

Differences in education and employment inequalities based on the social and cultural environments of universities

Anesa Hosein¹, Kieran Balloo^{2,1}, Nicola Byrom³, Cecilia Essau⁴

¹University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom. ²University of Southern Queensland, Springfield, Australia. ³King's College London, London, United Kingdom. ⁴University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Despite many years of successful widening participation initiatives, equity gaps in education and employment outcomes persist. Societal systems of oppression and marginalisation mean that individuals are treated differently based on their social characteristics, but it is not clear whether inequalities in graduate outcomes are also influenced by the environment of the university attended. Drawing on life course theory, we investigated this further. Using national university statistics data, we clustered universities with similar social and cultural environments into profiles. We then linked these environmental profiles with a longitudinal cohort data set to determine whether different university environments might predict differences in education and employment outcomes. The results indicated that associations between young people's social characteristics and their outcomes are not uniform across all universities; they appear to be dependent on their university environment. This research emphasises a need for new policies that address education and employment inequalities within certain universities.

Full paper

Introduction

Many years of widening participation initiatives across the developed world have led to a diversification of the student population (Evans et al., 2021). While this increased access for traditionally educationally disadvantaged groups has been rightly praised, equity gaps in education and employment outcomes persist. Since societal systems of oppression and marginalisation mean that individuals are treated differently based on their social characteristics (e.g., sex, ethnicity, sexual identity and socioeconomic status) (Homan, 2019), this can at least in part explain why there are educational and employment inequalities (Anders, 2012; Archer et al., 2012; Hosein, 2019; Klawitter, 2015; Schoon, 2014).

Higher education as a sector might not be able to completely remove societal inequalities, but some universities produce better outcomes for marginalised students than others. What is not clear is whether the positive or negative education and employment outcomes that are experienced by certain students are influenced by the type of university environment of the institution they attended. Since “higher education may serve to reinforce and reproduce the inequalities within societies” (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, p. 299), it could be the case that if students from marginalised backgrounds attend universities where the social environment (i.e., the social characteristics of other students and staff at that university) does not reflect their own social characteristics, this could negatively impact on their outcomes.

Some universities are also more geared towards, or supportive of, producing better outcomes for marginalised students. For example, prestigious universities are often cited as not supporting these students (Boliver, 2013). In prestigious universities, where there is a larger focus on research outputs, providing additional teaching and pastoral support for marginalised students may be perceived as coming at a cost to the academics’ time needing to be spent producing these outputs (Hosein, 2017), and these students may be seen as problematic and unconsciously ostracised. Therefore, the cultural environments of universities, in terms of their intensity of

focus on teaching or research, could have a disproportionately beneficial or detrimental impact on some students over others.

Using life course theory (Elder, 1998), in this study we investigate how young people's social characteristics impact on their education and employment outcomes, and whether these associations differ based on their university environment. In particular, we focus on how the social and cultural environments of the university might shape students' and graduates' outcomes. The research question for this study was: How do different university environments impact on young people's education and employment outcomes, and does this differ depending on the young person's social identities?

Method

Using similar methods to Boliver (2015), we drew on administrative data in the form of university statistics from the UK Higher Educational Statistical Agency (HESA) and the Office for Students (OfS) to cluster universities with similar social environments (e.g., comparable proportions of female students, students and staff from Black and minority ethnic groups, etc.) and cultural environments (e.g., similar perceived teaching quality scores, research quality evaluations, etc.).

Next, we determined three types of social environment and three types of cultural environment. We then linked this administrative data to the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) cohort data set (CLS, 2021). The LSYPE is a longitudinal study of over 15,000 young people, which started in 2004 when respondents were 13-14 years old. This data set includes a variety of educational outcomes (e.g., degree classification, completion, etc.) and employment outcomes (e.g., permanent job status, salary, management level, etc.).

Using logistic regression analyses, we determined how young people's outcomes could be explained by differences in their social characteristics, and whether such relationships could be explained by the environmental characteristics of the university they attended.

Results and Discussion

We observed a mixed picture. In some university environments, female students, Asian students, those identifying as a sexual minority, or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, were worse off than their counterparts, particularly with respect to their employment outcomes. Perhaps as expected, in almost all cases, university graduates had better employment outcomes than those who had not attended university, regardless of the university environment.

The results indicate that associations between young people's social characteristics and their outcomes are not uniform across all universities; they appear to be dependent on their university environment. It may be that certain university environments are more likely to recruit students from particular backgrounds and the effects we are seeing are structural or systemic. Still, this research emphasises a need for new policies that address education and employment inequalities within certain universities.

References

- Anders, J. (2012). *Using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England for research into higher education access*.
<https://ideas.repec.org/p/qss/dqsswp/1213.html>
- Archer, L., DeWitt, J., Osborne, J., Dillon, J., Willis, B., & Wong, B. (2012). Science aspirations, capital, and family habitus: How families shape children's engagement and identification with science. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(5), 881-908.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23319630>
- Boliver, V. (2013). How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? *The British Journal of Sociology*, 64(2), 344-364.
- Boliver, V. (2015). Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK? *Oxford Review of Education*, 41(5), 608-627. doi:10.1080/03054985.2015.1082905

Brennan, J., & Naidoo, R. (2008). Higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice. *Higher Education, 56*(3), 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9127-3>

Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS). (2021). *Next Steps: Sweeps 1-8, 2004-2016*. [data collection]. 15th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 5545. <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5545-7>

Elder, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development, 69*(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06128.x>

Evans, C., Rees, G., Taylor, C., & Fox, S. (2021). A liberal higher education for all? The massification of higher education and its implications for graduates' participation in civil society. *Higher Education, 81*(3), 521-535. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00554-x>

Homan, P. (2019). Structural sexism and health in the United States: A new perspective on health inequality and the gender system. *American Sociological Review, 84*(3), 486–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419848723>

Hosein, A. (2017). Pedagogic frailty and the research-teaching nexus. In I. M. Kinchin, & N. E. Winstone (Eds.). *Pedagogic frailty and resilience in the university* (pp. 135-149). Brill Sense.

Hosein, A. (2019). Girls' video gaming behaviour and undergraduate degree selection: A secondary data analysis approach. *Computers in Human Behavior, 91*(1), 226-235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.10.001>

Klawitter, M. (2015). Meta-analysis of the effects of sexual orientation on earnings. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society, 54*(1), 4-32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12075>

Schoon, I. (2014). Parental worklessness and the experience of NEET among their offspring. Evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies: International Journal, 5*(2), 22.

<https://doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v5i2.279>