

UNDERSTANDING
STUDENT
EXPERIENCES
OF HIGHER
EDUCATION

UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF FIRST GENERATION UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Culturally Responsive and
Sustaining Methodologies

Edited by Amani Bell and Lorri J. Santamaría

Understanding Experiences of First Generation University Students

Understanding Student Experiences of Higher Education

Edited by Paul Ashwin and Manja Klemenčič

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Series Editors' Foreword

The 'Understanding Student Experiences in Higher Education' book series publishes theoretically robust and empirically rigorous studies of students' experiences of contemporary higher education. The books in the series are united by the belief that it is not possible to understand these experiences without understanding the diverse range of people, practices, technologies and institutions that come together to form them. The series seeks to locate students' experiences in the context of global changes to higher education and thereby to offer a rich understanding of the different global and local meanings of being a student in higher education in the twenty-first century.

These aims are brilliantly met in *Understanding Experiences of First Generation University Students*. Drawing on studies of seven institutions from Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States, this book examines the experiences of students who are the first in their families to engage in higher education. Compared to the existing scholarship, the book brings a fresh and much-needed international perspective to our understanding of these students' experiences in higher education. It does so not with superficial comparisons, but with a deep sensitivity to the contexts, histories and cultures within which these students' experiences are embedded. The contributors to the book converse through shared theoretical frameworks of cultural identity and intersectionality. They meticulously apply and collectively advance culturally responsive and culturally sustaining research methodologies to explore first generation students. The resulting data present an impressive portrayal of persistence of first generation students in universities and a powerful articulation of their challenges and successes. The analyses culminate in an insightful synthesis of the convergences and divergences of students' experiences in different contexts. These are complemented by a thorough reflection on the research methodologies, future research possibilities as well as usable suggestions for practice, which all together make *Understanding Experiences of First Generation University Students* an important contribution to our conceptual, empirical and practical understanding of students' experiences of higher education.

Paul Ashwin and Manja Klemenčič
Series Editors

Foreword

We were honoured when asked to write the foreword for this groundbreaking edited book on research methods that we consider to be examples of innovation for social change across a group of countries that have each been impacted by histories of colonization resulting in systemically underserved students in higher education. The result of this book is shared research pathways and implications benefitting students who represent the first generation in their families to attend university. The book is both remarkable and unabashedly authentic in its offer of new approaches and fresh voices to some of the most challenging issues in higher education.

As US- and New Zealand-based mentor and mentee, we sometimes work together to co-generate and co-create new knowledge in our respective fields of education. Like the authors of the chapters in this book, in our own research we strive towards the use and application of our imaginations and initiatives to reach optimum outcomes from shared resources to benefit the greater good. Following this line of thought, towards true innovation in higher education, we believe this book is one that will influence thinking and research concerning first generation students in the countries featured and in similar countries around the world.

It is fitting that we should preface this contribution, as we are ourselves first generation women scholars of colour, active in the roles of teaching, research and service for our distinctive universities. In our research, we focus on the ways in which race, ethnicity and culture interface with power and privilege in education throughout the world. From this shared perspective, we agree this carefully edited text serves to complement existing research on first generation students but that it is remarkable and noteworthy on four specific points.

The first is that, like us, the voices of the contributing authors are mostly women of colour representing the perspectives and experiences of students of colour in the academy. Second, the authors feature innovative, imaginative and inspirational research methods, which are presented with descriptive detail worthy of further exploration or interrogation. Third, some of the

authors privilege their students' indigenous backgrounds and worldviews, complementing them with decolonizing versions of indigenous methodologies and culturally sustaining research approaches, when appropriate, rather than using purely Western-based research techniques. Finally, beyond the introduction of 'siloed' free-standing case studies, the book offers common and shared successful actions that can be located across each study. These shared approaches suggest the invaluable applicability and adaptation of the approaches and methods to others in higher education seeking to better understand and improve the experiences of systemically underserved first generation students in higher education.

These points are underscored by an international, intergenerational, intercultural, cross-institutional and rigorous scholarly writing process led by senior scholars and inclusive of academics at every level and doctoral students. As such, the editors and authors of *Understanding Experiences of First Generation University Students* have completed two significant feats. They have provided research-rich methods text featuring stories seldom told in the academy from an under-represented group of students. These scholars have also provided a model for others in the academy who choose by their way of working and contributions to critical conversations about race, ethnicity, class and culture to disrupt and challenge what has previously been published on the subject.

We suggest this book be the starting point for institutions, individuals, students and scholars alike who seek an alternative, empowering and innovative way to research and work with first generation students looking for a sense of belonging and a positive successful experience in higher education, regardless of country of origin.

Arnetha F. Ball
Stanford University, USA
with Lorri J. Santamaría
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Introduction: Why Focus on First Generation Students?

Amani Bell and Lorri J. Santamaría

My mum dropped out of school in year 7, so she thinks I'm a professor. As far as she's concerned, I'm running this uni She barely negotiated the school system but yeah, she's very proud.

Vanessa, female, Indigenous Australian,
first generation student

Introduction

Over the past few decades universities worldwide have opened their doors to students whose parents and grandparents were historically excluded from societal participation and higher education for reasons associated with racial, ethnic, socio-economic and/or linguistic diversity. Many students benefitting from such efforts to widen participation are from low socio-economic backgrounds or first in their family or both to attend university, otherwise known as first generation students (Archer, Hutchings and Ross 2005; David et al. 2009; Chowdry et al. 2013; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010). While some progress has been made in responding to the needs of these internationally underserved learners, many challenges remain.

This edited book features the unique and diverse experiences of first generation students as they transition into and engage with academe, and explores ways in which universities might better serve these students. With reference to culturally responsive and sustaining research methodologies undertaken by members of an international research collaborative in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom and

the United States, the book critically examines how these students enact persistence within university and ways in which success and challenges are articulated. Contributors and editors of this book view diversity and the associated complementary multiple perspectives offered as strengths. Though first generation students' experiences in multiple countries, universities and contexts are presented together, as editors and authors we agreed to refrain from formally referring to the book as a comparative collection. Rather, as international education scholars Dimmock and Walker (2000) suggest, we exercised caution to avoid superficial comparisons between practices adopted in different countries and misleading [conclusions] without thorough understanding of the contexts, histories and cultures from which the practices were drawn (144). Rather, in this book we employ a more critical comparative stance informed by similarly situated international research featuring multiple countries where intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and power are considered (Santamaría and Santamaría 2016a; Murakami et al. 2017; Normore and Watson 2015). From this perspective, elements that are unique to context and shared across the international higher education milieu are explored. A larger narrative connected by shared theoretical underpinnings and qualitative methodologies provides a sense of cohesion and organization to the book. These elements enable readers to easily move between chapters. To this end, the book is purposely replete with differentiated student voices, compelling implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

The studies featured are centred on theories of identity and intersectionality (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation experienced as multiple compounded forms of oppression), and on the value of student voices and experiences, with an emphasis on Indigenous and decolonized methodologies. Through these strengths-based culturally sustaining approaches (Paris 2012; Paris and Alim 2014), which include a Potentials Approach (Airini et al. 2010), Participatory Learning and Action (Bozalek and Biersteker 2010), Talanoa (Vaiolleti 2006), narrative inquiry (Denzin 1997), yarning (Sherwood et al. 2015), and photovoice (Wang 1999), the book explores rich data on first generation student experiences at seven institutions in six countries across four continents.

A note on terminology

In Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the UK, the term 'first in family' appears to be prevalent (Bell et al. 2016; Chowdry et al. 2013; O'Shea 2007), whereas 'first

generation' is more commonly used in the United States, Canada and elsewhere (Davis 2010; Thomas and Quinn 2007). Most of the authors in this book use 'first generation', with details on country-specific definitions provided where appropriate.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines first generation tertiary-educated adults as 'individuals who have attained tertiary education but whose parents' level of education is lower. The comparison is made only with the adult's parents, not with earlier generations' (OECD 2015: 84). However, beyond this static definition, we know that first generation entry is a dynamic concept and multifaceted: who is a first generation entrant and what that might mean is constantly subject to change (Thomas and Quinn 2007: 51). Jehangir (2010) also discusses the nuances around the definition, concluding first generation students inhabit spaces where the intersection of race, class and gender impact not only access to college but also their aspirations about their place in the unfamiliar land of higher education (15).

Colyar (2011) suggests that 'a privileging of "traditional" middle- and upper-income students is built into our scholarly work and in the discourse we use to talk about them. Even the descriptive terms used to indicate students' status – low- or higher-income suggest comparisons, hierarchy and difference' (2011: 125). While the term 'first generation' does imply difference, by taking a strengths-based stance and perspective, we hope that it can also be considered as having more positive and inclusive connotations such as winning and pioneering.

Following our deliberate discretion in comparing students across cases, we are as wary of treating first generation students as a separate and different species and realize there is major complexity and variation within this group, particularly when international viewpoints are presented. For example, for first generation Pacific Islander students in Aotearoa New Zealand, variations within this group include migrants from a variety of South Pacific Islands (e.g. Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands) versus students born in Aotearoa New Zealand, mature-age students versus school leavers, those who are parents versus those who are not and so on. And in South Africa, there may sometimes not be a huge amount of difference between first generation and non-first generation students, because both groups might be black, who have similarly suffered through apartheid and come from poor townships. Each chapter offers the particular nuances to diversity of each case within each country. In the concluding chapter, we consider all the cases together to determine collective and enduring successful actions practised by all students, thus adding to the discourse on first generation students to be shared worldwide.

Thus, at the outset, we believe and further demonstrate in this book that the narratives of first generation learners have a number of salient themes. These learners face unique challenges, such as having to adopt a different persona for university as compared to the ones they express with their families and communities who have no experience of higher education, or entering the university from a strong sense of collective community and having to adapt to a culture of individualism. Nuances such as these and many others around researching first generation students will be discussed in each chapter.

Why focus on first generation students?

Gaining a higher education qualification can lead to better employment, wealth and well-being outcomes (OECD 2015), and thus “it is critically important to address inequalities in education opportunities in order to maintain social mobility and broaden the pool of candidates for higher education and high-skilled jobs” (78). The numbers of first generation students entering higher education have been growing rapidly over the past decades, with the most recently available OECD figures showing that a mean average of 22 per cent of young adults in OECD countries have attained tertiary education, even though their parents had not (OECD 2015). While the OECD has found that first generation tertiary-educated adults and non-first generation tertiary-educated adults share similar employment rates and pursue similar fields of study (OECD 2015), some US-based studies have found that students from lower social class backgrounds ‘earn lower grades and graduate at lower rates than their middle and upper class peers (Bailey and Dynarski 2011; Bowen, Chingos and McPherson 2009; Engle and Tinto 2008; Ishitani 2006; Walpole 2003)’. (Yee 2016: 831).

Reay and colleagues remind us that ‘behind the very simple idea of a mass system of higher education we have to recognise a complex institutional hierarchy and the continued reproduction of racialised, gendered and classed inequalities’ (Reay, David and Ball 2005: 163). Thomas and Quinn concur that ‘first generation entry ... need[s] to be placed within a matrix of class and ethnicity and as constituting a point of overlap of many factors’ (2007: 250). Their review of the literature signalled ‘that there is something distinctive and neglected about first generation entry’ (ibid).

In short, there has been a large and rapid increase in the numbers of first generation students entering higher education, and first generation students who attain their degrees access a range of beneficial outcomes. Yet despite increased

numbers accessing higher education, there is also evidence of increasing societal inequalities (Burke 2012). And, as discussed below, there are few international studies on first generation students, and much remains to be done to transform the academy to better serve these students.

What our book contributes to the discourse about first generation students

We find that our work is very much in conversation with previous studies (Burke 2012; Colyar 2011; David et al. 2009; Stich 2012), particularly the calls:

- To ‘expand the tools and approaches used to explore the experiences of traditionally marginalised groups’ (Colyar 2011: 134).
- For ‘a vision for the global academy [that] include[s] diverse perspectives on pedagogies and institutional as well as cultural perspectives.’ (David et al. 2009: 201).
- For ‘fundamental changes in the ways in which we think and construct our own scholarship (to incorporate reflexivity and relational thinking, to recognise there is value in other fields, sub fields, and forms of capital)’ (Stich 2012: 115).
- For ‘theoretical and methodological frameworks that enable us to move beyond instrumentalist discourses of widening participation that are underpinned by neoliberal perspectives’ (Burke 2012).

By using Indigenous and decolonized methodologies, by sharing stories and images that invite deep reflection and by bringing together case studies from six countries, this book advances our understanding of ways in which higher education needs to transform to better meet the needs of first generation students.

What do we already know about first generation students?

There are a number of excellent books and papers that explore the experiences of first generation students – these mostly have a single country, and sometimes a single institution, context (e.g. David et al. 2009; Davis 2010; Harvey and Housel 2011; Jehangir 2010; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Stich 2012). These studies reveal the complex situations and circumstances faced by first generation students, the diversity within the category, students’ challenges and successes and the

need for transformation of policies and practices. Meta-thematic analysis of the literature on experiences of first generation students suggests complexity, diversity, success, challenges and the need for transformation as opportunities and challenges for further study.

Complexity

An important finding from earlier studies is that the social processes around university choice and access are complex, unpredictable, and often messy. For example, 'social class, ethnicity and in a different way gender all play their part but not in any mechanistic or simple sense. A sociological view of choice must recognise ... the complex and sophisticated nature of individual and familial decision making' (Reay et al. 2005).

The prestigious universities, in the UK at least, are still mainly the prerogative of the upper and middle classes. According to Reay and associates (2005), 'while more working class and ethnic minority students are entering university, they are generally entering different universities to their white middle class counterparts' (162). There is clearly still work to be done in understanding and facilitating first generation students' access to higher education.

Diversity

As discussed above in the note on terminology,

first generation students are by no means a homogenous group. ... These students have complex identities ... making students difficult to pigeonhole by group. Still, they are more often than not students of colour, immigrants and they come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These students are also often parents, employees and caretakers of their extended families and communities. They all do not have the same story, yet aspects of their narratives echo and weave together to form a pattern reflecting both the richness they bring to campuses and the obstacles they encounter in academia. (Jehangir 2010: 2)

Some studies warn of the problems of singling out first generation students for different treatment. As Colyar says in her study of six first generation students, 'All of the young women are considered "at-risk" as college students ... "at-risk" is a term they would never use to describe themselves' (2011: 121). Listening to individual student's stories (and viewing the images they create to illustrate

their stories) helps staff, policymakers and other students understand the rich diversity of first generation students' experiences and identities.

Success

The literature on first generation students emphasizes that it is important to focus not just on access but also on success: 'If access is not accompanied by student success, claims of "widened participation" or "social justice" are insincere' (Thomas and Quinn 2007: 2). First generation students have the capacity to create change and better conditions not only for themselves, but also for their families and communities (Thomas and Quinn 2007) – a 'huge leap of circumstance ... that happen[s] in one generation' (Davis 2010: 169).

Factors which impact on the retention and success of first generation students include strong peer networks, faculty and peers as advocates (Jehangir 2010) and their own persistence and determination – what Davis calls 'extreme self reliance' (2010: 158). There is often a 'key figure' or 'change agent' who helps first generation students 'move toward ... an intuitive orientation toward college' (Davis 2010: 155).

It is important as researchers and as educators not to view first generation students through a deficit lens (Devlin 2013), but rather to see the strengths of these students. It is also important to note that success for first generation students may not fit narrow definitions of 'standard' progression and achievement. Of course, universities have financial reasons to retain students, but students may take a non-linear path, change degrees, change institutions, return to studies later or not at all and yet still feel that they have succeeded because they have gained valuable experiences.

Challenges

Although a focus on strengths and success is important, we do need to understand the challenges that first generation students experience. Previous studies tell us that these challenges can include tensions in families, difficulties in negotiating access to higher education, financial stress, long work hours, social isolation, alienation from their culture and past identities, imposter syndrome, lower grades and higher attrition rates (Davis 2010) Kezar 2011; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Yee 2016;.

Stephens et al. (2012: 1178) describe the ways in which American universities' focus on independence ('paving one's own path') rather than interdependence

(‘being part of a community’) ultimately serves to undermine the academic performance of first generation college students. Yee found that students from lower class backgrounds were less likely to seek help from their lecturers, to be fiercely self-reliant and independent (2016). First generation students ‘engage less in the out of class life’ of university than non-first generation students, such as study abroad and co-curricular experiences, due to working, caring duties and commuting (Ward, Siegel and Davenport 2012: 50).

Jehangir’s study (2010) showed that first generation students often have additional family and cultural obligations, and that families may not understand the demands of higher education. Alongside the pressure to succeed, first generation students may experience discrimination and overt and covert racism. The usual struggles of the first-year transition experienced by many students (e.g. Kift 2015) are compounded, and as Kezar reminds us, these challenges ‘are often invisible to campus staff’ (2011: 19).

When first generation students are changed by their experience of higher education and feel different from their families ‘there is a sense of being an impostor in one world and a traitor to the other’ (Jehangir 2010: 42). Thomas and Quinn (2007) draw on Connidis and McMullin’s (2002) concept of sociological ambivalence to discuss and identify some of the ambivalences around first generation entry to university, such as parents wanting children to go to university but fearing the child will abandon the family, and children not wanting to go to university but feeling pressure from the family. ‘First generation entry is a contradictory and indeed conflicted position which represents a crossroads for the family from one mode of being outside the university into one where the family is both inside and outside’ (Thomas and Quinn 2007: 65).

Another challenge faced by first generation students is marginalization in the curriculum: ‘Students who are first in their families to attend college bring with them histories and experiences that have the capacity to inform and enrich the learning experience, and in doing so, make them part of the academic community. Instead, being excluded, silenced and rendered invisible in the curriculum only further marginalises and isolates them on campus’ (Jehangir 2010: 31). Similarly, Kezar points out while there is often an effort to include women and people of colour ‘in core course material ... there is not a similar effort to include individuals with a low-income background within course materials at most institutions’ (2011: 20). Conversely, first generation students may also be put on the spot during class to discuss an aspect of their culture, race or community – attention that may be unwelcome, superficial and tokenistic.

The need for transformation

Most studies about first generation students point to the need for transformation of institutional cultures, practices and policies. Alongside a ‘focus on developing creative and inclusive pedagogies’ (David et al. 2009: 200), there is a need for the academy to address ‘its own troubled, exclusionary history’ (Stich 2012: 114). Such transformation requires long-term structural change, including curriculum design that addresses the issue of marginalization discussed earlier, and ‘attempt[s] to prioritise knowledge that is of value and relevance to under-represented groups (Freire 1972)’ (Thomas and Quinn 2007: 105–6).

Certainly, we see these themes in the chapters presented in this book. By reflecting deeply on the literature, on the experiences of first generation students and on our own experiences as educators, throughout this book we offer some exemplars for the themes and suggestions for transformation discussed in the concluding chapter.

The origins of the book

The research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand (Chapter 2), one of the Australian sites (Chapter 3), Canada and South Africa was carried out with funding from the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), an international higher education and research network made up of twenty-one universities in eleven countries on five continents. WUN identified access and participation of first generation students as a global challenge in need of research and development (<http://www.wun.ac.uk/wun/globalchallenges/view/global-higher-education-and-research>).

Several of the chapter authors have, via the WUN project, been able to meet, share and compare ideas and methods. Our chapter, ‘Together to the Table’, gives some background on this (Bell et al. 2016). Chapters 6 and 8 were invited because we thought it was important to include perspectives from the United Kingdom and the United States, as countries with very large numbers of students in higher education and long histories of widening participation. The chapter from the other Australian site (Chapter 7) offers insights into the experiences of older first generation students, a focus not offered by the other chapters. These chapters were carefully selected as having complementary theoretical and methodological approaches to exploring the experiences of first generation students. An overview of these aspects and ways in which they are presented in each chapter is presented in the following table.