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Shifting the blame in higher education - social inclusion and deficit discourses

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Keywords

inclusion, social, blame, shifting, education, deficit, higher, discourses

Disciplines

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Abstract

The principles of social inclusion have been embraced by institutions across the higher education sector but their translation into practice through pedagogy is not readily apparent. This paper examines perceptions of social inclusion and inclusive pedagogies held by academic staff at an Australian university. Of specific interest were the perceptions of teaching staff with regard to diverse student populations, particularly students from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds, given the institution's reasonably high proportion of LSES student enrolment (14%). A mixed method approach was utilised: (i) in-depth interviews with a representative sample of academic staff and, (ii) an online survey targeting all academic staff across the institution. The results point to the dual responsibilities of students and institutions in enacting inclusivity in order to move beyond reductive standpoints that simply apportion blame.

Key words: Educational equity, social inclusion, inclusive pedagogies, higher education

Introduction

In Australia, higher education institutions have experienced a fundamental shift over past decades as they have incorporated the principles of social inclusion and social justice. In this context, social inclusion is recognised as the provision of opportunities that will allow all individuals to feel valued and to participate fully as members of society (Australian Government, 2010). The result has been a move away from higher education as the domain of privileged, affluent students to one in which widening participation has encouraged greater access from students of diverse backgrounds and cultures (Gale & Tranter, 2011). This shift, driven by economic and political policy, has resulted in institutions recognising that 'inclusive teaching practices' (Hockings, 2010) must be employed if the needs of a more diverse student body are to be satisfied.

The notion of universal access to education as a requirement in preparing citizens for responsibilities and obligations of democratic participation has conflated the "symbiotic" relationship between education and politics (Marginson, 1993:19). In the *Future of Tertiary Education in Australia*, Martin (1964) noted both influences, claiming "economic growth in Australia is dependent on a high and advancing level of education" (5) and the non-monetary benefits of wider participation included "democracy, culture [and] greater understanding of human nature" (6). These ideas were reflected in the 1970s Whitlam government policy of free public tertiary education to "enhance equality [and] involve all citizens in political decisions" (Australian Labor Party 1972, cited in Basit & Tomlinson, 2012:155), making tertiary education opportunities available to previously under-represented groups. The equity framework established by the 1990 Labor Government was titled: "A Fair Go For All" (Gale, 2011:6) while a dominant theme in the 2008 Bradley Report's remit was to make student equity "everyone's business" (Gale, 2011:6). As

Minister for Education in 2009, Ms Julia Gillard reinforced “social inclusion [as] a core responsibility of all institutions that accept public funding” (Gillard, 2009 cited in Gale & Tranter, 2011:41), setting a benchmark target of 20% total representation in higher education of LSES students by 2020.

Over five years from 2007 to 2012 the number of students enrolled in universities has substantially increased. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) reported on growth in the undergraduate sector, estimating a 20% increase from just over 528,844 undergraduate students in 2007 to 634,434 students in 2012 (Koshy, 2014). Numbers derived from equity groups² have similarly increased, with those from LSES backgrounds increasing by 27.8% in this period, representing a 17.3% share of the undergraduate market (Koshy, 2014).

Changes in student population and demographics have repercussions at a number of institutional levels. Increased student numbers affect staff workloads within universities and, with increases in casualisation, more is expected of individual academics (Bexley, Arkoudis & James, 2013). Whilst reporting of casual academic staffing levels is notoriously difficult, Bexley et al. (2013) note a study by May (2011) of nearly 60% of the Australian academic workforce on casual employment. Bexley et al. (2013) also report a level of dissatisfaction among academic staff who describe their employment in terms of “an unmanageable workload; a poor work/life balance; having to undertake an unreasonable amount of administrative work; and suffering considerable job related stress” (391). The volume of students will increase as the demand driven system, introduced in 2012 by the Australian Government, emerges and the “uncapping” of places allows universities the freedom to set their own limits. Kemp and Norton’s (2014) review of the system declares it a success, recommending that previous participation targets are removed with the focus instead on increasing “bums on seats” (Gale, 2012).

Providing access is only one part of the social inclusion equation. The International Association of Universities acknowledges: “access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase” (Devlin, 2013: 939). Globally, this imperative has prompted research interest into how various student cohorts’ experience transition and transition within the university environment (see for example Johnston, 2010; O’Shea, 2014; Vinson, Nixon, Walsh, Walker, Mitchell, & Zaitseva, 2010; Wawrzyniski, Heck & Remley, 2012). However, within Australia, student attrition remains a significant issue and, whilst rates have decreased, the latest figures (ABS, 2012) suggest approximately 12.8% of the total Australian student population leaves university prior to completion.

Shifting the Blame

Many factors impact on students regarded as “non-traditional” or who occupy a minority position within the university environment. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) suggest for these students, difficulties of “fitting in” with the university culture are pronounced. Couvillion-Landry (2002-2003) suggests that while most first year students undoubtedly experience feelings of “isolation and loneliness” (2), students who differ from the mainstream experience intensified feelings.

² Equity groups include students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, students from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as rural and remote students.

Bourdieu (1977, 1984) perceives social positioning as intrinsic to the nature of educational experience, arguing students who lack the cultural capital reflective of the university are faced with obstacles that can preclude success within this domain. Bourdieu's forms of cultural capital exist in three states: "objectified" in goods such as books and pictures, "institutionalised" as academic credentials or awards and a more embodied form described as "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986: 243) termed as habitus.

As highly structured organisations privileging particular cultural characteristics, individuals with similar cultural capital to the HE institution are more likely to succeed than those who find the environment confronting, alienating or discouraging (Karimshah, Wyder et al., 2013: 6). Lawrence (2005) suggests students must master a range of knowledges specific to higher education institutions. Acquiring these can present challenges to students without the relevant cultural capital to assist them to "respond to implicit expectations" (Devlin, 2013: 941). Certain skills and knowledges are socially embedded and depend on access to appropriate capitals in order to enact appropriately. Bourdieu uses the term habitus to refer to the norms and practices of social groups or classes and to particular dispositions or ways of behaving / acting speaking that are negotiated by both structures and also personal biographies and conceptions of reality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

For new students, the institutional habitus of the university must be understood in a timely manner because success is dependent on mastering both the terminology of the institution and implicit socio-cultural dispositions or ways of thinking, acting or speaking (Lawrence, 2005). Thomas (2002) argues that the institutional habitus informs and indeed dictates how staff and students interact as well as how both parties perceive each other.

A traditional institutional habitus assumes that the habitus of the dominant group (ie white, male, middle class, able bodies etc) is not only the correct habitus, but treats all students as if they possessed it, and this is reflected in teaching, learning and assessment strategies.
(433)

Non-traditional or traditionally under-represented students can then be perceived as lacking the requisite skills and knowledges required for university, and consequently, requiring remedial support (Ridley, 2012). The 'remedial' student is expected to conform to the institutional habitus, assume responsibility for attaining HE skills and access services on the margins of the mainstream curriculum, such as learning support and language units (Ridley, 2012). This is the essence of a deficit thinking discourse.

The early work of McKenna (2003) adopts a Gramscian approach to discuss the hegemony of discourse within higher education, in which the dominant group asserts its power by establishing a single authentic way of approaching the discipline, marginalising students' existing knowledges and labelling individuals as lacking if they fail to engage with the prescribed way of thinking (2003: 61). Similarly, Smit (2012) describes the deficit discourse as concentrating on deficiency within the student or an external weakness attached to the student, such as cultural or family background (370). That is not to say that we believe deficit resides "within" the individual. Rather, such discourses can be conceptualised in a Foucauldian sense, understood as operating to produce deficit. For instance, describing his own work, Foucault made a provocative point about his use of the term discourse, that it was:

A task that consists not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs
...but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.
(Foucault, 1972: 49, emphasis added)

Whilst we acknowledge the debate about Bourdieu and Foucault (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Callewaert, 2006), we note the argument by Samuelsen and Steffen who suggest that “One of the strengths of the concepts and theories developed by these two thinkers has been to point out how the structures of societies influence and form individual lives, and how power can never be seen as a thing in itself, but always as a relational phenomenon working on all levels of social interaction” (2004:3). This strength is evident in recent work that has drawn on Foucault’s microphysics of power and Bourdieu’s work with capital (Wachs & Chase, 2013). In this spirit we draw on Ball’s (2006) appeal to find new and imaginative ways of making theory work for the problems we encounter. This Foucauldian approach to discourse enables to critically analyse the production of truths about social inclusion and LSES students.

For example, a deficit discourse not only effectively blames the student for a lack of university-specific cultural capital and focuses on the perceived inadequacies of “at risk” students and the challenges of “fixing” the problem (Smit, 2012: 370); it also (and to paraphrase Foucault, 1972) systematically contributes to the construction of this student as “deficit”. This has considerable effects. For instance, Devlin (2013) suggests that this propensity to assume an individual’s class, background or culture is in itself the reason for disadvantage can lead to “victim blaming” (943). Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) point out that this is a characteristic of “free market liberalism” where the learner is constructed as “fully responsible for his/her own ‘choices’ and future” (599). As such, deficit discourses not only describe students. These are practices that can impact on students who are forced to adopt an independent position early in their studies, exacerbating the struggle of first year study. Devlin notes research suggesting that the non-traditional student is a “frustrated participant in an unresponsive institutional context” (Bowl, 2001 cited in Devlin, 2013:944), while Smit (2012) proposes acknowledgement of the university as an underprepared institution, framing the discussion around “structural disadvantage” rather than perceived notions of student inadequacies (378). Bensimon’s (2005) study showed that far from ascribing inequality to student deficit, it is possible to attribute it to individuals or to institutional practices that “unintentionally create circumstances that result in inequalities” (108). This supports Bamber and Tett’s (2001) argument that the institutional habituses of universities create and perpetuate inequalities.

Staff may play a critical role in exposing this institutional habitus, particularly for students who are the first in their family or community to attend university (Kantanis, 2000; Thomas, 2002). However, how academic staff perceive their role in this process and their perspectives on inclusivity remain ill defined. This issue provided the impetus for the current study, which explored the understandings of inclusivity held by university academic staff.

Methodology

A two-stage mixed method approach was used to explore the perceptions of academic staff (n=304) with regard to social inclusion, social justice and inclusive pedagogies: (i) in-depth interviews with a representative sample of academics (n=32); and, (ii) an online survey (n=272). All responses were de-identified to ensure anonymity. The institution, a large regional Australian university (31,000 students), has a diverse student body with

approximately 14% of students identified from LSES backgrounds. The university is located in a region with higher than state and national averages of unemployment and lower levels of educational retention when compared to nearby urban locations.

Interview Participants

Thirty-two academic teaching staff across disciplines, recruited via university-wide emails, participated in the semi-structured interviews. Overall, 19 females and 13 males participated. Table (1) overviews the discipline fields of participants. Experience in academia ranged from Head of School and an Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning to a Sessional Tutor in the first semester of teaching.

Field	Participants	Field	Participants
Arts	5	Chemistry	1
Commerce	1	Education	3
Engineering	4	College (Access)	2
Journalism	1	Languages	2
Law	3	Mathematics	4
Media Studies	1	Nursing	1
Science	3	Sociology	1

Table 1: Participants by discipline field

Interviews

Interviews were on average 50 minutes and structured around four themes: inclusivity, social justice, teaching students from LSES backgrounds and future teaching intentions including the nature of support required. Semi-structured questions included: “What does the term inclusivity mean to you?”, “Which students tend to require extra support with their learning, assessments and completion of coursework?”, “How do you implement inclusive pedagogies in your coursework?”, “How would you describe/identify students from LSES backgrounds?”, and “Do you feel you need extra support/what could the university do to support inclusive teaching?”.

The interviews were transcribed, imported into NVivo and analysed for recurring emergent themes. This process was assisted by electronic memos and the query function in NVivo (10), enabling the data to be interrogated from different perspectives. Themed data from the interviews guided the development of a 26-item survey. Following data collection, the interviews were analysed in depth and the interview and survey data were analysed using a Foucauldian discourse approach (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2013).

Survey Participants

Invitations to participate in the online survey were distributed via institutional (e)mail lists to all academics, including casual, contract and sessional teaching staff. 272 respondents started the survey, with some attrition, particularly with open-ended questions. A total of 195 participants responded to all questions. Of those who completed, 63.6% were female and 36% male (0.4% ‘other’).

The majority of respondents had experience in teaching at undergraduate level (84.9% or n=231) while only 27.9% (n=76) had experience in the supervision of higher degree research (HDR) students. Over half (58.1% or n=158) were employed casually or on sessional contracts and were therefore ineligible for HDR supervision. The second largest cohort (15.4% or n=42) was engaged at the level of Lecturer. Only 4% of respondents held

the position of Professor. Casual or sessional staff (60% or n=117) completed (i.e. answered all questions) the greatest proportion of surveys, which while skewing the results may also reflect strong sentiment concerning this topic amongst this staff cohort. When this study commenced, there was no institutional wide training offered in teaching for diversity, although this situation has since changed.

Survey

The survey consisted of 26 questions with a mix of five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. Questions 1-19 invited participants to rate their responses on a scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree with additional space for comments. Questions 20-24 were open-ended whilst Questions 25 and 26 asked if respondents would participate in future research.

Statements such as “University is a privilege and therefore not for everyone” and “There is no difference between good teaching and inclusive teaching” provide evidence of the survey’s provocative nature and the desire to draw out diverse responses. No definition of “inclusive teaching” was provided to avoid foreshadowing or influencing responses. Open-ended comments were imported into NVivo and analysed for emergent themes; quantitative data were collated for statistical purposes.

Findings

Responses to interviews complement survey data, with three interconnected discourses emerging: how students and inclusivity are understood, perceptions of inclusive pedagogy and perceptions of the challenges of enacting inclusivity. As we will argue below, understanding of inclusivity appears to amount to engaging in a deficit discourse of equity students.

Discourses relating to understandings of inclusivity

...inclusive teaching is like putting a big blanket over the whole cohort to make them feel included and part of the learning group... (Sessional Staff, Survey#19)

Survey responses provided strong support for the notion of inclusive teaching. In response to Question 8: “Inclusive teaching means making content accessible to everyone”, 86.5% (n=206) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, commenting that it “*was essential to higher education*” and constitutes the “*basics of good teaching*” (81%). Similarly, 88% of respondents (n=209) agreed or strongly agreed that inclusive teaching contributed to a “*rich learning environment*” with 83.6% (n=199) regarding this as being “*rewarding*”.

Qualitative comments provided insight into understandings of the term “inclusive teaching”. Some were framed positively:

Inclusive teaching ensuring access by all students at all campuses irrespective of culture, SES status, previous education levels is very important. (Lecturer, Survey#71)

Other responses challenged the concept of inclusive teaching, with a small percentage (9% or n=22) indicating a degree of cynicism, whilst a further 20% were either “not sure” or identified as being “neutral”. Two respondents explained their views:

I don't know what inclusivity means. It sounds like another buzzword. How could anyone reasonably say they are opposed to inclusivity? (Senior Lecturer, Survey#78)

My major concern is that the term is used commonly with little understanding of what it means - some people say they are inclusive while clearly some students are outside of the 'centre' (not included). Lip service is not enough. (Sessional Staff, Survey#17)

Positive responses were tempered by opinions about whether inclusive teaching was necessary, advisable or even possible. There was some concern over terminology and whether it would result in the “dumbing down” of content or privileging students with additional needs above others: “...*difficult to answer. University should distinguish itself from TAFE! Do not take students who have too low ATAR.*” (Senior Lecturer, Survey#65)

The idea that inclusive teaching may advantage certain cohorts of students was reiterated in interviews. A prevailing view indicated all students should be treated equitably to maintain standards. For example, Cameron (Lecturer) explained, “*you can't just kind of drop them and run [but] how do we help people succeed, without lowering the level of the material*”. In a similar vein, Jessica (Professor) explained that certain students are given a “*a leg up or a boost up that you're not giving to other students*” but later clarified this: “*It's really just letting them in the door and then they have to prove their own worth*”. Robert, however, a casual tutor/lecturer, reported that when considering his approach to determining whether to approve requests for special consideration, he would ask himself: “*Am I being fair to the other 200 students who are sitting the subject?*”

Enacting inclusive teaching

Good teaching can occur without inclusive practice - but it will not be good for everybody - this is the heart of the matter. (Professor, Survey#25)

Perceptions of the enactment of inclusive pedagogies were explored. Survey respondents described their attitudes to inclusive teaching and, of the 21 participants who provided additional responses, most were concerned with equality. Some participants supported the concept: “*Inclusivity requires careful thought and can be challenging ... but the rewards for students and teachers is beneficial and rich*” (Sessional Staff, Survey#4). Others were concerned that inclusive teaching did not translate into equitable provision: “*'inclusive' is a rather vague term... I take it just to mean everyone in the subject should have equal access to content*” (Senior Lecturer, Survey#63).

There was concern that extra work was required to differentiate materials for a particular segment of the student population, and this was not always feasible:

...it does require more preparatory work on the part of the teacher, which is not necessarily commensurate with the time allocated and pay received. (Sessional Staff, Survey#42)

I don't feel obliged to go out of my way amid other competing issues and tasks. It potentially represents just one more thing that is good to do and should be done among many such things but could just end being an addition to the pile. (Assoc/Professor, Survey#130)

There was strong agreement from survey respondents (79% or n=176) that “*inclusive teaching was difficult to do well*”. The major difficulties, particularly for tutors employed casually, were large classes, diversity of student background and abilities, lack of English language skills and lack of information regarding students’ additional needs. Competing demands such as research, supervision and publishing in addition to teaching were also mentioned as obstacles.

Catering for difference is challenging, particularly in large classes. This is the context we work in, and where it is so important to be deliberate about inclusivity, to ensure that students aren't invisible. (Lecturer, Survey#24)

Giving every student the opportunity to fully participate can be very rewarding but is also tiring and difficult when your workload is too high. (Lecturer, Survey#34)

Participants expressed frustration around workplace restrictions limiting their capacity to “know” students and make appropriate adjustments to teaching practices. A lack of time was noted in relation to “time on the job” and delivery of subject content. Not surprisingly, staff identifying as casual or sessional voiced greatest dissatisfaction about the casualisation of the workforce:

...we [sessional casuals] are paid very little and expect a lot of ourselves because we can remember very clearly what it is to need assistance (I'm now doing a PhD - so still a student). Added to this casualisation - is an issue we don't know if we have a job for next session and so that adds to a need to be doing more and more to 'please' rather than be real and push for improvements. (Sessional Staff, Survey#189)

Casual staff also mentioned the lack of space they were allocated. Sharing offices made it difficult to meet with students outside face-to-face classes:

I am often only on campus two days a week and the times I am available do not match up with when they [students] are available...Also there has been difficulty in finding a private room in which to discuss matters with students... (Sessional Staff, Survey# 219)

Additional comments to the question on barriers to inclusive teaching were provided by 175 respondents. Of these, 24 sessional staff compared with 13 permanent staff, mentioned casualisation of teaching as an issue whilst 58 mentioned lack of time or space as obstacles.

Similar sentiments were expressed in interviews, with many staff (68% or n=22) identifying that more practical assistance, particularly for casual tutors, was required. John, a first year casual tutor, explained he had little understanding of practical applications of inclusivity and would welcome mentoring in this area:

I've never actually spoken to the subject coordinator, he's just difficult to access but it would be good maybe to have a meeting and talk about [ways]... to improve.

Ivy, who had been employed casually for five years, explained how tutors were at “*the coalface*” requiring additional support from the institution as “... *we are confronted with them on a day to day basis because a lot of students don't go to lectures anymore but they do go to tutorials because they're compulsory*”.

Challenges to inclusivity

We have to find a way of personalising this instead of putting it into this enormous category...the category sucks. (Ivy, Sessional Staff)

Just over 63% (n=133) of survey respondents revealed that being “inclusive” was not necessarily enough to overcome the challenges faced by students. A further 103 descriptive comments indicated differing opinions regarding expectations and responsibilities around inclusivity. Whilst 22 respondents regarded the responsibility for inclusivity as residing with the lecturer or tutor, a further 28 indicated that this lay outside the remit of the teaching role, pointing to the need for students to help themselves or seek assistance elsewhere:

Students' problems cannot become the teachers' problems. Equipping and assisting students is important...but students must also be self-motivated and resourceful. (Sessional Staff, Survey#42)

The 'issues' that students might arrive with is of no concern to me. Inclusive teaching includes setting down the ground rules rather than pandering to 'issues' students might have. There is always room for accommodation of particular needs and the rest, but increasingly universities are becoming a part of mass education and that means that students need to be basically treated the same. (Assoc/Professor, Survey#197)

These comments reflect views about student motivation and responsibility, with students being prepared to “own” their own development and education rather than educators adapting their approaches to cater for “additional” needs. A further 20 comments indicated that some students were ill prepared for university, facing obstacles they could not overcome:

There are issues that people bring to uni that make it extremely difficult for them to fulfill the requirements of the subject. I can make it as good as possible but ultimately the personal challenge may be too great. (Sessional Staff, Survey#46)

Participant views about inclusive teaching practices were explored through the interviews. Jessica (Professor) described inclusivity as the inevitable result of a simple equation:

If we increased the number of students coming to university, we will be admitting more students with weaker backgrounds ... that is not to say they

are stupid [but] ... those students will require more support. I think all students should be given the opportunity if they have the aspiration.

In contrast, another senior academic asserted that “*university is a privilege, it’s not a right because it is very very expensive for the taxpayers*” and consequently it could be “*a waste of their time and effort*”. (Peter, Assoc/Professor)

Categorisation of students according to pre-determined expectations rather than individual circumstances was an issue. Nineteen interviewees referred to the issue of stereotypes underpinning discourses around inclusivity. Ivy (Sessional Staff) found assumptions underpinning inclusive practice as being “*really condescending*” and explained “*...for instance Aboriginal Australians who say ‘What, we’re all stupid so we all need help? Are you out of your mind? ... Go away’*”. This view was echoed by Aaron (Lecturer) who perceived a danger in ideas of social justice manifesting as another part of Western patriarchal imperialism, “*being saved or ‘help the poor little black fella who needs help’*”. Similarly, Terry (Lecturer) identified a risk in “*potentially stigmatising students with a kind of, ‘You’re poor, would you like a hand’ ... which really grates on me*”.

Discussion - Deficit Discourses and the Blame Game

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...
(Foucault, 1984: 73).

From the analysis of our data, it is difficult to get away from the conclusion that, following Foucault (1984), for LSES students the politics of truth is one entwined with deficit. Notwithstanding university initiatives to do otherwise and include these students, practices exist that engage with, and promulgate, deficit discourses. As we have shown, these are largely interconnected with discourses about the “difficulty to enact inclusivity” as well as the “challenges of inclusivity”.

A framework of deficit thinking appears to inform practice regarding the integration of non-traditional students into mainstream university study. At one extreme there is the focus on the deficit of (or within) the student who must adapt and learn to cope with the institution’s expectations. At the other is the focus on the institution itself, which needs to respond to the changing demands of a diverse student body by instituting effective support.

Problems with terminology such as “disadvantage” exacerbate the issues. Smit (2012), for instance, argues that “disadvantage” lacks clarity and has become an “umbrella term to cover a wide array of perceived shortcomings” (370). The findings from this study reiterate this observation, revealing just how vexed the issue of educational disadvantage is. Despite a growth in support programs, there remains a level of misunderstanding that causes concern. For instance, some staff conflated the concept of inclusivity with the requirement of “extra” assistance, resulting in “bucket” categories that included *all* students with additional needs. This echoes Smit’s (2012) findings that the reductive nature of the deficit discourse in attributing perceived inadequacies to the student is based on stereotypes and generalisations leading to lower teacher expectations, pedagogical disadvantage and alienation.

Our findings indicate that associated with the problem of “reductive discourse” is a strong sense of student responsibility in terms of inclusive practices. When describing the obstacles faced in enacting inclusive pedagogies, the tendency to regard students as responsible for their academic success (or lack thereof) was a strong theme in the interviews and surveys. In the latter, 35 respondents mentioned that it was difficult to “*overcome the issues that students arrived with*” because of the students themselves, their “*lack of motivation*”, sense of “*entitlement*” and dearth of necessary skills. These comments echo Bensimon’s (2005) work which concludes that institutions often seek to attribute lower rates of retention or completion amongst equity students to “cultural stereotypes, inadequate socialisation or lack of motivation and initiative on the part of the student” (102). Such views result in pessimistic assessments that it is unrealistic to expect students to overcome disadvantage; therefore some inequality is inevitable. This has important consequences for student retention given that students from diverse backgrounds may already be conscious of personal shortcomings (Reay, Ball & David, 2005). It is of particular importance therefore that these students feel valued and welcomed rather than “othered”, an effect that occurs if blame and deficit discourses remain unchallenged and invisible.

While there is an argument that shifting the blame to students is largely being abandoned (Devlin, 2013), our findings suggest otherwise. Responses to survey and interview questions indicate that problematising certain student cohorts as “lacking” or needing to be “acted upon” rather than “acted with” retains currency. Student success remains marked by the demonstration of acceptable cultural capitals, as Dumais and Ward (2009) explain: “...while on the surface it appears that students are being rewarded because of their natural academic talents, in fact they are being rewarded for their cultural capital” (247). Although capital is a relational concept and what is deemed as high status or requisite capital is variable, depending on the inherent values of institutions, our findings indicate a larger problem that is endemic in higher education.

Our findings also point to the impact that casualisation may have on expectations for inclusive practices. Respondents reflected upon the precarious nature of employment for a large segment of teaching staff. It is difficult to expect people to enact inclusion when they do not feel included or valued in the institution. As one respondent explained: “...*as a tutor I myself feel exploited, not included, and disrespected by Faculty*” (Sessional Staff, Survey#271). The effects of casualisation were felt at many levels and were reflected in the paucity of funds to pay casual tutors to attend lectures or meetings that would “*support tutors to be part of the team, to be up-to-date*” (Tina, Lecturer). A new tutor also endorsed this: “*for me it’s not a big deal because I’m just starting out, but for other tutors I feel that if they were part of the staff, they could be more motivated into learning other methods*” (Maria, Sessional Staff). The lack of permanency may also translate into a sense of powerlessness around the issue of inclusion: how can staff make others feel included when they feel excluded? As Speigler and Bednarek (2013) explain “...structural problems inherent in the organisation of education are camouflaged as cultural deficits of individuals” (331). This suggests a link between structural issues of academic employment and inclusive practices for students. The high response rate for the survey (n=272) was surprising but the volume of casual staff (58% or n=158) who elected to participate was particularly revealing. The voices of casual staff are often absent in university policy documents and such disenfranchisement undoubtedly has repercussions for how inclusivity is enacted in higher education.

In contrast to views that either mark the student or the university as deficit and thus responsible for change, Devlin (2013) advocates a “joint venture” approach, whereby both the student and the institution assume complementary responsibilities to “bridge” the gap. This “sociocultural conception” approach avoids the traditional “deficit conception” problem, whereby either the student is the problem or the university is at fault (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012: 13-14). Devlin (2013) proposes that both institutions and students embrace a complex and nuanced mutual dependency that encompasses a diverse range of cultural assumptions and knowledges.

Essentially, the “incongruence” between a student’s non-traditional cultural capital and the often implicit expectations of a middle class institution such as the university must be bridged by both parties. As Collier and Morgan (2008) explain “...understanding of the ‘college student role’ is a critical element in explaining student success at the university” (426). Smit (2012) and Devlin (2013) suggest that the role of schools in preparing students for the demands of university education must also be considered.

The operation of such a framework is complex and requires extensive institutional support and preparedness on the part of students to take risks, embrace opportunity and persevere (Devlin, 2013: 946), but it is far more adaptive and nuanced than either of the reductive deficit views. As our analysis of the deficit discourses suggest, there is much that can promote deficit assumptions, even amongst the most lively discussions of social inclusion. Academic staff play a key role in this process so exploring beliefs around inclusivity and practice in this domain underpins understandings of how we can move beyond deficit thinking. Yet academic staff are, as our findings demonstrate, also at the edges of the “HE inclusion spectrum”.

Bensimon (2005) suggests that university staff – teachers and administrators – can create or reverse inequality through their “beliefs, expectations, values and practices” (101). Indigenous researchers in New Zealand and Australia propose that those in higher education should embrace the concept that multiple knowledges can co-exist and that the time for the primacy of a single Western, euro-centric knowledge subsuming others is over (Sefa Dei, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Gale and Tranter (2011) call for a wider acceptance of the different knowledges, values and understandings that *all* students bring to higher education and note that this requires creating spaces for them and “not simply creating more places” (43). Hence, creating an educational environment that does not perceive of diversity in deficit terms begins with exploring the nature of this culture and the underpinning beliefs of its members. The research described in this paper identifies the very obvious ambiguities in understandings about diversity and the need for meaningful dialogue with those at the “coalface” of teaching and learning.

Discussions of university participation and engagement must then move beyond deficit discourses to explore the field by drawing on multiple “faces, voices and experiences” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002: 24). Cross-institutional research engaging staff and students in conversations about their experiences can achieve this by providing understandings of different perspectives. Through these conversations the capacities and the motivations of students entering the academy can be explored and the focus of academic and general staff on supporting students can be refined. A comprehensive framework resting on the resolve of institutions to “bridge the incongruence” (Devlin et al., 2012) that this research has identified is imperative.

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