



Managing and Supporting Student Diversity in Higher Education: A Casebook

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Book Review

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Written from an Australian higher education perspective, the information in this volume could be useful to anyone engaged in teaching, supporting, or recruiting prospective students in tertiary institutions (xi). It is a worthwhile (beneficial) resource for educators desiring to transform classroom pedagogical practices and approaches into ones that are user friendly, foster social inclusion and academic excellence, and are convergent with the pluralistic student population they serve.

Drawing on the expertise of multiple authors and a carefully constructed critical educational methodology, the book is divided into three sections. The first section introduces readers to the key terms and conceptual reasoning that underpin the participatory research used throughout the text. The second section (chapters 2 through 6) consists of selected student stories or case studies that provide windows of understanding about issues students face as they engage higher education and the educational and social factors that contribute to academic success. The authors contend that student voices serve as “organic educational theorists,” and thereby reinforce the authors’ claims that inclusive pedagogies must reflect the active involvement of the learner in achieving their own learning goals.

The case studies themselves were “developed over the course of a longitudinal research project that investigated how students from diverse backgrounds succeed in higher education” (20). The students represent Australia’s multicultural population and include both on-campus and distance education students. They also represent varied social-economic, ethnic, gender, and age groups. The authors state, “While participants’ backgrounds and experiences differed, they shared interrupted educational biographies with no clear pathways into higher education”

(20). The authors state that “students from diverse backgrounds require more time to fully comprehend course material, to integrate new knowledge into their existing frameworks and make sense of it”(120).

Other insights provide food for thought for anyone working with students facing both academic and cultural challenges. For example, higher education approaches in Australia often demand more classroom participation and discussion than what students may be accustomed to in their countries of origin. Hence, a degree of adjustment by students is required for success. Other case studies highlight the experience of nontraditional age students who began their studies in their forties. These case studies provide insights about the role of social obligation and self-reliance in their own learning goals. As one student stated, “I was never going to give up right from the start, because I wanted a good solid qualification that would get me a job” (213). Additional factors mentioned by students in support of their academic success included family support and encouragement, mentoring, stable finances, internships, and the usefulness of student services.

The discussion questions found at the end of every chapter are a welcome resource for educators. These questions are insightful and could easily be used in a variety of university forums to conscientize faculty. In addressing mature students, the authors raise the following question: “How do you currently support adult learners while respecting their adulthood? What changes could you make in your current practice to assist mature age students to cope with study and the demands of on their time and energy from other life responsibilities and situations?” (159). In the final chapter the authors discuss the implications of the cases for university staff and conclude with a summary of suggested strategies for managing and supporting student diversity and higher education.

What make this book significant is that it not only sensitizes educators to the challenges faced by students coming from non-traditional backgrounds, but it also incorporates solid methodologies to highlight needed improvements in the classroom. Having read and experimented with the book’s ideas in my own teaching I can attest to its usefulness.

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