

A mixed-methods exploratory study of the university experiences of working-class international students in UK universities.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Many studies of international students have highlighted the opportunity for social reproduction of advantaged socio-economic status through studying abroad. Concomitantly, the academic, sociocultural and economic challenges experienced by working-class 'home' students in their quest for social mobility are well-documented. However, there is a lacuna of studies researching the university experiences of international students from less socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. This sequential, mixed-methods study offered an insight into the experiences of working-class international students. An online questionnaire yielded circa 200 responses from international students at UK institutions. Regression analysis identified significant variations related to funding mechanisms, country of origin and undergraduate versus postgraduate taught students. Subsequently, thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 20 international students highlighted the impact of economic precarity and trans-national caregiving on experiences of higher education and mobility plans. This study offers a new lens for universities to challenge the cultural framing of all international students as 'privileged'.

Full paper

Context:

This study aimed to explore the academic, sociocultural and economic experiences of undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PGT) international students in UK higher education (HE) who self-identify as 'working-class'. Literature on the experiences of international students tends to frame them as privileged and largely homogenous in socioeconomic terms (Lee, 2022; Soong, 2022). It fails to acknowledge that many internationally mobile students come from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom access to international HE is a pathway to social mobility (Ploner, 2017; Raghuram, RoosBreines, Gunter, 2020).

Research objectives:

In light of the lacuna of research into international students who self-identify as 'working-class', the research study had a number of research objectives:

1. Contribute to the research gap empirically and theoretically on 'working-class' international students.
2. Compare and contrast experiences of less privileged international students across different types of UK universities (e.g. 'red brick' v post-1992)
3. Examine the impact of these experiences on international students' perspectives on learning and academic progress
4. Discern the impact of socio-economic background on international students' identities, their experiences of university life and understandings of mobility.

'Working-class' international students

This study acknowledged challenges of using the term 'working-class'. Occupations are often used as a proxy for socio-economic status, as they indicate levels of educational attainment and income. However, measures such as National Statistics-Socio Economic Classification (NS-SEC) (ONS, 2021) may not easily map onto the occupational backgrounds of individuals from across the globe. For example the composition of employment opportunities in a country may be based on an agricultural economy or there may be significant differences in intergenerational opportunities, further skewing understandings of social class. Furthermore, the increasing complexity in understandings of social class suggests that culture,

values and individual self-identification are important too (Bottero, 2014). It is also possible that participants may choose to reject the terminology of social class completely. We defined the social class of participants inspired by the principles used by Bathmaker et al., (2016): parental occupation was defined by the European Socio Economic Classification (E-SEC) (Rose et al., 2001), parental participation in HE, sources of financial support and individual subjects own definition of their social class.

Research design:

This was a two-stage sequential, explanatory mixed-methods study underpinned by a Pragmatic research philosophy (Creamer, 2018). The study began with a quantitative data collection phase via an online self-report questionnaire followed by 20 semi-structured interviews with international students (both PGT and UG) across a range of UK HEIs. The questionnaire was administered via the researchers' professional networks and contacts across UK HE. The questionnaire data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics as well as correlation and regression analysis and independent-samples t-tests.

In stage two semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom. Participants were sought through voluntary purposive sampling (Denscombe, 2017). Questionnaire respondents could opt to contact the researchers via email if they wanted to be interviewed. The interviews facilitated the emergence of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) to complement the statistical patterns identified in the first phase of the study.

Ethics:

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the institution at which the researchers both worked. The ethical guidelines of both the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) were also drawn upon.

Initial findings and reflections:

Analysis of the quantitative data identified significant variations

related to funding mechanisms, country of origin and undergraduate versus postgraduate taught students. Subsequently, thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with international students provided 'thick description' on the impact of economic precarity and trans-national caregiving on experiences of higher education and mobility plans. This study offers a new lens for universities seeking to work within the 'new mobilities' paradigm as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives begin to challenge the cultural framing of all international students as 'privileged'.

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