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Title Transitions from Higher Education: access, support and decision-making

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Background information

The advent of mass higher education has had a significant impact on graduate transitions and the changing demographics of UK higher education has led to greater diversity amongst the student population (HESA, 2016). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that students from working class and Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are under-represented in elite Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2015). These disadvantages also exist when students from different ethnic and socio economic backgrounds make transitions from higher education into the labour market, internships or post graduate study (Nielsen, 2012). Decisions made during this period have been shown to have a significant impact on social mobility and future life choices (Sutton Trust, 2015). This paper will explore the factors shaping young people's transitions from higher education. It will report preliminary findings with students who were in their final year of undergraduate study on Education/ Social Sciences degrees. The aims of the study are:

- To understand the experiences of students in their final year of undergraduate study
- To explore future choices such as post graduate study or entrance into the labour market and
- To analyse the impact of different types of support during this critical transitional period.

Theoretical approach

Bourdieu (1984) distinguishes between cultural and social capital. Cultural capital can take the form of academic qualifications, language and presentation and material possessions. Bourdieu sees social capital in two distinct ways, social networks and connections, which 'provide actual or potential support and access to valued resources' (1993: 143). Therefore, capital can take different forms such as cultural, symbolic and social. In education, cultural capital is the most valuable source of capital because, 'academic success is directly dependent upon cultural capital and on the inclination to invest in the academic market' (Bourdieu 1973: 96). Bourdieu argues that students who possess cultural capital are rewarded in the form of gaining higher education than those who do not. Consequently cultural capital affects educational outcomes in which possessing degrees of cultural capital (such as high levels of education) would enable some individuals to compete for better jobs in the labour market. Habitus refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital. In this study we draw on the work of Bourdieu to explore how students' background and access to different types of universities affects their transitional decisions.

Methodology

This paper is based on research being conducted in three different universities (post-1992, Russell Group and non-affiliated) with students in the final year of their undergraduate Education/ Social Sciences degrees. The study is based on a mixed methods approach which consists of a survey questionnaire followed by in-depth interviews with students in each

university. This paper will present preliminary findings of the study, based on 100 survey questionnaires and 15 interviews (to date). Several universities were contacted to take part based on personal contacts and university type. The final three were selected due to gaining access via gatekeepers (department heads and module leaders) and to ensure a variable spread of different types of universities. Questionnaires and interviews were piloted and ethical clearance was obtained from the participating university. Survey respondents were accessed via programme leaders who were asked to distribute the surveys to all students in their final year. This also included 'shout outs' to students by the researcher as well as email reminders.

The survey data was analysed using SPSS to explore the effects of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and type of institution on decision-making. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and the data analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as, 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data' (2006: 76). Thematic analysis consisted of various stages of data analysis which included ordering and sorting the data to generate initial codes followed by a searching of specific themes in which the codes were organised into themes. This was followed by a reviewing of each theme which consisted of a refinement of the themes. The process of thematic data analysis followed a data management phase and cross-sectional analysis across the data in which codes were arranged under a hierarchy of different headings based on the interview themes (Mason, 2002). The study also draws upon local (university) and national (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education DLHE) data.

Preliminary findings

Our findings suggest that there are significant differences in student transitions based on the type of institutions students attend. The 'culture' of the institution is key in terms of the level of support offered to students and the tools available to them when they make these transitions. Those students attending an elite Russell Group university are on an upward trajectory regarding their educational and career choices, irrespective of their ethnic, gender or socio-economic background. One way of interpreting Bourdieu's different forms of capital is, for example, when cultural capital can be understood in terms of 'qualitative differences in forms of consciousness *within* different social groups' (cited by Moore, 2014: 99). Those students attending elite Russell Group universities are developing as a 'specialization of consciousness' - they are able to master the techniques and gain the knowledge they need to be *more* successful than their peers at other institutions when moving onto post graduate study or the labour market.

Implications of study

Our study suggests that greater support is needed for students when making decisions about which universities to attend, for example how do 'A' level students make decisions to attend different types of universities. Furthermore, all universities (regardless of their status) should consider the systems of support available for students when they make transitional choices during the final year of their undergraduate degree. If universities are able to analyse data for student progression, they can further identify the gaps and provide strategies for dealing with them, particularly in relation to which students require support and what this support entails.

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