

Widening participation: does cultural capital really make a difference for first year students?

Convenor(s)

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Issues/topics to be addressed

Government policy to widen participation at university is aimed at producing significant changes in the student demographic. This will likely increase the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds such as those with low socio-economic status and those from rural or isolated areas. Many of these commencing students will also be the first member of their immediate family to attend university.

By drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of cultural capital the convenors will lead a discussion of how prior knowledge and experience of tertiary education can impact upon student's understandings and expectations of university study.

In particular, the discussion will examine the debate in the literature as to whether first in family students are significantly disadvantaged and compare these outcomes with findings from a large multi institutional ALTC project examining the expectations and experiences of over 3000 first year students.

Background literature

A number of studies have shown that in comparison to other student cohorts first in family students do not differ significantly in their perceptions of university study (Yorke and Longden (2008), or their coping strategies (Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis (2005). However, as Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) argue, the experience of participating in post-secondary education is 'a particularly formidable task for first-generation students' as they do not have access to 'the intergenerational benefits of information about college' (p. 409). This background information is particularly useful in helping students form realistic expectations of university life which, as shown by Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat (2000), helps to reduce student's overall stress and improve their adaptation to the university environment.

It has been argued that cultural capital may be 'used for social and cultural exclusion' from jobs, resources and 'high status groups' (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 156) it enables the holder to access and maintain positions of power and also ensures that the status quo is maintained as it is the holders of the cultural capital who may control how it is valued (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is related to cultural acquisitions and reflects the way in which knowledge, skills and qualifications are valued. It is associated with the ownership and ability to appreciate cultural artefacts such as paintings, musical instruments and books while emphasising the ability to embody and reproduce culture as part of a personal style such as the way someone speaks, dresses and behaves at public events. It also captures the ability to speak languages, paint or play a musical instrument (Bourdieu, 1991).

First in family students, however, are disadvantaged as they do not share the cultural capital of those students who have close family members that have attended university before them, and tend to enrol in universities which acknowledge and recognise the capital that they hold.

Data from our survey shows that first in family students based their expectations of university on school counsellors, teachers, university recruiting material and websites, whereas students who were not first in family relied significantly more on parents, friends and siblings for informing their expectations. In addition, first in family students believed that they were capable students who would do well at university but they expected university work would be more difficult than other students did. Interestingly, these first in family students were also less likely to enrol in high prestige courses such as Law, Medicine, Dentistry and Engineering at an 'elite' Group of Eight university. Instead they opted to take up courses in Science or Education at universities which, themselves do not have the capitals to make the same claims to prestige as the Go8.

Which leads us to ask; does cultural capital make a difference to student's choices and expectations? And will these differences have a long term impact on student's future job prospects?

Convenor's research interests

First year student experience, Academic practice, Higher education policy

Suggested question(s) for discussion

Will government policy to widen participation result in any change in power or status quo for first in family students?

Does a lack of cultural capital impede student's choices or options?

Does being first in family reduce your options for making good choices?

Does being first in family mean that you are less likely to be successful at university?

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