

Dissecting Diversity: Experiences of migrant and minority student populations in SETU Carlow.

Sandra Nolan

M.A. by Research

South East Technological University (SETU), Carlow



As a Research Fellow I completed an independent study focused on EDI in Higher Education for my Masters by Research. My passion for equality, and my love of education, was first given space to develop in a professional capacity for over ten years in my previous work as a Post Primary teacher of English and Religion. My research work now involves the Irish labour market and how qualitative research can positively impact an understanding of EDI in the workplace. I am now an Associate Lecturer of EDI and Academic Writing for SETU, and N-TUTORR EDI Student Champion for SETU Waterford.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural Education, Access to Education, Minority students, Belonging, Diversity

INTRODUCTION

This paper will outline findings from a study that examined the experiences of education inclusion and exclusion for migrant and minority ethnic students at SETU Carlow. The study sought to answer whether or not access to third level education for migrant and ethnic minority students in SETU Carlow can be facilitated through inclusive pedagogies. The paper will highlight research findings under the theme 'Diversity' – one of four themes explored in the study. Other themes from this study include 'Inclusion' and 'Belonging', and are discussed in a forthcoming paper (Nolan, 2024). The methodological design is also described here, along with the idea of researcher's positionality, and the role of HEIs around the theme selected. To protect the anonymity of research participants, the identifier 'Participant X' is used to indicate focus group responses, and 'Survey Respondent' is used to indicate survey questionnaire responses. This study was approved by the ethical committee of SETU and conducted in line with all ethical procedures and requirements.

Under the theme 'Diversity', findings are discussed as Macro-level Diversity – referring to the institution as a whole; Meso-level Diversity – referring to the general climate of the institution; and Micro-level Diversity – referring to the individual student experience of diversity. In line with the work of Tan (2019) this research study understands diversity in education as:

“The presence of differences within a given setting. This may include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, place of practice, and practice type.”

Incorporating a sociological perspective of the term diversity regarding educational environments, this research study demonstrated a positive relationship between ethnocultural diversity and access to education. This paper argues that there must be closer attention given to understanding how policies on diversity are best acted on in the interest of the student experience.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study, based around understanding the everyday experiences of participants, and was informed by the constructivist paradigm. Qualitative enquiry believes that reality is subjective and that social environments are personal constructs created by individual interpretations that are not generalizable (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003); these beliefs are rooted in constructivism. Qualitative researchers value rich description and deep understanding. Qualitative researchers believe that research is influenced by the values held by the researcher as well as by the theories, or the framework that the researcher is using (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Ontologically speaking, this study understood meaning as constructed rather than discovered. This ontological position is located in an understanding that reality exists beyond a single, verifiable truth, giving researchers the liberty and space to collect and analyse data in a holistic way (Gray, 2014). In this way, constructivism, as a posture within social research, allows us to understand how meaning, or truth, can be at once objective and subjective (Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

The sampling method used was volunteer sampling in order to respect fully the person-centred ethos of the project. There was both written and oral data collected through the use of survey questionnaire (written data) (n = 74) and focus groups (oral data) (n = 5).

Research Participants

Section A of the online survey questionnaire gathered general background information about participants, focusing on respondents' ethnic backgrounds, nationality, and area of study. The questions asked here were used to establish a broad picture of the student population in terms of ethnicity and minority status, along with differences in level and field of studies. When asked to provide details about their ethnicity, 51 participants responded with two main categories emerging, the first was White Irish/White Other, with a total of 26. The second was Asian/Black African/Black Irish/Black Other/ Arabic, with a total of 24. Additionally, within the category of White Irish/White Other, 11 out of the 26 respondents indicated migrant and/or minority ethnic status. Out of the 51 responses, 1 participant identified as having no race, writing “aracial” as their response. The information provided here indicated that the sample of participants represented the target group for this research project, that is, migrant and minority ethnic students.

Question 3 of the survey asked about migrant status. The question included the following general explanation for participants;

- First generation - you were born outside of Ireland and are not an Irish citizen by birth.
- Second generation - you were born in Ireland but one or more of your parents were born outside of Ireland, and you are an Irish citizen by birth.

57 participants responded with 44 indicating first generation migrant status, and 13 indicating second generation migrant status.

Regarding courses of study, the Humanities was the most represented, with a total of 20 out of 74 respondents choosing this field. This was followed by Business (n14), Science and Health (n12), Computing and Networking (n11), Aerospace, Mechanical and Electronic Engineering (n10), with Sport Media and Marketing, and Built Environment being the least represented at 4 and 3 respectively. In terms of the level at which respondents were studying, the majority were completing undergraduate studies, at 52 out of 74. Further, most respondents were following the more traditional path of full-time studies, 58, over part-time studies, 16.

Regarding the focus group setting, there were five participants, three of which were female and two were male. Two out of the three female participants were completing postgraduate studies and one was in the second year of their undergraduate degree. One male was a postgraduate student, and one was an undergraduate student. In terms of the ethnic profile of focus group participants, four identified as having first generation migrant status, and one as second-generation migrant status. Additionally, two out of the five participants explained that they identified as belonging to an ethnic minority (Nigerian and Ugandan), whereas three participants chose not to disclose this information.

Ethical Considerations

In line with SETU research policy regarding Vulnerable Participants (which includes migrant and ethnic minority groups), the researcher was committed to protecting respondents by way of ensuring that consent was obtained appropriately, and that data collection was safeguarded (ITC, Ethics Policy, Version 8, 2021). Although total confidentiality is not possible for vulnerable groups, the research was conducted in a manner that protected the confidentiality of participants insofar as it was possible as per the policies around guidelines and best practice. In addition, the data for this research project was collected in a manner that was convenient to participants – that is, by remote access to the survey questionnaire, and through online focus group discussion. This was especially significant as the data collection phase was conducted during the Covid-19 emergency. Besides needing to adhere to health and safety guidelines as mandated by the Irish Government, it was important to ensure that respondents felt safe and secure when participating.

Conducting research among vulnerable groups requires awareness of the potential distress this may cause (ITC, Ethics Policy, Version 8, 2021). As such, it was important that I, the researcher, not only made participants aware of this, but that they also prepared for such an eventuality. This was attended to by way of providing participants with detailed information about the project, ensuring participants understood their right to withdraw at any point in the process, receiving informed consent from participants, and outlining protocols for dealing with distress that participants may experience.

Positionality and Allyship:

In undertaking this research project, an important part of the work was creating a sense of inclusion at every stage, make research subjects part of the research by doing research *with* rather than research *on* participants. As a white woman working and learning in Irish Higher Education, I benefit from the privilege of normative identity – my position is the default which allows me the comfort and security of being the ‘norm’. In order to counteract the ‘stock story’ of the default ethnic majority position I occupy, and effectively understand the impact of diversity as part of the academic lives of students, this research needed to prioritise experiences which are beyond my own, to counteract what Joseph (2020) terms ‘racial complacency’. I am aware of the need to reflect on, and deconstruct my own positionality in order to become a ‘race ally’ in a meaningful way. Allyship involves recognising personal privilege or power and using it to advocate for people in underrepresented groups. Being a good ally is about awareness and

advocacy. Equality studies research requires that the experiences of participants, informed by their social, political and cultural backgrounds, be prioritised (Joseph 2020).

KEY FINDINGS AROUND DIVERSITY:

When the idea of diversity was explored positives include how SETU is engaging with government agendas in terms of policy reform, identified in this study as macro-level diversity. On the other hand, diversity appears to be lacking in the everyday lived experiences for ethnic minority students, identified in this study as micro-level diversity. The data suggest that it is the in-between space, identified as meso-level diversity, that could be a key area for consideration in order to bridge the gap between policy and the day-to-day reality for students.

Macro-level diversity:

On a macro-level diversity is part of SETU's identity as per policy documents, however the study found that the claim to be diverse can be felt as a selling point rather than a reality for students. If SETU is to truly achieve diversity as per the public perception being advertised, there must be closer attention given to understanding how policies on diversity are best acted on in the interest of the student experience and bridge the gap between 'doing' diversity and 'being' diverse. When asked if they felt SETU was a diverse environment, one focus group participant commented, "Make it more about the students in real life instead of social media" (Participant X). When asked about changes they would like to see at ITC, a focus group participants commented, "I think there is a lot of lip-service given to, say, the president on campus saying 'oh the students are our greatest asset, and the students are the greatest thing' but in practice you don't necessarily feel that" (Participant X).

Ahmed and Swan (2006) underline this idea by explaining that in cultivating a diverse climate institutes must understand that their community is organised around cultural and ethnic majorities. Diversity is about exposing the concealed inequalities of an "orientation around whiteness", which is achieved by examining how diversity is used as a marketing tool, or as "forms of capital" in order to portray an environment that is inclusive and equal, when this may not necessarily be the case.

Meso-level diversity:

This second layer of diversity examined the difference between diversity as a policy and diversity as a reality from two aspects, the first is diversity among teaching staff, the second is diversity in the curriculum. Findings here suggest that a lack of meso-level diversity regarding faculty and cultural awareness negatively impacts on curriculum design and delivery.

Meso-level diversity – (a) Diversity among faculty:

When asked 'Are any of your lecturers or tutors from minority ethnic backgrounds?' the majority of survey questionnaire responses were recorded as 'no'. This aligns with UK and Irish studies and scholarship on diversity in Higher Education and the diversity in the labour market. The lack of representation was sharply felt by minority ethnic and migrant survey questionnaire respondents: "All of my lecturers seem and sound Irish to me with no exceptions"; "It will be nice to see some black or ethnic representation"; "Almost all the cleaners [on campus] are Polish so that just doesn't feel right" (Survey Respondents). This lack of diversity has negatively impacted the student experience, with further comments on this explaining, "it's always there that I'm not from Ireland" (Participant X); "It just reinforces the message that you're different" (Participant X). SETU faculty is lacking in diversity and culturally divergent perspectives and this creates limited educational

experiences for students, an issue echoed in the HEA 2021 Report, 'Race Equality in the Higher Education sector'. The concern here is that if lecturers are limited in their diversity from an ethnical, cultural, and experiential position, then the students' worldview needs to shrink in order to fit in with the limited perspective of their lecturer.

Meso-level diversity – (b) Diversity in the curriculum:

Kelly and Padden highlight how diversity in HIEs concerns not just the student and teaching population but also the "extent to which institutes respond to the challenges of Diversity and the extent to which a curriculum demonstrates diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives is a key aspect of this." (2018). Diversity in the curriculum generated mixed responses in this study, with a relatively even split between positive and negative responses, such as: "The only examples used in tutorials come from Irish and/or Eurocentric perspectives" (Survey Respondent); versus, "Since the BLM [the Black Lives Matter movement] everyone is definitely more open to hear our insights" (Participant X). However, curriculum diversity is wide ranging and percolates into pedagogical practices; topics are often explored through in-class discussion work. Focus group participants centred on this, highlighting how a mismanaged approach to diversity in lectures, creates feelings of exclusion for some students:

"Depends on what the topic is about, if it's coming from a negative perspective and it's a country where my ancestors are from...it's about reading the room and knowing how to use these examples...there's a lack of understanding." (Participant X); "For some reason when lecturers find out where you're from they keep using examples from Saudi Arabia in class." (Participant X).

Rather than allow for diversity to be a positive learning experience for students, different ethnic backgrounds are referred to in ways that cause difficulties for students. Creating diversity is not about creating divisions or highlighting differences, but about creating respect and highlighting the richness of alternative perspectives, and understandings. Findings indicated that rather than use diverse backgrounds to create positive teaching moments when delivering the curriculum, lecturers appear to be doing the opposite in some instances. In all, exploring the meso-level diversity climate at SETU, this study found that a lack of diversity regarding lecturers and cultural awareness negatively impacts on curriculum design and delivery.

Micro-level diversity:

The topic of diversity repeatedly involved clubs and societies, but the responses show a dichotomy regarding the positive impact they have on creating diverse environments for students. On one hand clubs and societies appear to support diversity, whereas on the other hand, they themselves are not diverse environments. "An AfroCaribbean Society, that's the only thing that I see that shows diversity" (Participant X); versus; "If you look at the clubs and societies there are actually more international students than Irish. I feel they are where students would meet up and mix, but you're not going to get the mix of students there to begin with." (Participant X). This illustrates a picture of diversity as an intrinsic balance between creating support systems for minority ethnic and migrant students, while simultaneously fostering a diverse culture that creates a positive individual experience for students. The impact of clubs and societies on education experiences for migrant and minority ethnic students was considered in a previous paper, 'Researching Inclusion in HE: A Narrative of Initial Enquiry' (Nolan and Flynn, 2021).

Role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) – what matters to students:

The findings from this study deliver powerful testimony to what matters to the cohort of learners this research sought to examine: Their academic journey is fuelled when ethnocultural diversity is responded to, acknowledged, and facilitated, as this helps to create a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and belonging.

Indeed, the educational experience of migrant and minority ethnic students is positively affected when these students encounter and engage with diverse faculty members; representation matters. Additionally, the educational experience is improved when students are not singled out in class – in either a positive or negative manner. In this way, the lecturer-student relationship was identified as an important factor regarding experiences of diversity for migrant and minority ethnic students. Drawing on these findings, the role of HEIs must be to champion the ideals of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, more fully in terms of the micro, meso, and macro elements of diversity discussed here. This paper argues that there must be closer attention given to understanding how policies on diversity are best acted on in the interest of the student experience.

It has been observed that the role of educational institutions extends beyond their immediate environment into the wider social domain in and through the reproduction and legitimisation of dominant cultural practices and beliefs (Freire, 1998[1970]; Bourdieu, 1986; Baker, Lynch et al, 2004, p. 59; Mourad, 2020, p. 2). A key concern of the HEA 2021 report centred on this wider social role of HEIs, where their policy recommendations suggested the need to acknowledge “the power of HEIs to influence Irish Society in general” (Kempny and Michael, 2021, p. 69). The relationship between Irish society and HEIs is a fundamental aspect of government policies concerning the current and future role of education (DES, 2011; HEA, 2008, 2015; Liston et al, 2016). Engaging with the wider society has been identified as one of three core roles of higher education in Ireland (DES, 2011, p. 74). A common observance is that the student population in higher education should reflect “the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population”, and in that diversity, there needs to be clear lines of tolerance, acceptance, and equality of respect for the varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students (HEA, 2015, p. 9; Kelly and Padden, 2018.).

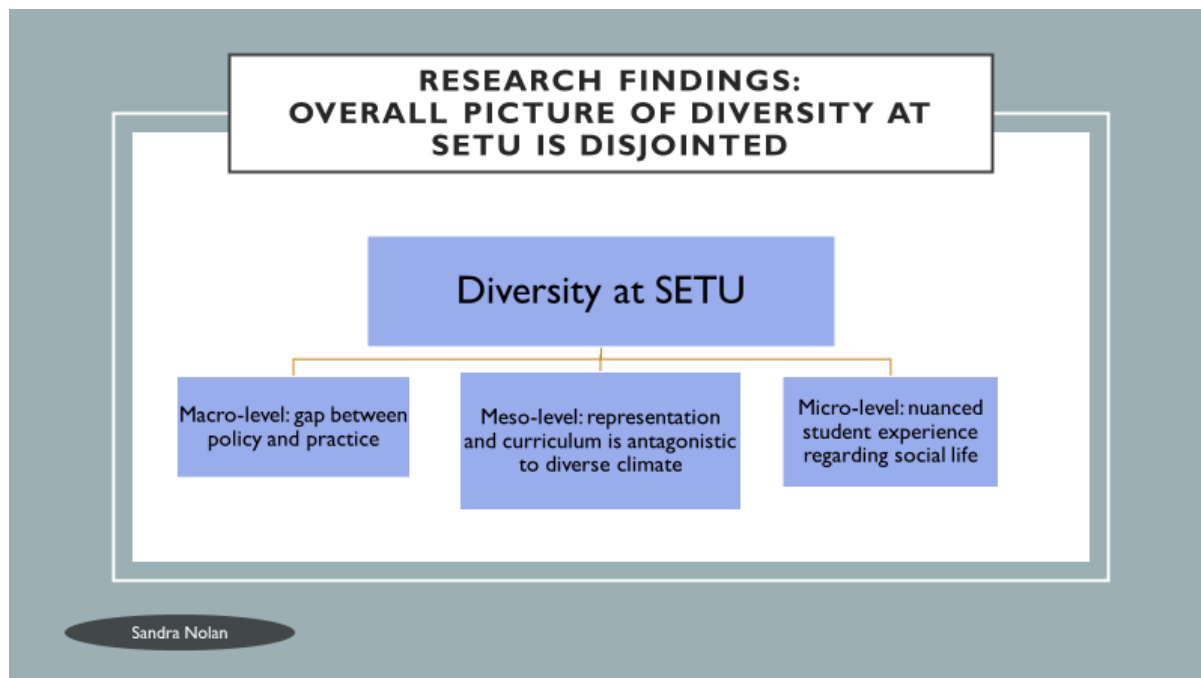
RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of recommendations, the findings appear to rest on a general need for culturally responsive teaching and engagement. This research project highlighted some of the tensions and challenges of SETU’s educational policies and practices. We view these findings as opportunities for educational innovation; with the following recommendations for future practice:

Regarding the challenges under the theme diversity, this study recommends that an intersectional lens is applied to enhance curriculum and assessment design. This could provide a wider perspective with which to accommodate the different lived experiences of migrant and minority ethnic students. Adopting an intersectional approach as such could create positive change for these more vulnerable students by accommodating and acknowledging their diversity of culture, experiences, and challenges. This approach could help bridge the gap between policy and practice. In addition, this study recommends increasing diversity among teaching staff thereby creating more representation for the migrant and minority ethnic student population at SETU and consequently, enhance curriculum content, design, and delivery. Finally, this study recommends working from a ground up over and above a top-down approach to bridge the gap between policy and practice, by honing in on the meso-level diversity space in order to successfully move from policy at a macro-level and practice at a micro-level to facilitate positive change in the day-to-day reality for students.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to provide participants with an opportunity to give their opinion about their experiences as part of the SETU student body. This was achieved by asking questions and generating discussion around how the issue of equality is being addressed in the day to day practices of this Higher Education Institution (HEI).



The findings generated from this qualitative research project were experiential and subjective, in keeping with the methodological underpinnings of the study. Regarding diversity, at the macro-level a gap exists between policy and practice; at the Meso-level, representation and curriculum issues are antagonistic to building a more diverse climate; at the Micro-level, nuanced student experiences around social engagement affects diversity; and all of this feeds into the issue that a lack of diversity hampers equal access to education. The findings strongly indicate there is space within the HE arena to create deeper awareness around improving access to education.

ACNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank SETU Carlow for providing me with the opportunity to complete this research study. Also, I would like to thank my wonderful supervisor, Dr Susan Flynn, without whom I would never have been able to do this work. Thank you too to the Sociological Association of Ireland for supporting my work, and to my mentor, Dr Aimie Brennan, for her guidance and support. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank all those who participated in this project; thank you for trusting me with your experiences and for inspiring my learning journey throughout this research work.

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