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Institutional Transformation to Engage a Diverse Student Body

Liz Thomas
Malcolm Tight
Editors

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER
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INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION TO ENGAGE A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

EDITED BY
LIZ THOMAS
MALCOLM TIGHT



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

**INSTITUTIONAL
TRANSFORMATION TO ENGAGE
A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY**

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Rashidah N. Andrews</i>	College of Liberal Arts, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
<i>Derek Bland</i>	School of Learning and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Qld, Australia
<i>Betsy Bowerman</i>	Widening Participation Office, University of Bristol, UK
<i>Linda Cooper</i>	Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa
<i>Glenda Crosling</i>	Monash University Sunway Campus, Malaysia
<i>Chris Croudace</i>	Head of Outreach and Widening Participation, University of the West of England, UK
<i>Blaženka Divjak</i>	Faculty of Organization and Informatics Varazdin, University of Zagreb, Croatia
<i>Jayne K. Drake</i>	College of Liberal Arts, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
<i>Vicky Duckworth</i>	Centre for Learning and Identity Studies (CLIS), Edge Hill University, Lancashire, UK
<i>Scott E. Evenbeck</i>	New Community College, City University of New York (CUNY), New York, NY, USA
<i>Kerry Ferguson</i>	Equity and Student Services Division, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Vic., Australia

<i>Michelle Gammo-Felton</i>	Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), Liverpool, UK
<i>Michelle Garvey</i>	Trinity College Dublin (TCD), Ireland
<i>Janet Graham</i>	Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme, UK
<i>Marit Greek</i>	Centre for Educational Research and Development, Oslo University College, Norway
<i>Margaret Hart</i>	The Open University (OU), UK
<i>Sue Hatt</i>	Aimhigher South West, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
<i>Sandra Hill</i>	Business School, University of the West of Scotland, Hamilton, UK
<i>Tony Hoare</i>	Department of Geography, Bristol University, UK
<i>Renata Horvatek</i>	Faculty of Organization and Informatics Varazdin, University of Zagreb, Croatia
<i>Amanda Ingleby</i>	Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice (CLIPP), Aston University, Birmingham, UK
<i>Salma Ismail</i>	Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa
<i>Steve Kendall</i>	University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK
<i>Christopher M. Klinger</i>	School of Communication, International Studies and Languages, University of South Australia (UniSA), Adelaide, SA, Australia
<i>Kerri-Lee D. Krause</i>	Griffith Institute for Higher Education, Griffith University, Brisbane, Qld, Australia
<i>Renaud Maes</i>	Unité de Psychologie des Organisations, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

<i>Neil L. Murray</i>	School of Communication, International Studies and Languages, University of South Australia (UniSA), Adelaide, SA, Australia
<i>Tony O'Shea-Poon</i>	The Open University (OU), UK
<i>Frank E. Ross</i>	University of North Texas at Dallas, USA
<i>Sabine Severiens</i>	Risbo, Risbo/Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
<i>Dan Shaffer</i>	Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme, UK
<i>Brian Spittle</i>	Center for Access and Attainment, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA
<i>Jacqueline Stevenson</i>	Leeds Metropolitan University, UK
<i>Michel Sylin</i>	Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
<i>Cécile Sztalberg</i>	Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
<i>James Tate</i>	Aimhigher South West, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
<i>Liz Thomas</i>	Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University, UK
<i>Violeta Vidaček-Hainš</i>	Faculty of Organization and Informatics Varazdin, University of Zagreb, Croatia
<i>Richard Waller</i>	Director of Lifelong Learning, Department of Education, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
<i>Rick Wolff</i>	Risbo, Risbo/Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
<i>Wátte Zijlstra</i>	Marketing and Research (central staff), The Hague University, The Netherlands

LIST OF INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDIES

- 1.1 **The Open University (OU) UK** – Margaret Hart and Tony O'Shea-Poon
- 1.2 **University of Cape Town South Africa** – Salma Ismail and Linda Cooper
- 2.1 **Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Australia** – Derek Bland
- 2.2 **Temple University US** – Rashidah N. Andrews and Jayne K. Drake
- 3.1 **Aston University UK** – Amanda Ingleby
- 3.2 **La Trobe University Australia** – Kerry Ferguson
- 4.1 **University of Bedfordshire UK** – Steve Kendall
- 4.2 **University of South Australia** – Christopher M. Klinger and Neil L. Murray
- 4.3 **Higher vocational education (HBO) institutions in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague Netherlands** – Sabine Severiens, Rick Wolff and Wátte Zijlstra
- 5.1 **Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts (LIPA) UK** – Michelle Gammo-Felton
- 5.2 **DePaul University US** – Brian Spittle
- 5.3 **Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) Belgium** – Renaud Maes, Cécile Sztalberg, Michel Sylin
- 6.1 **Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) US** – Scott E. Evenbeck and Frank E. Ross
- 6.2 **Trinity College Dublin (TCD) Ireland** – Michelle Garvey
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- 6.4 **Monash University Sunway Campus Malaysia** – Glenda Crosling
- 7.1 **University of the West of Scotland UK** – Sandra Hill
- 8.1 **Leeds Metropolitan University (Leeds Met) UK** – Jacqueline Stevenson
- 8.2 **Oslo University College Norway** – Marit Greek
- 8.3 **Edge Hill University UK** – Vicky Duckworth
- 8.4 **University of Bristol (UoB) and University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol UK** – Tony Hoare, Betsy Bowerman, Chris Croudace and Richard Waller

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CHAPTER 1

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION TO ENGAGE A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

Liz Thomas

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter provides an overview of the book and discusses student diversity and institutional responses.

Methodology/approach – The chapter draws together literature and conceptual thinking about what student diversity is. It then analyses the drivers for increased diversity within higher education in the case studies in this book. Alternative approaches to diversity are presented, drawing on a synthesis of approaches identified in the literature. Finally, the chapter provides a summary of the other chapters and the associated case studies.

Findings – The chapter finds that diversity incorporates difference across a number of dimensions: education, personal disposition, current circumstances and cultural heritage. There are a wide range of reasons prompting institutions to recruit a diverse student population: a commitment to social justice, expansion and access to new markets, tapping the pool of talent, enhancing the student experience, national and/or regional policy, funding incentives, conforming with equality legislation, institutional research and personal commitment of staff. Institutions can respond to diversity in different ways. The idealised types are: altruistic (no institutional

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change), academic (little or no change), utilitarian (special access and additional support mechanisms) and transformative (positive view of diversity resulting in institutional development).

Research limitations – This chapter draws largely on the author's work in England and the United Kingdom and the case studies presented in this book.

Practical implications – This chapter is important as an introduction to the book, and providing frameworks to think about diversity.

Social implications – The framework for institutional change assists institutions to critically consider the response they make to a more diverse student population.

Originality/value – The paper provides original perspectives to conceptualising and responding to diversity.

Keywords: Institutional responses to diversity; institutional transformation; student diversity

INTRODUCTION

This book is centred around the belief that the transformation of higher education institutions (HEIs) is necessary to engage a diverse student body, both to encourage them to enter higher education (HE) and to enable them to be successful in HE and beyond. In 1999 Maggie Woodrow said:

To achieve a genuinely pluralistic higher education which meets the needs of students from under-represented groups, will require a shift from an ethos of selective normality to one of diversity and inclusion. (Maggie Woodrow, 8th Annual European Access Network Conference, Malta)¹

Student engagement refers to the active involvement of students with peers, institutional staff and the institution and is necessary for students to be successful learners and graduates. To facilitate this, institutions need to proactively provide a range of opportunities for engagement, develop the capacity of staff and students to engage, and manage and co-ordinate the process. This requires institutional transformation, which includes an institutional commitment in engaging a diverse student body and changing institutional structures, processes and governance; developing an inclusive

culture and altering processes of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer to be more inclusive of a diverse student body. This book examines how institutions need to transform themselves to engage a diverse student population and uses a range of institutional case studies from around the world to explore how this is happening in practice, including the enabling factors, the challenges and future developments. It is important first however to clarify what student diversity is, why the student population is becoming more diverse and to review alternative institutional responses to diversity.

STUDENT DIVERSITY

Student diversity is used in this book to refer to those students who differ from the elite student groups who have traditionally monopolised access to HE. Historically HE has been the preserve of the more privileged groups in society, and although those groups who have been largely excluded vary to some extent between countries, they also have much in common. Student diversity is also used here to refer to students from specific equality groups or with protected characteristics, currently defined in the United Kingdom as age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity. Thus, student diversity can incorporate difference across a number of dimensions, namely previous education, personal disposition, current circumstances and cultural heritage, summarised with examples in Table 1 (Thomas & May, 2010).

The approach promoted in this book does not focus on specific target groups or dimensions of diversity, but rather strives towards proactively making HE accessible, relevant and engaging to all students through a mainstreamed approach to institutional transformation. This reflects commitment to an inclusive approach and recognition that individuals combine a range of diverse characteristics implying that only focusing on a particular aspect of their diversity could be meaningless.

AN INCREASINGLY DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

The most simple explanation for why the student population is becoming more diverse is expansion of the HE sector. For example, between 1983–1984 and 1993–1994, the UK HE sector grew by 77% (HEFCE, 2001a, 2001b). The growth, which was particularly accelerated between 1988–1989