The role of virtual learning environments & peer support in under-represented student groups’ experiences of higher education

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Conference (& workshop) issues:

• How do we, as learning and teaching practitioners, negotiate the competing demands of diverse student populations, diverse routes to entry and diverse modes of learning with an increasing focus on academic standards and student attainment?

• How do we create learning and teaching environments and experiences that ensure attainment for all students?

• How can we utilise different modes of learning to ensure equal and fair chances for educational success?

• How does the drive to ensure equal and fair attainment of a diverse population affect and/or drive academic standards?
Dr. Catherine Lido: Who am I?

• Social Psychologist- Stereotyping, Prejudice & Inclusion
• Research Fellow- University of West London
Former BSc Programme Leader
• Visiting Lecturer- University of North Carolina
Dr. Lucy Solomon: Who am I?

• Sociology of Education
• Phd: How do age and gender affect university students’ experience and outcomes? Doctoral thesis
• Student Progress & Assessment Manager - University of Sussex
• What does our research/experience highlight?
REF 2014: Impact Case Study

• Widening participation policy & practice within HE in the UK
• In collaboration with Prof Mary Stuart (VC University of Lincoln) as PI
• Highlights factors negatively impacting WP student populations, in experiences, progression & academic outcomes
• Promotes key variables to support WP students in HE & beyond (e.g. PG study/ employability).
• Our triangulated, mixed-methods research body reveals
  - ‘Sense of fit/belonging’ (cultural capital/ habitus linked)
  - ‘Connection/identification’ (Social Identity Theory/ group processes)
  - Predictors of students’ well-being, academic self-esteem & academic achievement and retention
Choosing a Student Lifestyle? Questions of Taste, Cultural Capital and Gaining a Graduate Job

Mary Stuart, Catherine Lido and Jessica Morgan

Students, choice, social mobility and higher education

Higher education (HE) participation is increasingly present in the United Kingdom. Participation rates are at about 43 per cent entering HE. Much of the debate over the last 10 years has centered on widening participation (WP) for young people from low groups, but, more recently, a debate has opened up, which has to be a key component of creating upward social mobility.

Little (2006) points out that there is a real diversity developing in institutions for students from different backgrounds. Some institutions will create different employment outcomes, and that there are no longer any ‘typical’ graduates. There is a rather blinkered view of what a ‘good’ student (2005) highlights that overemphasis on graduate opportunities of a pool of universities with certain characteristics of graduate opportunities.

Recent government reports have suggested that, for example, the United Kingdom, Nick Clegg. Research does not compare favourably with the level of social openness (Jantti et al., 2006). Excellence and talented people in society to succeed is seen to be a key aspect.
HEA STEM (Psychology): The Future of Widening Participation in Higher Education: Revisiting WP Policy & Practice in 2013 (hosted by Lido & Solomon)

“...a space to share best practice in terms of the recruitment, retention, attainment and onward progression of non-traditional and under-represented student groups.

...opportunities to explore practical solutions for supporting WP students inside the classroom and beyond (including current blended and e-learning tools), current issues for students with physical and learning disabilities, and issues surrounding student ethnicity.

AIM: to generate practical, strategic, recommendations for HE Institutions regarding WP support at all levels of study (from recruitment to employability).”

- N=766 Students across disciplines
- 4 Geographically & Demographically diverse HEIs (in south of England)
- Differential patterns of participation in ECAs for ethnic groups
- Focus Groups & Interviews:
- Differing perspectives of BME students with regard to importance employers alumni placed on Uni-linked ECAs
 Ethnicity

• ‘Collapsed’ ethnicity broadly for Quant. Analysis reveals

 Black students
• More Academic Self-esteem & UniID than white peers (p<.01)
• Less peer support than all other ethnic groups (p<.01)

 Asian students
• Less well-being at university than white peers (p<.001)
• Less well-being & lower marks for Asian females (p<.01)

 Mixed Race students
• Less comfort zone than all other ethnic groups (p<.05)
• Less UniID than all other minority ethnic groups
Socio-economic Status (SES)

SES Moderated these outcomes for BME students:

• Less comfort zone for lower SES BME students (p<.05)
• Less likely to engage in clubs & societies, or even other hobbies (p<.01)
• Spend more time in paid employment (p<.01)
• More likely to say their commitments & activities negatively impact in their HE performance (p<.05)
Ethnicity interacts with variables such as SES, age & gender to affect student outcomes/progression.

Even middle-class BME students had different experience/expectations than white British peers.

Success at earlier education level weakens barriers.

Family HE Experience: Encourages support and feelings of ‘fitting in’/belonging.

Peers: key to environment & ultimately success.

Realistic barriers to BME student experience

Life history interviews revealed:

- The impact of taken-for-granted practices in education and their effect on student outcomes
- Ethnicity, hybridity, identity and cosmopolitanisation
- Different educational cultures and aspiration
- The shock of change
- Social networks, entitlement and prior educational experiences
- Entitlement, rights and defying expectations
- Complex interactions: Class, age & ethnicity
- Going it alone
I was really like no one else at school. I felt distant definitely. Most kids there were just into football and mucking around... I just used to sit in the library just reading books. ... I would stay after school and I would come early just to get extra work done. Teachers never asked me to do any of this stuff but I was just coming in and hanging around after hours, reading extra books. ... The teachers were very passive, to be honest

- Majdy
I’ve always been the odd one out; I’m kind of used to it now. It’s hard to know with me whether I went into it out of interest, or really just to show people that I could. You know, “I’m a Black woman, yeah, I can do it too”. I was the only girl at school who could even pass the Physics exam; I found girls didn’t tend to do so well. Being a girl who was good at Physics, I kind of liked that idea. I felt “Yeah, I’ll show ’em, I’ll break the stereotype, I’ll be the trailblazer”. And then I joined the army, so I was the odd one out there for sex and race, and in Civvy Street I was the only female engineer in my company. But it was also horrible, the racism and sexism I experienced in the Army is really why I left.

- Gemma

- Study examined students’ engagement with university peers, teachers and institutional practices in year 2 (UG)
- Large-scale questionnaire at four UK universities,
- Triangulated with qualitative focus groups
- Students from certain ‘under-represented’ groups were less engaged with their peers within and outside the classroom
- These same demographic groups were more engaged with, and reliant on, virtual learning environments
- VLE can provide social/academic support in lieu of face2face
- Importance of widening access to peer networks & VLEs
Sampling

- University A - specialist medical institution, London: predominantly White & Asian student body;
- Universities B & D - both ‘post-’92’ institutions in London: high proportions of mature and minority ethnic students largely studying vocational courses;
- University C - ‘1960’s’ institution with a high proportion of young, white students largely studying academically focused courses
Broad Quantitative Findings

• White students’ had higher expectations of smaller class sizes / one-to-one teacher support
• MANOVA showing a main effect of ethnicity ($p < .001$), where White students had stronger preference for small group sizes than Black students and Asian students ($p < .01$ for each).
Quantitative Findings on VLE

• Mature students reported a significantly stronger preference for using VLEs than younger students ($p = <.001$)

• MANOVA revealed a main effect of ethnicity on students’ preference for using VLEs ($p = <.001$), where Black students and Asian students had a stronger preference for using VLEs than did their White counterparts ($p < .001$ and $p = <.01$ respectively)
Traditional perspective on peers

I will always go to my friends for help first, because they’ve been through the classes with me and are more likely to understand my difficulties. Then if we still don’t understand, a group of us will go and ask the teacher together. Problems are more likely to be resolved in this way.

‘Lauren’
‘Non-traditional’ perspective on peers

To be honest I didn’t really like my experiences with group work. Having to meet up with them at times that isn’t convenient with you, and that really slows me down, because I want to get on with it. Coz some students are only really able to meet at the weekend, it’s frustrating.

‘Joseph’

What I don’t like about it is people are noisy and distract you so much, you can’t get them to shut up. Some of us are older and more serious, we learn in a different way and the classroom environment is too noisy.

‘Mercy’
International perspectives on peers

Because I lived in Sierra Leone for the first 9 years of my life, the African culture is extremely competitive, similar to the American system, nothing like it is here. Everybody is striving for the first in the class. So there’s this individual “I’m gonna get this right, I don’t need your help” kind of thing, “I can do this by myself”. So I think that installed a very strong foundation in me to just go off and do things on my own, to concentrate on my own grades and what I wanted to get.

‘Joseph’

In Brunei it was more about competitiveness, wanting to do well compared to your friends and all that. And obviously I was brought up where you do kind of see people that are poor, so you think more of your future, you don’t want to be poor or homeless, you just wanna strive well and do your personal best.

‘Kim’
SES/ Minority status and group work

I've been invited to the formal study groups but I prefer to work independently. I suppose it goes back to school, I didn’t learn how to work in large study groups because I was one of the few nerdy kids, no one else was interested in what I was studying.

‘Majdy’
Accessing support

I’m worried that I’m not revising properly, and that I should go and speak with someone, but I'm not sure with whom I should talk to actually. I could speak to some of the students in the fourth year, but again it depends who you to talk to. It would be useful to have a point of reference like a teacher that you could talk to, someone who is qualified professionally on the topic. But I'm not sure whom can I speak to at the moment.
Non-traditional/ under-represented student groups and VLE

“The course uses BlackBoard software which is extremely helpful for me not being in the building every day, you can find out what books are there and reserve them, and use the discussion board to talk to others about the course. “

‘Marion’, New University 1

“I use the online learning resources like BlackBoard so in an emergency like when my baby had Chicken Pox I could access the lecture notes at home. Most of the lecturers put the notes up, but some of them don’t, and that can be a disadvantage to students who have a genuine case and were not able to come in.”

‘Honour’, New University 1
VLE Personal Examples

- Lecture capture
  http://newuncw.mediasite.mcnc.org/mcnc/Catalog/Full/d3444fca5dce4a39927a7be47ef8620021
  - BBIM/ Skype office hours and Q&A sessions
    - Turnitin/ Safeassignment
      - RLO’s
      - Online group work
“Mr. Osborne, may I be excused? My brain is full.”
Questions?
Now it’s your turn!

- What demographic student group do you think is presently in need of support?
- What is most personally relevant to you in terms of the topics we have touched upon?
- We will split into tables based on this...
- In these groups please address the following:
  - What practical solutions, in your experience, are there to support these student groups?
  - What innovative tools, online and otherwise, may be used to accomplish this?
  - What is working? What needs fixing?
  - Parallel student experiences problematic?