61 'It has such a huge impact on a person's identity and sense of belonging': Saying Students' Names Right – Practices and Policies in Higher Education in England

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Given that names signal people's socio-cultural identities, including ethnic heritage of race, language and/or nationality, there must also be a trend toward greater cultural diversity of students' names in UK higher education. In this article, we position the cultural diversity of students' names, and particularly the pronunciation of students' names, as key issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity. We present findings from our study of the pronunciation of students' names in institutions of higher education in England and show how student-facing staff in higher education manage students' names when they are unsure how those names should be correctly pronounced. We conclude that, to better support the pioneering 'identity work' already undertaken by individual staff, policymakers in higher education should develop and implement 'whole institution' initiatives in recognition of the pronunciation of students' names as a key equality, diversity and inclusion issue.

Full paper

In the UK, growth in the number of international students and students of minoritized ethnicities studying in higher education suggests that student populations have become less monocultural, mononational, and monolingual than previously. Ethnicity is linked to names (Pilcher 2016), and so it can be surmised that these changes in the socio-cultural profile of student populations also mean that there is a wider diversity of names amongst students. However, there is a paucity of evidence about the significance of names and naming in education in the UK, including for experiences of higher education, and for the development and operation of institutional equality, diversity and inclusivity practices and policies.

In this talk, we draw on findings from our British Academy-funded study of the pronunciation of students' names in institutions of higher education in England (Pilcher and Deakin-Smith 2022). In this exploratory study, we surveyed undergraduate degree-awarding institutions in England to gain a snapshot of existing policy and practice. Our survey captured responses from 31 institutions. Only two reported that they had a formal policy/guidance on the pronunciation of students' names, and both of these related solely to graduation. This finding suggests that higher education in England is not engaging systematically with the issue of the pronunciation of students' names. We also held qualitative interviews to better understand how students experience the (mis)pronunciation of their names and how staff manage students' names when they are unsure how those names should be correctly pronounced. Our focus in this presentation are the practices used by student-facing staff when they are unsure how to pronounce a student's name.

Staff participants in our studies reported being motivated by equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) concerns to engage in a range of innovative practices of their own devising. These included directly asking a student (on a one-to-one basis, not in a group setting) the correct way to say their name, Googling correct pronunciations, and writing phonetic 'cheat sheets'. In our analysis of these activities, we adapt Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation of identity work as being undertaken in different locales, including 'front stage' in public settings where there is an audience, and 'backstage', where preparatory rehearsals take place before a public 'show'. Whether undertaken in preparation for graduation ceremonies, daily in encounters with students, in front stage and/or in backstage locales, the various identity work activities described by staff in our studies in relation to the pronunciation of students' names were evidently ad hoc, and improvised, the result of their own individual motivation and efforts, and oftentimes, not entirely

trusted to work. These findings point to a lack of training, resources, guidance and/or policy about the pronunciation of students' names at an institutional and/or national level or, at least, a lack of knowledge about its availability.

Our findings enable us to identify actionable ways (some suggested by our staff participants themselves) that practice and policy in higher education can better engage with this important EDI issue. We recommend that institutions of higher education develop and implement 'whole institution' solutions. Holistic and potentially transformative strategies might include: the incorporation of names and identities including in relation to pronunciation within EDI training for all staff (tailored to meet the differing needs of e.g., academics and professional services staff) and within induction activities for all students, whether domestic or international; the adoption of and the integration with existing digital students' records systems of fit-for-purpose software specifically designed to aid the correct pronunciation of names through capturing audio-recordings of individuals saying their own name (e.g., NameCoach 2023); the implementation of policy to encourage all staff and all students to include an audio-name recording (created, for example, through NameCoach) in their email signature as a route to normalising declarations of the pronunciation of names; the development at both local and national level of resource banks to widely publicise and distribute guidance and tools to aid the correct pronunciation of names.

Whole institution' strategies incorporating multifarious solutions would shift the work of correctly saying students' names more firmly to the 'backstage' and would help rebalance the significant identity workload currently borne by individual student-facing staff - and, of course, by students themselves. Such solutions would systematically engineer into the whole duration of a student's period of study and across all aspects of a student's day-to-day interactions with staff an embedded recognition of the importance of names for their embodied identities, for their experiences of higher education and for issues of equality, diversity and inclusion more broadly.

References

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