

Higher Education as a pathway to ‘the good life’: hope, risk and regret in the post-92 university

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

As a result of widening participation, the number of students who are the first in their family to attend higher education (HE) has significantly increased, particularly for low-status post-92 universities where they form a significant proportion of the student body. Whilst the first-generation student experience has been explored at length in existing literature the relevance of university status in relation to student experiences has often been overlooked. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of first-generation students studying within a low status university. Twenty students at various points in their student journey completed in-depth biographical interviews which were theoretically analysed using Bourdieu’s theory of practice and Berlant’s (2011) depiction of “cruel optimism” and “the good life”. Findings from the study exposed the “cruel optimism” inherent within HE, revealing the way in which structural inequality and stratification can have damaging emotional impacts on students from post-92 universities.

Full paper

As a result of widening participation, the number of students who are the first in their family to attend higher education (HE) has significantly increased, yet their experiences are often characterised as being problematic, both in relation to university study and graduate outcomes. Importantly, many first-generation students study within post-92 universities which are also often positioned in deficit within the hierarchical HE field. This aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of non-privileged first-generation students studying within a case study post-92 university. Specifically, this study examined how non-privileged first-generation students framed their decision to attend the university, what they perceived to be significant in relation to their experience and their expectations regarding graduate employment. Additionally, the influence of the social and political context of HE on the participants’ lived experiences was explored, particularly in relation to the impact of university status.

Contextualised by policy discourses of massification and marketisation this research extends current work surrounding first-generation university students. Existing literature commonly offers a focus on a specific stage of the student lifecycle (frequently the first year). Less attention is paid to first-generation students throughout their student experience, including pre-entry and post-graduation. There is also a

paucity of knowledge surrounding first-generation student experiences specifically within low-status, post-92 universities, leading to limited exploration of inequalities in HE within this context. This inquiry addressed the gap in the literature by focusing exclusively on the transitional experiences of first-generation students in a post-92 university throughout the student lifecycle.

In line with the interpretivist paradigm this study utilised a hybrid approach incorporating both a case study research design and a biographical, narrative-based approach. Twenty students at various points in their student journey completed in-depth biographical interviews, including applicants, current students, and recent graduates. The conceptual framework for this inquiry was built on elements of Bourdieu's theory of practice coupled with Berlant's (2011) depiction of "cruel optimism" and "the good life". Whilst Bourdieu's thinking tools are frequently used in educational research, Berlant's (2011) theoretical framework is largely absent from sociological understandings of higher education. This research capitalised on this theoretical gap by drawing on Berlant's work to illustrate new understandings of first-generation students' experiences.

Research findings demonstrated that whilst university access and participation has widened, the dominant discourse of what it means to be a student has not. Class-based notions of the 'traditional' HE experience have resulted in a model which continually devalues the experience of both first-generation students and post-92 universities, which is challenged by this study. The research exposed the "cruel optimism" inherent within HE, revealing the way in which structural inequality and stratification can have damaging emotional impacts on students from post-92 universities. This study calls for a shift from the normative ideology of what it means to be a student and for a re-imagining of the post-92 university that recognises, rather than disregards, its value. Furthermore, findings raise important ethical questions regarding HE institutions and policy discourses which continually position university as a route to graduate employment and financial stability, without acknowledging the wider non-economic benefits of HE. Conclusions therefore offer insights for policy, universities, and schools and colleges with regard to developing a fairer and more just system of HE for first-generation students.

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