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Widening participation: effects on teacher education programs

Suzanne Macqueen

Recommendations from the Bradley *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) to increase numbers of students generally and percentages of students from low SES backgrounds specifically have led to university initiatives which encourage more such students to enrol. Historically, non-traditional students such as these who undertake tertiary education have been more likely to join programs such as teaching and nursing rather than, for example, engineering or medicine, and that trend continues (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Non-traditional students, often the first generation of their family to enrol, also experience higher education (HE) differently from more traditional students, and may face different challenges. This paper reports on the perceptions of teacher educators in a university with a percentage of low SES students which is higher than the Bradley targets. Anonymous surveys, completed by teacher educators, elicited perceptions of cohort characteristics and skills. The results show concerns over the academic skill levels of some students, and indicate that changes have been made to courses to cater for the demonstrated needs of the cohort. Universities must be aware of the changing demographics in cohorts which may be brought about by widening participation initiatives. Adequate resources and support for both students and those teaching them must be provided if the students are to have a real chance to succeed whilst maintaining program quality.

Widening participation agendas

The evolution of a global economy has led many governments around the world to encourage higher rates of participation in tertiary education. They consider that this will ensure a suitably skilled workforce to compete with other nations for economic opportunities. Some also consider this as a way of improving outcomes for socially disadvantaged groups. In Australia, such moves have been seen at least as far back as the Dawkins era (John Dawkins was Australia's Education Minister from 1987 until 1992) and have recently re-emerged through the Bradley review recommendations (Bradley, et al, 2008). The review set targets of 'at least 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or above' and '20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds' (p. xviii) to be reached by the year 2020. The practice of encouraging more of the population into higher education is termed 'widening participation' in much of the literature, and is evident in countries as varied as the United Kingdom (UK), various European nations, India, the United States (US), Israel and Hong Kong, with varying levels of success and differing issues.

Non-traditional students

If widening participation initiatives are successful in attracting more students to tertiary education, there are ramifications for those students, the staff who teach them and the institutions they attend. Encouraging more students means a change from the typical higher education student, to what can be termed 'non-traditional' students. Those previously unlikely to have attended university include people with the following characteristics; low SES, mature-age, low literacy, disability and having criminal records (DfEE, 1995). Many will be the first generation of their family to attend higher education (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010), and they are at greater risk of alienation in HE, due to a lack of family knowledge about the tertiary context (Penrose, 2002). They may struggle with HE systems and their academic demands, not having been adequately prepared for these at home or school (Burke & Johnston, 2004; Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, 2008).

Non-traditional students are more likely to attend less prestigious institutions. Factors leading to this include entry requirements, financial constraints, location and psychological comfort (Reay, Ball & David, 2005). Additionally, they are more likely to enrol in some programs than others. In urban areas, school students from low SES backgrounds perform four to five percentage points more poorly than their high SES counterparts (James et al, 2010), limiting their HE opportunities. Teacher education is a frequent choice due to familiarity with the profession, comparatively low entry requirements and a perception that it will lead to stable employment (Snell, 2008). The Australian Government seemingly promotes this trend, stating that it will reduce HE debts for those studying teaching and nursing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). There are concerns, though, that these students may lack sufficient support in such programs, as teaching courses have relatively low staff/student ratios (AARE, 2011).

University education requires specific literacy and other academic skills for success. Non-traditional students are more likely to find academic language unfamiliar (Bourdieu, Passeron & Saint Martin, 1994). They may struggle with the academic literacy required by assessment tasks, including the ability to read long, complex texts, synthesise information and determine inferred meanings (Snell, 2008). Priest (2009) suggested that the students experience a disconnect between their home/culture and academic discourses. Happily, it has been found that despite a perceived difference in literacy skills, first-generation students' overall college performance was not different from that of others (Penrose, 2002).

From the information outlined above it can be inferred that universities will be encouraged to recruit students from non-traditional backgrounds, including particularly those from low SES backgrounds as a result of Bradley Review recommendations, and that many of these will enrol in teacher education programs. Some of them will struggle with the academic practices and demands of university study, and this will impact teacher educators' work. It will of course also impact on the students themselves, and I do not wish to downplay the possible effects on students, but that is not the focus of this particular paper. Here I report on one discrete aspect of a longitudinal study into the experiences of non-traditional teacher education students. Through surveys with teacher educators I sought to determine the following:

1. What changes have teacher educators perceived in their cohorts over time?
2. How do teacher educators perceive student academic skill levels?
3. What changes have educators made to courses to cater for student needs?
4. What are the implications of student academic skill levels for universities?

Investigating teacher educators' perceptions

Course coordinators of teacher education courses at a regional Australian university were approached to participate in an anonymous survey regarding their perceptions of the cohort and associated changes to courses. This university attracts a high proportion of non-traditional students, already having a percentage of low SES students higher than Bradley targets as well as a relatively high proportion of mature age students and those entering via alternate pathways. Survey questions related to observations of teacher education cohorts, including how they have changed over time, their motivations, academic skills and study practices. For the purpose of this paper I focus on data related to student academic skills.

Responses from fifteen course coordinators were received and all were included. The respondents included 14 full-time and one casual staff members of whom 11 were female and four male. Combined, they had 150 years of experience teaching in universities. All respondents taught in multiple years of the teacher education programs, with most teaching in a variety of foundational, curriculum and professional experience courses.

The anonymous survey was comprised mostly of open-ended questions. An exploratory design (Creswell, 2012) was employed, as this part of the larger study was intended to provide an additional perspective and inform further investigations.

Data collected through the surveys presents an interesting and complex picture of teacher education students' interaction with tertiary education. Here I present data related to themes of student academic and literacy skills, motivations and academics responses to cohort needs.

Changes in pre-service teacher cohorts

There was consensus among all respondents that changes had occurred in TE cohorts over the time the respondents had spent working as teacher educators. Changes most often commented about related to academic orientation, motivation and skill level, with all stating that the changes were negative; that is, students' academic skills are lower now than previously. If literacy skill level is included then such comments were made by eight participants. Comments covered literacy (including such basics as spelling, grammar, sentence structure) and analysis as well as academic motivation and finding coursework difficult. These comments may link to one respondent's mention of the lowering of entry requirements in recent years. This person claimed a 25 per cent reduction in entry requirement from 2007 to 2012 (I have not verified this statement).

Changes in some characteristics of those enrolling were noted by six staff. Three specifically noted an increase in low SES numbers, two noted an increase in mature age students, one an increase in international students and one noted an increase in diversity generally. These

changes may be directly linked to the observation from two staff of an increase in student numbers, with one person suggesting that numbers had quadrupled (it is not specified over what period this growth was observed). There were also three comments about students complaining more, being less likely to take responsibility for their learning and having more personal and emotional problems that impact on their university studies.

The changes noted in this study are similar to those observed by Zipin and Brennan (2006) who saw TE students as increasingly being engaged in paid work in addition to their studies and being weak academically. Another concerning observation by Zipin and Brennan was that the students did not consider that Early Childhood or Primary teaching were demanding in terms of literacy or numeracy skills – this may lead to a lack of concern about their own skill levels. Widening participation will inevitably lead to an increase in numbers of students enrolling in HE. One way for institutions to increase numbers may be to lower entry requirements, and students who performed less well in school are likely to have poorer literacy and academic skill levels than students with higher attainment. This does not, however, explain the lower motivations observed. It may be that some students have enrolled in teacher education simply because they were able to do so, and did not qualify for other programs or positions, rather than because they had a strong desire to become teachers, and this may well affect motivation.

Academic skill concerns

When asked specifically for their observations on students' academic skills, all 15 respondents voiced concern over poor literacy levels. Six comments related to struggles with critical thinking skills and justifying an argument. Two noted that students struggle to read complex texts or don't devote sufficient time to such tasks, and three mention spelling specifically. Another three commented that students are more knowledgeable about information technology (one of the few areas of positive student skills). Three noted that students have issues with time, being either unable or unwilling to devote sufficient time to attending classes or undertaking reading or research. Lack of engagement with literacy and academic practices will not help students improve their skills.

In the US, Snell (2008) linked decreased capacity for complex reading tasks with a decline in reading nationally (US), and claimed this was related to family income. He also suggested a link to lower ability or inclination to engage academically and socially. One comment that poor literacy was noticeable in exams is of concern. Some students' poor skill levels may be masked by the opportunity to have assignments edited using spellcheck, grammar check and so on. These students' problems will become evident when they are required to write for an immediate audience (consider the classroom context).

Change leading to change

The vast majority of respondents (all but one) indicated that they had made changes to their courses to cater for students' needs. The respondent who did not make changes claimed this would be detrimental to course quality.

The most common type of change noted by the other respondents was to provide more explicit support or scaffolding for assessment tasks, including the provision of detailed rubrics and showing exemplars. Eight reported such changes. Three staff had reduced the number or difficulty of set readings, and two of these had also reduced the amount or difficulty of assessment. One had introduced rationales to help students learn to justify their responses.

When more time is spent on one thing, with no change to time constraints, clearly time for other things must be removed. If more time is spent on scaffolding assessment tasks, what is no longer being covered? Perhaps relevant theories and practices are covered in less detail, or some are omitted? What effect does this have on how comprehensive a course is, or on its quality? If it is happening in a number of courses, is there a cumulative effect on the program as a whole? In the UK, at least, the era of widening participation has been accompanied by concern around the maintenance of standards (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). While it is good practice to modify teaching for students, reducing amount or difficulty of content may not be the answer. These decisions are being made by teacher educators - those on the front line, as it were, who have limited options and even less power.

Implications for institutions and teaching staff

Cohorts can vary in characteristics from year to year and from one institution to another. I do not claim here that the changes outlined in this paper were a direct result of widening participation initiatives, lowered entry requirements or any other singular factor. These findings do, however, demonstrate the need for governments and institutions to carefully consider and monitor the results of their policies and practices. University courses and programs can be affected by the changing demographics of cohorts which are sometimes influenced by policy, as is likely to occur in the wake of the Bradley review. Academics' workload is likewise affected, when educators find themselves addressing academic skill levels and literacy in addition to actual course content. This is currently occurring under conditions of increasing workload for academics and inadequate education funding at all levels.

Whilst it is admirable to progress social justice agendas by improving access to HE for non-traditional students, such initiatives will not be completely successful until they are adequately funded and resourced. Student achievement is supported by the explicit teaching of academic literacies and discourses, and the unpacking of academic expectations, while, at the same time, being sensitive to the cultural origins, SES backgrounds, needs and values of students and so provide appropriate learning activities (James et al, 2010). Academics will need support in incorporating such aspects into their courses and programs.

Students may require bridging courses or extra academic support if they are to succeed in HE, and if institutions are willing to accept their enrolment, they are ethically bound to make it possible for those students to succeed. Bradley et al (2008) claimed that low SES students were frequent users of support services in universities and that more of those services should be provided. This contrasts with the claim by Zipin and Brennan (2006) that those students

are unlikely to use such services. Further research is required to illuminate this area. If students in need will not access support services, other responses must be investigated, such as embedding skill development within coursework, but with adequate time and funding. Funding for widening participation is available under the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program, but how this funding is used and its effectiveness also requires investigation.

The case examined here of teacher education may be the best case scenario in some ways. Those involved in the teaching profession may be more sympathetic than other academics towards those students who struggle. They may also be more aware of the social justice issues at play, with many teachers aware, if not supportive, of socialist ideals (forgive the generalisations). Similar research of the situation in other disciplines is needed, as widening participation will, if truly successful, affect all faculties.

An interesting point to note is that although the survey reported on here was distributed for anonymous response, three respondents approached the researcher after completing the survey to say that they felt this was a very important area and they would be happy (in fact it was their desire) to talk further in order to provide more in-depth responses. Clearly this issue is very real and important to some teacher educators. It would be worthwhile to investigate this more thoroughly in terms of academics' workloads and their success or struggles in addressing the situation.

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