

# 383 Developing a global translation of Widening Participation to support international HE students

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## Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## Abstract

The Office for Students (OfS) set out a range of criteria emphasising the importance of making Access and Participation Plans more accessible and easily comprehended for students, parents and other stakeholders. However, these criteria relate specifically to domestic students while the large cohort of international students in the UK are overlooked. Higher education institutions (HEIs) will fail to achieve their goals to support their entire student body when a partial understanding of the student experience is considered. This proposed study conducted focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews to explore how international students understand the concept of 'widening participation', what terms and language are used globally, and how they might be recognisable across appropriate global equivalents. This proposed study can help HEI staff to gain more comprehensive knowledge about their international students, and thereby minimise barriers, navigate dilemmas, establish inclusive approaches and support a more sustainable development in the institutions.

## Full paper

Do understandings of educational equality in higher education 'stop at the border' (Tannock, 2018)? Despite the United Kingdom's large numbers of international students, language and policy of widening participation in the UK context often explicitly and implicitly excludes international students. Yet as of 2022, the UK had the second highest number of international students in the world (HESA, 2022), having climbed dramatically from a total of 450,835 undergraduate and postgraduate students in 2016/17 to 605,130 in 2020/21, an increase of 24%.

International students, while commonly homogenised in the contemporary research as young, privileged, and consumerist, are nevertheless a diverse population. International students choose the UK as a study destination for diverse and complex reasons, such as its educational prestige, diversity, culture and career opportunities, many of which are associated with complex dynamics of diaspora, coloniality, and soft power (Lipura and Collins, 2020). Previous research has demonstrated that many international students experience economic disadvantage (Choudaha, 2012), racism and marginalization (Zewolde, 2022), persistent attainment gaps (Reilly, et al., 2019), and indeed access international HE differentially (Van Mol, 2022). This suggests that considering equity in relation to international students is an important and underdeveloped area of research. Yet there are currently significant lacunae within the data that many HEIs hold on international students (Hayes and Cheng, 2020), and a limited understanding from student perspectives of how this marginalisation may be experienced (Heng, 2018).

This gap is glaring when the new priorities for access and participation for HE providers are examined (2022) as the definition for widening participation does not include international students. Indeed, many widening participation categories as set out by the Office for Students (OfS), cannot be assessed with existing sector-level data on international students. The translation and understanding of these OfS categories in relation to international students are more problematic. Since such a significant proportion of the student population is comprised of international students, there is pressing need for HEIs to establish how domestic widening participation criteria relate to the international context.

As of 2022, The University of Manchester has the second highest number of non-UK International students in any UK HEI, with over 17,000 of its 44,000 students coming from abroad. This makes it a uniquely apt context to explore the intersection between widening participation efforts and international student populations. In a pilot study, we conducted focus groups and semi-structured interviews, comprised of undergraduate and postgraduate international students from diverse economic, national, social and linguistic backgrounds.

The aim was to explore how widening participation was understood by individual students, how they perceived the OfS criteria, and how they might be translated into appropriate global equivalents. Students volunteered through a variety of recruitment methods, including via the Student Union, student societies, and email communication through programme and course administrators. Recruitment materials specified that volunteers were sought from a range of economic, social, national, and linguistic backgrounds, and gave examples in accessible language. However, student volunteers from all backgrounds were eligible to contribute. Confidentiality was assured, and participants were offered the option of participating in either focus groups, or online individual interviews. Questions focused not on personal experiences, but on students' understandings of the concepts of widening participation, and the associated criteria. Through discussion with the researcher, and in the case of focus groups, with other participants, shared understandings of the specific challenges associated with translating these criteria and concepts were developed, and alternative, transnationally accessible language and terms proposed. Template analysis, a form of structured content analysis, was applied to build up a synthesis of understandings.

The results will support the development of phrasings and framings that can be adopted and examined in future research projects as well as to inform institutional data collection and practice. This pilot project can inform practice, helping HEI staff to gain more comprehensive and holistic knowledge about their international student cohorts, and thereby minimise barriers, navigate dilemmas, and establish inclusive approaches across institutional practice, from recruitment, to teaching and curriculum, to graduate outcomes.

This workshop seeks to bring colleagues from UK HEIs together to discuss the early findings of this research, solicit responses, and discuss implications for their own research and practice. It aims to generate critical discussion around existing practice and barriers to better understanding this complex and under-researched area (Mittelmeier et al., forthcoming).

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## Web pages

Office for Students: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/our-approach-to-access-and-participation/>

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA): <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>