income, occupation, geography, and parental level of education', p.27). These groups were identified in each of the participating

countries; they are of interest because their participation in HE is proportionally less than other socio-economic groups. The study found that contrary to popular belief, these lower socio-economic groups do not have lower rates of success. Further, educational systems support these students to varying degrees. The mechanisms and achievement of successful support would be of interest to policymakers.

A further theme relates to those first generation entrants who withdraw from HE. This is an important topic given the global move towards widening participation and increasing student numbers. In the UK alone, the Government has 'pledged that 50% of young people (aged under 30) should participate in higher education by 2010' (p.80). The book covers the various stages of the student experience from initial application to making the decision to withdraw. The text is peppered with student quotes, which make for interesting reading and help understand different student and family perspectives.

Finally, the later chapters focus on approaches to widening access and promoting student retention. An international perspective is adopted by examining the approaches taken across the 10 countries at both national level and with regard to specific institutions. Parental education, for example, is one of the key factors in determining access to HE, and was found to be more important than financial status. Overall, it is concluded that a transformative approach to HE is needed; 'assumptions cannot be made that students and families will possess insider knowledge of HE, and systems, procedures and essential curriculum information should be made both transparent and understandable' (p.131).

In summary, this book addresses some important issues. With more individuals participating in HE, there is a need for both policymakers and individual institutions to understand first generation entry, and the needs and aspirations of this group of students. Interestingly, the book challenges some of the assumptions concerning widening participation. It is carefully researched and written, and has something of interest for a number of groups. It is certainly worth reading if you are considering applying to university, concerned with widening access and participation, and success rates at an institutional level or are an educational researcher interested in large-scale projects and methodologies. I highly recommend it.

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