

Navigating Equity and Internationalisation: A Comparative Study of Awarding Gaps in UK Higher Education

Sofia Shan, Stuart Taylor, Opeyemi Akindehin, Sam Illingworth

Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study examines the impact of internationalisation and corporatisation on higher education equity at Edinburgh Napier University (ENU), Scotland. It explores the potential awarding gap between home and international students in Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes. Employing a multi-method approach, including surveys and interviews with students and staff from five Schools, the research identifies a general satisfaction with the educational experience. However, it also uncovers financial hardships faced by international students, leading to restricted resource access and tensions with domestic peers. The findings suggest that while internationalisation can enhance diversity, it also risks reinforcing inequalities and compromising educational integrity. The study calls for HEIs to resist detrimental corporatisation by developing inclusive policies that address the diverse needs of all students, ensuring equitable access to education and upholding its role as an activist space for public good in a global society.

Full paper

Introduction

In the UK, the internationalisation of higher education is a growing trend, with universities expanding their international student intake and promoting benefits such as curriculum internationalisation and global citizenship (Whiteford et al., 2013). However, this focus on attracting higher-fee-paying international students raises concerns about exacerbating inequalities, as 'diversity' in these strategies often overlooks the variety within domestic student groups (Gayton, 2020).

The corporatisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) further complicates matters, with universities operating like businesses and students as consumers, potentially deepening inequalities and reducing accessibility (Davidson, 2015). Jiang (2008) critiques the Western-centric internationalisation processes that perpetuate educational elitism and deviate from education's public good mission. The consumer model shifts the focus from intellectual development to market demands, reinforcing disparities and undermining education's societal role.

In light of the evolving landscape, higher education institutions are increasingly focused on embedding more inclusive curricula and expanding student intake. Consequently, the attention has turned to the awarding gap – the differences in degree attainment – between home students and international students.

Attention is being drawn to the financial burden on international students (Brooks & Waters, 2021) and the challenges they face when transitioning to British universities (Bunce et al., 2019; NUS, 2011). International students, regardless of ethnicity or nationality, have expressed difficulty in familiarising themselves with the "pedagogic languages" of British universities (Singh et al., 2023).

This study aims to understand the barriers and needs of both home and international students, contributing to a more equitable learning environment at Edinburgh Napier University (ENU). By comparing these student groups' experiences in Postgraduate Taught (PGT) programmes, the research intends to identify factors influencing academic performance and potential awarding gaps.

Research Methods

A multi-method approach was employed, including administrative data analysis, a university-wide online survey, and in-depth interviews with teaching staff and students from five Schools. The survey garnered 135 responses, and 16 students participated in interviews (9 international and 7 home students). Additionally, 8 teaching staff from various schools were interviewed.

Findings

1. **Positive Learning Experience:** Students, particularly returning ones, report satisfaction with their studies at ENU, praising the quality of teaching and university facilities, especially the library.

2. International Students' Financial Struggles: The flexible fee payment system has led to international students enrolling without adequate funds, relying on part-time jobs to cover tuition fees. Delays in payment result in restricted access to learning resources, such as Moodle.

3. Inequality in Accessibility: The university's offerings appear to benefit those who do not need to work or care for families, or who can afford to live near campus, exacerbating issues of equality and equity.

4. Conflict Between Student Groups: The high tuition fees lead some international students to treat education as a transaction, displaying behaviours like tardiness and disruptive conduct during lectures. This has caused tension with home and EU students, who feel their educational experience is being compromised.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the complex challenges that internationalisation poses to higher education in the UK. While students generally appreciate the quality of education at ENU, the financial pressures on international students and the resulting behaviours have created a divide between student groups, with negative impacts on both. These issues underscore the need for universities to re-evaluate their approach to internationalisation, ensuring that it does not come at the expense of educational integrity or equity.

Furthermore, the research reveals that the corporatisation of HEIs may be at odds with the mission of education as a public good. To bridge the awarding gap and foster a truly inclusive environment, tailored support mechanisms must be developed, taking into account the diverse backgrounds and challenges of both home and international students.

As HEIs continue to navigate the balance between internationalisation and inclusivity, it is imperative that they commit to policies and practices that uphold the values of equity and access for all students. Only through a concerted effort to address the multifaceted barriers identified in this study can HEIs ensure that the pursuit of higher education remains a transformative experience that equips students with the skills and knowledge to contribute meaningfully to a global society.

References

Bunce, L. *et al.* (2019) 'Experiences of black and minority ethnic (BME) students in higher education: applying self-determination theory to understand the BME attainment gap', *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(3), pp. 534–547. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1643305>

Brooks, R. & Waters, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Student migrants and contemporary educational mobilities*. Palgrave MacMillan

Davidson, C. (2015) 'The University Corporatization Shift: A Longitudinal Analysis of University Admission Handbooks, 1980 to 2010', *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 45(2), pp. 193–213

Gayton, A.M. (2020) 'Exploring the widening participation-internationalisation nexus: evidence from current theory and practice', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(9), pp. 1275–1288. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1678014>

Jiang, X. (2008) 'Towards the internationalisation of higher education from a critical perspective', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(4), pp. 347–358. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770802395561>

NUS (National Union of Students). (2011). *Race for Equality* [online]. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/race-for-equality-a-report-on-the-experiences-of-black-students-in-furtherand-higher-education-2011>

Singh, S. *et al.* (2023) 'Understanding the “degree awarding gap” in geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences in UK higher education through peer research', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 47(2), pp. 227–247. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363>

Whiteford, G., Shah, M. and Nair, C.S. (2013) 'Equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive: A discussion of academic standards in an era of widening participation', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 21(3), pp. 299–310. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-Apr-2012-0020>.