



Learners or consumers? Exploring the grade gap between widening participation and non-widening participation students

Dr Siân E. Jones^a, Professor Louise Taylor^b and Karl Johnson^a

^a Queen Margaret University, United Kingdom; ^b Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom

Abstract

Students from widening participation (non-traditional) backgrounds are increasingly entering higher education, yet they are typically awarded lower grades than non-widening participation students. This gap was explored from a social identity theory perspective to examine two key student identities that impact performance: university student (positive impact), and educational consumer (negative impact). Students were studying in a mass-consumer cultural context, Scotland, United Kingdom. A moderated moderation model was used to test the hypothesis that a consumer identity would have a negative impact on the relation between university student identity and grades, and that this would be more harmful for widening participation students compared to non-widening participation students given their increased social identity conflicts. An online questionnaire was completed by 133 widening participation and 100 non-widening participation students (85% women, mean age 22.6 years). As expected, the model was significant. For widening participation students, the positive relation between university student identity and grades reduced (disappeared) when students had a stronger consumer identity. For non-widening participation students, however, there were no relations among the variables, thus the hypothesis was partly supported. These findings suggest that a consumer identity contributes to the grade gap between these student groups, and that institutions should support students to resist developing an educational consumer identity in mass-consumer cultural contexts.

Editors

Section: Educational Psychology
Editor-in-Chief: Dr Joseph Crawford

Publication

Submission: 28 March 2024
Revised: 20 May 2025
Accepted: 21 May 2025
Published: 26 May 2025

Copyright © by the authors, in its year of first publication. This publication is an open access publication under the Creative Commons Attribution [CC BY-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/) license.

Practitioner Notes

1. A university student identity, as opposed to that of an educational consumer, is related to academic success.
2. Students from widening participation (non-traditional) backgrounds experience greater identity incompatibilities than non-widening participation students.
3. Our findings suggest that grade outcomes of widening participation students are higher when they have a stronger university student identity, but this benefit disappears in the presence of a strong consumer identity.
4. Widening participation students should be supported to develop a university student identity and resist the notion that they are educational consumers. Keywords

Keywords

Widening participation, non-traditional students, student-as-consumers, social identity, grades

Citation:

Jones, S., Taylor, L., & Johnson, K. (2025). Learners or consumers? Exploring the grade gap between widening participation and non-widening participation students. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.53761/3fw71w44>

Introduction

Ensuring fair access to higher education is a substantial international issue (Gibson et al., 2016). The widening participation agenda in many European countries, as well as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, refers to the drive to increase fair access by ensuring that those who could benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to do so (Osborne, 2003). This includes non-traditional groups such as low socioeconomic status students, first-generation students, student carers, students with disability, culturally diverse students, or those with indigenous backgrounds. For non-traditional students, inequalities in the education system, such as disparities in school resources, curriculum biases, and differential teacher expectations, were a major cause of underachievement in school, impacting their progression to higher education (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). Addressing fair access, therefore, requires not only opening the doors to university but simultaneously ensuring equitable opportunities for student success, regardless of background.

The neoliberal framing and marketisation of higher education, with its focus on competition and efficiency, emphasises higher access numbers, particularly among so-called 'widening participation' or non-traditional students, as a key metric of success (Leaney & Mwale, 2021). However, this approach fails to consider how to ensure the necessary conditions for equitable outcomes. Data show that widening participation students typically have lower degree outcomes than non-widening participation students, with substantial gaps in the number of 'good' degrees awarded to students who fall into a number of different widening participation categories (HESA, 2025). A 'good' degree in the United Kingdom is defined as a first class or upper-second class degree which approximately translates into Grade Point Average of 3.7-4 and 3.3-3.6. Furthermore, widening participation students also tend to report a lower overall experience in higher education than non-widening participation students, potentially due to factors such as feeling like they do not fit in, financial pressures, or inadequate support services (Friend, 2021; Jones et al., 2025; Reay et al., 2010; Veldman et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2025). These disparities underscore the urgent need to address the systemic barriers that prevent equitable outcomes for traditionally underrepresented student groups in higher education.

In this study we sought to further understand the persistent gap in grade outcomes between widening participation students and non-widening participation students, observing that it is unlikely that any one silver bullet will explain or solve this challenge. Our approach is underpinned by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This theory explains how individuals form their sense of self based on the social groups to which they belong. These group affiliations, such as those based on socio-economic status or ethnicity, can shape how students see themselves, how they are perceived by others, and how they experience university. Students from traditionally underrepresented groups may enter university with a heightened awareness of their self-concept, which may impact academic behaviours and outcomes in various ways (Jetten et al., 2008). In the current study, we explored the potentially interacting effects of two key student identities previously shown to impact grades: social identity as a university student, and identity as an educational consumer (e.g., Bliuc et al., 2011; Bunce et al., 2017). For widening participation students, who experience greater identity conflicts between their home and university identities (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021), adopting a university student identity and resisting a consumer identity may present specific identity-based challenges to academic success. Like most previous research on student identities (e.g., Bunce et al., 2017; Saunders, 2015), the study took place in

a mass-consumer society – Scotland – where higher education institutions operate on market principles. However, in Scotland, students are not educational consumers in the direct economic sense because the Scottish government provides free tuition to home-domiciled students. This natural comparator provided a unique context in which to explore the impact of these student identities on the grade gap between widening participation and non-widening participation students.

Literature

University Student Identity

Learning is not just an individualistic process but a highly social one, and this has historically been overlooked (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017). Psychological research has shown that the extent to which a student feels that they are an important part of a group e.g., the social identity group ‘university student’, influences their learning behaviours, wellbeing and outcomes (Bliuc et al., 2011; Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021; Platow et al., 2025; Smyth et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2025). This work is grounded in social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1986). The theory proposes that our self-concepts or *identities* are highly flexible and context dependent, and that we shape our identities in relation to the groups to which we belong (self-categorisation). Our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours become consistent with the norms and values of our in-groups (norms are rules or expectations about what is considered ‘normal’). We compare in-group members favourably with those in out-groups, and this increases our well-being (Griffin et al., 2025).

In a series of studies, Bliuc and colleagues (2011) were among the first researchers to assess how variations in students’ level of identification with the social category ‘university student’ affected how students approached learning (deep and surface) and their subsequent grades. Specifically, they used the concept of discipline-related social identity as a measure of university student identity. This was defined as the extent to which students were proud to be seen by others as a member of their discipline and that they respected and felt good about other members. Psychology students from Romania ($n = 183$) completed questionnaires to assess the strength of their social identity as a psychology student, as well as the extent to which they processed information using deep and surface approaches. Grade was measured by their final assessment mark in the course.

Bliuc et al. (2011) tested a mediation model to explore the hypothesis that discipline identity would be positively, but indirectly, related to grades through approaches to learning. Their analysis supported this hypothesis: students with a stronger discipline identity had higher grades because those students were more likely to use deep approaches to learning and somewhat less likely to use surface approaches. Thus, a strong student identity seems to support beliefs about learning as being a process of understanding and constructing meaning (i.e. a deep approach), which is generally associated with higher achievement. Although the students who participated were all from one discipline (psychology) subsequent research by Smyth et al. (2015) replicated the findings on a broader range of almost 300 students from six broad discipline subgroups, and they found similar results (see also Platow et al., 2025; Smyth et al., 2017; Larsen & James, 2022; Smith & Watson, 2022; Taylor Bunce et al., 2022).

Identity as an Educational Consumer

Another aspect of student identities that has only begun to receive attention in the last decade is that of the student as an educational 'consumer' in contexts where students, not the government, are responsible for their tuition costs. Consumer identity was conceptualised by Saunders (2015) on the basis of planned academic behaviours and educational priorities: at the extreme, students who identify as educational consumers only want to learn things that they perceive as useful to their future careers and want to take courses that they hope will increase their future earning power. They also feel entitled to receive a good grade despite doing little academic work and believe that it is the responsibility of their institution to ensure that they obtain a good job after graduating. In other words, this group-level identity, with an emphasis on grades and attainment, may have competing demands on a student's sense of self vis-à-vis being a university student with its emphasis on deep learning.

Early research in this area by Bunce et al. (2017), and Bunce and Bennett (2021) quantified the negative impact of consumer identity on students' approaches to learning and grades. In their study of over six-hundred undergraduate fee-paying students studying in England, Bunce et al. (2017) found a negative relation between consumer identity and grades: a stronger consumer identity was related to lower grades. They further showed that the relation between a student's identity and grades (Bliuc et al., 2011) was reduced by consumer identity. This negative impact of consumer identity on grades was replicated in a similar sample in Bunce and Bennett (2021). Bunce and Bennett additionally found that learning approaches helped to explain some of the relation between consumer identity and grades: students with a stronger consumer identity were more likely to use learning strategies that involved superficial (surface) processing of information, and less likely to use learning strategies that resulted in meaningful (deep) processing of information than students with a weak consumer identity. Although student grades were assessed in these studies using students' subjective recollections, which are potentially subject to inaccurate reporting, the findings are in line with Bliuc et al's. (2011) study in which grades were assessed objectively. In sum, this research shows that a consumer identity reduces the positive effect of a student identity on grades in fee-paying contexts.

While prior work has examined the effects of students' consumer identity in fee-paying contexts, comparative research in consumer societies where students receive free tuition is missing. In the current study, therefore, we collected data in Scotland, UK, whereby home students are provided with government-funded tuition. Like the rest of the UK (and Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States of America), Scotland is an established mass-consumer society, thus making a natural comparator. Despite being free to access for home students, Scottish higher education institutions nonetheless operate under market principles: they heavily advertise customer services, focus on customer satisfaction metrics, and rely on student feedback to improve service provision. In this mass-consumer context, students may be motivated to attend university for reasons associated with a consumer identity, as defined by Saunders (2015), for example, by choosing degree subjects as a function of their future earning potential and being career focused in terms of what they want to learn. It seems reasonable to expect, therefore, that in a mass-consumer context, non-fee-paying Scottish students may still be susceptible to the negative impacts of adopting a consumer identity on their education.

Widening Participation and Non-Traditional Students

A significant gap in the research discussed so far is that it does not take into account students' status in terms of whether they are from a widening participation or non-traditional background. This aspect of students' characteristics is particularly well suited to explore from a social identities' perspective. Even though all students experience social identity changes when transitioning to university, it can be a more unsettling experience for widening participation students than for traditional students (Jones et al., 2025; Reay et al., 2010; Veldman et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2025). From a social identity theory perspective, widening participation students may enter university with a heightened awareness of their self-concept based on their social groups (e.g., class status or ethnicity: Jetten et al., 2017). Adapting to new social identities is more difficult when new and existing identities are in direct conflict with each other. For example, widening participation students may have grown up not expecting to go to university, may have lower financial resources, may be more likely to have paid employment, may experience negative performance stereotypes, and may feel generally less well prepared and supported (Gibson et al., 2016; Grozev & Easterbrook, 2024; Jetten et al., 2008). Widening participation students may experience unease when considering whether their existing identities will be accepted by others (Cohen & Garcia, 2008), and they may ultimately feel the need to hide existing identities.

These issues could result in *social identity conflict*, which includes feeling that a) existing social identities are *incompatible* with a university student identity, and b) *social identity threat*, whereby an existing social identity feels undermined or stigmatised (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021). These social identity conflicts require widening participation students to use precious cognitive resources and engage in 'complex affective labour' to negotiate and process them (Leaney & Mwale, 2021, p. 985, Spencer et al., 2016). For example, they may need to overcome stereotypical beliefs that university is for white, middle-class students, and not for people from the global ethnic majority, or working-class backgrounds. Ultimately, identity conflicts between being a widening participation student and their new university identity could weaken their social identification with their new student identity (Jetten et al., 2008).

Support for this was found by Smyth et al. (2019) who examined the identity incompatibilities experienced by a diverse range of students to explore impacts on learning approaches. Identity incompatibility in this study concerned subjective feelings of incompatibility between the university environment and home environment. It captured the extent to which students felt that they needed to create a facade at university and felt like an outsider (e.g., 'I have gone to certain lengths to manipulate the way I am perceived by others and therefore conceal part of my pre-university identity'). In their sample of 121 students, they found that identity incompatibility was a significant direct predictor of increased surface approaches to learning as well as other performance diminishing behaviours, such as procrastination and self-handicapping. This suggests that, for widening participation students, their experienced identity conflicts and weaker identification with their new student identity may partly explain their poorer grade outcomes compared with non-widening participation students.

Further support for a link between social identity compatibility and learning outcomes in widening participation students comes from intervention studies that have attempted to increase students' university social identity. For example, Chen et al. (2020) found that a strong identity as a 'science person' was related to improved grades among a sample of 572 first-generation students or students from the global ethnic majority who were studying biology. Among those who

subsequently participated in a social belonging intervention, grade outcomes increased and were comparable to non-widening participation students. Chen et al. (2020) concluded that the positive effect of a science identity may be due to a science identity increasing a sense of compatibility between the individual and their university.

Taken together, the above findings suggest that widening participation students may find it harder to develop or integrate their new university student identity into their self-concepts than non-widening participation students. Nonetheless, we expected that the positive effect of a university student identity on grades would hold for widening participation students if they have successfully developed a university student identity.

Research on the impacts of a consumer identity on grades for widening participation students is sparse. However, we expected that widening participation status and a consumer identity may interact with each other and differentially effect the relation between university student identity and grades. In support of this possibility, it seems likely that a consumer identity is an additional source of identity conflict (Jetten et al., 2008), and one that may be particularly harmful to learning behaviours and grades (Bunce & Bennett, 2021; Bunce et al., 2017) given the needs of these students to work harder to develop a university student identity (Gibson et al., 2016; Jetten et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021) found that widening participation students described the visual representation of university education as extremely positive ‘marketing hyperbole’. This made them feel unprepared for potential challenges of university and sceptical of exaggerated promotional messages about the positive experience of studying for a degree. In another study (Leaney & Mwale, 2021) widening participation students who were studying at a satellite campus (a campus at a physical distance from the original institution, designed to attract more widening participation students) discussed how they felt that they had to ‘fight’ for what traditional students naturally have access to in the context of marketisation.

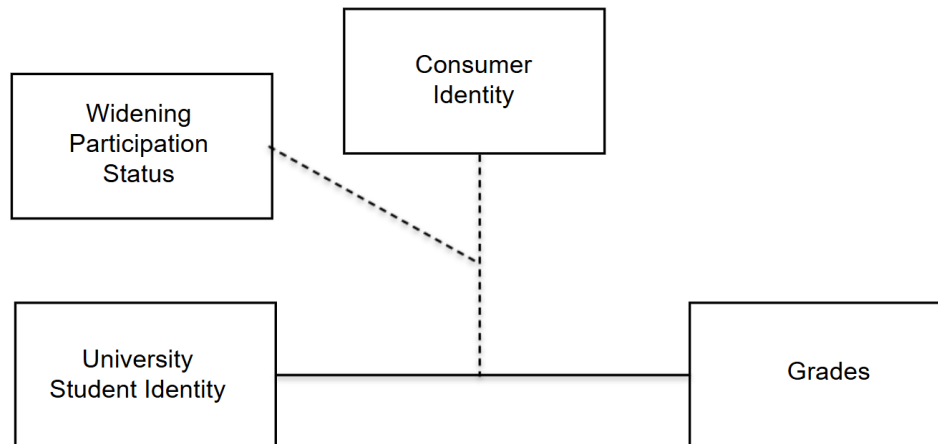
The identity conflicts faced by widening participation students suggests that consumer identity may be more harmful to the relation between a university student identity and grades than for non-widening participation students. In other words, the impact of a consumer identity on the relation between university student identity and grades may be more detrimental to widening participation students than non-widening participation students.

Current Study

In the current study we tested these possibilities using a moderated moderation model (see Figure 1). We predicted that widening participation status would interact with, or moderate, the conditional influence of consumer identity on the relation between university student identity and grades.

Figure 1

Moderated Moderation Model of Widening Participation Status, Educational Consumer Identity, University Student Identity and Grades



Specifically, we hypothesised that the negative impact of consumer identity on the relation between university student identity and grades would be greater (more detrimental) for widening participation students than for non-widening participation students.

Method

Sample

We aimed to recruit approximately 200 students from Queen Margaret University (100 widening participation and 100 non-widening participation) to provide a minimum of 20 participants per each independent variable for analysis. We relied on an opportunity sampling strategy and advertised around campus, on social media, and on the Psychology student participation panel.

Measures

University Student Identity

Using an online questionnaire, university student social identity was measured by adapting items used by Doosje et al. (1995): 'I feel strong ties with other students of my university', 'Being a student at my university is important to me', 'I feel close to other students studying at my university', and 'I am pleased to be a student studying at my university'. Students rated their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Cronbach's alpha indicated an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .69$) score.

Consumer Identity

Consumer attitudes commensurate with a consumer identity were assessed using Saunders' (2015) 18-item scale, with some items adapted for a British as opposed to American educational context (Bunce et al., 2017). Example statements were: 'I will only study something that will help me earn a lot of money' and 'I think of my university degree as a product I am purchasing'. Students rated their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha indicated good reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

Grades

To measure grades, students self-reported their grade profile. We asked them to select the option that represented their average mark in percent to date: 0-29%, 30-39%, 40-44%, 45-49%, 50-

54%, 55-59%, 60-64%, 65-69%, 70-84%, 85%+. These represent common grade bands in the United Kingdom and translate into approximate Grade Point Average scores as follows: 0-39% = 0-1.9 GPA; 40-49% = 2.0-2.6 GPA; 50-59% = 2.7-3.2 GPA; 60-69% = 3.3-3.6 GPA; 70-100% = 3.7-4.0 GPA.

Widening Participation Status

To determine widening participation status, participants were asked to identify if they met these criteria: first in household to attend university, taking an access/non-traditional course to enter university, identifying as a person with disability, being a student parent, having caring responsibilities, and/or being care-experienced. If they met any of these criteria they were categorised as being a widening participation student (=1) and if they did not they were classified as a non-widening participation student (=0). Finally, participants completed questions about age, gender, ethnicity, and course of study.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from Queen Margaret University ethics committee before data collection began. Adverts for the study were placed on social media, around campus, and on the undergraduate psychology participation panel during the spring semester. The study was advertised as seeking undergraduates' attitudes towards their university education in Scotland. Students could respond to the advert by clicking on a link, which took them to the questionnaire platform hosted by Qualtrics. First, they gave informed consent, then completed the questionnaire by responding to items for each key variable on a separate page, as described above. It took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Results

Participants

The questionnaire was completed by 233 undergraduates from Queen Margaret University, Scotland. The average age was 22.64 years ($SD = 6.69$ years). There were 198 women (85%), 30 men (13%), one non-binary student (0.5%), and one who preferred not to answer (0.5%). Most students described themselves as White British (191, 96.4%), three (1.5%) as Asian, two (1%) as mixed ethnic background, and one (0.5%) student who preferred not to say. One-hundred and thirty-three (57%) were from a widening participation background and 100 (43%) were from a non-widening participation background. These figures largely represent the student body at the university, although we had a higher proportion of females than is at the university. Of those with a widening participation background, 39% were the first in their household to come to university, 20% took an access course to enter university, 11.6% identified as disabled, 8% were student-parents, 6% had caring responsibilities, and 1% were care-experienced (students could select all that applied). Ninety-four students (40%) were studying psychology (who also received course credit for participating), 56 (24%) were studying education, and 27 (12%) were studying sociology. The remaining 56 (24%) students were studying social science and biological science.

Data Screening and Preliminary Analysis

Prior to analysis, the data were screened for patterns in missing values, outliers, and violations of parametric data assumptions. Descriptive statistics among the key dependent measures are

shown in Table 1. These data show that the mean strength of university identity and consumer identity, as well as average grade, were similar for both widening participation students and non-widening participation students. There were no significant differences for these three measures, however, widening participation students were significantly older than non-widening participation students, $t(198) = 2.434$, $p = .005$ [Cohen's $d = 7.91$, 95% CI = (-.610, -.063)]. Age was, therefore, controlled for in subsequent analyses.

Table 1

Widening and non-widening participation means and standard deviations for identities, grades, and age

	University Identity	Consumer Identity	Grades	Age*
Widening participation	3.99 (0.62)	2.32 (0.55)	64.73 (14.64)	24.53 (7.54)
Non-widening participation	4.02 (0.64)	2.37 (0.54)	65.24 (10.42)	21.86 (6.86)

Note. * $p < .005$

The relations between the key variables for both widening participation students and non-widening participation students are depicted as bivariate correlations in Table 2. Of note, there was a significant positive correlation between university student identity and grades, but only for widening participation students. In contrast, there was a significant negative correlation between consumer identity and grades, but this relation only held for non-widening participation students.

Table 2

Correlation matrix for widening and non-widening participation students

	1	2	3	4
1. University Identity	--	.01	.174*	-.11
2. Consumer Identity	-.24	--	.032	-.17
3. Grades	.03	-.345**	--	-.20*
4. Age	-.24*	-.02	.217	--
Mean difference	0.03	0.05	0.51	-3.52**

Note. Widening participation students above the diagonal, and non-widening participation below the diagonal. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Moderated Moderation Effects

We used the PROCESS Model 3 macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) to perform moderated moderation analysis (See Figure 1). The independent variable was University Student Identity, the dependent variable was Grades, and the two moderators were Consumer Identity and Widening Participation Status. We ultimately tested whether the interaction effect between Consumer Identity and University Student Identity on Grades was conditional upon Widening Participation Status, controlling for Age. This full regression model was significant overall,

meaning that it explained a significant proportion of the variance in Grades, $R^2(\text{adjusted}) = 0.13$, $F(8,141) = 2.54$, $p = .013$ (see Table 3). The direct effects of all three variables on Grades (University Social Identity, Consumer Identity, and Widening Participation Status) were non-significant (see Table 3). In addition, the two-way interactions between University Social Identity and Consumer Identity, University Social Identity and Widening Participation Status, and Consumer Identity and Widening Participation Status were also non-significant (see Table 3).

Table 3

Moderated moderation effects

Variable	B	SE	p	95% CI
Constant	77.97	4.18	<.001	[69.71, 86.23]
University Student Identity	2.51	2.55	.325	[-2.52, 7.55]
Widening Participation Status	1.11	2.18	.610	[-3.20, 5.43]
University Student Identity x Widening Participation Status	.36	3.40	.915	[-6.37, 7.09]
Consumer Identity	.85	2.97	.775	[-5.03, 6.73]
University Student Identity x Consumer Identity	4.16	3.66	.256	[-3.05, 11.38]
Widening Participation Status x Consumer Identity	-1.20	3.95	.762	[-9.00, 6.61]
Widening Participation Status x Consumer Identity x University Student Identity	-11.20	5.43	.041	[-21.93, -.48]
Age	-.63	.19	.001	[-1.01, -.25]

Three-way Interaction between University Student Identity, Consumer Identity, and Widening Participation Status

In support of our hypothesis, there was a significant three-way interaction between university student identity, consumer identity, and widening participation status on grades, $B = -11.20$, $SE = 5.43$, $p = .041$, 95% CI [-21.93, -.48]. This interaction is displayed in the simple slopes in Figure 2 to show the conditional effect of Consumer Identity on the relation between university student identity and grades for widening and non-widening participation students (Figure 2). The interaction arose because, as expected, the relations between the variables were different for widening participation students compared with non-widening participation students. In other words, the moderating effect of consumer Identity on the relation between university student identity and grades was further moderated by widening participation status.

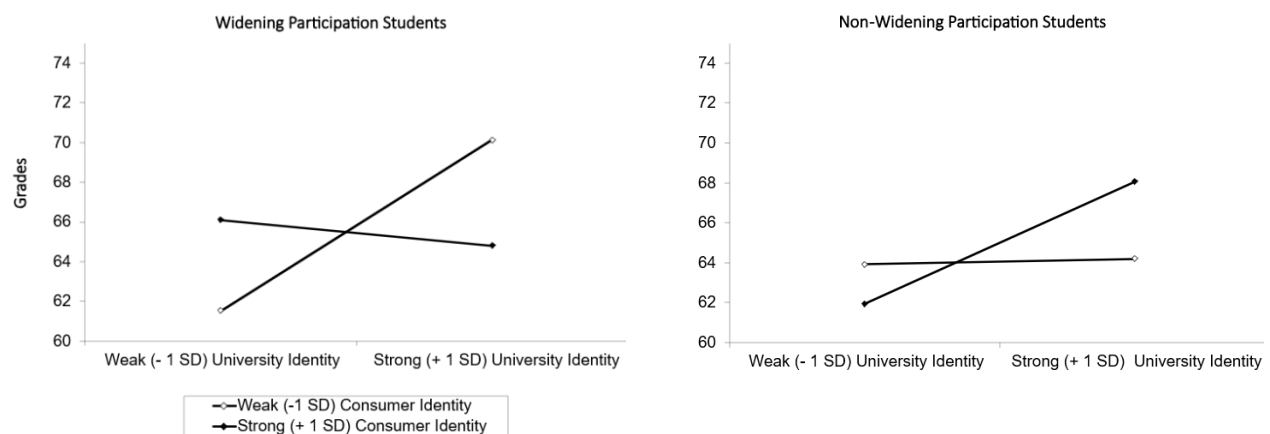
For widening participation students, there was a significant positive relation between student identity and grades at low levels (-1 SD) of consumer identity, $B = 6.77$, $SE = 2.88$, $p = .020$, 95% CI [12.48, 1.07], but not at high levels (+1 SD) of consumer identity, $B = -1.01$, $SE = 3.45$, $p = .295$, 95% CI [-7.85, 5.81]. In other words, for widening participation students, when they had a weak consumer identity, a strong university student identity was positively related to grades.

When they had a strong consumer identity, however, the positive relation between university student identity and grades disappeared.

For non-widening participation students, there was no relation between university student identity and grades at high levels (+1 SD) of consumer identity, $B = 4.81$, $SE = 3.33$, $p = .150$, 95% CI [11.39, -1.76], nor at low levels (-1 SD) of consumer identity, $B = .21$, $SE = 3.17$, $p = .947$, 95% CI [6.48, -6.06]. This means that university student identity was not significantly related to grades, regardless of whether they had a high or low consumer identity.

Figure 2

University Student Identity and Consumer Identity as a function of Grades for Widening and Non-Widening Participation Students



These findings suggest that a consumer identity plays a disruptive role for widening participation students, diminishing the academic benefits of identifying strongly as a university student. In contrast, neither identity had an impact on grades for non-widening participation students. These findings support the hypothesis that a consumer identity would have a more detrimental impact on the relation between university student identity and grades for widening participation students compared to non-widening participation students.

Discussion

To increase understanding of why widening participation students are less likely to thrive at university relative to their peers, this study considered relations between two key educational identities that impact grade outcomes: identity as a university student, and identity as an educational consumer. Our hypothesis was that widening participation status would moderate the conditional effect of consumer identity on the relation between university student identity and grades. Specifically, we predicted that a consumer identity would have a more detrimental impact on the positive relation between university student identity and grades for widening participation students compared to their peers. In support of the hypothesis, a strong consumer identity among widening participation students significantly interfered with the positive relation between their identification as a university student and their grades to a greater extent than for non-widening participation students. Indeed, for widening participation students with a strong consumer identity, the typical benefit of a university student self-concept on achieving higher grades disappeared.

However, contrary to expectations, there were no significant relations between consumer identity, university student identity and grades for non-widening participation students. For this group, the strength of their consumer identity did not moderate the relation between their university student identity and their grades. These findings need to be interpreted within the cultural context in which the data were collected: like previous research investigating the impacts of a consumer identity on student learning, the students in this study were enrolled in an institution situated in a mass-consumer society, Scotland, United Kingdom. However, a key difference in this context compared with other mass-consumer contexts is that tuition fees are government funded. Therefore, the context provided a natural comparator to research conducted in mass-consumer cultures where the individual student is responsible for their tuition costs.

These findings suggest that when widening participation students view their university education as a consumer, this undermines the positive influence of a university student identity on academic success. In this regard, our hypothesis was supported whereby the negative impact of a consumer identity was greater for widening participation students than for non-widening participation students. A consumer identity, as conceptualised and measured in this study according to Saunders (2015), includes a pragmatic view of learning predominantly as a means to an end, notably, a well-paid job. This is in direct contrast to valuing the intrinsic rewards of a university education in terms of enhancing cognitive skills and intellectual development. A consumer identity is also characterised by a sense of entitlement to receive good grades despite minimal academic effort, reflecting an expectation of a return on investment (time) without necessarily engaging in learning. Finally, this identity also involves the belief that responsibility for obtaining graduate employment rests primarily on the institution, rather than acknowledging their own active role in developing skills and career planning. The attitudes and beliefs associated with a consumer identity, at least for widening participation students, seem to over-ride the positive impact of a university student identity, with its emphasis on a sense of community and pride in belonging to a group of students studying within a particular discipline. This over-riding effect may be particularly pronounced for widening participation students owing to the additional social identity conflicts and identity incompatibilities that they face compared to their non-widening participation peers (Jones et al., 2025; Friend, 2021; Walker et al., 2025). For example, they face more direct contrasts between their home identities and their university identities, such as those relating to socio-economic background or prior educational experiences. Therefore, for widening participation students, the development of a strong consumer identity seems to be particularly harmful to their university student identity.

This raises interesting issues regarding the extent to which widening participation students adopt a consumer identity relative to their peers, and the potential differences in aetiology of a consumer identity among both student groups. It could be argued that widening participation students are *less* likely to adopt a consumer identity because they have overcome greater obstacles to reach university and may have a stronger appreciation of the educational opportunity afforded by a degree. Yet, the mean consumer identity scores for widening participation and non-widening participation students in our sample were not statistically different. Alternatively, perhaps the pervasiveness of mass-consumer culture with its neoliberal ideology exerts a stronger influence on students' adoption of a consumer identity than an individual's widening participation status or socio-economic background. This suggests that consumerism is more of a reflection on how institutions – and society more generally – frames the purpose of higher education.

Although there were no significant differences in our data regarding the extent to which a consumer identity was adopted between widening participation students and their peers, nonetheless, there might be different mechanisms responsible for its development among the two groups. Given the greater identity conflicts that widening participation students experience, embracing a consumer identity may provide a strategy that enables them to manage the conflict between their being at university and the belief that university is not for *people like them*. For example, identifying as a consumer would enable them to manage the stereotype threat that they are not expected to perform as well as their peers because it places responsibility for academic performance externally on the institution or their tutor, as opposed to on themselves. This may be an effective way of reconciling being awarded low grades with their high aspirations (Walker et al., 2025) and could even be used to mask their identity as a widening participation student.

In contrast, for non-widening participation students, developing a consumer identity may be influenced by the more general cultural context in terms of studying in a mass-consumer society. The way in which institutions operate within this neoliberal culture means that they compete for students by promoting branding and league tables, define and treat students as consumers, and link academic success to a return on investment (e.g., employment rates or future earnings: Saunders, 2015). This may lead to students uncritically evaluating their educational experience in economic terms rather than intellectual development terms. This environment may feel more comfortable for non-widening participation students because it aligns with their preexisting understanding of education as the primary key to future success.

However, an unexpected finding for non-widening participation students was that a consumer identity did not have a harmful effect on the relation between a university student identity and grades, even at high levels of consumer identity – indeed, there was no interaction between consumer identity and university student identity, or a direct effect of consumer identity on grades. This null finding runs counter to previous research showing that a consumer identity has a negative impact on grades by way of interfering with a student learner identity (Bunce et al., 2017; Bunce & Bennett, 2021; Platow et al., 2025). A possibility might be because non-widening participation students often come from more educationally advantaged backgrounds and are more socialised into academic norms. This may mean that they are better equipped to hold a consumer identity without it interfering with their academic performance. Indeed, Taylor Bunce et al (2023) found that a substantial proportion of students held both a strong student identity and learner identity, suggesting that these can, and often do, co-occur. Identifying as a consumer may even increase students' assertiveness in terms of ensuring they utilise all the services available, such as one-to-one tutorials during office hours, extra study services, which help their grades and reduce, or in this case, remove the negative impact of a consumer identity. In support of this suggestion, Platow et al. (2025) found that a consumer identity was not necessarily associated with poorer learning outcomes in the presence of deep-learning norms (e.g., learning attitudes and behaviours that favoured meaning making and critical thinking). Thus, it seems important to assess learning norms alongside student identities, in addition to taking into account widening participation status to explore these issues further.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the findings from this study apply to a specific cultural context, Scotland. In this context, students were situated in a mass-consumer society, yet were not traditional consumers of their education in the sense that their tuition fees were funded by the government and not themselves. However, the extent to which students in this study adopted a

consumer identity was comparable to research in fee-paying contexts, notably, England (Bunce & Bennett, 2021, $M = 2.37$, $SD = .77$; Bunce et al. 2017, $M = 2.53$, $SD = .85$). This suggests that the broader mass-consumer culture, rather than whether individual students were responsible for their tuition, may have been a primary driver in terms of the ways in which students framed their educational identities.

Limitations and Future Research

Treating widening participation students as a homogenous group overlooks the significant heterogeneity within this population. Factors such as socioeconomic background (e.g., working-class origin), ethnicity, age, and gender are independently associated with variations in academic grades (Richardson et al., 2020). Crucially, the unique intersections of these characteristics likely combine to create complex and potentially compounded effects on student outcomes. While this study did not explore these interactions, future research could investigate these identities and their combined influences on the relation between student identities and grades. Understanding these intersecting inequalities is essential, as their impact may differ significantly from the effects of individual variables. The cross-sectional nature of the design limits the ability to establish causality or understand the development of these identities and their impact on grades over time. It is unclear, for example, whether a strong university student identity precedes or is a consequence of grades: Platow et al. (2013) used a longitudinal design and found that Semester 1 grades for first year psychology students actually predicted the strength of social identification in Semester 2. Although their sample size was very small ($n = 42$), which limits the generalisability of their findings, the direction of identity effects would be important for future research to explore.

Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, our data demonstrate the important relation between having a strong university student identity and academic grades, particularly for widening participation students. This points to the importance of structures that help widening participation students to feel like they belong at university. This could include mentoring programs or resources that spell out institutional language and processes, alongside a curriculum that is inclusive and diverse, which represents them (Neves & Brown, 2022). Simultaneously, it is important to support these students to resist developing a strong identity as an educational consumer, as this has a detrimental effect on the positive impact of a student identity on grades.

While work targeted specifically at widening participation students may be appropriate in some cases, this simply risks increasing the already heavy workload of these students in relation to navigating their sense of fit and identity in the higher education environment. Instead, we advocate for an approach that includes *all* students and is timetabled into the curriculum to enable structured conversations about identities. For example, Taylor (2022) has developed materials for educators to lead a workshop with students to enable students to critically reflect on their student 'learner' and consumer identities. These types of activities may go some way towards beginning to address the identity conflicts addressed here. However, structural barriers also urgently need to be addressed to enable so-called widening participation students to feel like being a university student is a natural part of their identity.

Conclusion

This study provides a novel contribution to our understanding of the impact of student identities on grades in an established mass-consumer society, but one in which students are not economic consumers of their education owing to government-funded tuition. In particular, our study highlights differential contributions of identity processes for widening participation and non-widening participation students in this context. Widening participation status interacted with consumer identity and affected the strength of the relation between university student identity and grades. For widening participation students, the positive relation between university student identity and grades was confirmed when students had a weak consumer identity, but it reduced (in fact, disappeared) in the presence of a strong consumer identity. For non-widening participation students, contrary to expectation, there was no effect of consumer identity on grades, nor on the relation between university student identity and grades. Thus, our hypothesis was supported whereby a consumer identity had a more harmful effect on widening participation students than their peers. Nonetheless, the results suggest that widening participation students specifically are most likely to do well when they embrace their identity as a university student and resist neoliberal discourse that positions them as consumers of their education. Unfortunately, the additional identity conflicts and incompatibilities that these students face means that they have to use cognitive and affective resources to navigate these tensions that could otherwise be used for studying. Our findings provide clear implications for practice and policy relating to the need to support students to develop a strong university student identity to maximize the chances of academic success.

Acknowledgements

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. The authors used ChatGPT to support grammar and conciseness after writing the final draft. The authors list the following CRediT contributions: **Jones:** Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft. **Taylor:** Conceptualisation, Resources, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. **Johnson:** Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for their astute comments in shaping this manuscript.

References

- Bliuc, A. M., Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P., & Hendres, D. M. (2011). The role of social identification as a university student in learning: Relationships between students' social identity, approaches to learning, and academic achievement. *Educational Psychology*, 31(5), 559–574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2011.585948>
- Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. E. (2017). The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42, 1958–1978. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908>
- Bunce, L., & Bennett, M. (2021). A degree of studying? Approaches to learning among undergraduate student 'consumers'. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 22(3), 203–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787419860204>

- Chen, S., Binning, K. R., Manke, K. J., Brady, S., McGreevy, E. M., Betancur, L., & Kaufmann, N. (2020). Am I a science person? A strong science identity bolsters minority students' sense of belonging and performance in college. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(4), 593–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220936480>
- Cohen, G. L., & Garcia, J. (2008). Identity, belonging, and achievement: A model, interventions, implications. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(6), 365–369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00607.x>
- Danvers, E., & Hinton-Smith, T. (2021). The shifting subjectification of the 'widening participation' student: The affective world of the 'deserving' consumer. In R. Brooks & S. O'Shea (Eds.), *Reimagining the Higher Education Student* (pp. 62–78). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367854171-5>
- Doosje, B., Ellemers, N., & Spears, R. (1995). Perceived intragroup variability as a function of group status and identification. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 31(5), 410–436. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jesp.1995.1018>
- Easterbrook, M. J., & Hadden, I. R. (2021). Tackling educational inequalities with social psychology: Identities, contexts, and interventions. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12070>
- Friend, K. L. (2021). The creation of social networks: Social capital and the experiences of widening participation students at three elite institutions in the US, England, and Scotland. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 29(3), 359–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1735496>
- Gibson, S., Baskerville, D., Berry, A., Black, A., Norris, K., & Symeonidou, S. (2016). 'Diversity' 'widening participation' and 'inclusion' in higher education: An international study, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 18(3), 7–33. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.18.3.7>
- Griffin, S. M., Lebedová, A., Cruwys, T., McMahon, G., Foran, A. M., Skrodzka, M., Gallagher, S., Ginty, A. T., & Muldoon, O. T. (2025). Identity change and the transition to university: Implications for cortisol awakening response, psychological well-being and academic performance. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 17(1), e12608. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12608>
- Grozev, V. H., & Easterbrook, M. J. (2024). Can social identities improve working students' academic and social outcomes? Lessons from three studies. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), 939. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090939>
- Haslam, S. A. (2017). The social identity approach to education and learning: Identification, ideation, interaction, influence and ideology. In K. I. Mavor, M. J. Platow, & B. Bizumic (Eds.), *Self and Social Identity in Educational Contexts* (pp. 19-51). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hayes, A. F. (2017). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-based Approach* (3rd Ed.). Guilford publications. <https://www.guilford.com/books/Introduction-to-Mediation-Moderation-and-Conditional-Process-Analysis/Andrew-Hayes/9781462549030>
- HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) (2024). Higher Education Student Data, Retrieved 29 January 2025 from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>
- Jetten, J., Iyer, A., & Zhang, A. (2017). The educational experience of students from low socio-economic status background. In K. I. Mavor, M. J. Platow, & B. Bizumic (Eds.), *Self and*

- Social Identity in Educational Contexts* (pp. 112–125). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746913-ch6>
- Jetten, J., Iyer, A., Tsivrikos, D., & Young, B. M. (2008). When is individual mobility costly? The role of economic and social identity factors. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 38(5), 866–879. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.471>
- Jones, S. E., Appleby, J., Sartore, V., Lola-Luz, D., & Camus, L. (2025). 'Uplifting all voices within education': What fosters widening participation students' sense of inclusion in higher education? *Equity in Education and Society*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27526461251316591>
- Larsen, A., & James, T. (2022). A sense of belonging in Australian higher education: the significance of self-efficacy and the student-educator relationship. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 19(4). <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss4/05>
- Leaney, S., & Mwale, S. (2021). Campus closures and the devaluing of emplaced higher education: Widening participation in neoliberal times. *Higher Education*, 82(5), 977–992. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00696-6>
- Neves, J., & Brown, A. (2022, June 9). *Student academic experience survey 2022*. Advance HE & Higher Education Policy Institute. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey.pdf>
- Osborne, M. (2003). Increasing or widening participation in higher education?: A European overview. *European Journal of Education*, 38(1), 5–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1503479>
- Platow, M. J., Mavor, K. I., & Grace, D. M. (2013). On the role of discipline-related self-concept in deep and surface approaches to learning among university students. *Instructional Science*, 41, 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-012-9227-4>
- Platow, M. J., Mavor, K. I., & Bizumic, B. (2017). Introducing self and social identity in educational contexts: Promoting learning, managing conflict, facilitating change. In K. I. Mavor, M. J. Platow, & B. Bizumic (Eds.), *Self and Social Identity in Educational Contexts* (pp. 3–18). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746913-ch1>
- Platow, M. J., Lee, G. C., Wang, C., Grace, D., Knezovic, M., Smyth, L. & Mavor, K. (2025). The role of student and customer social identification on university students' learning approaches and psychological well-being. *Social Psychology of Education*, 28, 100. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10060-6>
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, D. J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925>
- Richardson, J. T. E., Mittelmeier, J., & Rienties, B. (2020). The role of gender, social class and ethnicity in participation and academic attainment in UK higher education: An update. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(3), 346–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1702012>
- Saunders, D. B. (2015). They do not buy it: Exploring the extent to which entering first-year students view themselves as customers. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 25(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2014.969798>
- Smith, S., & Watson, S. (2022). Experiences of belonging: A comparative case study between China-domiciled and UK-domiciled students. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 19(4). <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss4/12>

- Smyth, L., Mavor, K. I., & Gray, L. R. (2019). Not just who you are, but who you were before: Social identification, identity incompatibility, and performance undermining learning behavior in higher education. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 29(6), 474–491. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2413>
- Smyth, L., Mavor, K. I., Platow, M. J., Grace, D. M., & Reynolds, K. J. (2015). Discipline social identification, study norms and learning approach in university students. *Educational Psychology*, 35(1), 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2013.822962>
- Smyth, L., Mavor, K. I., & Platow, M. J. (2017) Learning behaviour and learning outcomes: the roles for social influence and field of study. *Social Psychology of Education*, 20, 69–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-016-9365-7>
- Spencer, S. J., Logel, C., & Davies, P. G. (2016). Stereotype threat. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 67, 415–437. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-073115-103235>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin & (Eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson Hall.
- Taylor, L. (2022). *Balancing students' identities as learners and consumers: Advance HE toolkit*, Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/balancing-students-identities-learners-and-consumers>
- Taylor Bunce, L., Bennett, M., & Jones, S. E. (2022). The relation between discipline identity and academic achievement within a marketized higher education context: A serial mediation model of approaches to learning and course complaints. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13:749436. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.749436>
- Taylor Bunce, L., Rathbone, C., & King, N. (2023). Students as consumers: A barrier for student engagement? In T. Lowe (Ed.), *Advancing Student Engagement in Higher Education* (pp. 71–81). Routledge.
- Veldman, J., Meeussen, L., & van Laar, C. (2019). A social identity perspective on the social-class achievement gap: Academic and social adjustment in the transition to university. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 22(3), 403–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218813442>
- Vignoles, A., & Murray, N. (2016). Widening participation in higher education. *Education Sciences*, 6(2), 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci6020013>
- Walker, S., Campbell, S., Smyth, L., Platow, M. J., Venville, G., & Willis, T. (2025). 'Why can't people see or understand or make that effort to see who I am?': Documenting the experiences of low socioeconomic students at an elite tertiary institution through a social identity lens. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52(2), 1663–1683. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00780-7>