

Reimagining the independent learner for the massified university: Motivations and constraints in the learning strategies of high-potential widening participation undergraduates

Alexander Hensby, Barbara Adewumi, Yetunde Kolajo
University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper critically interrogates ‘independent learning’ as the commonly invoked ‘ideal’ learning strategy for student success in higher education. While the term typically denotes a self-directed and self-motivated learning provision, it can also be seen as upholding certain assumptions and expectations that reflect higher education’s history as the preserve of white, male elites (Leathwood, 2006). But what does efficacious independent learning actually mean in an increasingly massified and employability-driven sector? To what extent does this model privilege certain student profiles and backgrounds above others?

Our research draws on a 3-year qualitative longitudinal study of the motivations and learning strategies of 25 undergraduates, drawing on a sample of academic excellence scholarship awardees from a range of socioeconomic and ethnicity backgrounds. Findings reveal a more nuanced and pragmatic picture of independent learning, while identifying how misapplications of the concept and differential resourcing may contribute to longstanding degree awarding gaps.

Full paper

There is no shortage of studies and research into the factors that cause degree awarding gaps for widening participation (WP) students in UK universities. It is often contended that working-class and racially minoritised students lack access to valuable resources such as academic and social capital, as well as experiencing unbelonging in a monocultural campus environment (Hensby & Adewumi, 2024; Bathmaker et al, 2016;

Reay et al, 2001). Less attention, however, is generally paid to how awarding gaps may be reproduced through differential student learning strategies and the extent to which they conform to institutional conventions of the 'ideal learner'. Such conventions are often opaquely defined within the sector (Wong & Chiu, 2021), but arguably its most common and durable expression is that of the 'independent learner'. Though independent learning is generally invoked to denote a more self-directed and self-motivated learning provision typical of higher education, it can also be seen as upholding certain assumptions and expectations that reflect the sector's history as the preserve of white, male elites (Leathwood, 2006).

Nevertheless, we may question the enduring significance of these assumptions and expectations when the Humboldtian ideal of 'learning for its own sake' is becoming increasingly marginalised in favour of a human capital rationality that prioritises students' preparation for the labour market (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013). Widening participation (WP) drives, too, have arguably challenged traditional motivations and strategies for learning in HE, even though evidence from Brooks et al (2022: 73) suggests that some teachers see this as contributing to an increase in 'dependent, passive, and instrumental learners'.

Despite the persistence of degree awarding gaps, we must avoid stereotyping WP students or overlooking their agency in converting their motivations and resources into efficacious learning strategies. To this end, we may ask the following questions. What does independent learning actually mean in an increasingly massified and employability-driven sector? How might we concretise independent learning into specific strategies and behaviours, and to what extent does this model privilege certain student profiles and backgrounds above others?

Our research compares longitudinally the motivations and learning strategies of 25 'high potential' undergraduates over the course of their degree study. The sample features awardees of an academic excellence scholarship from a diversity of socioeconomic and ethnicity backgrounds, with degree outcomes ranging from first-class honours to noncompletion. The longitudinal methodology consists of two annual in-depth qualitative interviews conducted over the course of students' undergraduate degree, where students discussed their motivations for study, their approach to timetabled and independent study, and learning through assessment.

Our research is underpinned by a theoretical framework, developed in previous studies (Hensby & Adewumi, 2024; Hensby et al, 2024) that combines self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capitals. The former enables us to analyse students' motivations for studying at university and the strategies they develop in order to succeed, including the need to develop relatedness, competence, and autonomy through the course of their learning (Earl, 2024; Bunce et al, 2021). The latter seeks to contextualise these motivational strategies with the resources students have at their disposal, including those which aid the development of academic capital within the campus field (Watson, 2013).

Our results highlight two key issues. First, while we find that while many high achieving students possessed 'classic' independent learner characteristics (such as a personal passion for their subject), this was also expressed through proactively seeking additional help from academics and student support services. Second, our findings support those from Money et al. (2020) in that students' expectations of HE learning was shaped by (mis)characterisations of the independent learner absorbed from FE level. This was especially pronounced among BTEC-qualified entrants, as teachers unfavourably juxtaposed their more extrinsically motivated learning strategies with the need to become more 'self-reliant' at university. This contributed to their adoption of a more isolated independent learner model at HE level, one that arguably compounded feelings of unbelonging on campus. Moreover, WP students' efforts to develop relatedness and competence through their studies was negatively impacted by the need to engage in paid work during term-time.

In sum, we seek to construct a more inclusive and empirically informed model of efficacious independent learning in contemporary higher education. Our longitudinal design importantly captures the temporal aspects of students' learning strategies, including where and when the pursuit of relatedness, competence, and autonomy was most likely to be rewarded, and where differential resource access was most likely to exacerbate awarding gaps.