

Widening participation and social justice: International comparison of institutional approaches, staff conceptualisations and student experiences

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Student access to and experience in Higher Education remain subject to multiple inequalities worldwide. This paper reports on research carried out as part of a PhD study into widening participation and social justice in England and Poland, and concerns two prestigious case-study institutions. It explores the nature of social justice practices, and how these are enacted and conceptualised by university staff, and the experiences of first-generation students studying social science subjects. Semi-structured interviews were complemented by examination of university websites and policies. Mechanisms of candidate and student support were shaped in important ways through external policy and data landscapes, identified as both key enablers and potential barriers, and staff conceptualisations of social justice were influenced by their respective historical and political contexts. Student experiences were theorised using the Capabilities Approach, with variations in participants' resources and conversion factors playing significant roles in shaping their social and academic experiences and orientations.

Full paper

Higher Education (HE) is key to both individuals' life chances and the functioning of societies (Hunt & Atfield, 2019; Marginson, 2020), yet worldwide, despite national and international efforts, student access and experience remain stratified by gender, race, socio-economic background and disability, among other characteristics (OECD, 2021).

English and Polish HE sectors are both high-participation systems subject to significant educational inequalities (Marginson, 2018; Kopycka, 2021; The World Bank, 2022; OfS, 2023), but there are notable differences in their policy approaches and historical trajectories (McCaig, 2018; Kwiek & Szadkowski, 2020). The research reported here forms part of a wider PhD study which aims to explore widening participation (WP) and social justice in the two countries, to offer insights into the nature and causes of existing disparities, and propose potential solutions.

This part of the project focuses on two case-study institutions to address two research questions. The first concerns the nature of WP and social justice practices, and how these are enacted, experienced and conceptualised by university staff. The second asks what can be learned from the comparison between the academic and social experiences of first-generation students attending high-prestige universities in both countries.

Fieldwork was carried out at one English (EI) and one Polish (PI) institution, consisting of semi-structured interviews, complemented by the examination of websites and institutional policies, in-person presence and informal conversations. The interviews were conducted with 20 members of staff, including WP practitioners, those with responsibilities for teaching and learning, and senior management, and 14 first-generation students studying social science subjects.

Staff identified a number of challenges faced by potential candidates and students, with issues of prior schooling and educational experiences, and the socio-economic context more salient within the English accounts, a finding in line with those of Brooks et al. (2020).

Fair access was implemented through outreach support at the EI, and transparent examination results ranking of candidates at the PI. In addition, three main mechanisms of student support were viewed as contributing to a just and inclusive student experience, including those relating to teaching, learning and the curriculum, student feedback, involvement and agency, and non-academic support services. Notable differences were evident between the two universities within the first two categories. Teaching and learning support at the EI was implemented through centrally coordinated social mobility and inclusive education agendas, and dedicated WP and student experience roles; at the PI, characterised by high levels of faculty autonomy, interviewees emphasised the importance of personal relationships in supporting student learning. Student feedback, involvement and agency was enacted through multiple mechanisms at the EI, whereas the pivotal role of the Student Council was emphasised by interviewees at the PI. Institutional approaches were strongly shaped by their external policy and data landscapes, which were identified as constituting major enablers, and also potential barriers to instigating change.

EI staff notions of HE justice referenced equity and 'levelling the playing field', whereas PI staff emphasised equal and non-discriminatory approaches, with considerable differences in attitudes to contextual admissions, a policy viewed through the prism of the two countries' histories. Notwithstanding the significance of policy, interviewees identified culture and attitudes as key to supporting students, in a finding consistent across both contexts. In addition, many interviewees reported a high degree of emotional involvement with their work, citing both the toll that supporting students could take, as well as their personal motivations for undertaking their roles and implementing improvements.

First-generation student experiences were conceptualised using the Capabilities Approach (CA) (Sen, 1999 & 2009; Nussbaum, 2003), utilising Wilson-Strydom's (2016) Capabilities list for equitable transitions to university. While all participants achieved the functioning of accessing a prestigious HE institution, variations in their resources and available conversion factors played significant roles in shaping their social and academic experiences and orientations. In addition, interviewees at the EI placed greater emphasis on their perceived status as a 'WP student' than those at the PI, with potential implications for their identities, agency, and wellbeing (Turner, 1994; Reay, 2009, Fernando & Kenny, 2021). Analysis of these interviews, as part of a current PhD project, is ongoing, and feedback in relation to the interpretation of the findings will be sought as an integral part of the presentation of the paper.

It is hoped that the results of the study as a whole will contribute to a deeper understanding of HE social justice, and could form the basis for further development of policies and approaches to enhancing equitable student access and experience in European HE.

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