

Geographies of aspiration within the university: First-generation students within doctoral education

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Pursuing a university education is a choice that is often wrapped up with the deeply held dreams and hopes for an individual's future. These dreams may be informed by some experience of the university and knowledge about the ways in which tertiary academic studies can help students to achieve their personal goals or they may be formed at a distance as in the case of many first-generation students who may know very little about the arena of higher education. First-generation university students can find themselves positioned differently to those students who come from backgrounds where going to university is a traditional post-secondary school pathway. A body of largely American research indicates that first-generation students are less likely to participate in tertiary study than students with parents who attended university (Rood, 2009) and are less likely to graduate once there (Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students also go onto graduate or doctorate education in smaller numbers compared to their continuing education peers (Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003). However, despite differing levels of access to doctoral programmes there appears to be growing numbers of first-generation students who are deciding to pursue this pathway, many of whom are seeking academic roles. Yet, in spite of the increasing presence of students from diverse backgrounds like those who are first-generation, and some indications that these students are likely to be less successful within the doctoral arena (See Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw, & McDowelle, 2008), there is scant literature that focuses on their experiences within doctoral studies or investigates their movements into academic positions. This paper presents an exploratory analysis of data gathered as part of a qualitative study focused on first-generation students within doctoral education. In particular, this paper will explore some critical notions of aspiration (Appadurai, 2004) in relation to first-generation students as they develop their academic identities and pursue their imagined academic futures.

References

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