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## **A comparative analysis of post-16 learner outcomes: social mobility and educational transitions**

Pallavi Banerjee<sup>1</sup>, Debra Myhill<sup>1</sup>, Joanne Tyssen<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom. <sup>2</sup>University Centre Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom

### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

Learner's trajectories through the education system and their ultimate outcomes are more strongly shaped by socio-cultural factors, including the context of the educational setting, than by cognitive factors. Whilst learners do vary in terms of their 'intellectual' capacity, notions of fixed intelligence have been shown to be limiting for educational outcomes, and particularly for socially and ethnically diverse students. Educational outcomes are powerfully affected by a range of social factors, including home background, economic poverty, and the nature of the school experience. Research reports identify key factors which influence educational outcomes: inequalities in child development; inequalities in access to high-quality education; stressors experienced in school; and different school practices. We will summarise the findings from our project funded by UniConnect which addresses social mobility and educational transitions: a comparative analysis of post-16 learner outcomes in FE and sixth form settings, investigating attainment, progression to higher education and student perceptions

### **Full paper**

Overview: Learners may choose educational settings for different

reasons and may have varying educational experiences depending on the setting they are in. In this paper we present our findings from a project funded by UniConnect to deepen our understanding of the differences experienced by learners across FE colleges and sixth form settings in relation to their intentions towards and preparation for higher education. Recommendations from the study will help leaders in tailoring the approach to different settings and ensure learner's needs are met effectively and strategically.

Theoretical influence: Focussing on the theme of social mobility and educational transitions we take as our key theoretical perspective that learner trajectories through the education system and their ultimate outcomes are more strongly shaped by socio-cultural factors, including the context of the educational setting, than by cognitive factors. Whilst learners do vary in terms of their 'intellectual' capacity, notions of fixed intelligence have been shown to be limiting for educational outcomes (Dweck, 2006), and particularly for socially and ethnically diverse students (Gillborn and Youdell, 2001; Sisk et al, 2018). Instead, educational outcomes are powerfully affected by a range of social factors, including home background, economic poverty, and the nature of the school experience. Crenna-Jennings (2019), for example, identified four key factors which influence educational outcomes: inequalities in child development; inequalities in access to high-quality education; stressors experienced in school; and different school practices.

Crucially, educational outcomes are not simply linked to out-of-school factors, as Crenna-Jennings' four factors highlight: they are also linked to within school factors. Successive studies in the UK have shown that within-school variation in student outcomes is greater than between-school variation (Reynolds, 2007; Husbands and Pearce, 2012), and Macleod et al. (2015) found that up to two-thirds of the variance between schools in terms of attainment of socially disadvantaged students is attributable to school level characteristics, not home background.

The consequences of these educational inequalities are far-reaching for those they affect in terms of social mobility and life chances. The Social Mobility Commission (2020a, p.35-36) draw attention to the fact that at the end of Key Stage 2, 51% of disadvantaged students achieve the expected standard in writing, reading and mathematics,

compared with 71% of all other students; 25% of disadvantaged students achieve a good pass in English and Maths GCSE, compared with 50% of all other students. These differences in educational outcomes play out into differing life opportunities: students from disadvantaged backgrounds are 'less likely to attend university than those from wealthier backgrounds growing up in the same area. Across local authorities, education gaps between sons from poor and wealthy families explain, on average, around 80% of the gap in adult earnings between them' (SMC 2020b, p.6). With reference to post-16 education specifically, these socio-cultural factors are further affected by the range of qualifications available to students, including vocational qualifications. Different perceptions of post-16 qualifications (Shields and Masardo, 2015) appear to lead to differential access to university (Mian et al, 2016; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Our own research (Banerjee and Myhill, 2019), drawing on both statistical analysis of attainment and progression, and on interviews which elicited students' perspectives on their learning experience suggested that it is important to consider how, for example, students' sense of belonging and student experiences of ways of learning, assessment and feedback, student support systems, and relationships with teachers affect their capacity to learn and to succeed.

**Methodology:** In designing our methodology, we have been mindful of the two key research questions:

1. In what ways (if any) do post-16 learner experiences and outcomes differ across FE Colleges and Sixth Form settings?
2. How might any differences be explained and understood in context?

The research design made use of cross-sectional and longitudinal perspectives and interpreted these statistics to give a clear narrative about what they mean for learner outcomes and perspectives. We have analysed administrative datasets, administered surveys, and interviewed participants.

**Findings:** We present these under two main themes:

1. Analysis of learner outcomes data on attainment and progression to HE taking demographics into account

2. Direct engagement with learners in both FE settings and sixth forms to develop a better understanding of their perceptions

We focus on ways of learning, relationships with teachers, assessment/feedback practices, social background/support, nature of advice and guidance for transition to HE from school/FE colleges and parental support. We believe the recommendations will be of particular interest to academic researchers as well as practitioners.

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