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University Academic Culture, Gender Norm Internalization, and Family Social Background as Determinants of Students' Social Mobility: The Mediating Role of Student Social Integration

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Abstract

This study examines how sociological factors within higher education shape students' social mobility. Grounded in education sociology and gender sociology, the research investigates the effects of university academic culture, gender norm internalization, and family social background on mobility outcomes, with student social integration serving as the mediating variable. University academic culture includes academic expectations, peer learning norms, and faculty–student interactions that influence students' engagement. Gender norm internalization refers to the gendered beliefs and behavioural expectations students adopt through socialization. Family social background represents class-related resources such as parental education, cultural exposure, and social networks. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from students in public universities to assess how these variables shape their integration into academic and social communities. The findings show that all three independent variables significantly predict student social integration, which in turn enhances social mobility. Mediation analysis confirms that social integration functions as a key pathway through which university culture, gendered

identities, and family social structure influence mobility outcomes. The study highlights the role of sociological processes operating within universities in shaping students' opportunities for upward mobility.

Keywords: Academic Culture, Gender Norm Internalization, Family Social Background Students' Social Mobility, Student Social Integration

Introduction

It has been long recognized that higher education is a key institutional procedure of promoting social mobility and alleviating structural inequalities in modern societies. Universities are not just places of knowledge transmission and acquisition of skills, but they are complex social environments, which bring together cultural norms, social relations, and institutional practices to define the future of students. The sociological literature has repeatedly emphasized that access to higher education is not enough to achieve an upward mobility, rather, the extent to which students are integrated into the academic and social community in the universities is what determines whether the engagement in education is going to result in better socioeconomic results (Roshan & Rahman, 2025). In many developing and transitional situations, such as those in the system of higher education of a particular state, the heterogeneous social backgrounds of the students offer different access to the advantages of higher education because of the differences in cultural familiarity, gender expectations, and institutional climate. These inequalities underscore the necessity of exploring the ways in which sociological mechanisms that are in place in universities predispose the mobility of students after the completion of their formal academic levels (Le et al., 2025).

In the sociology of education, universities are coming to be viewed as stratified places that not only reproduce but potentially transform already existing social inequalities. Though higher education is primarily discussed as meritocratic, the empirical studies show that the experiences and results of students are largely influenced by the culture and social organization within the institutions that favor specific types of capital while disadvantaging others. Academic culture in the universities is a set of common norms in relation to learning, expectations of performance, faculty and student interaction patterns and peer-acquired academic practices. All these factors together influence the engagement of students, their sense of belonging, and their ability to cope with academic pressures (Yi, Zhang, Lu, & Shadiey, 2024). The closer the students are to the hegemonic academic standards, the more likely they can access institutional resources and establish supportive relationships and transform the educational involvement into social mobility. On the other hand, students whose backgrounds or identities do not conform to these norms can feel marginalized, disengaged or may not gain much out of higher education. It is therefore important that academic culture as a sociological variable is comprehended in explaining the variations in mobility among students (Vögtle & Windzio, 2025).

At the same time, gender is a strong stratification axis in the educational institution that affects the desires of pupils, their actions, and the perceived opportunities. Gender norm internalization is the process whereby people internalize; internalizing and reproducing socially constructed expectations about what men and women should do, how they should behave, and their competencies. These norms are learnt in the early socialization and are constantly strengthened by the institutional settings, such as universities. Gendered ideologies may influence the academic confidence of students, their choice of field of study, their involvement in classroom activities, and their involvement in extra-curriculum activities(Hassan et al., 2021). As an example, gender-based internalized norms that equate leadership, assertiveness, or scientific competence with masculinity might deter female students because they are not ready to participate actively or because of their lack of academic legitimacy. In the same way, anticipations of caregiving obligations or emotional work may affect time utilization and acculturation of the students to the university. Gender norm internalization is a key factor in organizing social incorporation, and, eventually, mobility outcomes, by influencing the perception of students regarding themselves and their standing in academic settings(Beroíza-Valenzuela & Salas-Guzmán, 2025).

Family social background is another background determinant of the experience and paths of students in higher education. The sociological theories of stratification also focus on the fact that families do not only pass on economic resources but also on cultural capital, social networks and educational dispositions that benefit some students more than others. The level of education of parents, exposure to the activities of culture, knowledge of the language of study, and access to powerful social connections all influence the capacity of students to negotiate within the institution. Even more privileged students tend to come to universities with an unspoken understanding of the academic demands and are more assured about their interactions with professors and classmates(Schany, 2025). Conversely, first-generation or working-class students might fail to decode institutional rules, feel alienated, or they might not have access to informal support systems. Such differences in inherited resources show that family social background still affects social mobility, even once students are in higher education, and this dispels the hope that universities are equalizing institutions(Davison, 2023).

Student social integration concept forms an important bridging point of these structural and cultural factors to social mobility outcomes. Based on the classical sociological and educational theories, social integration is understood as the degree to which the students are integrated into the academic and social life of the university. This includes taking part in classroom interactions, being part of peer networks, taking part in extracurricular activities, building significant relationships with faculty and staff. Social integration helps to gain access to information, mentoring, emotional support, and opportunities that promote academic achievement as well as post-graduation opportunities(Kaprano & Semenoh, 2025). Well

integrated students have higher chances of persisting, doing well academically and translating their school experiences into upward mobility. In line with this, social integration is considered as a mediating process according to which institutional culture, gendered identities and family background influence their mobility outcomes(Y. Wang et al., 2025).

In theory, the connections between the academic culture in universities, the internalization of gender norms, the social background of families, the social integration of students, and social mobility can be explained in the combination of sociological theories. The theory of cultural and social capital by Bourdieu offers a background perspective of explaining the role of family background in determining the dispositions and abilities of students to peruse academic culture. The closer the student habitus is to the institutional norms, the more likely the student would be able to accumulate symbolic and social resources in universities. The theory of student integration by Tinto also states that the persistence and success in higher education is based on cumulative and social integration, which underlines the role of the institutional environment in determining the student outcome(Watson, 2025). These frameworks are complemented by the feminist and gender sociology perspectives that help to explain how the gendered norms and power relations are contained in the educational institutions and affect the participation, recognition, and reward patterns. In combination, these theories imply that social mobility is not simply a result of individual effort or academic achievement but a creation of the interaction of the institutional cultures, social identities and structural inequalities(Perez, Duffy, Kim, & Kim, 2023).

Existing research, in an empirical manner has looked into the aspects of these relationships in a divided manner. Research on the academic culture has shown that positive faculty-student relationships and collaborative learning conditions increase student involvement and performance. Studies that have been conducted on the gender aspect in higher education have reported some of the ongoing differences in participation and confidence as well as outcomes attributed to internalized gender norms. Similarly, the role of family social background on educational achievement and labor market performance is testified in a considerable amount of literature(Ellikkal & Rajamohan, 2025). To a large extent, however, this research takes these factors as independent of each other, and does not adequately examine their interaction at the university level to produce social mobility. Furthermore, although social integration is often investigated as a result in itself, its mediating effect between sociological predictors and mobility outcomes has not been well-investigated, especially in the context of non-Western and public universities(Alajmi, 2022).

The other major literature gap is that of the contextual specificity of higher education systems. A large portion of the available empirical data is based on the Western context in which the institutional frameworks, cultural beliefs and welfare systems are significantly different than

those in the developing or transitional societies. Such public universities usually serve with a set of limited resources, huge number of students, and a strong social inequality(Purcell & Lumbreras, 2021). Such conditions could also compound the influence of academic culture, gender norms, and family background on the experiences of integration on students. However, the research on these dynamics in the context of public universities, in which students with different and sometimes less privileged backgrounds come together, is still limited. This gap needs to be addressed in order to come up with a more inclusive and globally applicable concept of social mobility in higher education(Ogunola, Omachi, Toromade, Ajayi, & Hulugh, 2024).

The lack of integrated models that can consider the effects of the institution, culture, and family is also a limitation to the practical applicability of the available research. Unless one has a clear picture of the combined influence of these factors on social integration and mobility, policymakers and university administrators are prone to take a very limited perspective on access or academic performance and neglect the sociological mechanisms that allow students to take full advantage of higher education. This disparity is especially worrisome when we are discussing the situation in which the increase in the access to the universities has not been accompanied by a similar growth in equity of results(Cahalan et al., 2022). Marginalized students could come to the universities in a growing number but still experience a lack of opportunities to interact and climb the career ladder, thus, perpetuating the social disparities instead of lessening them.

It is within this context that the main research problem presented in this study can be explained as being the process by which sociological aspects in universities can affect the social mobility of students. Particularly, the research aims to comprehend the influence of academic culture in the university, gender norm internalization and family social background on students becoming members of academic and social communities, and the effect of the latter on mobility outcomes. The study surpasses the simplistic cause and effect models by including student social integration as a mediating variable, and providing a more complex explanation of the workings of structural and cultural forces in higher education(Q. Wang et al., 2024). This method is a direct reaction to the multi-level, process-based analyses of the educational inequality and mobility that have been called in the literature.

This study is important because it made a theoretical, empirical and practical contribution. Theoretically, it develops sociological insights into higher education by coming up with a combination of sociology of education, gender sociology, and stratification theory perspectives in a consistent analytical construct. The empirical testing of the role of social integration as a mediator helps in understanding the mechanisms through which institutional culture, gendered identities and family resources are converted into mobility outcomes and thus serve to add to the existing discussions on whether universities reproduce or transform social

inequalities(Tong & Chen, 2025). The study empirically contributes to the existing body of literature by offering evidence in terms of underrepresented contexts in the existing research, that of the public universities. The application of quantitative data allows conducting a systematic study of relations between important sociological variables, which provide strong information about integration and mobility patterns(A. Wang et al., 2020).

In practice, the results of the presented study have significant implications to the policy and institutional practice of higher education. The study emphasizes the need to focus more on building inclusive environments to help different students by identifying the focal role of academic culture and social integration and the need of universities to go beyond access-oriented reforms. Programs focused on addressing supportive faculty-student relationships, encouraging collaborative learning among peers, and disruptive gender ideals can improve students belonging and involvement. Likewise, the impact of unequal inherited resources can be countered by providing students with disadvantaged family background with targeted support. In the end, shedding light on the sociological processes of influence on the experiences and results of students, the given study will contribute to the creation of more just higher education systems that can realize their potential as social mobility drivers.

Litrature review

This literature review is a theoretical synthesis of three complementary sociological perspectives: the theory of capital and habitus developed by Bourdieu, the integration framework proposed by Tinto, and modern gender-sociological explanations of internalized norms, which are used to produce a process-based explanation of the way higher education can be both a location of social reproduction and a putative source of mobility. Inthe social background of the family is not limited to one economic variable but comprises of a multiplex of economic, cultural and social capital, which is intergenerationally passed on, and embodied in dispositions or habitus that predetermines individuals to learn, to have an interest in institutional authority and professional aspirations. The interpretive frames that these dispositions create define what students enter university life with and how easily they can decipher unwritten rules of the game and turn credentials into symbolic payoffs(Weinstein, 2025).

The model proposed by Tinto introduces a micro-processual prism and assumes that academic and social integration are the proximate determinants of persistence, higher educational achievement and accrual of benefits; the students who become embedded in the peer networks, engage in classroom activities and associated with faculty are better placed to inhibit access to mentoring, information and opportunities that lead to better educational and work outcomes. Gender-sociological viewpoints make this interaction complicated by revealing that the internalized gender norms, the beliefs about proper behaviours, roles and competency, influence the styles of interaction, self-efficacy and domain-specific decision; when institutional cultures

create cues to gendered expectations, internalized norms may either enable or limit engagement in activities that yield social capital. Collectively, these frameworks imply an integrative causal pathway: the social background of the family provides divergent capacities and orientations (habitus), which combine with academic culture of the university and internalization of gender norms of the individual to create the extent of social integration in the student; it is this social integration that mediates the relationship between the antecedent sociological factors and the realized social mobility. Such a framing of the problem previews not only structural inheritance but also the interactional processes in universities that exacerbate or mitigate inequalities, thus focusing attention on institutional levers, including culture, mentoring and norm-defying practices, which may be focused upon to enhance mobility outcomes(Krivov, 2025).

Empirical research into the academic culture of universities continues to show that institutional climates have an impact on various student outcomes, including engagement and persistence to meaningful employment. The history of studying faculty-student interaction and collaborative learning approaches associates friendly and high-challenge academic settings with increased student involvement and academic achievement(Tournier, Chimier, & Klein, 2025). More recent quantitative studies build on these results to indicate that academic cultures, as reflected by clear assessment practices, positive faculty mentorship and norms of peer collaboration, are related to more robust measures of academic and social integration, including frequency of classroom interaction, learning community membership and co-curricular activities, which are then linked to better retention and more positive post-graduation outcomes.

More critically, the literature on the supportive cultures in the context of resource-constrained systems of public universities is finding that these supportive cultures can partly offset the disadvantages of lower family capital: structured peer-support programmes, active faculty outreach and norm-clarifying orientation sessions lessen information asymmetries and allow first-generation students to access informal networks (surveys in developing-country university institutions). However, comparative work warns that the efficacy of culture based interventions is conditional upon the level of correspondence between the disposition of students to habitus and those prevailing institutional norms; students with more congruent cultural dispositions will benefit more through supportive climates and those whose cultural dispositions are less congruent may require more bridging support to affect culture into integration(Hou, 2025).

Simultaneously, parallel empirical literatures record the multidimensional nature of the role of gender norm internalization in determining the educational experiences in universities. Cross-national studies at the macro-level show that a significant part of the variance in educational trajectories and field-of-study segregation can be attributed to societal gender norms, and micro-level research of university samples demonstrates that there are specific mechanisms:

internalized expectations of gender-appropriate behaviour influence classroom engagement, interest in technical areas and readiness to take visible leadership positions in student organisations (gender participation studies). Experimental and quasi experiments have revealed the cause and effect relationships with stereotype-threat and cueing manipulations: conditions that elicit masculine-dominant expectations decrease female students involvement and self-efficacy in STEM context, thus restricting access to reputational and social capital that can enable mobility(Wierzchowski, 2019). Notably, two-way interaction effects between gender norms and institutional culture have become a focus of recent scholarship, which demonstrates that egalitarian academic climates, characterized by inclusive pedagogy, gender-sensitive mentoring and explicit counter-stereotype messaging, can mitigate the adverse effects of restrictive internalized norms, but gendered or traditional academic cultures have the opposite effect on unequal integration patterns(Trujillo, 2025).

The empirical literature of family social background is sound and methodologically varied, and longitudinal panel studies, regression-discontinuity designs and intervention studies all indicate that parental education, cultural exposure and social networks influence not only access to higher education, but also the quality of experiences in university and further labour-market performance. Recent studies have supplemented classic longitudinal studies with the finding that the social background of family's accounts for differences in cognitive and non-cognitive preparedness, knowledge of academic language, and access to advice on career options and paths- factors that in their turn are associated with students being able to interact with faculty, build productive peer networks, and negotiate institutional processes. Empirical studies of the experiences of first-generation students all indicate a lower degree of academic and social integration when compared with continuing-generation students, with intermediate processes such as the absence of tacit knowledge about unspoken norms, weaker access to instrumental social capital and competing demands in terms of time management (first-generation literature) explaining the difference. Causal evidence is found in intervention studies -mentoring programmes, bridge course designs and structured orientation initiatives- which show that if a student is helped to integrate by targeted supports and has a reduced outcome gap, family background does contribute to mobility, at least in part through effects on the ability to integrate into university life (evaluation studies).

The synthesis studies and recent research on the mediation topic is a convincing argument that student social integration acts as a proximal process between institutional culture, gender identity processes and family social background and mobility outcomes, but also demonstrates fragmentation and gaps that warrant further integrated investigation. The retention and academic success model proposed by Tinto has been repeatedly tested and quantified as indirect effects in work using structural equation modelling (SEM) and path analysis, where institutional culture is found to raise integration which raises grades, persistence and employability measures (Tinto

extensions; SEM mediation studies). Gender-specific mediation research also indicates that the internalized norms influence the results in terms of participation and networking behaviour - key elements of integration - and family background influences on job quality are often weakened by models that incorporate strong indicators of integration. Although these developments have been made, much of the research is still based on individual antecedents (family, gender or institutional culture alone), or individual outcomes (e.g. retention as opposed to occupational quality) or specific national contexts- often Western systems- therein limiting the generalizability of results and the capacity of the research to determine the relative strength of competing predictors in different public university contexts.

Methodology

The research design followed in this study was quantitative and cross-sectional in nature to investigate the impact of university academic culture, gender norm internalization and family social background on student social mobility with the mediating variable being the student social integration. The survey method was used to gather standardized information among students in the universities of the public sector. This design is suitable in testing hypotheses based on theoretically motivated relationship based on education sociology and gender sociology and also in estimating both direct and indirect effects among latent constructs within one time frame.

The target group was comprised of undergraduate and postgraduate students attending the public universities. Multi-stage sampling was applied to achieve representativeness in academic fields, level of study and gender. In the preliminary step, a few public universities were chosen according to the number of enrolments and access. Simple random sampling was used to select departments at the second stage and students in the department were approached. All 400 questionnaires were sent out with 360 respondents of usable data being returned resulting in a response rate of 90 percent. This is a large sample, which satisfies minimum requirements in multivariate and mediation analysis and gives this study enough statistical power to test hypotheses.

A structured, self-administered questionnaire that consisted of five sections was used to collect the data. The culture of the university academics was assessed with the help of the questions evaluating academic expectations, peer learning norms, and the quality of faculty-student interactions. Internalization of gender norms was operationalized using statements that contained the internalized gender roles, beliefs, in respect to how one should behave academically and socially, and perceived gender-based expectations in school settings. The family social background was assessed with the help of such indicators as the parental education level, access to cultural resources (e.g., books, educational support), and the perceived family social networks. All of the items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The mediating variable was student social integration, which was measured by indicators of academic integration, peer relationships, sense of belonging and involvement in university social and academic activities. The dependent variable, social mobility was measured by how students perceived upward mobility, in terms of improved educational ambitions, development of skills, optimism about their future job opportunity and their future socioeconomic status. The measurement scales were based on the previous empirical research and were contextualized to the local higher education to provide the relevance of content. The data were filtered beforehand with regard to missing values, normality and outliers. Factor analysis and Cronbach alpha were used to measure reliability and validity. The correlation analysis and descriptive statistics were used to examine the relationship between variables. Direct effects were tested by means of the multiple regression, whereas the mediation analysis was done by the means of regression-based bootstrapping methods to test indirect effects via student social integration. The ethical considerations were highly considered, and they included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, as per the institutional research guidelines.

Results

Reliability Analysis

The alpha of Cronbach was used to determine internal consistency within the study constructs. According to Table 1, construct reliability was satisfactory in all constructs and the alpha coefficients exceeded the traditional criterion of 0.70. The culture of the university academics was the most reliable, then gender norm internalization, family social background, student social integration and social mobility. The above findings prove that the measurement scales that are used in this research have sufficient reliability and can therefore be used later in statistical analysis.

Table 1

Reliability Statistics

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
University Academic Culture	8	.88
Gender Norm Internalization	7	.84
Family Social Background	6	.81
Student Social Integration	9	.90

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Mobility	7	.86

Factor Analysis

The construct validity of the measurement instruments was assessed through an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of the adequacy of the sample was 0.89, which shows that it is sufficient to use the dataset in the process of factor analytics. The Test of Sphericity provided by Bartlett showed a significant value which supported the fact that there were sufficient inter-item correlations. A principal component analysis using Varimax rotation created five factors which corresponded to the constructs proposed in theory and explained 67.4% of the total variance. Each factor loading exceeded the acceptable minimum of 0.60 thus showing evidence of convergent validity.

Table 2: Factor Loadings and Validity Statistics

Construct	Factor Loadings Range	Variance Explained (%)
University Academic Culture	.64 – .82	18.3
Gender Norm Internalization	.61 – .79	14.1
Family Social Background	.63 – .77	12.6
Student Social Integration	.68 – .85	13.9
Social Mobility	.65 – .81	8.5

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were determined in order to determine the interrelationships among the study variables. In line with the findings as indicated in Table 3, university academic culture, gender norm internalization, and family social background had a significant positive correlation with student social integration and social mobility (p 0.01). Moreover, there was a strong positive relationship between student social integration and social mobility (r 0.62, p 0.01), indicating that this may have a mediating effect.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. University Academic Culture	1				
2. Gender Norm Internalization	.41**	1			
3. Family Social Background	.38**	.36**	1		
4. Student Social Integration	.55**	.47**	.49**	1	
5. Social Mobility	.51**	.44**	.46**	.62**	1

Note. $p < .01$

Regression Analysis

The authors used multiple regression analysis to examine the direct relationship between university academic culture, internalization of gender norms and familial social background and social integration of students. The ensuing model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.48$, $F = 108.34$, $p < .001$), and none of the independent variables were found to be insignificant in predicting student social integration. A successive regression model was used to determine how social integration can affect social mobility where the result was found statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.39$, $F = 227.19$, $p = .001$).

Table 4

Regression Results

Predictor	β	t	p
Dependent Variable: Student Social Integration			
University Academic Culture	.31	6.82	.000
Gender Norm Internalization	.24	5.19	.000
Family Social Background	.27	5.94	.000
Dependent Variable: Social Mobility			
Student Social Integration	.62	15.07	.000

Mediation Analysis (Hayes PROCESS Model 4)

The mediating role of social integration of students was tested with Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. The results showed that the impact of university academic culture, gender norm internalization, and family social background had important indirect effects on social mobility through student social integration. The bootstrap confidence intervals did not include 0 and this confirmed the presence of mediation. The direct effects were still important; however, when the mediator was added their value decreased, which is evidence of partial mediation.

Table 5 *Mediation Results (Bootstrapping)*

Path	Indirect Effect	Boot SE	95% CI
Academic Culture → Integration → Mobility	.19	.04	[.12, .28]
Gender Norms → Integration → Mobility	.15	.03	[.09, .22]
Family Background → Integration → Mobility	.17	.04	[.10, .26]

The empirical evidence is solid evidence in support of the proposed research model. The culture of the university, internalization of gender norms and family background, all help in improving student social integration, which in turn, has a positive impact on social mobility of students. The mediation analysis supports that social integration of students is an important process where institutional culture, gendered socialization, and family-based resources are converted into mobility outcomes. The above findings highlight the importance of sociological processes in institutions of higher learning as they demonstrate that the ability of students to combine both academically and socially is a key factor in transforming structural and cultural benefits into upward social mobility opportunities.

Discussion

The current study provides a finer understanding of how sociological processes in the universities mediate student social mobility using the student social integration mechanism. In line with the theoretic paradigm and prior empirical data, the results prove that the academic culture of a university has a significant positive impact on the social integration of students. Such conclusion suggests that the circumstances in academic settings that are typified by high expectations, positive relationships between faculty and students, and normative peer-learning create a situation in which students become engaged in both academic and sociocultural aspects of university life. Informational and relational barriers seem to be diluted by such milieus thus allowing the students to develop a sense of belonging and to draw upon institutional resources

needed to transform educational participation into mobility-enhanced outcomes. These findings support the sociological argument that universities are not neutral spaces, but orchestrated spaces in which institutional culture has a determinative effect on the varying student experiences and outcomes.

The analysis also demonstrates that gender-norm internalization is a considerable predictor of social integration of students, thus the role of gendered identity processes in higher education is important. Students who internalize constraining or customary gender standards undergo lower degrees of integration, particularly in actions, which require visibility, leadership, or assertive involvement. The trend aligns with the gender sociological literature that conceives internalized ideas of appropriate gender roles as defining the confidence, style of interaction, and readiness to participate academically and in extra-curricular activities in students. On the other hand, internalization egalitarian gender norms reveal elevated integration implying that gender convictions might either retard or promote access to social and educational networks in higher educational establishments. These conclusions therefore point to the insidious, but powerful ways in which gendered socialization still shapes educational experiences in even the ostensibly egalitarian institutional settings.

Family social background also proved to be a significant predictor of student social incorporation, which supported long-standing sociological assertions of the unchanging impact of inherited assets on the educational paths. Individual students with a background of family with high parental education, cultural exposure, and social capital have higher chances of successful integration into the life of the university. This trend is indicative of the necessitate functions of cultural familiarity, linguistic proficiency and network access in institutional spaces. The results suggest that the benefits of family do not only relate to access to higher education, but have a long-lasting influence on the ability of the students to take advantage of university experiences. Notably, this supports the criticism of unqualified meritocratic theories of educational achievement by showing that the unequal initial position still influences results through the channels of social integration.

The focal point of the contribution of the study is the establishment that the student social integration acts as a key mediating factor between the university academic culture, gender-norm internalization, and family social background and social mobility results. Mediation analysis shows that a significant part of the effects a set of these sociological antecedents has on mobility, is indirect through the integration into academic and social communities. It is this empirical evidence that supports the integration-based theories of student success but goes further to demonstrate their usefulness in understanding social mobility but not academic outcomes in a vacuum. It suggests that the ability of students to forge meaningful relationships, to engage in

institutional praxis, and to take part in campus life is an important channel through which structural and cultural elements are converted into long-term mobility benefits.

The fact that the positive correlation between social integration of students and the social mobility outcomes contributes to the further emphasis on the significance of the relational and participatory dimensions in the higher education. Integrated students have a better access to mentorship, career opportunities information and networks that create access to higher status jobs or increase employability. This finding is echoed by the social capital theory that focuses on the importance of networks and relationships to facilitate mobility. It also highlights the shortage of policy solutions that are overly narrow in their perspective on curriculum or credential-based attainment, without considering the social ecology of universities as a whole. The study provides a strong argument that institutions should invest in practices that promote inclusive participation and belonging because it has shown that integration enhances mobility.

Combined, these results support a series of discussions that address the issue of whether higher education contributes or alleviates social inequalities. Even though universities have the capacity to develop upward mobility, this capacity is not realized across the board since institutional culture, gendered identities, and family resources differ. The findings indicate that without a conscious attempt to foster inclusive academic cultures and encourage integration, higher education institutions can continue playing into the existing social stratifications. At the same time, the mediating power of social integration suggests that institutional interventions can greatly change mobility paths by intervening in the processes through which inequalities are practiced in the university.

To sum up, the present work contributes to the sociological knowledge on the topic of student social mobility by showing that the academic culture of the university, internalization of gender norms, and family social background have a joint influence on the achievement of mobility due to the mediating role of social integration of students. Its results are not limited to either the access-based or performance-based description of mobility but help to understand the importance of relational, cultural, and identity-based processes in higher education. The study is more comprehensive and process-driven in explaining the production of social mobility in universities by empirically validating an integrated model that relates institutional, familial, and individual level factors.

The suggestions made out of the research underline the need to have social integration as a strategic goal of higher learning institutions alongside academic training. Universities need to invest in faculty development programmes that promote inclusive teaching, active mentoring and substantial faculty and student interaction especially to disadvantaged students. Peer learning, learning communities and co-curricular programmes may also be structured peer-learning programs and help to increase integration through the development of collaborative and

supportive spaces. Furthermore, academic establishments ought to embrace gender sensitive policies and methods of instruction that oppose confining gender stereotypes and encourage equal enrollment in academic and leadership programs. The impacts of unequal family backgrounds on integration and mobility can be alleviated by targeted support mechanisms of first-generation and lower-socioeconomic-status students, including orientation programmes to demystify institutional norms, mentoring programs, and career advice.

This study has implications on policy, practice and future research. On a policy level, the results suggest that widening participation programs should come with measures that increase the rate of integration of students into university life in case higher education should be effective in its role as a catalyst of social mobility. The policy makers must thus entrench signs of student integration and belonging in quality assurance and performance evaluation systems. Concerning the institutional practice, the findings highlight the significance of considering academic culture as a flexible phenomenon that could be influenced to facilitate inclusion and equity. The research opportunities that this study has provided on a future basis are longitudinal and mixed-method studies, which will help analyse how the process of integration changes with time and how it interacts with labour-market transitions. This study provides a basis of more specific and practical solutions to inequality and social mobility in higher education systems by preempting the mediating effect of social integration.

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