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Volume 6

Institutional Transformation to Engage a Diverse Student Body

Liz Thomas Malcolm Tight Editors

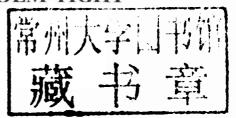


INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH VOLUME 6

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION TO ENGAGE A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

EDITED BY

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INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION TO ENGAGE A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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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