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One size doesn't fit all: Pathways into and within higher education institutions (0081)

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Abstract

This paper explores challenges faced by institutions of higher education in light of increasing diversity within their student body. As students registering at a particular university come from increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural milieus in communities close to the institution, they also come from increasingly distant communities, as well as diverse academic and scholastic traditions. As part of its institutional data analysis for a Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario funded project on regional peer mentoring for its francophone students, the research team at the University of Ottawa became more aware of the diversity within what was considered homogeneous groups such as Francophone and Anglophone students, or groups from specific geolinguistic or geopolitical communities. Given the great variety of pathways into the university, how can we afford to only offer one pathway within a program? This paper highlights some of the challenges and solutions currently explored at the University of Ottawa (Canada).

Outline

The province of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, like many other educational jurisdictions, wishes to increase the further and higher education of its citizens. In 2010, it set a target participation rate of 70 per cent by 2020, up from 63 per cent. Luckily, the province boasts both the largest number of public institutions of further and higher education in Canada. However, despite increased targeted immigration, they are not showing growth rates. Rae (2005) concluded that increasing participation in further and higher education is dependent on raising the participation rates of 5 traditionally underrepresented groups (some new immigrants, francophones, 1st generation students, students with certain disabilities, and aboriginal students) increasing the participation of students other than direct admissions from secondary school. In Ontario, Francophones remain underrepresented, particularly in higher education (Labrie, Lamoureux & Wilson, 2009; Lennon, Zhao, Wang & Gluszynski, 2011).

Campus diversity is also increased by greater international student participation, which also contributes important revenues for institutions. Furthermore, as a result of changes to Canada's immigration regulations which facilitates immigration for graduates of Canadian PSE institutions, it can also increase the number of Canadians with further or higher education credentials (Lamoureux & Labrie, 2012).

As North America's largest bilingual institution of higher education, the University must serve its students in the official language of their choice, French or English. This is true from its Web pages, to services at Financial Affairs, student services, custodial and food services, to classroom instruction. In the Fall of 2012, total undergraduate and graduate program enrolment at the University approached 45,000 students, of which little more than a third are Francophone and about 1,500 are pursuing a French immersion program. Diversity within this institution goes beyond the French-English divide, as it draws its student body from all regions of Ontario and Canada, and around the world, with international students choosing to register in either Francophone or Anglophone programs, including French immersion programs.

As is noted in several studies on the massification of further and higher education, students who meet the admission requirements increasingly experience a gap or distance between their linguistic repertoire and that valued at the PSE institution where the language of instruction is their mother tongue (Erich, 2004; Klein & Pierret, 1994; Monballin *et al.*, 1995; Parmentier, 2006, 2011;). This gap poses additional challenges for students' whose mother tongue or language of use is different from the institution's language of instruction, despite meeting language admission requirements for their PSE program (Gaudet & Loslier, 2009; Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Montoya, 2011; Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba & Arce, 2006; Stevenson and Willot, 2010).

In 2011-2012, the University of Ottawa designed and implemented a regional peer mentoring program, based on the premise "Someone like me" to help first entry First-Year Francophone students from regions where the French language is not only in a minority context but also minoritized negotiate their entry to the academic world (author *et al.*, 2013). As part of this project, presented at SRHE in 2012, the research team also conducted in-depth regression analysis to identify variables that could help explain the achievement gap that emerged between different sub-groups of our cohort during our preliminary analysis of student success data.

In light of the results of this first study (*Ibid.*), the University created a new additional language course for Francophone students from regions where the French language is not only in a minority context but also minoritized,

as a pilot project. A study was developed to shadow the implementation of the pilot project from the perspective of various actors concerned: professors, students, and administrators. Preliminary analysis of the survey and focus group data suggests that this course was well appreciated by students who felt better prepared to meet the literacy requirements in their other courses than they had been by the one mandatory foundational language course for all Arts and Social Science students.

As we undertook this pilot study, our attention was drawn to another subgroup of students – Ontario Visa International Students, who register directly from a secondary school granting an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Analysis of data for the regional peer-mentoring project brought to light a new category of students, traditionally grouped with all secondary school graduates from Ontario who directly access PSE after secondary school. However, a small group of about 100 students registers annually from international schools located in Ontario, that prepare international students to better integrate into Canadian PSE institutions. Students from around the world attend for a year or two to complete the Ontario secondary school diploma requirements in Ontario, with other international students. They come from a variety of countries, mostly in Africa and Asia, but also from Europe. In order to better understand how these students navigate the institution during their first-year as University of Ottawa students, focus groups were held. There we learned that some students had completed the secondary school requirements in their country of origin, while others had not. Some were in their first entry to PSE; others were not. It came to light that we needed a better understanding on how these partly Canadian schooled international students experienced being a student, as they are not quite “home” students, yet, they are not quite like ‘traditional’ international students, as indicated by our data analysis. A peer-mentoring program was set up for these students, based on the principles of the one created for Francophone students in 2011. A study is also shadowing the implementation.

Based on the initial findings of these two focused studies, the University is rethinking the admission requirements asked of students from various pathways to get into the institution, as well as questioning narrow course sequence pathways to degrees. This paper will present the findings for the two case studies collected through focus groups and analysis of student success data. Challenges and limitations of the study will also be discussed. We will highlight how this project has informed and continues to inform university policy and services at the University of Ottawa. Finally, we hope to provoke a discussion with other conference attendants to discuss how institutions can increase pathways into and within PSE institutions to enhance student success, and how critical 1) evidence-based practice and 2) intersectorial collaboration are in the process.

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