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Negotiating a sense of fit in elite higher education: exploring the identity work of

widening participation students

Abstract

Elite higher education institutions in the UK and the US are under increasing pressure to intensify their widening participation efforts and improve access for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other underrepresented groups. Through a case study of business and law students who participated in a widening participation scheme at an elite university in the UK, we examine how WP candidates undertake identity work in order to negotiate a sense of fit in an elite higher education setting. We make two theoretical contributions. First we show the complex identity work that social minorities undertake to negotiate a sense of fit in diversifying organisations – dynamically backgrounding and foregrounding their minority identity as the situation befits. Second we illustrate how diversity and inclusion practices form an integral component of a HE institution's identity workspace to crucially shape the identity work that social minorities undertake to negotiate a sense of fit, illuminating how an elite university's inclusive practices facilitate the rhetoric of diversity and enable elite HE institutions to maintain their exclusive status. We discuss the practical implications of our findings.

Key words: widening participation**,** identity work, diversity, inclusion, identity workspace, elite institutions

Introduction

Higher education is seen as an important vehicle for improving social mobility (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015; Sutton Trust, 2019), and credentials from elite universities are often a

prerequisite for entry into high-paying professions (Ashley Duberley, Sommerlad & Scholarios, 2015; Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner & Yagan, 2017; Moore et al., 2016). While a significant cohort of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds do enter higher education in the UK, relatively few attend elite institutions (Gorard, Boliver, Sidduqui & Banerjee, 2019). For example, recent figures reveal that only 6.2% of students at the 24 highly selective Russell Group universities come from the most disadvantaged local areas of the UK, and this figure drops to 3.5% for some Russell group institutions (Hazell, 2018). Similar inequalities exist in the US, where very high-income students (the top 1% of incomes) are 77 times more likely to attend the most selective (Ivy League) universities than students from the lowest 20% of income, and only 3.8% of students from the lowest income quintile attend these most selective universities (Chetty et al., 2017).

The US and the UK have similar levels of social mobility (World Economic Forum, 2020), and both share a recognition of the need to widen participation in higher education to foster economic growth and reduce socioeconomic inequality (Dougherty & Callender, 2017). Hence elite higher education institutions in both the US and the UK have been under increasing pressure to intensify their widening participation efforts and improve access for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other underrepresented groups (i.e. students from some minority ethnic groups, care leavers, mature students and students with disabilities) (Dougherty & Callender, 2017). Within the UK, elite universities are seen as having an ethical responsibility to widen access as they are publicly-funded institutions charging some of the highest fees in the world (Jones, 2016; Parker & Starkey, 2018), and they provide the credentials required to access high-paying careers (Ashley et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2016). The twenty English Russell Group universities responded to increased government pressure

to widen access by committing £265 million to widening participation activities in the 2019/20 academic year (Russell Group, 2019). However, elite universities have been criticized for adopting a 'deficit approach' in their discourse around diversity and inclusion and hence towards students recruited through such schemes (Archer, 2007; Thompson, 2019), and viewing them as lacking the required academic skills and attributes (Archer, 2007; Gibson et al, 2016; McLellan, Pettigrew & Sperlinger, 2016). Research has shown that some WP students who enter elite institutions feel 'out of place' in academic, social and recreational spaces (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). Furthermore, they feel that they lack the 'know-how' required to effectively operate within high-profile elite higher education spaces (Stephens, Townsend & Dittmann, 2019).

The transition to higher education is a significant experience for all students. Individuals are exposed to new demands, new behaviours and new patterns of interactions. They need to learn about their new environment and refine understandings of *who they are* within this environment (Ibbara, 1999). In other words, the transition to higher education has important implications for individuals' self-definitions. Furthermore, in transitioning to any new context or role, people may experience a gap or disconnect between expected and experienced identities (Ibbara & Petriglieri, 2015; 2017), which may trigger the need for identity work – processes of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising constructions of self to produce a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Identity work is an ongoing process; however, it is most intensely and consciously undertaken during transitions (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010), including into new occupational roles (Ibarra, 1999; Croft et al., 2015; Pratt et al., 2006) and new organisations (Beyer & Hannah, 2002).

The existing literature shows how WP students who enter new HE settings withdraw to the margins of their institutions (Reay, 2018), drop out of the system altogether (Lehmann, 2007; Crawford, 2014), play down their sociocultural background (Gray et al., 2018) or feel the need to assimilate (Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2009). Less is known about how these individuals negotiate a sense of fit in their new institutions, and how their approach to negotiating fit is mediated by the particular organisation's discourses and practices. Through a case study of business and law students in a widening participation scheme at an elite research-intensive university in the UK, we address the following research questions: how do WP candidates negotiate a sense of fit in elite higher education settings, and how are their approaches to negotiating fit mediated by the discourses and practices of the particular HE institution?

Business schools play a significant role in UK universities' widening participation agendas. Business and law schools have a particular imperative to engage in WP because they operate by means of (and reiterate values and discourses related to) the market, meritocracy and justice (Sliwa & Johansson, 2014). Furthermore, given their historical role in providing a 'vocational' academic education and high rates of graduate employability, business schools are seen as being in a better position than many other university faculties to promote social mobility. Business and management graduates have the second highest rate of being in sustained work a year after graduation (77.1%) and the highest rate after ten years (89.2%) (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2017). Degrees in law, economics and management from elite universities were the most popular qualifications held by the top 5% of earners in the UK (Sullivan, Parsons, Green, Wiggins, Ploubidis, 2018). In addition, as business schools usually have a wide range of income streams, including significant income

from overseas students (Parker & Starkey, 2018), they are often in a better position than other University departments to offer financial incentives and support to lower-income students.

We will first review the literature on widening participation focusing on in widening participation in the UK and in elite universities. We will then draw on theoretical ideas of identity work to examine widening participation students' transition to elite higher education. We will then provide details of widening participation activity in the case study organisation and introduce our research design. Our findings provide insights into five identity work strategies used by widening participation students. We make two theoretical contributions. First we show the complex identity work that social minorities undertake to negotiate a sense of fit in diversifying organisations – dynamically backgrounding and foregrounding their minority identity as the situation befits. Second we illustrate how diversity and inclusion practices form an integral component of a HE institution's identity workspace to crucially shape the identity work that social minorities undertake to negotiate a sense of fit, illuminating how an elite university's inclusive practices facilitate the rhetoric of diversity and enable elite HE institutions to maintain their exclusive status.

Widening participation in UK higher education

The UK is one of the least socially mobile societies in the OECD (Sutton Trust, 2017), with the best-paid and most influential roles in society being dominated by individuals from the most affluent backgrounds (Sutton Trust, 2019). The 1997 Dearing Report entitled '*Higher Education in the Learning Society'* provided the impetus for the contemporary focus on widening participation at UK universities (Archer, 2007; Kimura, 2014; Thompson, 2019). The recommendations made by this report included the expansion of HE provision and targeted

activities to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups (for example, low socioeconomic status, ethnic minorities, care leavers, mature students and students with disabilities) (Thompson, 2019). These recommendations were enthusiastically enacted by the Labour government, which linked the expansion of HE to national economic success (Archer, 2007). A key theme in government reports on widening participation in HE is diversity (Archer, 2007). Universities were encouraged to go beyond serving middle class (largely white) 18-22 year olds with A-levels (the standard pre-university qualification) to include students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse credentials. 'Diversification' presented multiple opportunities for universities with lower entry requirements, enabling them to draw from a wider pool of learners to increase their student numbers and tap into additional funding streams (Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman & Reid, 2007). The traditional focus on teaching and learning in these institutions and their knowledge of local communities enabled them to make the adjustments needed to serve students from a wider range of social backgrounds. Universities with more selective entry criteria engaged in widening participation in more limited ways, however, (Archer, 2007; Kimura, 2014) focusing on identifying and preparing small numbers of 'non-traditional' students whom they felt could benefit from their demanding curricula (Crawford et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2007). The market value of selective universities within a diversified system relied on their maintaining a focus on producing world-class research and international excellence (Archer, 2007; Kimura, 2014), and WP students entering selective universities were therefore expected to adapt to the prevailing systems and cultures. As Shaw et al., (2007) argued, selective universities saw their role as carefully targeting and raising the aspirations of *bright* people from underrepresented groups and enabling them to access what the institution was already providing. Assimilating a small

number of the best-prepared disadvantaged students allowed institutions to continue with their existing cultures and approaches largely intact.

The best returns from entering higher education are enjoyed by individuals with credentials from the most selective universities (Ashley, et al., 2015; Belfield et al., 2018; Boliver, 2013; Moore et al., 2016; Wyness, 2017). As UK university tuition fees increased, the fact that not all degrees offered the same financial returns became a more pressing issue for policy-makers (Boliver, 2013). In addition, it became clear that despite WP activity, there had been no increase in the proportion of the least advantaged students attending selective institutions (Boliver, 2013; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013). The most selective Russell Group universities therefore came under greater pressure to increase the proportion of students they took from underrepresented groups (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Widening participation influences the funding systems of elite universities because their ability to charge higher fees is dependent on access and participation plans that demonstrate how they are providing equal access and opportunities to underrepresented groups (Office for Students, 2019). In 2018, the Office for Students published its targets for eliminating gaps in HE inequality within 20 years (Office for Students, 2018). These targets have intensified the pressure on elite universities to improve the rates at which they admit students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and other underrepresented groups (Major & Banerjee, 2019).

Widening participation in elite universities

There are around 130 universities in the UK, and 24 of them (including Oxford and Cambridge) are part of the Russell Group. The Russell Group includes the most research-intensive

institutions, which between them produce more than two-thirds of UK universities' world-leading research (Russell Group, 2019). Although universities outside the Russell Group also produce good graduates (and some of the top stand-alone business schools are not members of the Russell Group), employers often use Russell Group universities as a recruitment pool for careers with the most competitive entry criteria (Ashley et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2016). Sixty per cent of students from fee-paying independent schools attend Russell Group institutions, in comparison to just under a quarter of students from State comprehensive schools and sixth-form colleges (Major & Banerjee, 2019; Montacute & Cullinane, 2018).

As purveyors of 'high standards' and merit-based entry procedures (Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014), highly selective universities in the UK have been criticised for taking a deficit approach to non-traditional students (Thompson, 2019) and for explaining their absence as due to their inability to meet the high entry grade requirements, their poor choice of A-level subjects and/or a general lack of ambition and aspiration (Archer, 2007; McLellan, 2016). Many selective institutions mobilise a *rhetoric of diversity* in their widening participation efforts. This diversity rhetoric often reduces individuals to group-based categories associated with specific strengths and qualities (Litvin, 1997). A binary is then created in the context of this rhetoric between traditional and non-traditional students (Gibson, et al., 2016). Individuals are positioned as '*exemplars of particular demographic categories'* (Litvin, 1997: 204) and placed in crude, simplistic group-based prototypes (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000) that do not recognise the complexity of their lives and identities (Thompson, 2019). Because by their very nature WP initiatives tend to focus on specific groups, they easily lend themselves to homogenisation and to contrasts being made between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students as they are operationalised (Thompson, 2019).

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There is an inherent contradiction in the diversity rhetoric between seeking to 'dissolve' differences (and create environments in which differences are not seen to be important) and seeking to 'value' differences (Liff & Wajcman, 1996). According to Liff (1999), if differences are to be dissolved, they first need to be valued. However the imperative for elite universities to retain their place as sites of research excellence in the international market makes it harder for them to truly dissolve or value the differences that WP students are perceived to bring. Many WP students are not especially seen as having the skills and aptitudes that might enrich the institution (Thompson, 2019). Norms of exclusiveness often go beyond the curriculum and shape expectations around social and cultural life within the institution (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). Although the very nature of 'widening participation' efforts may contribute towards increasing student diversity, selective universities are given very few guidelines on how to become genuinely inclusive (Shore et al., 2011; Shore et al., 2018). Furthermore, because exclusiveness enhances the status and employability of those associated with the institution, students and staff have an interest in maintaining the status quo (Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014).

Widening participation students' transition to elite higher education: identity dynamics

On their transition to higher education, students are exposed to a new environment, and are compelled to learn about the dynamics of this environment (Ibbara, 1999). Learning through participation (Lave & Wenger, 1999) has important identity implications (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) that shape individuals' subjective understanding of who they are and how they belong within the institution. Mindful of the multiple theoretical takes on identity (Brown, 2015), we define identity as the dynamic subjective meanings that individuals

reflexively attach to their self (Brown, 2019) comprising personal attributes, roles and group memberships. We understand identities as being construed through discourse (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004) and enacted in the here and now (Brown, 2015) and in relation to significant others (Beech, 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010).

WP students who transition into elite HE settings are reported to experience a gap between expected and experienced identity (Reid, 2015). In other words, they feel that the way they perceive and understand themselves differs from the external expectations of students attached to elite HE institutions. For instance, individuals feel that they have fewer academic skills than other students (Stephens et al., 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 2019) and that their level of preparation for university classes does not measure up to that of their more privileged peers (see Gray et al., 2018). Furthermore, they feel that they lack pertinent cultural skills (see Ostrove, 2003; Aries 2008; Torres, 2009) and capabilities such as independent learning styles (Stephens, Townsend & Dittmann, 2019) and discipline and focus, which are highly valued in elite HE settings (Leathwood, 2001). Most individuals do not anticipate this lack of fit before going to university; these views are formed as they enter elite HE spaces (Clark & Hordosy, 2019).

Experiencing a lack of fit may serve as a pertinent trigger for doing identity work – exercising agency to modify, adjust and refine self-definitions and achieve a sense of coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Vough & Caza, 2017). Studies show how upon transitioning to new roles or contexts, individuals do identity work to fashion culturally appropriate selves (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) or minimise (Zapf & Gross, 2001) and distance themselves from particular behaviours that constrain them from embracing new expectations (Croft et al.,

2015). Reframing understandings so that the gap between expected and experienced identities becomes less pronounced is also a potential identity work strategy. For instance, Creed et al., (2010) show how gay ministers redefine their gay partnerships as being integral rather than contradictory to their vocations, and draw on established theological discourse to facilitate the redefinition. Similarly, Slay & Smith (2011) show how African-American professionals position their racial and cultural identity as offering a unique perspective on civil rights as an attempt to bridge the gap between expected and experienced professional identities. Alternatively, individuals can recalibrate the standards they use to evaluate themselves (Ashforth et al., 2007) and/or focus attention on the positive aspects of their new experiences as a way of enhancing themselves (Dutton et al., 2010; Maitlis, 2009) and coping with perceived identity gaps. Individuals can also dodge issues of identity when their identities are concealable (Doldor & Atewologun, 2020; Gray et al., 2018) or circumvent questions relating to identity altogether through disengagement (Alvesson & Robertson, 2015). More radically, they can choose to exit organisational or occupational settings (Lips-Wiersma, 2002) or question and challenge the prescriptions that lead to gaps between expected and experienced identities. For instance, Creed et al., (2010) provide insights into how gay ministers tell themselves that it is not they who are falling short of God's expectations, but rather those who perpetuate the institutional claims. Identity work is not a static or one-off process; rather, individuals continuously negotiate their identities in response to changing circumstances (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016).

Organisations operate as 'holding environments' to support, facilitate (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Warhurst, 2011) or constrain (Hay, 2014) individuals' identity work. Using the 'identity workspace' concept, Petriglieri & Petriglieri (2010) describe how business schools provide a

holding environment for identity work. They describe the holding environments of these schools in terms of three interrelated, and partially overlapping, components. Social defences comprise organisational structures, practices and discourses that are used by members in their identity work, and provide shared meanings that help individuals frame and organize their experiences and negotiate a sense of relatedness between self and environment. Sentient communities are groups individuals can rely on for feedback, support and encouragement, enabling people to address questions relating to "how do I belong within this context". Rites of passage are established ceremonial events that are seen as helping individuals develop their confidence and transform their professional and personal lives. Studies on MBA candidates show how business school discourses of 'developing others', 'initiating and implementing change' and 'accountability for outcomes' influence the identity work of managers, providing linguistic resources for sensemaking (Warhust, 2011). Conversely, other studies illustrate how management education discourses contribute towards silencing the identity struggles of individuals transitioning into managerial roles (Hay, 2014). Driven by a need for identity work, individuals' are seen as investing in universities' discourses, practices and communities in the process of their learning and education (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). In turn, these discourses, practices and communities provides a holding environment for their identity work.

Previous literature has illustrated ways in which non-traditional students often feel out of place in elite universities. The literature suggests that upon their transition to higher education, most WP students withdraw to the margins of their institutions (Reay, 2018) and/or play down aspects of their non-traditional status (Gray et al., 2018). Some, it is suggested, drop out of the system altogether (Lehmann, 2007; Crawford, 2014) or feel the

need to assimilate (Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2009). Less is known about how WP students as agents negotiate a sense of fit within elite HE institutions. More importantly, we are largely unaware of how the discourses and practices of the particular higher HE institution they are studying at enable them to do so. In this paper, we draw on theoretical ideas of identity work to address how WP students negotiate a sense of fit within elite HE institutions, and how their identity work strategies are mediated by the discourses and practices of the particular HE institution. Identity work enables us to understand how individuals exercise agency to revise constructions of self (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and cope with potential gaps between expected and experienced identities (Ibbara & Petriglieri, 2015; 2017) as they transition into elite HE institutions, while also showing how the institution can work as an identity workspace (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) to provide a holding environment for individuals' self-constructions. Identity work also facilitates the exploration of the macro consequences of micro-processes (Brown, 2019). Although it is traditionally seen as having only a 'vague' influence on phenomena, the impact of identity work on internal organisational legitimacy (Brown & Toyoki, 2013) and institutional change (Creed et al., 2010) and maintenance (Leung et al., 2013; Lok, 2010) is being increasingly recognised.

Widening participation in the case study university

The student body of the case study university (especially its business school) largely comprised individuals who had attended independent schools in the UK and international fee-paying students. Widening participation was a strategic priority of the university, however, and a commitment to removing the barriers to participation and access for individuals from lower socioeconomic groups and ethnic minority communities and disabled students was explicitly pledged and communicated in the university's strategic objectives. Furthermore,

inclusion was communicated as a key value, where the university emphasised its profound commitment to creating a community that celebrates cultural differences, values and respects differences in opinion and rejects any form of prejudice and socially unacceptable behaviour. Extensive poster campaigns, flyers, newsletters, special events and committees and a centralised diversity and inclusion team signalled and supported these strategic priorities and values.

University-led widening participation schemes outline a list of criteria for deciding which students would benefit from additional support in order to enter higher education. These include being the first generation of the family to attend university, having received free school meals, living in a low-income neighbourhood, attending a school that has not historically sent many pupils to elite higher education institutions, coming from particular minority ethnic backgrounds or being disabled, mature and/or a care leaver. The university had partnerships with local schools and colleges that aimed to raise the aspirations and attainment of students before they entered the university. Prior to attending the university, young people participating in widening participation programmes were invited to specialised open days and offered mentorship and coaching and assistance with the application process. Upon entering university, they were offered financial stipends, guidance on study techniques and career development sessions. In addition, a plethora of social events was organised to encourage students from widening participation schemes to gather and get to know one another. Visits to businesses, careers workshops and cultural training (such as visits to the theatre) were offered to participants to better equip them for careers in elite organisations. Members of staff who interacted directly with widening participation students were trained in diversity and inclusion for the WP scheme. Entry criteria were lowered for some WP

students who demonstrated the potential to undertake degree-level study but did not fulfil the high entry criteria. These students were offered additional support to develop their problem-solving and academic skills. Although adapted and expanded over recent years, the current set of WP activities had been in place for about ten years.

The business and law schools from which the research participants were recruited had similar demographic profiles. Around 6% of entrants were from neighbourhoods with a low participation in higher education in 2015 (an increase over previous years), and non-continuation rates were extremely low, at 3% (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018). In terms of graduate outcomes, many students from WP target groups performed well, some even outperforming their more privileged counterparts in 2018.

Research design

A qualitative study was conducted with thirty-four current students and recent alumni of the elite Russell Group University. Twenty-three of the interviewees were attached to the business school, two were reading for combined degrees from the business and law schools and nine were studying law. We decided to interview respondents from the business and law schools because it was these departments that were leading the widening participation agenda for the university and investing heavily in flagship widening participation programmes. While these widely-renowned departments undoubtedly did not depend on WP programmes for increasing student numbers, they were keen to position themselves as making a contribution to social mobility in the local area and more widely, in line with the university's mission statement.

<u>Data collection</u>

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling methods. (Silverman, 2009). We sent a generic e-mail to students registered with WP programmes and recent alumni of these programmes in which we explained our study. We stated that we were interested in learning about the career journeys of students attached to WP programmes and understanding their experiences at the university. The individuals who responded to our invitation put us in touch with others who were interested in talking to us. Twenty-four of our respondents were female and ten were male. Over sixty per cent were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Table 1 provides details of our participants.

Insert table 1 about here

Data were collected through qualitative interviews. Interviewing encourages participants to draw on their feelings, beliefs, opinions and sense of self subjectively in order to contribute to the social construction of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Loosely-structured interviews based on a series of open-ended questions were employed to encourage participants to interpret questions subjectively and respond in their own words. They were asked to explain their decision to enter higher education, their academic and social experiences at the university, their perceptions of widening participation initiatives, their sense of belonging within the institution, their coping strategies and their aspirations for the future. Twenty-six interviews were digitally audio recorded, while eight were partially note-recorded at the respondents' request. A typical audio recorded interview lasted between one and two hours, providing enough time to explore the topics until the interviewer and participant felt they had been covered sufficiently. Note-recorded interviews went beyond two hours. The interviewer who note-recorded interviews was proficient in shorthand and had prior experience of this process. From a practical standpoint, note-recording involved the researcher pausing after

each question to take notes and summarise the notes with the participant in order to ensure that everything had been captured accurately. Being students, and therefore having fewer time restrictions, the participants were cooperative. We were conscious that interviewers attached to the institution would be seen as 'insiders' (Merriam & Simpson, 2000) and that perceptions of the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee might affect the data collection (Corlett & Marvin, 2018). To mitigate this, we ensured that almost all of the interviews were conducted by newly-employed post-doctoral scholars who had no previous connection to the students. A small number of interviews were conducted by a permanent staff member, but we made sure that this person had no connection with the students being interviewed, and we examined these data carefully to ensure that the students were as forthcoming. The interviewers invested a significant effort in developing a rapport and establishing trust so as to encourage the participants to share their experiences freely and openly. It was emphasised to the participants that they were seen as interactive partners in the research study (Cotterill, 1992) and that the study was aimed at empowering WP students through their involvement in knowledge construction (Merriam and Simpson, 2000). The respondents were keen to share their experiences, with a view to improving the WP programme within the school and WP more generally.

We stopped at 34 interviews because it was clear that we had reached a point of data saturation and that no new information or themes were arising in the data (Guest et al., 2006). Quality checks were conducted to ensure that the analytical findings and interpretations were credible and that the findings were confirmable and dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For instance, emerging interpretations of fully anonymised findings were discussed with various audiences (including WP students) to gauge whether there were any alternative or rival

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interpretations and to ensure that the story we would be telling was not simply a reflection of our own predispositions. We have also provided quotations in support of our findings and offered sufficient contextual detail to enable readers to understand reality as constructed by the respondents and the extent to which they are applicable to other situations and contexts. The methods employed to collect and analyse the data have been explained thoroughly so that the study can be scrutinised and replicated.

Data analysis

As noted above, data analysis took place throughout the research (Silverman, 2009) in the form of what has been described as a common iterative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). We adopted thematic analysis (King, 2004) to analyse the data, which involves sorting data into themes. The first level of coding was descriptive. We examined the data, looking for emerging themes and the key differences and similarities between them. We gave these 'codes' descriptive labels and assigned data extracts to them. These first-level codes were local in the sense that they were grounded in the respondents' accounts: for example, "perceived lack of discipline and focus", "perceived lack of academic knowledge", "perceptions of not being good enough" and "perceptions of being behind others". Once the initial codes had been constructed, sections of data were assigned to them. We adopted what is called 'progressive focusing', defining empirical codes fairly loosely initially, but then more specifically as the analysis progressed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997). We then developed more generic, more conceptual second-order themes from the descriptive codes (Silverman, 2009). For example, "diversity initiatives are a proxy of inclusiveness", "role models are a proxy of meritocracy and equal opportunity", "the institution values difference" and "WP candidates have similar prospects to traditional candidates" were amalgamated to form "re-defining widening

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participation candidates' position in the elite university with reference to organisational discourses and practices" because in these codes, the respondents drew on various features and practices within the university to make the point that the status of WP candidates was similar to that of traditional candidates. Likewise, "highlighting belongingness in student societies" and "highlighting belongingness in special events for WP students" were amalgamated to form "carving out a distinctive space to belong within the university with reference to specific communities" because here the individuals explained that there were designated spaces for them to exist within the elite university. Second-order conceptual codes were amalgamated to develop two key third-order aggregate themes. For instance, "lack of fit due to academic knowledge and orientations" and "lack of fit due to cultural skills" were amalgamated to form "gap between experienced and expected perceptions of self" because when discussing these themes, the respondents explained how they saw themselves as falling short of the normative expectations of students who attend elite HE institutions. Likewise "re-defining WP candidates' position in the elite university by appealing to organisational diversity discourses and practices, carving out a distinctive space to belong within the elite university with reference to specific communities, focusing on positive aspects of WP candidacy within the elite university, aligning oneself with normative expectations of students in elite HE institutions, and challenging practices that position widening participation candidates as falling short of normative expectations within the elite university" were amalgamated to form identity work because these themes all comprised the individuals' attempts to reinterpret who they are, how they feel and how they belong within the elite university. Table 2 outlines our coding template, providing insights into how second- and third-order codes were developed from first-order descriptive themes.

Insert table 2 about here

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We realised that the respondents' identity work strategies have different reference points (for example, the university and HE system) that highlight the potential specific macro consequences of micro-level self-definitions. For instance, in attempting to align oneself with normative expectations of students in elite HE institutions, the respondents potentially influenced the elite HE system, contributing towards changing long-standing stereotypes and discourses. In contrast, by "challenging practices that position WP candidates as falling short of normative expectations within the elite university", "carving out a distinctive space to belong within the elite university with reference to specific communities" and "focusing on positive aspects of WP candidacy to feel valued within the elite university", the respondents contributed towards the transformation or maintenance of the social order in the particular university within which they were situated. We used pseudonyms to refer to the respondents in order to maintain their anonymity. It is important to explain how we negotiated our positionality in the research. We assumed distinct but complementary roles during the data analysis process. The first author was closer to the data and the empirical setting, while being more distanced from the empirical setting, the second author was in a position to reject certain emerging interpretations and provide alternative views of the phenomena under review.

Owing to their different empirical stances, the two authors had repeated discussions on the nature and meaning of the data set, and gradually constructed a joint interpretation of the empirical evidence. As reflexive researchers, we also questioned our relationship with the research (Corlett & Marvin, 2018) and considered how our position and beliefs as tenured academics within elite business schools might influence how the data were acquired, interpreted and presented. We questioned whether our positionality could lead us to

misinterpret findings, especially those that were critical of elite business schools and their WP agenda. We interrogated our own assumptions of how WP students experience elite business school environments. Through ongoing discussions, we gave careful consideration to how we interpreted the narratives and ensured that we gave a voice to the full range of experiences communicated in the data (Corlett & Marvin, 2018). In addition, as minority ethnic female academics, we recognised that we might feel particularly attuned to the voices of students who found themselves in minority groups in an elite academic space, acknowledging that our demographic backgrounds and experiences might potentially influence the interpretation of our data. Hence we encouraged each other to continue questioning our assumptions in order to increase the robustness of the findings.

Making sense of being a WP candidate in an elite higher education institution

In this section, we discuss our findings, which are structured around the second-order conceptual codes that emerged in the analysis (see table 2). Upon transitioning to this elite university, our respondents experienced a lack of fit (Ibbara and Petrieglieri, 2015). They felt that their academic knowledge, orientations and cultural skills did not match the majority of the student body. This triggered the need for identity work in order to negotiate a sense of fit in the elite university. We will first examine how the respondents accounted for the lack of fit they experienced as they transitioned into this elite university. We will then explore the five identity work strategies that individuals used to negotiate a sense of fit in their new setting - redefining WP candidates' position in the elite university, carving out a distinctive space to belong within the elite university, focusing on positive aspects of WP candidacy within the elite university, aligning themselves with normative expectations of students in elite HE

institutions and challenging practices that position WP candidates as falling short of normative expectations within the elite university.

Lack of fit due to academic knowledge and orientations

Many respondents talked about how they lacked the academic knowledge of their more privileged counterparts, although they had done well at secondary school. In Heike's words:

> *When I started university I felt that most people were brighter than me – I felt that they had a better academic foundation to do well in university. They seemed to know everything. I was like whoa how did I get here* (Heike)

While there was no tangible evidence that Heike was falling behind her peers academically, she was intimidated by their school education and the broader knowledge they were seen to possess, and therefore she did not feel that she measured up to the normative expectations of students in this university (Archer & Hutchings, 2000).

A number of respondents talked about how they felt that they were slow to embody orientations such as discipline and focus, which were seen as being essential for achieving success in higher education (Leathwood, 2001) and beyond. Sian explained:

> *People here are very focused, disciplined – they'll do anything to reach their career goals. Don't know if I can develop that discipline, that drive which is obviously important to do well here from what everyone says* (Sian)

While Sian did not appear to be struggling with her university courses, she experienced a sense of difference as she appraised herself in comparison with her peers and wondered what this would mean for her final outcome at university.

Peter explained how he felt as if he 'was nothing' and 'not good enough' as soon as he entered university:

> *As soon as I got here I felt that I was nothing – I was not good enough, slow in comparison to everyone else* (Peter)

Although Peter considered himself to have been academically able at a school level, he felt 'slow' in comparison to his university peers, harming his self-worth.

Lack of fit relating to cultural skills

Almost all our interviewees talked about how they lacked the cultural proficiency their privileged counterparts possessed, and explained how this made them hesitant to participate in the classroom and interact informally with their peers:

> *Like, you know everyone wants to speak about politics and like Marxism and stuff like that and . . . I couldn't join in. I haven't got a clue. I think I don't have that sort of, I don't know, conversation with anyone. I don't really have that knowledge base* (Caitlin)

Caitlin suggested that conversations about philosophy and politics came naturally to most students in her university, but were well outside her comfort zone. While Caitlin's limited knowledge of philosophy and politics did not appear to have a negative effect on her grades, she perceived herself as falling short of expectations within this setting.

Hasan talked about lifestyle elements that distinguished him from his classmates, and suggested that he constantly felt like an outsider within the university:

Many people are kind of privately educated.... You're very different. They've got, you know, hobbies like cheese and wine tasting and stuff. It makes you think if you can ever fit in here (Hasan)

Heike explained how she felt ashamed of her comparative lack of cultural knowledge and wondered if she could ever measure up:

I have felt ashamed – as soon as got here, to be really honest. Everybody is so privileged and they seem to know everything and I don't know anything. At one point I wondered if I could ever measure up (Heike)

The respondents' tendency to see themselves as falling short of the normative cultural expectations associated with students attending elite higher education institutes (Shaw et al., 2007) seemed to be shaped in part by the WP programme's focus on cultural training, which aimed to prepare individuals for jobs in prestigious firms by broadening their cultural exposure. Compulsory cultural training (as part of the WP programme) sent participants the implicit message that cultural capital is extremely important for operating within in elite HE settings and work spaces, and that they are required to undergo this training because they are seen as lacking important cultural exposure. Nnamdi explains:

I went for a tea tasting and NAME used to talk about the value of cultural capital. He was like, you know, "You never know when understanding how a tea is made or the difference between an oolong tea and a natural tea is going to come useful in conversation", and that kind of thing. I never would have known about that had I not

> *gone. I went to a number of Shakespeare plays. And that's apparently the conversation, things you can talk about with different people in different environments* (Nnamdi)

Internalising what was told to him by programme coordinators, Nnamdi felt that cultural exposure was essential in order to make conversation in high-profile environments. He also realised that he had had very little cultural exposure.

Hasan similarly explained how he appreciated his lack of cultural exposure when he went to watch a stage play as part of the WP programme:

> *Last year we went to watch a play and, you know, I never thought I'd go to physically watch a play, but we watched a play called [NAME]. I wouldn't have had that sort of cultural exposure because I'd never gone to the theatre before* (Hasan)

While there might be other explanations for individuals' tendency to see themselves as falling short of cultural expectations in elite HE spaces, the cultural training element of the university's WP programme appeared to have influenced participants (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) to think that they lacked the cultural skills that are essential in order to operate in elite environments. We will now explore how individuals did identity work to negotiate a sense of fit within the university. We have identified five forms of identity work, which we will examine in turn.

Re-defining WP candidates' position in the elite University

This identity work strategy involved appealing to the university's diversity discourses and practices (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) in order to make the point that WP candidates are not outcasts within the 'highly diverse' elite university. This was the most popular identity work strategy in our sample. By re-defining their position (Creed et al., 2010) within the university, WP candidates told themselves that their difference would not disqualify them from being able to negotiate a sense of fit because the university was open to differences. Individuals redefined the position of WP candidates in two key ways. First, they appealed to specific awareness-raising diversity campaigns and the targeted recruitment of particular underrepresented groups to make the point that there is space for people from an array of backgrounds to belong. In Divya's words:

> *After a couple of weeks I realised that diversity and inclusion is big in this university. The business school is obviously a very privileged place and some like me can feel like the minority. But when you look around, you see the diversity and you understand that they really care about diversity because they do things, have events, raise awareness etc. I was very impressed with the LGBT agenda although I am not a sexual minority. It says something about the place and what they stand for. There are so many people who are different in their own way here– and the institution seems to celebrate difference - so I am overthinking about myself* (Divya)

As Divya participated in the university and learnt about it (Ibbra, 1999), she realised that it was more diverse than she had thought it would be. While attention to diversity cannot be taken as an indicator of 'inclusiveness' within the system (Winters, 2014), the university's considerable attention to the LGBT agenda meant that Divya was able to feel that differences were celebrated within the university and hence to do identity work to re-define her status

as 'one of the many'. Diversity practices thus appeared to operate as a *social defence* that facilitated Divya's identity work (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010), enabling her to make sense of herself as being able to fit into the business school as a WP candidate.

Sana focused specifically on the university's targeted recruitment of Black students to explain how she feels that she has space to fit:

> *More and more black people have been applying and getting offers and getting in and accepting and coming through. … It's actually just giving Black students the hope and vision that this is something you can get through and this is something that, you know, there's someone like them there. "Okay, this is a university that Black people actually apply to and I won't be so out of place." So that really helped. ….. The beauty within NAME is that they're trying. ..They don't have to but they're doing it because they actually want to...* (Sana)

Sana interprets Black student recruitment as evidence of the university's genuine commitment to diversity and widening participation. As a Black working-class student, she argues that she should not feel out of place in a university that Black students would consider applying to, attempting to negotiate a sense of fit by drawing on the university's targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups as a social defence (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

The second way respondents attempted to reframe the status of WP students was by appealing to the presence of diverse role models within the elite university. Peter explained how a lecturer from a working-class background shaped his perceptions of belonging in an elite HE institution:

> *There is quite a bit of diversity if you look around. One of our lecturers – she was amazing. She had a [location, name] accent, she came from a working-class background and she is still who she is after a PhD and everything. For me this was important – so I can learn and grow here without changing who I am. I may not have the cultural skills, but I now feel that this doesn't mean that is the end of it* (Peter)

Peter relied on role models as evidence of meritocracy prevailing over ascription. He therefore suggested that WP candidates' prospects were similar to those of traditional entrants in elite universities. By placing the emphasis on commonalities between individuals like himself and someone employed by the university in a high-status capacity, Peter has arguably seen himself as being able to carry on in this space without 'playing down' his background (Gray et al., 2018).

Carving out a distinctive space to belong within the elite university

This identity work strategy involved appealing to specific communities in order to legitimise a distinctive place for WP candidates in the elite university. In contrast to the previous strategy, where individuals placed themselves in a similar position to other students, in this case they identified distinct spaces for social minorities such as themselves to exist within elite higher education. This identity work strategy was mainly carried out by minority ethnic participants. Nazia drew on the wide array of student societies the university offered in order to explain how through participation and learning (Ibbara, 1999), she eventually found space for herself in a context in which she felt significantly different and alienated:

> *I felt alienated sometimes. (..) I felt like there were a lot of people who weren't like me. So for example, there were a lot of international students, but they were kind of rich,*

like really rich and sort of snobby. Not all of them, I'm not saying… (..) it was hard to find someone who was similar to me. When I started to get more involved in the Islamic society - I found [xxxx]… more and South Asian and so on. So it took a while to find people like that. So they were like "Yeah, we're going to this thing the Islamic society [xxxx]." I went to their social [xxxx]… and it was nice. It was like we were talking about stuff and it was fun. So it was nice seeing everyone else's experience and stuff like that and, you know, we had a community there (Nazia)

Nazia's excerpt highlights intersectionality in identity work (Atewologun et al., 2016) where distinct dimensions of identity interacted with each other to shape the way she coped within the elite higher education system. As Nazia placed herself at the intersection of Islamic religious identity and low socioeconomic status, she felt able to find a community within the university's Islamic society and restore her sense of worth. In other words, intersecting social identities were utilised in her identity work to shift prevailing patterns of disadvantage that she experienced as a WP student. Indeed, the Islamic society operated as a sentient community (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) to facilitate Nazia's identity work, providing her with a point of reference to legitimise her place within the elite university.

Gazi referred to special events organised for widening participation candidates to explain how he was able to discover a like-minded community for himself within the university:

The [Name] programme, we met in the first week or second week and so it was meeting people from a similar background but who have done the process. They've done their first year and second year, some were in their final year, some were in intermediate years. It's being able to talk to them, take their advice academically,

professionally, but then also about university life as well. Once you get to know them they open up personally. The friendship group that I formed and the friends that I have now even, I mean we're a solid group and we have been since like the first year. So I mean yeah, that's always a good equilibrium, a normaliser (Gazi)

Gazi's excerpt highlights how identity construction at university is connected to specific social groups, and how feelings of belongingness are facilitated by participating in the WP programme. Opportunities to meet other widening participation students and form solid friendships with them enabled Gazi to experience a sense of belonging. Widening participation initiatives thus provided sentient communities (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) that individuals like Gazi were able to relate to and rely on to negotiate a distinct space for themselves within the elite university. We might wonder, however, if these WP candidates' involvement in the university, being restricted to particular ethnic groups and others in the WP programme, reflects an implicit sense of 'othering' within the wider university environment. While the respondents were generally slow to speak of explicit experiences of being othered, their tendency to participate mainly in specific communities within the university suggests that diversity may not necessarily mean inclusiveness.

Focusing on the positive aspects of WP candidacy within the elite university

This identity work strategy involved focusing attention on the positive aspects of WP candidacy (Ashforth et al., 2007; Maitlis, 2009) and using them as a basis to enhance self. This strategy was exercised in two key ways. First, some individuals talked about how the special care and support bestowed towards WP students by the programme team, academics and administrators made them feel highly valued:

I practically know everyone in the undergraduate office. I know so many of the academics along here too. They (non-WP students) *don't have the same network or pool of resources and I feel like because the academics got to know you better, they care about you more because they know you more. So if you're ever struggling with something they're more willing to make exceptions or help you out more or give you the extra support. You feel special, you know (Noor)*

Noor went so far as to suggest that WP candidates have better internal 'social capital' than other students, and implied that they therefore received better treatment from academics and administrators. While her statement may sound self-aggrandising, it indicates that she was keen to focus on the positive aspects of being a WP candidate in an elite university and tell herself that she feels valued. Furthermore, the university's inclusive practices undoubtedly provided Noor with discursive material (Petrieglieri & Petrieglieri, 2010) to construct herself as a valued individual and enhance herself on this basis (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Noor's statement highlights how WP programmes can move beyond traditional diversity-based quantitative goals such as increasing the aspirations and attainment of underrepresented students towards more inclusion-based goals of facilitating belongingness and making individuals feel valued.

Second, a few of the respondents explained how their *distinct* life experiences as non-traditional entrants enabled them to make a better contribution to the university and academic work. In Stacey's words:

We were learning about the mining industry and I knew about it coming from NAME and having scores of family members in the industry and I made the biggest

contribution to the class because nobody can resonate with workers' rights unless you come from that kind of a background. I was involved in a big way in the group project and it was great, you know. I think that was a point when I started to feel that I am part of this place (Stacey)

Stacey argued that her mining heritage enabled her to take the lead role in a class project. Individuals like Stacey were able to do identity work in the process of their learning and education (Hay, 2014) to focus on positives of their WP status because the university curriculum was inclusive and covered topics that resonated with them. Constructing herself as being able to make a contribution to academic work due to her particular life experiences enabled Stacey to enhance herself and negotiate a sense of fit to the elite university.

Similarly, Heike explained how she felt positively distinctive about her identity as a WP candidate by being invited to be an ambassador for the widening participation programme:

I was invited to be an ambassador for new WP candidates – and this is very meaningful. I am helping to drive the WP strategy of this organisation, make a difference to other people's lives. I have the right background to say OK this will be hard in the beginning, but it will get better, trust me. You can never say this if you haven't been through it yourself (Heike).

In her role as an ambassador, Heike felt that she was contributing towards driving the university's WP strategy and making a difference to other people's lives. She suggested that unlike other students, she had the 'right background' to play this role and to be a central part of the university's strategic initiative.

Aligning oneself with normative expectations of students in elite HE institutions

This identity work strategy involved drawing on a minority ethnic and/or immigrant heritage to position oneself as an exception to the prevailing negative stereotypes (Ezzel, 2009) associated with widening participation candidates, and move closer to normative expectations of students in elite HE institutions. Rity appealed to the achievements of her immigrant parents to make the point that Asian minority ethnic people like herself are extremely driven and achievement-oriented (Fernando & Cohen, 2015):

> *My parents came to this country with nothing but they made it. They did several jobs, educated us, managed to scrape some money for tuition. They worked fourteen hours a day on various odd jobs. While people in this country claim benefits … Asian people develop their families and extended families. I saw it and I know hard work can do wonders. I look at them and know that I am going to achieve much more than this if I have half the drive that they have* (Rity)

Rity drew on a narrative of hard-working Asian immigrants (Fernando & Kenny, 2018) being more driven than their British counterparts and more focused on using education as a way out of poverty. Rity's excerpt highlights how intersecting social identities (low socioeconomic status and minority ethnicity) are mobilised in individuals' identity work (Atewologun et al., 2016). She used minority ethnicity to deflect the negative stereotypes associated with low socioeconomic status. Positioning herself as a minority ethnic person from a low socioeconomic background enabled her to problematize stereotypes attributed to widening participation candidates and distance herself from them. In the process of reinstating how her minority ethnic parents inspire her to achieve, Rity is arguably able to move closer towards normative expectations of students in elite higher education institutions.

Nmandi, a second-generation immigrant student of African heritage, also drew on his minority ethnic heritage to explain the profound importance that he and his family attach to academic achievement, once again challenging negative stereotypes of WP candidates lacking aspiration:

> *My friends who are of African heritage, the question of university was always kind of just there. It was never even up for discussion. Even if it was that you didn't necessarily go to, you know, the most prestigious university, everyone went to university…. It was something that they (PARENTS) pushed on our generation I think, the importance of academics and the importance of going to school and getting good grades and stuff* (Nmandi)

In highlighting how his minority ethnic parents 'pushed' him to attain high grades at school and go to university (Fernando & Cohen, 2011), Nmandi aligned himself with what he saw as the backgrounds of the majority of students who attend elite universities.

Hasan, a Bengali male from London, drew on his South Asian heritage to explain how Asian people like himself are driven to succeed socioeconomically:

> *There is, I mean right now there's a lot of competition between Bengali families. I think it's just a South Asian thing "My son went to this," "My daughter's doing this," and it's about how many houses you have, how many restaurants you have, and it comes down to that sort of metrics. So, you know, I am definitely influenced by that as well* (Hasan).

In highlighting how he is influenced by his community's tendency to compete and enhance their social status, Hasan implicitly distanced himself from the claim that WP candidates lack aspiration (Archer, 2007) and followed others to align himself with the majority of students in elite higher education.

Challenging practices that position widening participation candidates as falling short of normative expectations within the elite university

This identity work strategy involved questioning and rejecting organisational practices (Creed et al., 2010) that position widening participation candidates as falling short of normative expectations. A few of our respondents vehemently rejected the university's cultural training schemes, which aim to equip widening participation candidates with the cultural exposure required to navigate elite organisational settings. By rejecting cultural training initiatives, these individuals were arguably able to tell themselves that it was not they who were falling short of expectations, but rather that the expectations were ridiculous and inconsistent with 'diversity' in a true sense:

> *It is kind of patronising in one way – "you have to learn these things to be one of us". You know what I mean. So you are not a proper person if you have not been to the theatre and if you don't know how to use six different kinds of fork at dinner. There are many great people who don't know these things. Are these things really necessary to make it in this world? If they are then we live in a very small-minded world* (Sian)

Sian questioned the whole point of cultural training schemes, asking if they were aimed at 'widening participation' or rather promoting conformity to notions of elitism in selective universities. Furthermore, in questioning whether an elite cultural exposure is really required

in order to succeed in the world, and highlighting that fact that there are many great people in the world who may not have desirable 'cultural skills', Sian demeaned the organisational practices that support the WP programme in her university. Sian is arguably able to protect her self-worth by telling herself that falling short of the cultural skills possessed by many traditional entrants does not symbolise any kind of inadequacy on her part, because cultural skills are *not* required to survive and progress in any setting – especially not in an organisation that claims to truly value diversity.

Similarly, Nnamdi talked about how he and other WP candidates explicitly opposed and resisted their university's cultural training initiatives:

> *I'll never forget, we went to see the Philharmonic Orchestra and everyone … half of us slept through it, it was terrible, no one really understood the value of it and they were like "Why were you guys sleeping through? What happened?" And everyone was like "We have no interest in orchestras," and after that we never did it again* (Nnamdi).

By emphasising to others that he does not understand the value of orchestral music and by sleeping through it as a sign of his resistance, Nnamdi is arguably able to tell himself and others that falling short of exposure to culture is not significant because its value is not justifiable from a work and career point of view. Indeed, the fact that university representatives did not put forward any counter-arguments to the students' resistance or require them to attend similar cultural events again was taken as conformation of the needlessness of the initiatives.

Discussion

In this article we examined how a group of WP students in the UK account for their experience in an elite HE setting. Echoing existing understandings of individuals who transition into new contexts and roles (Ibbara, 1999; Ibbara & Petriglieri, 2015), our respondents experienced a lack of fit in terms of academic knowledge (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Stephens et al,. 2019), orientations important for the achievement of success in higher education (Leathwood, 2001) and/or cultural skills (Lee & Kramer, 2013) as they entered the elite university. The gap between expected and experienced identity (Ibbara & Petriglieri, 2015) triggered a need to engage in identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) to negotiate how they fit into their new setting. Through participating in their university and learning about it, the respondents were able to draw on organisational discourses, practices and communities to support their identity work. We draw on these findings to make two contributions. Our first contribution involves providing insights into the complex identity work that WP students undertake in order to negotiate a sense of fit within their university, and highlighting how it both legitimises and delegitimises the university. Our second contribution involves providing a theoretical explanation for how diversity and inclusion practices operate as a significant part of the holding environment of universities to facilitate the identity work of WP candidates.

Identity work undertaken by WP students and its impact on legitimising and delegitimising the elite university

In the existing literature, non-traditional candidates who enter HE are seen as feeling a need to assimilate (Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2009), play down their non-traditional status (Gray et al., 2018), withdraw to the margins of their institutions (Reay, 2018) and/or drop out of the system altogether (Crawford, 2014; Lee, 2016). In contrast, our findings show a more complex picture of people doing forms of identity work to both *background* and *foreground*

their WP status to negotiate belonging in an elite university setting. By positioning their acceptance levels and prospects as being no different from traditional entrants, some respondents *backgrounded* their WP status. In contrast, others *foregrounded* their WP status in their identity work, focusing on the positive aspects of their WP candidacy (Gray et al., 2018; Maitlis, 2009), and/or challenging and refuting organisational practices (Creed et al., 2010) that exacerbate the gap between expected and experienced identity for WP candidates.

A few individuals placed themselves at the intersecting social locations of religion/minority ethnicity and low socioeconomic status to negotiate belonging within distinct communities in the elite university, and/or to position themselves as exceptions to the negative stereotypes (Ezzel, 2009) associated with WP candidates and better align themselves with normative expectations of students who attend elite universities. These findings demonstrate the use of intersecting social identities in identity work (Atewologun et al., 2016) to problematize and shift patterns of disadvantage associated with the WP category. While these respondents did play down certain aspects of their WP status to some extent (Doldor & Atewologun, 2020; Gray et al., 2018), what is different in our study is that they did so in a positive rather than a negative manner, choosing not to hide their WP status, but to lessen the importance attached to it. The respondents' tendency to dynamically background and foreground their WP background as the situation demands highlights how social minorities cope in 'diversifying' exclusive organisations. Backgrounding enables WP students to temporarily retreat from addressing issues related to fit and pondering about the implications of these issues. Individuals are able to tell themselves that socioeconomic background does not matter and maintain their focus on learning and education. Foregrounding their WP status enables them

to enjoy the positive aspects of the organisation's inclusive practices while also challenging practices that serve to maintain the status quo. Backgrounding *and* foregrounding their WP status may be seen as a feasible way of carrying on in a diversifying exclusive organisation. The organisation's increasing attention to diversity and inclusion gives individuals the scope to background their WP status and say that it does not matter; however, the longstanding notions of selectivity and elitism that exist alongside the organisation's diversity agenda means that students' WP status is also foregrounded in certain instances. Thus we argue that continuous identity management (through both backgrounding and foregrounding their WP status) is part and parcel of being a WP student in a 'diversifying' elite HE institution.

In light of our findings, we suggest that most WP students do not seem to wholly integrate into elite universities. Some participate mainly in specific communities within the university and proceed as an "othered" group, suggesting that diversity is not necessarily evidence of inclusiveness. Many choose to navigate elite HE settings without assimilating the dominant mould – evidencing the implicit (and sometimes explicit) element of resistance in their identity work. One might wonder whether the respondents might believe that assimilation is an impossible endeavour, or it may be that some individuals are reluctant to recognise the shortcomings of the system they are situated in. Many respondents, in fact, maintained that there were equal opportunities for bright individuals from any background to develop their careers through the university. While the uncritical advancement of meritocracy and equal opportunity certainly enables individuals to feel positive and continue to engage in the university (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014), they also risk constructing their organisation as disembodied and ignoring power differentials within the system.

We argue that on the whole, our respondents' identity work contributed towards maintaining the legitimacy of their organisation (Toyoki & Brown, 2014). Apart from proposing a rhetoric of meritocracy and equal opportunity, some individuals drew on their ethnic identity in order to align themselves with the high levels of ambition and achievement orientation prioritised within elite HE (Leathwood, 2001). These individuals therefore legitimated (Creed et al., 2010; Watson, 2009) the university and its practice of widening participation through their personal identity work. In other words, through their identity work, they propagated the organisation's diversity rhetoric of 'dissolving differences', and camouflaged the organisation's relative slowness to truly value the differences that WP students are perceived to bring (Liff & Wajcman, 1996; Liff, 1999). However a view of delegitimation is also proposed by the people who rejected the cultural training practices of the WP programme and implicitly refused to assimilate the dominant mould in their identity work. Based on our findings, we argue that WP candidates' identity work is not only a way of negotiating belonging, but is also a vehicle for having a macro-level impact on their universities - propagating discourses such as equal opportunity that minimise significant inequalities in elite systems. A conundrum still remains, however: although retaining the legitimacy of the existing system may eventually work for the small numbers of WP students who will benefit from the elite status of the institution through the labour market currency of their degrees, elite universities may still be perceived as 'off-limits' by other, less confident, bright but disadvantaged young people who could have benefited from an education there.

How diversity and inclusion practices operate as a significant part of universities' holding environment to facilitate WP candidates' identity work

The existing HE literature addresses how non-traditional candidates struggle to deal with their perceived lack of fit and belonging in HE (Gray et al., 2018; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2007), but pays less attention to what organisations can do about it. Our findings develop existing understandings by showing how organisational diversity and inclusion practices (Shore et al., 2011; 2018) lead to individuals' experiencing a lack of fit and belonging, while also facilitating the identity work (Warhurst, 2011) undertaken by them to engender a sense of belonging.

Diversity and inclusion practices formed a significant part of the case study university's holding environment (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Cultural training initiatives have led to some WP candidates experiencing a lack of fit. However the university's diversity campaigns, diversity in role models and the targeted recruitment of underrepresented minority groups, provided individuals with useful discursive material for backgrounding the significance they placed on their WP status and mitigating the lack of fit that they experienced. Likewise, inclusive practices such as opportunities to contribute non-traditional perspectives to classroom projects and special attention from academics and administrators enabled individuals to refocus their attention on the positive aspects of their WP status (Roberts, 2005; Slay & Smith, 2011) and to use this to enhance themselves. Thus while certain elements of the diversity agenda exacerbate the gap between expected and experienced identity for WP students, others facilitate the identity work they undertake to maintain a sense of worth.

These findings show how diversity and inclusion practices can work as an essential 'social defence' (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) that helps individuals feel more secure in their engagement within organisations. Furthermore, a wide array of student societies and

specialised events for WP candidates provides crucial 'sentient communities' (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) that help individuals find like-minded others whom they can relate to and rely on for support and encouragement (Gray et al., 2018), providing a platform for them to engage in identity work to carve a distinct space for themselves within the elite university. Thus, although certain elements of universities' widening participation agendas leads to WP candidates feeling like outsiders, they also enable individuals to find a space to belong and background their traditionally disadvantaged social status.

We draw on our findings to develop Petriglieri & Petriglieri's (2010) conceptual idea of 'identity workspaces' in higher education. Specifically, we argue that diversity and inclusion practices form an integral component of any HE institution's identity workspace because it provides resources for 'sense making' (Warhust, 2011) and communities of support that facilitate individuals' identity work, helping them redefine the position of WP candidates in elite universities, carve out a distinctive space to belong within elite universities, focus on positive aspects of WP candidacy and challenge practices that position WP candidates as falling short of normative expectations. The focus in the current widening participation literature has mainly been on efforts in UK HE to diversify (Archer, 2007), and little attention has been paid to the issue of inclusion (Shore et al., 2011). Although "diversity is about counting heads", while inclusion is about "making heads count" (Winters, 2014), diversity and inclusion are nevertheless often used interchangeably or together as a noun (D&I) in this literature, despite being two very different constructs. Our findings develop existing understandings by providing insights into how an elite university's inclusive practices facilitate the rhetoric of diversity and thereby enable WP candidates to feel that survival and progress are possible for individuals from *any* background. In this sense, inclusive practices actually

enable elite HE institutions to maintain their exclusive status: they can mobilize a rhetoric of diversity (Archer, 2007) while also continuing to be highly selective and focusing on mainly recruiting the brightest of socially disadvantaged candidates (Shaw et al., 2007) if they effectively help these candidates (through extensive inclusion efforts) to survive in the institution without dropping out or withdrawing completely to the margins (Reay, 2018). As WP candidates negotiate a sense of belonging with reference to the support they receive from the institution, the institution has no need to make substantial changes to its services or its underlying value system. Students from marginalised communities can find a way of existing and succeeding in elite academic environments by carving out a distinct space. As individuals passing through an institution, they may not be aware that while they engage with the institution and remain at the margins, the organisation is under no pressure to change and become more fully inclusive. Institutions must continue to take account of the extent to which increased diversity in terms of student background actually results in increased inclusivity.

Conclusion and implications

We have shown that WP students who enter elite HE environments experience a lack of fit, and therefore need to undertake important identity work if they are to survive and engage within their institution. The identity work individuals undertake involves both backgrounding and foregrounding their WP status, and contributes to both de-legitimising and legitimising the prevailing academic and social environment of elite HE institutions. One pertinent finding is how inclusive practices facilitate WP candidates' identity work and – by default – their survival within the system. We draw on our findings to argue that business schools and other faculties that aim to enhance inclusiveness should make diverse role models available, demonstrate their commitment to addressing diversity and inclusion, offer opportunities for

students to contribute their distinctive perspectives and experiences (whilst also acknowledging that these 'perspectives' only represent a part of the individual's identity and may not always reflect the views of others from the same demographic background) and participate in the organisation, and finally offer spaces for diverse individuals to come together with like-minded others. In addition, we argue that staff should be briefed on the importance of engendering a sense of achievement and belonging for WP students.

We question whether universities' inclusive practices and the identity work they facilitate are sufficient to provide effective support for candidates from WP schemes as they seek to make an effective transition to elite jobs and careers. Organisations are not under anything like the same pressure from the government as universities are to enable individuals from an array of backgrounds to fit in and negotiate a sense of belonging. Although it appears that in the US lower SES students who attend the most elite universities have similar income prospects to their affluent peers (Chetty et al., 2017), longitudinal evidence in the UK suggests that social background can play an important role in securing jobs (Sullivan et al., 2018), especially in exclusive professions that attach great importance to employees who embody elite cultural skills so that they will be able to represent the value of their brand to clients (Ashley & Empson, 2013; Moore et al., 2016). Thus, although WP candidates may be able to finish university by engaging in the identity work we have noted, if they continue to do so beyond university, they may be poorly equipped to deal with the realities of class-based exclusion in elite occupational environments (such as law firms, investment banks and the senior civil service). Institutions running widening participation schemes should carefully consider and reflect on the nature and extent of exclusion in the labour market and professions, and this should be openly discussed with WP candidates, together with ways of navigating these

barriers. In fact, many of the participants in our study vehemently rejected the efforts made by WP scheme organisers to underscore the importance of being able to adopt elite cultural skills to enhance their post-graduation prospects. Cultural training efforts should not be completely abandoned by universities, but rather redesigned in such a way that they integrate and value aspects of the cultures the WP students arrive with. These initiatives should also be carefully presented to incumbents. A balance needs to be struck between offering a realistic preview of what they may encounter in elite organisations and helping WP students to understand what strengths and experiences they have that can help them to effectively navigate these environments. Nudging WP students towards the importance of projecting desired competencies such as their knowledge, passion and drive for their field, and their communication and networking skills, as well as offering them opportunities to seek more information about cultural activities they are actually curious about, is likely to be more attainable and more sustainable in the longer term. Cultural training programmes should help the students to understand and build on their own strengths, and also reflect on different ways to connect with and build alliances with those who are different to them.

Our findings are based on a single case study of a particular elite university in the UK. We should emphasise, however, that their implications extend beyond the UK to elite institutions in the US. While there are some striking similarities in the level of commitment and the approaches to social mobility in both UK and US higher education, it has been suggested that some of the widening participation arrangements in UK universities might be usefully deployed in the US to complement existing actions to increase racial diversity (Dougherty & Callender, 2017). We endorse these arguments, and highlight the key inclusive organisational

practices that are imperative in order for WP students to be able to have a place within elite university settings. It is certainly possible that our sampling method may have led us to underemphasise those WP candidates who may be floundering in the system, and we acknowledge that this is a limitation of our study. With regard to future research, we call upon scholars to examine whether the identity work strategies we have identified in our study also play out in different faculties and across various study subjects. Our respondents were reading for highly-regarded degrees in vocationally-orientated business and law faculties, and so despite their modest backgrounds, their labour market value is arguably higher than it would have been if they had studied less vocational subjects. Future research should therefore also examine whether similar identify work is deployed by WP students studying for degrees that might have a lower labour market value than business and law. It is also important to explore the interplay between inclusive practices and WP students' sense of belongingness within elite higher education in greater depth, with a focus on elite institutions outside the UK. Extending the study to organisations in diverse national cultural contexts would enable us to identify important contextual mediators of the effects of inclusive organisational practices, and it would also be possible to develop an understanding of how WP students' identity work is influenced by factors outside the organisation.

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Table 1: Demographic details of participants

	Pseudonym	Faculty	Ethno-racial Background	Gender	Status at time of interview
1.	Robbie	Business	White English	Male	Student
2.	Saffron	Business	White English	Female	Student
3.	Sana	Law	Black English	Female	Alumnus
4.	Raziq	Business	English Asian	Male	Alumnus
5.	John	Business	White English	Male	Student
6.	Caitlin	Business	White English	Female	Student
7.	Nnamdi	Business	Black English	Male	Alumnus
8.	James	Business	White English	Male	Student
9.	Noor	Business	English Asian	Female	Student
10.	Mnyaradzi	Business	Black English	Female	Student
11.	Amber	Law	White English	Female	Student
12.	Ashley	Business	English East Asian	Female	Student
13.	Suzie	Business	White English	Female	Student
14.	Hasan	Business	British English	Male	Student
15.	Emma	Law	English East Asian	Female	Student
16.	Ahmed	Business	British Asian	Male	Student
17.	Fatima	Law	English Asian	Female	Student
18.	Soorya	Law	English Asian	Female	Student
19.	Akunna	Law and Business	Black English	Female	Alumnus
20.	Ngozi	Business	Black English	Female	Student
21.	Gazi	Law and Business	British Pakistani	Male	Student
22.	Ode	Law	Black African	Female	Alumnus
23.	Zane	Accounting and Finance	Black African	Female	Student
24.	Lale	LLB	White British	Female	Alumnus
25.	Divya	Business	British Asian	Female	Alumnus
26.	Peter	Business	White British	Male	Student
27.	Hieke	Business	White British	Female	Student
28.	Sian	Business	White British	Female	Alumnus
29.	Stacey	Business	White British	Female	Student
30.	Malena	Business	British Asian	Female	Alumnus
31.	Banu	Business	British Asian	Male	Alumnus
32.	Fiona	LLB	White British	Female	Alumnus
33.	Leyla	LLB	British Asian/Pakistani	Female	Alumnus
34.	Nazia	LLB	British Asian/Bangladeshi	Female	Alumnus

Table 2: Coding template

First-order codes	Second-order codes	Aggregate themes
Perceived lack of academic knowledge	Perceived lack in knowledge and skills	*Gaps between experienced and expected perceptions of self*
Perceptions of being behind others		
Perceptions of lacking discipline and focus		
Perceptions of not being good enough		
Perceptions of lack propagated by discourses of exclusivity and selectivity		
Struggling to understand the interests and hobbies of others	Perceived lack in cultural exposure	
Struggling to participate in conversations		
Falling short of normative cultural exposure		
Perceptions of falling short of normative cultural exposure, shaped by cultural training initiatives		
Diversity initiatives are a proxy of inclusiveness	Re-defining widening participation candidates' position in the elite university	*Identity work*
Role models are a proxy of meritocracy and equal opportunity		
The institution values difference		
WP candidates have similar prospects to traditional candidates		
Highlighting belongingness in student societies	Carving out a distinctive space to belong with reference to specific communities	
Highlighting belongingness in special events for WP students		
Specialised help from staff	Focusing on positives to enhance self	
Support from senior WP students and alumni		

Opportunities to contribute distinct experiences to learning		
Ambassadorships		
Ethnic/immigrant identity to highlight drive towards achievement	Positioning oneself as an exception to prevailing negative stereotypes	
Ethnic identity to highlight family push towards academics		
Ethnic identity to highlight desire for material success		
Cultural training is inconsistent with 'diversifying'	Challenging practices that lead to the devaluation of WP candidates	
Cultural training promotes conformance to elitism		
Cultural training does not have a strong association to succeeding in work and career		

Author Biographies

Dr Dulini Fernando is an Associate Professor at the Warwick Business School, University of Warwick. Her research focuses on advancing theoretical understanding of how highly skilled individuals' navigate barriers, mobilise enablers and manage conflict in their careers, and how organisational and wider contextual discourses and practices are experienced by highly skilled individuals and influences their meaning making related to work and career. Dulini holds two BSc degrees from the London School of Economics (LSE), UK and Lancaster University, UK, an MSc from LSE and a PhD from Loughborough University, UK. Her work has been published in leading organization and management journals, and is cited regularly in the media. Email: dulini.fernando@wbs.ac.uk

Dr Etlyn Kenny is an Associate Professor in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour at the Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK. Etlyn researches how employees from different diversity categories experience their careers and are effectively included within organizations, with a particular focus on the careers of minority

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