Are our Higher Education Institutions Inclusive? A Study of the Barriers to Student Retention

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Higher education has the potential of being a transformational experience that opens doors for students from a whole variety of backgrounds. However, while there has been an increase in the number of students from more deprived backgrounds entering university, conversely there has been an increase in the dropout rate of students from these backgrounds. Young people from poorer backgrounds are more likely to drop-out, less likely to complete their degree and less likely to be awarded the highest degree classifications than young people from more affluent backgrounds.

While there has been greater engagement of students from different backgrounds in higher education institutions, there are clearly existing barriers that prevent the engagement and achievement of these students at university. As such, there is a pressure on higher education institutions to find alternative solutions to addressing the retention of these students, alongside the initial recruitment stage. In view of the innumerable interventions currently in place to support pupils from deprived backgrounds, including careers' guidance, funding and one-to-one support in an attempt to develop the existing lack of social capital, it is difficult to isolate a single factor as being determinative of an individual leaving higher education before the completion of their course. The issues are however undeniable: it is important to consider what about the fabric of our higher education institutions contributes to this. Are our institutions and our pedagogical approaches inclusive enough? What barriers exist to students from more deprived barriers? What prevents full engagement for all students at our universities?

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