

Widening Access in higher education: Analysis using linked administrative data

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Abstract

Access to higher education (HE) has become a controversial area of policy, as successive UK administrations have sought to balance increasing student fees with ensuring that HE is open to individuals from as wide a range of social backgrounds as possible. This research replicates work done in England (Chowdry et al., 2013) by using a unique, linked individual-level data set to analyse the key determinants of young HE participation in Wales. Analysis of 3 cohorts of data (2005-2007), shows that not all of the socioeconomic difference in HE participation arises at the point of entry to HE but is largely explained by the fact that students living in more deprived areas do not achieve as highly as their more advantaged contemporaries. That said differences according to socioeconomic status (and other factors) remain highly significant even after including prior attainment.

Background

Access to higher education (HE) has become a controversial area of policy, as successive UK administrations have sought to balance increasing student fees with ensuring that HE is open to individuals from as wide a range of social backgrounds as possible. Moreover, relatively distinctive approaches have been adopted in the different devolved administrations of the UK. For example, currently, the Welsh Government has undertaken to pay the increased costs to students arising from the abolition of the fees cap. However, the evidence-base for evaluating different approaches to widening access is relatively weak.

This research analyses how individuals who are resident in Wales progress through secondary school, into sixth forms and further education colleges for post-16 education and on to HE. More specifically, this paper will explore the key factors in determining whether individuals progress through the education system to HE, or not. It will also consider the relative impacts of the social characteristics of individuals, their previous educational attainment and other individual characteristics. Similar research has already been conducted in England but this is the first of its kind in Wales.

These analyses will contribute to devolved policy-making in Wales. Successive Welsh administrations have used devolution since 1999 to implement policies on HE distinctive from those elsewhere in the UK, especially in relation to student finance and widening access (Rees and Taylor, 2006; Gallacher and Raffe, forthcoming). This study will, for the first time, produce an analysis that will provide a systematic foundation for evaluating the impacts of these policy approaches.

Methods

The analysis is based on the innovative use of three linked sources of information, the data for each of which are collected initially for administrative purposes. These are: the National Pupil Database (NPD) for Wales; the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR); and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data. By linking these together, it is possible to trace individual trajectories through the education system to entry to HE. It is also possible to compare systematically the trajectories of those who do participate in HE with those who do not. Moreover, using sophisticated statistical techniques, it is possible to determine which are the most influential factors in shaping patterns of HE participation. By adopting similar methods to those used by Chowdry et al., (2013) results here will be compared with those that have been produced by similar analyses in England.

Findings/Discussion

The research shows that students from the highest SES quintile are the most likely to participate in HE, with the greatest difference showing at the top of the SES distribution, i.e. between the top and 2nd quintiles, a finding that is consistent with the Chowdry paper. However, unlike in the Chowdry paper, this research found that it is not the bottom quintile, but the 4th quintile who are the least likely group to participate in HE.

Like Chowdry, we found that not all of the socio-economic difference in HE participation arises at the point of entry to HE, but is largely explained by the fact that students living in more deprived areas do not achieve as highly as their more advantaged contemporaries. Despite this, differences between the WIMD quintiles do remain statistically significant even after including prior attainment, but are much reduced when compared to the 'raw' estimates.

This research found that ethnicity is highly pertinent to the question of HE participation. Indeed, it is second only to attainment in terms of the size of its effect. Both 'White other' and 'non-White' groups are significantly more likely to participate than 'White British'

students. Indeed, non-White students are 12.4% (males) and 10.2% (females) more likely to participate in HE. Only those students categorised as ethnicity 'unknown' are less likely to participate in HE, this was true for both males and females.

Schools were shown to make a great difference to HE participation, however owing to the methodology used here we are unable to test any school-level variables and as such are unable to elicit what it is about particular schools that make their students more or less likely to participate in HE.

Male participation has declined year on year between 2005 and 2007. For females however, their participation saw an increase of 1.5% in 2006, but decreased by 0.8% in 2007.

Counter to findings from other work in this field (HEFCE, 2005; Crawford et al., 2010; and DfE, 2010), summer-born students are the most likely to participate in HE, while autumn-born students are the least likely. Whilst this is different to previous research, it is similar to the results from the Chowdry paper.