

Under conditions: Family involvement in higher education through the eyes of Greek-Cypriot students

Loizos Symeou¹, Eleni Theodorou, & Iasonas Lamprianou

Department of Education Sciences, European University Cyprus, P.O.Box 22006, 1516 Nicosia, Cyprus

¹*Telephone, +357-22-713178, fax +357-22-559405, e-mail address: L.Symeou@euc.ac.cy*

Abstract:

Most research in the field of family involvement has focused on lower levels of education, mainly in primary and to a lesser degree in secondary education. However, given the migration of family involvement in increasingly higher levels of education (see Lynk Wartman & Savage, 2008; Symeou & Theodorou, 2012), it becomes important to investigate the cultural constructions and meanings associated with the phenomenon of family involvement in higher education, particularly given higher education's increasing cost and significance in an individual's life opportunities. This paper presents part of the pilot findings of a larger mixed methods research¹, which investigates whether (and if so, the extent to which and how) the involvement of families in undergraduate students' university education influences students' academic experiences in Cyprus. For the purposes of the study, 'family involvement' is meant to signify any type of involvement from member(s) of a student's family in any matter associated with the student's university studies and which is undertaken to support them. The term 'family' refers to one's partner, guardian, or adult(s) with whom one is biologically related.

The pilot study data which this paper will discuss centre on the perspective of the students on the issue of family involvement and have been collected both through quantitative and qualitative methods in 2012. Specifically, a questionnaire investigating the phenomenon was completed by a convenience sample of 101 undergraduate students attending a state university and 186 undergraduate students attending a private university (constitution of student sample: 76% women; average age 20.5 years old). Furthermore, individual interviews with twelve purposefully selected undergraduate students of all years of study attending a private university in Cyprus were conducted.

The data analysis demonstrates the existence of the phenomenon of family involvement in higher education in Cyprus, while highlights important differences and similarities between the form it takes and how the involvement of the family is realised and performed in public and private universities. More specifically, it appears that the phenomenon involves a wide variety of aspects in students' studies, beyond the family's financial contribution as perhaps more commonly expected, which includes decisions regarding field of study and living arrangements during the period of one's studies, provision of non-financial support with studies, counseling regarding the work force entry, handling of written and other communication between the family and the university, organising university visits, etc. Moreover, family

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involvement does not seem to be a one-time thing; rather it is characterised by temporal continuity and transpires in different forms in different phases of the students' university life. In addition, students seem also to draw on different family members for different aspects of their studies, thus indicating the expansion of the phenomenon to the broader family and not only parents/guardians. In comparing how the involvement of the family is realised and performed in state and private universities, among the most important differences this pilot study has revealed is that this involvement seems to be more frequent and more intense among families whose children attend private rather than state universities. At the same time, although students in both state and private universities indicate that they discuss with their families topics relevant to their studies, the majority of participants seem to be negative towards family involvement in their studies. According to the students, in principle, family involvement is a phenomenon which undermines the cultural value of autonomy through cultural practices which do not support them as adults who can take their lives into their own hands. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen if such differences and similarities between students attending private and state institutions still exist in the case of a representative student sample from both institutions to be collected as part of the broader study.

The qualitative data concurs with the quantitative regarding students' disapproval of family involvement and has also provided a window into more nuanced understandings of the phenomenon as participants made a distinction between family involvement and family briefing. With regard to the former, students appeared not to perceive it as a particularly common phenomenon whereas they considered the latter to be quite frequent and expected, as it related to matters of accountability and responsibility to their family due to their covering the expenses for the students' studies. To be sure, the interpretation provided needs to be seen as part of the broader cultural scenery and the local cultural norms defining child-parent relationship more specifically.

The analysis depicts the relationships between universities and families and sheds light on the meanings negotiated among the actors affected more directly by the phenomenon of family involvement, namely the students. This research contributes to a growing body of work investigating parental involvement prior to and during the experience of higher education (e.g. Brooks, 2004; David, Ball, Davies, & Reay, 2003) which may offer a fruitful avenue in describing, understanding, and seeking common ground between higher institutions and students' families for the purposes of providing effective academic support (Crozier, Reay, & Clayton, 2008) as well as negotiating and defining each part's role, responsibilities and rights in this relationship.