Patterns of Differentiation in UK Higher Education, 1996-2010

Abstract

There is increasing theoretical and policy interest in the institutional differentiation of UK higher education (HE), and its relation to social inequalities. This paper presents emerging findings from a research project which uses administrative data on six cohorts of applicants and entrants between 1996 and 2010 to explore the institutional differentiation of HE in the UK.   Building on an earlier analysis of institutional segregation, the analysis poses two questions. First, how stable has the hierarchy of Russell Group, other pre-1992 and post-1992 universities in England (and ancient, old and new universities in Scotland) been between 1996 and 2010? Second, what dimensions of institutional differentiation, and what groupings of institutions, are reflected in the characteristics of applicants or entrants to each institution, and how has this pattern of differentiation varied over time?

Outline

Social inequalities in overall participation have declined, albeit slowly, as higher education has expanded, but the more disadvantaged groups have increased their participation mainly in lower status institutions. These institutions may be the means both of the 'inclusion' of under-represented groups in HE but also of their 'diversion' away from higher-status pathways (Shavit, Arum and Gamoran 2007; Iannelli, Gamoran and Paterson 2012). The concept of 'effectively maintained inequality' predicts that as education expands and the participation of advantaged groups approaches saturation point, inequalities become manifested in the different institutions or programmes in which people participate rather than in the difference between participation and non-participation (Lucas 2001). Reay, David and Ball (2005, p.162) describe a "shift in the focus of attention in contemporary debates, as the higher education system itself moves from an elite to a mass system, from a concentration upon who goes and who does not go to university to questions about 'who goes where?'" Much recent research on widening participation in the UK has focused on relative rates of entry to higher- and lower-status institutions, with the former variously defined as Oxbridge, the Russell Group universities, the 'Sutton 13' or 'Sutton 30' (Sutton Trust 2011; Sutton Trust and BIS 2009), pre-1992 universities or, in Scotland, the 'ancient' universities founded before 1600.

This paper presents emerging findings from the Nuffield Foundation-funded research project "Changing transitions to a differentiated higher education system". The study uses administrative data on six cohorts of applicants to full-time undergraduate courses in UK institutions between 1996 and 2010 to explore differentiation both in terms of pre-existing status hierarchies and the social, demographic and educational characteristics of applicants and entrants. An earlier analysis used indices of social segregation, as hitherto applied mainly to secondary schools, to the social and ethnic composition of HE institutions. It found broadly stable levels and patterns of social segregation, and a slight weakening of ethnic segregation. In this paper we examine two further aspects of institutional differentiation.   We ask:

♦   How stable has the three-tier hierarchy of universities, defined by Russell Group, other pre-1992 and post-1992 universities in England, and by ancient, old and new universities in Scotland, been between 1996 and 2010?

♦   What dimensions of institutional differentiation, and what groupings of institutions, are reflected in the characteristics of applicants or entrants to each institution, and how has this pattern of differentiation varied over time?

Methodology

The project uses data provided by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The data cover all applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK institutions for six selected cohorts 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010. They include data on the demographic, social and educational characteristics of applicants, and details of applications.

We measure the strength of institutional hierarchies in terms of institutional status differences between and within sectors. Higher-status institutions tend to be 'selectors', able to choose among applicants, while lower-status 'recruiter' institutions are at greater risk of being under-subscribed. However, qualifications act as a kind of currency to balance supply and demand; higher-status institutions can demand higher qualifications in the knowledge that there will be sufficient demand from qualified applicants to fill the available places. Lower-status institutions, on the other hand, demand lower qualifications in order to attract students who do not expect to meet the requirements for higher-status institutions. Indicators of selectivity were derived to show the overall balance of supply and demand for places in each institution, and the qualification levels of applicants and entrants to each institution.

Our second analysis uses the characteristics of applicants (or entrants) as the criterion for identifying institutional differences, an approach suggested by Huisman et al (2007) and similar in concept to analyses of 'parity of esteem' among post-16 options (Raffe et al 2001). We explore the characteristics of each institution's applicants (or entrants) using latent variable analyses (including principal components analysis) to identify dimensions of differentiation, and cluster analysis to group and categorise institutions. This approach allows us to map the nature of such differentiation, for example whether it is mainly hierarchical or multi-dimensional, and to compare patterns of differentiation over time.

Emerging findings

This research is on-going, and our conference paper will synthesise current and emerging findings. So far we have found that existing status hierarchies between institutions are remarkable stable, especially in England. Using a number of indicators we have found no evidence that the status distinctions associated with the former binary line between pre- and post 1992 institutions, or with Russell Group membership, have become less important. The stability of institutional status hierarchies appears to reflect their embeddedness in the social and economic structure.

Our work in relation to the second research question is still at an early stage. Our analysis of institutional differentiation in terms of the characteristics of applicants and entrants suggests that there has been more stability with respect to social background than to ethnic background, that an independent-school education is much more strongly associated with the choice of HE institution than is social class (at least as recorded in the UCAS data) and that institutions also vary widely in the proportions of older or non-UK students.

References

Huisman, J., Meek, L. and Wood, F. (2007) Institutional diversity in higher education: a cross-national and longitudinal analysis, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61 (4) 563-577

Iannelli, C., Gamoran, A. and Paterson, L. (forthcoming) Expansion through diversion in Scottish higher education 1987-2001, *Oxford Review of Education*.

Lucas, S. (2001) Effectively maintained inequality: educational transitions, track mobility and social background effects, *American Journal of Sociology*, 106, pp.1642-1690.

Raffe, D., Brannen, K., Fairgrieve, J. and Martin, C. (2001) Participation, inclusiveness, academic drift and parity of esteem: a comparison of post-compulsory education and training in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, *Oxford Review of Education*, 27 (2) 173-203.

Reay, D., David, M.E. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education* (Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books).

Shavit, Y., Arum, R. and Gamoran, A. (2007) *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

Sutton Trust and the Department for Business Innovation, and Skills (2009) Applications, Offers and Admissions to Research Led Universities, *BIS Research Paper No 5*. London.