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Choices during higher education as micro-resistance

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

While choice of higher education has received substantial attention, students' choices while studying is less researched. Building on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews, the paper explores the choice processes and experiences of second-year students at a research-intensive university. The students were continuously choosing on a day-to-day basis, be it elective courses for the following semester or how to allocate time for study activities.

The choices were framed by the dominant culture at their study programme that would make some choices available and legitimate, while other paths were obscured. The social environment at the programmes therefore were resources for the students' reflections concerning the choice, but they also limited the options based on culture.

Choices also served as micro-resistance against national education policies that tried to increase the pace of the students' studies. Students used choices to find cracks allowing them to spend more time on study content.

Full paper

Introduction

This paper addresses the choices students make after having entered higher education. It has two focusses. The first is what affects the students' choice processes and the decisions students eventually make. The second is to see students' choices as acts of micro-resistance against the dominant discourses and educational policies related to their studies.

The choice of higher education and the transition into higher education has been researched for some time. Choices made while studying have received less attention. Some studies on non-completion include this perspective (e.g., Tinto 1993, 2017; Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen 2014) and a few examine the choice of post-graduate programme (e.g., Towers and Towers 2020), but focusing on specific decisions at a particular time (e.g., choice of Master's programme). In this paper, those decisions mainly occur as something in the future that could be affected by the present day-to-day decisions.

Methods

The paper builds on two studies of second-year students. One explored students' choice of what to do following a three-year bachelor programme; the other studied how much time students spend studying and why. Both included ethnographic fieldwork and interviews (cf. Nielsen and Madsen (2023) and Ulriksen and Nejrup (2021) for details). Qualitative analysis of field notes and interview transcriptions was carried out inspired by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Results

Students experienced choices related to specific decisions, such as choice of elective course for the following semester. Some students experienced that what appeared to be simply choosing between a list of courses could have implications for future possibilities, e.g., which master's programme were available or the possibility of studying abroad. This surprised some of the students, and while some delved into seeking information, others tried to ignore the approaching choice process.

The culture at the study programmes affected the choice process by framing what paths were available and legitimate. Some courses had a status as courses 'one should take to be a real chemist', as one student said, while other choices were obscured by the dominant culture. In one programme, this was the case for students considering becoming high-school teachers. The disciplinary culture was passed on explicitly and implicitly: in spontaneous comments, in omissions in official information meetings or through humour. Being recognised as one belonging was challenged if the student's interests would take a path that was too unusual to the culture.

Consequently, the social environment at the programme played an ambiguous role. It was highly important as a resource for the students' considerations, but the social environment could also restrain which paths were considered possible to pursue.

Students' choices also served as a way to challenge and circumvent the pace of progression through the study programme that is expected by official rules and guidelines, following national reforms of higher education that seek to increase the students' pace through higher education. Students experience this as mistrust, but also as something hampering their learning (cf. Brooks et al. (2022). Some students deliberately made choices that would reduce their pace to allow for time to work in depth with the subject matter, e.g., by not signing up for the expected number of courses or by deliberately failing exams to earn more time. Students also allocated time to their studies in a way that would let them balance the requirements of the programmes with their wish to engage in activities in other realms of life.

Discussion

Students' paths through higher education involves choosing beyond the institutional decisions points. Students experience that their decisions on a micro-level have implications for their long-term opportunities as well as for their everyday experiences and engagement with the content matter at the study programme. The choices the students make are to some extent in opposition to the national policies, and some students explicitly criticise these policies and seek to evade their consequence. Students insisted that it was possible to be engaged students while also being involved in other realms of life.

The everyday practice of choosing is something the students continuously need to consider and engage in with the doubts and concerns it entails. Thus, choices could be challenging. However, the choices also became acts of resistance and critique at a micro-level, allowing the students to pursue other priorities, but without challenging the underlying structures of being a university student. Thus, the students looked for cracks in the system, both to engage more in depth with the subject matter, to earn time to reflect and absorb the content, and to be more than a student.

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