

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

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Mutually exclusive? Critically interrogating student and staff perceptions of 'excellence' and 'inclusion'

Ruth Walker<sup>1</sup>, Meg Tait<sup>1</sup>, Alistair Hyde<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom <sup>2</sup>Cambridge University Students' Union, Cambridge, United Kingdom

**Research Domain:** Access and widening participation (AWP)

**Abstract:** Common pushbacks to the implementation of inclusive policies into practice are concerns about academic standards and quality - tropes familiar in the discourse of excellence. Using Little and Locke's (2008) framework for 'excellence' – as, variously, a positional good for individual students, a form of reputational advantage, a means of achieving national social and economic goals, or as an aspirational target for continuous quality enhancement – this study critically interrogates student and staff perceptions of the cognate concept of 'inclusion' at one highly-selective residential university. Through a university-wide survey followed by semi-structured focus groups and interviews with a range of institutional stakeholders, the student-staff co-researchers explore how the two terms are understood, what inter-relationships or tensions might exist between them, and their perceived impact on educational experiences and practices. The findings offer evidence of the way inclusion is critically shifting the parameters of excellence in higher education at a time of educational policy change across one institution's organisational culture, in ways which may be illuminating to the wider sector.

**Paper:** The term 'inclusion' has become as prevalent in contemporary higher education discourse as that of 'excellence': social inclusion policies underpin the widening participation and access agenda, while commitments to excellence support the increasing emphasis on both competition and quality assurance across the sector. Advocates for inclusive practices have made explicit a connection to excellence, for instance in the report by the Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group *Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A Route to Excellence* (2017), which argues that enabling all students to deliver to their full potential would facilitate the deliverability of an institution's mission for excellence. More broadly, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education makes a case for higher education to foster the values of a civilised society: "an excellent institution will demonstrate commitment to social and cultural inclusion and to widening participation in higher education to all who have the ability and motivation to benefit from the experience" (Brusoni et al 2014 p31).

The term 'excellence' is aligned to a wide range of higher educational activities: it has been connected to sector-wide comparisons (Marginson 2006), cross-institutional league tables and rankings (Hazlekorn 2011), quality assurance (Ashwin et al 2014), teaching excellence (Gibbs 2008) and learning excellence (Middlehurst and Fielden 2016). However, the term has also been challenged; Readings (1996, 22) has pointed out that "excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless", as it is a qualifier whose meaning is fixed in relation to something else, rather than a standard of judgment on its own. Further, Saunders (2014) has argued that while a commitment to excellence is a laudable goal, the term now represents a body of meanings and values that are inextricably tied up in ideological interests. Similarly, 'inclusion' is a complex and contextual term as it is deployed in diverse ways and may mean many things to different people. It is recognised as a conceptual approach that has the potential to significantly change the focus of practices and understandings of higher education: "inclusion needs to become the *leitmotiv* – or the driving principle – of the higher education institutions of the future" (Clarke & Beech, 2016). Clough and Corbett's (2000) review of literature in the field indicates five overlapping historical perspectives to inclusion, ranging from a psycho-medical legacy of the 1950s to a curricular approach for educational inclusion, and with definitions that might narrowly focus on the inclusion of specific groups of learners to broader definitions that focus on the diversity of everyone within an educational institution (D'Arcy 2014). As with other contestable terminologies, when seeking to implement educational policy across an institution it is vitally important to clarify stakeholders' perspectives, assumptions and understandings, if the actions the terms align with are to have a practical impact and perceivable benefit.

This study therefore investigates student and staff understandings of 'excellence' and 'inclusion' in one highly-selective residential university, following the launch of a new educational strategy where both terms were foregrounded as a rationalisation for a suite of actions to be undertaken across the next five years, and where strong commitments have been made to widening access and participation, as well as inclusive teaching and learning practices. Little and Locke's (2011) framework for 'excellence' – as, variously, a positional good for individual students, a form of reputational advantage, a means of achieving national social and economic goals, or as an aspirational target for continuous quality enhancement – provided the basis for an investigation of the cognate term 'inclusion'. Students and staff co-researchers disseminated an online survey across multiple student and staff networks, and also collaboratively facilitated semi-structured focus groups. In this way, the project used an inclusive methodology and served the double purpose of gathering evidence and enculturating different university communities into a critical engagement with the relationship between the two terms or conceptual approaches.

This university has previously called for a reconceptualization of teaching excellence as 'educational excellence' in its TEF submissions, on the grounds that higher education offers students opportunities to engage with wider affordances than learning and teaching. The findings of this study will therefore contribute to the ongoing critical engagement with measuring 'excellence' across the sector and within institutions, particularly in light of the widening participation and access agenda. More immediately, as the recent development of the university's internal Educational Framework revealed multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings of both terms, the study's findings will inform ongoing work to support the development of inclusive practices across the university, in collaboration with student representatives as collaborative partners.

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