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Expansion and Simplification: Challenges with Implementation of Ireland's First National Strategy for Adult Literacy

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Practice-inspired working paper

Abstract

This working paper discusses one piece of educational policy in detail; the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, which was introduced in September 2021 as the first dedicated national strategy for adult literacy in Ireland. The strategy presents new challenges and opportunities for adult literacy education and advocacy in Ireland, where rates of adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs are relatively high within the OECD. This paper analyses the Adult Literacy for Life strategy through textual analysis to bring the challenges to light and propose potential solutions. A key question driving the analysis is why implementation of the strategy is slower than expected. It is proposed that this may be at least partially explained by contradictions and obfuscations that are written into the strategy document. This discussion is intended to provoke consideration of what makes effective educational policy, and it may provide useful lessons for other countries, as well as policymakers and practitioners in Ireland.

Key words: adult literacy; education policy; Ireland

Introduction

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a registered charity in Ireland, with 1,700 members. We work to make sure that people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs. As part of this work, we advocate for national policy approaches that we believe, based on best available evidence, will achieve these goals. We are also an educational provider through our distance learning service and eLearning platform, Learn with NALA.

Adult literacy education is rooted in a philosophy of liberation and empowerment of the learner (e.g. Freire 1970). Pedagogy in adult literacy is typically learner-directed, and takes a 'wealth model' approach which uses and celebrates the knowledge and skills that adults bring to their learning through life experience (NALA 2018). It is our experience that people who have unmet literacy needs as adults are often from disadvantaged social groups and very often had negative experiences of formal education as children – too often they have been seen through a deficit lens. Improving literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills can benefit learners in terms of health, employment and self-confidence among many other benefits (NALA 2020a).

In 2021, Ireland's first national strategy for adult literacy was published: Adult Literacy for Life: A 10-Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (Government of Ireland 2021a). The strategy aims to embed a cross-government, cross-society and cross-economy approach to adult literacy in Ireland. This working paper reflects on the content of the ALL strategy in the light of the first few years of its implementation and considers challenges inherent in the strategy document, and how those might be met.

The Need for a National Strategy

The extent of the adult literacy issue in Ireland is often underestimated, perhaps in part because our rates of third-level participation are high (CSO 2022) and our school-age reading achievement relative to other countries is good (ERC 2023) – in recent years. However, the latest OECD Survey of Adult Skills, run by the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), found that the following percentages of adults (aged 16 to 65) were at or below Level 1 (basic functional competency) in literacy, numeracy and ‘problem-solving in technology-rich environments’ (i.e. digital skills) in 2012 (CSO 2013).

Competency	Percent of adults at or below Level 1	Ranking
Literacy	18%	17/24
Numeracy	25%	19/24
Problem-solving in technology-rich environments	42%	N/A

Table 1: OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2012 - results for Ireland

Table 1 shows that significant proportions of Irish adults do not have the literacy, numeracy or especially digital competency needed to participate fully in modern society. Table 1 also shows that Ireland performed poorly in literacy and numeracy among the 24 participating countries (a ranking was not provided for digital skills). The OECD Survey of Adult Skills is run every ten years, and the 2022 survey was delayed, so we are currently awaiting those results with interest.

Despite evidence that Ireland has a high level of adult literacy needs, policy intervention on adult literacy has historically been fragmented. Research commissioned by NALA and conducted by the Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) found that there were nine government departments operating 22 strategies relating to literacy in 2019. That report concluded that “there is a severe inadequacy in the approach and allocated resources to tackle the scale of the adult literacy issue in Ireland” (NALA 2020b, p70). While Ireland has a proud history of adult literacy education by both state and community actors (see e.g. NALA 2022) the disparate parties did not necessarily work together and were competing for limited resources. There was a clear need for co-ordination and investment.

The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy – a new opportunity

Thanks to long-running advocacy by NALA and others, in 2020 the programme for the new coalition government contained a commitment to “develop and implement a new 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills within the first year of the Government” (Government of Ireland 2020, p100). Under the new government, the previous Department of Education and Skills was split into the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), essentially separating adult education from children’s education. The new Minister of DFHERIS, Simon Harris TD[1], now Taoiseach[2], expressed his personal commitment and acknowledged the State’s responsibility for adult literacy:

> “We have to challenge the misconception that an inability to read, write or digitally communicate is a failure of the person. It is a failure of society and the State. But one I intend to address.”
>
> (Government of Ireland 2021b)

The ALL strategy is a 10-year strategy with a range of immediate and longer-term actions intended to reduce the proportion of adults in Ireland at PIAAC Level 1 or below in literacy from 18% to 7% and in numeracy from 25% to 12%; also to reduce the proportion of adults without basic digital skills (as

[1] Teachta Dála (TD) is the Irish equivalent of a Member of Parliament (MP)
[2] Taoiseach is the Irish equivalent of Prime Minister

measured by DESI) from 47% to 20% (*ibid*., p13). Other success measures, which are not in the Executive Summary, are as follows:

- "MORE adults accessing literacy, numeracy and digital literacy education and supports."
- "FEWER adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs."
- "GREATER provision of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy education and supports."
- "INCREASED access to services by adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs."

(*ibid*., p34)

The primary method for achieving these targets and other success measures is co-ordination of the existing services for adult literacy: "the most critical thing that this strategy needs to do is **join up** this support" (*ibid*., p10 – emphasis in original). The strategy proposes to do this by creating a new governance and implementation structure.

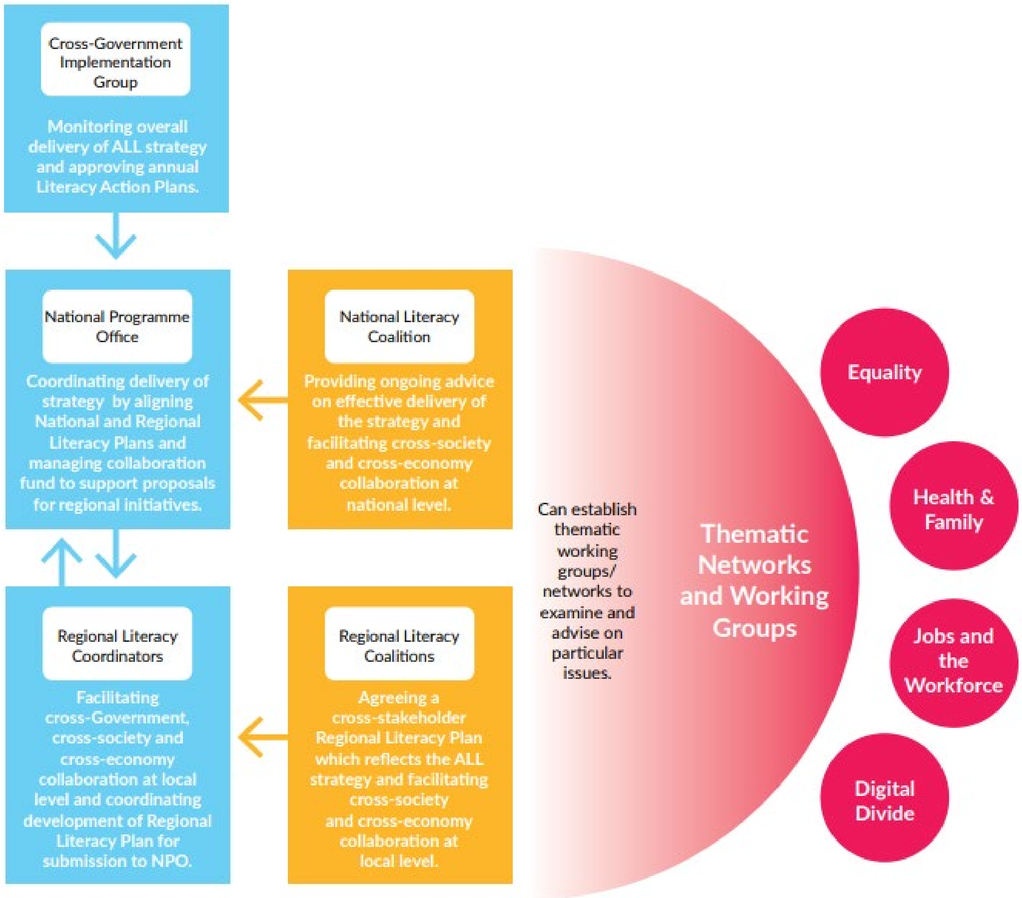

Figure 1: ALL strategy governance and implementation structure (reproduced from ALL strategy, p38)

As Figure 1 illustrates, there is an emphasis on action at regional level, and at the same time a layer of national governance is being created to co-ordinate the various collaborations that are envisaged. Collaborative adult literacy projects are also to be supported by a new Collaboration and Innovation Fund.

The actions are organised into four pillars called "Understand", "Access", "Expand" and "Empower". An overarching goal across all four pillars is to "Measure Success" (*ibid*., p43). Under the "Empower" pillar, certain "vulnerable cohorts" are identified that could potentially receive targeted funding (*ibid*., p59).

Implementation so far

Approximately a quarter of the way into the life of the ALL strategy, a number of key goals have begun to be achieved. The NPO has been set up and partially staffed, the Regional Literacy Co-ordinators have been appointed and the national governance bodies are now in place. The Collaboration and Innovation Fund was established in 2023 and is being run on an annual basis; funded projects from 2023 can be viewed at Adult Literacy for Life (2024a). The ALL NPO has begun to run national literacy awareness campaigns as set out in the strategy.

However, given the strategy has been in place for around three years, one might expect that more would have been achieved by this point. The regional and national action plans described in Figure 1, for example, are not yet developed. A key action, in accordance with the strategy's aim to co-ordinate diverse services, is to establish a "one-stop-shop" (*ibid*., pp44-45) for information on literacy supports and resources – so far this is simply a webpage with NALA's freephone information service number, and a list of contact details for local Education and Training Boards (ETBs - the main, state-funded providers of in-person adult literacy tuition) (Adult Literacy for Life, 2024b). Many of the local ETBs are yet to agree to a referral protocol from the NALA freephone, which would be a straightforward process in keeping with the collaborative spirit of the ALL Strategy. Overall, the majority of actions assigned to the initial implementation phase of the strategy have yet to be implemented.

Understanding the Challenges

This working paper seeks to understand why implementation of the ALL strategy has been slow to date, by analysing the strategy itself and identifying challenges inherent within the way it has been conceived.

First and perhaps foremost is the strategy's contradictory aim to simplify adult literacy provision in Ireland by adding new structures and personalities into the mix. Some language in the strategy hints at this paradox of wanting to grow and streamline provision simultaneously (emphasis added):

> "Alongside the **expansion** of literacy support capacity, there is also a need to **simplify** literacy provision within FET." (*ibid*., p57)
>
> "[…] a more **consistent**, **localised** approach to literacy support." (*ibid*., p45)

In a telling example, the one-stop shop for literacy information is proposed on page 44, and on the next page it is proposed that local helplines be set up. Local helplines would undercut the usefulness of a one-stop shop and this exemplifies the tension in the strategy between bespoke provision which meets local needs or the needs of specific target cohorts, and consistent provision which can be overseen by one national office, and promoted to the general public in a clear awareness campaign.

Collaboration is the proposed key to resolving this tension. The strategy does not remove any of the existing actors from Ireland's adult literacy space, to simplify matters. Instead, it creates a fund as incentive for collaborative projects, and establishes coalitions at regional and national levels to bring all the key actors together. These initiatives may well succeed in creating a more collaborative spirit. There will always be some level of competition, however, between actors who are funded by the same government department (DFHERIS), particularly as funding is currently allocated (partly) on the basis of the number of adult learners enrolled. Each individual organisation will want to get credit publicly for the work that they have done but branding all adult literacy activity under "Adult Literacy for Life" would better suit the one-stop-shop purposes of the ALL strategy.

There is also a risk that by making adult literacy everyone's responsibility, it becomes no-one's primary responsibility. The ALL NPO is too small to be solely responsible for implementing the strategy; meaningful engagement is required from all the departments in the Cross-Government Implementation Group and all the stakeholders in the National Literacy Coalition. That engagement is voluntary in reality, and the ALL NPO must influence without authority. The strategy actions do not have assigned owners, making them easier to approve (and the strategy was published early in the new government's term of office) but more difficult to implement. It is not clear when the "initial implementation phase" (*ibid*., p73) of the strategy is intended to be completed.

Similarly, the strategy is vague on financial matters. In the Introduction there is a clear indication that the strategy will require little or no further investment into adult literacy:

> "There is already significant investment in Ireland to tackle unmet literacy needs […] This strategy will harness the resources already in place […]" (*ibid*., p15)

This would meet the approval of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, founded after the recession of 2008 to ensure efficient use of government revenue. But the strategy also aims to "increase investment in overall literacy provision across FET" (*ibid*., p56) and to "use long-term capital investment and leasing strategy to ensure modern, informal 'non institutional' facilities are available for literacy learning and support" (*ibid*., p75). In fact, implementing all the actions set out in the strategy would realistically require significant investment.

As the actions are a means to the end of decreasing the share of Ireland's adults with literacy, numeracy or digital literacy needs, it may be more fair to focus on achievement of those targets. The strategy proposes introducing a more regular assessment system, based on PIAAC levels, which would be absolutely essential for monitoring progress - but this is yet to be introduced. The strategy, by no fault of the authors, also suffers from a lack of baseline data on use of existing literacy services; hence the lack of numeric targets attached to the success measures quoted above (*ibid*., p2).

Potential solutions

The following suggestions are not official policy positions of NALA - they are simply intended to spark discussion or consideration among the readers of this working paper.

1. Communication between the various actors in adult literacy in Ireland should be facilitated and encouraged. The regional and national coalitions should meet as often as feasible to allow maximum opportunity for information-sharing and relationship-building.

2. The national action plans and regional action plans should contain specific timelines and action owners. Costings would also be helpful to assess the feasibility of the plans, and to make the case for funding. The strategy cannot succeed without adequate budget for all action owners.

3. The following should be high priority areas for immediate action:
    a. Introducing data collection systems to measure success of the strategy
    b. Reaching an agreed approach to awareness-raising across national and local actors

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the key features of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, how and why it was developed, and how implementation has progressed to date. It has highlighted a number of elements of the strategy which could be causing challenges with implementation, and tentatively proposed solutions. It is hoped that the paper will be a useful springboard for consideration and discussion of effective policy-making in education, particularly adult literacy education.

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Exploring the Impact of School Choice on Education Segregation in the UK: A Comparative Analysis of Regression Analysis and Qualitative Interviews in School Choice Research

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Abstract

This working paper explores the impact of research methods on research findings generation by analysing two studies that focus on the impacts of UK school choice policies on educational segregation. One of them utilises qualitative interviews (Reay 1996), the other one uses regression analysis (Gorard et al. 2001). School choice policies, which allow parents to select schools outside their local catchment areas, have sparked debate over their role in educational stratification. Reay's work, using qualitative interviews, explores socio-economic constraints on educational choice through the experiences of two groups of mothers from different socio-economic backgrounds. Conversely, Gorard et al's study employs regression analysis to analyse educational outcomes from large datasets, examining variations in student performance and school composition over time. This paper conducts a detailed comparison of these diverging methodologies, assessing how their philosophical underpinnings, data collection techniques, and analytical strategies influence the interpretation of results. The findings suggest that while both methods offer valuable insights on the impacts of school choice policy, they also have inherent biases and limitations that affect research design, data analysis, and conclusions. The paper advocates for methodological awareness and reflexivity, encouraging researchers to consider how their selected methods might impact their research. This paper concludes by discussing the potential for integrating these methods to overcome individual limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational policies and their implications.

Key words: School Choice Policy, Educational Segregation, Methodological Comparison, Regression Analysis, Qualitative Interviews

Introduction

School choice has been made a national policy in the UK since the issue of the Education Reform Act of 1988 (here from – the 1988 Act). The policy gives parents freedom to choose from schools, even those outside their catchment areas, and forbids schools to refuse any students unless capacity has been reached (Gorard et al 2001). Since then, parents' school choice has become a heated research topic in the UK.

A common argument in support of school choice is that it can create competition among schools and improve educational outcomes for all students (Chubb and Moe 1991). However, there has been disagreement over how school choice policies might impact education stratification. Some believe that the policy can perpetuate existing inequalities as more privileged families have greater ability to choose better schools for their children, while disadvantaged families may not have the same opportunities due to the limited economic, social and cultural capital (Ball et al. 1996). Research in other contexts shows that affluent parents tend to avoid schools with a high proportion of immigrant pupils or low-socioeconomic-class students under the school choice policy, which may foster social segregation and further disadvantage marginalised social groups (Parma et al., 2024). Others argue that school choice policy has contributed to reducing the segregation in schools compared to the prior system where schools were assigned according to students' residential areas (Gorard et al. 2001).

One of the key differences between these studies lies in their research methods. This working paper will compare the two most frequently used research methods - regression analysis and qualitative interviews - in answering the question 'whether and how the school choice policy has impacted education segregation?'. The two methods are chosen for their contrast in approaches to research, including ontological and epistemological assumptions, data collection methods and analysis techniques.

Methods Comparison

There are a number of studies that have investigated the impacts of school choice policies on education stratification, among which, the work of Diane Reay and her co-researchers (e.g., Reay, 1996; Reay & Ball, 1997; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay & Lucey, 2000) and that of Stephen Gorard and his colleagues (e.g., Gorard et al., 2001; Gorard et al., 2002; Gorard, 2000) represent two divergent groups of research methods and academic opinions. Reay and her colleagues use qualitative interviews as their primary research method, while Gorard's research relies mostly on regression analysis. The findings of the two groups of studies contrast with each other. These two groups of research, especially Reay's research on the school choice of parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Reay 1996) and the Cardiff-based study carried out by Gorard et al. (2001) will be used as examples to analyse the use of these two major research methods and how it impacts the researcher's understanding of the proposed question. These two papers are selected for their distinct methodological approaches and contrasting findings. Moreover, Reay and Gorard's work are among the most cited research evidence on the impact of school choice on social segregation in the UK context.

Reay (1996) examined the constraints faced by parents from different socio-economic backgrounds and the complexity of educational choice through an examination of the experiences of two groups of mothers. The data for the paper was gathered through 20 interviews with mothers of children at an inner-city, working-class primary school and 13 interviews with mothers of children at a middle-class primary school in outer London.

The Cardiff study (Gorard et al. 2001) applied multiple regression analysis based on what can be seen as a type of natural experiment. It studied multiple datasets in England and Wales by comparing two cohorts (each containing around 8 million students a year) that take terminal examinations in the years 1990 and 1994, separately. Multiple regression analysis was carried out to predict and explain variation in students learning outcomes based on national examination results such as the Key Stages results, as well as variation in the school compositions over time. The degree of SES was evaluated based on the indicator of eligibility for free school meals, which, according to the authors, is 'the most reliable and complete indicator of disadvantage' (Gorard et al., 2001, p.19).

The Conceptualisation and Operationalisation of Research Questions

One key difference between the two groups of studies is how they approached the question being studied. This is evident in the following aspects.

First, how 'education segregation' was conceptualised and measured. In Reay's research, segregation is reflected through the sense of injustice or unfairness perceived by the parents of lower SES (socio-economic status) in their school choice-making and their children's educational experiences. The word 'segregated' is used both in the researcher's analysis of and in parents' statements about the school choice system. In contrast, in Gorard's research, class segregation in education is measured by the proportion of students eligible for free school meals who would need to switch schools in order to achieve an even distribution of that characteristic among all schools. Instead of people's perceptions or feelings, which are difficult to quantify, this regression analysis focuses on the composition of schools in terms of students' SES. To evaluate the quality of education received by children with different SES, Reay's research pays more attention to the process of education, including the ups and downs undergone by the families during the whole process, while Gorard's analysis places more importance on the results of choice and the results of education reflected in academic results.

Second, how 'school choice' was conceptualised differs in the two groups of studies. In Gorard's regression analysis, school choice was treated as a result of parents' one-time decision. In contrast, Reay argued that the school choices made by parents should be viewed as an ongoing process that occurs within specific contexts, and that the options available to some parents may not be perceived as available to others depending on the context. By analysing the personal accounts provided by the parents, Reay revealed that choice-making itself reflects perpetuating inequalities and was used as a justification for education segregation in public discourses.

Therefore, though both methods were applied to study the relationship between school choice policy and education segregation, the research question were conceptualised and operationalised in different ways. For Gorard's regression analysis, it was 'whether socio-economic segregation between schools will increase or decrease in comparison to a system of neighbourhood allocation' (Gorard & Fitz, 2006, p.798); while for Reay's qualitative interviews, the question is how the school choice policy is perceived by and responded to by parents from different SES, and how this reflects education segregation and inequity.

This difference in conceptualising research questions reflects the difference in the ontological and epistemological stances of these two groups of research. In Gorard's research, the underlying assumption is that the relationships and rules in the world are independent from people's perception, and can be captured and predicted through observation and measurement; while in Reay's research, the assumption is that the social discourses are constructed and the focus should be placed in understanding people's perceptions and actions. Reay used the concept of 'discourse' to analyse the public policy and debates surrounding school choice, as well as parents' resistance to being constructed as consumers of education in those discourses. Reay also utilises Bourdieu's concept of habitus and capital as a way of understanding the options available to mothers in the context of educational choice. These theoretical frameworks treat the world as constructed and value-laden, and appreciate people's perceptions and interpretations as valid knowledge.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The research designs and analytic strategies of the two research methods diverge from each other. Reay's qualitative interview research is a small-scale case study comparing parents from different residential areas, different social classes and different races. On the other hand, Gorard's study features a large-scale (claimed to be the largest at the time, Gorard et al., 2001) database with a comparison of data before and after the issue of school choice policy. In terms of proper research design to answer the proposed question, Gorard argues that qualitative interview studies, which only examine the status after the implementation of school choice policy and attribute education stratification to the policy, assume that the prior-market system was fair. In reality, he suggests, the prior-market system was already severely stratified based on families' ability to purchase housing near high-quality schools and it is not accurate to claim the relationship between school choice policy and education segregation without identifying the education segregation in the prior-market system (Gorard, Fitz 2006). This criticism can be seen as valid as it can be difficult for researchers to accurately, unbiasedly grasp the status of prior-choice system through qualitative interviews with parents who have already been affected by the school choice policy.

The understanding of the people being studied and the interpretation of the results also differ in regression analysis and qualitative interviews. In regression analysis, the people whose data is being analysed were treated as 'subjects'. Though the subjects' data was collected and analysed, the actions, voices or stories of any specific individuals were not included. In Gorard's research, these subjects were represented by numbers or values. This partially explains why one criticism of this type of research is that it removes people from their social context and fails to consider the specific ways in which they make choices within their particular social context (Bowe et al., 1994a, p. 72). In qualitative interviews like Reay's, the people who are interviewed are regarded as 'participants', emphasising the active role that these individuals play in the research process and suggesting a degree of collaboration between the researcher and the participant. Actually, one of the major goals as well as contributions of Reay's is to give voices to disadvantaged parents and present their personal stories. In her narrative of the parents' stories, Reay tries to understand the 'psychological and emotional' drains of her participants (1996, p.592) and their self-perceptions, which, are almost impossible to capture in regression analysis.

Both of the researchers defended the validity of their research design. Reay (1996) implies that qualitative interviews can help overcome the tendency of oversimplifying the choice-making and present the 'qualitatively different process' (1996, p.594) undergone in working-class and middle-class parents' school choice. While Gorard argues that segregation between schools is a characteristic of groups and cannot be measured at the individual level or within a single school. Hence, it is only possible to analyse segregation between schools by analysing the statistics across a group of schools (Gorard, Fitz 2006). Also, Gorard insists that comparison over time is essential to make claims on whether the policy has changed the tendency of school segregation (Gorard & Fitz, 2006).

In terms of the reliability of the research design, Gorard applied regression analysis to explore the impacts of school choice policy in several other studies (e.g., Gorard & Fitz, 1998; Gorard, 2000a; Gorard & Fitz, 2000b), which all supported the finding that school choice policy has not aggregated the stratification in both primary and secondary schools in various economic regions of England and Wales. Evaluation of other socio-economic indicators of school compositions, including poverty, ethnicity, first language and special needs were reported to show similar results (Gorard et al. 2001). The finding was argued to remain valid regardless of the index used to measure the school composition or disadvantage (Gorard, 2000a). In addition to this, in their research, no evidence was found showing the school choice policy has created 'spirals of decline' where schools not desired by the market also become more stratified (Gorard & Fitz, 1998). Reay and her colleagues also carried out several other qualitative research featuring other aspects of the school choice-making process to further demonstrate the relationship between social class and school choice-making, including children's voices, family dynamics of making choices, the information resources parents rely on to make school choice, etc (Reay & Lucey, 2000; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay & Ball, 1997).

The Combination of the Two Methods

It can be seen that in answering the proposed question, both research methods have their limitations and strengths. Some of the limitations of the two research methods can be addressed by using mixed-method approach. For example, qualitative interviews carried out by Reay can shed a light on the individual experiences undergone by families of different SES, and help verify and explain the findings of Gorard's that, even seen as mitigated compared to the education segregation before the 1998 Act, the segregation at school is still severe in the UK society. On the other hand, the large-scale regression analysis like Gorard's can help generalise the findings produced by qualitative interviews.

Philosophically, the combination of the two methods can help overcome the dualism of 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism' that Bourdieu argues can and must be bridged as neither of these stances is thought to have the ability to fully grasp the complexity of social life (Bourdieu, 1990). According to Bourdieu, to fully understand social life, it is necessary to consider both the objective structures at play as well as the living practices and experiences of individuals and groups that shape them (Lane, 2000). In this light, Gorard's findings can provide a bigger picture of what is going on in the education system, and Reay's analysis offers in-depth insights into parents' living experiences and perceptions.

In answering the question of how the school choice policy has impacted education segregation in the UK, it is important to both grasp the overall trend of the school composition and learning results, and capture the individual experiences of families. Though the results may seem contradictive, efforts should be made to explain the contradiction and try to provide a more holistic understanding of the question. For example, the researcher can show the results of the regression analysis to the participants of the interview and listen to their opinions about it. The discrepancy in the results of the two research methods may provide important insights into how the policy was planned, publicised, implemented and perceived (Ball et al., 2011).

There can be challenges in combining the two utterly different research methods, such as combining data of different natures and different levels, and integrating the two types of data to serve a valid research purpose. This requires careful planning and design beforehand, and reflexivity of the researcher's position and the research approach during the whole research process (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Instead of thinking of one's own research as the best practice, it is important to be open-minded about the advantages and disadvantages of each research method, including the mixed method, and reflect on how the methods selected have impacted the research process and conclusions.

Conclusion

Though carried out in significantly different ways and following divergent philosophical stances, both of the research methods, regression analysis and qualitative interviews, can provide valuable pieces of evidence in answering the proposed question. It was found that the differences in research method largely influence the way the question was understood and operationalised in the studies. The way that research is designed and data is collected, analysed, and interpreted also differs between the two methods of research.

In conclusion, the research methods used have an inevitable, nonnegligible influence on the whole research process, starting from the interpretation of the research question, to the research design, and the analysis of findings and final conclusions. Therefore, it is essential for researchers to be mindful of the interdependent relationship between methods and the research question in the investigation, and be reflexive about the suitability and potential biases and limitations of their chosen methods in relation to the broader context in which their work is situated.

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Developing professional skills through a live research project in Architecture

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Abstract

Live projects (a type of coursework which is set in collaboration with a client, to contribute to a real situation in practice) have traditionally been an important part of the development of professional skills and employability in architectural education, to solve the challenge of promoting the readiness for the professional environment. The focus of live projects is usually connected to design studio modules in order to engage with design specific professional skills. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the delivery of a live project with a research focus within architectural education. We present and analyse the context of our case study, the delivery of a Townscape Heritage project in Nottingham with Nottingham City Council, supported by students in the Masters of Architecture and Bachelor in Architecture Programmes at Nottingham Trent University. Our reflection highlights the challenges and opportunities that this project brought, within the context of inclusive approaches to education, specifically regarding authentic assessments, Inquiry Based Learning and the tradition of live projects in Architectural Education. We believe that this approach to embrace research as a professional skill in architectural education can also promote a more holistic readiness for the profession for our graduates. Our conclusions aim to contribute to solving the challenge of employability by inspiring other academics to use a similar approach.

Key words: Inquiry Based Learning, live research projects, architecture, authentic assessments.

Introduction

Architectural education has traditionally engaged with live projects to support the development of professional skills: designing, developing, and building with and for clients. This kind of projects address real work situations, which offer students a chance to contribute, with their work (research, design, etc), to a work like situation. This is a controversial challenge in architectural education, since the length of the course, combined with work placements, begs the question whether architects should be trained or educated (Orr and Gao 2013). More recently, the Architects Registration Board (ARB) has proposed to dismantle this lengthy process, which will affect the way we approach architectural education (2023). Young (2023) questions how we can ensure that students get both academic knowledge and practical experience, so they are ready for the professional context. This will also add to the current challenge that universities and academics face regarding graduates’ employability (Connolly et.al 2023).

Working in an architectural practice is not part of the traditional format of architecture education; this is only now being addressed by the new Apprenticeship routes. And yet, there is an expectation that students are ready for the professional context. Live projects serve as a bridge between academia and practice: as authentic assessments they involve a client, and their needs, which inform the assessment briefs.

Inclusive approaches in architectural education: authentic assessments, live projects, and Inquiry-Based Learning

There has been extensive research and sharing of good practice regarding authentic assessment in higher education, where employability has become a focal point (Connolly et al. 2023). Our approach aligns with this philosophy, recognising that 'assessment is authentic when we directly examine student performance on worthy intellectual tasks' (Wiggins, 1990, n/p). Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004) have further developed these theories within the context of professional and vocational training, where architectural education sits. They highlight how 'current educational goals focus more on the development of competent students and future employees than on simple knowledge acquisition' (2004, 67), instead of the more traditional practices, that emphasize instruction, learning and assessment. They promote authentic competency-based assessments: 'activities that are also carried out in professional practice' (71). This is a significant aspect of our pedagogical approach: to reinforce research as a crucial professional skill in architecture. At Nottingham Trent University (NTU) many practitioners are hired as hourly paid lecturers or 'pracademics', using the new coined term that recognises the 'knowledge, experience, and expertise of practitioners in higher education' (Dickinson et al 2020, n/p). However, their influence remains within the studio modules, tutoring design skills, but not research as a transferable professional skill.

Research-based education recognises research as a professional practice, applicable to most university degrees: students learn transferable research skills such as planning, data collection methods, analysis, and ethics (Naseem and Fleming 2018, 228). Universities are promoting stronger connections between students' research projects and local communities, like University College London's *Connected Curriculum Framework* which includes live projects, vertical projects, and the Science Shop Model, whereby communities propose topics for students' dissertations (Carnell 2017, pp.17-21). This pedagogical approach focuses on the research processes, 'how knowledge is created – the process behind innovation' (Telfer and Oliver 2018, p.245). Our aim was to adapt the live project approach, a familiar method in architecture, adding a research-based pedagogy, informed by the philosophy of authentic assessments, to support our students to be ready for their professional context.

Architectural education is significantly centred around the studio, a method that became more popular since the Bauhaus, in the 1930s (Rodriguez 2017). The studio is equally understood as the physical space (a room), the location of teaching (learning environment) and as the mainstream pedagogical approach in Architecture (Thompson 2019, p.20). Alongside the studio-based teaching, there is also a long tradition that involves students with live projects, connecting students with real life problems which are not always encountered in the studio context (Watt and Cottrell 2006; Sara 2011, pp.8-9). Students learn about the needs of different communities and other professional skills in the process (Denicke-Polcher 2020), which supports the transition from university to the professional world (Thompson 2019, p.11). It is within this context that our project explores a new perspective: our innovative framework merges a pedagogical approach rooted in the design studio (live projects), with a focus on research.

Our project was influenced by Healey's Research teaching matrix (2005), which aims at transforming our students from audience to participants; with an emphasis on Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), where students can complete their research and see its application on a live research project. IBL is an empowering, engaging approach with benefits for subject learning and the development of a wide range of attributes and skills (Levy et al. 2010, 5). This IBL project gave our students the opportunity to engage with 'real world' scenarios and contribute to knowledge as part of the inquiry-based approach (Wood and Levy, 2009). They became producers of original knowledge (gathering and analysing primary data), contributing to the final report and website of the funded project.

The Project

In December 2015, Nottingham City Council was awarded £682,400 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Heritage Fund) for a Townscape Heritage grant scheme to reinstate historic details and to repair buildings along in this area (Nottingham City Council, 2024). Carrington Street is the main route between the station and the regeneration zone around the former Broadmarsh Shopping Centre. When this project was first conceived this route was car dominated; over time, this area lost historic details with inappropriate alterations, leaving the historic buildings in poor condition and vacant. Carrington Street and Station Street straddle two conservation areas which were on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register: at risk of being lost due to neglect, decay, or inappropriate development (Historic England 2015).

The evaluation of the project became an opportunity to work in partnership with NTU: students could learn about heritage-led regeneration as well as research methods by recording and evaluating the impact that the transformation of the area was having on the perception of the users. Moreover, their contribution to the project provided opportunities for students without experience in an architectural studio to enhance their CV and portfolio, highlighting a confident research skillset (which included observations, interviews, questionnaires, and mapping, as well as a comparative analysis over the five years life of the project).

Between 2016 and 2019, students on the Masters in Architecture (MArch) learnt and put in practice research methods by collecting data for this live project. This project was designed to create a community of practice. Wenger has defined these communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (1998, 1). Our intention was to provide an environment whereby students engaged with research skills within architectural education, especially using an external dimension: 'to connect the experience of students to actual practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities beyond the walls of the [university]' (4). This became a project spread beyond the classroom: it contributed to a Council led regeneration scheme and its final evaluation report, whilst meeting all the learning outcomes

This research live project allowed the students to meet an essential learning outcome at master's level: 'To undertake postgraduate-level research activity involving establishing research questions and the collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative data on a range of humanities-based topics' (Module guide, mapped against the RIBA criteria). The focus of the live project was to embrace research skills, alongside other professional skills, such as working for a client, teamwork, and leadership. The authenticity of the assessment engaged students with a work-like experience, which reinforced its applicability on their own research projects. Due to the impact of Covid, students in the MArch could not see the completion of the project. However, we adapted the project to an extra-curricular summer experience (five weeks), whereby a group of five students from the Bachelor in Architecture (BArch) completed the tasks for the Council and added this work-like experience to their CVs (2021).

Research strategy: A critical reflection between the academic and the client (Ana and Alice)

The authors used a Critical Reflection Process to write this paper, a popular method in Education. This involves 'an overall process of learning from experience, with the express aim of improving professional practice' (Fook 2011, 56). Over the years, both the academic and the client have reflected on how the project was working, the students' engagement, and reviewed our professional practice within the community of practice of research live projects. This critical reflection was performed informally on a yearly basis. Before the beginning of the academic year, we would plan the focus of the live research project, which evolved alongside the development of the Heritage project. We believe that this method of critical reflection has been beneficial not only for this project, but for others we have worked together since. We could even argue that this reflection informs our collaborative practice and has helped us to be authentic partners in the process. We encourage colleagues embarking in similar projects, to embrace this method of reflection, as an on-going process of learning and developing our professional practices (Souto, Ullathorne and Siebert 2023).

1. Opportunity for collaboration: Time and timely

It is difficult to disentangle the challenges and opportunities of a collaboration like this. We were introduced by a third party, who thought that the work that Alice was doing with the council could become a great Live project for Ana, the academic. This was timely, since we met before the academic year started, and we could plan meetings with the students and the client, a visit to the site, etc. We believe that the most important factor to support our collaboration was the duration of our partnership and the working relationship with the academic leader. Having an academic giving consistency to the project through 5 years of delivery was the most important success factor.

2. Interest in informing each other's roles and responsibilities. From the beginning of the collaboration, in 2016, both academic and client recognised the importance of influencing each other, so the university content would embrace the nature of a current heritage project, whilst the academic forced a different dynamic due to university constraints (academic calendar, learning outcomes, assessment deadlines, etc.). Flexibility was essential in this aspect, especially due to the length of the project (five years).

3. Student engagement. First, students engaged with the live research project and ensured they met the learning outcomes for this assessed coursework. Designed as an authentic assessment, a hands-on research experience, it gave the students an opportunity to engage on a live project in the city where they were studying their MArch. Second, students worked with the data gathered and analysed by previous cohorts and prepared theirs for the future groups. Since the project was longer than the duration of the MArch course (two years), it was difficult to keep this project 'live' and promote the necessary engagement over the years.

This is one of the challenges that academics face when working with external partners: academic timelines do not always match the length/ delivery of courses. However, there was a clear sense of continuity of the project the previous research became a foundation stone for the analysis of their new data. The last cohort delivered a very comprehensive analysis of the 4 existing reports, and submitted a cohesive document, which was consequently used to inform the final report to the funder (2021). Even though it could be argued that part of the authenticity was limited since students did not see how their reports were handed to the Council and were used thereafter, this could be also a good learning from a live project. We do not always control timelines and our collaborations can be shorter than the actual length of a project.

4. Professional outputs from the students: As a client, Alice, the Heritage Officer from the Council, reflected on how working with students was both incredibly valuable and meaningful, and it fulfilled the main aims: to develop an evidence base to evaluate the Carrington Street project and to produce legacy material for the project. Working with students can sometimes produce mixed results; however, the long duration of the partnership and different levels of engagement (MArch, as a curricular and assessed experience, versus the summer project with the BArch students, which lasted five weeks), the students provided some rich evidence.

For both the academic and the client, the live research project was a success. It allowed us to learn from each other; it gave the academic and the students the opportunity to learn from a real project, taking place in their city; and the client collated a wealth of data, analysis and illustrations that enhanced the final report to the funder. This report recognised the value of the students' work, which 'provide valuable documentary evidence of the progression of the project and the views of local people over time' (Carter and Flood 2022, p. 55):

> The research by successive cohorts of NTU architecture students provides valuable detailed records of both the history of the area as well as charting the changes over the five years of the THS. Each report includes details and images which bring the area to life, along with primary quantitative research with people in Nottingham and qualitative research with the staff in shops on Carrington Street' (Carter and Flood 2022, p. 76).

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Based on the literature on IBL, authentic assessments, communities of practice and especially live projects in architectural education, and the reflection on our own experiences as the academic leader (Ana) and the Heritage Officer (Alice), we would like to warmly recommend this kind of learning experience to other colleagues, both in academia, and professionals working in industry, in Architecture and beyond.

Despite the challenges of time (five years vs five weeks), engagement and ownership (academics and professional) the nature of the authentic assessment, a research live project, resonated with all those involved, recognising the relevance of contributing to real projects, not only speculating on imaginary scenarios in the classroom. It underlines that research skills are not only needed for writing academic essays or dissertations: professionals need to be versatile with a research skillset to design research methods, collect and evaluate data, and report it through text and visuals. This applies to the RIBA Plan of Work (2020) as well as the Post Occupancy Evaluations designed by the RIBA to support these reports by architects (RIBA 2021).

As highlighted by both IBL, live projects, and authentic assessment approaches, we recognise the value of the process (in this case of research and reflection), not only the outcomes. We believe that, based on the literature and our reflections the client and the academic, research live projects are worth pursuing, especially to highlight how research skills should be considered as professional skillsets in the professional arena. Employability is becoming more significant as part of the university experience: these projects will contribute to highlight the importance of research skills, lived experiences outside of the classroom, and interdisciplinary collaborations.

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Food waste management in UK universities: the role of the international, the national and the institutional levels

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Type of submission: scholarship-inspired working paper

Abstract

The higher education sector is one of significant sites of food waste generation in the UK. Measures on the international, national and institutional levels have been taken to address food waste generation in the country in general as well as particularly in universities. This working paper relies on a review of literature as well as relevant policy documents at all three policy-making levels to provide a snapshot of the gravity of this problem, outline working solutions and gaps in them. This review is important in contribution to our understanding of the intersection between food waste and higher education.

Introduction

Food waste (FW) is a problem in the UK. Around 10.7 million tonnes of food was wasted in 2021 in the UK, as estimated by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) in the UK (Malik et al, 2024). The higher education (HE) sector of the UK is one of massive sites of FW generation. For example, in the 2022-2023 academic year, the HE sector in the UK included over 2.86 million students (HESA, 2024a) and over 240 thousand staff (HESA, 2024b) studying and working with HE providers, which all contribute to FW generation. While waste from UK universities with regard to carbon emissions and wastewater are reported in the data available in the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), FW as a category of waste is not included in the available data (HESA, 2024c).

It is impossible to speculate what is happening at universities with regard to FW without acknowledging the interconnectedness of FW management policy-making at different levels in the UK. This working paper examines international guidelines for FW management, relevant UK national initiatives as well as some examples of FW management in UK universities. In doing so, the working paper relies on reviewing relevant literature sources, which are quite scarce in this area, and key relevant official communications from key policy-making actors at the international, national and university levels of the UK.

International guidelines and inspiration for food waste management in the UK

This section explores existing developments on the international level with regard to FW management. This is an important contextual information as what happens at the national and university levels in the UK draws inspiration and is influenced by these international developments.

The influence of SDGs on policy making in different areas of development globally is undeniable (Kushnir and Nunes, 2022), including in the area of FW management. FW is addressed in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 'Responsible Consumption and Production', which, in its Target 12.3, sets out the following: 'By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels…' (UN, 2024). It is important to note that the term FW is juxtaposed in this target to the term 'food loss' which means the loss of food along production and supply chains, whereas FW, which is the focus of this working paper, is the waste of food in the process of delivering it to the consumer and the process of consumption. This definition of FW is, understandably, broad and signifies an effort to devise one in the context when it is difficult to differentiate food categories (Beretta and Hellweg, 2019) and multiple definitions of FW at each stage of the food supply chain at different geographical regions could be more productive for any environmental assessment (Priestley, 2016a). Nevertheless, Target 12.3 of the SDGs has been driving recent efforts in the UK in managing FW, and the UK Government 'are also fully committed to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 target, which seeks to halve global food waste at consumer and retail levels by 2030', as noted by the conservative MP Robecca Pow in 2020 (UK Parliament, 2020).

Further inspiration for UK FW policy has been provided by the EU Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/EC (Priestley, 2016a) with subsequent amendments. The most important aspect of this Directive was the introduction of a waste hierarchy which established the order of priority actions to manage products and waste (see Figure 1 below). The ideas from this Directive remained influential in the UK after Brexit as the UK continues cooperating with the EU in environmental sustainability (Bronckers and Gruni, 2021), while proclaiming more independence in driving these matters. For instance, it is emphasised in HM Government (2018: p.82) strategy a few times the need to review the guidelines set out in the Directive 'We will review the end of waste criteria and tests that are currently laid out in the Waste Framework Directive. We will review our current Quality Protocols to see where they need to be updated'. This document also emphasises a few times UK's example in waste management for other countries to follow: 'The EU is now following our lead by committing to annual reporting of food waste data' (p. 102). It is unclear to what extent the 2020 National Food Strategy (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2020) relies on the EU Waste Framework Directive and what exactly is different, as the EU document is not mentioned in the UK 2020 National Food Strategy.

Figure 1: Waste hierarchy in the EU Waste Framework Directive

Source: Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (2008)

UK national food waste management initiatives

Even before Brexit, while EU waste legislation applied to the UK as a whole, each devolved administration incorporated them in their own way, as waste is a devolved matter and there have been no standardised mandatory FW reduction targets across the UK (Dray, 2021). See the Vignette below.

Vignette: FW management in the different parts of the UK before Brexit

– In *England*, there are no mandatory food waste reduction targets or mandatory separate food waste collection requirements. The UK Government currently looks to voluntary initiatives, rather than a regulatory approach, to deliver food waste reductions.

– In *Scotland*, there are plans for a food waste reduction target of 33% by 2025; food businesses are required to separate out food waste for collection; local authorities are required to provide separate food waste collections in non-rural areas.

– In *Wales*, there are mandatory local authority targets for recycling, re-using and composting household waste (including food waste); 99% of households were provided with separate food waste collection services in 2015.

– In *Northern Ireland*, there are no mandatory food waste reduction targets or mandatory separate food waste collection requirements. Certain food businesses must present food waste for separate collection.

Source: Priestley (2016a: p.19)

Waste management remains a devolved matter, and the devolved administrations have been developing their FW management initiatives along with the initiatives to manage other types of waste following the Brexit vote. For example, England published the aforementioned document: 'Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England' in 2018 (HM Government, 2018), Scotland touched on FW in its Climate Change Plan issued in 2018 and Food Waste Reduction Action Plan in 2019 (Scottish Government, 2022). In Wales, FW is addressed in its Environment (Wales) Act from 2016 which included revisions in June 2022, October 2023 and April 2024 (Legislation, 2024). However, clause 66 in part 4 of the Act, which is relevant to FW (prohibiting disposing of FW to sewer), remains the same. In N.Ireland's Food Waste Regulations Guidance remain valid since 2015 (Department of Environment, Agriculture and rural Affairs, 2015). Evidently, while the legislature in Wales and N.Ireland regarding FW has not changed, relevant updated documents in England and Scotland have been issued. However, significant change in essence there is questionable. Regarding England, as mentioned in the previous section, the need to review the guidelines set out in the EU Waste Framework Directive is reiterated a few times in the most recent England strategy (HM Government, 2018). The 2018 Strategy was also supplemented by the publication in 2020 of the programme for achieving it and monitoring progress, which was updated in November 2021 and November 2022 (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2022). Scotland's FW reduction target of 33% by 2025 is restated in the Scottish Government (2022) policy on managing waste but no concrete data on progress is available as of 2024.

These initiatives from each devolved administration dovetail with the recent UK National Food Strategy policy paper issued in 2020, which as of 2024 was updated once – in 2021 (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2020). This Document is applicable nationally, revealing the most recent important data. This includes the facts that the UK produces more FW than many of its European neighbours whereby 'Beyond the farm gate, the biggest contributors to food waste are households (70%), followed by manufacturers (18%), the hospitality and food industry (10%) and then retailers (2%)' (p.107). Regarding strategic priorities, it is important to emphasise the plan of the UK to reduce FW 'to 50% of 2007 levels by 2030' (p.107). It is acknowledged in the document that halving FW this way could contribute to creating a possibility 'to feed the UK on a third less land' if coupled by 'increasing crop yields by 15% and eating 30% less meat' (p.110).

In addition to these pieces of legislature, there are other national initiatives that use more 'soft' governing techniques to promote FW reduction, in line with UK Government's strategy, applicable across the devolved regions, to appeal to 'voluntary initiatives, rather than a regulatory approach, to deliver food waste reductions' (Priestley, 2016a: p.19). One of them is the Food Waste Reduction Roadmap, launched in 2018. It was developed by the WRAP and the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) and put forward 'a series of milestones for retailers, food producers, manufacturers and hospitality and food service companies to meet in order to tackle food waste in the UK' (Priestley, 2016b). Priestley's (2016b) research briefing outlines another initiative is the redistribution of food to charities and community groups by the organisation FareShare to produce meals for vulnerable people. There are also other campaigns mentioned that are run by charities to reduce FW, such as Love Food Hate Waste, Wasting Food: It's Out of Date, Guardians of Grub, The Pig Idea, Grocery Code Action Network, Innovative Farmers. Thanks to all this work, WRAP states in its report that if the current rates of progress are maintained in the UK, it will be able to meet SDG Target 12.3 (Dray, 2021).

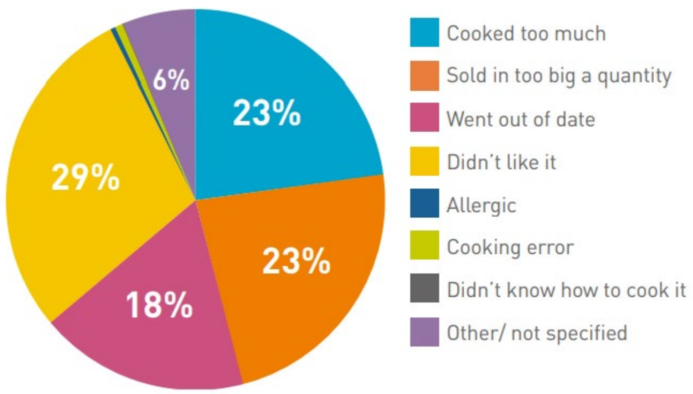
Food waste management in UK universities

The previous two sections about influential international and the national FW management initiatives in the UK have provided an important context for us to understand the grassroots landscape of our main interest here, which is the level of the university in the UK. While WRAP's optimistic prognosis should be celebrated, it is now timely to have a closer look into FW management measures specifically at UK universities which are sites of waste generation.

Despite unavoidably being sites of waste generation, universities across the UK have been active in formalising their FW policies, such as in the example of the University of Cambridge (2024) which was originally adopted in 2016 and revised in 2018 or Cardiff University (2024), etc. Hoolohan et al (2021: 853) who analysed policies for 'flying and food' from 66 UK universities established that, with regard to food, while universities do 'recognize their role in creating demand for long-distance travel and sustaining high-carbon diets' but few of them have developed concrete waste reduction targets or action plans to reduce waste.

While the body of scholarship on FW management in universities is growing (e.g., Zou and Zhang, 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Giosa, 2024), there is very limited information about this problem specifically with regard to the universities in the UK, particularly recently. A couple of older single-university case studies in the UK, presented in the scholarship, are helpful in understanding how various pieces of interconnected national-level legislature came to inform aspects of FW management in these cases. For example, at the University of Southampton, the 1999 Landfill Directive galvanised separate FW collection, the 2005 Animal By-products Regulations established 'controls on the storage, transport, treatment, and disposal of animal by-product food' (Zhang et al, 2011: p.1610). The study from the University of Wolverhampton (Ezeah et al, 2015), generated an analysis of FW composition, negative environmental impact and proposed tools for assessing waste management in general, including FW, in big organisations such as universities. More recent studies placed emphasis on the investigation of sustainable practices of universities to deal with the ever-shocking waste figures. Acheson's (2019: 3) report of a study of 155 students at the University of St Andrews in Scotland found out that 'the average purchase cost of avoidable food waste per student per week was approximately £5.25' which adds up to £273 per year per student (see Figure 2). If this is multiplied by the number of students (2,751,865.00 students (HESA, 2022a)) that were studying with the UK HE providers in the 2020-2021 academic year), the approximate amount of FW in GBP in 2020-2021 alone only from students stands at over £751 million.

Figure 2: Reasons of avoidable FW by students



Source: Acheson (2019: p. 4)

Conclusion

This scarce information about the FW problem and management at UK universities, particularly recently, demonstrates the need to investigate the extent to which FW is being produced at UK universities, and to provide recommendations for university FW policies which may assist in dealing with the problem. Future research should address this avenue.

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The external dimension of the Bologna Process – what the literature says

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Literature review based working paper

Abstract

This working paper is based on a review of literature on the external dimension of the Bologna Process. The paper maps existing scholarship which highlights the influence of the European Higher Education Area on other global regions. While this perspective is important, a notable gap in prior research is evident around the question of whether these external regions have had any influence on the development of the European Higher Education Area itself.

Key words: Bologna Process, external dimension, Asia Pacific, Africa, Latin America

Existing scholarship about the role of the external dimension of the Bologna Process (BP) has put forward a few facts regarding the influence of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) on other regions. The BP has been an ambitious project that has been facilitating an attractive image of European higher education to countries and regions beyond its borders (Eta and Kushnir, 2014; Mngo 2019). Eta and Kushnir (2024), in a recent study, highlight the constructed instruments devised by BP policy actors to facilitate the global diffusion of the BP. Different world regions have been looking up to the EHEA and have even adopted similar policies. Several studies have examined the influence of the EHEA on other parts of the world, such as the Asian Pacific region, Africa, and Latin America, a phenomenon Chao (2011: 102) describes as the 'Bolognasation of global higher education'.

The specific case that Chao (2011: 102) focuses on is the 'Bolognasation of the Asia Pacific region'. As such, the scholar examines the aim of the Brisbane Communiqué, initiated by Australia, to follow BP aspirations in increasing student and academic mobility and the recognition of higher education qualifications in the Asia Pacific region. This has led to unique developments in Asia Pacific Higher Education. In a similar vein, Dang (2015) examines how and to what extent the BP has shaped the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) higher education policies. She argues that domestic policy actors and the local policy context are significant to determine the level of policy borrowing from

Europe. Zeng et al (2013) also examine the ASEAN region but as part of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA). They investigate the possibility of higher education convergence within the CAFTA following the BP. They highlight the impact of diverse economic, societal and cultural factors, alongside external pressures, and conclude that the CAFTA region has the potential of initiating BP reforms. However, they caution that disparities in education systems within the region, with some countries having stronger systems than others, may not necessarily benefit underdeveloped countries in the region. This discrepancy could perpetuate education imperialism, favouring stronger countries at the expense of weaker ones. Pohlenz and Niedermeier (2019) adopt a comparative analysis on the EHEA and ASEAN BP-related initiatives. They focus on the crucial issue of trust among actors and institutions, as well as potential competition arising from diverse higher education systems with varying qualities. Similar to the findings of Zeng et al (2013), Pohlenz and Niedermeier (2019) argue that stronger higher education institutions may not benefit from integrating with higher education systems of different sizes and scopes. Evidently, the Asian Pacific region, as discussed earlier, has shown aspiration for and adoption of initiatives by the BP, there is a noticeable degree of caution among key actors in the region regarding these converging processes. This cation stems from internal differences within the region, which requires careful consideration.

Africa is another major region where scholarly research delves into the external influence of the EHEA. Eta and Mngo (2021) traced the adoption of the BP across Africa. Their study reveals that between 2000 and 2008, 23 African countries were already in the process of implementing BP-related reforms within their educational systems. Additionally, continental efforts initiated by the African union began in 2007, aiming to facilitate a more systematic approach to this transformation. Sall and Ndjaye (2007) compare higher education policies in some African countries, evaluating the impact of colonial history. They examine how the implementation of the BP in these countries fosters the internationalisation of higher education through various means such as offering online courses, developing joint programs, and establishing franchised universities in African countries, often influenced by former colonial powers such as France, Belgium, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.

Similarly, Alemu (2019) explores how the external dimension of the EHEA manifests itself in African higher education reforms, drawing from the colonial legacy of education in the region. The author examines the BP as both a potential reform opportunity and a neo-colonial tool. In addition to colonial influences, attention is given to factors hindering effective BP reforms in Africa. These include socio-economic and political instabilities, power imbalances in partnerships, diverse foreign interests, the epistemological dominance of the West, and the potential brain drain resulting from these reforms (Alemu 2019). In their more recent work, Alemu (2022) argues that higher education institutions with colonial origins have adopted reforms that impede the authentic development of African higher education. For instance, in a case study focusing on Ethiopia, Mekonnen et al (2022) examine how the adoption of the BP facilitated the autonomy of higher education institutions. However, academics and institutional leaders perceive their autonomy as limited due to a lack of decision-making control over their internal issues, contradicting the BP's notion of academic autonomy. Other case studies investigate Cameroon`s adoption of BP reforms specifically focusing on graduate employability and addressing the related interconnected social justice and neoliberal narratives. The study suggests a tension between these two narratives, as the former implies training for all students, while the latter implies training primarily for those who can afford it (Eta 2023). Moreover, other research on Cameroon has explored various aspects such as the justifications for the adoption (Eta, 2015), the process of adoption and transfer (Eta, Kallo and Rinne, 2018), challenges of implementation (Eta and Vuban, 2017), and the adaptation of the BP degree structure and credit system (Eta and Vubo 2016).

The literature on the BP in Latin America is more relatively sparse compared to the extensive coverage of the Asian Pacific and African regions. In contrast to these two regions, adopting BP-inspired reforms in Latin America has proven more challenging, primarily due to the absence of common regional, political, economic and monetary organisations (Mngo 2019). However, Gacel-Ávila (2011), recognising the aspirations of Latina American countries towards higher education regionalisation, emphasizes the necessity for research on institutions before arguing the BP`s inapplicability in the region. In a case study analysis of Chile and Mexico, for example, Figueroa (2010) argues that the BP is a hegemonic instrument of the soft power wielded by Europe. This suggests the influence of the BP on these two countries.

The BP is seen more broadly as a tool of European foreign policy (Moscovitz and Zahavi, 2019). The literature review on the Asia Pacific, African and Latina American regions above indeed highlights the extensive influence of the EHEA far beyond its borders. Further research is expected to fully understand the implications of this influence, as well as the nature of the external dimension of the EHEA. Prior research often positions this external dimension as equivalent to the influence of the EHEA on other regions, rather than – also – the other way around.

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Promoting student-centered teaching and learning: of the case of international grant programmes in Ukrainian universities

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Type of submission: practice-inspired working paper

Abstract

This publication describes Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University's experience of participation in ERASMUS+ project entitled "Bringing Opportunities and Organizational Success to Small Local Universities in Ukraine" (BOOST) within cooperation with six Ukrainian universities and three European ones. The authors highlight the necessity of introducing a student-centered approach in education and stimulating students' active participation in their learning process. The need for a change of teacher's role from being a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator, guide, coach, and mentor is also mentioned. The review of the literature in this field shows that university lecturers in Ukraine feel a lack of readiness to switch from the traditional authoritative teaching style to flexible interaction strategies. The authors acquaint the readers with the results of a survey, conducted among the teachers of Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University. The respondents are not aware enough of what student-centered teaching is and how to become more flexible and interactive in their teaching and cooperation with students. That is why the BOOST project initiative to create a new generation of teachers who are agents of change ready to implement leading European and Ukrainian reforms, improve digital skills and build professional capacity in the Ukrainian educational system, is vital and urgent one.

Key words: student-centered learning and teaching, pedagogical approach, higher education, grant projects, Erasmus+.

Ukraine's wish to participate in European initiatives in the area of education not only contributes to the comprehensive development of the country in different aspect of life, but also sharpens the competition amongst prospective students across domestic higher education institutions. In this competitive context, everything should be taken into account – the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and other stakeholders, university's scientific capacity and university rankings, university's ability to promote the use of innovative methodologies and techniques in the educational process, opportunities for the academic mobility of students and staff and their participation in international programmes funded by the European Union (EU). In this competitive context, funding bodies usually give priority to huge educational centres and leading national establishments located in the capital and large cities of Ukraine: the top higher education institutions (HEIs) based on the number of Erasmus+ CBHE projects are prestigious universities with extensive experience in executing international projects, such as Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (6 projects), Lviv Polytechnic National University (6 projects), Kyiv Taras Shevchenko National University (4 projects), and V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (4 projects). While other Ukrainian universities situated in smaller cities have more limited opportunities to participate in international grant programmes and develop innovative educational approaches according to EU standards (National Erasmus+ Office in Ukraine 2024). This fact determines the necessity and relevance of this study, the aim of which is to highlight the peculiarities of the student-centered approach in the international cooperation of six Ukrainian higher educational institutions with European partners. The below will discuss this as well as focus in more detail on the case of Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University's experience of participation in international grant project in order to develop its technical, digital, learning, community, and international capacity.

The issues connected with student-centered learning have been broadly discussed in relevant scholarship and policy. This type of learning is often understood as an approach aimed to turn students into self-directed learners making their need and interests the center of learning process (Glavind et al. 2023; Dong et al. 2019;Kerimbauev et al. 2023). It should be mentioned here that the approach should not be reduced to a set of methodologies and techniques, but should directly affect the way staff and students understand their relationship in an educational process (Trinidad 2019). Thus, learners have more opportunities to become actively engaged in their learning, develop critical thinking, creativity, reflection, soft skills necessary to live and work in the XXI century. The teaching staff's role, on the contrary, shifts from being a lecturer and knowledge transmitter to being a facilitator and mentor in the field and scaffolder, promoting students' self-study, encouraging active cooperation, strengthening motivation, providing necessary support and checking understanding. Being a student-centered educator here does not mean giving constant support, as far as the teacher's support decreases with students' growing ability to master new concepts on their own. In this case, lecturers move from direct instruction to a more equal interaction, the one which aids learners' autonomy, responsibility, active participation, an individual development trajectory and problem-solving skills (Oseni, Adejumo and Kolawole 2022).

Key elements of successful student-centered learning are constructive interdependence, personal accountability, promotive interaction, suitable use of social skills, and cluster processing. These elements form a strong basis for teaching meaningful learning strategies that allow learners to make personal connections between prior knowledge and experience, and new information (Oseni, Adejumo and Kolawole 2022).

According to Elkin et al. (2016), at present Ukraine is making its first steps in changing the paradigm of "teaching as knowledge transfer" to "teaching as knowledge construction". It is clearly demonstrated by a secondary school reform provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine that turned a New Ukrainian school into a child-centered environment, focusing on learners' needs in the educational process (Elkin et al. 2016). Yet, research shows that university lecturers in Ukraine are still not ready to switch from a traditional authoritative teaching style to flexible interaction strategies in order to encourage students' active participation in their learning process (Bulvinska and Chernova 2019). This happens because the majority of educators misunderstand the importance of changing the attitude towards students to improve their success and competitiveness (Bakhrushin 2018).

The idea mentioned above is concordant with the results of the survey conducted by the authors of this paper in May 2023. The survey aimed to find out from academic staff (including lecturers, associate professors and professors) of Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University about teaching methods they use. was An opportunistic sample of 70 respondents was recruited for the survey. It included lecturers from Philological Faculty, Faculty of Information Technology, Mathematics and Economics, Faculty of Natural Geography, Faculty of Chemistry and Biology, and Educational and Scientific Institute of Social-Pedagogical and Artistic Education. The survey consisted of multiple choice questions with option to add their own answer.

The analysis of the survey relied on descriptive statistics and revealed that only 26,4% of the staff consider their teaching to be student-centered, 71,7% combine traditional and student-centered methods, 1,9% use teacher-centered methods in their practice. 38,5% of participants admitted that they did not take into account students' mental health side of things while constructing the curriculum for the modules, whereas only half of the teaching staff (52,8%) were using all three components (evocation, realization, reflection) of a student-centered didactic process. Within the evocation phase students identify their prior knowledge and experience creating a context for new learning; the realization phase deals with searching and building students' new knowledge and skills; and the reflection phase allows learners to express new knowledge, contextualize it and reflect on it (Steele 2001). The majority of the respondents did not plan their lectures/seminars according to the semantic wave structure (59,6%), which implies simplifying technical terms and abstract contexts to secure foundational knowledge, then linking these simpler meanings back to the original complex concepts and language (Maton 2013). The same respondents were not able to use Bloom's taxonomy as "a logically sequenced structure depicting the cognitive skills required for students to grasp knowledge comprehensively and meaningfully" (Nurmatova and Altun 2023) in educational process (55,8%).

The survey results point out the lack of awareness about student-centered methods, needed by the teaching staff to become flexible, change traditional methodologies into innovative techniques, and stimulate a new type of interaction with students in order to encourage a more participatory environment centered around learners and their needs. There also is a definite necessity to develop corresponding student-centered skills and bring necessary changes to promote the ability of teaching staff to overcome challenges in acquiring new methodologies concerning student-centered learning and teaching. With the purpose to fulfil this task, Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University participates in an international grant project, detailed below.

Being temporarily transferred from the territory occupied by Russian troops to the city of Zaporizhzhia, the University experienced certain challenges ranging from technical difficulties (all equipment and laboratories of the university were left in the occupied city of Melitopol) to acquiring modern learning approaches necessary to carry on with its educational and research activities. At that very moment a decision to participate in "Bringing Opportunities and Organizational Success to Small Local Universities in Ukraine" (101083203 – BOOST – ERASMUS-EDU-2022-CBHE) was crucial to the university's survival because of its relocation and loss of venues and facilities. Previously, this university had no experience in international project activity and the EU Erasmus+ funding programmes of this kind.

According to the information provided on the BOOST project website (2024), the BOOST initiative is aimed at creating a new generation of teachers who are agents of change eager to implement leading European and Ukrainian reforms, ready to bring positive transformation in the education system of the country by using innovative tools and practices, promoting open-mindedness, digitalization, student-centered and lifelong learning approaches as key factors altering the content and forms of education in the project target country – Ukraine. The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ KA2 Programme of the EU. It is a consortium comprising ten partners:

- 3 European universities (Narva College of the University of Tartu (Estonia), University of Primorska (Slovenia), University of Applied Sciences in Elblag (Poland));
- six Ukrainian institutions (Poltava V.G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University, Donbas National Academy of Building and Architecture, Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, Izmail State University of Humanities, Kemenets Taras Shevchenko Regional Academy of Humanities and Pedagogy, Mukachevo State University);
- the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine.

Additionally, the project (BOOST 2024) offers opportunities for teaching staff's academic mobility (three study trips to Estonia, Slovenia and Poland) and implies sharing the EU partners theoretic and practical experience within four online training courses on the Moodle platform of the University of Tartu (Estonia): "International and grant office duties in the EU universities", "Workshops on IT and tech support", "Learner-centered methodologies and techniques", "Digital learning tools and platforms" and one offline "Project writing course" aimed at submitting a new application at Erasmus+ call of proposals.

The international cooperation of the BOOST project partners facilitates the development and launch of a new compulsory module for Bachelor's students "Student-centered approaches for blended learning" (which comprises three ECTS credits) and updating ten university courses according to student-centered philosophy, thus improving graduates' employability and competitiveness. The project also promotes the renovation of the participants' technical equipment, updating their internalisation strategy, designing a roadmap of support for remote local universities, increasing international grant capacity, fostering dissemination skills through social media.

The survey has demonstrated a gap in the knowledge about student-centered methodologies of the teaching staff of Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University and the need for changes in teaching methodology and practice. The first tangible results of the BOOST implementation prove a positive influence of the project on the development of professional and digital competences of teaching staff, stimulating them to design and facilitate the educational process in accordance with the philosophy of student-centered learning and teaching. The experience obtained in this project will be used in the development of student-friendly and autonomous educational environment, foster cooperation of the EU and UA partners, and promote further international grant activity of our university.

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Shifting Educational Priorities: A Case Study of a Liberal Arts University in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract

Numerous American-style liberal arts universities have emerged in the Middle East and North Africa amid conflict. Not only do these higher education institutions cultivate critical thinking among youth but also mobilize knowledge to promote peace-building efforts. For many decades, Iraq has faced significant political instability exacerbated by the American-led invasion of the country in 2003. These tumultuous events have further spurred the establishment of American-style universities, supported by the United States. In the context of Iraqi Kurdistan, socio-political and economic changes have affected the trajectory and priorities of higher education institutions therein. The value and pedagogical approaches of American-style liberal arts universities, in particular, has been challenged by external forces, including wider societal and market pressures, as well as internal challenges, such as faculty dynamics and leadership vision. Drawing on interviews with university staff, our working paper posits that the liberal arts identity of a university in Iraqi Kurdistan is eroding. This erosion is prompting its divergence from the humanities towards a more technical approach to education. Accordingly, this shift aligns with the teaching methods of other regional universities to reflect traditional Kurdish preferences, representing a "new challenge" to the success of liberal arts universities in the post-conflict society of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Key words: American-style liberal arts, critical thinking, institutional identity, post-conflict societies

Introduction

In modern history, many new American-style universities have been established in countries that have had a regime change or experienced conflict (Long 2018; Jafar 2023). This further applies to Iraq, which has undergone dramatic political, social, and economic shifts following its invasion in 2003, led by the United States (US), which presented an opening for the establishment of American-style universities. With decades of warfare, sanctions, and economic instability taking their toll on society, these universities were envisioned by their founders as tools to reform the existing education system, improve social cohesion, promote peacebuilding, and facilitate Iraq's transition to democracy (Jafar 2023). As of 2024, three American-style universities have been established in Iraq, including the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) in 2007 (AUIS, n.d.), the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) in 2014 (AUK, n.d.), and most recently, the American University of Iraq, Baghdad (AUIB) in 2021 (AUIB, n.d.).

When adopted in a non-American context, the American-style university is characterized by the use of English as the primary medium of instruction. In addition, such universities often hire Western faculty members, adopt student-centred teaching methods, embody a not-for-profit financial model, and most importantly, adhere to a liberal arts curriculum (Purinton and Skaggs 2017). They have also proven to be instrumental in inculcating critical thinking skills and responsible citizenship values in students which allows them to be politically aware and "question" the legitimacy of their governments, enabling the university to act "as a centre of civil society in an otherwise authoritarian political landscape" (Noori 2017, p. 141). Such skills and values are taught through the "core program" or "general education" component of the liberal arts curriculum. Unlike most conventional undergraduate programs, which are limited and homogenous, universities that adopt a liberal arts education (LAE) model have a broad, open curriculum that promotes interdisciplinary learning across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences (Cooper 2018; Dekker 2017; Kovačević, Dekker, and van der Velden 2023).

For example, AUIS identifies as an institution dedicated to offering comprehensive LAE, with the intent to provide an alternative to the "lecture-memorize-repeat" model of education so prevalent in Iraq and the Middle East (AUIS, n.d.). Through its unique educational offerings, this model was envisaged as attractive to Iraq's government after 2003, with the former Minister of Higher Education envisioning such universities as the answer to the need to produce "students who are critical and imaginative thinkers…[and] draw on the world's knowledge in all areas of thought" (Al Adeeb 2013). However, several factors can negatively affect such universities' ability to adhere to their institutional identity and core values, including the absence of an institutional vision, lack of funding, resistance from a conservative community (Jafar and Eskander, forthcoming), and market pressure and values (Axelrod, Ansief, and Lin 2001; Roosevelt 2006).

While most scholarship on the decline of the liberal arts and humanities has focused on the US, few sources have examined this phenomenon in other contexts, such as the Middle East more broadly (Hodapp 2021; Al-Hendawi et al. 2019). Accordingly, in this case study, we examine the shift in identity of an American-style university based in Iraqi Kurdistan. We contend that multiple factors such as institutional competition, the rise of market-driven programs related to information technology (IT) and healthcare, and other challenges have marginalised the liberal arts and humanities, diminishing their effectiveness in building societies that embody pluralistic or multicultural values. Consequently, this gradual process towards prioritising technical programs over humanities and liberal arts programs could erode the university's identity as a bastion of LAE in the region.

Literature Review - The Decline of Liberal Arts and Humanities

Many scholars have warned that the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts — the core subjects of LAE — are at risk in various universities around the world. The danger arises largely from the forced reorientation of higher education to assumed market needs (Axelrod, Ansief, and Lin 2001; Steele 2022). Axelrod (1998, pp.6-7) argues that after the 1990s, "the doctrines of globalization, privatization, institutional competition, market-driven programming, and user-pay fee schedules are now pushing at the gates of higher learning". These forces propel universities towards decision-making based on "rationalisation," thereby prioritising efficiency in program delivery and allowing the market, rather than nation-building and societal needs, to dictate the success of universities (Axelrod 1998, p.49). In adapting to the demands of the increasingly globalised and technologically driven economy, some colleges and universities are showing "a preference for "practical" vocational disciplines over what is seen as less "useful" but more "liberal" or humanistic ones." (Mack 2011, p.4) This shift is influenced by the needs of many corporations in the "new global economy," which calls for well-educated professionals in business and technology-related fields to innovate and safeguard knowledge-based products, processes, and services (Mack 2011,p.4) while dismissing the possible "saturation" or rise in many contexts in the number of people studying computer science, business and other technical fields

(Mullin 2019; Baker 2023). Despite this contradictory outlook, many administrators, parents, and students now consider humanities and liberal arts majors to be literally "worth" less (Mack 2011, p.4).

For example, in 2010, the State University of New York at Albany made headlines by announcing the discontinuation of enrolment in languages and classics programs, citing a lack of student interest and questioning the value of humanities and liberal arts courses (Jaschik 2010). Similarly, in 2015, social sciences and humanities faculties were abolished in 26 out of 60 national universities in Japan, to allegedly better align with societal needs without clarifying what those needs really are (Grove 2015). Qiao (2018) argued that this shift could restrict the cultivation of critical thinking skills, as well as promote the adoption of standardised evaluation practices rather than fostering genuine learning in university. Furthermore, it was anticipated that this change would narrow the scope of citizens' political literacy and engagement, negatively impacting civic life (Roosevelt 2006). Hence, diminishing the value of LAE challenges its goals, potentially moulding students into uncritical thinkers or profit-driven individuals with a limited inclination to contribute to the advancement of society (Qiao 2018). Likewise, Hodapp (2021) defined the crisis of humanities in the Middle East, particularly in Western style universities, as manifesting in the offering of fewer English and humanities majors, diverted funding to STEM and business fields, loss of prestige, and the decreased hiring of full-time English and humanities faculty.

Liberal education in the Middle East and Arab countries has attracted much attention, with American-style universities often viewed as good quality educational institutions (see Agarwal and Srinivasan 2012). However, this view overlooks the frequent cultural challenges posed by conservative societies as well as the ignorance or scepticism of students, parents, or other stakeholders of the value of LAE compared to that of technical or STEM-related fields (Al-hendawi et al. 2019). As Godwin (2017) suggests, the language used in general education, liberal arts, and liberal education can be confusing. People often confuse these terms, which can lead to uncertainty. For instance, the term 'liberal' in LAE might be thought to refer to political liberalism or Western liberal democracy, despite its original meaning suggesting openness and preparing the mind "to deal with complexity, diversity, and change" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d, p.1). Furthermore, Tolmacheva (2008) suggests that despite the Middle East's enthusiasm in adopting the American higher education model to replicate the success of the knowledge economy, some crucial elements of this model are not being fully implemented in the local institutions that have adopted it.

Methodology

This working paper employs a case study qualitative approach to answer the research question: "*Can an established American-style university in the Kurdistan region claiming to embody the values of the liberal arts model maintain and preserve its core curriculum*?". Furthermore, through answering this question, this working paper aims to understand the factors that could contribute to the gradual erosion of its institutional identity as an American liberal arts university. The researchers used semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five administrative staff and faculty members working at one of the three universities mentioned in the "introduction" section. Following the guidelines of the research ethics board at the university, all interviewees' identities will remain anonymous. A thematic data analysis was employed to examine recurring patterns in the data across participants, which led to the emergence of categories and their interrelationships. These categories offer insights into the participants' views on adopting and localizing the American-style university model in a post-conflict society.

Findings

As noted above, this section examines the overall effectiveness of the attempts to implement a liberal arts curriculum at an American-style university in Iraqi Kurdistan. Based on interviews with internal stakeholders, we argue that specific factors are negatively affecting the preservation of the university's LAE curriculum and institutional identity. Some of these core changes include (1) offering fewer core LAE courses to students; (2) the inability to clearly define the meaning and outline the benefits of LAE to both internal and external stakeholders; and (3) the prioritization of "inclusivity" over excellence when accepting prospective students due to financial considerations. Together, these key challenges have negatively affected the reputation and quality of education in the university, pushing it away from an institutional identity demarcated by LAE values, towards a more technical or scientific orientation similar to other public Kurdish universities in the region.

Firstly, as discussed earlier, American-style liberal arts universities distinguish themselves from other higher education institutions by offering core program courses covering general education topics. These include courses such as life sciences, math, history, English, and philosophy, aiming to empower students to become well-rounded critical thinkers, regardless of their majors. Hence, the general aim is for students to complete the core program in their foundational year before specializing in their fields. In our case study, the American-style university in question had gradually begun to reduce its offering of core LAE courses in the foundational year. This was in part due to financial considerations stemming from concerns about the long study duration that has been exceeding the typical four years of study at any given university delineated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Iraq.

This has been further exacerbated by the need for some students to take additional semesters to improve their English speaking, reading, and writing skills to meet the essential requirements for undergraduate study. Accordingly, the administration, prompted by parents' discontent over the yearly incremental increases in tuition fees, has opted to reduce the number of credits that students are required to obtain from the core program and general education courses. This decision was further justified by the views of internal and external stakeholders (e.g., the program's accreditation bodies)[1] pushing for the prioritization of technical courses due to the general perception that LAE is worthless and does not offer any practical value or advantage in the Kurdish job market. Unfortunately, however, this perception does not align with studies on the Kurdish and Iraqi economies, which suggest that the market is oversaturated with graduates who have earned degrees in the fields of engineering, dentistry, pharmacy, and medicine (KAPITA 2021). Hence, the undermining of LAE in this particular university was implemented through the literal reduction in both core course offerings from the general education program as well as elective course offerings.

The second core challenge identified by the interviewees pertains to the absence of consensus on the meaning and value of LAE among both internal and external actors. In the case of internal stakeholders, there is a rift between faculty in support of and against LAE. On the one hand, professors who had highlighted the importance of obtaining soft skills[2] cautioned against decreasing the number of required core program courses. Their perspective suggests that such courses can help students acquire the tools and skills needed to become politically literate, practice agency, and pursue change in Kurdish society. In their view, LAE plays a key role in helping transform the image of Iraqi Kurdistan, and Iraq more broadly, as a society defined by "never-ending" conflicts. However, on the other hand, the university's decision to offer fewer core program courses was supported by faculty in STEM fields who questioned the relevance of LAE and did not implement such values in their teaching approach. Such faculty and administrators believe it is necessary for students pursuing technical careers to obtain the majority of their credits from specialized courses.

These opposing views between faculty teaching technical and non-technical courses reveals that the university has followed inconsistent hiring practices, exposing a lack of alignment with liberal arts values among faculty. This showcases that the university implemented this strategy because it was unable or unwilling to define what liberal arts values are and how they can be beneficial in reforming Kurdish society. This confusion and misunderstanding of the purpose of liberal arts values has fuelled general criticisms from the Kurdish public, including among parents and students, of LAE's potential to "destroy" or damage long-held and respected traditional Kurdish values. Moreover, the university decided to open up additional technical majors to the public. Our interviewees were concerned that these decisions were not made based on any feasibility studies or market-based assessments, and instead cater to public perceptions of what majors are desirable and socially reputable. In addition, the majors are perceived as giving the university in question a supposed competitive advantage over other private universities offering similar fields.

Thus, this indicates that the university's administrators have decided to acquiesce and accommodate Kurdish preferences while further shifting away from publicly defending its choice to be a LAE institution. Moreover, another observation that appears to reinforce this move is the university's plans to increase its class sizes, more closely resembling those of public universities. This change has affected student learning and shifted teaching methods towards instructor-centric approaches, thereby emphasizing rote learning and memorization over critical discussions.

Thirdly, the university's attempts to present itself as an "inclusive" and widely accessible (e.g., by taking in students with lower scores) higher education institution has led it to sacrifice its educational standards when accepting prospective students. Due to some of the abovementioned considerations, including discontent with lengthy study times and higher tuition fees, our interviewees suggested that the university has "loosened" its acceptance criteria for students. Accordingly, students who do not meet certain standards, such as in terms of their GPA or level of proficiency in English, are accepted in the name of inclusivity to increase enrolment rates and allow the university to "survive" financially. The university has further represented itself to both internal and external stakeholders as a "neutral" and "depoliticized" entity, increasingly moving away from strongly identifying with its LAE values. By shifting away from its LAE curriculum and institutional identity, the university continues to attract students with its "American" brand and increased technical programs, while further appeasing parents, students, faculty members, and individuals in Kurdish society who either do not value or are unaware of the benefits of LAE. Nonetheless, while capitalizing on its American name, some stakeholders view this decision as a sacrifice in educational quality due to the erasure of the university's foundational affiliation with LAE.

Conclusion

The American-style university in Iraqi Kurdistan faces challenges in maintaining its liberal arts education (LAE) curriculum, primarily due to financial pressures, societal perceptions that undervalue LAE, and ambiguity regarding its institutional identity. Key issues include offering fewer LAE courses, internal disagreements on the importance of LAE, and prioritizing enrolment over academic excellence by lowering admission standards. These factors have led to a shift away from the university's liberal arts identity, compromising educational quality and aligning it more closely with the technical focus similar to other local universities. Within the context of post-conflict society, the American liberal arts university model holds a promise for improving social cohesion, promoting peacebuilding, facilitating Iraq's transition to democracy, promoting responsible citizens and increasing political literacy and agency. However, the erosion of liberal arts education negatively impacted students as they are becoming financially driven and unimaginative thinkers, the inability to critically discuss and evaluate Kurdish values and traditions, and underestimating the value of humanistic fields, overestimating the value of technical fields to the point of saturation in the job market.

We argue that without a clearly defined and implemented mission, vision, and values, the university is turning away from finding solutions that enable it to position itself as a unique provider of a critical and holistic educational model. Accordingly, this working paper demonstrates how the shift in educational priorities of the university poses a new challenge to the success of American-style liberal arts universities established in post-conflict societies. It further brings into focus the need for greater alignment among stakeholders on the value and role of such universities in order for them to have a *truly* transformative impact on society.

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[1] This includes ABET for engineering programs or AACSB for business programs. They require specific credit hours for major-related courses to meet the knowledge requirements of the profession.
[2] These include intellectual curiosity, intercultural understanding, ethical reasoning, lifelong learning, among others.

Leveraging International Graduate Students' Challenges through EdTech during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Research and practice-inspired working paper

Abstract

Studying abroad is to leave one's home country and study in a different one, and adapting to a new culture and environment has always been a major challenge for those who study abroad. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about another environmental change for international students - the growth of online education which is referred to as educational technology (EdTech) in this piece. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted between May 2022 and January 2023 to explore the challenges in online classes faced by international graduate students in the United States during the pandemic, relying on a convenience sample of two students from universities with low ratios of foreign students. The findings suggest that the current generation of international students can use digital technology skilfully, and they were very receptive to studying abroad while engaging in online classes. For international students with relatively small social networks, online learning did not limit their social connections as they were able to overcome this challenge by leveraging digital technology for their academic support. In addition, online classes kept them away from unfamiliar in-person environments, which reduced their stress level and allowed them to conserve their energy and focus on their studies. Since the online classes also made EdTech accessible easily, international students could use EdTech to overcome their potential academic deficiency, and in turn, it positively affected their academic self-efficacy. Based on these findings, the study suggests that online education and the use of EdTech can be a helpful tool for academic support for international students in broader contexts.

Key words: EdTech, International Students, Case Study

Developing the focus of the study

The United States is the country with the largest number of international students in the world. 5.6% (as of 2023) of U.S. colleges and universities enrol foreign students which adds up to 1,057,188 students (Institute of International Education, 2023). Moving to an unfamiliar place to live requires a lot of change and adaptation for individuals. Some of the challenges that international students in higher education face include language difficulties, cultural prejudice, and loneliness (Alharbi and Smith, 2018). This puts them in the position of having to fulfil multiple roles: as foreigners who have to learn a new culture, as civilian diplomats representing their country in their interactions with peers, and as students who have to study, but their primary role and purpose is a student (Russell et al., 2010). Therefore, international students are a group that experiences more stress than home students due to their simultaneous multiple statuses (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002)

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has created another challenge for international students. As higher education providers abruptly implemented online education for personal hygiene and safety reasons (Chakraborty et al., 2021), they had to adapt to the new environment of online education on top of their new environment related to studying abroad. International students reported having more difficulties with the online educational process, including classroom instruction, assignments, and tests (Al-Oraibi et al., 2022). Also, the online environment put more academic pressure on them, as they had limited physical network with fellow students and instructors who could directly help them with their studies (Martirosyan, Van De Walker and Saxon, 2022).

Though these are all challenges for international students, advances in technology have made it possible to personalize education, giving international students the opportunity to get an education that is tailored to them (Akram et al., 2021). As higher education has gone through the trials and tribulations of implementing online education during the pandemic, various educational technologies were incorporated to secure different weaknesses of different students, and international students were no exception. Studies showed that students' academic achievement improved after the pandemic in higher education due to the support of educational technology and individual efforts in adapting to new technology (Lestari et al., 2022; Magatef et al., 2024). Given the fact that today's university students are a generation of tech savvy (Tran et al., 2020), and this is also true for international students, it can be assumed that students can choose and utilize EdTech that suits them based on their personal academical hardness. To sum up, online education poses a hurdle for the students, but it is quickly overcome by their familiarity with digital technology, and to overcome it, students use technology themselves . In this paper, the total set of digital technologies used in education will be called EdTech in line with Weller's view (2018).

Although international students have many purposes for studying abroad, this study defines international students as a temporary cultural group that moves into the host culture for the purpose of studying, a concept proposed by Guruz (2011). In higher education, international students study undergraduate and graduate programs. However, the focus of this study is on graduate students only, who study abroad for academic and career growth (Lee, 2009). In addition, graduate students in the U.S. universities often work as research assistants in labs or teaching assistants in on-campus classes while studying through coursework (Fullbrook et al., 2015). In other words, within higher education, they play the roles of learners, instructors, and researchers at the same time, making them the best group to look at all aspects of education and research as universities function.

While there have been a number of studies on the perceptions and experiences of online learning in higher education since the full implementation of online classes due to COVID-19 (Heng and Sol, 2021; Tuncer and Karatas, 2021), there is still a paucity of research on the online learning experiences of international graduate students (Mbous et al., 2024; Trout and Alsandor, 2020). Furthermore, fewer studies have explored how EdTech have impacted graduate students' academic journey. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the academic transition of international graduate students in the US throughout the COVID-19 pandemic during, arguably, the most challenging year of it which was 2021. This working paper reports on a case study approach undertaken, focusing on digital technology interventions in the online class experiences of international graduate students. The significance of this study has twofold . First, the findings may have timely policy implications in terms of academic support, as U.S. university policies are shifting from attracting international students to supporting their retention (Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Second, this study will provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of online education and EdTech for international students who use those tools to overcome multiple barriers in their studies.

Methodology in brief

The study reported in this working paper sought to answer the following research questions: "How did international graduate students in the United States leverage educational technology (EdTech) to address the academic challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic?"
Data collection involved conducting two in-depth semi-structured interviews with international graduate students in the United States during the pandemic, relying on a convenience sample of two students from universities in the mid-West with low ratios of foreign students. The interviews took place via Zoom between May 2022 and January 2023. This sample was treated as a case study aimed at understanding what is happening or why it is happening in a particular case that is worthy of study, recognising its potential for generalization, albeit very limited (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The reasoning around the small scope of the sample and limitations of its generalisability are aimed to be extended and improved in further work beyond this working paper. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically following Yin's (2015) framework.

Preliminary findings and discussion

The results showed that the increase in online education at universities due to COVID-19 helped international students overcome challenges. Notably, it showed that the online environment helped them adjust to studying abroad, especially because they're comfortable with digital technology. In addition, the online environment, where EdTech can be freely utilized, has been found to aid international students in overcoming academic challenges and adjusting to their studies.

Online Education and International Graduate Students’ Adaption

For most international students, the idea of studying abroad involves walking around a campus and interacting with new people, but it seems that the online-based university experience has given them a different experience from what they expected.

> J: "I was like, 'Why did I come to the U.S., why did I come all the way here if I can do this online?’"

Back in 2021 when higher education institutions still had social distancing policies in place, though the unexpected start to the online course, the research participants reflected on their first semester and noted the benefits of being online during a period of adjustment to a new environment. Since it was online, participant J felt that her stress level was not as high because she was able to study in a space she was comfortable with. In addition, she was able to focus on her studies more due to not being exposed to unfamiliar environments, she did not need to put more effort into adapting to new environments. Also, participant S felt comfortable with online studies due to access to literature and online conferences. This finding contradicts previous research that suggests that online education in the context of COVID-19 could lead to a lack of academic support for international students due to hardship in contact with teaching staff and other students who could help them (Kivelä et al., 2024). Contrary to this, the participants in this study showed that they felt comfortable with the online environment. Based on the age cohort of the study participants, they could be considered so-called "digital natives" who were born after the internet became a mass medium (Tran et al., 2020, p, 2). “Digital natives” are comfortable with online environments and digital technology, and in this study, they had a clear preference for the online environment.

> J: “Still, it's hard to adapt when it's a change of environment, but when it's online, it's a little bit less stressful to be in a strange space, so I could focus on the content... I think it kind of lowered my stress level a little bit because I could just focus on this content, psychologically, so I kind of liked it…”

> S: “I think it's a little bit easier after COVID because once I was looking for resources or doing my own personal research, I used to have to go to the library physically, ask my professor or my friends for help in person, and go to conferences and meet somebody in person, but now it's all online and I can just do everything online...”

Despite concerns from previous research that continuing to study online would be seen as a significant challenge for international students (Koo and Mei Jiang, 2022), the participants in this study were able to adapt to online classes in their own way. In addition, one of the participants felt that studying and researching online was no different from studying offline, and in fact, they were more focused when they were online. As illustrated by the quotations below, this is because they were able to use a variety of technologies to help them study, and they had more freedom to use them in an online environment, while the participants agreed that using EdTech in offline classes was more restrictive.

> J: “I don't really notice a difference between online and offline.”
> S: “Concentration, I think it depends on the situation, I think it depends on the area, I think concentration is much higher with zoom... 'Because I can look up information right away, I can use a lot of these secondary means, like googling things I don't know, I can use a lot of these secondary means, I think concentration is higher with zoom.”

> J: "... So I tend to do a lot of looking up in person, which is great, but when you're in a room with people watching... when you're in a physical room with them anyway, it's a little bit different to be able to look up and participate in that, versus just explaining things independently on Zoom, where you have a lot more freedom to use aids. Zoom gives you a lot more freedom."

When nobody held your back, EdTech got you

The exposure of online education due to the pandemic has enabled students to navigate various information in the online world. At this time, international students felt freer to use EdTech due to online classes, and the active use of EdTech allowed them not only to overcome their linguistic limitations but to overcome psychological challenges such as frustration, helplessness, etc. Moreover, the phenomenon that is particularly noticeable to them is that overcoming the language barrier prompted using EdTech and enabled them to identify themselves and others and communicate their social and cultural identities.

A language barrier has been a challenge for many international students.. While many non-English-native speakers feel that English is not a problem in their daily life, they recognize that their English skills are lacking in school and professional settings. Their English language skills were not only creating a language barrier, but also threatening their self-efficacy. In other words, international graduate students are easily caught in a vicious cycle of psychological withdrawal, frustration, and eventual helplessness due to their perceived limitations in their language skills.

> J: "In everyday life, I'm 9-8 out of 10? It's high, but … feel like 6 in the classroom, 3 in the lab, so it's not that I don't speak English, but I think it's the pressure of the situation... First time I went to the lab and did meeting, and I can't understand anything. I can't understand this content. And I can't verbalize my thoughts... I get frustrated and I come home from school and I'm just lying down… If I had all this content in Korean, I would be able to talk about my thoughts and I would be comfortable and I would be able to take my ideas and I would be comfortable. But it's a language barrier. But even though I recognize that it's just a language barrier, my self-efficacy is very low. It lowers my confidence."

However, utilizing EdTech was key for them to break the vicious cycle. For the participants, EdTech was acting as a leverage of self-realization as a student by allowing them to be more engaged in class. Edtech was being used by participants to access information, improve their ability to communicate, and break down language barriers. These uses allowed EdTech to function as a confidence booster by reducing the anxiety caused by the language barrier for the study's participants. EdTech was used as an aid in finding the right words for the situation. Participants felt that the use of EdTech as a tool enhanced their own learning experience.

> J: "And because there is enough time to prepare what I'm going to say, because I've got the tools and I've got the time, I can say it with a bit more confidence... I think it increases the chances of getting it right. For example, one of the things I'm most confused about is running a country… running the country well. handling this crisis well… I can look it up quickly and then I'm like, 'Oh, it's this word, it's this expression!' ... And then there's political terms, which I never use in daily life… what rebel in English, corruption, that kind of thing."

> S: "When I study with technology, I'm well prepared. I'm curious to see how people react when I talk about it or if they ask me questions again, and I want to validate my self-efficacy a little bit because I've worked hard, and then in terms of language skills, I want to engage in the conversation with thoughts that I've studied for class..."

For international graduate students, EdTech is also used to protect their identity. In the previous research, international students sometimes feel as diplomats as they feel that their language and behaviour have representation (Härtel, 2010). Moreover, as international students find themselves adding new layers of identity on top of that of being international students, such as gender and race: for example, as female, and Asian, their wording became more cautious. It is because language is viewed as a form of social behaviour because it is entwined with culture and enables people to communicate not only their knowledge of the outside world but also the presumptions, opinions, and perspectives they share with others (Kramsch, 2014). In this sense, people identify themselves and others through the use of language, which allows them to communicate. Culture is a socially constructed reality in which language and social practices interact to construct meaning (Burr, 2015). They had the ability to communicate their thoughts in English, but they were not sure if the words they chose were in line with their identity, so they used EdTech to hold their back.

> J: "...I do cybersecurity, but there's no women in security, and there's no women in cyber security, so there's a little bit of pressure to be good when you say something... especially Asian women. When I speak in the lab, I'm very careful about my tone and I think about it a lot. When I say something, I think, "Is this the right thing to say?"
> S: "I think it comes down to the fact that they are serious about their studies and research. These are some of the things that make them want to be more involved and want to do more research."

Conclusion

Contrary to many concerns about online education due to COVID-19, international graduate students have shown themselves using these challenges as their academic driving force by utilizing EdTech. Firstly, the international graduate students, who often have limited immediate social networks, were able to use EdTech expertly, so that they made EdTech serve as a vital support system. Through EdTech platforms, they could access resources, engage with peers globally, and receive academic assistance regardless of physical proximity. In addition, because classes were online, they could reduce the energy they have to adapt to the new physical environment and focus more on their studies. Secondly, language barriers frequently hinder international students, affecting their self-efficacy and academic performance. EdTech interventions offer tailored language support, breaking this cycle of frustration and enabling students to surpass language limitations. By providing interactive language learning tools or translation assistance, EdTech empowers students to communicate effectively and regain confidence in their academic pursuits. Moreover, EdTech facilitates the expression of diverse identities beyond pressure of communication. International students often grapple with cultural and personal identities that shape their academic experiences. EdTech platforms can help them to engage in self-expression, accommodating various cultural backgrounds and allowing students to articulate themselves authentically. Incorporating EdTech seamlessly into the learning environment enables real-time utilization, maximizing students' academic skills. Whether during class sessions or virtual meetings, allowing students to actively engage with EdTech fosters greater participation and enhances their overall learning experience. By embracing EdTech concurrently with traditional teaching methods, educators can create dynamic learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of international students, ultimately promoting their academic success and integration. This thinking was inspired by the small-scope research project reported earlier in this working paper. However, it must be acknowledged that the reasoning around the small scope of the sample and limitations of its generalisability are aimed to be extended and improved in further work beyond this working paper.

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