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An exploration of the factors affecting the likelihood of young people in England progressing into higher education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an analysis which investigated the extent to which the likelihood of young people in England progressing into higher education is affected by their gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, area of residence and school attainment. Data concerning the entire cohort of over half a million young people in England who turned 16 in the 2014-2015 academic year were sourced from the Department for Education and matched with data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Raw disparities in progression rates by different characteristics were explored first and binary logistic regression was then used to shed light on the influence of individual characteristics once other factors were controlled for statistically. All of the characteristics investigated were associated with a variation in the likelihood of progression to HE and suggestions for how different HE access inequalities might be reduced are made.

Full paper

It has long been established that the subset of young people in England who progress into higher education (HE) each year is not representative of the wider population (Crawford *et al.*, 2016; Richardson *et al.*, 2020). This raises social justice concerns given that graduate status is associated with higher lifetime earnings

(Britton *et al.*, 2020) as well as other positive non-financial outcomes such as longer life expectancy and greater civic engagement (Brennan *et al.*, 2013). This study sought to identify the factors that exert the greatest influence on the likelihood of school pupils in England progressing into HE by the age of 19 through an analysis of data concerning over half a million young people.

The Department for Education's National Pupil Database was used to gather data concerning the entire cohort of young people in England who turned 16 between September 2014 and August 2015. Data was accessed concerning pupils' attainment at age 16, gender, ethnicity, free school meals (FSM) status and postcode of residence. Records from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) were then used to identify whether or not pupils had progressed to degree-level study by the age of 19.

Various quantitative methods were used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used to establish raw differences in progression rates between groups of pupils with different characteristics and binary logistic regression was used to explore how individual factors influenced the likelihood of progression once attainment and other characteristics were controlled for statistically.

Female pupils were considerably more likely than male pupils to progress to HE, however this observation could be explained predominantly – though not entirely – by their higher average attainment in school examinations.

Pupils in receipt of FSM were substantially less likely to progress to HE than those not in receipt of FSM, though this trend reversed once attainment was controlled for and an FSM pupil of a given level of attainment was slightly more likely to progress to HE than a non-FSM pupil of the same level of attainment. Pupils who resided in areas of low HE participation (as measured by the POLAR classification) were less likely to progress to HE both before and after other factors were controlled for. This would suggest that the best way to increase progression for FSM pupils would be to raise attainment, while pupils living in low participation areas might also benefit from interventions which do not have the effect of raising attainment (such as programmes which improve the quality of information, advice and guidance that pupils receive).

Pupils residing in London were considerably more likely to progress to HE than pupils in all other regions of England, though statistical controls reveal that this phenomenon can be explained almost entirely by the higher average attainment of pupils in the capital as well as average demographic differences between London and other English regions.

Ethnicity had the largest bearing on the likelihood of young people progressing to HE. White British pupils had a below-average progression rate to HE and are less likely to progress than all minority ethnic groups bar Travellers of Irish heritage, Gypsy or Roma Travellers and pupils of mixed white and black Caribbean ethnicity. Ethnic disparities in progression are largest for students with below-average school attainment. Whilst high-attaining ethnic minority pupils were marginally more likely to progress to HE than high-attaining white British students, lower-attaining ethnic minority pupils were considerably more likely to progress than their lower-attaining white British counterparts. The social mobility implications of this are complex given that those with lower school attainment are less likely to benefit financially from HE participation (Boero *et al.*, 2020). Large ethnic disparities in progression rates to HE persisted once attainment and other factors were controlled for statistically, with almost all minority ethnic groups being considerably more likely to progress to HE than white British pupils after statistical controls were applied.

Given that pupils from a white British background will not face barriers to progression in virtue of their ethnicity, the overrepresentation of ethnic minority pupils in HE may in fact be a mirror image of the underrepresentation of these pupils along other pathways at age 18. These other pathways may include apprenticeships, technical education and employment where there may be barriers restricting access for those pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds. For this reason, HE progression statistics ought not to be seen as a simple barometer of equality of opportunity for different groups of young people.

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