

## Reclaiming Higher Education Discourse Through Participatory Research: Empowering Diverse Voices and Challenging Power Imbalances

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Participatory research methods offer a crucial strategy for challenging reductive media and political narratives that portray universities as elitist or divisive. This study explores how participatory approaches empower underrepresented students to co-create counter-narratives that highlight higher education's transformative potential. Through a scoping review of 42 empirical studies, analysed with Aldridge's Participatory Model, the research examines how participatory methods can both meaningfully redistribute power in higher education research, and also be tokenistic in their application. The analysis finds that deeper student participation often leads to stronger challenges to external critiques, as students become active agents in knowledge production. Successful cases show that inclusive methodologies amplify marginalized voices and foster narratives emphasizing higher education's role in promoting collegiality, compassion, and community impact. This research argues that participatory methods provide both an ethical framework and a practical means for stakeholders to reshape public discourse and bridge divides between academia and society.

### Full paper

#### Introduction

Participatory research methods offer a powerful means of reclaiming control of higher education (HE) discourse from external critics and media narratives that frame universities as elitist and disconnected. Students from underrepresented backgrounds continue to face challenges across multiple axes of exclusion which can impact their experiences and attainment whilst studying in HE. This is often felt through established practices and systems which those students do not feel part of, or able to challenge. Participatory research challenges traditional hierarchies by positioning participants as co-researchers rather than subjects. By dismantling traditional power structures and engaging students as

active co-creators of knowledge, these methods provide a concrete pathway for higher education institutions to authentically demonstrate their commitment to inclusion, partnership, and elevating student voices that are often marginalized in dominant narratives about university value and purpose.

### The project

This project explored where participatory research methods have been adopted in HE research with under-represented and diverse students, and how successfully power relations were meaningfully challenged in those studies. We sought to understand how research in HE can be made more participatory and used as a mechanism to challenge traditional power relationships. An initial literature review identified the origins and uses of Participatory Research, explored the different terminology and definitions employed, and reviewed existing models of measuring participation. This was followed by a comprehensive Scoping Review (Scher et al., 2023) which found 699 papers initially which underwent systematic refinement, culminating in detailed analysis of 42 empirical studies.

These studies were analysed using Aldridge's Participatory Model (2015), which maps participation along a continuum from passive and "tokenistic" engagement (where students remain "objects" or "subjects" of research) through to more active and transformative roles leading to "inclusion" or "emancipation."

### Findings

Ten papers were excluded as too conceptual or containing insufficient detail to categorise. The remaining papers were almost equally divided between: Participant as subject, Participant as actor, Participant-led. The features identified in each category are summarised below.

Participant as subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some principles of PR adopted</li><li>• Inconsistent definition or limited scope of participation</li><li>• Social change and transformation outcomes not fully evident</li><li>• Methods did not always align with PR eg interviews and tests</li></ul>
Participant as actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More clearly defined methodological approach</li><li>• Students as co-researchers</li><li>• Greater participation at some stages but still researcher-led</li></ul>

- More equal role but never fully participant-led
- Predominantly Participatory Action Research

## Reflections and Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that when genuinely implemented, participatory approaches empower those typically excluded from shaping higher education narratives to become active agents in knowledge creation. The most successful examples show how collaborative knowledge production between academics and students can generate powerful counter-narratives that celebrate the transformative communities at the heart of higher education. These studies, categorised as participant as actor and participant-led, offer strategies to increase meaningful participation in research which could provide a model for other studies to increase levels of participation. However, in many studies power relations and social change outcomes need to be more explicitly addressed in the project design and reporting. Further, greater conceptual clarity to define participatory research is required to elevate its impact in HE research.

## Conclusion

Participatory research has gained some traction in HE as institutions seek to align with inclusive, student-centred agendas. By elevating diverse student voices, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds, participatory research creates spaces where the lived experiences of higher education participants can directly influence the future direction of HE and challenge media and political discourse that portrays universities as elitist or failing to deliver value. Yet, despite these potential benefits, this study reveals that the emancipatory potential of PR at a sector level remains constrained by inconsistent definitions, methodological misalignments, and unresolved power dynamics.

Participatory methodologies represent not just an ethical approach to research but a potential strategic pathway for higher education institutions to reclaim control of public discourse. By embracing truly collaborative approaches that move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward emancipatory participation, universities can demonstrate the very collegiality, compassion, and community engagement that critics claim is lacking. These methods provide a mechanism for reconnecting with communities that have felt excluded from higher education, potentially bridging divides between academic communities and broader society.

The evidence indicates that participatory research offers one meaningful approach for higher education to take back control of its narrative through authentic engagements that embody the very values and transformative potential that universities seek to communicate in an increasingly sceptical public sphere.

