Student diversity is good!

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Abstract

This paper reports on a completed study that compiled an institutional profile of the session 2001/2 graduates of a new Scottish University. The research explores demographic characteristics, participation patterns and the use of Accredited Prior Learning (APL) in programme building among this cohort of recent graduates. Comparisons are drawn between students who have school leaving qualifications and those who have taken advantage of the opportunity to import APL into a new programme of study. The data are further disaggregated by gender, age, subject area studied and whether or not the student attended on a full or part-time basis. This institutional profile provides a snapshot of 'today's students'. The paper presents evidence of the extent to which flexible routes into higher education (HE) lead to successful outcomes for the student and makes recommendations about the need for institutional transformation with regard to the structures and processes to support learning.

Introduction

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century HE in the UK has undergone a process of change, probably unprecedented in the history of the sector since the establishment of its first university over six hundred years ago. The pace of this change is indicated by quantitative measures including the number and frequency of government inquiries and reports since the 1960s, increasing age participation rates and increasing numbers of students in the sector; and by the substantial qualitative changes taking place in the diversity of student populations, configuration of provision and differentiation of institutional mission. The final decade of the twentieth century has been described as "that period of relentless policy documentation" (Osborne *et al,* 1999:6) when issues of widening participation reached the top of the Government's agenda.

Since the time of the Robbins Report (1963) the history of UK HE has been one of expansion. Robbins marked a sea change in HE participation rates although in its aftermath universities continued to recruit from traditional student populations. However, in the 1970s, the Leverhulme Enquiries[1], conducted against a background of anticipated declining demand occurring for both demographic and economic reasons, focussed attention on the recruitment of "new" student populations. This was given impetus by the establishment of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) awarding accreditation powers to Polytechnics and Central Institutions, which subsequently became flagships for the recruitment of mature students, non-standard entrants, part-time students and the provision of vocational degree courses.

At the same time as the creation of the new universities, further education (FE) colleges were freed from the constraints of local authority control, hence were in a strong position to enter into new relationships with the expanded university sector. In particular their former close links with Polytechnics and Central Institutions (most of which were now post-1992 universities) allowed them scope to increase their HE provision through a range of articulation and franchising arrangements. Such developments led to rapid growth, renewed

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[1] The Leverhulme Enquiries: a programme of research directed by Gareth Williams and published by the Society for research in Higher Education (SRHE) in a series of seven volumes.

emphasis on adult and part-time participation and in due course new routes into HE from FE.

Policies promoting greater diversity arose from a series of government enquiries and publications including the *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (Dearing, 1997; Garrick, 1997), *Learning for the Twenty-First Century* (Fryer, 1997), *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) and *Opportunity Scotland* (Scottish Office, 1998), all of which encouraged more flexible opportunities to study than hitherto and, as a consequence, more diverse student populations than had previously been the norm.

By the end of the twentieth century, participation in HE in Scotland higher education had greatly increased and there had been major changes in patterns of participation (Paterson, 1997), most notably increased participation by women, mature students, students from socio-economic groups III - V, students from ethnic minorities, students with special needs, students with non-traditional entry qualifications and students gaining entry on the basis of APL.

The traditional entry requirements for degree courses in Scotland are Scottish Highers, usually taken at the end of year five of secondary education. Able pupils may take five or even six Highers, maintaining a breadth of study that has always been the hallmark of the Scottish education system. Breadth of study generally persists in the first year of their University study providing flexibility to students in their final choice of degree up to second year. For the majority of courses in Scotland, an ordinary degree can be completed by full-time study in three years, while an honours degree requires four years.

Whereas initially the concept of widening participation was predicated on a recruitment paradigm, conceptualised as increasing the number and range of participants in HE, more recently attention has shifted from marketing and recruitment to the student experience and student success (HEFCE, 2001).

This present study explores the profile of all 1794 graduates from a "new" Scottish university in 2002. The focus is on the importance of a range of characteristics, including gender, age, mode of attendance and entry qualifications, on degree performance. The outcomes provide a context for the discussion of the institutional challenges presented by diverse student populations and the research seeks to identify issues, which require to be addressed at both operational and strategic levels in order to ensure a quality student experience for all.

Research context

The University of Paisley provides the context for this research. Although now a university, Paisley's history is rooted in its vocational tradition as a former Scottish Central Institution. Its mission and the structure of its provision have always been aimed at preparing students for employment and meeting the needs of local labour markets. The principles of credit accumulation and transfer (Robertson, 1994) are firmly embedded within Paisley's provision (Raban and MacLennan, 1995). Students can participate on a full-time or part-time basis, import prior credit where appropriate and select the individual programme of study that best meets their professional or personal needs. Many study routes have been negotiated to ensure articulation between FE and HE across a wide range of discipline areas and between professional qualifications and degree routes in many subject areas. Such features of provision are encouraged by SHEFC (Musselbrook *et al*, 2000) and are seen as essential to "the new educational order" (Field, 2000) if lifelong learning is to become a reality.

Methodology

Data was obtained from the University's Information Management System in relation to the student's gender, date of birth, highest level of previous qualifications, subject discipline studied and graduating award.

Research findings

There were 1794 students who graduated from the University of Paisley in 2001/2. The principal student variables of interest were gender, age at graduation, highest level of entry qualification on entry, mode of study (full or part-time) and subject discipline. The gender balance was 40% males and 60% females, the mean age at graduation was 28 and 76% had studied full-time and 24% part-time.

Of those who graduated 38% gained an honours classification and 62% an ordinary degree. A criterion at ordinary level exists which will allow students who have a good overall performance (approximately 65% across all modules in final level of study) to exit with an award with distinction. 62% graduated with an ordinary degree and 8% received distinction.

The majority of the students who graduated with an honours degree studied on a full-time basis (5% part-time). Of those 675 honours students the proportion of 1st (6%), 2.1 (42%) 2.2 (45%) and 3rds (7%) was investigated.

Further analyses provided a deeper insight with regard to the other variables of gender, age, subject discipline studied and entry qualification in relation to the students' exit award.

Part-time students are significantly more likely to exit with an ordinary degree award than an honours classification. This is because the majority of part-time students study in the evenings and a part-time evening pathway to honours is not an option available to them.

Mode of attendance and gender balance

Overall there were 719 (40%) males and 1075 (60%) females. However, among the 1373 full-time students, 46% were male and 54% female, whereas among the 421 part-time students only 22% were male and 78% were female.

Subject disciplines studied

The graduates had studied within the University's faculties of Business; Computing, Engineering and Science; Education and Media; and Health and Social Sciences. The majority of part-time students study either through the University's Combined Awards Programme, which does not sit within a particular faculty, or are nurses who are topping up their nursing diploma qualification to degree level within the Health and Social Science faculty.

Age of graduates

On graduating 55% of the graduates were aged 25 or under. The remaining graduates ranged from over 25 to over 50. The age categories selected (<25, 21-25, 26-30, 31-40, 41-50, >50) were based on those most widely used in previous research. The only two categories with very small numbers of graduates were the under 21 and the over 50s.

Progression

There is no evidence to suggest that females are more likely to progress to honours than males. However, there is a significant difference with age indicating that younger students are more likely to progress (significance level 1%) as are full-time in comparison to part-time (significance level 1%). However, as indicated earlier there are University constraints on part-time students pursuing honours programmes.

Entry Qualifications

The highest level of entry qualification was recorded for each graduating student. Entry qualifications varied and categorised as follows:

- No qualifications (2%)
- Highers/A-levels (33%)
- HNC (9%)
- HE credit (included e.g. incomplete HNC/D or incomplete degrees) (6%)
- HND (30%)
- Degree or Professional Qualifications (e.g. police, banking, nursing) (20%)

Within each entrance qualification category gender, age at graduation, mode of study and award at graduation are compared.

It is worth highlighting that overall 33% of the graduate population entered with traditional school leaving qualifications and 65% imported prior credit. Of those who graduated with an honours degree 41% had imported prior credit.

The performance of the students and the key student variables within each of the above categories were explored. In conclusion those students who have Highers/A levels are more likely to progress to honours compared to all other entry qualifications. At Honours level students with Highers/A levels perform significantly better than HND entrants but not significantly better than HNC or other entrant qualifications (significance level 5%). In addition there is evidence to suggest that those students who enter with HNC perform significantly better than HND entrants. (Most HNC entrants enter directly into level 2 and HND entrants directly to level 3). At ordinary degree level, Highers/A-levels, HNC/D entrants show no significant difference in their likelihood of gaining distinction. However, variations exist in the proportions of good degrees awarded in different subject areas. This might be accounted for by variations in teaching and assessment practices in different academic disciplines. Future research is required to investigate the various interactions between the simple effects explored.

Conclusions

Implications exist at an institutional level. The findings concerning entrance qualifications and resulting exit awards are of considerable interest. Admissions tutors can accept students with credit from various qualifications with few concerns about their ability to cope and gain a degree award. However, further work may be required to predict the most appropriate level of entry given that HNC entrants appear to do slightly better than HND entrants. This may initiate a debate regarding whether HND entrants would be better admitted to level 2. Such research findings could have policy implications concerning the type of students that should be admitted to the University, or the types of entrance qualifications that lead to student success.

The profile of our 1794 University's graduates from session 2001/2 clearly illustrate that non-traditional students, particularly women, adults and those entering with credit from other sources of learning become important groups in the University. The traditional 'snap-shot' of graduation as images of graduates about 21 years old, full-time students has become an anachronism.

There are many institutional challenges arising from providing education to and supporting a diverse student population. The University is one that accepts mature students and those with non-traditional entry qualifications. Full-time and part-time learning opportunities are offered. It is critical to provide an appropriate supported learning environment that takes diversity into consideration.

The University must think how to adapt its mission, objectives and structures most effectively to provide equal opportunity to *all* students. Institutional barriers and opposition to change, which might include re-ordering of strategic priorities, reluctance to admit what is perceived as 'higher risk' students,' more time consuming students, increased complications in terms of delivery and resource implications need to be overcome. Curriculum change needs to be encouraged and to adopt a student-led rather than the existing provider-led approach.

> Curriculum delivery remains based predominantly on a teacher-centred, top-down approach, considered to be appropriate for the young school-leaver …a model of linear, uninterrupted study, (Layer *et al*, 2001:264).

Winning the hearts and minds of the academic staff developing and delivering the curriculum to a diverse student population is essential. Effective administrative, student tracking, co-ordination of various modes of delivery, student guidance and support services are also required by the University.

A major requirement is the need for 'joined-up strategic thinking'. It is a necessity to give various institutional strategies overall consideration. They should not be developed in isolation. Widening participation; marketing and recruitment; estates and facilities; teaching and learning; ICT and human resource strategies need to be developed to rise to the challenge and develop an institutional ethos to provide flexible and appropriate curriculum and time frames adapted to non-traditional students' needs.

Few published studies have examined traditional versus non-traditional entrance qualifications, but the results from this study indicate that there is student diversity and that the students succeed.

Student diversity brings added benefits to institutions including, ability to continuously adapt to change and new developments, provision of a wider range of experiences and choices to learners, an environment more encouraging to innovation, and staff development and bringing a broader range of people into higher education both as learners and lecturers.

Student diversity is not only good for the student!

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