

Exploring the experiences of students originally from the EU newer member states in Eastern Europe in UK Higher Education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper reports on an ongoing SRHE-funded project exploring the Higher Education experiences of first-generation migrants to the UK, who are originally from new EU member states in Eastern Europe but have received some or all of their schooling in the UK, i.e. they did not migrate to study. This is a diverse group about whose HE experiences little is known. A series of interviews is being conducted (20 in total) with current students and recent alumni from a range of subject areas and universities. Early findings suggest firstly that there is confusion around home and international students which impacts on access to services, leading to mix-ups over fee status, and exclusion from events. Secondly, some reported stereotyping. Thirdly, their stories are not represented in the curriculum. The paper considers what universities can do to ensure they are more inclusive, and how this group's position can be theorised.

Full paper

This paper reports on an ongoing SRHE-funded project exploring the Higher Education experiences of first-generation migrants to the UK, who are originally from new EU member states in Eastern Europe but have received some or all of their schooling in the UK, i.e. they did not migrate to study, they migrated when under 18. They have a variety of citizenships, including British and dual citizenship, and many have the 'settled status' required for EU citizens who migrated before Brexit. This is a diverse group about whose HE experiences very little is currently known. Although the group may be significant in size, there are no records of how many students in total it includes, since HESA keeps records of domiciles, and this group is recorded as domiciled in the UK and counted together with UK students. Government figures show that what is referred to for statistical categorisation purposes as 'white other' pupils make up 6.8% of school pupils in secondary schools, (2020-21), but this figure also includes non-Eastern Europeans.

On the one hand, they are, as a group, more or less 'invisible', to universities and to research in general. There has been almost no research on the experiences of HE students who fall into the statistical category of 'white other', and none on Eastern Europeans schooled in the UK specifically. Attention has been paid to EU HE staff and students in general following Brexit (British Academy, 2021), however, the focus is on those coming from the EU, rather than those living in the UK. Equally there has been a significant amount of research on the experiences and outcomes of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) versus white British students and staff. This research shows that universities tend to reproduce racial inequality, privileging white, middle and upper class British students and staff, and disadvantaging BAME and international students and staff (Arday, 2018; Mirza, 2018). Other research has focussed on Eastern Europeans in UK HE as 'international students', i.e. as students who have migrated to study, highlighting their plural identifications: national, European, migrant and student (Genova, 2016) and mobility as a tool for competition (Marcu, 2015). Research has also explored the experiences of Eastern European pupils in schools, suggesting they experience racial stereotyping (Tereschenko et al 2019).

On the other hand, Eastern Europeans are 'hypervisible' politically in the post-Brexit context, in which EU migration has been a defining issue and the voice afforded to Euroscepticism has been amplified (Sumption and Fernandez-Reino, 2020; the3million, 2021).

There are debates around sociological theories employed to understand the experiences and positioning of Eastern Europeans in Britain. While some argue that white people cannot be viewed as racially disadvantaged as they occupy a more privileged position than BAME groups, others argue that certain white groups experience forms of racism and should be understood as racialised.

Research questions:

- How does this group experience university life?
- How can HE policy and practice ensure that this group have an inclusive student experience?
- Can they be considered a racialised group and how can their position be theorised?

Methodology

The project takes a qualitative approach. It is exploratory and interpretive, with a focus on depth rather than breadth. A series of narrative interviews is currently being conducted (20 in total) with current UG and PG students and recent alumni from a range of subject areas and both higher and lower tariff universities. Whilst not aiming to be representative, this approach enables the capture of rich data which foregrounds the voices of students in this group and offers insights into diverse, particular experiences as well as enabling us to identify common themes.

Emerging findings

Early-stage findings suggest firstly that there is confusion in universities, among staff, systems and procedures, around home and international students. There is a perception of international as non-white, and home as native. This is impacting these students' access to ESOL and disability support, leading to mix-ups over fee status, and exclusion from e.g. international events. Secondly, those with non-British accents reported some stereotyping from staff and students. Thirdly, they do not find themselves and their stories represented in the curriculum. All this impacts on their sense of identity.

The study shows that these students have found support from peers in similar situations, individual lecturers going the extra mile, and Eastern European societies.

Theoretical framework

The paper considers the relevance of concepts such as 'non-colour coded racism' (Cole, 2009), 'xeno-racism' (Fekete, 2009) and 'marginal whiteness' (Tereshchenko et al, 2019) to better understand the positioning of this group.