

An investigation into the role of Positive Psychological Capital in moderating achievement disparities among higher education students in the UK: A socioeconomic perspective

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1. Introduction and Research Context

Socioeconomic disparities in educational achievement remain persistent across the UK education system and continue into higher education. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience lower rates of continuation, attainment, and progression compared to their more advantaged peers (OfS, 2023; Tahir, 2022). Despite sustained institutional and policy-level interventions, including widening participation strategies and financial support mechanisms, these disparities have not been eliminated and, in some cases, have widened over time (Lewis & Bolton, 2025). International evidence further demonstrates that socioeconomic status is a strong and consistent predictor of educational achievement across national contexts (Dräger et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022).

Existing responses in higher education have predominantly focused on structural, academic, and financial explanations for inequality. While these approaches are necessary, they provide only a partial account of how students navigate higher education environments in practice. Less attention has been paid to the psychological resources that shape students' capacity to sustain motivation, interpret academic challenges, and persist in the face of adversity (Jury et al., 2017; Reay, 2018). This gap is particularly salient within widening participation institutions such as Liverpool John Moores University, where students often experience cumulative academic, financial, and psychosocial pressures across the student lifecycle.

This study examines Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as a potential mechanism that may shape achievement outcomes and moderate socioeconomic disparities. PsyCap is a higher-order psychological construct comprising hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). Originating in positive psychology and positive organisational behaviour, PsyCap is conceptualised as state-like, measurable, and developable, and has been robustly linked to performance outcomes in organisational and educational contexts (Çavuş & Gökçen, 2015; Luthans, 2012). However, its role in moderating socioeconomic achievement disparities within UK higher education remains underexplored.

2. Research Aim, Questions and Objectives

The aim of this research is to examine the role of Positive Psychological Capital in shaping achievement outcomes for higher education students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds, and to assess its potential to moderate observed achievement disparities.

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What is the relationship between Positive Psychological Capital and student academic achievement in UK higher education? (2) How do levels of Positive Psychological Capital vary across students from different socioeconomic backgrounds? (3) To what extent does Positive Psychological Capital moderate the relationship between socioeconomic background and student academic achievement? (4) How is Positive Psychological Capital associated with multiple dimensions of student achievement, including continuation and academic attainment? (5) What implications do the observed relationships have for higher education policy and professional practice?

3. Theoretical Framework and Literature Overview

The study draws on capital theory, positive psychology, and research on higher education inequality. Building on Bourdieu's broader conceptualisation of capital, Psychological Capital is positioned as a distinct psychological resource that complements economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Within positive psychology, PsyCap is defined as an individual's positive psychological state of development characterised by hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007).

Research demonstrates that the individual components of PsyCap are positively associated with student engagement, motivation, and academic performance (Bandura, 1997; Richardson et al., 2012; Snyder, 2002). Recent studies suggest that PsyCap functions as a higher-order psychological resource whose combined effect exceeds the sum of its individual components, supporting sustained engagement and performance over time (Siu et al., 2014). However, existing PsyCap research in education has largely focused on direct relationships with engagement or performance and has rarely examined interactions with socioeconomic background, particularly within the UK context.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The study adopts a post-positivist research philosophy and a deductive, explanatory approach (Phillips & Burbules, 2000; Saunders et al., 2023). A mono-method quantitative design will be employed, integrating primary survey data with secondary institutional administrative data. Positive Psychological Capital will be measured using an adapted version of the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24), while socioeconomic background will be operationalised using nationally recognised indicators such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation (OfS, 2023).

Achievement outcomes will be treated as multidimensional, focusing on continuation and academic attainment derived from institutional records (York et al., 2015). The study will sample students across NQ levels 3–8 within a single UK higher education institution. Data analysis will be conducted in R and will include descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, and regression-based

moderation models to examine whether PsyCap moderates the relationship between socioeconomic background and achievement outcomes (Peng, 2011; Wickham et al., 2023).

5. Contribution and Practical Relevance

This research contributes to knowledge by extending Psychological Capital theory into the UK higher education context and by empirically examining its role in moderating socioeconomic achievement disparities. It responds to calls for more integrated explanations of student success that consider both structural conditions and psychological resources (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Reay, 2018).

From a professional practice perspective, the findings have the potential to inform evidence-based student success strategies by identifying whether targeted psychological development initiatives may complement existing academic and financial interventions. Importantly, the study does not individualise responsibility for disadvantage but supports a holistic, equity-informed approach to improving student outcomes within widening participation contexts.

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