The challenges and opportunities of diversity in university settings

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Introduction

International student recruitment creates diversity which has potentially far-reaching consequences for universities and their surrounding communities. A learning experience that caters for the needs and aspirations of all students, while responding to other stakeholder demands, suggests the need to manage diversity within different contexts and across the full range of institutional activity. The implications for assessment, learning and teaching practice go far beyond any deficit-assimilationist model (where international students are viewed as being deficient in their capacity to operate successfully in UK higher education settings without extensive support to assist them in adapting to the academic culture of the host institution). Rather, diversity strikes at the very root of attitudes, values and beliefs about how the curriculum should be shaped and possibly re-conceptualised to acknowledge difference among cohorts of both international and home students.

In discussing the challenges posed and opportunities afforded by diversity in UK higher education this paper draws on the findings of research recently commissioned by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) from CAPRI, Leeds Metropolitan's Centre for Academic Practice and Research in Internationalisation. *Internationalisation and equality and diversity in higher education: merging identities* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010) reports on a project operating across six heterogenous universities located in Australia, Wales and England, which aimed to identify the advantages of working at

the intersection of internationalisation and equality and diversity (E and D) agendas in higher education.

In order to capture a wide range of stakeholder views the project used a multi-level, mixed-method approach. Extensive documentary research to assess the influence of geographical location, profile and size on rationales for internationalisation and commitment to equality and diversity was complemented by interviews with key personnel to provide insights into performance, accessibility etc. Data on staff and student awareness, perceptions and dispositions in relation to internationalisation and equality and diversity were captured via online surveys and focus groups. Overall, 14 senior members of staff involved in internationalisation and/or equality and diversity specifically, and teaching, learning and assessment or quality assurance and enhancement more generally, were interviewed. 160 students and 200 members of staff responded to the online survey and individuals also attended separate focus groups for staff and students held at each of the six universities involved. Finally a review of the literature supported data interpretation and emergent key themes.

A central focus of the research is the student learning experience, with discussions embracing key issues such as competing perspectives on learner support models; the association between inclusive curricula and the concept of multicultural education; and the barriers encountered in attempting to design appropriate learning experiences. While identifying issues and tensions, the report also cites examples of effective practice and synergy and considers how existing initiatives may be developed to enhance learning, teaching, assessment and support for a diversity of home and international students. As far as supporting staff in delivering effective and inclusive practice is concerned, the findings of the ECU report suggest that an integrated programme of continuing professional development catering for managerial, professional, administrative and support staff, which acknowledges the synergy between internationalisation and E and D at all levels of activity, is critical in re-shaping universities as multicultural institutions capable of adapting to and indeed harnessing the opportunities created by ever-increasing levels of diversity.

Institutional processes of adaptation in the context of increasing diversity

Phillips (2005) identifies five principles of good race relations: equality of rights and opportunities; acceptance of the right to espouse one's own culture while exploring others; the security of a safe environment free from racism; unity in a wider community with shared values and responsibilities rooted in citizenship and humanity; and finally, co-operation among individuals and groups to achieve common goals, resolve conflict and create community cohesion. He explains that the major challenge facing multicultural societies today is "… finding a way for very different kinds of people to share the same space and resources and to prosper …" [with failure counted in terms of] … communities divided by suspicion and tension". In transforming difference from a burden into a benefit, the "… biggest, new task is to encourage interaction between different groups in society". Phillips goes on to argue that "while there may be less individual hostility than in the past, there is a slow but definite drift into a kind of voluntary social segregation, based on racial groupings and cultural or religious traditions" (Phillips, 2005, pp. 1–2).

Universities are effectively communities within communities, and the recruitment of international students alters their demographic (and that of their surrounding environs), increasing structural diversity (demographic mix). If internal cohesion and balance is to be maintained, this – at the very least – requires a shift from being a monocultural to becoming a multicultural institution. With rapidly expanding international student numbers, the traditional focus on teaching understanding of the home academic culture and training on how to function in the home institution and environment is being challenged:

"It is not only the newcomers who need to adapt and learn … When diversity ceases to be something exotic … and has become part of daily life … it cannot be ignored … the university … has to adapt and learn …on institutional level, the class room level … and at the level of the student community" (Hermans, 2005, p. 3).

Intercultural encounters that take place in institutional contexts are complex, and diversity that cannot be assimilated to an existing frame of reference and set of communication rules and strategies challenges institutional routines and working practices. Failure to adapt, as those once perceived as a 'minority group' and designated 'non-standard' increasingly become the norm, results in transaction costs in terms of funding, workload and satisfaction. As existing organisational structures, norms, practices and processes become strained the pressure to act in order to restore internal cohesion becomes stronger. For many institutions that are currently redoubling their efforts to recruit ever-expanding numbers of international students, a key message is the need to manage diversity in order to avoid widespread student failures on potentially hostile campuses (Dobbins, 2009; Hermans, 2005; Otten, 2003; Shaw, 2009).

A business case approach to diversity: corporate social responsibility and 'business' benefits

In contrast to other organisations, universities use the 'language of diversity' while providing little evidence of the ways in which learner diversity delivers business benefits to the sector and to the wider community. Though it is firmly on the HE agenda, student diversity is usually discussed in terms of how it will be achieved rather than directly as an end in itself. Caruana and Ploner (2010) argue that in order to maintain internal cohesion and external credibility, universities should be less concerned with compliance and instead divert their efforts towards managing structural diversity and measuring its benefits in their own context and in line with their distinctive profile, mission and priorities.

Broadening the demographic of those accessing and succeeding in higher education can be explored through the lens of individual institutional viability, particularly in the current context of a sector likely to become increasingly marketised and stratified as a result of changes in funding arrangements. Mapping the potential benefits of structural diversity may be wholly consistent with, and complementary to, a commitment to corporate social responsibility within a sector driven partially by self-

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interest within the marketplace. Maintaining and developing reputation, exploiting business development opportunities through creating a distinct position in the market, the creation of 'brand' and building credibility and trust with current and potential 'customers' are all legitimate goals of a policy to promote and encourage diversity strategically on university campuses. In the context of corporate social responsibility the business case can be extended beyond immediate institutional benefits to encompass the wider needs of society and the economy, embracing social and ethical principles which focus on the benefits to the region or the country (Shaw et al, 2007; Shaw, 2009).

When asked to consider the factors determining strategy, over-arching goals and supporting processes related to diversity in their universities, the senior managers involved in the ECU project (Caruana and Ploner, 2010) generally agreed that *"compliance with legislation"* is not the central driving force of policy and strategy. Loosely defined notions of tolerance are rejected in favour of policy initiatives informed by sound ethical principles. In this sense *"enhancing student and staff experiences" and "improvement of quality"* are the key drivers for designing and implementing both internationalisation and E and D policies (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 44).

A more inclusive approach towards the educational requirements of international students may provide opportunities for quality improvement by *"connecting and integrating different pedagogies and learning cultures which challenge established colonial approaches to learning and teaching".* However, it seems that popular internationalisation discourse is often associated negatively with the process of globalisation of HE. Students acknowledge that internationalisation increases structural diversity on university campuses and argue that once this exists the challenge then becomes one of "breaking down barriers to facilitate the free exchange of ideas, different world views, etc. to counter the stereotyped images so frequently portrayed by the global media" (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 96) However, the articulation of internationalisation embodied in some university marketing strategies places too much emphasis on international students as a distinct, separate and possibly favoured group. In essence, the message that

"internationalisation is for everyone" (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 86) is often lost and more importantly, such marketing strategies fail to communicate any sense of shared goals between international and home students. Formulating a business case for diversity would influence marketing discourse in such a way as to articulate the real benefits for *all* students of studying in a multicultural environment.

The general consensus of academic, support and administrative staff involved in the ECU project similarly acknowledges that internationalisation can engender a sense of community, intercultural communication and understanding, but progressing internationalisation particularly via international student recruitment "profoundly changes the ways in which institutions (ought to) reflect on, conceptualise and operationalise their E and D policies". If internationalisation encourages a global mix of students on UK campuses then it effectively becomes subsumed into or becomes simply "*another dimension of E and D"* in the sense of institutions needing to be *"more aware of issues of culture and religion … and more conscious of … individual students and their needs"* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 64).

It seems then that enhanced internationalisation synchronised with E and D within over-arching ethical and philosophical frameworks is required as the basis for *"good business sense"* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 94) and inclusion is the unifying factor underpinning the business case that freely acknowledges that income generated through student fees or international partnerships legitimately allows progress within other key strategic areas like widening participation and community outreach in order to promote social cohesion and inclusion.

Establishing a business case that manages structural diversity originating from local and global communities, that addresses the institutional context and clearly articulates benefits to all key stakeholders within the university and the broader local, regional and global communities is not something likely to happen overnight. The process requires the assimilation of international perspectives within E and D policy and organisational frameworks. Appropriate mechanisms to accommodate regular communication between international offices, E and D offices, learner advice and support functions and international development units to promote the sharing of data,

information and practice are required. Above all, future progress depends on the willingness to invest in evaluating existing schemes and widely disseminating outcomes, complemented by an element of corporately responsible risk-taking and a willingness to learn from mistakes. A key message in terms of evaluation to support the business case is the need for research exploring perspectives and experiences on the ground, which, in conjunction with institutional performance indicators and metrics designed principally for the purposes of compliance, can provide a more rigorous basis for measuring achievements in curriculum internationalisation (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 57, 94).

Curriculum challenges and opportunities arising out of diversity

While structural diversity defines the changing demographic mix and level of racial/ethnic diversity in the student body at any one university, classroom diversity refers to its representation in the curriculum and pedagogy, learning about diverse people and gaining experience with diverse peers. As suggested above, structural diversity alone can be damaging to institutions but it can also be damaging to individuals. On the one hand, "demographic diversity unleashes creativity, innovation and improved group problem solving" but at the same time, research in 'relational demography' shows that working with dissimilar others is often associated with negative outcomes. Benefits are contingent upon the situation, providing "little comfort for those who seek simple rules and procedures which apply across all situations" (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004). Jayne and Dipboye go on to argue that diversity initiatives based on the 'integration and learning perspective' – rather than access and legitimacy or discrimination and fairness – are most likely to motivate in a sustained manner to ensure long-term change.

In the multicultural classroom students may be expected to experience tension between their own competing perspectives on social justice and self-interest, in the absence of practical interventions which reduce uncertainty and promote real conversations and two-way communication. Tensions may sometimes be

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exacerbated by relationships with teaching staff: staff may be reluctant to converse with international students or they may inadvertently compound language barriers by not encouraging the use of English in class. Nonetheless congenial staff–student relationships may be developed by those who have taught or conducted academic research overseas sharing their international experiences with students.

Notwithstanding individual approaches within the staff–student relationship, tensions tend to vary across learning communities, with heightened tension at undergraduate level giving way to a greater sense of openness, common identity and reciprocity at postgraduate level. International students participating in the ECU project referred to feelings of marginalisation within multicultural learning environments, expressing a preference for maintaining relationships with their international peers as a distinct "…equity group…[in order to avoid] …feelings of inferiority"(Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 83, 96). "Yet it seems that with learner maturity often comes the realisation that many home students originate from similarly diverse ethnic and cultural – and indeed socio-economic – backgrounds which involve similar transition into the norms and practices of HE" (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 96).

Research with students also suggests issues surrounding assessment of the cross-cultural dimension of learning. In the online survey cross-cultural capability was regarded as an essential graduate attribute by students, which, they feel, potentially enhanced their employability. Nonetheless, a high proportion were, at the very least, ambivalent about how their learning experience relates to employability either in global labour markets or in local, culturally diverse working environments, with some claiming that their learning experience had not enhanced cross-cultural capability in any way. On some programmes of study this scenario may reflect the nature of curriculum content, which varies across disciplines. Business and commercial subjects tend to embrace international perspectives, whereas subjects like teacher education, sports studies and design explore intercultural and diversity issues, and subjects like art, media and global ethics straddle the boundaries between the two (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 68, 89). However, students across disciplines still claim that there is generally no explicit assessment of cross-cultural capability within their programmes of study. This probably reflects a relative absence of structured

opportunities for interaction based on the conscious use of 'difference' in multicultural classrooms. Good practice cited in the ECU report includes the use of mixed-method assessment strategies including reflective, problem-solving and comparative processes within cross-cultural contexts; group work complemented by assessments requiring reflection on students' 'own' and 'other' cultures; and presentation of work to and feedback from international or cross-cultural audiences. Formative assessment based on the use of learning journals is also useful in preparing students for what can be quite challenging summative assessments (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 93).

Learning for cross-cultural capability may be frustrated by cohort profiles on particular programmes which tend to be predominantly monocultural. For most colleagues involved in this study, engaging diversity from external sources is a means of compensating for the lack of structural diversity within student cohorts. In this context, opportunities for experiential learning abroad or at home, which engage students with multicultural community groups in order to develop cross-cultural skills, assume particular importance. Other initiatives include International Summer Schools and online collaborative learning with groups of students and staff at partner institutions. Off-the-shelf web-based learning activities such as the Google Online Marketing Challenge at http://www.google.com/onlinechallenge/ can also enable students to cross cultural boundaries from home with a relatively limited burden of development time and effort on the part of staff. Finally, short, intensive exchange programmes provide students with experience of alternative HE systems, encouraging cross-cultural networking and communication to enable students to challenge their own perceptions of education (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 55–56).

While students cite a range of issues in relation to their learning experience in multicultural settings, insights from teaching staff reveal a preoccupation with managing students' expectations of learning in multicultural settings – the need to skilfully negotiate the varying expectations that international students bring with them and simultaneously manage home students' expectations, encouraging them to engage with the experiences of their international peers rather than regarding them

as *"slowing things down"* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 56). International academics cite a perceived tendency for UK students to come to HE with prior experience of what might be regarded as a very traditional, "*'restrictive' education"*, expecting that learning encounters in HE will be structured along similar lines. Experience of different educational systems and teaching styles, encapsulated in a *"more globalised approach to education"* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 55) which questions assumptions in learning environments, is regarded as central to challenging limited expectations. However, colleagues also suggest the need for interventions which, while acknowledging difference, work towards enabling students to find the common ground in face-to-face classroom encounters. This is validated by literature in the field which confirms that as groups interact over time, deep level diversity, based on common identity, emerges to reduce inter-group conflict (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). In developing appropriate opportunities it is important to understand that genuine interaction goes beyond mere contact. Intercultural encounters do not automatically increase intercultural competence; rather they can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices if critical incidents are not evaluated on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels. Students need to be able to learn about 'differences' and get to know each other with sufficient intimacy to be able to discern common goals and personal qualities (Gurin et al, 2002; Otten, 2003; Shaw, 2009).

While student expectations and dispositions in the multicultural classroom may be problematic, teachers also need to consider their own dispositions in their encounters with student diversity. Inclusion as the underpinning principle of an internationalised curriculum may be viewed in two different ways, each of which influences the nature of student engagement: either no-one should be disadvantaged, or all should be helped to learn by a curriculum designed to enable success. In the first case, academic cultural capital (or the requisite skills, behaviours, dispositions etc) to succeed in academia is defined only in traditional or dominant mainstream ways (which are likely to create conditions for disengagement or opposition); in the second, academic cultural capital development includes and builds upon students' backgrounds and cultures (Chanock, 2007; Higbee et al, 2007). The second approach acknowledges the "partiality inherent in the curriculum" (Pinnock et al, 2008, p. 23) which is based on the first approach, and assumes that

the high quality, critical curriculum has to include multiple perspectives and "teaching strategies that engage students' racial/ethnic backgrounds in a more positive manner toward the development of more relevant pedagogies and learning activities" (Tierney, 2008, p. 107). It is claimed that in affirming students' identities rather than just avoiding discrimination this model also assists integration processes and substantially influences attrition rates (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 12–13; Gurin et al, 2002; Otten, 2003; Shaw, 2009).

The challenge for teachers in the multicultural classroom is balancing these two theoretical positions through a process of understanding and negotiating the potential tension between affirming students' funds of knowledge and identities and bridging the gap in cultural academic capital (Chanock, 2007; Higbee et al, 2007). Teachers involved in the ECU project generally agree that the internationalised curriculum, at the very least, should take account of students' backgrounds and prior learning experiences. This need to engage diverse backgrounds in order for the curriculum to have relevance was underscored in the Australian context, where "a class who probably all look Australian would have probably ten nationalities and language groups represented" (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 45). Some quite simple and very practical interventions are cited as effective in capturing the essence of diverse backgrounds and prior learning experiences. These include, for example, asking students to produce short reports of prior learning and experience, and allowing curriculum space to discuss and reflect on transitions. 'First day introductions' which encourage students to talk about their backgrounds can produce useful responses which assist in determining how much and what cultural capital students possess (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 14, 56).

A cross-disciplinary approach to curriculum development may be beneficial in developing structured opportunities that go beyond mere contact in multicultural classrooms, providing the space that enables students (particularly those accustomed to scientific approaches to teaching and research) to reflect on individual and collective experiences. The creative and arts-based disciplines, for example, require the development of technical skills complemented by open-mindedness about unfamiliar ideas and experiences, so personal knowledge and

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cultural knowledge become central resources within the classroom. New approaches to teaching which challenge disciplinary norms by privileging and sharing personal, embodied stories in cross-cultural classroom interactions may provoke students to critically reflect on knowledge, re-conceptualising it in the context of their own and others' personal and professional lives (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 14; Carless and Douglas, 2010).

Promoting interactional diversity

Informal interactional diversity relates to the frequency and quality of inter-group interaction, the majority of which takes place outside the formal classroom and programme of study. Interactional diversity generally occurs in social settings but it is also an important consideration when scoping the 'informal curriculum' and devising university support structures that cater for diversity.

Evidence from *Internationalisation and equality and diversity in higher education: merging identities* suggests that students value the openness of the welcoming and integrative environment that universities try to create by promoting interaction among international students. Cultural diversity is highly visible at Leeds Metropolitan University through cultural festivals and other social events designed to celebrate diversity while promoting inclusion. The general consensus is, however, that while building cohesion among and between groups of international students, such arrangements serve to *"separate the international students from the home students"* and celebrations of culture can be "*counter-productive*" in terms of reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating voluntary social segregation, if not accompanied by other cross-cultural experiences and interventions that prompt reflexivity to develop the common ground between home and international students (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 67). A key consideration is acknowledging that students have multiple identities and though culturally different, home and international students may have similar interests. Essentially, the informal curriculum should create the physical and psychological space that enables students to get to know each other. Student opinion supports the organisation of celebratory events which promote greater

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informal interactional diversity based on common identities and aspirations. Since learner maturity is a factor in developing open-mindedness within university settings, initiatives at the School/department level which bring together diverse postgraduate and undergraduate communities may be helpful in fostering cross-cultural integration. International students in particular voice the opinion that while international associations are useful in enabling them to feel more comfortable, universities should encourage international students to join other societies too: *"it will be good always having an international voice in all societies".* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 67) The concept of the international study centre is also cited as a potentially useful arrangement to provide a focal point for international and home students who want to extend their international experience and cross-cultural engagement.

Informal interactional diversity also provides a useful framework for shaping university support structures where the need to acquire academic cultural capital forms the all-important common ground within a diverse student body. In the current economic climate, more home students are tending to study locally, maintaining local friendship networks and using local facilities rather than engaging on university campuses (Rolfe, 2002). Such students may be disadvantaged throughout their university experience by a socio-cultural environment that does not provide the types of social and cultural capital required to succeed in higher education. Parochialism may be reinforced when students are confronted with others from very different backgrounds who may have travelled long distances to study in the UK, but find themselves in very unfamiliar educational surroundings and are thus similarly disadvantaged (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 13).

As far as existing support practices are concerned, Warren (2002) differentiates between two forms of learning development in higher education. The academic support model is based on the principle of support for targeted groups of 'non-traditional' students. The integrated model is based on the premise that *all* students require some level of support in acquiring academic cultural capital and adjusting to higher learning. Support is mainstreamed within the curriculum, focusing on the development of academic literacies within the disciplines, rather than simply focusing

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on academic socialisation. This kind of model advantages students by 'situating' their learning and it is also beneficial to staff in reducing strategy/policy overload.

Orientation programmes for international students are commonplace in university support structures, yet there is little preparation for intercultural settings for home students, despite the fact that they need to be able to embrace difference without feeling a major threat to their own shared cultural identity. In addition to experiencing unfamiliar international dimensions, they have to deal with the regional and local diversity arising from domestic multiculturalism. If students don't understand 'culture shock' which explains the process of adaptation for international students (the temporary reaction to psychological stress which involves segregation, isolation, emotional over-reactions and physical stress), their behaviours can be interpreted as a lack of willingness to integrate (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 13).

This lack of preparation for home students is compounded by ever-present language barriers. Both home and international students assert that despite the best of intentions, language – both verbal and body language – is a particular barrier to cross-cultural communication. Language is regarded as the pre-requisite tool for understanding cultural difference but a dilemma presents itself in that developing language proficiency requires socialisation, yet without perceived language capability students will naturally be reluctant to socialise. It is noteworthy that in the Australian HE context cultural awareness and English language training are offered to both international and home students, acknowledging complex socio-cultural urban environments where many home students originate from first- or second-generation immigrant families and speak a language other than English at home (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, pp. 37-38).

Peer mentoring is regarded as a key component for supporting inclusion on internationally-orientated and diverse campuses. Where the discourse differs markedly between UK institutions and their Australian counterparts is in respect of 'target groups'. The UK discourse is dominated by notions of 'widening access' to embrace 'non-traditional' groups (which in itself, implies the persistence of the 'traditional' in UK HE settings). In contrast, the views of staff at Australian universities

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tend to convey the explicit assumption of multiple identities (Caruana and Ploner, 2010:, p. 61).

It is significant that students report very positive experiences from their involvement in peer mentoring programmes involving both home and international students which provide the opportunity to improve English language skills by overcoming the problem of *"what to talk about because I can talk to them about the topics and subject"* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 66). Peer mentoring schemes are also cited as important in terms of making friends, building confidence, developing a sense of common identity from *"learning from each other"* (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 66), team-based problem-solving skills and self-improvement.

Peer mentoring schemes therefore represent a good example of sound practice in providing integrated support and promoting integration based on the principle of developing academic cultural and social capital. However, in terms of learner support models, particularly in the UK context, the current emphasis on 'target groups' should be complemented by more schemes based on the 'integrated model' (more common in Australia) which assumes that all students need to develop academic cultural capital within the framework of their respective disciplines (Caruana and Ploner, 2010, p. 100).

Conclusions

This paper shows how increasing structural diversity arising from expanding international student recruitment and domestic multiculturalism can be damaging to both universities and individual students if pursued without adequate consideration of classroom and interactional diversity. A more holistic approach requires a shift in focus from demonstrating how universities have become diverse institutions – in order to demonstrate compliance with legislative requirements – to identifying the benefits of diversity within the multicultural university and building a 'business case' which addresses institutional and wider community contexts. This is the first step in shaping coherent policies, processes and practices that will effectively manage

structural diversity.

The ECU report cites evidence of effective practice but also highlights continuing tensions in all aspects of the student experience, from the impression conveyed by marketing, through assessment, learning and teaching practices, to support structures and the informal environment. These tensions, reinforced by evidence of voluntary social segregation on university campuses and of the challenges posed to both staff and students suggest the need for adaptation across *all* activities related to the quality of the student experience. For those participants contributing their views to the ECU project, successful adaptation from the mono- to the multicultural university requires spaces that enable practice and issues to be shared across disciplinary and professional boundaries; which develop the capacity for evidence-based and research-informed practice; and which acknowledge the importance of 'grass-roots' evaluation and research as the essential complement to institutional performance indicators and metrics in transforming challenges into opportunities.

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