

Title: Socio-digital Disadvantage, Widening Participation and Management Education

Authors:

Dr Uzair Shah*: *Lancaster University Management School* s.shah2@lancaster.ac.uk

*corresponding author

Dr Ahmad Timsal: *Derby Business School* A.Timsal@derby.ac.uk

Dr Hameed Chughtai: *Lancaster University Management School* h.chughtai@lancaster.ac.uk

QIC:

What is the relationship of socio-digital disadvantage, widening participation and management education? How do we support students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they transition within business schools?

Summary:

Business education is often seen as a means for social mobility and economic prosperity (Kumar et al., 2024). There is an increasing emphasis on widening participation within business schools (Fernando and Kenny, 2021). However, scholars have warned that social and digital inequalities negatively impact the educational opportunities and experiences of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; Timsal et al., 2024). There tends to be a ‘deficit approach’ adopted within widening participation practices that assumes limited motivation and skills of students from disadvantaged students as the main reason for lack of progression to and within universities (O’Sullivan et al., 2019)

Scholars have questioned the claim that business education offers equal opportunities and a level-playing field to all students for social mobility and economic prosperity (Dar et al., 2021; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021). Studies have highlighted narratives and practices within management education that perpetuate and normalize social and digital inequalities within business schools (Clark and Hordósy, 2019; Eisenman et al., 2024; Timsal et al., 2024). Critics have also questioned the assumption prevalent in business schools that success is solely the result of an individual’s hard work and dedication to self-improvement and task completion (Eisenman et al., 2024). This belief is particularly appealing to students from disadvantaged background, despite evidence suggesting elusive nature of the promise of social mobility. Further, scholars have identified that the hidden curriculum within business schools disproportionately disadvantages students from less privileged backgrounds, thereby perpetuating existing inequalities. (Eisenman et al., 2024; O’Sullivan et al., 2019).

In this work, we report findings from our study exploring use of digital technologies of students from less privileged backgrounds, enrolled in a full time MBA programme in two business schools in Pakistan. Our research revealed that the students found digital technologies to be alienating and isolating. This experience significantly impacted their academic engagement and social interactions, and further entrenching their socio-digital disadvantage in business schools within a Global South setting.

Our findings shed light on the complex relationship between socio-digital disadvantage, widening participation and management education in a Global South context (Chughtai, 2023). We question the deficit approach of widening participation, and the view of digital technologies as neutral, functional, mundane objects used for enhancing students' experiences of management education. We highlight that the assumptions regarding prior exposure to, and skills in using digital technologies within management education, contributes to the socio-digital disadvantage of students from less privileged backgrounds. In so doing the MBA programmes/business schools (in-)advertently reproduce social and digital inequalities (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021).

Insights into the students' experiences of socio-digital disadvantage can contribute to widening participation practices within business schools. This is important as students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to study at higher education institutions (HEIs) in comparison to those from elite backgrounds (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). Studies have also highlighted students are likely to continue studies in their educational institutions depending on the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging with that institution (Clark and Hordósy, 2019). More research into critically reflexive and transformative dialogues and reflections amongst students and academics on probing the influence of, and addressing socio-digital inequalities, will offer useful contributions to management education literature.

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