Call for policy change on low-SES students

By Marcia Devlin | 28th November, 2011

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The ways in which students from low socio-economic status are thought, and talked, about in Australian higher education bear examination. There are deficit conceptions of students from low SES backgrounds and deficit conceptions of the institutions in which they study. Is there a more useful and progressive framing of the widening participation agenda?

The federal government has recently set an ambitious target in an attempt to address low SES under-representation in higher education: that by 2020, up to 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be from students from low SES backgrounds. But is Australian higher education ready to ensure not only their access to, but also their success at, university?

Cultural capital is a notion that is critical to understanding the experiences of low SES students in higher education. University students from higher SES and more traditional backgrounds build familiarity with high SES assumptions, values and expectations over a lifetime. They have a reservoir of cultural and social resources and familiarity with particular types of knowledge, ways of communicating and worldviews when they come to university, which helps them to feel comfortable, to progress and to succeed.

Many low SES students do not have such a reservoir. Australian research shows that first-year students with this background were more likely than their higher SES peers to say they have difficulty adjusting to teaching styles within the university environment. Research shows they are not familiar with the discourses of university, nor how to engage with, master and demonstrate capacity in them. To do so requires particular socio-cultural capabilities relevant to the specific context of university study which many low SES students just do not have.

The notion of cultural congruity and incongruity has resonance in relation to socio-economic status and in particular to the level of socio-cultural congruence between low SES students and the higher education institutions in which they study. The first deficit conception is that students are the problem. There has been much research conducted on elements of success at university within an individual student’s sphere of influence. This includes research on resilience, self-efficacy and motivation.

While valuable, such research can be based on the assumption that university success is primarily the responsibility of individual students and can presuppose a level playing field in relation to socio-cultural and background characteristics. It can be seductive to think that if non-traditional students are clever enough, or try or persevere enough or believe enough in their own ability, they can succeed at university. However, with such a limited line of thinking, it follows then that failure to succeed at university is the fault of the student. Such thinking is highly problematic.

The absence of social class being considered as a key influence on the university experiences of low SES students, and the assumption that individualised factors are the main reason for student disadvantage, can lead to “victim blaming” that can impede student success and fail to solve the real problem.
The second deficit conception is that institutions are the problem. Many researchers problematise the institutions that are responsible for low SES-student progress. Institutional inflexibility is one common theme in such research and the argument is that the educational institution itself creates and perpetuates inequalities and should change.

A recent Australian research report suggested universities should make changes in terms of heralding the expectations they have of students. This suggestion is underpinned by an assumption that the significant deficit lies with the student and that the only deficit for institutions is in not being clear enough about how they expect students to fit into existing structures and expectations. There are at least two different discourses on the issue of retaining non-traditional students at university. One centres on what institutions do to fit students into their existing cultures and this discourse dominates. The second discourse challenges the dominant one and is still emerging. Rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, it suggests that institutional cultures be adapted to better fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

The socio-cultural conception is that incongruence must be bridged. In recent work, I have proposed the notion of “socio-cultural incongruence” to describe the circumstances where low SES students engage with the discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education. There are many examples of this in the literature and in the lived experiences of such students. I have also proposed the adoption of the notion of a “bridge” in the conceptualisation of changes that could be made to lessen or ease socio-cultural incongruence for low SES students at university.

In contrast to the rather simplistic approach of advocating that either students try harder or institutions make expectations more explicit, the bridges and joint venture proposed are more complex and nuanced. As the government agenda in relation to widening participation is implemented, an increasing number and proportion of higher education students in the sector will be from low SES backgrounds. Without a radical shift in thinking, institutions within the sector in Australia may not be ready to respond en masse to ensuring the success of all students in the future. Significant change in policy and practice is needed.

Professor Marcia Devlin is chair in Higher Education Research at Deakin University. The full text can be found in the journal Studies in Higher Education at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.613991