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Problematizing Inclusion: A Critical Exploration of Inclusion Policies of Elite UK Universities

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: This paper presents findings from an ongoing study that explores how inclusion is framed in policy documents from a sample of UK universities. We focus our analysis on the 24 Russell Group institutions (i.e., the UK's 'exclusive' group of research intensive universities), as we are interested in examining how inclusion might be understood by policymakers in this elite context. We undertook a critical discourse analysis of 48 policies. Five discursive themes were identified: ambiguous definitions of inclusion; inclusion for all vs. an individual responsibility; inclusion as an exercise of legislative compliance; inclusion and pedagogy; and varying purposes of inclusion. We argue that the Russell Group universities mostly adopted a managerial and reductionist approach to inclusion. Ambiguities and tensions were largely ignored, and inclusion was presented as a marketised commodity to enhance their reputation. The findings contribute to the literature by extending critical and theoretical debates around inclusion in HE.

Paper: Traditionally, the realm of higher education (HE) has been understood as exclusionary and elitist, with universities seeking to recruit the brightest and best to maintain their reputational advantage (Reay et al., 2005; Leathwood & Read, 2009). This has led critics to identify universities as an instrument of social reproduction. Yet the diversification, internationalisation and massification of HE in recent decades has opened up the sphere to a greater number of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds. In turn, university leaders are under increased pressure to create 'inclusive' environments so that students feel welcome and that they have received a good standard of provision in an increasingly competitive HE marketplace (e.g., Tomlinson 2018).

In this paper, we present the findings from an ongoing study that explores how inclusion is discursively framed in policy documents from a sample of UK universities. We focus our analysis on the 24 Russell Group institutions (i.e., the UK's most 'exclusive' group of research intensive HE institutions), as we are specifically interested in examining how inclusion might be understood by policymakers in this 'elite' context. This analysis contributes to the HE literature by extending critical and theoretical debates around inclusion and by applying theoretical insights from the field of inclusive education and disability scholarship, where rich debates regarding inclusion have been taking place for a number of decades (e.g., Ainscow, 2020; Norwich, 2013). We introduce and explore concepts of accommodation (i.e., educational institutions are expected to change in order to accommodate diverse learners) and assimilation (i.e., students are expected to change and assimilate within pre-existing structures and arrangements), and consider how such tenets might be embodied in the policies.

Our analysis was guided by the following research question:

1. How is inclusion defined and understood in Russell Group university policy documents?

Methodology

In May 2021, we located and downloaded 48 policy documents from the websites of the 24 Russell Group Universities (Russell Group, 2021). The policies were either directly related to inclusion or inclusion was explicitly discussed in the documents (which were most often about equality, diversity, respect, fairness, or more broadly the vision of the institution). We analysed the policies using a critical discourse analysis approach, informed by Wodak and Meyer (2009) and Mullet (2018). The approach was both inductive and deductive, in the sense that we started from the literature and our research questions, but we also accounted for emerging themes. We coded each policy line-by-line in order to draw out latent or hidden beliefs, and paid particularly close attention to issues of power and language use (e.g., managerial discourse). The authors worked together to discuss and agree on emergent discourses regarding inclusion.

Findings

We identified five discursive themes: ambiguous definitions of inclusion; inclusion for all vs. an individual responsibility; an exercise of legislative compliance; inclusion and pedagogy; and varying purposes of inclusion. In particular, we found that the way inclusion was approached in the policy documents could largely be described as reductionist. Inclusion was often defined in a cyclical way in line with values that are difficult to define (e.g., respect, fairness, equality). Further, very few institutions acknowledged that achieving inclusion can be challenging (i.e., accommodation vs assimilation); the use of managerial language and discourse used in the context of inclusion appeared to in some ways absolve the institutions of responsibility to engage with such challenges and tensions. For example, inclusion was often presented as the responsibility of the individual rather than the whole institution, subtly shifting accountability – and potentially blame – away from the institution. Inclusion was also frequently described as way for an HE institution to ensure its relevance in a fast-changing and globalised world, and in a sense ‘marketed’ by the HEI as a signifier of ‘excellence’. This can be seen as representing a more cynical and commercial take on inclusion (i.e. inclusion as a commodity) that can enhance the global reputation of a university – in turn leading to more students and more profit.

Overall, we argue in this paper that ambiguities and tensions were largely ignored in the policy documents of the Russell Group universities, and inclusion was presented as a marketised commodity to enhance their reputation. The findings contribute to the literature by extending critical and theoretical debates around inclusion in HE that are beginning to emerge (e.g. Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2020).

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