

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Considering the impact of 'entitlement' and 'belonging' on student persistence within the pandemic university

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: *Generating deep understanding of the ways in which learners persist in higher education (HE) is vital as higher education sectors navigate a way through a continuing health crisis. This paper considers how students, all of whom were first in their family to come to university, articulated belonging within the HE environment and how understandings of entitlement played into this conceptualisation. Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus, particularly the notion of 'habitus clive', was drawn upon to inform these understandings. The student narratives not only revealed the emotional undercurrents and relational complexity that attending university can have for those with no generational biographical belonging to this environment but also highlighted the ways in which learners negotiated between existing and new expectations and norms. The findings from this study can be usefully applied to the current health context as students continue to face new and unforeseen pressures during university studies, with the result that 'belonging' is both difficult to enact and also, sustain.*

Paper: Introduction

Within a higher education (HE) context, social connections with peers inform the ways in which learners engage with their university experience and this is particularly important for those who may have had little experience of the university environment prior to attending (Crozier et al, 2008). While establishing belonging is an individual and somewhat fluid act, it is also relationally bounded. Equally the practices that signify both belonging and entitlement are socially defined. These practices are often validated by institutional discourses that are tied to notions of power including who has the power to define who belongs and how belongingness is expressed. While measuring sense of belonging may provide some indications of how students 'feel' within the university environment, we still have little understanding of how lower levels of connection with an institution actually play out at an individual learner level, particularly how this can impact on the retention of different student cohorts.

The term 'belonging' is being used to refer to how students negotiate 'feelings of being accepted, included by and connected to their institutions' (Ahn & Davis, 2019, p.1). For those students who are first in their family to come to university, a lower sense of 'entitlement' to be at university can translate into lower levels of belonging and also, limited self-belief in their ability to achieve (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p.77). This lower level of belonging may result in thoughts of early departure from university and certainly within Australia the numbers of first in family (FiF) students who consider

leaving university (22%) are noticeably higher than their non-FiF peers (19%) (QILT SES: 2020).

There are a myriad of reasons informing decisions to leave university but importantly, such decisions cannot be solely attributed to the individual but instead are nested within wider social constraints or as Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) explain: ‘...structural problems inherent in the organisation of education are camouflaged as cultural deficits of individuals’ (p.331). By focusing on the narratives of those students who have persisted through their degree, the research in this paper contributes a deeper understanding about how both belonging and entitlement are articulated by individual learners and also how these perspectives impacted on persistence behaviours.

Overview of Research

The data in this paper is derived from an Australian study that occurred in 2017, which focused on the narratives and reflections of domestic university students who were all first in their families to attend HE. The following table summarises the study:

Study dates	Focussed on	# of Participants
2016-2020	First in family students	309 surveys
<i>Australian Research Council: DP170100705</i> <i>Involving 9 universities</i>	Two or more years of UG study completed How persistence at university was understood and enacted	69 interviews

Adopting a narrative inquiry approach, participants were encouraged to deeply reflect about their experiences of persisting in higher education. Participants storied their journeys through the university environment and so indicated the ways they managed this movement amidst often complex and competing demands. The work required in navigating such contested and complex fields can result in developing a habitus clive (clefthabitus), which Bourdieu (1999) describes as a separation in one’s sense of self or a ‘habitus divided against itself’ (Bourdieu, 1999, p.511). Such divisions can result in internal conflict or what Baxter and Britton (2001) refer to as ‘habitus dislocation’. This is emotional work and within the field of HE, habitus dislocation can result in a rejection of university for some students who having experienced little ‘felt’ connection, choose to withdraw rather than persist in an alien or isolating setting (Lehmann, 2009).

Exploring how the students in this study reflected upon the HE field and the ways in which they considered their belonging and entitlement ‘to be’ within the habitus of the university, provides insight into the nuances of university engagement. This close-up analysis can provide some insight into complexities of these environments, particularly the ways in which individuals enact success in such contested spaces.

Final Thoughts

The practices that signify belonging and entitlement are socially defined. However, the changes wrought by the recent health pandemic have led to very different learning contexts and delivery which have periodically removed the social interaction or physical connectiveness associated with participating in university. Drawing on the reflections of students from more diverse backgrounds as they consider their own belonging and entitlement provides a foundation for how we might move forward and re-envision a more inclusive institution post-pandemic.

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