Higher Education (2025) 90:355–369
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01324-9

Widening access and participation: Exploring discourses in academic writing from the USA and the UK

Jennifer M. Case[1,2]

Accepted: 23 September 2024 / Published online: 11 October 2024

Abstract

Widening access and participation feature prominently in higher education policy globally, and there are now significant academic communities engaged with implementing and interrogating initiatives aimed towards these goals. Despite an apparent global homogeneity in the use of this terminology, this study explores whether differing structural arrangements for higher education in different contexts might lead to subtly different meanings for the same terms. To investigate this question, this article analyses the discourses on expanding access to higher education in the Anglo-American world, focusing on the USA and the UK. While both countries have been at the forefront of higher education research on widening access, they exhibit starkly different systems concerning their structures, governance, and levels of youth participation. Using a discourse analysis of an exemplar academic text from each context, the article identifies key differences in how widening access to higher education is conceptualized across these two settings. Two structural features that are shown to significantly influence the discourses on widening access are the centralized admissions system in the UK (compared to the USA), and the theoretically open 'system' of access in the USA by virtue of the non-selective community college sector.

Keywords Access to higher education · Widening participation · Anglo-American higher education · Discourse analysis

Introduction

The significant expansion of higher education across the globe during the twentieth century through to the twenty-first has been aligned with social aspirations for increased access and participation across broader sectors of society, leading to national, regional, and institutional policy directives, coupled with substantial public investment in targeted initiatives (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020; Vignoles & Murray, 2016; Weedon, 2016). The push for widening access and participation is also reflected in the work of

✉ Jennifer M. Case
jencase@vt.edu

1 Department of Engineering Education, Virginia Tech, 349 Goodwin Hall, 635 Price's Fork Road, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA

2 Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

a scholarly community dedicated to these goals, who also engage critically with policy directives and discourse (see, for example, Archer, 2007; Deem et al., 2022; Liveley & Wardrop, 2020; Madriaga, 2023; Mavelli, 2014). Burke (2016), surveying this field, points out that while the discourse of 'widening participation' has gained international momentum, there is less underlying clarity to this term than one might expect:

> The different meanings circulating from policies of WP [widening participation] are often implicit, while assumptions are often made about a common or universal understanding of the term. The meanings attached to WP are not only highly contextual but are also connected to diverse and competing values and perspectives, as well as interconnected policies across the public sphere. WP is thus a contested terrain, and there are different perspectives underpinning policy and practice, which have different outcomes and effects. (p. 1)

This article seeks to further unpack some of these different perspectives, by looking closely at the discourses at play for two major actors in the Anglosphere, the USA and the UK. Here, the terms 'Anglo-American' and 'Anglo-Saxon' are often used in the comparative higher education literature, lending some validity to this overall descriptor of national arrangements in Britain and her former colonies, including the US higher education behemoth, as well as other countries with an imperial history of substantial white Anglo settlement such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This assumption is useful when doing broad comparisons with systems beyond this grouping which have markedly different degree structures and/or different expectations of public funding, such as those in Continental Europe (Currie et al., 2003) or China (Marginson and Yang, 2022). Such terminology also often references the dominance — until the recent rise of China — of the Anglo-American sphere in global rankings of research productivity, and the increasing hegemony of the English language in academic writing. There are also cultural, political, and economic links at multiple levels across these national contexts, as commented on by Scott in his survey of policy-borrowing in higher education (2021, p. 109):

> Anglophone solidarity, however frayed and diminished, still counts, implying there are greater social, cultural and political affinities between the UK and the US than with the rest of Europe, despite compelling contrary evidence.

What is of interest for the present study is that, despite what seems to be a relatively homogeneous discourse on the topic of widening access and participation to higher education across the Anglo-American world, the actual arrangements for higher education in these countries are starkly different, with the USA being an outlier not only in terms of the size of its higher education operation, but also its structure, governance, anticipated role in society, as well as levels of participation of the youth cohort. Focusing in on the USA and the UK, the possibility seems likely that while on the surface, researchers might seem to be talking about the same phenomenon, in fact they are not. If one is interested in higher education beyond a rhetorical level, then actual contextual arrangements really matter. This study aims to try and tease out some of these differences, to advance a more nuanced global conversation regarding access to higher education. To this end, this exploratory study employs a discourse analysis of an exemplar academic text from each of the US and UK contexts to examine how (widening) access to higher education is conceptualized differently in these two settings. Firstly, the article gives some background on participation in higher education in these two contexts, followed by details on structural arrangements for higher education.

Participation trends in higher education: Comparing the USA and the UK

The global expansion of higher education has outstripped any sensible predictions made in the early post-war period. The growth this century has already exceeded that of the assumed heyday of expansion from the 1970s onwards, with the global number of students having already doubled since 2000 (Scott, 2021). However, disaggregation at a national level reveals very different patterns. In order to normalize patterns of growth in the context of changes in population, one measure that can be used to track these trends is the Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio (GTER) used by UNESCO (2015), a rough indicator of the proportion of the youth cohort entering post-secondary education. To calculate the GTER it counts all enrolled students, regardless of age, and divides this by the population who are within 5 years of leaving high school. While therefore a crude measure and clearly a slight overestimate of the actual proportion of a particular youth cohort in higher education, it nonetheless facilitates global comparisons with a degree of comparative validity. The GTER measure also allows application of the much-used and somewhat critiqued categories of elite, mass and universal participation originally proposed by Martin Trow (1974) — elite systems have participation less than 15%, mass systems have participation greater than 15%, and universal systems have participation beyond 50%. Increasingly, there is a policy move to use the term 'higher education' to include all post-secondary (tertiary) students (Scott, 2021), hence the use of the GTER (T = tertiary) to talk about participation in higher education. And recent work by Marginson and colleagues has proposed the term 'high participation systems' as an updated term for systems where more than half of the youth cohort participate in higher education, now the norm for most Western countries, also for some East Asian countries such as South Korea (Marginson, 2016a).

Within the group of industrialized and now mostly post-industrialized nations who have high participation in higher education, the USA and the UK have had markedly different patterns of expansion. The USA is the first country where higher education reached mass participation early on in the post-war period (with a massive boost from the GI Bill) and approached universal participation (more than 50%) by the 1970s, at which point the UK was still just emerging from being an elite system. From that point on, both systems continued to expand, as displayed in the figure below (Fig. 1): The UK shows dramatic growth from the late 1980s, reaching a GTER of about 60% at the turn of the century and then levels off; and the USA steadily rises to 80% participation by the early 1990s, then mostly maintains that level, with some fluctuations, most notably a spike in the period after the 2008 recession.

An important additional consideration is to look at higher education outcomes. Here, as might be expected, the USA and the UK have very different outcomes, with the latter achieving much higher completion rates. In fact, despite the marked difference in levels of participation in higher education, these countries achieve very similar levels of qualified young people, with the OECD (stats.oecd.org) reporting that approximately 50% of the 25–34-year-old cohort in both countries hold at least a 2-year degree, and around 40% hold a bachelors' degree. Cantwell (2018) notes that in the USA, the youth have not attained college degrees at higher levels than their parents, i.e., despite increases in participation over recent generations, outcomes have stagnated due to a decline in completion rates.

Putting together these starkly different patterns in participation and completion rates opens a complex normative debate regarding access. An earlier analysis by Weko (2004) argued that the lower completion rates are an intrinsic outcome of the USA's commitment to open access, crucial in a society that at least rhetorically rests on the expectation that

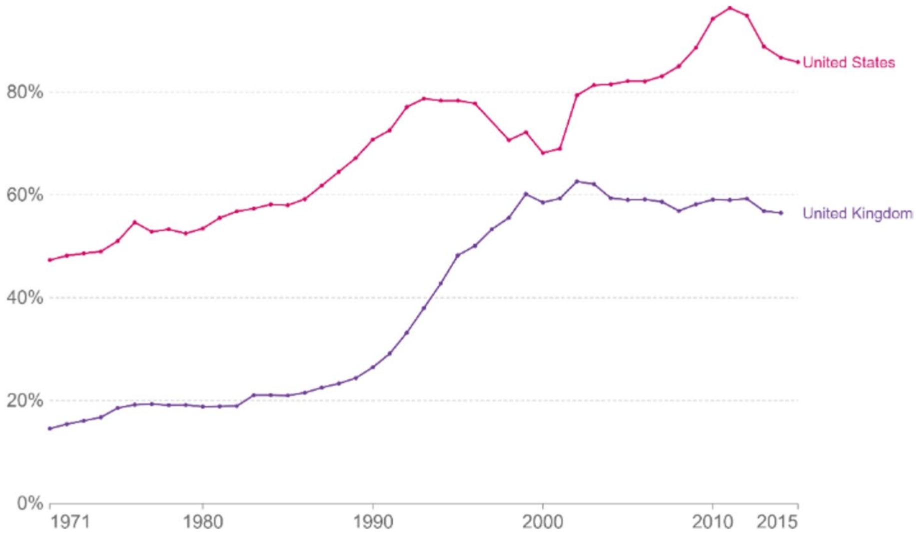

Fig. 1 Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio (GTER) for USA and UK between 1971 and 2015 (UNESCO 2015)

access will grant everyone an equal chance to succeed. The UK, even to this day, can be seen to have retained many features of an elite system, with entry mostly direct after high school into full-time study, and national systems aimed at the assurance of uniform academic standards, with participation of not much more than half of the youth cohort. The USA offers essentially universal access through a non-selective community college system offering 2-year degrees, from which students can transfer into 4-year bachelors granting institutions. However, a critical view on this apparent utopia was put forward in the 1960s by US sociologist Burton Clark in his theory of the 'cooling out function' served by two-year colleges (Clark & Clark, 2008). Clark theorizes that the US higher education system is closely aligned with forms of democracy in the USA, offering everyone — at least in principle — possibilities for advancement. This has led to the USA valuing forms of education that never fully close out possibilities and delay selection mechanisms, as compared to European (including British) systems tracking young people early on into different forms of education destined for different labour market outcomes. While US higher education with its massified levels of enrolment and potential for transfer from 2-year to 4-year colleges theoretically embodies wide access, Clark suggests that the functions within the system serve in more subtle ways to 'cool out' aspirations for some parts of the youth population. More contemporary analyses in this line argue that this is not a matter of system design, but an outcome with multiple drivers (see, for example, Broton, 2019).

While the USA and the UK can therefore be seen to embody two very different higher education contexts, as will shortly be explored, especially since the 1980s there has been a degree of political convergence in both societies, with shifts towards what are generally termed neoliberal public policies, with distinct impacts on higher education policy and practice (see Pickard, 2014). Both societies have seen declining public investment in education, stagnation of wages, and dramatic increases in social inequality. Access to higher education has only increased in its individual significance for assuring labour market returns, and in its role in the political arena. It also remains a significantly prominent focus in the field of higher education studies in both countries. Both systems are increasingly differentiated and stratified, and deliberations around access are no longer simply about access to higher education per se, but more specifically about access to *which* institutions. On the face of it then, one can think about an 'Anglo-American' discourse on how society and academia think about access to higher education (Marginson, 2016b), but the different trajectories of expansion, and present levels of participation outlined above, would suggest that in fact these discourses might function quite differently in practice. To more fully set up the contextualization for the present study, the following section offers further details on higher education in these two contexts.

Structural features of higher education in the USA and the UK

A crucial starting observation (following Cantwell, 2018) is to compare the present population sizes of these countries: The USA has the world's third largest population, and this is nearly 5 times as large as the UK. The GDP per capita for the USA (first amongst countries with more than 10 million in population) is 75% greater than that of the UK. As measured by the gini coefficient, the USA also has significantly higher levels of social inequality than the UK. Until recently, it had the world's largest student population (nearly 18 million students), now dramatically exceeded by China (with 35 million students).

A key difference between the USA and the UK concerns government involvement in higher education (Halsey & O'Brien, 2014). The US federal (national) government provides a system of financial aid (only partial coverage of tuition in loan form for all students except those in greatest financial need who receive fuller coverage), provides the bulk of academic research funding, and legislates some aspects of higher education at this level. However, the bulk of the regulation of public higher education (the largest part of the higher education sector) happens at the state level. The USA does not have a nationally regulated or funded system of higher education; in fact, some commentators would say one can't really talk of a 'system' of US higher education unless one is open to expanding what is meant by 'system' (Labaree, 2020).

While most higher education institutions in the UK are public, more than half of US institutions are private (Dougherty & Callender, 2020). The private sector in the USA includes both not-for-profit and for-profit institutions and includes an exceptionally high status sector of research-intensive institutions. An important dimension of the US 'system' (Labaree, 2020) is the 2-year community college sector, which enrols just over 40% of undergraduate students. While most of the remainder of the students are enrolled in (mostly larger) public 4-year institutions, there is still a sizeable enrolment (about a quarter of all students) in (mostly) smaller private institutions. Importantly, while not nationally coordinated, the USA has a formally stratified system, with only a select group of institutions offering doctoral degrees, a further group offering (4-year) bachelors and masters degrees, and the community colleges only offering 2-year associates degrees.

Historically, the UK had a binary system of higher education, where public universities were funded and (lightly) regulated by the national government, and polytechnics (formerly colleges of advanced technology) were funded at the local level and curricula were nationally regulated. In a process starting in the 1980s and culminating in the formation of the post-1992 university sector, polytechnics were given university status. At the same time, the UK moved to regionally distinctive governance, with one regional funding body for each of England, Scotland and Wales. Regarding England, the region with the largest enrolments (and population) in the UK, a further dramatic shift was the progressive introduction of tuition fees from the late 1990s (Scotland has retained free tuition for domestic students). In England, only high-cost STEM programmes now get block grant funding via the OfS (Office for Students) which has a largely regulatory role, focused now both on research (the Research Excellence Framework, the REF) and teaching (the TEF). While the binary system of higher education has been dropped, the UK retains the binary distinction between higher education and further education — which is not used in the USA — and which some commentators (e.g. Scott, 2021) call anachronistic. Only 5.7% of English students are in further education (much lower than the US enrolment in the 2-year colleges discussed above) and there is also not as strong a system of articulation/transfer from further into higher education as in the USA. Scotland, by comparison, has 25% of its students in further education, and an overall higher rate of post-secondary participation (Scott, 2021).

The UK most definitely has a national system of higher education, now quite closely regulated by the government, with the bulk of funding being public, given that tuition fees are backed by full government loans which are income-contingent in relation to repayment. Admissions are done through a central body, the University and College Admission Systems (the UCAS). Furthermore, there is no differentiated system of institutions offering different degrees as in the USA. The formal anticipation is that all higher education institutions participate in teaching and research and graduate education, although in reality this is accomplished to varying degrees. Scott (2021, p. 42) considers this, in an apparently wistful comparison to the California Master Plan ideal from the USA, a 'poverty of institutional forms' — basically all higher education institutions in the UK are large public universities.

Methodology

This study sets out to discern whether the (dramatic) structural differences in higher education between the USA and the UK, as outlined above, are reflected in the research on widening participation that is done by higher education scholars in these two national contexts. With the present methodological allure of big data, large scale bibliographic reviews tend to be the method of choice for analysis based on published literature. This might well be a viable long-term goal for such work, but as a starting point, a close-up discourse analysis of limited textual data was chosen for this paper's study due to its potential to discern detailed modes in how discursive features relate to the social settings in which they are generated and received. This exploratory study thus uses an exemplar text from each setting that was subjected to a close-up analysis to determine fine-grained differences.

A process was undertaken to identify two reasonably comparable texts that could form a dataset for this study. In each of the country contexts I looked for a recent journal article published by a lead author who is well established in researching on this topic, at least one of the prominent contemporary names in the field in that national context. I sought articles that had a mix of conceptual and empirical work and that were centred on key questions in relation to access to higher education and equity/inequality. The process was iterative, resulting in the selection of the following two articles:

> **Text 1:** Perna, Laura W., Jeremy Wright-Kim, and Elaine W. Leigh. 'Will College Promise Programs Improve or Reduce Equity? Understanding the Contextual Conditions That Influence Program Implementation.' *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 29, no. 26 (2021).

Text 2: Boliver, Vikki, Pallavi Banerjee, Stephen Gorard, and Mandy Powell. 'Reconceptualising fair access to highly academically selective universities.' *Higher Education* (2022) 84: 85-100.

Laura Perna is a prominent and influential US researcher with respect to college access. A Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, she has been publishing on this topic for nearly 30 years, and her work is highly cited. Vikki Boliver is a prominent UK researcher on the topic of inequality in education and access to higher education. She has been publishing on this topic for nearly 20 years and her work is also highly cited. She is Professor of Sociology at Durham University in England. Boliver's work focuses mostly on the English context, and this paper is no exception.

A real challenge presenting this study is that it is not intended to provide commentary or evaluation on individual researchers and their work. Rather, these texts were selected because they exemplify some of the best work on this topic in a national context. To highlight this choice, the texts are referred to as Text 1 and 2 throughout rather than using a conventional author-date label. More crucially, as will be elaborated further, the discourse analysis methodology adopts the fundamental assumption that one operates within particular discursive worlds which both constrain and open up particular ways of thinking (and writing).

The titles, abstracts, and opening paragraphs for each of these texts are displayed in the figure below .

At this point, it is also important that I also acknowledge my positionality with respect to this study. As a South African who did postgraduate studies in South Africa, England, and Australia — and now works in the USA — I am differently enculturated by each of these places, and I had already started thinking about how one's commitment to advance access to higher education is always located in a particular context (Case et al., 2016).

The approach to discourse analysis selected to guide this study is that of Norman Fairclough, particularly his 2003 text 'Analysing Discourse: Textual analysis for social research'. A core feature of Fairclough's approach is that it involves linguistic analysis directed towards the aims of social research, i.e., the emphasis is not on linguistic features per se, but rather how these features offer pointers to understanding social practices and structures. One important aspect to note is that Fairclough's work fits into the general approach of Critical Discourse Analysis, and as such tends to be used to understand the workings of power, e.g., in policy documents. Applying it here to socially critical work therefore requires a subtle move — the intention is not to show that the authors of these texts are propping up particular structures, rather that their writings reveal to us how those structures create and constrain the spaces in which critical engagement can happen. Both of these societies presently function as neoliberal democracies, and, as such, market language permeates their governmental policy, but the broader polity in each context is engaged in tight contests over fairness and equity. A key tenet of Fairclough's broader work is always to analyse text in its context.

Fairclough's approach builds on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, and the menu of 'tools' is thus extensive. For the purposes of this study, the following questions with associated tools guide the analysis (adapted from Fairclough, 2003, 191–194, and ordered to suit the purposes of this study):

1. What are the predominant types of speech functions (statements, questions, etc.)? In particular, what questions can be asked? Who is the presumed audience?
2. What existential, propositional, or value assumptions are made?

Fig.2 Titles, abstracts and first paragraphs for the exemplar texts

Text 1:

Title: Will College Promise Programs Improve or Reduce Equity? Understanding the Contextual Conditions that Influence Program Implementation

Abstract: Although "free tuition" programs are politically popular, some worry that these programs will exacerbate inequity. Scholars note that program outcomes depend on implementation, but few have probed the contextual conditions that contribute to differences in implementation or the consequences of implementation for equity. To address this knowledge gap, we draw on conceptual models of implementation fidelity and case studies of last-dollar, free tuition programs at four community colleges. The consequences of an implemented program for equity depend on program content and coverage and are moderated by programmatic and organizational conditions. For the studied programs, implemented content includes the financial award and non-financial academic supports. Coverage is determined by eligibility requirements. Program content and coverage are moderated by programmatic characteristics, including program goals and placement in the organizational structure, program staffing, and recruitment strategies. Organizational conditions, including sources and availability of funding, availability of synergistic programs, capacity for data collection and evaluation, and perceptions of the community college also moderate implementation. The results inform understanding of how to implement programs at community colleges that increase equity in particular contexts.

First paragraph: At the federal, state, and local levels, college promise programs have emerged as a mechanism for improving higher education attainment (College Promise Campaign, 2019). Also known as 'free college' and 'free tuition,' these programs are politically popular (Hartig, 2020). But, observers have raised questions about the implications of these programs for equity (e.g., Jones & Berger, 2018; Perna et al., 2018; Poutré & Voight, 2018). Some emerging models, including those that provide a financial award that is the difference between tuition and other need-based grant aid (a 'last-dollar' award), may exacerbate inequity by providing no new resources to students from the lowest-income families and allocating resources to students from higher-income families who would have enrolled in college without the aid (Perna et al., 2018).

Text 2:

Title: Reconceptualising fair access to highly academically selective universities

Abstract: The higher education regulator for England has set challenging new widening access targets requiring universities to rethink how merit is judged in admissions. Universities are being encouraged to move away from the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model of fair access, which holds that university places should go to the

3. What other texts are referenced (intertextuality) and what other voices are included? How are other voices textured in relation to the authorial voice?
4. What do authors commit themselves to in terms of truth (epistemic modalities) or in terms of obligation and necessity (deontic modalities)? To what extent are modalities

most highly qualified candidates irrespective of social background, in accordance with the principles of procedural fairness. Instead, they are being asked to move towards what we term the meritocratic equity of opportunity model, which holds that prospective students' qualifications should be judged in light of the socioeconomic circumstances in which these were obtained to enhance distributive fairness, a practice known in the UK as contextualised admissions. In this paper, we critically discuss the theoretical underpinnings of these two competing perspectives on fair access and review the existing empirical evidence base, drawing together for the first time insights from our ESRC and Nuffield Foundation funded studies of fair access to highly academically selective universities in England. We argue that reconceptualising fair access in terms of distributive fairness rather than procedural fairness offers a more socially just set of principles on which to allocate valuable but scarce places at the most academically selective universities in England, unless or until such time as the vertical stratification of higher education institutions is reduced or eliminated entirely.

First paragraph: High participation systems of higher education are commonly characterised by a bifurcation between highly prestigious 'elite' universities—such as the Russell Group in the UK, the Ivy League in the USA, and the C9 universities in China—and low prestige 'demand absorbing' institutions attended by the majority of tertiary level students (Cantwell & Marginson, 2018). Entry to the most prestigious universities within these systems is highly competitive, and prospective students are selected on the basis of their academic attainment in national examinations taken at age 18, such as A-levels in England and the Bachillerato in Spain, bespoke university entry tests, including the Gaokao in China and SAT and ACT in the USA, or based on earlier selection into different school tracks as in Belgium, Italy, and Poland, or some combination of the above (Haj et al., 2018).What all of these systems have in common is that they invariably lead to socially and economically stratified bodies of higher education students, especially within the elite tier of institutions, prompting critiques of the assumption that such stratification reflects the natural outcome of 'fair' merit-based testing and selection (Marginson, 2018).

categorical, and to what extent are they modalized (in levels of high/median/low modality)?

It must be emphasized that this is a small selection from the vast repertoire of tools in Fairclough's approach. A large part of what has been omitted are those tools that would focus attention on the kind of text more broadly, and that would describe academic research writing more generally. The rationale for this exclusion is simply that this is not the focus for this study, and thus tools were selected that do more to bring us 'close-in' to the functioning of these texts.

Analysis

The analysis is structured following the selected tools from Fairclough's approach outlined above, with subheadings signalling each of the four categories of tools.

Speech functions and audience

This tool focuses on what functions the language is serving. Here, asking questions and making statements constitute the two main forms evident in these academic texts. A particular interest for this analysis is to look at what questions can be asked in a given context — with this not only being about what is permissible but also to identify the logical constraints posed by the context and its structural features. Furthermore, this part of the analysis also considered the intended audience(s).

Text 1 signals a key question orienting the entire piece in the title: 'Will college promise programs improve or reduce equity?' Notably, this title appears to be phrased as a question with a yes/no answer, although the subtitle already suggests that no such answer will be forthcoming — but rather an 'understanding' of what makes for successful program implementation. The foci for this text as stated in the title are 'college promise programs'. The abstract and first paragraph provides the alternative term 'free tuition' programs, but beyond this the audience is assumed to already be part of a debate on these programs — so the boundaries for this work are give right from the start: Some people like these programs ('politically popular'), but some people question whether they will improve equity as claimed. Text 1 thus works within the boundaries of a particular financial aid program which it is assumed can either improve or reduce equity. Questions are not addressed to the broader systems of higher education in the country. Importantly, Text 1 implicitly addresses the citizens who might be placed to make decisions about which kinds of financial aid programs (beyond federal and state aid) might be worthy of support (presumably by non-governmental organizations). Text 1 thus does not open up for question either federal or state policy on higher education.

Text 2 offers some sharp contrasts to Text 1 in how it uses speech functions to set the parameters for its work. The phrasing of the title is indicative: 'Reconceptualising fair access to highly academically selective universities'. Compared to Text 1, this text does not make claims about outcomes (increased or decreased equity), but rather aims to put forward a new conceptual argument about what might be considered fair in relation to (academic) admission policies for highly academically selective universities, specifically in the context of England. This text is directly addressed to an English policy audience, in that in the first line of the abstract it references the recent policy from the OfS that is calling on the most academically selective universities to equalise the ratio of entrants from different parts of the country with high and low rates of participation in higher education, from a baseline of 5:1 presently to achieve parity (1:1) ratio by 2039 (OfS 2018). (Universities that do not meet this demand will risk losing public funding.)

Existential, propositional or value assumptions

Text 1 signals 'equity' in its title question, but interestingly, at no point in the text is equity defined, or even discussed. The implicit assumptions that emerge through the article is that equity is equated as removing financial barriers for access to college, with a focus on getting low-income students to enrol in community college. Specifically, the following sentence offers an implicit definition of 'inequity', that would involve giving financial aid to those who are less deserving of it in terms of need:

> Some emerging models, including those that provide a financial award that is the difference between tuition and other need-based grant aid (a 'last-dollar' award), may exacerbate inequity by providing no new resources to students from the lowest-income families and allocating resources to students from higher-income families who would have enrolled in college without the aid (Perna et al., 2018).

Notably, the discussion about academic preparedness for higher education does not feature as a major consideration in how this text sets up its focus, but emerges in the first part of the findings, discussing academic eligibility requirements that these different institutions have for access to this aid program. The authors state their view baldly:

> Academic eligibility requirements may also reduce equity.

In the discussion that follows this statement, it is clear that, from this point of view, equity centres on financial aid to support access to college; successful completion does not enter the picture.

The title of Text 2 already makes clear that its focus will be on interrogating value propositions in relation to what is framed as 'fair access'. It sets up a contrast between the traditional position emphasizing equality of opportunity, using school-leaving results to determine access to highly selective universities, contrasting this with a position framed with regard to equity, defined as bringing students' backgrounds into consideration for judging their academic achievements. These terms are defined in the abstract, and these definitions are then the basis for how the two positions are judged on the basis of evidence presented later in the text. This sentence concluding the introduction illustrates the explicit position taken in this article:

> Instead of emphasising the need for procedural fairness interpreted as equal treatment, the meritocratic equity of opportunity models calls for individuals to be treated differently depending on their social background in the pursuit of a greater degree of *distributive fairness* with respect to allocation of university places. [emphasis in the text]

Intertextuality

This aspect of the analysis might seem a mere linguistic feature of particular styles of research articles (that by definition need to quote prior literature), but it is worth looking more closely at some key differences that a discourse analyst would argue are not only stylistic.

As can be generally observed in much of US higher education research, Text 1 assumes a national audience—notably, at no point in this entire text are there any words such as 'in the USA' and no references are made to any other higher education contexts. By contrast, Text 2 starts its introduction by making reference to high participation systems in other countries and the typical patterns of differentiation into high and low prestige sectors. There is an assumption that the audience could be persuaded by arguments that aren't limited to the national context.

It is worth considering the empirical evidence presented in each text as a form of intertextuality. Text 1 presents case studies of four community colleges that have implemented college promise programs, and the predominant evidence are quotes from both students and administrators at these institutions. These appear as clear voices through the text, for example:

> What my school counsellor does is, she tells all of the students that are able to come to Midwest about the Promise and she – we sit down in the classroom and we sign up for it. So we take class time for that. And that way she makes sure everyone that's able to participate in the Promise program gets in. [student]
> First year we got about 50% of their senior class who had come, which was tremendous. That continued for a couple of years, and we were feeling really great. We're like, 'Our enrollment, our matriculation from this high school is fantastic.' […] And then we realized, it's students who wouldn't have gone to college without this, so their levels of academic preparedness were low. [administrator]

These voices are utilized as the data to inform the findings of this paper on what are the important conditions for successful implementation of these programs.

By contrast, the other texts that Text 2 draws on are predominantly quantitative studies published by their team and others, for example:

> An analysis of linked NPD and HESA data found that public examination results achieved at ages 11, 14, 16, and 18 accounted for 62% of the 31.2 percentage point raw difference between low-SES and high-SES young men in their probabilities of attending a high status university given participation in HE at all (Chowdry et al., 2013). A further 30% of the raw gap was accounted for by combination of individual characteristics — specifically ethnicity, English as an additional language, special educational needs, and month of birth — and by school fixed effects that capture the impact of the specific school attended.

Text 2 marshals these texts to interrogate models of fair access that have been set up as alternatives, and uses these to argue in favour of contextualised admissions.

Modality

The texts display strikingly different modalities employed to summarize their claims, as can be seen in their abstracts. The abstract of Text 1 has one sentence using the active form and describing the methods employed in the article ('we draw on conceptual models….') but thereafter moves to a sequence of short statements in the passive form, with significant use of nominalization to make claims asserted with high levels of modality, for example:

> Coverage is determined by eligibility requirements. Program content and coverage are moderated by programmatic characteristics, including program goals and placement in the organizational structure…

What Text 1 aimed to deliver and delivered is an outline of elements needed for successful program implementation. The assumption is that successful implementation advances equity — this is not questioned.

Text 2 puts forward its findings in a different register. There is one sentence outlining what was done in the paper which uses the phrase 'we critically discuss [the theoretical underpinnings of these two competing perspectives]' and then one complex sentence which starts with ‘We argue that…’ and offers a number of modifiers that lower the modality for these claims, e.g. the use of ‘more’ in ‘more socially just’ or the phrases ‘unless or until such time’ and ‘reduced or eliminated entirely’. Read across the article, Text 2 is offering evidence in support of the OfS policy that admissions should not be based only on academic achievement, but its conclusions are couched with multiple qualifiers and caveats.

Discussion and conclusion

At this point, it is important to restate what this study is and is not aiming to do. One text cannot stand in for a full national literature on a topic, or even be argued to be representative. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is not to bring forward new findings about the national contexts under review. Its purpose, in an intentionally exploratory manner, is to illustrate how the different contexts in which higher education researchers work, will fundamentally influence how they go about their research. In this regard it is then striking how the major distinctive features of the US and UK systems stand out in the selected texts on access to higher education, acknowledging that Text 2 is explicitly focused on the largest region in the UK, England.

Maybe the most significant finding is that the structural realities in each context fundamentally determine how researchers formulate their investigations – in relation to the questions they are able to ask, the alternatives that can be considered, and the evidence brought forward. Formally, the USA has universal access to higher education, in that the community college sector is relatively open access. Thus, the focus for researchers in this context tends more to be on probing the financial and other related barriers impacting students’ enrolment in higher education. It is important to acknowledge here that there are of course UK researchers who look at the financial barriers to access, especially in the light of the introduction of tuition fees (see for example, Callender, 2008). In contrast though, note that the very definition of equity employed in Text 1 focused on financial access while, by contrast, the UK does not have open access to higher education, and academic access, which happens through a national system, is based primarily on grades in the final (A-level) examinations at the end of high school. Hence, the focus in Text 2 is on how this system works, particularly in relation to access to highly selective universities.

As discussed earlier, a striking contrast between these two contexts, is that the UK system is managed at a central regional level and is predominantly a public system, while the US system is managed at the level of each of its 50 states. Hence, Text 2 can direct its attention to regional policy in England, where the new OfS is steering institutions tightly in relation to desired enrolment patterns. Even in the closely regulated public state universities in the USA (in terms of assessment and accountability), admissions remain an institutional black box, and thus there is no system that can be commented on. Of course, one key feature has been the use of affirmative action in some states, which has now changed after a recent Supreme Court ruling, but even still there is no transparent system of how any particular university is making these determinations, and thus again not a system that can really be interrogated in the same way as it can in the UK. This ties in with the analysis of Soulas, (2014), showing the ways in which regional governance in US higher education significantly constrains the accountability of the higher education system in relation to access and participation.

Consideration of these features makes very clear the logics behind each of texts 1 and 2. But it also opens up questions about the potential for real ‘Anglo-American’ academic interchanges in relation to access to higher education, since the contextual realities are so strikingly different. UK researchers may quote US researchers on this topic, and to a lesser extent this may happen in reverse, but a real question remains on whether these discourses are in any way commensurate beyond a very superficial or rhetorical level. In this regard, the findings of this study are in accordance with those from a recent article in this journal which demonstrated that 'diversity' and related terms are less universalised concepts that might be assumed from their use in the literature (Pineda & Mishra, 2023). While the idea of higher education as an internationally connected scholarly field is much to be valued, more conceptual and contextual care in our work might allow for deeper advances.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

References

Archer, L. (2007). Diversity, equality and higher education: A critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation. *Teaching in Higher Education, 12*(5–6), 635–653. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510701

Broton, K. M. (2019). Rethinking the cooling out hypothesis for the 21st century: The impact of financial aid on students' educational goals. *Community College Review, 47*(1), 79–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552118820449

Burke, P. J. (2020). Access to and widening participation in higher education. In P. N. Teixeira & J.-C. Shin (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions* (pp. 1–10). Springer.

Callender, C. (2006). Access to higher education in Britain: The impact of tuition fees and financial assistance. In P. N. Teixeira, D. B. Johnstone, M. J. Rosa, & H. Vossensteyn (Eds.), *Cost-sharing and accessibility in higher education: A fairer deal?* (pp. 105–132). Springer.

Cantwell, B. (2018). Broad Access and Steep. In B. Cantwell, S. Marginson & A. Smolentseva, *High participation systems of higher education*, (pp. 227–265). Oxford University Press.

Cantwell, B., Case, J., & Marginson, S. (2022). 50 years of higher education: A critical reflection and thoughts on an evolving agenda. *Higher Education, 84*(6), 1169–1181. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00960-3

Case, J. M., Fraser, D. M., Kumar, A., & Itika, A. (2016). The significance of context for curriculum development in engineering education: A case study across three African countries. *European Journal of Engineering Education, 41*(3), 279–292.

Clark, B. R., & Clark, A. (2008). *On higher education: Selected writings, 1956–2006*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Currie, J., DeAngelis, R., deBoer, H., Huisman, J., & Lacotte, C. (2003). *Globalizing practices and university responses: European and Anglo-American differences*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Deem, R., Case, J. M., & Nokkala, T. (2022). Researching inequality in higher education: Tracing changing conceptions and approaches over fifty years. *Higher Education, 84*(6), 1245–1265. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00922-9

Dougherty, K. J., & Callender, C. (2020). Comparing and learning from English and American higher education access and completion policies. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education, 4*(2), 203–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1737959

Halsey, J., & O'Brien, K. (2014). Education markets in English and American universities. In S. Pickard (Ed.), *Higher education in the UK and the US: Converging university models in a global academic world?* (pp. 35–58). Brill Publishers.

Labaree, D. F. (2020). *A perfect mess: The unlikely ascendancy of American higher education*. University of Chicago Press.

Liveley, G., & Wardrop, A. (2020). Challenging chronocentrism: New approaches to futures thinking in the policy and praxis of widening participation in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education, 25*(6), 683–697. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1733957

Madriaga, M. (2023). Reframing race and widening access into higher education. *Higher Education, 86*(6), 1455–1470. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1512660

Marginson, S. (2016a). High participation systems of higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 87*(2), 243–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11777401

Marginson, S. (2016b). Higher education and inequality in Anglo-American societies. In A. Harvey, C. Burnheim, & M. Brett (Eds.), *Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of a fair chance for all* (pp. 165–182). Springer.

Marginson, S., & Yang, L. (2022). Individual and collective outcomes of higher education: A comparison of Anglo-American and Chinese approaches. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 20*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1932436

Mavelli, L. (2014). Widening participation, the instrumentalization of knowledge and the reproduction of inequality. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(8), 860–869. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2014.934352

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2023). *OECD Statistics*. Retrieved September 30, 2024, from https://data-explorer.oecd.org/

Pickard, S. (Ed.). (2014). *Higher education in the UK and the US: Converging university models in a global academic world?*. Brill Publishers.

Pineda, P., & Mishra, S. (2023). The semantics of diversity in higher education: Differences between the Global North and Global South. *Higher Education, 85*(4), 865–886. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00870-4

Robinson, D., & Salvestrini, V. (2020). The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: A review of the evidence. *Education Policy Institute.* Retrieved September 30, 2024, from https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/impact-of-interventions-for-widening-access-to-he/

Scott, P. (2021). *Retreat or resolution?: Tackling the crisis of mass higher education*. Policy Press.

Soulas, C. (2014). Access and the rise of accountability in the governance of public universities in the US. In Pickard, S. (Ed.) *Higher education in the UK and the US: Converging university models in a global academic world?,* (pp. 35–58). Brill Publishers.

Trow, M. (1974). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education, general report on the conference on future structures of post-secondary education* (pp. 55–101). Paris, France: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2015). *UNESCO Institute for statistics data on education*. Retrieved September 30, 2024, from http://data.uis.unesco.org/

Vignoles, A., & Murray, N. (2016). Widening participation in higher education. *Education Sciences, 6*(2), 13. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci6020013

Weedon, E. (2016). Widening access to higher education in Scotland, the UK and Europe. In Riddell, S., Weedon, E. & Minty, S. *Higher education in Scotland and the UK: Diverging or converging Systems?*, (pp. 90–109). Edinburgh University Press.

Weko, T. J. (2004). *New dogs and old tricks: What can the UK teach the US about university education*. Higher Education Policy Institute.