

Quality in undergraduate education

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Quality in Undergraduate Education
MONICA MCLEAN, ANDREA ABBAS AND PAUL ASHWIN 2018
Bloomsbury
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This book forces the reader to reflect upon the state of English higher education in this space and at this time. Being a lecturer within it, I have become weakened by duties to publish key performance indicators, which in turn are inputted into spreadsheets for leading newspapers to publish their university league tables. For me, the authors of this book offer evidence on the extent of the current dysfunction of the English higher education sector in having to balance neo-market forces and in addressing societal inequities.

The book is divided into five parts. The first part, entailing two chapters, introduces the question of whether English universities reproduce inequalities. It is here that the context is set and the reader is introduced to the four anonymous institutions and departments of study, categorised as: (1) community university; (2) diversity university; (3) prestige university; and (4) selective university. The researchers focused on the delivery of teaching and undergraduate student experiences of sociology-related courses within these four institutions. The second part of the book, which comprises chapters 3, 4 and 5, details patterns of inequality within the English higher education sector. Discussion of inequality revolves around widening access into higher education for students with non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. working-class backgrounds) and efforts to support and retain them when they do enter. The discussion moves on to the question of what constitutes good-quality university education in an environment where performing well in league tables is key. The second part concludes with chapter 5 on the significance of sociology and its related disciplines to further explain the theoretical backbone of the study, which is based on Bernstein's (1971) ideas on epistemological access in education and persistent inequalities. The third part of the book, entailing chapters 6 and 7, is where the reader becomes immersed in the empirical evidence, beginning with how courses are designed and delivered at the four institutions. In chapter 7, the reader gets insight into how students make sense of their experiences and what is expected of them, such as contributing in a seminar or in 'independent study'. Part 4 of the book carries on presenting the findings in chapters 8 and 9, with emphasis on what constitutes discipline identity and how students see their future selves. It is here where the reader, like myself, gained a greater sense of distinction between the lives of students at a less prestigious university from a more prestigious university: '...wealthier students are less preoccupied with settling on an occupation straight after a degree...' (p. 188). The final part of the book concludes with chapter 10 advocating for socially just undergraduate education and highlighting the 'good quality' of teaching and experience of students in lower league table universities in England.

The book's strength is in its empirical work. Contrasting the design and delivery of undergraduate sociology courses across the four institutions, the authors of the study compel the reader to consider how quality is constituted and how students are

able to form an identity by practicing a discipline (p.98). This reminds me of the narrative offered by Faith, a student at 'prestige' university. She offered a snapshot of how the projected course identity (focused on building-up the sociology discipline) was disconnected with her interest in pursuing a lucrative career in marketing.

There are a couple of shortcomings of the book, and this may be more about me than the presentation of the work. I would have wanted to gain more insight from staff perspectives, particularly on how their course has been packaged and marketed. Working in the sector for a number of years, I have learned through time how a course is projected does not necessarily reflect the view(s) of the teaching team. Another aspect which could have been addressed and expanded upon was the unequal degree outcomes and university experiences of students of colour, particularly in England. Not much was made about the ethnic and racial composition of staff working in the four departments, the module titles on offer and how this reflects the student diversity within the course.

As a course leader and lecturer who has a sociological studies background, I found this book valuable for me to not only reflect on my course and delivery, but to have the necessary, convincing evidence to make change. This work has offered much to ponder in my own professional development as a higher education worker, and it should be for others working in the sector.

Reference

Bernstein, B. 1971. *Class, Codes and Control Vol. 1: Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language*. London: Routledge.

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