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Tomé Lourido, G. orcid.org/0000-0002-3456-7334 and Embracing Linguistic Diversity satellite (2024) *Tackling accent bias could improve student belonging in Higher Education*. Report.

<https://doi.org/10.48785/100/283>

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Tackling accent bias could improve student belonging in Higher Education

[Gisela Tomé Lourido and the Embracing Linguistic Diversity satellite. July 2024.](#)

New research explores the accent-based disadvantages experienced by university students. An accent equality statement is proposed to be included in university inductions to reduce discrimination and improve students' sense of belonging.

Accent bias is widespread at UK Universities

Everyone has an accent; but our biases lead us to perceive speakers of certain accents as more or less fluent, competent, or intelligent. These perceptions are rooted in wider societal ideologies about social class, race, nationality and migration, gender, etc. Accent bias can lead to inequalities in access to housing, jobs, and education, and can have a long-lasting impact on people's lives¹. In Higher Education, accent discrimination is reported to be widespread at UK Russell Group Universities²; and 41% of university students from the North of England express concern that their accent may affect their future success³.

Many university students feel disadvantaged by their accent

In an open survey inviting university students to share their experiences, a significant number of the 641 respondents report feeling disadvantaged by their accent in academic and social contexts at university (Tomé Lourido & Snell, in prep).

Negative experiences were most frequently reported by students with accents from the North of England and students who did not grow up speaking English. Disadvantages include having their accents mimicked, mocked, and commented on; feeling pressured to change their accent; reluctance to participate in lectures and seminars; feeling that their contributions are not valued; and being the target of explicit discrimination.

Our findings indicate that such experiences have a negative impact on students' confidence, sense of belonging, mental health, careers, and lives, and may result in unequal opportunities.

Recommendation

Our data suggests that negative comments and accent discrimination experienced in the first weeks of university have a lasting impact, and, when left unchallenged, establish a bad precedent for future behaviour.

To break this negative cycle, we recommend including a statement similar to the following in inductions at Higher Education institutions, signposting students to support and reporting provisions and implementing other context-specific actions to tackle accent-based inequalities.

All accents are welcome and valued at the University of Leeds

Everyone has an accent in any given language. Accents are an integral part of who we are, and can carry information about our identities, for example where we grew up, our socioeconomic background, or the languages we speak.

Our students and staff come from many different accent and language backgrounds within the UK and from all over the world. We celebrate and value this linguistic diversity.

We all have biases about people's accents. We acquire our biases as we grow up and throughout adulthood. As they are often unconscious, we actively work to be aware of them and understand how they influence our behaviour. When left unchecked, biases can lead to discrimination.

We do not disregard what students or staff say because of their accent, we do not mimic or mock their speech, and we do not make assumptions about their background or ability. To ensure that everyone's voice is heard, we respect how people express themselves, regardless of their accent, in both academic and social contexts at the University.

In line with the University of Leeds vision and strategy, respecting each other's accent and language background is an essential step towards ensuring that all students and staff feel that they belong, can thrive, and are valued.

Further Information

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The statement was co-produced with [Embracing Linguistic Diversity](#), a University of Leeds group developing initiatives to celebrate linguistic diversity and tackle language inequalities: Bethany Hillan, Bettina Hermoso-Gómez, Cécile De Cat, Clare Wright, Diane Nelson, Helen Sadig, Julia Snell, Kashmir Kaur, Milena Marinkova, Niamh Mullen, Rasha Soliman, Sascha Stollhans, Sofia Martinho; Kelly Vera Diettes (Research Assistant); Elizabeth Pender (Director of Student Success in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies); Alice Craigie, Jowanah Majeed, and Paulette Papapericleous (Linguistics and Phonetics Research Experience Scheme students); students in the module "MODL3650 Minoritised Languages, Dialects and Cultures from Past to Present", led by Diane Nelson and Chiara La Sala; and Leeds University Union representatives, Rachel Cantlow (Liberation and Campaigns Assistant), Rimsha Khan (International and Postgraduate Officer) and Haryati Mohammed (Equality and Liberation Officer). We thank all survey participants for sharing their experiences.

Full journal article: Tomé Lourido, G. and Snell, J. (in preparation).

Research funded by the Michael Beverley Innovation Fellowship.

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3. Levon, E., Sharma, D., & Ilbury, C. (2022). [Speaking up. Accents and social mobility](#). Sutton Trust.