Chapter 15

Conclusion

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Introduction

This book has brought together a diversity of perspectives that seek to deconstruct the ways in which students, as individual actors and cohort types, have been defined and negotiated. The intent is not to 'smooth out' or untangle these representations but rather to reveal their complexity and how such constructions reveal deeper, often hidden, political and institutional agendas. By focusing on a seemingly accepted or taken for granted social role, in this case that of the university student, this book grapples with the myriad of possible understandings attached to this position and in so doing highlights the deeper political connotations that are inherent in student positionality.

This is an important topic as without a deeper understanding of our university student populations, the enduring issues of participation and retention can only be partially addressed. Globally, we know that these populations are increasing in number and also diversity; Marginson (2016) reports that, between 2007 and 2013, the worldwide number of tertiary students multiplied over six times. This drive to access university is generally defined in terms of opportunity including better employment and financial futures (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty & May, 2018; Marginson, 2016). However, in this move from an elite system to one characterised by mass participation, we have a fragmented understanding of how different student cohorts both imagine and experience this higher education space or how these populations are imagined and constructed.

The complexity of the university setting has been somewhat underestimated with a general assumption that we 'know' who our university students are. However, what the chapters in this book attest to is an enduring 'mis-recognition' (McNay, 2008) of various student cohorts, a mis-recognition that invariably reflects dominant values and judgements, often positioning some student types as the 'other' to an assumed norm. Such a situation essentialises students and works 'to subtly reproduce inequalities through shame and shaming' (Burke, 2018, p. 15). Exposing the constructs and subtle propagation of this reproductive naming is ultimately key to understanding how we can ensure equal participation across higher education systems.

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In recognising this as an international phenomenon, contributors to this publication discuss understandings of higher education students in various nations across the globe, including Australia, China, Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Thailand and the UK. This international insight is complemented by cross-disciplinary focus and the integration of broad theoretical applications. Of particular interest was how these conceptualisations sometimes 'jostle uncomfortably' in relation to each other, with different stakeholders portraying students in somewhat contradictory or divergent terms.

This publication deliberately draws attention to how the 21st century student is buffeted by a range of conflicting and powerful forces; in exploring these forces, the intent has been to better consider the ways in which understandings of 'the student' are shared across and within nation-states. Scholars have contributed their unique analysis on how such understandings expand beyond the position of learner and include the role of consumers, political actors, future workers and dependent adults-in-the-making. Interestingly within this diversity lives commonality: this is not to say that each chapter is similar but rather that regardless of location or student types, correlations are apparent. This final chapter provides an overview of these commonalities as well as highlighting the theoretical and empirical innovations that have emerged from across these contributions.

Conflicts in the 'making' of university students

The combination of increased participation in higher education alongside the drive to improve the economic viability of countries and states has not only led to more students attending university but also a greater range and type of individual choosing this educational pathway. This growth in student diversity has arguably thrown into sharp relief conflicts within the sector, and the ways in which these contradictions are understood and played out by individual actors features strongly in a number of these chapters. For example, in Chapter 6, Sykes interrogates the ways in which student populations are still unhelpfully defined as either 'traditional' or 'non-traditional'. The former implicitly referring to the idyll of the university student as school leaver, a 'coming of age' mythic that resonates with access to the requisite material and emotional wealth needed for success. The non-traditional student is then positioned as the 'other', a displaced figure that exists in the shadows of the mainstream.

Divides like this one are simplistic and also an unnecessary obfuscation of the complexity of student populations. For Sykes, naming students in this limiting (and 'senseless') fashion only serves to 'demonise' cohorts, attributing certain behaviours or attitudes to groups which have little foundation or relevance to actual reality. These constructions, according to Sykes, are not simply perpetuated by institutions but equally may be enacted by the students involved, even when, as Sykes explains, 'their own experiences do not necessarily correspond with its main precepts.'

Chapter 9 similarly considers understandings of the 'traditional' learner but in this case explores how this assumption can be disrupted by a partnership model of learning. This model is characterised by collaboration in learning where the educative responsibility is shared across the teaching and learning realms. In this chapter, Eloise Symonds draws out the conflicts that exist between depicting students as 'traditional learners' but then expecting them to perform as partners in learning – the contradictory nature of both positions is unpacked in the context of two universities. Symonds argues that the case studies point to how the development of a collaborative and partnership model of learning is unsettled by continued institutional alignment with more transmission-based models of learning. This transmission model forces the student into the role of passive recipient with the lecturer assumed to be the all-knower or expert. Such roles are historically placed and reflect a hierarchy of power that is not only contested but equally limits the nature of the university experience; as Symonds points out, such differences ultimately promote 'discord' for students who are forced to do additional work reconciling a matrix of 'different approaches' and 'different outcomes'.

The broad theme of 'conflict' features strongly in a number of the book chapters particularly in terms of the various identity positions or labels available to contemporary students. In Chapter 12, Allen, Finn and Ingram unpack the term 'millennial' exploring how this nomenclature has 'narrowed' thinking about students and the recognition (or misrecognition) of this cohort. These authors consider how the millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) has 'grown up' with a higher education system characterised by fees, debt and also, austerity. The resulting marketisation has imbued a radically different understanding about university attendance demonstrated by media representations which variously construct these learners as either 'passive consumers/entitled learners' or as 'fragile snowflakes, PC Warriors'. Drawing on UK newspaper articles, Allen et al. detail how such constructions effectively 'frame' the ways in which students are understood, essentially silencing or obscuring the diversity that we know exists within contemporary student populations.

Continuing the theme of hidden conflict, Lumb and Bunn interrogate the ways in which social imaginaries construct and constrain university learners. In this chapter (Chapter 8) epistemological notions of studenthood are related to a critique of employability in order to disrupt preconceived notions of how to 'be' a student. Lumb and Bunn foreground the contested nature of understandings about 'employability' revealing how the construction of this term increasingly 'patterns the purpose of study'. As this chapter and others attest, such constructions of students not only limit perspectives or definitions but also, have wider political and ideological connotations. For example, Lumb and Bunn point out how implicit understandings of 'employability' work to benefit industry rather than individual learners, this discourse of employability ultimately contributing to the sustenance of the 'precarious' labour underpinning the flourishing and growth of contemporary economies.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the contested undertones of such constructions reveal wider contradictions spanning social and cultural spheres. This is clearly highlighted by Calver and Michael-Fox in Chapter 10, in which documentary representations of UK students are critically analysed. Following a recent upsurge in 'student life' documentaries, the authors draw upon media theory to explore how these representations reflect broader 'socio-cultural' concerns about university learners. These representations are also framed around 'risk' with either the individual learner presented as being 'at-risk' and in need of protection or else as posing 'a risk' to themselves and others. What such depictions offer is more than just a series of stereotypes or 'tropes' but rather insights into broader social and cultural norms at play in British society. Echoing Sykes' analysis of the traditional and non-traditional student, Calver and Michael-Fox's chapter highlights an enduring duality with early documentaries depicting the traditional student as being 'risky' with behaviour such as binge drinking and promiscuity featuring but contrasting this with more recent documentaries showing students as being 'at-risk' from predatory colleges or financial debt.

The chapters in this book reveal different facets of understanding about university students in terms of the imagery drawn upon, the language applied and the activities attributed to these populations. However, what each chapter also reveals is the ways in which such facets are constructed and embedded within dominant political and policy discourse; such constructions arguably say more about the society that perpetuates them than the individuals they refer to. For Danvers and Hinton-Smith (Chapter 5), it is the lack of any embodied or emotional understanding of our student populations that ultimately limits perceptions. Drawing upon their work with young people involved in Widening Participation activities, Danvers and Hinton-Smith point to the disempowerment and disassociation caused by categorising individuals in terms of 'blunt' postcode identifiers. Such categorisation has powerful implications for those being named and also ignores the complex political and social structures that people exist within.

The next section further situates these complexities within a broader geographical context revealing how students are positioned as actors in an increasingly international global education economy.

Players in a global setting: Students within the international realm

Chapters 13 and 14 both interrogate constructions of international students; Eiras and Huijser (Chapter 13) explore the identity-making of Chinese students within 'transnational university' settings which offer a hybrid education across nation states. Drawing on the concept of 'liminal space', the authors argue that these particular transnational systems offer individuals the possibility of negotiating various and sometimes conflicting identities as both university students and also, in their participants' case, Chinese culture. The

students in this study were perceived as occupying an 'in-between' space negotiating both an existing or former identity and also considering a future or desired one. The chapter reveals the intricate negotiations required as Chinese students move from a traditional Confucius-style education environment into a HE system based upon a UK model, while simultaneously ensuring a future reincorporation into Chinese society. The Angolan and Cape Verdean students in Alves and King's study (Chapter 14) who are enrolled in a Portuguese university context, experience a different type of conflict but are similarly located in an 'in-between' space. As these authors explain, the colonial history of this state leads to a tension between these students being categorised as 'international student' or as 'immigrant'. In this way, the construction of these students is situated within a national agenda that appears to discriminate on the basis of both geography and social origin.

This international scrutiny of students is also the focus of Chapter 4, where Uerpairojkit and Burford turn their attention to Thai students and the ways in which this cohort is constructed according to four key imaginings: 'future worker, preserver of culture, customer and the "new gen" student'. Drawing upon online materials, these authors indicate how the dominant imaginaries of Thai university participants reveal a level of antagonism and even fear; much like the UK students in Calver and Michael-Fox's TV documentaries (Chapter 10), these students are 'othered' in this imagery, often sexualised and presented in antithesis to dominant socially acceptable roles. These online representations deviate sharply from the policy documents analysed, which highlight both enduring and traditional notions of student as 'future worker' or 'consumer'. These traditional perspectives jostle uncomfortably with the more recent depictions of learners or the 'new-gen' students characterised in terms of being an entrepreneur or degree seeker.

In Chapter 3, Sarah McDonald attends to the relational nature of student identity formation focusing on Australian female first-in-family students and their relationships with their mothers, exploring how familial relationships impact on the transition into university. McDonald shows how the 'unrealised aspirations' of mothers can impact on their daughters, increasing the pressure to succeed. Equally, McDonald points out that these female actors (both mothers and daughters) are generally 'playing the game of HE' at a disadvantage due to classed or gendered behaviours. Similarly addressing the themes of family and also media representations of students, is Chapter 11, in which Lainio and Brooks highlight how students across five European nations are constructed as family members. Drawing upon content analysis of newspaper articles and interviews with policymakers, these authors highlight a clear typology of how students are constructed in relation to their family identifying 'integrated', 'independent' or 'ambivalent' positionality. Understanding this relationship is particularly key in a higher education context where financial responsibility for university study is increasingly the burden of the entire family rather than the individual learner.

Returning to the Australian context, O'Connor (Chapter 7) focuses on the online student and explores the tensions between 'instructivist' and 'constructivist' understandings of this learner cohort, particularly the ways in which students are constructed as either 'engaged and empowered' learners, or as 'vulnerable' and in need of support. Finally, Patfield, Gore and Fray (Chapter 2) attend to the imaginings of prospective university students to explore how they construct their future university self. These authors argue that rather than prospective students 'buying into' the student as 'consumer' dominant imagery, the participants in their study, all of whom were still at school, articulated a number of alternative types that informed their perception of future university selves. Such perspectives are somewhat silenced in the dominant imagery of the higher education student and serve as a timely reminder that key to understanding how university is perceived requires a need to return to the players themselves – the students.

Delineating the field: What can this book offer?

As the previous sections have indicated, this book is a rich resource and provides both methodological and theoretical insights. This section draws together some of the key themes as well as an overview of additional contributions to the field. This is not an exhaustive list but rather a summative overview of some key 'take-home' messages.

Tensions in depictions of studenthood

A number of these chapters highlight the demise of the 'ideal' or taken-for-granted student type instead variously pointing out that this is constructed, unrealistic and contrary to the realities both experienced by individual learners and also presented within the media or political agendas. For example, the students in the TV documentaries featured in Calver and Michael-Fox's chapter (Chapter 10) seem to conform to a 'risky' student imagery – those who drink excessively or avoid study. Equally, Finn et al. (Chapter 12) focus on the newspaper reporting of students born between 1981 and 1996, revealing how the representations utilised serve to 'shore up particular imaginings of students' that are very removed from an idealised or imagined version of the student type that is a 'resilient scholar of the past'. These chapters and others reveal how the positioning of 'students as learners' is absent from policy and instead the roles of 'consumer', 'risk taker' and 'hedonist' are often foregrounded. Such understandings do not account for the more relational or embodied nature of university attendance and instead emphasise an individualised relationship that can be negatively interpreted as both 'passive' and 'entitled'. This is just one example of many in this book where there is a tension between versions of studenthood exemplified across the sector.

Diverse methodologies and foci

The chapters in this book not only present diversity in terms of findings but equally the methodologies used and the data generated are rich in complexity and insights. This deliberate and careful methodological work is demonstrated across studies. For example, Danvers and Hinton-Smith (Chapter 5) describe evocatively how they adopted Kvale's (1996) traveller motif as they journeyed alongside their young school student participants. Outlining their role in focus groups, these authors explained how they intentionally strived 'to gently guide' the participants ultimately 'wandering together with' them to frame and support emerging insights about Widening Participation. These authors explore the difficulties of conducting research in this space and the need to avoid adopting the role of, what they term as, a 'transient stranger' in order to enable a much deeper exploration of the affective impact of transitioning into university spaces and places.

A number of the studies refer to a range of mediums and modalities in order to unpack the domain of studenthood. Drawing upon Fairclough's Critical Discourse Approach, Chapters 9 and 13 both explore spoken discourse in combination with images to develop a holistic understanding of how subject positionings were conceived and understood by participants. In Chapter 13, Eiras and Huijser further complement this approach with an arts-based interview method that encouraged participants to 'sketch' their experiences of identity construction during the interview, an important first step in establishing trust and also, opening up dialogues.

Calver and Michael-Fox (Chapter 10) provide a detailed textual analysis of UK documentaries over 10 years to expose contradictory thinking about student behaviours and characteristics. Drawing upon analysis of both dialogue and narration, the many contradictions and complexities of student representations are drawn out and interrogated. Interestingly, in these media, there is no reference to older, part-time or distance students, instead these documentaries focus exclusively on 18- to 21-year-olds, a narrow construction of what the 'student experience' is, which precludes the diversity of students that actually attend higher education. Finn et al. (Chapter 12) also draw attention to the limiting nature of language and terminology, highlighting how the term 'snowflake' defines students in largely deficit ways as needing 'safe spaces' and being anti-activist. Closer analysis of policy documents, however, reveals how it was higher education institutions rather than students who demanded less debate, exposing how institutions can be censuring bodies that 'delegitimise' political voices and 'deflect' any need for change.

Finally, McDonald's chapter (Chapter 3) draws upon narrative case studies to reveal the complex situations of two first-in-family students. These case studies provide the reader with insight into the diverse lived experiences of two young women as they make the transition to university. This piece also offers a departure from common themes explored in relation to first-in-family

students and their family's attitude to university attendance. Too often this work focuses on the conflicts that arise between family members. McDonald's work instead sheds light onto how relationships, particularly those with parents, can positively reinforce and support movements into HE; a much-needed alternative perspective for the field.

Diversity of conclusions drawn: Final thoughts

We largely consider the role of university students as being a 'taken-for-granted' one, an accepted and somewhat unchallenged type. However, this book has revealed the highly contested and variable nature of this role and how the positioning of contemporary students exposes deeper political agendas and understandings. The 'risky' nature of university attendance features strongly in these chapters and yet what is generally publicly articulated is the value of higher education enrolment, the seemingly endless opportunity this participation brings, with little recognition of the contradictions that can result at an individual learner level. Danvers and Hinton-Smith (Chapter 5) refer to this as a 'hyper positive' portrayal and argue that recognising the illegitimate nature of this presentation requires ongoing scrutiny and critical analysis of our university systems and their associated constructions.

Lumb and Bunn (Chapter 8) draw upon an 'Ames Room' motif to encourage the reader to step back from a particular viewpoint in order to deliberately seek out the 'concealed dimensions' within a scenario. These authors equally warn that unless alertness is retained by the 'viewer', it is easy to 'step back' into accepted perspectives and accept the 'illusion' once again. This scrutiny might be uncomfortable, particularly for those who work within this system but it is clearly vital for the ongoing development of higher education. Continually questioning the student identity and recognising its constructed nature contributes to deeper understanding of the hidden tensions within the sector. Such understandings, presented in this book, will contribute to wider debates across the disciplines of education, sociology, gender and social policy ultimately continuing the conversations about the ways in which our understanding about students is both highly contested and deeply constructed.

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