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Student diversity in the first year: Challenges and rewards

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Abstract

With the momentous global shift to mass higher education, the diversity of the undergraduate student population has become an issue of international import for higher education researchers and practitioners. The Australian national studies of the first undergraduate year have been tracking changes in students' sociodemographic characteristics and university experiences over ten years. This paper features empirical trend data on the relationship between student diversity and the quality of the first year experience. It will examine the challenges, as well as the rewards, of diversity for university students and learning communities. The paper concludes by considering internationally relevant implications for teaching, learning and student support.

Introduction

Like most Mandarin words, that for “crisis” (wēijī) consists of two syllables written with two separate characters, wēi and jī. Together, the syllables connote ‘wēijī’ - a perilous situation in which one should be especially wary.

危机

The jī of wēijī, however, has a distinct meaning. It signifies quick-wittedness and resourcefulness. A common interpretation of this interesting coupling of syllables is that a crisis point in one's experience is a defining moment in that it represents both danger as well as the opportunity to be resourceful. A wēijī is indeed a genuine crisis when things may go awry, but the Chinese characters also depict such situations as dynamic, comprising many elements at play and thus many opportunities alongside the dangers and challenges.

It may well be said of universities across the OECD nations, who have experienced massification on an unprecedented scale, that we find ourselves in a situation that offers both dangers and opportunities. The ‘crisis’, if we choose to perceive it thus, is twofold. First, is the fact that university undergraduate populations are far from representative in terms of the diversity of the broader population across the OECD world. Second, while national and institutional efforts to promote participation of under-represented groups in higher education proceed apace, there is a danger that once these students arrive at their institution, there is insufficient support for and responsiveness to their particular needs and circumstances. Such danger points and challenges are not without their rewards and opportunities if staff, administrators and policy-makers work together with students and the communities they represent to achieve positive outcomes.

This paper considers why the higher education sector nationally and internationally finds itself in potentially perilous waters, facing substantial challenges to be quick-witted and resourceful, particularly in terms of supporting diversity in the student experience. To illustrate this, selected examples are

drawn from empirical trend data on the relationship between student diversity and the quality of the first year experience in Australian higher education (Krause et al., 2005). The discussion concludes by outlining implications for teaching, learning and student support. A model of institutional support for student diversity within a national and international context is also proposed as a guide for ongoing discussions at the institutional and national levels.

The First Year in Higher Education in Context

The rise of the first year experience movement coincided with a growing awareness that massification of higher education brought with it significant institutional responsibilities to monitor and respond to the diverse needs and experiences of a new generation of students embarking on university studies. Unlike the more homogeneous student body characterizing the elite phase of higher education some decades ago (Trow, 2005), mass higher education is characterized by an undergraduate student population representing increasingly diverse background experiences, capabilities, expectations and aspirations.

The imperative to widen participation of students from under-represented groups in higher education has been accompanied by a developing realization of the critical importance of students' first year experiences as a key to persistence and success. Understandings of the pivotal role of the first year have progressed from a focus on one-off 'orientation to university' activities, with a strong socialization emphasis, to an appreciation that orientation is just one part of the first year puzzle. The higher education community has come to realize that, in order to optimize opportunities for student success, orientation is best accompanied by extended transition support during the first year. This is particularly important in the case of students for whom the university culture is alien and for those – such as first generation enrollees - who arrive at university with no social networks to support them through the often tumultuous transition to university study.

Over the past decade, Australian higher education has witnessed a shift from orientation-focused first year support to more extended transition programs that typically take place over the first six weeks of study, and, in some cases span the first six to twelve months of the student experience. This shift has largely been informed by a growing body of empirical evidence pointing to the longterm value of sustained programs to support both academic and social integration of undergraduate students into the university culture and learning community.

Australian National Studies of the First Year Experience

While the first year experience movement began in the United States, it has been imperative to develop a national, context-appropriate approach to monitoring the experience of first year undergraduate students in the Australian higher education sector. The same is true for any nation, and indeed institution, serious about optimizing the quality of the experience and outcomes of all undergraduate students, including those from diverse demographic subgroups.

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education of the University of Melbourne has conducted three federally-funded national studies of the first year experience in Australian universities at five-year intervals since 1994. These three studies, spanning a decade, have assembled a unique database on the changing character of first year students' attitudes, expectations, study patterns and overall experiences on campus. Since the original first year study in 1994, the Australian higher education system has changed significantly. The policy environment has established the conditions for greater competition between universities for undergraduate students. As a result, university marketing activities have intensified and there is greater student choice in courses and subjects, more flexibility in modes of delivery and more pressure on staff to be innovative in teaching and learning. Australian universities have continued vigorously to recruit international students from South-East Asia and beyond. The internationalisation of Australian higher education has had a significant impact on student diversity and has caused reflection and adjustment in approaches to teaching and learning, the curriculum and modes of delivery. Another notable change in the last few years has been in the use of information and communication technologies in teaching and learning and other aspects of university activities.

In the 2004 study, the First Year Experience Questionnaire was mailed to a 25 per cent random sample of first year commencing undergraduate students, stratified by eleven fields of study, chosen from each of nine participating universities. Surveys were distributed during the second half of the students' first year of study. Details of the methodology can be found in the full report, available online (Krause et al., 2005). A total of 2344 useable surveys were returned, resulting in an effective response rate of 28 per cent.

A feature of the 2004 study was a close analysis of the unique first year experiences of demographic subgroups, including students from equity groups. While there are several similarities between the experiences of these students and the broader sample, sufficient subgroup differences emerged to warrant consideration of institutional support strategies designed to meet the specific needs of various groups of students. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic subgroups that shaped our analysis in 2004. Further details of the sample and their characteristics are included in the full report.

Table 1 Proportionate comparisons between 2004 study sample and the national commencing undergraduate population (% of total number of students)

Demographic subgroups	Proportion of 2004 study sample (%)	Proportion of national commencing undergrad population ^a (%)
Age		
19 years and younger	67	50
20-24 years	20	27
25 years and older	13	23
Gender		
Female	66	57
Male	34	43
Enrolment		
Full-time	91	92 ^b
Part-time	9	8 ^b
Equity groups ^c		
Indigenous (ATSI) students	3 ^d	2 ^e
Students from NESB	16 ^d	4
Low SES	16 ^d	15
Rural/isolated	27 ^d	20
Fee arrangements		
International full-fee	8	23
HECS upfront	25	24
HECS deferred	63	73
Domestic full-fee	2	3
Broad Field of Education		
Society/Culture	14	23
Management/Commerce	11	26
Education	9	9
Health	13	11
Sciences	8	9
Creative Arts	5	8
Engineering	6	7
Information Technology	3	8
Agriculture	3	2
Architecture/Building	3	2
Cross-disciplinary/combined degree	24	-- ^f

^a Figures are for Bachelors (including Graduate entry), associate degree, diploma and other award courses unless otherwise specified.

^b Expressed as a proportion of internal domestic students new to higher education.

^c Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) equity group data (except ATSI) are reported for all commencing (including undergraduate and postgraduate) domestic students.

^d Expressed as a proportion of domestic students only in sample, using Australian Bureau of Statistics postcode classifications.

^e Includes all commencing undergraduate students enrolled in enabling and non-award courses as they were included in the study sample.

^f Not recorded in DEST statistics.

The full project report (Krause et al., 2005) presents a commentary on the experiences of the following demographic subgroups:

- Indigenous students
- The effects of socioeconomic background
- Students from urban and rural backgrounds
- Females and males
- The influence of age
- Full-time and part-time enrolment
- Students who deferred study the previous year
- First generation students in higher education
- Students from non-English speaking backgrounds
- International students
- Full fee-paying domestic students

For the purposes of this paper, I will provide an illustrative sketch of what the data tell us about the experiences of three of these demographic subgroups: students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, mature age students, and international students.

The effects of socioeconomic background

There are continuing social disparities in the access to and participation in Australian higher education. Australians from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are far less likely to participate in higher education than Australians from higher or medium socioeconomic backgrounds. These imbalances have persisted despite a national equity policy framework and the sustained efforts of universities in offering a variety of access programs (Coates & Krause, 2005). The first year project team explored whether or not there were any patterns of student response according to socioeconomic background, though we were aware that the available data on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds shows that while access rates are lower, students once enrolled have broadly comparable rates of success, retention and completion (James et al., 2004).

The 2004 first year experience data were analysed using the postcode definition of socioeconomic status (SES) and three groups were analysed, lower, medium and higher SES. There were many demographic differences between the groups. The higher SES students were disproportionately male, while the low SES students were disproportionately female. As expected, parental education levels were significantly higher for the high SES group compared with the low SES group. Students in the sample from low and medium SES backgrounds were more likely to be the first in their family to attend university. Those from high SES backgrounds were more likely to be enrolled in combined degrees and to have paid their Higher Education Contribution Scheme¹ payments on enrolment (as opposed to opting for deferred payments).

There were differences in the patterns of part-time work across the SES groups. The high SES students were the most likely to report that part-time work was their main or only source of income (39 per cent, compared with 33 per cent of medium SES students and 24 per cent of low SES students). Other forms of income for low SES students included government assistance and independent living allowances earned as a result of having deferred study and worked for a period before commencing university study. Overall, 67 per cent of high SES students were undertaking paid work of some kind, compared with 60 per cent and 43 per cent for the medium and low SES students respectively. A high proportion of the employed students reported that the work allowed them to afford extras. This was more likely to be the principal motivation for high SES students (84 per cent reported this), whereas the low SES students were more likely to indicate that they worked part-time in order to meet their basic needs (68

¹ The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) involves students making a contribution towards the cost of their education (known as the student contribution). HECS is available to Australian domicile students only and has since been superseded by a Student Learning Entitlement (SLE), giving students access to an equivalent of seven years of full-time study in a Commonwealth supported place. Deferred or upfront payment options are available. For more information visit:
<http://www.goingtouni.gov.au/Main/FeesLoansAndScholarships/Undergraduate/CommonwealthSupportForYourPlaceAndHECS-HELP/Pre2005HECSStudents.htm>

per cent). The low SES students were more likely to indicate that money worries made it difficult for them to study.

Students across the SES subgroups reported similar levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and expressed comparable levels of enjoyment with their university experience. It is pleasing to note such similarities in some dimensions of the student experience; nevertheless, students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to say that they had difficulty comprehending the material and had difficulty adjusting to the style of university teaching. They were also more likely to report that their parents had little understanding of their university lives. These qualitative differences in the ways students from different socioeconomic backgrounds experience university learning point to the value of designing targeted programs that introduce students to the skills required to be successful at university. A careful balance is required, however, in supporting the particular needs of students from demographic subgroups, while at the same time avoiding the potential stigmatizing effects arising from 'special programs' for certain student groups. For this reason, while some initiatives are appropriately designed for particular demographic subgroups in higher education, the most effective support mechanisms are those that are integrated into the curriculum for the benefit of all students as part of an institution-wide priority given to enhancing the quality of learning and teaching for all first year students.

The influence of age

For the first time in 2004, the transition experiences of mature age students in the first year were reported in some depth. These students emerged as a highly satisfied group on the whole. They typically received higher marks than their younger peers, and were slightly more positive about the way university had met their expectations. They tended to have strong clarity of purpose and were more likely to seek assistance from staff. However they typically kept to themselves at university and were less interested in extracurricular activities than were younger students.

The project team examined the differences in student background and attitudes according to their ages. The students were divided into three groups – those students aged 19 years or younger (school-leavers), those aged 20 to 24 years (non-traditional age in the first undergraduate year of study) and those 25 years and over (mature age). The three-group division according to age allowed the project to examine the experiences of school-leavers entering higher education directly from school, those who 'deferred' entry for a year or two, and genuine 'mature-age' students. There were noticeable demographic differences between the groups. The 19 year old students were more likely to be of higher socioeconomic background. The students 25 years and over were more likely to be first generation university enrollees. Table 2 summarises some of the main areas of contrast in the attitudes of school-leavers and mature-age students (25 years and over).

Table 2 Comparison of the attitudes of school-leavers^a and mature-age students (25 years +)

School-leavers (age 19 years) are more likely to:	Mature-age students (age 25 years and over) are more likely to:
Be marking time while they decide their future	Have a strong clarity of purpose
Find it difficult to get motivated to study	Be motivated to develop talents and to be confident they know the occupation they want
Skip classes	Find their course stimulating and get satisfaction from studying
Wish to change courses	Find lectures stimulating
Have made close friends at university	Seek assistance from staff and believe they are receiving helpful feedback
Work collaboratively with other students and borrow notes from others	Be strategic about managing their workload
Like being on campus and be active in extracurricular activities	Keep to themselves at university and be uninterested in extracurricular activities

^a school-leavers are those who successfully complete high school study before making the transition to university.

The attitudinal differences across the age groups were marked. The older students were very focused on their objectives. They indicated clear sets of goals and expressed fewer concerns about motivation to study. They also expressed high levels of satisfaction with their study and indicated they enjoyed the intellectual challenge of their courses. The responses of the older students indicated they were strategic students who often worked independently. They were far less likely to borrow course notes than their younger peers, and were less likely to engage in collaborative study. Mature-age students were less likely to report that they used web-based resources and were more likely to report that they kept to themselves at university (39 per cent compared with 26 per cent).

Overall, students aged 25 years and over emerged as a highly satisfied group. They expressed strong satisfaction with their courses and believed they were receiving helpful feedback from their teachers. Mature age students were a highly engaged group. They emerged as a group with clear goals, they worked consistently, they typically enjoyed the teaching and learning process and the challenges associated with it. Nevertheless, the relative lack of social engagement with peers in the learning community among mature age students is a reason for close monitoring of this group. Despite the positive learning experiences and strategic self-analyses, mature age students also have a tendency to feel disengaged from social networks on campus. During times of stress, uncertainty or self-doubt, such connections become a particularly powerful means of building resilience (Krause, 2005). If they are largely missing from the mature-age student experience, this is a cause for concern.

International students

While international students, like mature-age students, are not a designated equity group in Australian higher education, their experiences nevertheless highlight the merits of close monitoring of the diverse experiences of demographic subgroups at the institutional and national level as part of a comprehensive and responsive approach to enhancing the experience of all students in higher education. The threefold increase during the past decade in the proportion of fee-paying overseas students has been one of the most significant changes to occur within the Australian higher education system. The patterns of the responses of international students to the first year survey reflect numerous concerns that have been raised during recent years associated with student adjustment, academic progress and the overall quality of the university experience.

The signs of academic stress experienced by international students during their first year at an Australian campus are unambiguous:

- the international students were significantly less likely to indicate that orientation programs helped them make a good start to university (in part a possible sign of problems caused by arrival times near the start of the academic year);
- forty per cent of the international students reported they had difficulty comprehending course material compared with 21 per cent of domestic students;
- close to half of the international students were receiving grades lower than they had expected;
- the international students reported considerably more discomfort in participating in class discussions (31 per cent compared with 20 per cent — a finding related to differing pedagogical expectations and experiences); and
- 46 per cent of the international students found the workload too heavy, compared with 30 per cent of domestic students.

Overall, 56 per cent of international students found the academic standard higher than expected, compared with only 39 per cent of domestic students. One of the worrying signs in the 2004 dataset was the apparently lower level of social integration of international students. Fewer international students reported feeling part of a group committed to learning (46 per cent compared with 56 per cent), and fewer experienced a sense of belonging (35 per cent compared with 52 per cent). Fewer were confident that a staff member knew their name and fewer believed staff took an interest in their progress. Generally, the international students were more critical of the teaching and, significantly from a policy perspective, 46 per cent of the international students reported that university had not lived up to their expectation (compared with 27 per cent of domestic students).

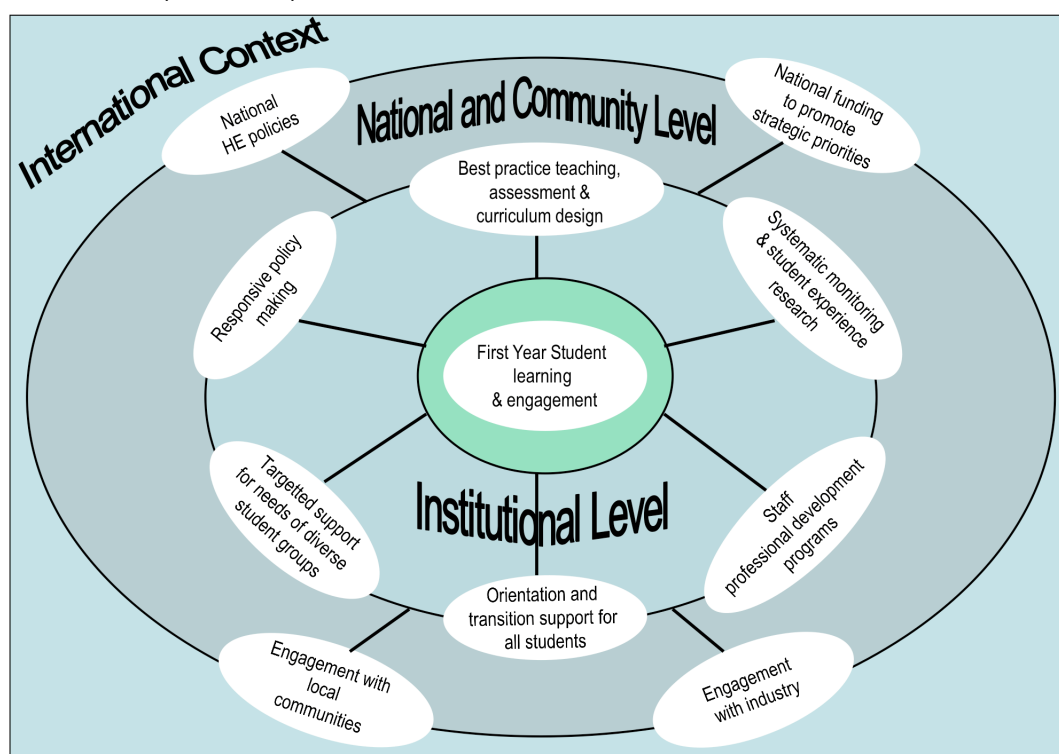
A far larger proportion of the international students said that their families were their main source of income, and international students were more likely than their domestic counterparts to report they felt pressured by financial commitments (40 per cent compared with 23 per cent). This finding may indicate that international students were particularly concerned about the financial commitments their families had made on their behalf. Certainly, parental expectations figured more prominently in the thinking of international students than they did for domestic students.

As federal policies continue to support initiatives aimed at ensuring widening access and participation of students from under-represented groups – as well as others from diverse backgrounds, it is imperative that systematically collected empirical data be used to inform decision-making and program development at the institutional level. Many universities have supported the implementation of orientation programs that support the transition of first year students to higher education, but the process cannot stop there. The next stage in the development of integrated and sustainable first year support initiatives is to monitor the needs and experiences of students from diverse demographic subgroups, particularly those from equity groups. In this way, targeted initiatives can be implemented to enhance the quality of the first year experience for all students, including those most under-represented in higher education. The following section presents a model to guide decision-making and discussion regarding such initiatives.

Implications for learning, teaching and student support

The model shown in Figure 1 provides a catalyst to further conversations among academic staff, student support staff, institutional administrators and national-level policy makers. Adopting a hub-and-spoke approach, it highlights the dynamic interconnectedness of interactions among all stakeholders in the higher education process, taking into account the central importance of student learning and experiences in higher education. Each dimension of this model represents its own challenges and concomitant rewards.

Figure 1 Model of Institutional Support for Student Diversity in a National and International Context (Krause, 2006)



Institution-level implications

One of the enduring challenges facing institutions is to foster a culture in which the quality of student learning and engagement is the hub that drives institutional decision-making and activity. The rewards of such efforts are many, including enhanced student retention, persistence and satisfaction, along with improved staff satisfaction resulting from a sense of accomplishment at promoting students' engagement with learning. Such a culture does not emerge without strategic planning and priority-setting across the institution. In the first instance, this involves a commitment to systematic monitoring of the student experience that in turn informs responsive policy-making and guides decisions about curricular, pedagogical and assessment matters.

A more encompassing view of the student experience is needed: one that considers the experience beyond the classroom to be as important as that within the formal learning environment – whether face-to-face or virtual. In this way, the curriculum will be complemented by targeted support programs developed to meet the particular needs of diverse demographic subgroups. In many cases, it may be best to keep all students together for orientation and transition programs in order to foster a sense of belonging in the broader learning community. However, evidence suggests that there are certainly times when custom-designed support is required. The balance between these approaches can only be effectively achieved when informed by a deep understanding of the students, their needs, expectations and experiences. To further such an agenda, institutions must attach premium value not only to ongoing institutional research on the student experience, but also to ongoing, context-appropriate staff development and an evidence-based approach to practice. In this way, a holistic and integrated approach to the student experience may be achieved. This involves academic and support staff working side-by-side with administrators, institutional researchers and policy-makers, rather than in traditional silos that work to segment the institution instead of promoting seamlessness in students' university experiences.

National and community level implications

No institution of higher education operates as an island. National and local communities play a significant role in the quality of the student experience. This includes national higher education policies and funding to promote priority areas, such as national level monitoring of the student experience. It also includes institutional consultation with industry stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum underpinning student learning is representative of real-world settings and authentic learning experiences. Figure 1 also acknowledges the international environment shaping national and local initiatives to support diversity in the student experience. A detailed treatment of this subject lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

Institutional engagement with local communities is another key to supporting and enhancing student diversity in a range of ways. Universities have a responsibility to work with communities that are under-represented in higher education to raise aspirations with regard to higher education from early in the lives of young people. Equally, once students from under-represented communities enter higher education, they should have the opportunity, with their peers, to feed back into their communities through civic engagement and service learning opportunities so that a cycle of success and raised aspirations gradually replaces cycles of failure and lack of motivation to attend university. These opportunities should be integrated into the curriculum and valued as part of an institutional culture that celebrates diversity and recognizes its rewards for all involved.

Concluding comments and ways forward

Social, economic and moral imperatives are at the foundation of universities' responsibility to not only widen participation to higher education but, equally, to optimize the quality of all students' experiences once they enrol and throughout the undergraduate years. The first year represents an opportune time for such initiatives. It is indeed a period when students, for whom the university environment is sometimes an alienating place, may face a crisis point – will they stay or will they go? What is it that encourages such at-risk students to persist? There is no single panacea, but at the heart of persistence is a sense of connectedness and engagement.

Opportunities for connectedness in higher education occur at many levels. It may be simultaneously evident:

- among staff, including academic staff, student support staff, and administrators who work together to promote a holistic approach to supporting high quality student experiences;
- among students from diverse backgrounds who work together to build a shared university learning community, whether it be in real or virtual settings, in order to create a sense of belonging;
- between staff and students, for instance when academic staff, in particular, make the time to be available for student consultations or take part in department-based student-staff social events beyond the formal classroom setting;
- between students, their learning, and the disciplinary community;
- between university learning communities, including staff and students, and communities beyond the university to foster civic engagement;
- among universities and tertiary institutions at the sector-wide level, through the sharing of resources and ideas that enhance the student experience;
- between universities in the sector and national-level policy makers; and
- internationally among staff, students and institutions who increasingly find themselves citizens of a global community in which diversity is one of the greatest assets.

No matter what their background, when students are connected and part of an interconnected learning community, diversity becomes a springboard from which they can develop and explore the world of higher learning, rather than a source of difference that potentially disadvantages and alienates.



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