Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0328

S2 | Beaumaris 1
Chaired by Liz Austen

Fri 13 Dec 2019

09:45 - 10:15

Using Online Life Writing to Understand the Experiences of Estranged Students in UK Higher Education

Rachel Spacey[1]

[1]University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract:

Biographical research is an approach which can be used with marginalised groups in educational settings. This paper presents the findings of biographical research undertaken with estranged students in Higher Education (HE) who have no contact with their family and are studying without the support of a family network. Estranged students completed a Directive – a set of questions with prompts - which was hosted online. This online life writing approach generated rich data about the experiences of this small but emerging cohort of university students. The paper explores, through the life histories of the participants, how universities can support and encourage estranged students to succeed at university. The paper will also reflect on whether estranged students' experiences vary according to the type of university they attend. Finally, the benefits and drawbacks of undertaking online life writing research will be considered.

Paper:

Background and context

Estranged students often have no contact with their family and are studying at university without the support and approval of a family network (Stand Alone, 2018). Familial estrangement, in general, has not been widely researched in the UK and the research which has been undertaken with estranged students is primarily quantitative. Students become estranged from their families because of abuse, clash of values and mismatched expectations around family roles. It also results from divorce, forced marriage and family rejection (OFFA, 2017). Most estranged students remove themselves from a family situation without any professional intervention (Bland, 2016) and one of the biggest barriers they face at university is unawareness and inexperience of estrangement amongst students and staff such that it is regarded as a taboo topic, making it harder for them to disclose their situation: "*Stand Alone has found that societal knowledge and awareness regarding family estrangement and disownment is currently low but, conversely, stigma is high*" (Bland & Shaw, 2015, p.24).

A recent qualitative study at one UK HEI found that there is a gap in the Higher Education (HE) sector's knowledge of student estrangement, particularly in relation to the estrangement itself and its relationship to the student experience (Spacey, 2019). This paper details the findings of a research project which used a life history approach by using online life writing in order to address that gap by gathering the life histories of estranged students in the UK. It recruited estranged students via social media from universities in the UK and asked them to complete a Directive – a set of questions with prompts - to help them write an autobiography with a focus on their estrangement and their university experience.

Research aims and objectives

The project aimed to address a key theme which emerged from an earlier study (Spacey, 2019); the lack of awareness and understanding of student estrangement by using a life history approach. Based on the life histories gathered as part of this project several research questions were explored:

-
    - How can universities attract estranged students at the pre-entry stage?

-
    - How can universities better support estranged students during the transition phase at university?

-
    - How can universities help estranged students to succeed at university?

-
    - What can universities do to help reduce the stigma around family estrangement?

-
    - Do estranged students' experiences vary according to the type of university they attend?

Methodology

Life history, where participants are asked to write an account in response to a set of prompts, offers participants an opportunity to share their unique accounts without the potential discomfort which can arise from being interviewed in person. This is especially important for estranged students who fear that they may be judged by others and who often come from complex and stressful family backgrounds. Life history, whether based on written accounts or transcriptions of interviews is a useful biographical method in social research, with a strong tradition in the study of education (Merrill & West, 2009).

Drawing on the work of Prof. Mary Stuart who used a life history approach - life writing - to explore social mobility and higher education (Stuart, 2012), a 'Directive', in the style of the Mass Observation Project at the Mass Observation Archive, was created to gather autobiographies of estranged

students from a range of universities. Following receipt of a favourable institutional ethical opinion, the Directive was hosted online using Qualtrics during March and April 2019. Recruitment used a snowball approach where the researcher promoted the call to participate on Twitter and this was retweeted. All participants received a £20 Amazon e-voucher upon receipt of their completed Directive response in recognition of their contribution to the project and because lack of finance has been identified as a key factor in estranged students' non-continuation of studies (Stand Alone, 2018). Following cleansing of the data, a total of 17 complete, anonymous Directive responses were uploaded into and analysed using the qualitative software analysis tool, NVivo, to permit thematic analysis.

Results

Seventeen students completed the Directive's questions online. Respondents were predominantly female (n=14), over the age of 21 (n=11), White (n=12), had a disability (n=10) and were attending a Russell Group university (n=8). The paper will explore, through the life histories of the participants, how universities can support estranged students during the transition to university and succeed at university. The themes of belonging and isolation will be detailed and the practicalities of finance, accommodation and wellbeing which emerged from the thematic analysis will be considered. The paper will also reflect on whether estranged students' experiences vary according to the type of university they attend.

Implications of the study/significance of the research

This project is the first time a life history approach – using online life writing, has been used with estranged students to collect qualitative data about their experiences. This paper contributes to the sector's understanding of the experiences of estranged students at a time when the Office for Students, the independent regulator for HE in England, has emphasised that universities may wish to consider a range of under-represented groups in HE including "*people estranged from their families*" to access, succeed in and progress from HE, in their Access and Participation Plans (OfS, 2019, p.17). Biographical research has a strong tradition in education and the paper will reflect on this methodological approach and consider the practicalities of undertaking online life writing research.

References

Bland, B. (2016) The students with no support network, *Times Higher Education*, Jan 25 2016. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/students-no-support-network (accessed 27th September 2018).

Bland, B. and Shaw, J. (2015) *New Starts. The challenge of Higher Education without the support of a family network*. Unite Foundation and Stand Alone. Available at: http://standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/StandAloneUNITEfoundation.pdf (accessed 2nd October 2017).

Merrill, B. and West, L. (2009) *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Office for Fair Access (2017) *Topic Briefing: Estranged Students*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-estranged-students/ (accessed 2nd October 2017).

Office for Students (2019) *Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance*. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/0bcce522-df4b-4517-a4fd-101c2468444a/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance.pdf (accessed 21 June 2019).

Spacey, R. (2019) "It's not like I'm on my own": recognising and recording the experiences of estranged students in Higher Education, *IMPact: The University of Lincoln Journal of Higher Education Research* (forthcoming).

Stand Alone (2018) *Who are estranged students*. Available at: http://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/who-are-estranged-students (accessed 1st October 2018).

Stuart, M. (2012) *Social Mobility and Higher Education. The life experiences of first-generation entrants in Higher Education*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.