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Motivation, Markets and Meaning Perceptions of Higher Education in Students at Traditional and Local Universities in England and Cuba

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Abstract

This article reports research exploring students' perceptions of higher education in traditional and local universities in England and Cuba. The study has explored parallels identified in the course of research-informed teaching that harvested qualitative questionnaire data from students at two English universities. One a Traditional (high-status and elite) institution, the other a Local (post-92 widening participation) university. This data was analysed in relation to pre-existing qualitative data from two Cuban universities with similar profiles. Thematic analysis extrapolates parallels in relation to students' experiences and motivations, and considers the relative impact of political culture, systems of access and choice, and the community character of each of the institutions. Key findings suggest that the marketisation of the system in England provides choice that is dependent on (and therefore reinforces) socio-economic status. They further suggest that both a participatory political culture and local modes of study can be effective in developing perceptions of higher education that are more closely aligned with social contribution and the collective good.



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Introduction

The empirical research that underpins this study emerged organically from research-based teaching and collaboration. In 2019, the authors designed undergraduate teaching focussing on traditional and local higher education in Cuba. This was based on testimony collected in two qualitative studies by one of the authors between 2009 and 2019 (Smith). The same teaching content was used with students at two universities in England – one a traditional Russell Group institution and the other a Local post-92 inner-city university with a strong widening participation agenda and community focus. In the discussions that took place in these sessions, striking cross-overs emerged in relation to the demographics and life experiences of the student cohorts at these institutions and those who studied in Cuba, which were also reflected in students' evident identification with the interview testimony they were studying. These cross-overs gave rise to questions about the significance of culture, political system, class, place and life-stage in students' understanding of the purpose and meaning of higher education.

In order to investigate these intersections and, vitally, to complete the circle of reflection by communicating the experiences of the students at the two universities in England to Cuban participants, a simple questionnaire tool was used to collect responses on three key areas that had emerged from the sessions, which were then discussed with Cuban students as part of a series of workshops conducted later in 2019. This article explores these themes by comparing the questionnaire responses with interview data from students in Cuba that had formed the basis of the original taught sessions.

This research trajectory – building the snapshot of English experience into completed and ongoing research in Cuba – necessarily implies methodological (and therefore analytical) issues. Differences in the forms of data collection (lengthy semi-structured interviews versus short questionnaires) and the depth of that data (the two studies on Cuba were conducted over ten years in total and included nearly 350 interviews) means that linear quantitative comparison is impossible. The authors believe, however, that these limitations are more than outweighed by the integrity of research developed through practice and in genuine dialogue with participants, and by the strength and richness of the shared themes that emerged, which show clear avenues for future research. By foregrounding the voices of students and starting from their shared experiences in different contexts, particularly in terms of collective citizen identity, the key elements of difference and the impact of policy choices are made clear. These are the spaces where educators in England who are committed to genuinely widening participation can learn from Cuban experiences, despite their radically different social and political contexts.

University Systems in England and Cuba

The countries' contrasting socio-political and economic environments arise fundamentally from histories lived out on opposite sides of colonisation. England's colonial and industrial past provided the basis for its highly-developed economy, deeply embedded in capitalist neoliberal relations of production. Political representation is based on 'first past the post' elections of local councillors and Members of Parliament within a system of constitutional monarchy. Importantly, England has long-established state institutions that, in education, comprise a universal system of compulsory schooling in which state and private providers run side-by-side, with only the state sector required to adhere to the centrally imposed National Curriculum. State primary and

secondary education are free at the point of delivery, while universities charge tuition fees of up to £9,250 per year.

Cuba's economic development, in contrast, has historically been limited by its reliance on sugar production and export, creating dependence on a series of purchasing countries – Spain during the colonial period, the United States from 1898 until 1959, the socialist Eastern Bloc during the 1970s and 80s and (to a lesser extent) Venezuela in the 2000s (Morris, 2014), by which time tourism and medical internationalism were contributing more than the sugar industry to the nation's economy (Kirk, 2009; Blue, 2010). This economic dependency and the legacies of European colonialism, common to many countries in Latin America, has been exacerbated in Cuba by six decades of the embargo imposed by the United States and its economic partners. Its centrally-planned, socialist economy, almost exclusively state-run after the Revolutionary Offensive of 1968, has, since the 1990s, functioned alongside an active sector of small private businesses and larger state-foreign investor partnerships (Kapcia, 2021; Morris, 2014). The one political party (the Cuban Communist Party) retains control of ideological direction and drives policy, while political representation is based on direct elections (competitive at the local and provincial and non-competitive at the national level) and on grassroots participation through mass organisations (Roman, 2021; Collins, 2017). Primary and secondary education are obligatory, with the state the sole educational provider, and a single, centrally-imposed curriculum. Education at primary, secondary and university levels is free at the point of delivery, and pre-school education is predominantly delivered at home and in local communities through the free *Educa a tu Hijo* (Educate Your Child) programme.

These distinct histories have inevitably given rise to very different higher education systems. Higher education in the UK has two important characteristics. First, the countries that constitute the UK have distinct university systems; hence, we need to specify that our interest here is England only. Second, universities in England are, both, stratified and differentiated, creating a complexity that needs to be introduced and defined to contextualise the perceptions we report later in this article.

Stratification refers to the binary of traditional and non-traditional. Élite older universities, sometimes referred to as pre-92, were established often centuries ago for a small minority to access; new universities, commonly referred to as post-92 institutions, are based on civic principles and widening participation. The year 1992 is significant for the formation of the modern university sector because it was then that polytechnics and colleges of higher education were granted university status, with the aim of creating an expanded higher education sector. This expansion paved the way for a political commitment, from all subsequent governments, to widening participation to non-traditional students at university level education.

There is also significant differentiation within each of the two groups of universities. While all pre-92 universities are generally more elite and more globally-facing than the post-92 institutions, *within* this group of pre-92 universities there are considerable differences. For example, the Russell Group is a self-selected association of 24 institutions that have very selective admission criteria and have the resources to focus intensively on research, as well as on high-quality teaching. Further differentiation exists within this elite grouping, with an intra-grouping, known colloquially as the Golden Triangle, or Loxbridge, that consists of Oxford, Cambridge and select London-based universities.

Despite a market promoting and political proclamations that emphasise student choice and ‘meritocracy’ (e.g., BIS, 2016), as well as an explicit duty on universities to promote a widening participation agenda, the social class demographics of these institutions differ significantly. Generally, the older, more élite and more globally competitive an institution is, the less working-class its student body. Such is the seriousness of this situation that the most selective universities have had to employ contextual admission as part of their attempt to diversity the study profile (see The Sutton Trust, 2021).

Cuba also has a two-tier university system, although the division sprang from very different causes. When the revolutionary government took power in 1959, they inherited a university system that was elitist and small (Rodríguez, 2012) – just 16,000 students at seven universities in 1956-7 (MES, 2019). Over the subsequent three decades, undergraduate enrolments increased twelve-fold (MES, 2019), with a university founded in each provincial capital. The system was founded on social utility, prioritising medicine, teaching, and agriculture (Lutjens, 2019; Rodríguez, 2012), in order to facilitate its social programmes and combat the ‘brain-drain’ caused by middle-class migration (Kapcia, 2010).

Universalising first primary then basic secondary education provided opportunities for those people previously marginalised by geography, ethnicity and class. These factors are impossible to extricate when trying to understand Cuba, where the huge disparity of wealth and opportunity between urban and rural areas has never been entirely erased, despite having been a long-standing policy priority, especially during the 1960s and 2000s (Kapcia, 2010; Íñiguez, 2015). An additional complication is that the government’s historical reluctance to foreground issues of ‘race’ has meant that scholars have frequently had to interpret them through the proxies of class and geography (Morales, 2013; Íñiguez, 2015). Many of those newly able to access schooling then moved into higher education, with 62% of university students in the late 1980s having parents involved in manual work (Domínguez, 2005).

After the US embargo, however, the resources needed to provide this level of higher education (and the jobs guaranteed on graduation) relied on Cuba’s relationship with the USSR. The economic and social consequences for Cuba of the collapse of the Socialist Bloc were devastating across all sectors (Kapcia, 2021). While health and schools continued to be prioritised (Christiansen and Leonard, 2019; Griffiths and Williams, 2014), leading to Human Development Index (HDI) outcomes far stronger than those of ‘transition’ countries in Europe (Morris, 2014; UNDP, 2020), higher education suffered. The 1990s saw undergraduate student places fall by two-thirds and, as in other sectors of society, pre-revolution inequalities began to re-intensify, leaving the student body smaller, whiter, more urban and more middle-class in 2000 than it had been a decade earlier (Domínguez, 2005; MES, 2019).

From 2002, local university sites, designed to address social inequality and re-integrate marginalised groups, were set up in every one of Cuba’s 169 municipalities under the umbrella of the provincial institutions (Hernández and Benítez, 2006) and, by their peak in 2007-8, undergraduate enrolments reached over 700,000, falling again throughout the 2010s as the programme was rolled-back (MES, 2019). Students attending these local university centres were part-time, often with work or family responsibilities; they enrolled via access courses, not entrance exams; teachers were generally also part-time and less qualified than at traditional universities; fewer subjects were offered and university centres were almost exclusively associated with

teaching, as opposed to research (Smith, 2019). These differences, along with associated concerns around quality and relevance to available employment, led to a frequent perception that the local university centres had been a failure (Núñez, 2018). They were, however, highly successful in widening participation; among students of the local centres in 2003-4, for example, just 14% of students had a mother who had attended university and 17% a father who had done so (Tejuca et al. 2015, p.56). The changes nevertheless created a stratified system of full-time traditional universities, which came to be seen as more elite, and part-time community sites - a practical alternative for those unlikely to access higher education through any other route.

Access. In England, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is the primary system used to enrol at university. Prospective students list five universities in order of preference, and are accepted, rejected, or receive a conditional offer. Prestigious universities are therefore able to select the ‘best’ students: usually those students who have studied for, and excelled in, the highly regarded ‘academic’ traditional A-Level exams. Students who are rejected, fail to satisfy conditions of their offer, or make a late decision to apply, all have a second chance to enrol through clearing (a system for awarding unfilled places, usually to students with lower academic qualifications). This is an opportunity for the universities of lesser esteem in the elite and traditional stakes (i.e., not Loxbridge) to sweep up middle-class students.

In Cuba, local university sites operated a different entry system from that used in traditional universities. The traditional university system relies on academic selection, beginning at age 15, when students are allocated either to a ‘technical’ high school for a vocational qualification, or to a pre-university high school emphasising academic subjects. All pre-university students are guaranteed a university place if they pass the nationally standardised entrance exams, but numbers for each subject are capped and require different percentage scores for entry; some choose not to go to university at all rather than study an unpopular course, such as agriculture or teaching. The very highest performing students in technical schools and the ‘worker-farmer’ pathway may also sit the exams. At the end of technical school or university, students are allocated a job that is (at least ostensibly) related to their degree or vocational course. Until the advent of the local university centres, this essentially meant that a student’s professional possibilities were pre-determined at an early stage, and the move in the late 1980s and 1990s to offer more places in technical schools and fewer in pre-university high schools was profoundly unpopular and meant that many young people who might have expected to access higher education no longer had the chance to do so (Eckstein, 1997; Gómez, 2011).

This situation changed with the advent of the local university centres. They offered new routes into study, all specifically for residents of that municipality, notably schemes for unemployed young people and for sugar workers at risk of redundancy, which paid a basic salary to study. These courses (comparable to Access programmes in England) awarded high school equivalence and, importantly and controversially, granted access to the local university centre without taking entrance exams (Luis Luis, 2016). The subjects offered also included popular courses, such as those in the social sciences, without caps on numbers, giving marginalised groups potentially privileged access (Hernández and Benítez, 2006). Unlike in the traditional universities, however, there was no guarantee of a relevant job on completion (Luis Luis, 2016).

Fees and funding. A key distinction between the English and Cuban systems is the way that higher education is funded. In England, students at almost every university pay £9,250 per

year for a three-year degree (generally via student loans at commercial interest rates, paid back once a baseline of earnings is reached). The market-place in England forces universities to compete to attract students, because more students equate to more money – essential in the context of reduced public spending; international students (who pay higher fees) are the ‘premium’ customers (Maisuria and Cole, 2017).

In Cuba, university tuition is free for all, along with accommodation and food for those who study away from home. While embodying an ideological commitment to education as an entitlement, rather than a commodity, policy has also consistently recognised the economic necessity of developing *human capital* in a country where industrial capacity is limited (Fitzgerald, 1994; Núñez, 2018). Free and accessible education is also an investment in cultivating consent for the system among young Cubans, despite restrictions on individual economic and civic freedoms. At the point the local universities were most massive, almost 60% of young Cubans identified education as the main benefit they received from the Revolution (Castilla and Domínguez, 2011). Free tuition does not necessarily mean, however, that everyone can afford to attend university, as associated costs, particularly transport, are prohibitive for many; eliminating the need for long-distance travel was a key factor in the increased access offered by local university centres (Smith, 2019). With the state bearing the full cost of university tuition, the increased enrolments in the 2000s led to a concomitant increase in investment, and government spending on higher education increased from 0.8% of GDP in 1998 to 5.2% in 2008 (MES, 2019).

Choice and markets. Since 1992, a driver of education policy in England has been an ideological commitment to expand the marketization of higher education, achieved through creating more universities, private and state-run, and granting further and technical colleges university status. This move has been publicly presented with the argument that creating more choice for students about where they want to study is about empowering them. There has also been a shift to reconfigure students to be like any other consumer, and this is now the dominant driver of much education policy-making. It is about allowing consumers of a commodity decide where they want to invest their capital – an approach based on neoclassical economics and rational choice theory, where the government creates markets for citizens to make best-interest judgements (see Maisuria and Cole, 2017).

Individual student choice has not been a significant priority for Cuban higher education during the revolutionary period. The reforms of the early 1960s addressed the failings of an individualistic pre-revolutionary system that offered a high-quality education that was tailored to the choices of its middle- and upper-class White students but failed to provide the teachers, doctors, scientists and agronomists needed to confront Cuba’s social and developmental challenges (MacDonald, 2009; Rodríguez, 2012). The new system determined the numbers of places available in each discipline, with a particular emphasis on health, education and agriculture. In the traditional HE sector, the same basic system is still in place. Students specify up to ten subjects they would like to study, in order of preference, before taking their entrance examinations. The numbers of places on each course are capped, and each subject requires a different percentage score on the entrance examination.

Nor do Cuban students generally choose where to study. There are 15 universities in provincial capitals, plus numerous specialist institutes for specific sectors, equating to 50 higher education institutions in total (MES, 2019). After the examination process, students are allocated

a place at the nearest university offering their degree subject, usually the university in their provincial capital, and students from the city in which they are to study are expected to continue to live with their families. It is common to travel further afield for more prestigious subjects, such as foreign languages (which offer the potential to work in the lucrative tourist sector) and medicine (which, while only attracting a state wage, is highly respected and frequently leads to opportunities to travel as part of Cuba’s extensive programme of medical internationalism) (Blue, 2010; Baggott and Lambie, 2018). Before the local university centres, this meant that it was far more difficult for those living in isolated areas, where transport made reaching even the provincial capital a significant challenge, to consider studying a competitive subject that might only be offered, for example, at the three most established universities – Havana (the capital), Las Villas and Oriente (Santiago de Cuba). Students entering university through the local university sites were only eligible to study in their own municipality but, unless limited to courses related to their work, they were able to choose freely from the subjects offered in that municipality (Smith, 2019).

The Empirical Study

As outlined in the introduction, the data analysed here comes from three separate studies, covering four institutions. The four institutions studied (England Traditional, England Local, Cuba Traditional and Cuba Local) offer comparisons through cross-overs and divergent characteristics including: political system, age, geography, diversity, mode of study and socio-economic status. These cross-overs are illustrated in Figure One, while Table One details the data collection undertaken at each institution.

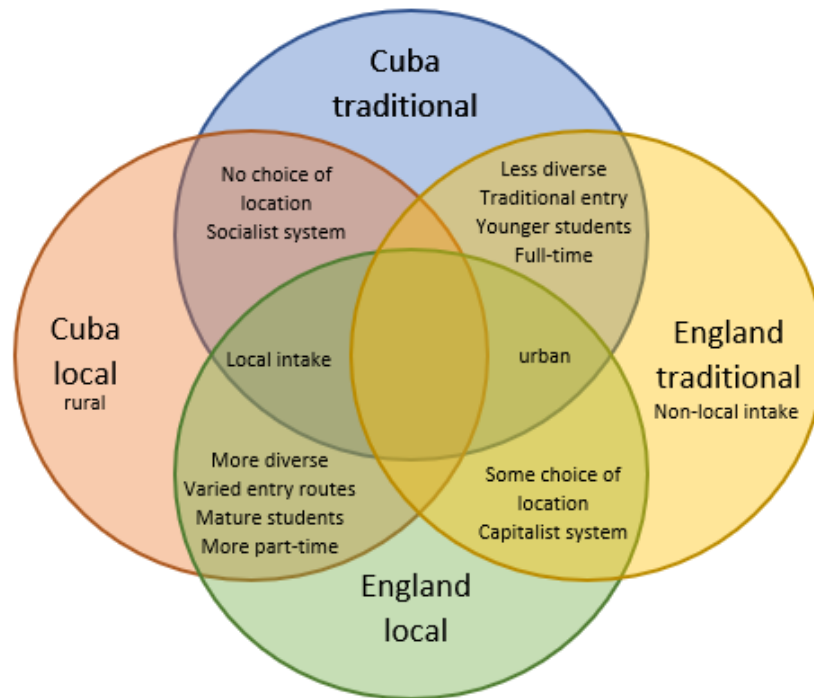


Figure 1. Cross-overs between the four institutions in this study

Table 1: Data collection

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Characterisation</i>	<i>Research undertaken</i>	<i>Sample</i>
<i>Cuba Traditional</i>	Specific diversity statistics not available.	Fieldwork conducted 2010-13, reported in Smith 2016. 101 Semi-structured interviews on education, values and identity, including views on higher education (Smith, 2016).	16 interviews selected as valid for this study. All were studying/had studied full time at Cuba Traditional across a range of subjects within the period 2002-2012. None were mature students, all but one were local and all entered university through the traditional route.
<i>Cuba Local</i>	Specific diversity statistics not available.	Fieldwork conducted 2016-2019. 241 Semi-structured interviews on experiences of and views on higher education (2019).	99 interviews selected as valid for this study. All had studied part-time at one of five of Cuba Local's sites in a predominantly rural/mountainous province, across a range of subjects within the period 2002-2012. All were mature students, entering through the non-traditional access routes outlined above.
<i>England Traditional</i>	Russell Group 34,000 students 91% under 21 76% White 20% private education	2019 Three-question, open-response questionnaire, submitted anonymously. <i>Why did you decide to go to university?</i> <i>Why did you choose to go to X university?</i> <i>In your opinion, what is the purpose of higher education?</i>	12 responses. All were full-time, final year students of modern languages. None were from the local area, none were mature students and all had entered through the A-Level route. Convenience sample – group taught the sessions on Cuba that gave rise to the study.
<i>England Local</i>	Post-92 inner-city 40% part time, 70% 'mature' 39% White, 0.2% private education 74% local	2019 Three-question, open-response questionnaire, submitted anonymously. <i>Why did you decide to go to university?</i> <i>Why did you choose to go to X university?</i> <i>In your opinion, what is the purpose of higher education?</i>	40 responses. All second-year students of Education Studies. Most were local. Mixture of mature and younger students, full- and part-time, entering through traditional and access routes. Convenience sample – group was taught sessions on Cuba that gave rise to this study.

Data analysis. Interview transcripts and questionnaires for each institution were coded by emergent themes. Historical data from the two Cuban studies (where coding already existed) were reviewed first according to the three questions used in the English study. This was done in order to avoid unconscious selection of only that data from the richer Cuban sources that reflected the more limited data-set from England. The two sets of English data were separately coded by each of the authors. Finally, the coding was brought together to identify common themes across the studies and institutions.

Direct quotations from the Cuban data used in the analysis and reflection have been anonymised and are referred to by CL (Cuba Local) or CT (Cuba Traditional) and the participant’s interview number (from the original projects, see Smith, 2016, 2019). Table Two, below, gives these numbers, along with the participants’ characteristics, which are also provided in footnotes for ease of reference. Responses from England Local and England Traditional students were submitted anonymously via questionnaires (therefore data regarding individual characteristics is not available) and are also referred to in the text by EL (England Local) or ET (England Traditional) and their questionnaire number.

Table 2: Cuban participants

Interview no.	Characteristics
CL172	Socio-cultural studies graduate; librarian; semi-urban, coastal municipality.
CL183	Law graduate; social worker; rural, coastal municipality.
CL195	Law graduate; women’s organisation leader; rural, coastal municipality.
CL44	Agricultural engineering graduate; food cooperative; rural, mountainous municipality.
CL173	Sociocultural studies graduate; cultural centre director; semi-urban, coastal municipality
CL88	Law graduate and practising lawyer; dept. of education; urban municipality.
CL27	Accountancy graduate; finance specialist; rural, mountainous municipality.
CL28	Accountancy graduate; accountant; rural, mountainous municipality.
CT25	Languages graduate; university lecturer and translator; major city.
CT2	Biochemistry graduate; unemployed; major city.
CL86	Law graduate; lawyer; urban municipality.
CL1	Socio-cultural studies graduate; librarian; rural, mountainous municipality.
CL36	Accountancy, tour guide; rural, mountainous municipality.
CL90	Socio-cultural studies graduate; lawyer; urban municipality.
CL104	Socio-cultural studies graduate; literary researcher; urban municipality.
CL34	Socio-cultural studies graduate; tourist shop worker; rural, mountainous municipality.
CL41	Agro-industrial engineering; technician at sugar mill; rural, mountainous municipality.
CT7	Accountancy graduate; accountant; major city.
CL11	Socio-cultural studies graduate; local government management role; rural, mountainous municipality.
CL38	Agro-industrial engineering; technician at sugar mill; rural, mountainous municipality.
CT33	Science student; current student at time of interview; major city.
CL32	Socio-cultural studies graduate; cultural promoter; rural, mountainous municipality.

Analysis and Reflection

Why did you decide to go to university? The first question to students at English institutions – ‘Why did you decide to go to university?’ – prompted answers that challenged the idea that it was a ‘decision’ at all. Among students at England Traditional, a recurrent response was that it was ‘the norm’ (ET9) or the ‘next natural step’ (ET8), seen as inevitable after A-Level qualifications. The assumption underlying these responses – i.e. that all those with who could attend university would – is lent credibility by responses from Cuba Local, where it appeared axiomatic that this opportunity would not be refused, with one interviewee explaining that ‘it was a door that was opened for us at a time when young people truly needed it. At that time, we didn’t have any options’ (CL172).¹ Those in remote areas, who had previously been unable to access higher education:

...[we] realized that it was within reach. That was the greatest benefit of universalisation [of education]. Because people would say, ‘Oh, but it’s so difficult to go to [provincial capital] once a week, the transport...’, but then when you have it right here in the palm of your hand, you say, ‘Maybe I won’t manage it, but I’m going to give it a try.’ (CL183)²

The group that had most consciously decided to attend university were those at England Local. In contrast to the students at England Traditional, where typically ‘both of my parents went to university, so I saw it as the next step after finishing school’ (ET12), the England Local sample frequently referred to ‘make[ing] my family proud’ (EL29) by being ‘the first child in my family to go to uni’ (EL39). Mature students with families of their own emphasised ‘set[ting] an example for my children and other family members’ (EL9) and ‘show[ing] my two daughters that education is important’ (EL4). This sense of creating new/different normative expectations of possible selves (Harrison and Waller, 2018) was also key for students of Cuba Local, where the expectation was that their educational successes would provide the same confidence and familial continuity experienced by students at England Traditional.

My eldest daughter is 17 now and she is proud that her mother is a graduate in law, and now she is studying to be a special needs teacher. (CL195)³

The knowledge that I have, I’m passing on to my children so that they can be professionals too and not get stuck in mediocrity. (CL44)⁴

Essentially, in both countries, the key difference between younger students coming directly from school and older students returning to education was that the first group saw university as a continuity, the second as a rupture. England Local students referred to being frustrated in previous jobs or of having ‘seen so many family members stuck in a job they despise, [and] I don’t want to go down the same path’ (EL18). At Cuba Local, the same need to redress previous missed opportunities was evident:

¹ Socio-cultural studies graduate; librarian; semi-urban, coastal municipality.

² Law graduate; social worker; rural, coastal municipality.

³ Law graduate; women’s organisation leader; rural, coastal municipality.

⁴ Agricultural engineering graduate; food cooperative; rural, mountainous municipality.

I'd been working for 19 harvests... but I had this itch that made me think about what I could achieve before I died... This itch was always bothering me and saying, 'You're going to retire without ever having studied', and when I saw this opportunity, it was like an open window. (CL173)⁵

These accounts reflected themes of self-esteem and self-efficacy. At Cuba Local, one interviewee explained that 'I used to look at my classmates from high school who were already studying at university and it was sort of like I thought of myself as less than them, knowing that I really could be doing something different' (CL88),⁶ while an England Local student returning to higher education similarly noted that 'after dropping out of university, I felt like a failure compared to my peers. Attending university and getting a degree were my attempt to "catch up". The professional benefits were simply a bonus' (EL31).

This student's assertion that 'the professional benefits were simply a bonus' was anomalous among responses at England Local, where the vast majority described entering or rising within the education profession as their main reason for studying, frequently with an emphasis on their increased earning potential. Typical motivations included 'want[ing] to pursue a career as a teacher and therefore need[ing] to have a degree' (EL6) and 'so I can make enough money for me and my daughter' (EL32). This contrasted with responses from students at England Traditional, none of whom gave job prospects as their principal motivation for university study, with some explicitly disavowing material motivations, stating that they had enrolled in order 'to study a subject I enjoy and am interested in – *not* linked to career choices at all' (ET4, emphasis in original). These differences could be explained in part by their degree (modern languages) being less explicitly tied to employability and a particular career than that of the students at England Local (Education Studies). Here, however, cause and effect are tricky to disentangle; the secure financial and social status of most at England Traditional offered scope to choose subjects on the basis of enjoyment, with many giving the chance to 'dedicate yourself to something you enjoy' (ET7) or 'study a subject you enjoy into great depth' (ET5) as a primary purpose of higher education. In contrast, the generally less wealthy students at England Local felt the pressures of cost, debt and responsibility more acutely and were compelled, therefore, to make more pragmatic choices, especially with reference to employability. Social status and milieu also operate here: although many England Traditional students had not yet decided on a future career, there was a greater sense of confidence in the *experience* of university facilitating future success, with several noting that 'ultimately, HE opens doors for you through connections/friends that you make' (ET8) and, specifically, that they would be able to rely on 'contacts in the future – [because of] England Traditional having useful links' (ET9).

Despite students at Cuba Local (unlike those at Traditional Cuban universities) not being guaranteed work upon graduation, they (like those at England Local) frequently saw changing jobs or progressing careers as the primary motivator. Those who were studying part-time alongside work often regarded the benefits in financial terms:

⁵ Sociocultural studies graduate; cultural centre director; semi-urban, coastal municipality

⁶ Law graduate and practising lawyer; dept. of education; urban municipality.

The position I have now is a graduate job. I'm a finance specialist and my salary is different since I was promoted. This has left me much better off economically, because initially I held a 'labourer' level job. (CL27)⁷

Yes, it was a huge change for me because I used to work in the warehouse on a pretty low salary and now I've got a graduate job with a pretty acceptable salary. (CL28)⁸

Students at Cuba Traditional also expressed concerns over their economic futures but – based in a large urban centre where the cost of living is far higher than in rural areas and provincial cities – they were less likely to see university study as a solution to these concerns. Although guaranteed graduate employment, the relative buying power of a state wage in a professional sector is so low in comparison to the 'dollar' income available through tourism and some forms of self-employment that it no longer meets even basic needs, meaning that many students could not afford to work in the area in which they had trained. As explained by one Cuba Traditional student:

Nowadays there are many graduates, very educated, very good, masters, doctors, who have to put away their papers and diplomas to work in something where they won't grow... Instead of continuing to develop in the subject that you studied, you decide not to do it because you see your dad or your uncle who is a doctor, who studied and who doesn't make enough [to live on]. (CT25)⁹

This disjunction between a degree and earning power, however, did not deter students from enrolling. Many Cuba Traditional students saw university study as a natural progression, even as a right, but they also cited the possible future value of their degrees if economic circumstances were to change or, particularly, if they were to move overseas (Smith, 2016:204), describing how:

[There's] this idea that here in Cuba studying is in vain lately: you can have a degree in your bag... but many people are calculating to give their lives another hope, which is getting out of the country. If it's with a university title, better, you might get a chance in another country and recognition. (CT2)¹⁰

Why did you decide to go to X university? As discussed earlier, Cuban students are either allocated a place at a traditional university or can attend a local university centre only in their own municipality, while 'choice' and 'markets' are watchwords in English higher education. Crucial for the focus on perceptions, it may at first appear that there is a clear divide based on the very existence of choice in the two countries. However, choice does not exist equally for all students in England, as revealed by the operating strategies of different universities.

Stratification within pre- and post-92 universities means that simple binaries are unlikely to capture the range of 'business models'. At their poles, however, the post-92 market claims to offer employability, while the pre-92 holds out a more ephemeral university 'experience'. Callender and Mason (2017) show working-class students to be more debt-averse than their middle-class peers, meaning that cost is an important factor in choice-making. Although almost all universities in England charge the maximum undergraduate tuition fees (£9,250) (see OfS,

⁷ Accountancy graduate; finance specialist; rural, mountainous municipality.

⁸ Accountancy graduate; accountant; rural, mountainous municipality.

⁹ Languages graduate; university lecturer and translator; major city.

¹⁰ Biochemistry graduate; unemployed; major city.

2019), some offer other material inducements. One England Local student explained their choice on the basis that ‘they give a scholarship and a free tablet’ (EL13), while others highlighted the affordability of their access provision, which took ‘only 12 weeks and £200, whereas other access courses are an entire year long and cost a year’s tuition fees’ (EL3). A clear difference between England Local and England Traditional was that England Local students were generally from the locality. Proximity was at the top of almost every respondent’s reasons for choosing England Local, with many selecting it ‘simply because it was in my area’ (EL34) or to ‘save travel money’ (EL38).

In contrast to England Traditional students, who were able to visit institutions across the country to evaluate universities against their personal preferences (regarding, for example, ‘The campus. The city. The night life. The reputation’ (ET5) and ‘Beauty of campus. Distance from home. Quality of university. Night life’ (ET9), most England Local students were limited to post-92 institutions within their city and, given that the institution had to be accessible, offer their chosen course and make them an achievable offer, many, in reality, had little choice. This limited choice was reflected in statements such as, ‘[poor results] axed the rest of my choices’ (EL35) and ‘I had personal issues with my parents, so I couldn’t go to [other local university]’ (EL13), or even ‘I did not choose England Local. England Local chose me’ (EL37).

Cuban students may not choose their institution, but, just as at England Local, where they offered a ‘[£200 access course] as a route into higher education that I had never heard of before’ (EL4), part-time, local study and access courses were repeated factors enabling those at Cuba Local to attend university, especially in the case of returning parents.

At 19 years old I had a child and I was pretty much stuck in the house, and then they opened these access courses and, since I already had my baccalaureate – my 12th grade – I went back into education, with this opportunity to study right here in the municipality. (CL86)¹¹

For someone with children and a house, with a husband to take care of, it would be really difficult, for example, to move to [provincial capital], which is where they used to study for degrees in the past – a superhuman effort. I think that out of ten maybe one managed it. (CL1)¹²

Others had missed out on their chance to study in the 1990s.

It was a really dark time for the Cuban economy and I left university and gave up my studies because of this issue of travelling and because I was one of four brothers – we were raised by a single mother, and for a single mother to maintain a university student in [large city] was very difficult, not to say practically impossible. (CL36)¹³

Despite gratitude for these opportunities, local university centres were acknowledged as a welcome, but not an equal, substitute for traditional university, which was still regarded as the ideal. One interviewee who had studied in both modalities stated:

¹¹ Law graduate; lawyer; urban municipality.

¹² Socio-cultural studies graduate; librarian; rural, mountainous municipality.

¹³ Accountancy, tour guide; rural, mountainous municipality.

The traditional full-time system is linked up to everything you need – everything is set up for you to be able to study... Most students of that age don't have children yet – they think they can change the world in just five years. The university is like a world that you fill and, if you get involved in it, it's a lovely world, and you can combine study with social responsibility. That's the full-time course. That's Cuba Traditional or the provincial university. But the course for workers is different... everything is your individual responsibility. (CL90)¹⁴

Some, however, noted that the reduced transport costs and the small wage paid through the access programmes were significant inducements and that some young people dropped out of pre-university high schools 'in order to go onto the access courses, because they were easier, you got paid – they gave you 150 pesos, you hung out there for a while and then you got to go to university (CL104).¹⁵

One benefit of studying locally is, of course, continuing to live in the family home, whether to avoid disruption to family life as a parent or carer, or to avoid greater debt for young students. While perceived as an advantage by students of Cuba Local and England Local, the reverse was true for England Traditional students, none of whom were local to the university, who saw university as a chance to 'leave home, [and gain] independence without a job' (ET9).

The differences reflect class background and life-stage; students at the local universities (generally older) emphasised integrating university into existing work and family lives, while England Traditional students spoke about it as clearly delineated from their former and future lives, providing an opportunity to experiment with adult identities. They felt unready to embark upon adult life, seeing university as a way to postpone adulthood and to practise adult skills and behaviours in a less threatening, more controlled setting, regarding it as 'a step between school and life' (ET8). These factors were given both as reasons for going to university and as the *purpose* of university itself.

To help me grow up. University is the perfect bridge between being a child and an independent adult. (ET10)

I, personally, didn't feel ready to step into the world as an adult, felt like the 'baby' of adult society. (ET8)

A crash course in many things before you reach the 'adult' world, such as learning from different perspectives, living with people from everywhere, budgeting and handling money, cooking and seeing where you want to go with your life really. (ET1)

This view of university as a discrete experience is clear in their reasons for selecting an institution. England Traditional students emphasised the social life and extracurricular activities offered by their chosen city. Place was equally important for England Traditional and England Local students, but their criteria were different. The most common factor for England Traditional students was 'fall[ing] in love with the campus' (ET8), with one explaining that 'as soon as I arrived on open day and saw the campus, I knew it had to be England Traditional' (ET10). England

¹⁴ Socio-cultural studies graduate; lawyer; urban municipality.

¹⁵ Socio-cultural studies graduate; literary researcher; urban municipality.

Traditional's campus is beautiful, set in acres of green land, consciously reflecting romanticised ideas of the cloistered traditional university.

Unfamiliarity had a romantic appeal for England Traditional students, who also often mentioned the chance to study abroad for a year, but for those at England Local the familiarity of the environment, especially its diverse demographic, reflective of the local area, was a draw. England Local students emphasised:

Diversity and provision of opportunities for adult learners. (EL5)

Location, attracting mature students. (EL9)

Its diversity and support. I knew that England Local has a range of students from different backgrounds and I knew that this would best reflect the kinds of people/places I wanted to work with. (EL17)

Students at both local universities (England Local and Cuba Local) valued teacher-student relationships, with students at England Local citing supportive teachers and a non-threatening environment at open-days as reasons for selecting the institution.

Compared to other universities, England Local supported all my doubts and questions. (EL28)

I really like the environment in which we learn. Lecture and seminar rooms and staff are all nice. Also, I got a nice vibe from the university. (EL39)

Provides good support to achieve my dreams. Flexibility and good resources. (EL7)

Diversity and support. (EL17)

[I] felt comfortable in the environment. (EL23)

Students at Cuba Local highlighted support from teachers (usually part-time and very often friends, neighbours and colleagues of the students) as a strength of the local institutions and as a key factor in maintaining their commitment.

The teachers gave us the opportunity to go to their houses at any time, whatever the hour. (CL34)¹⁶

I'd say that the great strength of this little group of teachers was that they didn't see it as something... they just did because they received a salary, but rather because they already saw us as family... My teacher rescued me any number of times... because you go through times of uncertainty, indecision, and she knocked on my door and told me,

No, the mission is that you graduate; it's to keep moving forward". Thanks to her help, at the moment when I needed this, maybe, emotional support... and what she gave me, other teachers gave me too. (CL41)¹⁷

Students at England Traditional placed greater emphasis on the university's status, referring to deliberately selecting an institution with a 'prestigious reputation – Russell Group' (ET8) and wanting to study at a 'good and widely acknowledged university' (ET6). As with comments on

¹⁶ Socio-cultural studies graduate; tourist shop worker; rural, mountainous municipality.

¹⁷ Agro-industrial engineering; management at sugar mill; rural, mountainous municipality.

‘connections’ formed during their studies, they thus showed an implicit awareness of the differential future value of their degrees that was not expressed explicitly in terms of specific career goals – they knew the difference between gaining a degree and gaining a degree from *that* university.

In your opinion, what is the purpose of higher education? This third question was perhaps most revealing with regard to the intersection of community, class and politics in the different settings.

Alongside employability, another factor common to all four institutions was an emphasis on personal development and improvement as a key purpose of higher education. The quotes below are indicative of this shared perspective.

England Local: Absolutely a different level of learning and inspires me to develop and improve my life in every sense. (EL28)

England Traditional: Open our minds. Show us the world. (ET2)

Cuba Traditional: To be able to grow as a human being. (CT7)¹⁸

Cuba Local: You become familiar with a lot of things; you open yourself up to the world, and of course you’re enriched by it. (CL1)¹⁹

In each case, this personal development was matched by perceptions of intellectual development, but the students of each institution framed this development differently. England Traditional students repeatedly referred to ‘specialis[ing] in a certain field’ (ET7), emphasising skills-acquisition to consolidate an already secure place within social structures. The term most frequently used by England Local students was ‘understanding’, particularly with reference to ‘systems and how they are governed’ (EL9) and to how to understand and claim their own place within that society, arguing that higher education ‘gives you a voice and an opinion – to better understand society politically’ (EL34). For Cuban students at both institutions there was a strong emphasis on attaining cultural capital (although none explicitly used that phrase), which was felt to be particularly transformative by those at Cuba Local. They spoke of the importance of being able confidently to discuss literature and the arts, a theme that extended to those studying science subjects, due perhaps to the first year of every Cuban degree covering a ‘common trunk’ that includes Spanish, Cuban history, philosophy, and Marxism-Leninism. One graduate of sociocultural studies explained that:

My vision of the world was completely altered, because the degree of sociocultural studies is beautiful and, for me, the subjects common to all degrees are beautiful too... Cuban culture encapsulates everything that is fine – literature, Cuban cinema. You become familiar with a lot of things... – your contribution, your vocabulary, your plans, your vision of the future, everything [changes]. (CL1)²⁰

These cultural developments also impacted social position, creating ease, self-confidence and assertiveness as a professional:

¹⁸ Accountancy graduate; accountant; major city.

¹⁹ Socio-cultural studies graduate; librarian; rural, mountainous municipality.

²⁰ Socio-cultural studies graduate; librarian; rural, mountainous municipality.

I've got methods and styles of communication that have allowed me to relate to people and feel comfortable. I didn't used to be like that. I was really poor at communicating... For example, before I wouldn't have dared to talk to a manager ... The degree gave me all of this, because, I'm telling you, I wouldn't even be talking to you now but, with time and my degree, I learnt how. (CL11)²¹

This personal development manifested politically, with a number of interviewees perceiving that their views and social standing were now more respected at the meetings and debates that are an integral part of Cuban community life.

Taking a degree is a complete change. It's not the same when you walk through a large room or theatre for them to say, 'Look, the operator, the worker from the sugar mill,' as it is for them to say 'Look, it's Engineer so-and-so' ... In the community, you can contribute a lot, because it enables you to express yourself at a certain level. And now, when you have to express yourself in the community, in a meeting... they don't just look at you as a normal citizen but as a qualified person, a person with comprehensive knowledge, someone you should listen to. (CL38)²²

It is challenging to map English class identities onto the Cuban context, where educational, geographical, ethnic or political categories often reflect identities more coherently. The terms working- and middle-class are rarely used in Cuba, and more common designations – 'worker' versus 'professional' or 'intellectual' (each used synonymously with 'graduate', demonstrating the widely accepted link between educational level and social position) – are meaningful in social and cultural but not in economic terms. The market reforms and introduction of dual currency in the 1990s have led to a disorientating dissociation between socio-cultural markers of class and material wealth, with those in the tourist and small private sectors or in shortage areas, such as the rice industry, earning far more than highly educated professionals, such as doctors or lawyers.

Class-based terminology was used much more directly by students at both universities in England. England Local students represented university as an engine of social mobility (Marginson, 2016), stating that their degree was a way to 'change my class status' (EL7), while England Traditional students recognised its conservative role in maintaining class divisions, with one acknowledging that it functioned 'to separate the classes – i.e. the lower classes can't always afford the general costs of university' (ET6). The students here play out the tension between the elitist model – wherein graduate status is seen to mark both class distinction and 'meritocratic' recognition – and the modern, commercialised university, wherein a degree is a product sold on the open market. The two groups, however, share the conviction that class stability/mobility is linked to attaining a degree, despite evidence showing that upwards mobility is at a standstill and actual mobility is likely to be downwards (Ainley, 2016).

While students at all institutions mentioned personal development, those at England Local and Cuba Traditional also recognised the value of their studies to their society and community, with England Local students stating that higher education would 'fulfil my dream of making an impact on the UK's education system' (EL4) and 'help the economy and the country progress' (EL20), while Cuba Traditional students referred to contributing to the collective work

²¹ Socio-cultural studies graduate; local government management role; rural, mountainous municipality.

²² Agro-industrial engineering; engineer at sugar mill; rural, mountainous municipality.

of their society as ‘one more grain of sand’ (CT33)²³ and to ‘becom[ing] qualified in order to help others’ (CT25).²⁴ This suggests that a sense of collectivity fosters the association between education and social good, whether this collectivity is generated through the socialist system and/or through rootedness and connection in a community. Where both were present, as in the Cuba Local students, this sense of responsibility was embedded, leading directly to community action and participation, with one graduate noting that ‘since [gaining our degrees], the activities that are developed in the community are on our shoulders ... the shoulders of the young people who went to university’ (CL32).²⁵ Among students at England Traditional, by contrast, none explicitly mentioned social or political factors, reflecting a wider discourse of élite university education as an exercise in personal development for personal gain.

Conclusion

These initial comparisons support the authors’ observations from their taught sessions, and begin to disentangle the impacts of markets, socio-economic status and political culture on students’ motivations. The ostensible binary between a Cuban system that offers no choice of institution and an English system where students have relatively free choice, as customers in a competitive marketplace, is belied by the different experiences at England Traditional and England Local. Differing socio-economic statuses, life stages and prior academic attainment meant that consumer choice was only experienced in a meaningful way by the students of England Traditional, although the financial price was no higher than for students of England Local. In each of the four institutions, higher education was seen as imbuing both material benefits and cultural capital, and held a high value in terms of personal growth and development. Importantly, it appears that the extension of this individual development to the collective sphere can be impacted either through contextualised engagement with study – an engagement that unites work, family and community identity – as in the cases of Cuba Local and England Local, or through the development of a political culture that emphasises participation and collective responsibility, as in Cuba Local and Cuba Traditional.

These findings suggest a number of avenues for future research. Firstly, a larger-scale study with the same data collection method used in the two countries to reinforce and enrich the current data. Secondly, participatory student research that develops links between the English and Cuban institutions and involves students co-analysing the testimony and experiences from the other context. The recent developments in connectivity in Cuba, especially the successful use of video-conferencing applications during the COVID-19 pandemic, make such exchanges increasingly feasible.

More broadly, research beyond the contexts discussed here could be undertaken to test our emergent conclusion that studying within one’s own local community correlates with the motivation for study that emphasise contribution to society and the collective.

²³ Science student; current student at time of interview; major city.

²⁴ Languages graduate; translator; major city.

²⁵ Socio-cultural studies graduate; cultural promoter; rural, mountainous municipality.

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