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

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Abstract

The pursuit of inclusion in elite universities has been widely explored from a structural lens concerned with issues of access faced by traditionally underrepresented students and staff. Building from a sociological institutionalist approach, this paper proposes the concept of ‘agentic inclusion’ to capture the growing valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion, and the underlying shift from inclusion as ‘structural pursuit’ to inclusion as ‘organisational commitment’. Drawing on primary data mapping the presence of inclusion offices, units and teams across 124 UK universities as of 2018, and secondary data such as student and staff inclusion statistics, I show that elite universities are leading in the organisational display of inclusion, irrespective of the actual levels of inclusion across traditionally underrepresented students and staff. The findings call for further research into the gap between universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion and inclusion at the structural level and inform several policy recommendations.

Keywords: agentic inclusion, elite universities, organisational commitments; higher education; United Kingdom

Introduction

Today it is easier to imagine a university with an inclusion strategy and an inclusion-oriented office but with the numbers of students and staff from underrepresented backgrounds as a ‘work in progress’, than to imagine a university with a remarkably diverse student and staff demographic but who is yet to articulate its organisational commitment to inclusion. The pursuit of inclusion in the UK higher education (HE) sector has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades, moving towards a growing emphasis on universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion as opposed to seeing universities as passive entities that merely implement governmental directives. The UK academic staff and HE practitioners developing institutional submissions to the various equality charters (Athena SWAN Charter for Women in Science, Race Equality Charter etc) will know that the student and staff inclusion statistics represent only one of the criteria that make for a competitive application: universities’ organisational commitments, as evidenced by mechanisms of monitoring and implementation of inclusion strategies and missions, bear a growing weight in the policy-crafted definition of an inclusive university.

In this paper the author argues that the valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion has enabled universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion to act as a purveyor of institutional status for universities. This is a game changer for elite universities, who may emerge as ‘leaders’ in terms of organisational commitment to inclusion, irrespective of the structural levels of inclusion among students and staff from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. The paper is structured as follows. First, the author engages with a sociological institutionalist approach and proposes the concept of ‘agentic inclusion’ to capture the growing valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion and its significance as a purveyor of institutional status for universities who become attuned to this expectation. It is argued that in the process of seeking to maintain institutional status, elite

universities are advantaged by their established reputation and by the changing meaning of what constitutes an ‘inclusive university’ characterised by a growing emphasis on organisational commitments beyond inclusion statistics. Second, the argument is operationalised empirically by assessing the usefulness of elite status to predict universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion, controlling for the share of traditionally underrepresented students and staff and net of institutional level differences (institutional size, financial resources, foundation era and region). Third, the results are discussed in terms of their implications to the wider scholarly literature and to the current inclusion policies in the UK HE sector.

Higher education research has identified persistent issues of access faced by traditionally underrepresented students and staff, particularly in elite universities, despite universities becoming increasingly vocal about their commitments to inclusion (Boliver 2013, 2017; Kimura 2014). By proposing the concept of ‘agentic inclusion’, this study provides an explanatory framework for this phenomenon which draws attention to how universities’ formal commitment to inclusion has become an end in itself. Furthermore, organisational research interrogates the role that elite universities play in legitimising or in resisting the appeal of formalisation in university missions (Oertel and Söll 2017; Kwak et al 2019). The current study informs this question by showing how elite universities cater to their formal commitments to inclusion, and it goes beyond it by problematising what the emphasis on formal commitments means for the actual levels of inclusion across traditionally underrepresented students and staff. Finally, this study contributes to the sociological institutionalist literature documenting the ways in which the cultural trends of rationalisation and formalisation enable new models of institutional identity and purpose for universities (Krücken and Meier 2006; Ramirez 2013).

The Institutionalisation of Inclusion as a University Mission

What exactly constitutes inclusion is a contested terrain in higher education (Kwak, Gavrila, and Ramirez 2019; Bhopal and Shain 2014; David 2007). As a starting point, let us consider the definition of inclusion provided by Clayton-Pederson, O’Neil and Musil (2009, p. 2) as ‘the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity’. Of course, the object of this engagement is confined to any given conceptualisation of inclusion at a certain point in time. For example, the object of inclusion in the UK HE sector is currently set by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)¹ via the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)² in terms of equality of opportunity and the tackling of discrimination among groups with historically protected characteristics such as race, disability and sex (Equality Act 2010).³ Moreover, unlike Clayton-Pederson and their associates, this paper does not present proactivity and purposiveness as defining features for the pursuit of inclusion, but rather as attributes of the current inclusion paradigm whereby systems and institutions are expected to rationalise inclusion as a systematic pursuit organised according to goals and targets. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that inclusion ought not to be a property of individual universities. However, it can and it has been exercised via direct governmental intervention (in the UK, consider the post-1960s sector-level reforms aimed at widening participation, such as the introduction of student loans that were means tested against parental income) (Wyness 2010). It has only been since the Dearing Report (1997) that universities have been urged to develop inclusive approaches at the institutional level partly to compensate for deregulation in the use

¹The EHRC is the body responsible for the overseeing the implementation of equality and non-discrimination laws in England, Scotland and Wales.

²As of 2018, the ECU has merged with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Leadership Foundation for HE (LFHE) into Advance HE.

³The Equality Act of 2010 covers the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation.

of tuition fees.⁴ Other regulatory changes, such as the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has prompted HEIs to consolidate their institutional position in relation to widening participation (McCaig and Adnett 2009). A more recent example is the White Paper for Higher Education presented by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS 2011), which states that universities ‘may charge up to £9,000 a year but this will be subject to meeting much tougher conditions on widening participation and fair access’ (p.15).

The Rise of ‘Agentic Inclusion’

The growing valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion has been theorised in the sociological institutionalist literature as indicative of a new model of institutional identity and purpose for universities (Baltaru 2018b; Krücken 2011). The sociological institutionalist perspective conceptualises organisational change as a cultural artefact, deeply embedded in the cultural ideologies of individual empowerment and rationalisation (Krücken and Drori 2009; Frank, Meyer, and Miyahara 1995; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Research informed by the sociological institutionalist tradition theorises a shift in the perception of the university from an institution with a taken-for-granted societal role and a loosely defined organisational backbone, to a highly integrated entity, strategically oriented towards the pursuit of clearly defined goals and targets (Ramirez 2013; Meyer and Bromley 2013; Krücken and Meier 2006). The increasing emphasis on universities’ declared *organisational commitments*, manifested in the formalisation of goals and missions and in the development of new organisational offices to cater for these missions, is a sign of this transformation (Christensen, Gornitzka, and Ramirez 2019; Baltaru and Soysal 2017; Krücken, Blümel, and Kloke 2013). The valorisation of universities’ agency is equally reflected in the

⁴A year after the Dearing Report the richest students started being charged upfront tuition fees.

changes of governance in late 20th century Western Europe, namely the move away from a ‘tight steering’ approach where the state regulates the HE sector through direct interventions (e.g. caps on student numbers, restrictions on the use of tuition fees), to a ‘steering from distance’ approach where universities have more institutional autonomy and the state plays a rather ‘evaluative’ role (Neave and van Vught, 1991). These changes rely on the idea that universities can be viewed as integrated organisational entities, responsive to societal demands and accountable for their actions (Ramirez 2013).

I propose the concept of ‘agentic inclusion’ to capture the implications that this shift has had on the pursuit of inclusion, namely the new emphasis on universities as agents strategically oriented towards inclusion, as opposed to passive entities merely implementing governmental directives and for whom inclusion is a by-product rather than a goal on its own. Furthermore, it is important to note that in the context of agentic inclusion universities may expand organisationally in order to articulate their declared organisational commitments e.g. developing inclusion offices and units, but this may not reflect the underlying activity structure i.e. the composition and actual diversity in the student and staff body. Earlier sociological accounts conceptualise this dynamic in terms of ‘loose coupling’ between formal organisational structures and the activity structures (Meyer and Rowan 1977). For example, universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion may be indicative of inclusive environments or may be ‘window dressing’ where universities merely aim to meet cultural expectations about how they should look like (Krücken, Blümel, and Kloke 2013). This aspect is particularly relevant to understanding the pursuit of inclusion in the UK HE sector, as there is an increasing sense of a ‘diversity crisis’ in higher education where universities ‘talk the talk’, but seldom ‘walk the walk’ (Thompson 2018).

Elite Universities and the Pursuit of Inclusion as a University Mission

Qualitative explorations into the UK HE sector draw attention to the discrepancies between universities' discursive commitments to inclusion and the structural pursuit of inclusion among students and staff. These studies argue that subjecting issues of inclusion to managerial and bureaucratic logics 'hinders academics and practitioners from addressing structural and fundamental social issues of "equality and diversity" inherent in universities' (Kimura [2014, p. 525], see also Ahmed [2007]). This possibility is supported by quantitative research exploring inclusion statistics in UK's elite universities compared to all other universities, where elite universities are typically older, research intensive, most selective universities that have developed strong reputations over time (e.g. Oxbridge universities) and/or are members of interest groups aiming to consolidate a UK university elite analogous to the Ivy League in the US (e.g. Russel Group universities, that includes Oxbridge universities).⁵ For example, Boliver (2013) shows that from 1996 to 2006 applicants from private schools and white ethnic groups were more likely to receive offers of admission from the prestigious Russell Group universities compared to the equally qualified applicants from state schools and from black and Asian ethnic backgrounds. Although under-researched compared to students, similar dynamics can be observed among HE staff: the organisational partnership Green Park and Operation Black Vote has revealed that only 6% of the vice-chancellors of the UK's top 50 universities are from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (2018). Moreover, elite universities continue to score low in terms of structural inclusion across students and staff.

Interestingly, emerging research from an organisational lens reveals that elite universities may be leading on the formal, organisational display of inclusion instead. Kwak,

⁵The Russel Group is formed of 24 research intensive universities which have been particularly successful in promoting themselves as the UK's 'elite' universities (Boliver 2013).

Gavrila, and Ramirez (2019) analyse a nationally representative sample of 236 US universities and find that 96% of elite universities have diversity offices compared to only 59% of universities in the random sample. As potential explanations for this association, the authors emphasise *material* forces i.e. elite universities have greater access to financial and staff resources to enable such inclusion-oriented organisational expansion, and *normative* forces i.e. due to their visibility, elite universities may be under greater pressure to articulate their organisational commitment to inclusion. It should be noted that the consideration of normative factors has yielded contradictory expectations in the literature. Researchers exploring universities' organisational commitments in the German HE sector have suggested that elite universities should be more resistant to change as they have lower external legitimacy needs by virtue of their established reputation (Oertel and Söll 2017). However, these researchers have struggled to find empirical evidence to support a negative relationship between elite status and the level of organisational commitment to inclusion (Oertel 2018).

The findings of Kwak, Gavrila, and Ramirez (2019) may find resonance in the UK context, following the growing valorisation of universities' organisational commitments to inclusion. Expanding on this argument, this paper postulates that the normative forces underlying agentic inclusion in the UK have enabled universities' organisational commitments to inclusion to act as a purveyor of institutional status for universities, and consequently a desired catalyst for universities seeking to maintain their reputations.

Agentic Inclusion as a Purveyor of Institutional Status

Keith (2001) draws on Berger, Cohen and Zelditch (1972) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) to conceptualise institutional status as 'one's relative standing based on prestige, honor, and deference', which, in organisational environments, becomes 'a property differentially allocated

to legitimate organizations' (p. 496). UK universities' organisational commitments to inclusion are increasingly shaping universities' access to resources that enable them to be recognised for the defining functions of teaching and research, thus setting expectations about what constitutes a 'legitimate' university. The various equality charters that rank universities in terms of their commitments to inclusion further consolidate agentic inclusion as a purveyor of institutional status. Take the example of the Athena SWAN Charter which was established in 2005 to encourage and recognise the commitment of HE institutions (HEIs) to advance the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM).⁶ The charter ranks universities as bronze, silver and gold, commensurate to their commitment to gender equality, which is demonstrated, among others, by the presence of inclusion-oriented policies and organisational arrangements. Recent research focusing on this charter suggests that the prestige associated with achieving an Athena SWAN award is driving universities to participate in the charter (Tzanakou and Pearce 2019). As an example, the National Institute of Health Research does not expect to short-list applications for the Biomedical Research Centre (BRC) fund when the academic partner has not achieved at least a Silver Award of the Athena SWAN Charter for Women in Science. Agentic inclusion is also embedded in mechanisms recognising universities for their teaching, as the White Paper for Higher Education (BIS 2016) stipulates that universities' participation in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is conditional on their commitment to widening participation (p. 48).

From a functionalist point of view, enabling universities' organisational commitments to inclusion as a purveyor of institutional status is instrumental in terms of rewarding inclusive universities. However, elite universities have been shown to maintain institutional status regardless of fluctuations in activity structure and performance (Keith 2001). As an example, Baltaru (2018a) shows that in the UK HE sector elite universities are likely to maintain their

⁶The Athena SWAN Charter was subsequently expanded to cover a wider array of academic fields and HE staff.

top positions in the league tables irrespective of variations in student attainment, employability or research quality over time. The ability of elite universities to maintain institutional status across traditional dimensions (teaching and research, and possibly among more recently institutionalised dimensions, e.g. inclusion), could be attributed to material assets such as greater access to financial and staff resources (Kwak, Gavrilu, and Ramirez 2019), but also to their established reputation as elite universities are often viewed as models of ‘best practices’ by other universities (Labaree 2016) and stakeholders (Baltaru 2018b). The growing emphasis on organisational commitments enable elite universities to ‘manage reputation’ by focusing on a ‘balance between talk and action [...] meant to increase support and legitimacy’ (Christensen, Gornitzka, and Ramirez 2019, p. 3; see also Brunsson 1989).

Thus, being perceived as an ‘inclusive university’ is vital for elite universities and their quest for maintaining institutional status. In the context of agentic inclusion, they can afford to do so by presenting themselves as inclusive organisations, where formal commitments are actively codified in terms of inclusion-oriented offices, teams and units.

Hypotheses

The paper tests the proposed argument according to which elite universities display greater organisational commitments to inclusion than other universities, reflecting the valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion as a purveyor of institutional status.

H1 Elite universities display greater organisational commitments to inclusion compared to all other universities.

The paper concurrently tests the functionalist argument according to which organisational commitments are reflective of the underlying activity structure.

H2 Universities with larger shares of students and staff from non-traditional backgrounds display greater organisational commitments to inclusion compared to all other universities.

Control Variables

The hypotheses above will be tested net of institutional-level differences. The model controls for university size (measured as the total number of students) (Daraio et al 2011) in order to account for the possibility that universities' organisational commitment to inclusion stems from the growing student numbers. Second, the model controls for the availability of financial resources as these could enhance universities' ability to meet organisational expectations (Kwak, Gavrilu, and Ramirez 2019). Third, the model takes into account foundation era, as older universities may be more resistant to change compared to newer universities (Oertel 2018). For this purpose, it is important to distinguish between older universities and universities founded after the 1960s following the granting of university status to all colleges of advanced technology (Robbins Report 1963) and to polytechnics (Further and Higher Education Act 1992). Finally, the model controls for universities located in Scotland as opposed to England, Northern Ireland and Wales, in order to take into account the absence of undergraduate level tuition fees for home and EU students in Scotland, which creates different conditions for the pursuit of inclusion in the universities located in this region compared to all other UK regions (Riddell 2014).

Data and Method

The analysis in this paper is based on 124 UK universities, amounting to over 90% of the UK higher education institutions (HEIs) with university status. The 124 universities were selected on the basis of data availability across all variables of interest, secondary data being extracted from the Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA) and the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). HESA is the official data collection agency for the UK HE sector, principally funded through the subscriptions of the higher education providers, while ETER is the first pan-European register of HEIs, funded by the European Commission. The sample consists in universities of different sizes, from universities of under 5000 students (e.g. Bishop Grosseteste University) to universities of over 30,000 students (e.g. University of Leeds), the average number of students being of approximately 17,000.

Data to operationalise the dependent variable (universities' organisational commitments to inclusion) have been collected from universities' websites in 2018 whilst most recent data to operationalise the principle predictors (elite status, student and staff inclusion statistics) and the control variables (foundation era, total number of students, financial resources and region) were collected from HESA for 2017. Secondary data to control for universities' foundation era have been collected from ETER. This indicator is time invariant.

Web Data Collection: Mapping Universities' Organisational Commitments to Inclusion

University websites are increasingly used in HE research to collect data about universities' core values and areas of action (Waeraas and Sataøen 2019; Liang and Christensen 2019), and about the organisational structures that universities may employ in the process of catering to these areas (Gavrila and Ramirez 2019; Kwak, Gavrila, and Ramirez 2019). With virtually all the

UK universities having a webpage dedicated to inclusion, university websites have become a key source of data for the current investigation. The inclusion-oriented webpages of the UK universities are typically located under the ‘about us’/’governance’/’corporate information’ sections.⁷ The content of these webpages tends to be standardised across universities, with: (a) endorsements of inclusion as a value and as a strategic area of action (value statements and action plans); and (b) information about the organisational structure responsible for providing oversight and coordination in the process of implementing the university’s inclusion strategy. While all universities display inclusion as a key value and area of action, less than half displayed an inclusion-oriented organisational structure.

Coding procedure

In line with Kwak, Gavrilă, and Ramirez (2019), the display of inclusion-oriented organisational structures will be used as an indicator of *organisational commitment*. Out of 124 UK universities under investigation, 39% display an inclusion-oriented organisational structure, typically referred to as: ‘office’, ‘unit’ or ‘team’; these universities were coded ‘1’ as opposed to all the other universities coded ‘0’. The above organisational structures play a central role in catering to inclusion, equality and diversity across all characteristics protected by the equality legislation e.g. race, gender, disability, and across all students and staff at the university. In terms of personnel, they are primarily composed of HE practitioners such as inclusion-oriented officers and advisors.⁸ Further steps were taken to ensure the reliability of the indicator. Beyond displaying the name of the inclusion-oriented organisational structure (e.g. office, unit and team), the webpages were inspected to identify the presence of a

⁷ Some universities displayed two inclusion-oriented pages (one located under ‘Human Resources’ and one under ‘Student Services’) as opposed to a combined webpage; in these cases, both pages were analysed.

⁸The operational definition of inclusion-oriented organisational structure does not include *ad hoc* committees formed of HE staff who do not focus on inclusion as their main specialism e.g. academic staff temporarily acting as E&D chairs or champions, and/or committees formed of executive staff who are responsible for inclusion as part of their broader role e.g. Head of Human Resources, Director of Student Services.

specialised inclusion email address formatted as: [*Prefix* ϵ (*equality; diversity; inclusion*)] @ [*universityname.ac.uk*]. If the indicator was reliable, we would expect universities which name an inclusion-oriented organisational structure to also display a specialised inclusion-oriented email and vice versa.

Figure 1 shows that as expected, all universities that did not name an inclusion-oriented organisational structure also did not display a specialised inclusion email, while 73% of universities which displayed an inclusion-oriented organisational structure also displayed a specialised inclusion email. A closer investigation of the 27% of universities that made an exception to this rule revealed that in most cases the individual emails of the inclusion staff were provided instead. Second, to ensure that the display of information about inclusion-oriented organisational structures is a reliable indicator of the presence of inclusion-oriented organisational structures, an email survey was conducted on a random sample of 10% of the universities, stratified in terms of whether they displayed or not information about an inclusion-oriented organisational structure.⁹ A response rate of 60% was received, overwhelmingly supporting the findings from the online data collection. One university which displayed an inclusion-oriented organisational structure in the web data collection refused to answer the request on grounds that the information is already available online and a link was provided to the inclusion webpage. This case illustrates the expectation that the display of organisational information on the university websites accurately reflects their organisational structures.

[Figure 1 about here]

⁹A further sample was derived specifically from the universities who did *not* display information about an inclusion-oriented organisational structure. All responding universities have confirmed the findings from the online data collection process. Some have clarified that the reason why a specialised organisational structure is not present is because inclusion is a responsibility that is ‘diffused across the university’.

Overview of Explanatory Variables

Elite status represents the principal predictor (enabling the testing of **H1**) which captures prestige differences between ‘old’ universities and ‘new’ universities, as well as more recent distinctions between more and less research-intensive universities. Thus, the author uses the membership of the Russell Group to take into account the growing emphasis on research activity when defining elite universities (Boliver 2015). The Russell Group is the subset of UK universities (Oxbridge universities included) that distinguish themselves through the strategic orientation towards world leading research in addition to being committed to teaching, learning and industry engagement. The binary differentiation between Russell Group members and non-members has been widely used as a sociologically meaningful indicator of elite status (Boliver 2013; Wakeling and Savage 2015), following the group’s success in promoting itself as representing the UK’s ‘leading’ universities’ (The Guardian 2003; BBC 2016; Times Higher Education 2016). Russell Group membership has been operationalised as a binary indicator coded ‘1’ for member universities and ‘0’ otherwise.

Inclusion at the structural level represents the second predictor (enabling the testing of **H2**) and it has been operationalised based on the share of students and staff from non-traditional backgrounds. Following the approach of Baltaru (2018b) this paper specifically looks at the demographic groups that were highlighted in the equality duties of the early 2000s in respect to ethnicity (2001), disability (2006), and gender (2007). These duties are important as they set expectations of anticipatory and proactive behaviour on the behalf of the institutions as opposed to earlier approaches emphasising the redress of individual wrongs in a retrospective manner (McLaughlin 2007; Baltaru 2018b). Following the approach of Oertel (2018), inclusion across these demographic groups is operationalised in relative terms i.e. the ratio of students and staff from black and ethnic minority (BEM) backgrounds to white students and staff (*BEM inclusion*), and the ratio of students and staff with a declared disability to students and staff

without a declared disability (*disability inclusion*). Regarding *gender inclusion*, the model controls for the ratio of female academic staff to male academic staff, as the number of female students already makes for over a half of the students population (HESA 2017), and ongoing inclusion initiatives have been particularly focused on promoting females in academic research (e.g. the Athena SWAN Charter).

The model controls for a range of institutional level differences that are likely to shape universities' organisational commitment to inclusion as argued earlier in this paper (see previous section 'Control Variables'). The *foundation era* of universities is operationalised as a binary variable distinguishing between universities founded pre-1960 (coded '1') and post-1960 (coded '0').¹⁰ To address the potential role of financial *resources*, the model controls for total income, measured in £000s. *Institutional size* is operationalised as a the total number of students (undergraduate and postgraduate). Finally, universities located in *Scotland* have been assigned a code of '1' as opposed to all other universities coded '0'.

Tables 1(a) and 1(b) show the descriptive statistics.

[Tables 1(a) and 1(b) about here]

Analytical Technique

A logistic regression model has been utilised to predict universities' organisational commitments to inclusion (the dependent variable) based on elite status, controlling for the shares of students and staff from underrepresented backgrounds, and for institutional level differences: total number of students; financial resources; foundation era; and region. Logistic regression was chosen as it is suitable for modelling dichotomous (binary) dependent variables

¹⁰ To check the robustness of the results, the logistic regression model was additionally run with foundation era as a continuous variable. Results were consistent across models.

(Agresti and Finaly 2014). This is the case for the current dependent variable measuring whether the university displays an inclusion-oriented organisational structure (category '1') or not (category '0'). The probability of a university displaying an inclusion-oriented organisational structure varies according to the values of the explanatory variables, which enables the author to test the hypothesised relationships. Odds ratio estimates by logistic regression for having an inclusion-oriented organisational structure will be presented, where an odds ratio bigger than '1' represents a higher probability of displaying an inclusion-oriented organisational structure relative to the probability of not displaying it, and vice versa. An odds ratio of '1' means that these probabilities are equal.

The Hosmer-Lemeshow test confirms the model's goodness of fit, as the predicted and observed frequencies match closely ($X^2 = 13.17$, $p > .05$). There is no issue of multicollinearity, the Variance Inflation Factor being low ($VIF < 2$) (see Hair et al [2014] for a detailed discussion of VIF values). Outliers are not a cause of concern e.g. less than 1% of the sample has standardised residuals with an absolute value greater than 2.5, and no standardised residual is greater than 3.29 (Field 2005). The model has been run with robust standard errors. Logarithmic transformations have been applied where appropriate to improve variables' distributions, i.e. the total number of students, BEM inclusion, female inclusion and disability inclusion. The logistic regression model reports McFadden's Pseudo R^2 ($\rho = .25$), values of .2 to .4 confirming that the model is a good fit for the data (McFadden 1977).

The model, where 'Y' is the probability of a university 'i' displaying an inclusion-oriented organisational structure, and '1 - Y' is the probability of the university not displaying an inclusion-oriented organisational structure, becomes:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \text{Log}[Y_i/(1 - Y_i)] \\
& = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (\text{Russel G. Member}) + \beta_2 (\text{BEM Incusion}) \\
& + \beta_3 (\text{Female Inclusion}) + \beta_4 (\text{Dsability Inclusion}) \\
& + \beta_5 (\text{Total number of students}) + \beta_6 (\text{Total Income}) \\
& + \beta_7 (\text{Foundation era}) + \beta_8 (\text{Scotland Located}) + \varepsilon_i
\end{aligned}$$

Results and Discussion

Table 2 illustrates the results. We can see that the odds of Russell Group universities to have an inclusion-oriented organisational structure is almost five times higher than that of other universities ($\beta = 4.96$, $p < .05$), controlling for the levels of inclusion among traditionally underrepresented students and staff and net of institutional level differences (**H1** confirmed). Furthermore, the level of inclusion among students and staff is not a significant predictor for the presence of inclusion-oriented organisational structures (**H2** disconfirmed). The finding applying to all inclusion indicators: the ratio of BEM students and staff to white students and staff ($\beta = 1.24$, $p > .05$); the ratio of female academic staff to male academic staff ($\beta = .64$, $p > .05$); and the ratio of disabled students and staff to the students and staff without a declared disability ($\beta = .70$, $p > .05$). We can also see that the total number of students significantly increases the odds of universities displaying inclusion-oriented organisational structures ($\beta = 3.94$, $p < .01$), controlling for all other variables.¹¹

[Table 2 about here]

¹¹Although no issue of multi-collinearity has been identified, the inclusion of the total number of students in the model has been treated with caution as larger universities may have more resources as well as higher levels of inclusion among specific demographic groups. To ensure the robustness of the results, the model was additionally run (a) without the total number of students, and (b) with the total number of students but without the inclusion indicators. The results proved to be consistent across the models.

An overview of the marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals and expressed in terms of predicted probabilities is provided in **Figure 2**. We can see that, on average, elite universities and universities with a large number of students are significantly more likely to display inclusion-oriented organisational structures compared to all other universities. Universities with higher ratios of students and staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as older universities, are also more likely to display inclusion-oriented organisational structures, but the associations are not significant at the 95% level (at the lower limit, the confidence intervals for these indicators contain values smaller or equal to '0').

[Figure 2 about here]

Agentic Inclusion and Elite Status: the Talk is the New Walk

Together with the preliminary findings from the web data collection, the results inform three characteristics of *agentic inclusion* in the UK HE sector i.e. standardisation (virtually all universities display a webpage in which they articulate their commitment to inclusion), organisational expansion (almost forty percent of the universities display inclusion-oriented offices, units and teams), and decoupling between organisational commitments and inclusion at the structural level, as the student and staff inclusion indicators are not significantly associated the odds of universities displaying inclusion-oriented organisational structures. This transformation is important as it places growing emphasis on universities' agency and on their ability to cater for inclusion as a university mission (Baltaru 2018b).

The findings show that elite universities are leaders in the organisational display of inclusion compared to all other universities, supporting the results of Kwak, Gavrila, and

Ramirez (2019) regarding the case of US universities (see also Ramirez [forthcoming]). As evidence from the current study shows, this dynamic manifests irrespective of the levels of inclusion among students and staff. The findings echo concerns about a ‘diversity crisis in higher education’ where universities are able to present themselves as inclusive regardless of the state of inclusion at the structural level (Thompson 2018; Kimura 2014; Ahmed 2007). From a sociological institutionalist perspective, this dynamic is likely to occur as organisational commitments ‘serve mainly as a display window for universities’ political environment’ (Krücken [2011, p. 8], see also Meyer and Rowan [1977]). The findings support the possibility that the valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion has been consolidated as a normative direction and, as a result, universities articulate organisational commitments to inclusion in order to align with these expectations.

Furthermore, the proliferation of equality charters such as Athena SWAN represent a notable feature of the external environment that shapes expectations about how inclusion should be pursued in the UK HE sector. They enable an operationalisation of inclusion that places a growing emphasis on universities’ ability to demonstrate organisational proactiveness, thus legitimising the pursuit of inclusion as a property of individual universities. Given that elite universities are seen as models of ‘best practices’ by other universities (Labaree 2016), in the future we may expect more universities prioritising the formal display of inclusion (Kwak, Gavrilă, and Ramirez 2019).

Further Research Directions and Policy Implications

While the current cross-sectional study provides an important insight into how universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion map into elite status, further longitudinal research is needed to closely investigate the gap between organisational commitments and inclusion at the

structural level. This study shows that universities' organisational commitments to inclusion are independent from inclusion at the structural level, but further research may assess whether the various ways in which universities act as strategic agents driving inclusion, e.g. developing inclusion-oriented organisational structures, joining equality charters, is associated with subsequent increases in the shares of traditionally underrepresented students and staff. Further research may also explore whether changes in the composition of the student and staff body are reflected across the various disciplines and courses of study within universities.

Policy research may question whether the valorisation of universities' agency in the pursuit of inclusion is a more successful strategy in terms of fostering inclusion among students and staff compared to the approaches emphasising the role of governments e.g. by regulating the use of tuition fees or by addressing educational inequalities prior to the university level. In this sense, this paper provides a premise for a more radical shift in the current inclusion paradigm by looking beyond universities as the de facto agents in the pursuit of inclusion. Moderate recommendations for adjustments to the current inclusion practices in the UK HE sector can also be derived. As ongoing inclusion practices become subject to empirical scrutiny, it is essential that conflicts of interest are minimised. For example, to achieve a 'gold' award at the Athena SWAN Charter universities must complement their applications with inclusion data demonstrating the impact of Athena SWAN activities (ECU 2019). Such a criterion should be dropped to eliminate the biases stemming from institutions seeking a gold award rather than an impartial assessment of these activities.

In a twist of fate, universities' 'talk' about inclusion has become a 'walk' of its own, but a walk towards maintaining institutional status as opposed to more direct concerns about enhancing inclusion among underrepresented groups. While the growing rhetoric celebrating universities' organisational commitments to inclusion has been criticised for driving attention away from structural issues of equality and diversity in universities, this paper shows that

inclusion at the structural level does not drive up universities' organisational commitments to inclusion. Instead, elite status does, and it does so in the context of agentic inclusion, when the formal organisational commitment to inclusion is perceived as what good universities do.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1a *Descriptive Statistics*

| | % | N |
|---|-----|-----|
| Inclusion-oriented organisational structure | 39% | 124 |
| Russel Group member | 19% | 124 |
| Pre1960 founded | 77% | 124 |
| Scotland located | 11% | 124 |

Table 1b *Descriptive Statistics*

| | Mean | SD | Min | Max | N |
|--------------------------------|---------|--------|------|---------|-----|
| BEM Inclusion | .25 | .25 | .02 | 1.22 | 124 |
| Female Inclusion | .96 | .41 | .17 | 4.03 | 124 |
| Disability Inclusion | .13 | .05 | .05 | .32 | 124 |
| Total number of students | 16737 | 8607 | 1280 | 40490 | 124 |
| Resources (total income £000s) | 2667771 | 286778 | 5537 | 1869925 | 124 |

Table 2 *Logistic Regression Predicting the Presence of Inclusion-Oriented Organisational Structures*

| Variables | Odds Ratio |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Constant | .000** (.00) |
| Russel Group | 4.96* (3.91) |
| BEM inclusion | 1.24 (.36) |
| Female inclusion | .64 (.35) |
| Disability inclusion | .70 (.59) |
| Total number of students | 3.94** (1.94) |
| Resources | .97 (.19) |
| Pre-1960 Founded | 2.05 (1.02) |
| Scotland located | .76 (.56) |
| Wald Chi ² | 26.64*** |
| McFadden's R ² | .25 |
| N | 124 |

Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05
Robust Standard Errors in parentheses

Figure 1 *Presence of Inclusion-Oriented Organizational Structure Over Presence of Inclusion-Specialised Email*

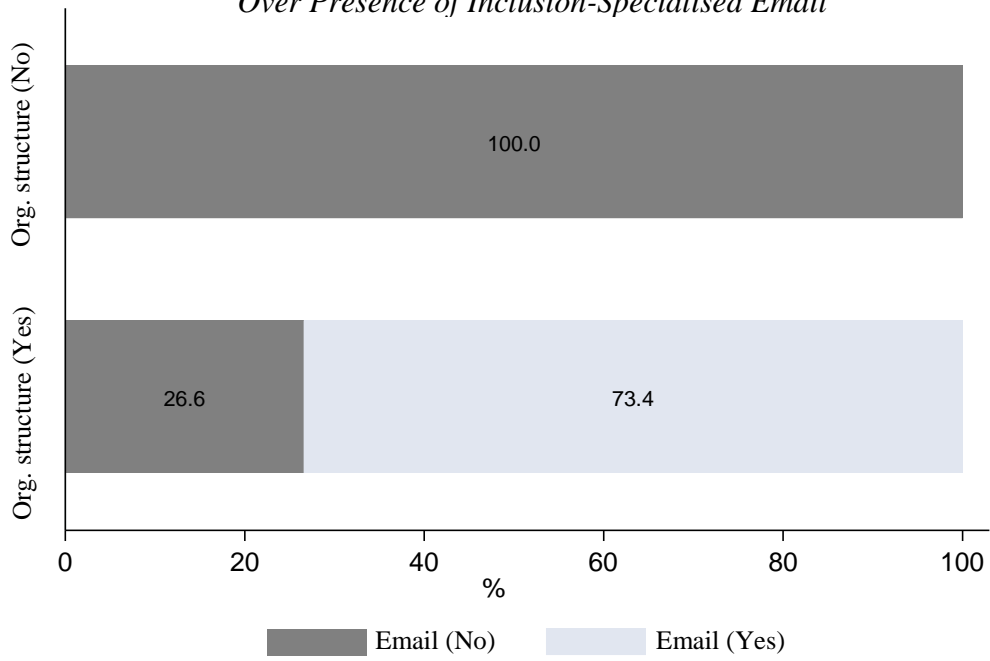


Figure 2 *Average Marginal Effects 95% Confidence Interval*

