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Reimagining the independent learner for the massified university: Motivations and constraints in the learning strategies of high-potential widening participation undergraduates

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

This paper critically interrogates 'independent learning' as the commonly invoked 'ideal' learning strategy for student success in higher education. While the term typically denotes a self-directed and self-motivated learning provision, it can also be seen as upholding certain assumptions and expectations that reflect higher education's history as the preserve of white, male elites (Leathwood, 2006). But what does efficacious independent learning actually mean in an increasingly massified and employability-driven sector? To what extent does this model privilege certain student profiles and backgrounds above others?

Our research draws on a 3-year qualitative longitudinal study of the motivations and learning strategies of 25 undergraduates, drawing on a sample of academic excellence scholarship awardees from a range of socioeconomic and ethnicity backgrounds. Findings reveal a more nuanced and pragmatic picture of independent learning, while identifying how misapplications of the concept and differential resourcing may contribute to longstanding degree awarding gaps.