

Heteroglossic narratives of choice for vocational degrees in an expanding higher education field

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Non-university higher education in colleges and specialist institutions have expanded in response to two distinct policy concerns: on the one hand, to prepare people for advanced skill formation and on the other, to increase the inclusivity and diversity of higher education (HE). Yet in highly stratified HE systems, educational mobilities often intersect negatively with social mobility. What institution one graduates from is thought to matter and is commonly understood to offer a competitive edge in the labour market. This paper draws on qualitative data from over 50 students studying bachelor degrees in non-university higher education in Australia to analyse how students understand and justify their choice of possible and desirable institutions in the context of HE hierarchies. Framed by Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of monoglossia and heteroglossia, and Francis' (2012) application of these, the paper contributes to theorising student narratives of educational mobilities and the dominant norms of HE.

Full paper

New forms of higher education with a vocational focus and located in

the non-university sector are growing rapidly across a range of countries. This growth is presenting new challenges for researchers concerned with how spatial educational mobility intersects with social mobility (Knight et al 2022). In higher education (HE) systems that are relatively stratified, such as Australia (Marginson 2016), and where there is near universal participation (Trow 1999), the expansion of higher vocational education, leads us to ask why would students choose to study for a vocational degree in colleges that according to Wheelahan (2022, 281) are disadvantaged and 'more constrained than universities by differentiation policies'?

As higher education provision grows in institutions with a vocational heritage and orientation towards offering qualifications for occupations, the paper contributes to understanding the following questions. Firstly, why do students who are qualified for entry to university choose to undertake a vocational degree in a non-university setting, and secondly, whether the understandings generated by analyses of student narratives, challenge the dominant norms of HE hierarchy and offer new conceptualisations of the relationship between educational mobilities and equity or reinforce material differences between vocational and academic HE?

The paper answers these questions through drawing on analysis from an Australian project that examined the new tertiary higher education qualifications being offered by Australia's TAFE institutions (similar in function, but not form to UK further education colleges). The project explored how these awards are contributing to social equity and to the development of a knowledge-based workforce.

For the project as a whole, a multi-method approach was used to collect and analyse national quantitative data, qualitative case studies of TAFE institutes (the providers of vocational degrees) and the perspectives of employers and education policy actors. A multiple-case study design was used, with deep case sites in Melbourne and Sydney and shallow case sites across Australia in all TAFE sites. In the case sites, data was collected through interviews and a survey with current students and employers, and with vocational institution managers and teachers, along with publicly available marketing messages and statistical data. This paper draws on narratives of over 50 students undertaking bachelor degrees in vocational institutions when outlining their choice for non-traditional

education paths. For these students, choice to attend a vocational institution (as opposed to a university) is often positioned in relation to the university alternative in terms of what the qualifications and experiences are perceived to offer students.

The paper is mindful of the literature that recognises that educational mobilities and students' choices may be constrained by their circumstances and imaginaries. However, the main conceptual frame we use draws on Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of monoglossia and heteroglossia. We also borrow from Francis' (2012) application of these concepts, to theorise the narratives provided by students and how they challenge dominant norms of HE. Dominant accounts of HE – regarding its function, purpose, and value – derive from socially dominant groups: governments, universities, and those that benefit from university's social position as the ultimate form of education. These accounts serve as a “totalising ‘world view’” that works to “achieve complete hegemony” (Francis 2012: 6) over alternative accounts. This can be considered to be monoglossic accounts. In this context, monoglossic narratives (as often seen in policy documents which infer that higher educational hierarchies have real meaning that can be translated. These narratives inform dominant ideas HE choice can be characterised as people ‘possessing’ the ‘correct’ ‘high’ aspirations about higher education – that is aspiring to attend prestigious institutions to achieve qualifications that are esteemed for their symbolic / exchange value as much as for their subject content.

In contrast, the heteroglossic accounts articulated by the students in our research, threaten the hegemony of the monoglossic accounts in the ways they position the value and utility of bachelor degrees provided by vocational institutions. Further, in contrast to monoglossic accounts that have a totalising effect where the possibility of other voices are rendered impossible, heteroglossic narratives are constructed in a dialectic relationship with other readings (Blackledge & Creese 2014) - in our research this involves students contrasting vocational higher education with university counterparts, never in denial of the alternative.

The contribution of this analysis is that increased social justice in HE requires broader recognition of these heteroglossic narratives and the students that articulate them. As educational spaces

continuously and rapidly evolve by becoming more inclusive and diverse, the hierarchies of student 'choice' that have underpinned spatial educational mobility and social mobility may be being disrupted by the opening up of new spatial mobilities.

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