

Diversity in Learning Careers

Careers such as medicine, pharmacy, optometry and law are traditionally seen as attractive and successful professions amongst the BAME and immigrant communities. This reflects in the higher diversity observed for these courses, in comparison to the arts and humanities where there is underrepresentation of BAME students (and likely lecturers too). Careers such as Optometry are seen to provide future stability and reflect success. This view is further supported by Fazackerley's (2019) article, in which Professor Alec Cameron acknowledges that BAME students are more likely to pursue a clear study path that leads to a particular career after graduation. The 'immigrant paradox' describes the correlation between immigrants from the lower social classes and their unexpected increased participation in higher education (Orupabo et al., 2020, p.1). I draw on my own experience as a second generation immigrant, whereby education formed a central pillar in my life. There were no questions regarding whether I would pursue higher education, it was an expectation that I would. When considering which subject to study, the arts and humanities for me came at the bottom of the list, partly because I perceived it to be an 'aristocratic subject' – one reserved for the middle-classes. My other reason was that I didn't think I would be able to build a career from it – these didn't seem like relevant subjects for the labour work-force and I needed to get myself into full time employment after leaving higher education. For most immigrant families, education is regarded a key strategy for upwards social mobility (Louie, 2012, p.116) – more so for early generations. I believe this places cultural expectations on immigrant or BAME students to study a specific topic – not one they are necessarily passionate about.

I like to ask my students why they are here. By knowing their primary motivations, this may also guide me in tailoring my lectures to promote 'deep learning'. I recall an informal introduction with a couple of students (named student A and student B) in the first weeks of my module (SFO1002) starting. I posed an ice-breaker question to explore their reasons for choosing to studying Optometry:

ME: 'What has inspired you to study Optometry?'

STUDENT A: 'I wanted to study medicine initially, but I didn't get in. Optometry is also a good career and I like biology'.

STUDENT B: 'I didn't think I would get into university, so this is a surprise. I was looking at different courses provided by this university and Optometry looked quite fascinating'.

Student A's response was broadly in line with many other students in the cohort – most expressing an interest in an optometry career that is linked to their perception of its stability as a career. Interestingly, no students I spoke with mentioned an interest in the eyes specifically – the closest response was that of student B.

Interestingly, student B is the white minority in this cohort. This suggested to me that the motivation for a large proportion of my students to enter higher education, was to initiate themselves on a structured pathway towards stability and a financially rewarding future. Motivations for students to enter higher education may be linked to; an inherent desire to increase knowledge in a particular subject, to enter a specific career pathway by enrolling on vocational degrees (like Optometry), to partake in the social aspects of university and be part of a knowledge community, or because higher education is now perceived a societal norm. In many cases a student's motivation will be a combination of these and may even change amidst their learning careers. Bloomer and Hodgkinson's (2000) research into the nature of learning highlights that a student's learning career is seldom linear throughout the duration of a course, but rather subject to profound influence from social and cultural factors. Overall, this can lead to changes in commitment levels and disposition to learning. They articulate well the turbulent nature of a learning career and the need for educators to have an awareness of the learners' world and be responsive to this (ibid) to enable students to succeed.

Optometrists, examine people's eyes, give advice on eye disorders and prescribe and fit spectacles and contact lenses. Optometry (a three-year undergraduate degree) offers people a healthcare career with good financial gains and job security. It is no wonder then that Optometry is a popular career choice, particularly for second and third-generation immigrants who may be the first in their families to enter higher education.