Review

Whose Knowledge Counts? Reframing "Demographic Literacy" in Scottish Widening Access Higher Education Through International and Anti-Oppressive Perspectives

Eva Kourova *

Posted Date: 1 September 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

Keywords: demographic literacy; population need; widening access; international students; anti-oppressive practice; Scotland; Foucault; Esposito; global justice

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

Review

Whose Knowledge Counts? Reframing "Demographic Literacy" in Scottish Widening Access Higher Education Through International and Anti-Oppressive Perspectives

Eva Kourova

The University of Strathclyde, UK; kourova@strath.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines how demographic knowledge is framed and re-imagined within a Scottish widening access higher education programme. Drawing on my positionality as a former international student and widening access graduate, alongside over 15 years of community-based work with disadvantaged Roma populations, I reflect on how notions of population "need" are often shaped by national policy priorities and narrow imaginaries of population—typically white, Scottish, and urban. While these narratives reflect lived realities, they risk overlooking multilingual, racialised, and globally mobile populations increasingly present in both the student body and the communities that graduates will serve. Based on my work since 2021 in placement coordination and teaching, I outline how applied changes to placement partnerships, thematic content, and assessment practice can challenge and reframe these dominant narratives. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of population, discipline, and control, and Esposito's theorisation of community, immunity, and exclusion, and coupled with anti-oppressive pedagogies, I argue for a re-orientation of demographic literacy toward more plural, critically engaged, and globally attuned understandings of population. In reframing demographic literacy as a site of justice, I move it beyond a technical skill of interpreting population data toward a critical practice of interrogating how populations are constructed, which groups are rendered visible or invisible, and how imaginaries of "need" shape inclusion and exclusion in higher education. Such a shift positions international students not only as beneficiaries of widening access but as active population actors whose experiences and knowledges expand the terms of justice and belonging in higher education.

Keywords: demographic literacy; population need; widening access; international students; anti-oppressive practice; Scotland; Foucault; Esposito; global justice

1. Introduction

The ability to understand, interpret, and apply population data is an essential competency, particularly for those in population-facing professions such as social work and education. For example, Teater (2024) [1] argues that social workers have a responsibility to draw on academic research in their practice. It is therefore common for entry into social work or education courses to require a basic level of mathematics. At Strathclyde University, Glasgow, Scotland, for instance, applicants to the BA (Hons) Social Work or Education programmes must hold at least a National 5 Mathematics qualification at Grade C [2,3]. As societies become increasingly diverse and demographically complex [4], students must be prepared to engage effectively with varied and complex populations [5], that includes ability to actively engage with population demographics including the ability to actively engage with and interpret demographic data.

The term "demographic literacy," used throughout this paper, draws on two key sources. Polston and Sulivan (1986) [6] originally define it as the capacity to interpret and evaluate

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

demographic data, rather than treating demography as a catalogue of problems. Bellani et al. (2025) [7] apply the concept to ageing, framing demographic literacy as knowledge of demographic concepts and methods that enables critical engagement. In both accounts, demographic literacy is less about receiving facts from educators and more about developing the skills to critically read population data. Positioned within critical social work approaches, it offers a tool to challenge injustices that arise when such data is misinterpreted or narrowly framed. The need for demographic knowledge among social work and education students is therefore well recognised [8–10] because such skills are understood to help future professionals interpret demographic trends, engage critically with population data, and respond to social issues in informed ways.

Far less is however known about these skills among higher education educators. The ability to understand the demographic composition of one's student cohort—and use this to inform teaching, curricula, and assessment—remains largely unresearched. While Gurin et al. (2002) [11] highlight the benefits of diversity in higher education, and Brown (2004) [12] explores systemic challenges in accommodating diverse needs, little work has examined the demographic literacy of individual educators themselves. This gap suggests that there is no guarantee educators consciously apply demographic literacy when designing teaching for increasingly diverse student populations.

In my own experience as higher education educator, international students, for example, will have different interests from local students and those might not be represented in teaching materials of applied science. Widening access students with lived experiences, on the other hand, might possess more limited or localised understandings of community. In both cases, it can be argued that students will display specific learning needs, a fact already contested in higher education academic literature (see for example [13–15]).

A critical question underpinning this discussion is: Whose knowledge counts in defining "population need" in higher education curricula? This review argues that demographic knowledge is often shaped by educators that, too, can have narrow imaginaries of population, reflecting the needs of the majority student population. In Scottish context, in such frameworks, "communities of need" are typically imagined as white, Scottish, and urban— an imaginary that overlooks the realities of marginal student populations.

My own positionality—as an international student, a widening access graduate, and a practitioner engaged in Roma community work—provides a reflexive lens for this analysis. These intersecting experiences shape my understanding of how above-described structural inequalities constrain students' imagining of the communities they will serve and their student experiences when at the university. For that reason, I use auto-ethnography as key methodology for my professional observations.

My observations as well as analysis are also informed by a critical theoretical framework. Foucault's concepts of population, discipline, and control position higher education as a mechanism of population management. Esposito's notions of community, immunity, and exclusion highlight how demographic literacy is shaped by inclusion/exclusion dynamics. Anti-oppressive and postcolonial scholarship further challenge dominant constructions of "need," advocating for epistemic justice and the recognition of subjugated knowledges.

Using the BA (Hons) Education and Social Services programme, where I currently teach, as a case study, I demonstrate how population literacy can guide positive changes in teaching and placement allocation. It is essential that educators represent diverse student populations in their teaching so that learning resonates with students from marginalised backgrounds, enhancing their experience of higher education. Equally, "community" must not be narrowly defined if students are to be prepared for work with diverse population, beyond their own.

In conclusion, this review argues that population-facing professions, such as those taught within our widening access programme, risk having their demographic literacy and higher education experience limited by educators' narrow imaginaries of population "need." In the following section, I situate this discussion within the Scottish widening access policy landscape and the BA (Hons)

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

Education and Social Services programme, showing how these frameworks shape—and sometimes limit—how "population need" is conceptualised in practice.

2. Context: Widening Access in Scotland

The Scottish widening access agenda is a national policy initiative designed to ensure equitable access to higher education for individuals from underrepresented and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. A core target is that by 2030, 20% of full-time, first-degree university entrants will come from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland [16,17] as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) [18]. This goal was formalised in 2015 through the Commission on Widening Access (COWA) [19], which set out 34 recommendations to achieve equal access. While progress has been made—including reaching the interim target of 16% SIMD20 entrants by 2021—recent reports show momentum has slowed, prompting calls for renewed strategies and more nuanced indicators beyond SIMD alone [20]. This reliance on SIMD also shapes how educators, often implicitly, imagine the populations they are teaching.

As an educator whose own pathway into higher education was marked by widening access and international student status, I view these dynamics from an insider-outsider position. Having navigated higher education from a marginal position, I bring lived insight into how systems of access and support operate—and where they exclude. My academic trajectory (MA in Citizenship and Human Rights, PhD in Community Development) and over 15 years of community-based work with disadvantaged Roma populations have centred on questioning how power, policy, and identity intersect in defining "need."

Although SIMD targets do not directly address ethnicity, there is growing recognition of the need to better support Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students. For example, the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee has acknowledged that minority ethnic students face unique barriers not captured by SIMD data [20,21]. International students, while not directly addressed by SIMD measures, also encounter barriers that shape their access and participation. Recent studies highlight challenges such as visa restrictions [22] differential fee structures, and ineligibility for public financial support [23]. These barriers frequently intersect with race and migration status [24] with research documenting how international students experience racism and racialisation within UK higher education [25–27].

However, there are currently no national targets for racialised populations representations [21]. Institutions are instead encouraged to adopt anti-racist curricula, inclusive outreach, and mentoring schemes [28], while also addressing the needs of migrant and refugee students under the Equality Act 2010 [29]. For example, some universities, including Strathclyde, have named contacts and tailored support for refugee and asylum-seeker students, including assistance with documentation, funding, and integration [30]. Taken together, these measures illustrate how widening access has been framed primarily around SIMD, with other inequalities treated as add-ons rather than central priorities. These dynamics complicate the demographic landscape of widening access, underscoring the need for approaches that extend beyond SIMD to account for global mobility and transnational inequalities.

The BA (Hons) Education and Social Services (BAESS) widening access course at the University of Strathclyde operates within this national policy framework, with entry criteria focused on SIMD data. Most entrants therefore come from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, a population that is statistically and demographically majority white [31]. In my experience since joining the course team in 2021, the student body reflects this trend, with racialised population forming a small minority, and it was my insider position that allows me to critically reflect on how SIMD shapes student composition and curriculum design.

From this positional standpoint, I observed how deprivation was often presented in teaching materials and placement contexts through examples rooted in white, Scottish, urban experiences, closely aligned to SIMD definitions and to the lived experiences of most students. This framing risked narrowing the concept of "population need" to a single demographic profile. For example, a teaching

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

poster comparing life outcomes for two babies—one in an affluent area, one in a deprived area—depicted both children as white. Case studies similarly centred white residents of urban housing schemes. Placement partnerships at the time did not include organisations working with racialised populations, and topics such as migration, racism, and discrimination were largely absent from core teaching, except for disability-related discrimination. These examples show the everyday reproduction of policy imaginaries.

This alignment between SIMD-led policy, majority-white widening access cohorts, and localised urban deprivation narratives can inadvertently reinforce racialised understandings of disadvantage. Scholars such as Wekker (2017) [32] and Markkanen & Harrison (2013) [33] note that deprivation discourses, even when well-intentioned, are not neutral; they can "smear white dirt" on racialised population residents in deprived areas, while simultaneously centring whiteness in policy imaginaries. Arday et al. (2022) [34] further note that racialised population students' experiences in higher education can be negatively affected by "whiteness" embedded in curricula due to its specific ideological and exclusive lens.

For example, in the context of social policy, Craig et al. (2019) [35] demonstrated how discussions about "race" and racism, lived realities of racialised population students, generally remain marginal in teaching curricula. To this Doharty et al (2020) [36] add that whilst decolonisation of curricula has been attempted to be implemented in universities of the Global North (in line with Black lives matter 2020 movements), they contest that those efforts are often tokenistic, reinforcing, rather than challenging "whiteness" (also [37]). Anti-oppressive theory adds a further dimension, positioning these exclusions as part of broader structural inequities (see for example [38–40]. In higher education and professional training, this means recognising how whiteness, as a hegemonic organising principle, permeates both the definition of "need" and the preparation of students for population-facing roles [41].

The obstructive presence of "whiteness" in higher education curricula therefore effectively continues to allow for a dismissal of lived realities of racialised student populations and a forceful introduction of new, racialised knowledge in a process that has also been described as assimilation [42]. These critiques quite what I observed in BAESS materials and placements.

Reflecting on dominant ideologies about who holds power and whose knowledge is valued [43], it is also important to briefly explore the scale of the issue. It is argued that "whiteness" is not confined just to higher education but is argued to be interwoven through the wider education system in Scotland [44] as part of the broader structures of the Global North [45]. This globalisation of "whiteness" can therefore be described as neo-colonialism [46].

This subsection demonstrated how positive strategies such as widening access, and seemingly neutral concepts such as deprivation, can reinforce disadvantage by obscuring lived realities of marginal student populations. Before I move on, it must be mentioned that reflections here are grounded in the specific context of the BAESS widening access course and are not intended as a generalisation across Scottish higher education. These observations however raise a critical question: whose experiences are recognised as legitimate in defining population 'need' in higher education, and how might alternative knowledges—supported by critical demographic literacy—reframe these imaginaries of population? The next section outlines the theoretical framework I use to address this question.

3. Theoretical Frameworks for Auto-Ethnographic Reflections

The combination of auto-ethnography and theory based in philosophy for observations is unusual, if not at first sight counter-productive. Whilst autoethnography offers a reflexive mode of inquiry into population-level phenomena by situating personal experience within broader cultural and structural contexts [47,48], philosophy approaches such questions through abstract reasoning and conceptual critique. Combining those for professional or research observations thus requires delving into philosophy prior observations and thus "offering a robust philosophical framework [to those observations] that transforms personal experiences into deeply insightful narratives" [49] (pp.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

3186). Auto-ethnography is appropriate here because demographic literacy is both personal (how one reads populations) and structural (how policy frames them), and my lived lens is integral to uncovering exclusions.

The use of auto-ethnography therefore allows me to bring forward lived realities that might be hidden behind [50] current majority-driven higher education governance. As an innovative research style [51], it allows me to reflect on my own practice, whilst giving voice to marginalised perspectives [52]. My analysis is therefore underpinned by a critical reading of population as a socially and politically constructed category and thus offers original reflexive observations informed by this specific framework.

Following Foucault [53,54], who argues that population is not a neutral descriptor of groups, but a target of biopolitical governance, control, and regulation [55]. I start my observations by acknowledging that populations are defined by who is visible, which needs are prioritised, and how resources are allocated. In the context of Scottish widening access policy, this classification can be, for example, seen as operating also through metrics such as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), which, while ostensibly objective, privileges particular demographic narratives, as discussed in relation to SIMD's privileging of white working-class narrative.

I further draw on the concept of pastoral power [56] the everyday practice of those in power, in our case the educators. Pastoral care can be seen as a form of power that has the ability to inadvertently normalise students into docile professional identities that conform to state-sanctioned norms via "disciplinary power" [57]. To sums up this "normalising process" of governing bodies I perceive as a production of a specific "culture of engagement" [58] that is defined by the presence of experts and social professionals whose expertise is measured by their ability to manage and control unwanted deviations in the median population mass [59]. In widening access contexts, this may mean that educators reproduce narrow imaginaries of deprivation and disadvantage, aligning student aspirations with policy-defined notions of "need," rather than encouraging critical, oppositional perspectives, an issue broadly discussed by Beattie (2020) [60] and (Bevir (1999) [61].

Complementing Foucault, I use Esposito [62,63] to provides a framework for understanding how community is often constructed through mechanisms of "immunity." Communities protect themselves by excluding or neutralising what is perceived as threatening to their integrity [64]. Immunity, Esposito argues, is necessary for protection, but when taken to excess it becomes counterproductive, leaving the body unable to adapt to new challenges [63].

In the context of demographic literacy, this logic of immunity is to me, for example, evident in the way dominant narratives (white, Scottish, urban deprivation) are defended as the norm, while alternative experiences—such as those of racialised student populations—are treated as peripheral. This line of observation and subsequent analysis demonstrate how deprivation discourses not only centre whiteness but also obscure the structural racism and lived experiences of racialised populations. This means that the combined insights of Foucault and Esposito point my observation to how exclusion can be normalised through both policy metrics and everyday academic practice.

Against this, I draw on the concept of a "culture of engagement" as explored in Kourova (2020) [65]; a way to reframe how knowledge is valued. On the example of Roma "culture of engagement" in Govanhill, Glasgow, the author outlines how this culture can be both inclusive and exclusive. When narrowly constructed, it reinforces dominant norms, but when informed by lived realities and marginal perspectives, it can open up possibilities for alternative knowledges to challenge stereotypes and exclusions.

Those philosophies enable me to observe detailed manifestations of negative biopolitical governance in the field, but also it reveals marginal forms of engagement that closely resemble what Esposito defines as "affirmative biopolitics" [66]. In my further analysis, this provides a bridge to the central question of the paper: whose knowledge counts in defining population need? In the next section, I illustrate this shift from negative to affirmative biopolitical governance through examples from my BAESS teaching and placements.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

4. Professional Practice Insights

The applied examples presented here are drawn from my work as lecturer and placement coordinator on a Scottish widening access degree programme since 2021. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, I critically reflect on my actions, observations, and decision-making processes to examine how demographic "need" was reframed in practice. The following subsections outline specific interventions—in placement partnerships, curricula content, and assessment design—and analyse their impact through the conceptual lenses introduced earlier.

4.1. Placement Expansion: Introducing Racialised Populations-led and International-Facing Placements

Placements are a crucial part of the programme, providing students with opportunities to connect theoretical knowledge with professional practice [67]. Historically, placements on the course were concentrated in education and social care settings aligned with SIMD framings of disadvantage—such as homelessness, addiction, and youth work. Since taking on coordination, I have expanded this scope to include partnerships with organisations serving racialised and migrant populations, including Women on Wheels, WSREC, Community Renewal, and Ando Glaso.

This shift both reflects more accurately Glasgow's reality as having the highest proportion of minority ethnic residents in Scotland [68] and challenges the implicit assumption that "deprivation" is synonymous with white, urban Scottishness. This also represents more fairly the student population on the course which means that it includes their lived realities in the curricula. If curricula that fail to reflect realities of racialised populations reinforce exclusion, as argued earlier, then placements in organisations led by racialised populations firstly allow majority-white widening access students to encounter new population needs, and secondly enable racialised student populations to see their lived realities acknowledged in the institutional structure. Those placements can thus be seen as reinforcing inclusion on multiple levels of demographic literacy; First in the sphere of student cohort population, secondly in the sphere of general population.

4.2. Curricula Shifts: Moving Beyond White Scottish Deprivation to Global and Racialised Contexts

My early attempts to foreground race and migration in teaching highlighted the challenges of anti-oppressive pedagogy. For example, a classroom discussion on Roma communities escalated into open expressions of racism from students, revealing both the limits of my preparation and the risks of initiating critical dialogue without first creating safe conditions. This echoes the call in decolonising scholarship [69–71] as also argued earlier.

Since then, I have introduced more incremental curricular interventions. These include replacing a white female case study with one centred on a Black Scottish woman in deprivation, and sequencing modules so that students first engage with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory before applying it to analyse racism. This approach has resulted in more nuanced essays, where students increasingly acknowledge the impact of racism and propose interventions grounded in this understanding.

Such changes not only bring lived realities of racialised populations into the curriculum but also model safe, non-tokenistic ways to address race. In doing so, they can be argued to generate a sense of belonging for minority students and prepare majority students to confront racism as a structural factor in deprivation, a process that can also be described as democratic transgression [72].

Placements are a crucial part of the programme, providing students with opportunities to connect theoretical knowledge with professional practice [67]. Historically, placements on the course were concentrated in education and social care settings aligned with SIMD framings of disadvantage—such as homelessness, addiction, and youth work. Since taking on coordination, I have expanded this scope to include partnerships with organisations serving racialised and migrant populations, including Women on Wheels, WSREC, Community Renewal, and Ando Glaso.

This shift both reflects more accurately Glasgow's reality as having the highest proportion of minority ethnic residents in Scotland [68] and challenges the implicit assumption that "deprivation"

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

is synonymous with white, urban Scottishness. This also represents more fairly the student population on the course which means that it includes their lived realities in the curricula. If curricula that fail to reflect realities of racialised populations reinforce exclusion, as argued earlier, then placements in organisations led by racialised populations firstly allow majority-white widening access students to encounter new population needs, and secondly enable racialised student populations to see their lived realities acknowledged in the institutional structure. Those placements can thus be seen as reinforcing inclusion on multiple levels of demographic literacy; First in the sphere of student cohort population, secondly in the sphere of general population.

4.3. Assessment Changes: Embedding Reflective, Critical Approaches Alongside Policy Knowledge

In my observation, students on this widening access course, many of them mature with significant lived experience, often draw heavily on "common sense" [73,74] interpretations of population need rooted in local contexts. While valuable, these perspectives risk reproducing narrow imaginaries when unmediated by theory.

To address this, I progressively increased the role of theory in assessments across years 3 and 4. Research methods and context modules now include dedicated lectures and seminars on theory (replacing some policy-focused content), and placement-linked modules explicitly require application of anti-oppressive and sociological concepts to project design.

If uncritical absorption of policy risks producing what Foucault termed "docile subjects" - professionals who reproduce normative frameworks without question, as argued earlier, then assessment tasks that demand theoretical interrogation instead encourage students to become critical practitioners. This shift supports the development of graduates capable of democratic professional practice [75] moving beyond passive compliance to reflective, justice-oriented engagement.

4.4. Democratic Pedagogy: Embedding Student Choice

Beyond content and assessment, I have sought to democratise pedagogy by expanding opportunities for student choice. In the Context module, students now decide both their group members and whether they wish to present orally, a change motivated by heightened post-COVID anxieties around public speaking. Additional case-study options and specialist pathways in year 4—including a migration-focused strand I deliver—further allow students to align their learning with personal interests and identities.

These changes have been positively received, both informally and through module evaluation feedback. They resonate with Freire's (2020) [76] insistence that education must move beyond banking models towards dialogical, participatory practice. Similarly, Kourova's (2020) conceptualisation of "culture of engagement" also reminds us of a space where diverse voices can challenge exclusions and enable, what can be described, as "transgression" [77], demonstrating how democratic pedagogy contributes to more inclusive and critical forms of demographic literacy.

5. Discussion: Challenging and Reframing Demographic Literacy

Four key shifts emerge from this observation in showing how my practice challenges static and racialised notions of "need." First, placements act as sites of demographic literacy reinforcing inclusion both within the student cohort and across wider society. Second, embedding lived realities of racialised populations into the curriculum models safe, non-tokenistic ways of addressing race [78] generating belonging for minority students while preparing majority students to recognise racism as structural [34–36]. Third, assessment tasks that demand theoretical interrogation encourage students to move beyond passive compliance towards reflective, justice-oriented professional practice [79]. Finally, a democratic culture of engagement enables diverse voices to contest exclusions and enact forms of transgression, contributing to more inclusive and critical understandings of demographic literacy [76].

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

Taken together, these changes mark a reframing of how "population need" is understood within the course as a site of justice. They resist the narrow SIMD-led imaginaries by recognising racialised population communities as integral to Scottish society, situating racism as a systemic factor in disadvantage [80], and equipping students with the tools and agency to critique policy framings. In this sense, the programme illustrates what Giroux (2011) [79] describes as a democratic education committed to social justice. At the same time, progress remains fragmented and largely under the radar, with limited institutional mechanisms (e.g., standing decolonisation agenda items in staff meetings) to consolidate these shifts. Nonetheless, these interventions demonstrate how educator positionality, informed by critical theory, can create openings for alternative knowledges to shape higher education practice.

On those examples, Esposito's concept of "affirmative biopolitics" [77] can be observed. Rather than closing off difference, communities sustain themselves through exposure to the knowledge of the "Other." The organism, he suggests, thrives not by defending fixed norms but by changing its own norms, embracing "permanent self-deconstruction" [77] (pp. 143) as a form of vitality. In the higher education context this means that engagement with the lived realities of racialised student populations is not simply about fairness or inclusion but about strengthening the collective by enabling deviation to be recognised as a normal and vital form of life [81].

Framed this way, affirmative biopolitics also offer a counterpoint to Foucault's description of pastoral power, which risks guiding students into docile professional identities aligned with state-sanctioned norms [56,60]. Where disciplinary power normalises, affirmative biopolitics insists on transgression, thus resisting neoliberal forms of governance [82]. Thus, the interventions described here—placements, curricula, assessments, pedagogy—can be read as attempts to rebalance education from reproducing immunity (protecting the status quo) towards fostering community through difference [83].

The introduction of international students' perspectives and migrant or minority experiences into curricula can be understood as moments of transgression—forms of change that cannot be fully controlled or predicted. Providing students with the capacity to critically apply demographic literacy likewise promises shifts beyond the imagination of the current policy-led system, precisely because it includes what Esposito calls the "foreign body" within its processes.

Transgression here is not reducible to inclusion. It moves beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion and towards what Esposito terms "common immunity" [63} (pp. 165-177): a space where the boundaries between self and Other, proper and improper, inside and outside, begin to dissolve [63} (pp.168). Knowledge drawn from marginalised students is thus not an add-on or tokenistic gesture but constitutive of community itself [84]. In this sense, it can be argued that widening access cannot be understood solely through a national (SIMD) lens but must address global flows of students and populations.

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

For population-facing professions, this has direct implications. Future educators, social workers, and community practitioners trained in this way are better equipped [85] to see beyond policy framings of deprivation, to recognise racism and migration as systemic forces [34,35] and to treat demographic literacy as a site of justice [85]. Enabling students to become critical practitioners is therefore not just an equity measure for racialised minority populations; it is an existential necessity for the professions as a whole. As these graduates re-enter communities, they carry with them the potential to establish new forms of common immunity—practices of unity through difference that reflect the needs of entire populations.

In summary, the implications are threefold. For educators, curricula must be reoriented to embed demographic literacy as a justice-oriented practice rather than a technical add-on. For students, cultivating critical demographic literacy provides the tools to resist narrow policy imaginaries and to reimagine population need in more inclusive ways. For policy, widening access

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

agendas must move beyond SIMD to recognise international, racialised, and migrant populations as central to Scotland's demographic future.

This analysis is however necessarily partial. It draws on auto-ethnographic insights from a single widening access programme, shaped by my own positionality as educator, international student, and widening access graduate. While these perspectives offer depth, they cannot capture the full range of student experiences or institutional practices across Scotland. Nor does the article engage with quantitative data that might evidence the broader impact of interventions. Future studies could therefore triangulate these reflections with student voices, institutional policy analysis, and comparative perspectives from other contexts to deepen and extend the argument.

Another limitation is the near absence of direct student voice in this analysis. While I draw on classroom observations, assessment materials, and placement experiences, the perspectives of students themselves are not systematically represented. This was a deliberate scope choice, as the focus here is on the policy and curricular framings that shape demographic imaginaries, rather than on documenting student experiences in depth. Future research could extend this work by incorporating student narratives—through interviews, reflective writing, or participatory approaches—to provide a more textured account of how widening access policies and teaching practices are lived and negotiated.

A further limitation lies in reflexivity bias. My interpretation of teaching materials, student interactions, and policy framings is filtered through my own standpoint, which may foreground certain issues while underplaying others. Future studies could therefore triangulate these reflections with student voices, institutional policy analysis, and comparative perspectives from other contexts to deepen and extend the argument.

6. Conclusions

At the heart of this article lies the question: *whose knowledge counts* in defining population "need" within higher education? Drawing on Foucault's analysis of population management and Esposito's critique of community and immunity, I have shown how widening access in Scotland, while progressive in intention, too often reproduces narrow imaginaries of deprivation centred on whiteness and localised poverty. Through my own practice, I have demonstrated how alternative approaches—racialised populations-led placements, curricula that embed racism as structural, assessments that demand theoretical interrogation, and democratic pedagogies that amplify student agency—can begin to destabilise these exclusions.

To frame demographic literacy as a site of justice is to treat it not merely as a technical skill but as a contested terrain of epistemic authority and global justice and migrant student perspectives are central to reframing demographic literacy for sake of justice. Following Fricker (2007) [84], this means recognising how certain knowledges are marginalised and how curricula and placements can either reinforce or redress such epistemic injustices. The inclusion of international and minority students is therefore not an act of benevolence or tokenism, but a vital rebalancing of whose knowledge is legitimised in shaping professional education.

The contributions of this article are threefold. Conceptually, it advances the idea of demographic literacy as a justice-oriented practice that draws on critical theory to reimagine population need beyond deficit framings. Practically, it illustrates how targeted interventions in placements, curricula, assessment, and pedagogy can enact this shift and model affirmative biopolitics in higher education. At the policy level, it highlights the limitations of SIMD as the dominant metric and calls for widening access strategies that reflect Scotland's plural, global, and racialised realities.

My use of auto-ethnography is central to this argument: by situating professional observations within my lived experiences as an international student, widening access graduate, and practitioner, I have sought to demonstrate how educator positionality itself becomes a resource for identifying exclusions and reimagining demographic literacy as a site of justice.

Ultimately, the reframing of demographic literacy requires higher education to move beyond static and racialised constructions of "population need" and towards an affirmative biopolitics that

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

embraces difference as constitutive of community. Such an approach does not simply prepare students to serve populations as they are defined by the state; it equips them to engage critically and justly with populations as they are lived. In this sense, demographic literacy becomes not only a professional competency but also a site of social justice.

Funding: "This research received no external funding"

Institutional Review Board Statement: "Not applicable"

Informed Consent Statement: "Not applicable."

Data Availability Statement: "No new data were created."

Acknowledgments: "During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Chat GPT for the purposes of editing and polishing. The author has reviewed and edited the output and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication."

Conflicts of Interest: "The author declares no conflicts of interest."

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BAESS	BA (Hons) Education and Social Services
COWA	Commission on Widening Access Education
HE	Higher Education
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
UK	United Kingdom

References

1. Teater, B. (2024). *EBOOK: An introduction to applying social work theories and methods, 4/E*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
2. *BA primary education | Teacher education degree | University of Strathclyde*. (n.d.). University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. https://www.strath.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/primaryeducation/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
3. *BA social work bachelor's degree course UK | University of Strathclyde*. (n.d.). University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. https://www.strath.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/socialwork/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
4. Vertovec, S. (2023). *Superdiversity: Migration and social complexity* (p. 251). Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203503577
5. Olcoń, K., Gilbert, D. J., & Pulliam, R. M. (2019). Teaching about racial and ethnic diversity in social work education: A systematic review. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *56*(2), 215-237. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1656578
6. Poston, D. L., & Sullivan, T. A. (1986). Developing demographic literacy and evaluation skills: Techniques for the introductory demography course. *Teaching Sociology*, *14*(2), 83. https://doi.org/10.2307/1317614
7. Bellani, D., Luppi, F., Rivellini, G., & Rosina, A. (2025). Demographic literacy on aging. Conceptualization and empirical evidence. *Italian Statistical Society Series on Advances in Statistics*, 147-152. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-96303-2_24
8. Claes, E., Schrooten, M., McLaughlin, H., & Csoba, J. (2021). Community service learning in complex urban settings: Challenges and opportunities for social work education. *Social Work Education*, *41*(6), 1272-1290. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1948003
9. Laidlaw, K., Cabiati, E., Henriksen, O., & Shore, C. (2020). Preparing students for social work practice in contemporary societies: Insights from a transnational research network. *European Journal of Social Work*, *23*(6), 980-991. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1793108

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

10. Fook, J. (2022). *Social work: A critical approach to practice*. SAGE.
11. Gurin, P., Dey, E., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review*, *72*(3), 330-367. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.72.3.01151786u134n051
12. Brown *, L. I. (2004). Diversity: The challenge for higher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *7*(1), 21-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332042000187289
13. Hockings, C. (2010). Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: A synthesis of research. *Higher Education Academy*, 1-67.
14. Knight, C., Conn, C., Crick, T., & Brooks, S. (2023). Divergences in the framing of inclusive education across the UK: A four nations critical policy analysis. *Educational Review*, *77*(2), 495-511. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2222235
15. Morgan, M. (2013). *Supporting student diversity in higher education: A practical guide*. Routledge.
16. 16. *Report on widening access 2023-24*. (2025). Scottish Funding Council. https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/report-on-widening-access-2023-24/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
17. Finkel-Gates, A. (2025). Adapting the social mobility index: Evaluating the role of Scottish higher education in advancing equity and inclusion. *Scottish Educational Review*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-bja10017
18. *SIMD (Scottish index of multiple deprivation)*. (n.d.). Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. https://simd.scot/#/simd2020/BTTTFTT/9/-4.0000/55.9000/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
19. *Commission on widening access 2030 target*. (2024). Scottish Funding Council. https://www.sfc.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/insight-briefings/commission-on-widening-access-2030-target/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
20. *Widening access to higher education*. (n.d.). Scottish Parliament | Scottish Parliament Website. https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/committees/current-and-previous-committees/session-6-education-children-and-young-people-committee/business-items/widening-access-to-higher-education21 [Last accessed 26/8/25]
21. *Widening access to higher education inquiry*. (n.d.). Scottish Parliament Reports. https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/Committees/Report/ECYP/2025/5/15/72f3d996-1fb4-4f23-a4d2-4f6f32453662#a2f59702-2071-4533-9565-109321e9ea03.dita [Last accessed 26/8/25]
22. Lomer, S. (2018). UK policy discourses and international student mobility: The deterrence and subjectification of international students. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *16*(3), 308-324. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1414584
23. *Global mobility report 2024 July*. (n.d.). Henley & Partners. https://www.henleyglobal.com/publications/global-mobility-report/2024-july/stricter-visa-rules-limit-choices-international-students?utm_source=chatgpt.com [Last accessed 26/8/25]
24. Erel, U., Murji, K., & Nahaboo, Z. (2016). Understanding the contemporary race–migration nexus. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *39*(8), 1339–1360. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1161808
25. Brown, L., & Jones, I. (2013). Encounters with racism and the international student experience. *Studies in Higher Education*, *38*(7), 1004-1019. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.614940
26. Madriaga, M., & McCaig, C. (2019). How international students of colour become Black: A story of whiteness in English higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *27*(1), 84-98. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1696300
27. Hu, M., Moskal, M., & Read, B. (2024). Mapping the emotions of racialised international students and the politics of exclusion in higher education. *Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01362-3

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

28. *Mainstreaming and equality outcome report 2025-29*. (2025, July 10). Scottish Funding Council. https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/mainstreaming-and-equality-outcome-report-2025-29/29. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents [Last accessed 26/8/25]
29. *Equality Act 2010*. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents [Last accessed 26/8/25]
30. *Widening access at Strathclyde | University of Strathclyde*. (n.d.). University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. https://www.strath.ac.uk/professionalservices/accessequalityinclusionservice/wideningaccess/wideningaccessatstrathclyde/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
31. *Social work - Practice learning support grant: Equality impact assessment*. (2025, January 21). The Scottish Government - gov.scot. https://www.gov.scot/publications/equality-impact-assessment-results-practice-learning-support-grant/pages/9/ [Last accessed 26/8/25]
32. Wekker, F. (2017). Discourses of Deprivation and Ethnic and Racial Otherness. In *Top-down Community Building and the Politics of Inclusion* (pp. 41-69). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53964-5
33. Markkanen, S., & Harrison, M. (2013). 'Race', deprivation and the research agenda: Revisiting housing, ethnicity and neighbourhoods. *Housing Studies*, *28*(3), 409-428. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2013.759180
34. Arday, J., Branchu, C., & Boliver, V. (2021). What do we know about Black and minority ethnic (BAME) participation in UK higher education? *Social Policy and Society*, *21*(1), 12-25. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1474746421000579
35. Cole, B., Craig, G., Ali, N., Pomati, M., Rees, J., & Heins, E. (2020). 'Race': The missing dimension in social policy higher education? *Social Policy Review 32*, 25-50. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447341666.003.0002
36. Doharty, N., Madriaga, M., & Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020). The university went to 'decolonise' and all they brought back was lousy diversity double-speak! Critical race counter-stories from faculty of colour in 'decolonial' times. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(3), 233-244. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1769601
37. Sherry, A. (2016) *Widening participation or reinforcing privilege in Scottish higher education?* Fraser of Allander Economic Commentary, 39 (3). pp. 126-130. ISSN 2046-5378
38. Dominelli, L. (2017). *Anti oppressive social work theory and practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
39. Burke, B., & Harrison, P. (2004). Anti-oppressive practice. In *Communication, relationships and care* (pp. 141-148). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203494325-39
40. Baines, D. (Ed.). (2020). *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Social justice social work*. Fernwood publishing.
41. Arday, J. (2018). Dismantling power and privilege through reflexivity: Negotiating normative whiteness, the eurocentric curriculum and racial micro-aggressions within the Academy. *Whiteness and Education*, *3*(2), 141-161. https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2019.1574211
42. Dar, S. (2018). The masque of blackness: Or, performing assimilation in the white academe. *Organization*, *26*(3), 432-446. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418805280
43. Carter, S., Honeyford, M., McKaskle, D., Guthrie, F., Mahoney, S., & Carter, G. D. (2007). What do you mean by whiteness?": A professor, four doctoral students, and a student affairs administrator explore whiteness. *College Student Affairs Journal*, *26*(2), 152-159.
44. Shahjahan, R. & Edwards, K. (2022). Whiteness as futurity and globalization of higher education. Higher Education 83, 747–764. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00702-x
45. Carr, P. R. & Lund, D. E. (Eds.). (2007a). The great White North? Exploring whiteness, privilege and identity in education. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

46. van der Westhuizen, C., and S. Hunter. 2022. "Viral Whiteness: Twenty-First Century Global Colonialities." In *Routledge Handbook of Critical Studies in Whiteness*, edited by C. van der van der Westhuizen and S. Hunter, 1–28. Oxon: Routledge.
47. Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (Eds.). (1996). *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
48. Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *7*(1), 38-53. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690800700103
49. Dahal, N. (2023). Writing philosophical Autoethnography: A review. *The Qualitative Report*. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.6757
50. Hernandez-Carranza, G., Carranza, M., & Grigg, E. (2021). Using auto-ethnography to bring visibility to coloniality. *Qualitative Social Work*, *20*(6), 1517-1535. https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211039514
51. Reed-Danahay, D. (Ed.). (2021). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Routledge.
52. Denzin, N. K. (2003). Performing [Auto] ethnography politically. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, *25*(3), 257-278. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714410390225894
53. Sheridan, A. (1977). Discipline and punish. *Pantheon New York*.
54. Macey, D., & Foucault, M. (2003). Society must be defended.
55. Lemke, T. (2001). "The birth of bio-politics": Michel Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality. *Economy and Society*, *30*(2), 190–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140120042271
56. Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Springer.
57. Foucault, M. (1975). Discipline and punish. *A. Sheridan, Tr., Paris, FR, Gallimard*.
58. Smith, S. S., Peters, R., & Caldwell, C. (2016). Creating a culture of engagement -- Insights for application. *Business and Management Research*, *5*(2). https://doi.org/10.5430/bmr.v5n2p70
59. Hewitt, M. (1983). Bio-politics and social policy: Foucault's account of welfare. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *2*(1), 67-84. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276483002001007
60. Beattie, L. (2019). Educational leadership: Producing docile bodies? A Foucauldian perspective on higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *74*(1), 98-110. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12218
61. Bevir, M. (1999). Foucault, power, and institutions. *Political Studies*, *47*(2), 345-359. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00204
62. Esposito, R. (2010). *Communitas: The origin and destiny of community*.
63. Esposito, R. (2011). *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life*. Polity.
64. Bird, G., & Short, J. (2013). Community, immunity, and the PROPER *an introduction to the political theory of roberto esposito*. *Angelaki*, *18*(3), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725x.2013.834661
65. Kourova, E. (2020). *Biopolitics and the Transformative Powers of Life in the Case of Roma People in Glasgow. Unpublished PhD dissertation thesis, Glasgow Caledonian University* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation].
66. 66. Campbell, T. (2006). Bios, immunity, life: The thought of Roberto Esposito. *Diacritics*, *36*(2), 2-22. https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2008.0009
67. Billett, S. (2020). *Learning in the workplace: Strategies for effective practice*. Routledge.
68. Walsh, D., Buchanan, D., Douglas, A., Erdman, J., Fischbacher, C., McCartney, G., Norman, P., & Whyte, B. (2018). 5.3-O6The changing ethnic profiles of Scotland and Glasgow, and the implications for population health. *European Journal of Public Health*, *28*(suppl_1). https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/cky047.175
69. Arday, J., Zoe Belluigi, D., & Thomas, D. (2020). Attempting to break the chain: Reimaging inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the Academy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(3), 298-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0076.v1

70. Le Grange, L. (2019). The curriculum case for decolonisation. *Decolonisation in Universities*, 29-48. https://doi.org/10.18772/22019083351.7
71. Moncrieffe, M., Race, R., Harris, R., Chetty, D., Riaz, N., Ayling, P., Arphattananon, T., Nasilbullov, K., Kopylova, N. and Steinburg, S.(2020) 'Decolonising the curriculum' in *British Educational Research Association* | BERA. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/spring-2020 [Last accessed 26/8/2025]
72. Hooks, B. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.
73. Jansson, M., Wendt, M., & Åse, C. (2013). Common-sense notions of "Nation": A challenge for teaching. *Journal of Political Science Education*, *9*(1), 34-51. https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2013.747837
74. Watts, D. J. (2011). *Everything is obvious: Why common sense is nonsense*. Atlantic Books.
75. Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. John Wiley & Sons.
76. Freire, P. (2020). Pedagogy of the oppressed. In *Toward a sociology of education* (pp. 374-386). Routledge.
77. Esposito, R. (2008). *Bios: Biopolitics and philosophy*. U of Minnesota Press.
78. Ahmed, S. (2020). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
79. Giroux, H. (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*. Bloomsbury Academic.
80. Su Rasmussen, K. (2011). Foucault's genealogy of racism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *28*(5), 34-51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411410448
81. Webb, S. A. (2020). Roberto Esposito, biopolitics and social work. In *The Routledge handbook of critical pedagogies for social work* (pp. 260-270). Routledge.
82. Tierney, T. F. (2016). Toward an affirmative biopolitics. *Sociological Theory*, *34*(4), 358-381. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275116678998
83. Zembylas, M. (2023). Racism, white supremacy and Roberto Esposito's biopolitics through the lens of Black affect studies: Implications for an affirmative educational biopolitics. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *56*(4), 358-370. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2023.2229552
84. Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford university press.
85. Henderson, J., & Corry, M. (2020). Data literacy training and use for educational professionals. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, *14*(2), 232-244. https://doi.org/10.1108/jrit-11-2019-0074