Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Understanding the Barriers Posed by the Hidden Curriculum that HE students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds experience

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: The presentation arises from currently ongoing work (Sept 2018-completing in Sept 2019) seeking to enhance inclusive practice at the University of Exeter. The study uses a participatory design involving two academics and eight undergraduate and postgraduate Humanities and Social Science students as co-researchers.

Students and academics co-developed scenarios used during focus groups with 24 undergraduates concerning their academic experiences.

The emerging findings indicate that there are some practices in the university that are modelled around a certain type of student, such as a young, white, social, British, able-bodied student living away from home and without caring responsibilities or financial worries, there can are be assumed values and political views (anti-Brexit). Students not fitting the implied model can feel marginalised or might not be able to access knowledge about social and curricular expectations. However, not all disadvantaged students feel marginalised and can succeed in accessing support. We employ the theoretical lens of the 'hidden curriculum' (HC) (Bernstein, 1977) and the notion of the 'implied student' (Stevens, 2007; Ulriksen, 2009). The findings offer insights into what academic practices within universities and support, in particular when transitioning into university, could be helpful.

Paper: Background and aims

Statistical data from the university of Exeter website indicate that international students represent

just 18% of the overall student population in 2017/18 – the remaining is a combination of UK/ EU students (with EU only around 15%). In addition, 70% of the students attending the university in 2016 were from white ethnical backgrounds, justifying the strong claim that Exeter has the least ethnic diversity of any UK university (The Tab, 2013). Private school intake figures and free school meal statistics also indicate a picture of advantaged students even in comparison to other Russell Group universities (The Guardian, 2010).

Given these data, this study explored the barriers that students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds experience in their studies within this predominantly white, British and affluent environment. The project used the theoretical lens of the 'hidden curriculum' (HC) (Bernstein, 1977) and the notion of the 'implied student' (Stevens, 2007). In relation to the former, HC is a term coined by Jackson (1970) to mainly describe a tendency of school curricula to reproduce the inequalities of wider society. The term gradually took a broader meaning to express any type of often unintentional learning that is not prescribed by formal curricula – the HC has also been discussed with reference to the continuum between explicit (stated) and tacit (experiential) knowledge (Semper & Blasco, 2018, see Portelli (1993, p. 345).

Our study focuses particularly on students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the HC where the HC could include norms, behaviours, perspectives and attitudes that reflect the current but also previous educational and cultural experiences of students that can vary significantly between students from diverse backgrounds. Yet, previous experience can act either as facilitator or barrier to equal participation to a high-quality higher education experience:

'Compared to students at earlier levels of education, adult students have a larger reservoir of personal experience on which they draw when integrating new learning, either through relearning or unlearning what they already know; […] this reservoir forms part of the HC inasmuch as it affects the way in which students receive new learning and give it meaning' (Semper & Blasco, 2018, p. 11).

This suggests though that not all students will be able to catch on to 'the hidden rules of the game' (Portelli, 1993, p. 345).

Methods

This ethics-committee approved study adopted a participatory approach in that a group of 8 students with varied backgrounds (in terms of UG/ PGT, topic of study and college, ages, cultural background, disability and gender) worked with two academic staff to develop and undertake the research. The active engagement of students in the study was a way of ensuring that perceptions of what constitutes the HC and potential barriers will come from the students themselves, rather than be defined by the lead researchers or the literature. The students in the development team participated in a series of workshops throughout the academic year. Workshops involved research-related training and activities, including developing a range of scenarios on the topics below:

- **Assumed students** – do tutors assume that students have specific characteristics, backgrounds and experiences?
- **Academic values** – how are implicit values in social sciences/ humanities presented in teaching and how students navigate this?

- **Being one of a kind** – how do tutors work with minority groups without alienating them?
- **Structure of learning** – how do tutors navigate student engagement?

The scenarios were used as stimuli for discussion during focus group interviews with 24 undergraduate students from social sciences and humanities courses (different from the ones participating in the development team). The focus groups took place in March and April 2019 and were conducted by the students/ co-researchers. The recordings of the focus group interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Findings

While the actual research has completed, we are currently in the middle of undertaking the data analysis. Emerging themes relate, for example, to lecturer's power and world-view and transition to university.

Because lecturer's have a "position of power and influence" over students, any indication of their view and opinion can directly alter students actions in ways that could impact their academic experience. Interviewee's expressed the idea that lecturers have assumed a sense of established political and social identity within their students which may be misguided, as many students were still developing their own perspective, leading to this expectation putting them in compromising positions. One participant related this to the difficulty of "transitioning into university and not knowing what to expect", as it was only after receiving help from other students in higher years that they began to settle into the routine.

We find that not only disadvantaged students perceive this power dimension as this quote illustrates: "I think within social sciences there's just very much an assumption that it is left. I know all my teachers are very left. One of my main lecturers is… he's very liberal. He's a gay man, he's very involved in it. Yes activist, that's the word I'm looking for. So I think then it's just kind of assumed that you're left as well which I think is the majority of social scientists I want to say… I am kind of Tory myself".

We also find that transition into university are impacted by prior educational experiences as illustrated by this participant:

"I'm from a very working-class background and the culture within that type of environment is very, put your head down, shut up, work hard and do well. I moved from a state school to a grammar school to this uni, and from that kind of environment it didn't prepare me very well for uni… I was so used to just copy down the information, memorise it, learn it; don't have opinions, just shove it in your brain and shove it on the paper and get a good mark. And that doesn't work in uni, because you have biased lectures and you have ideas that need to be challenged and need to be transformed, and I found that transition incredibly hard"

We will have further findings to share by December.

References used in abstract:

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