

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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The Rise of Agentic Inclusion in the UK Universities: Maintaining Reputation through (Formal) Diversification

Roxana Diana Baltaru<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

**Abstract:**

**Abstract**

The pursuit of inclusion in elite universities has been widely explored from a structural lens concerned with issues of access faced by traditionally underrepresented students and staff. Building from a sociological institutionalist approach, this paper proposes the concept of 'agentic inclusion' to capture the growing valorisation of universities' agency in the pursuit of inclusion, and the underlying shift from inclusion as 'structural pursuit' to inclusion as 'organisational commitment'. Results from extensive analysis of 124 UK universities show that in the context of agentic inclusion, elite universities emerge as leaders in the organisational display of inclusion (in terms of inclusion-oriented offices, units and teams), despite persistent issues of access faced by traditionally underrepresented students and staff in these universities. The findings call for further inclusion research into the gap between universities' organisational commitments to inclusion and the inclusion of students and staff at the structural level, and inform several policy.

**Paper: *Objective***

The relationship between university reputation and inclusion has been widely explored in the sociology of higher education from a structural lens, in respect to issues of access faced by traditionally underrepresented students and staff to elite universities (Boliver 2013). Despite staggering institutionalisation of inclusion as a university mission, little is known about the relationship between university reputation and universities' organisational commitments to inclusion. In this sense, virtually all UK universities display formal statements in which they articulate their organisational commitment to inclusion, and a growing number of universities have developed inclusion-oriented offices and organisational sub-divisions to cater for inclusion as a university mission (Baltaru 2018). This paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding the uniqueness of the pursuit of inclusion as a university mission, followed by a systematic analysis of the relationship between university reputation and universities' organisational commitments to inclusion.

## **Theoretical argument**

Departing from a sociological institutionalist approach, the author proposes the concept of “agentic inclusion” to capture the growing valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion, and the underlying shift from inclusion as “structural pursuit” to inclusion as “organisational commitment”. Agentic inclusion is important from two points of view. First, organisational commitments to inclusion are not a guarantee of inclusion at the structural level, due to long documented dynamics of “loose coupling” between organisational forms and the underlying activity structure (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Krücken et al 2013). Second, the emphasis on organisational commitments represents a game changer for elite universities who have the opportunity to balance “the talk” and “the walk” thus presenting themselves as inclusive institutions. The central hypothesis is that in this context, elite universities emerge as leaders in the organisational display of inclusion despite persistent issues of access faced by traditionally underrepresented students and staff. Furthermore, it is expected that universities’ organisational commitments are disconnected from the structural levels of inclusion among students and staff.

## **Method**

The analysis in this paper has been enabled by extensive data collection on 124 UK universities, approximately 90% of the UK university population. The dataset combines primary data collected from universities’ individual websites with secondary data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). HESA is the official data collection agency for the UK HE sector, whilst ETER is the first pan-European register of HEIs, funded by the European Commission. A logistic regression model suitable for binary outcomes has been utilised to predict universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion (the dependent variable) based on university reputation, controlling for the shares of students and staff from underrepresented backgrounds, and net of institutional level differences: total number of students, university resources, foundation era, and region. Data to operationalise universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion has been collected from universities’ websites in 2018 via web census methodology. Most recent data to operationalise the principle predictors and the control variables was collected from ETER and HESA for 2017. The model was run with robust standard errors. No issues of multicollinearity have been identified. Logarithmic transformations have been applied where appropriate to improve variables’ distributions.

## **Findings**

The results support the above hypotheses: elite universities distinguish themselves through greater organisational commitment to inclusion (in terms of inclusion-oriented offices, units and teams) compared to all other universities, irrespective of the shares of students and staff from non-traditional backgrounds and controlling for institutional level differences. The findings call for further research into the pursuit of inclusion from an organisational lens, and critically reflect on the UK experience in order to inform inclusion policies at the international level. The paper advocates for a shift in the current inclusion paradigm by looking beyond universities as the *de facto* agents in the pursuit of inclusion. This shift may translate into revisiting the role that of the state in enhancing inclusion in HE, for instance by regulating the use of tuition fees or by addressing educational inequalities prior to the university level.

## References

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