

Choosing Exclusivity: How Applicant Behaviour Sustains Elite Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This paper explores how applicants' perceptions and choices reinforce the elite reputation of Durham University, despite internal efforts to broaden access. Using admissions data and sociological theory from Organisational Ecology and Blau Space, the research shows that contextual applicants are less likely to accept Durham as their chosen institution suggesting a persistent sense of exclusion and cultural misfit. These choices, shaped by class-based expectations and reputational narratives, co-produce the institution's elite identity. The paper argues that students are not just passive recipients of exclusion but active agents in its reproduction. If institutional leaders are serious about changing this perception, strategy must go beyond procedural fairness and address the culture of elite institutions within the HE ecosystem. This includes tackling the status hierarchies, branding narratives, and social signalling that sustain exclusivity. Without this shift, internal reforms risk complicity in the very elitism they aim to disrupt.

Full paper

Durham University has implemented several widening participation (WP) initiatives, including a major centralisation of its undergraduate admissions process in 2019. Yet, despite these reforms, the social composition of its student body has remained largely unchanged. This paper draws on doctoral research investigating this paradox: why internal reforms at elite universities often fail to shift student demographics. Using Durham as a case study, the research finds that contextual applicants continue to perceive the institution as culturally exclusive and are less likely to make it a firm choice, even when offered a place. The paper argues that applicant behaviour, shaped by perceptions of prestige and belonging, plays a critical role in reproducing the elite identity of higher education institutions (HEIs), limiting the impact of institutional efforts unless broader cultural forces are addressed.

The study is framed by Organisational Ecology and Blau Space theory, which provide tools for analysing how universities exist within stratified market niches shaped by both institutional action and environmental forces. Organisational Ecology views HEIs as competing for resources—students, funding, reputation—within a broader ecosystem. Blau Space theory enables modelling of student choice across multiple dimensions, including class, ethnicity, and school type. These frameworks emphasise that a university's "realised niche"—who it admits—is not simply a function of internal policy but is co-produced by external perceptions and audience behaviour. This shifts attention from what universities do to how they are perceived, and how those perceptions drive application and acceptance patterns, particularly among underrepresented groups.

The research used statistical analysis of 229,217 applications to Durham from 2010 to 2023 and findings show that after centralising admissions in 2019, contextual applicants were more likely to receive offers, particularly in "recruiting" departments. However, this procedural change did not significantly affect who entered the university. Entrance rates have seen little positive change. Contextual applicants are increasingly accepted other HEIs before Durham; there has been an increased proportion in entrants from the highest two parental-SES groups; independent school applicants made up 32% of the entrance pool in 2023, therefore remaining overrepresented.

The findings suggest that while internal reforms improved fairness in process, they did not address the deeper reputational dynamics that shape applicant behaviour. Applicants from underrepresented backgrounds continue to perceive Durham as a place for others—not for them. As a result, the university remains locked in a narrow, prestige-based niche, with relatively little change in social composition despite considerable internal effort. These dynamics reveal that access is not only about policy, but also about perception, signalling, and social belonging.

The research situates these findings within a broader critique of stakeholder complicity in higher education. Academics, leaders, and professional services staff often express strong support for widening access, as demonstrated by strategy documents. However, WP policies, while acting as an important step to address the imbalance, fail to address the deeper issues of a sense of "fit" between a potential student and institutional culture or identity. A student's perception of where they "fit" are shaped by engrained narratives of their social networks driven by communication at schools, with peers and within their families. Thus, WP outcomes are not only the result of institutional strategy, but of the broader social system within which those strategies operate. Holding universities solely

accountable for entrant profiles overlooks the extent to which student perceptions and choices are also part of the problem—and should be part of the solution.

To shift the entrant pool meaningfully, universities must rethink what is within their control. This means developing metrics that are underpinned by knowledge of the social drivers which attract students to particular HEI. Structural reforms must be accompanied by cultural transformation on campus.

Sector-wide collaboration is also needed. The prestige hierarchy in UK HE is not dismantled one institution at a time. Policymakers, regulators, and elite universities must work together to realign metrics, incentives, and narratives so that equity is not at odds with excellence, and inclusion is not perceived as a reputational risk.

Elite identity in higher education is not only preserved through internal admissions policies, but through the ongoing choices and perceptions of applicants. Durham's case illustrates that even well-intentioned reforms can fall short when cultural narratives remain unchallenged. A more honest, collaborative, and perception-aware strategy is needed—one that recognises the limits of institutional control and embraces shared responsibility for creating a more inclusive system.