



One goal, different pathways: Capturing diversity in processes leading to first-year students' achievement

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ABSTRACT

The growing heterogeneity among first year university students is a challenge for achievement in Higher Education. A better consideration of student diversity could help to gain a greater understanding of freshmen adaptation to university life. This study aims to develop a perspective that could address the diversity in student backgrounds and experiences. Two complementary methods were carried out. First, we employed latent profiles analyses to classify 1339 freshmen according to the characteristics they presented at the start of their first academic year. Six distinct profiles were identified, representing different combinations of possible achievement predictors (i.e., high school grade, socioeconomic status, informed-choice, and self-efficacy beliefs). Second, we investigated the achievement processes of these six profiles throughout the academic year using multigroup path analyses. Results revealed significant differences in achievement process from one entrance profile to another. Implications of the findings in support of success interventions and further research on the transition to higher education are discussed.

1. Introduction

The current policy push to expand participation in Higher Education (HE) and student graduation (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2009) confronts institutions to the challenge of massification and growing heterogeneity of the student body (Coertjens, Brahm, Trautwein, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017). This situation demands enhanced attention to student diversity and to its impact on academic achievement. Several authors called for accounting for this diversity in a more comprehensive way in educational research (Coertjens et al., 2017; Heikkilä, Niemivirta, Nieminen, & Lonka, 2011; Kyndt, Donche, Trigwell, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017). However, despite a vast body of knowledge on first-year experience and academic achievement, studies addressing the complex nature of diversity in the transition into HE and its effects on achievement process are still scarce. Moreover, although diversity in student entrance backgrounds is increasingly being considered, the diversity of first-year experiences remains overlooked. Behind the common goal of achieving at the university, students could endorse different pathways to achievement (Winstone & Hulme, 2019). Considering this variability in students' experiences, in addition to students' background heterogeneity, therefore represents a promising research perspective (Balloo, 2018; Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2009; Hailikari, Sund, Haarala-Muhonen, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to further explore student diversity in the transition to HE, through the combined use of a person-centered approach to students' entrance background characteristics, and an

analysis of the variability of students' first-year experiences.

1.1. First-year student diversity

Research originally interested in student diversity in HE predominantly focused on the influence of gender, socio-economic status, and/or ethnicity (Lent et al., 2018). A vast body of literature revealed that girls tend to outperform (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012), although this effect appears to be domain-specific (Miyake et al., 2010). Other studies observed that student coming from ethnic minorities (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006) or lower social class (Harackiewicz et al., 2014) were less likely to achieve academically. While this finding brought our attention to the impact of specific groups of students, it fails to adhere to a multivariate conception of diversity. In order to capture the latter among students, several European initiatives have recently emerged.

Various authors have focused on a longitudinal approach to student diversity in the transition from High School to HE. Van Herpen (2019) identified three main profiles of first-year students, each comprising differing levels of self-efficacy, performance and effort. According to this theory, the respective profiles lead to experiencing different challenges when adjusting to the academic context of HE. However, the authors never tested this assumption. In a qualitative study, Hailikari et al. (2019) followed 65 first-year students throughout six years. They identified five student profiles, each based on varying levels of progression, self-regulation, self-efficacy, motivation, and perceived

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