

## **From Micro to Macro: Widening the Investigation of Diversity in the Transition to Higher Education**

**Mikaël De Clercq<sup>1</sup>, Ellen Jansen<sup>2</sup>, Taiga Brahm<sup>3</sup> & Elke Bosse<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

<sup>2</sup>University of Groningen, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>University of Tuebingen, Germany

<sup>4</sup>HIS Institute for Higher Education Development, Germany

### **Introduction**

Transition into higher education (HE) remains at the forefront of policy and practice in education worldwide (Gale & Parker, 2014). Transition as a process (Nicholson, 1990) in which individuals move from one stage to another may cause stress and discomfort that possibly lead to negative outcomes. Transition into HE is a particularly challenging process for the student due to a large variety of difficulties and requirements which could impede study success (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Moreover, increasing student numbers and diversity in European HE have reinforced concerns about study success in general and the successful transition to university in particular (Abbott-Chapmann, 2006, 2011; Vossensteyn et al., 2015; Wolter, 2013). Consequently, it is important to further develop our understanding of factors that can contribute to a successful and less stressful transitions into higher education for a diverse student body. In this special issue, we go beyond considering individual factors, such as student characteristics (micro level). We go beyond student diversity, to investigate also the impact of the learning environment/ institution (meso level) and national educational policies (macro level). Each study contributes to this endeavour by connecting two of the three levels of higher education.

### **Defining and Framing Transition to HE**

The notion of transition lacks a clear-cut definition in the literature. For example, Zittoun (2008, 2009) endorsed a developmental approach of transition and considered it as a brutal rupture implying major change in attitudes and behavior in order to adjust to a new environment. Hutchinson's (2005) life course perspective rather conceived transition as a continuous progressive change in individual status. Gale and Parker (2014) defined the transition as the « *ability to navigate change* » (p.4). Finally, Briggs, Clark, and Hall (2012) depicted the transition as an adjustment process to a major change in life. Further extending these conceptions, we define transition into HE as a process of instability and, thus, a rupture period, which leads to a qualitative evolution regarding students' academic and social integration. Transitions into HE can have different transition situations: from secondary to higher education, from home country to abroad, from vocational/professional to university higher education. Furthermore, the transitions can result in different realities, for example, students choose study programmes with varying aims; they study diverse disciplines, and are confronted with other students who each bring their own realities to campus.



## Defining and Framing Diversity in HE

Recent attempts to clarify the notion of diversity in HE (Balloo, 2018; Bosse, 2015; De Clercq, Galand, & Frenay, 2020; Winstone & Hulme, 2019) highlight that in the current literature diversity mostly encompassed students' variability in background characteristics. In this special issue, we propose that diversity in HE goes beyond students' heterogeneity and can be extended to the variability in the features of the learning environment, as well as higher education institutions (Tremblay, Lalancette, & Roseveare, 2012). In fact, the distinctive characteristics of the student in interaction with his or her learning context both determine if the transition will be unsettling and unproductive or a transformative experience leading to achievement and self-fulfilment (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010). In HE research, diversity can therefore be defined as the sum of the interrelated differences in students' backgrounds and in context characteristics that influence the process of transition into HE and, consequently, study success.

Diversity can be viewed through different lenses, each focusing on a certain range of related factors that influence the process of transition into HE. Many studies use a three-level framework of HE, distinguishing micro, meso and macro level approaches of the transition into HE (Enders, 2004; Munge, Thomas, & Heck, 2018; Taylor & Ali, 2017; Tremblay et al., 2012; Vavoula & Sharples, 2009). These three main levels of analyses will be considered as a guideline to extend our conception of diversity. To situate the different research perspectives, the notion of diversity will include differences at (1) the micro-level of the individual student experience, (2) the meso-level of the learning environment or institutional context and (3) the macro-level of the wider education system and global context. This calls for innovative methods that consider the different levels of investigation and possibly capture the relation between the levels.

## Different Approaches to Diversity in the Transition into HE

While the body of research on the transition to HE is steadily growing (see for example the special issues or books by Coertjens, Brahm, Trautwein, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017; Jenert, Postareff, Brahm, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2015; Kyndt, Donche, Trigwell, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017), the focus on student diversity in the first-year of HE can provide new perspectives, from a methodological point of view as well as content wise. Most studies investigating the transition into HE focus on one specific individual lens of diversity and do not address its interaction with the learning environment. Considering different layers of differences together with advanced techniques (e.g. mixed method, social network analysis, multi-level analysis) promises perspectives on research of diversity. This widened analytical lens will constitute an important theoretical contribution for a better understanding of transition to HE.

The research up-to-now offers valuable insights into **student diversity** at the **micro-level analysis of the transition into HE**. With respect to the students' individual development, it examines student success correlates (e.g., motivation, learning strategies; for a review: Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012) and identifies relevant student profiles with distinct experiences of the HE environment (De Clercq, Galand, & Frenay, 2017; Hailikari, Tuononen, & Parpala, 2016; van Rooij, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2017; Vanthournout, Coertjens, Gijbels, Donche, & van Petegem, 2013). HE research also explores how non-traditional and international students experience their encounter with HE (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Holmegaard, Madsen, & Ulriksen, 2017; Hope, 2017; Jansen, Suhre, & André, 2017).

By analysing the institutional contexts (e.g. the learning environment, study programmes), the research takes the **meso-level of diversity in the transition into HE** into account (De Clercq, Galand, Dupont, & Frenay, 2013; Jansen, 2004; Schaeper, 2020). In fact, the respective studies widen the perspective on diversity by considering **context diversity** including organisational factors in order to investigate their impact on the transition to HE and study success. These studies offer new insights into the role of diverse study contexts on the transition to HE.



To complement these perspectives on diversity, studies often consider **organisational diversity** in terms of types of HE institutions (Powell & Solga, 2011; Van de Werfhorst, & Mijs, 2010) or institutional characteristics (e.g., completion/entry rates, institutional structure) (Chen, 2012; Hauschildt, Vögtle, & Gwosć, 2018). Such studies allow shedding light on inequalities and the structural barriers on the **macro-level investigation of diversity in the transition into HE** (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

The existing literature provides valuable insights, yet there are three main limitations in the field.

- First, the insights into the role of diversity in the transition process remain scarce and underdeveloped in the literature (De Clercq et al., 2020). For instance, it is not yet clear how certain diversity characteristics are related to particular transition experiences (Winstone & Hulme, 2019). Further investigation of diversity as a student characteristic as well as a characteristic of the institutional context and the organisation is therefore needed.
- Second, the research approaches are fragmented due to the distinct perspectives on diversity at the different levels of the HE system (Bosse, 2015), resulting in difficulties to integrate findings from these different levels and to discuss practical implications (Noyens, Donche, Coertjens, & van Petegem, 2017).
- Third, it is not yet clear how new/advanced methodologies can address the analyses of the different levels of the HE system not only one layer at a time but instead to integrate these multiple, nested layers. Complex methods, such as multi-level analysis, mixed methods or social network analysis may therefore provide new insights. Furthermore, transition is not a state but a process (Tett, Cree, & Christie, 2017) and thus requires longitudinal approaches alongside analysis of personal and situational states to properly investigate the role of diversity (Brouwer, Jansen, Krijnen, & Warrens, 2021; Noyens et al., 2017).

## Connecting Different Levels of Analysis of Diversity in HE

To overcome the limitations of the existing literature in the field of HE, this special issue aims at entering a novel pathway to investigate diversity to HE by a) **further investigating** the role of diversity at different levels of HE, b) **connecting** previously unconnected **investigations** of diversity in the transition into HE at **micro, meso and macro level** and c) **developing methodological designs** that can tackle this broadened perspective of diversity in the transition into HE.

Thus, the special issue does not only aim at widening the perspective on research concerning the role of diversity in transition processes, it also aims to contribute to further methodological developments in the field. As current research widely acknowledges the need to endorse a multidimensional approach in HE research (Coertjens et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2012), the special issue provides research that employs a methodology that goes beyond a single-factor analysis of the transition issue and uses cutting-edge data analysis to investigate different levels of diversity in the transition to HE.

The common aim of the studies composing the special issue is to connect either two or more levels (micro/meso/macro) in transition research or different types of diversity by using a range of methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and beyond). These studies therefore **contribute collectively and individually to a widened understanding of diversity**. Each study included in this special issue is intended to provide a specific approach of the role of diversity in the transition into HE by connecting different levels of diversity through a complex methodology.

Five studies of the special issue propose different ways of connecting micro and meso levels of analyses of diversity, with two studies looking into the characteristics of secondary schools in relation to student characteristics and students' adjustment in the first year and three studies investigating factors at micro and meso level within the first year of higher education. Together, these studies provide new



insights into the role of diversity in the transition process and new perspectives to integrate these levels in a same approach.

The study of Van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen, and Meijer investigates longitudinally the relationships between teacher practices in secondary education (meso level of analysis) and first-year student academic achievement and social and emotional adjustment at university (micro level of investigation). Results show that teachers in secondary education might play a pivotal role in preparing students for university. This role goes beyond preparing students for academic achievement, as teachers may have a long-term impact on first-year student social and emotional adjustment.

Willems, van Daal, Van Petegem, Coertjens and Donche compare two distinct HE contexts: professional and academic programs (meso level of analysis). They investigate how student's psychosocial variables at the end of secondary education impact academic adjustment (micro level of analysis). The multigroup structural equation modelling demonstrates that learning strategies and motivational variables at the end of secondary education have higher predictive power in the academic context than in the professional context and that academic adjustment in the first semester influences academic achievement to a bigger extent in professional than in academic programs. These findings highlight that the role of individual characteristics for academic success differs from one context to another.

An integration of micro and meso levels of analysis is proposed in the study of Jenert and Brahm by combining a person-centred quantitative and a longitudinal qualitative approach. While the quantitative study identifies three profiles of first-year students that demonstrate the individual diversity of the student body, the qualitative study finds very different reactions to the characteristics and events of the first-year environment among students of the three profiles. From a practical point of view, the findings show how different students perceive similar situations in distinctive and even contradictory ways. It emphasizes the need for more customized support structures during the first year of higher education that go beyond the usual distinction of traditional and non-traditional students.

Also, the study of Bohndick, Jänsch, Bosse, and Barnat endorsed a person-centred approach (micro level of analysis) but combined with structural equation modelling on the perception of institutional requirements (meso level of analysis). While latent profile analysis failed to demonstrate relevant diversity regarding the perception of institutional requirements, the structural equation modelling showed that these perceptions largely depend on the self-efficacy and volition. From a practical point of view, this study not only suggests to use the differences in the perception of requirements as a guideline for the design of support activities, but also to support the students' self-efficacy and volition.

The study of De Clercq, Hospel, Galand and Frenay compare the impact of student's psychological variables (micro level of analysis) on academic adjustment among 21 different study programs (meso level of analysis). The multilevel analyses show significant variations of success rate between the programs. It highlights the diversity of the student body in the program. This means that the programs are not composed of the same student body. Instead, how students perceive the characteristics of the context explains success variation. Finally, engagement, motivation and social support do not have the same impact on academic adjustment from one program to another. From a practical point of view, the findings suggest that students' experience of the transition to HE widely differs from one program to another because these programs do not attract the same types of students and they do not provide the same learning context. Students' support therefore needs to be specific with regard to the characteristics of the program and to the type of students that are part of the program.

The paper of Balloo and Winstone provides a methodological demonstration about how institutions can carry out nuanced analyses of their institutional data by combining a micro and a meso level of analysis on diversity. In four illustrative examples this primer provides tools which can empower university staff to perform such an investigation without requiring specialist software or expertise. The findings can inform the design of context-specific interventions that focus on reducing achievement gaps. In doing so, institutions can enhance the evidence-based understanding of potential reasons for differential study success during transition to HE.



Dalhberg, Vigmo and Surian extend the scope of investigation by connecting the micro and macro level of analysis of diversity in the transition to HE. They first compared two higher education institutions in Sweden and Italy (macro level of investigation) regarding their institutional policies to widened participation of migrant students. Second, they investigate ethnographically generated student narratives regarding their individual transition to Higher Education from a migrant perspective (micro level of analysis). By combining these two perspectives, the authors show how policy ideas about widening participation and transition become visible in the students' narratives and how they shape students' experiences of participation, normalization, and marginalization in their own HEI. This study highlights the need to follow-up on the impact of educational policies as it discovers the mismatch between the support provided to students and their needs and challenges when transitioning to HE.

As the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, every study carried out specific investigations that are constituting the complementary pieces of the final discussion of the special issue. The discussion article of this special issue connects the findings of the papers and relates them to the New Zealand educational HE context. The discussion paper of Van der Meer reopens the question of diversity toward the concept of “the whole student”. This concept can serve to take an “helicopter view” on each study contribution and to address the practical question of the “right” support to provide to a heterogeneous student body. The discussion also focuses on the methodological developments in the field of transitioning to HE as well as on further developing the theoretical model of addressing diversity in HE.

## Keypoints

The special issue

- Contributes to developing an understanding of diversity as a multidimensional construct encompassing characteristics of students, learning environments, HE institutions and HE systems.
- Provides a comprehensive theoretical framework as well as empirical findings that connect individual, context and organisational diversity factors of the transition into HE.
- Exploits and reflects on advanced methodologies (e.g. social network analysis, multi-level analysis, mixed methods etc) to address the different levels of diversity, always bearing in mind that transition processes into HE are complex in nature, and therefore need an appropriate (multidimensional) methodology.
- Responds to a new challenge in the field of HE - based on the current policy push to expand HE participation and graduation - by reflecting diversity in a comprehensive way.

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