

‘New students’ gaining access to HE: the admissions process as a means of regulating the changing field of higher education (0260)

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This paper explores higher education (HE) transitions in England in the context of ‘dual sector’ FE/HE institutions. These institutions offer both further education (FE) and HE programmes. Not only do they prepare students for participation in HE, but they also provide the possibility of ‘seamless’ transition to HE, whereby students remain within the same institution for HE study. These institutions are therefore an example of the changing field of higher education, opening up HE to a wider and more diverse population, and reflect a trend in a number of countries across the globe. The regulation of what was once a highly autonomous field is being challenged by these developments. The student admissions process can be defined as one way of regulating the field, and new procedures for access to HE provision particularly in the ‘new’ HE, provide a focus for exploring how the boundaries of the field are possibly being eroded.

The paper considers this issue by examining the experience of making HE transitions in a number of different subject sites in four FE/HE institutions in England. The paper explores what sorts of admissions processes were required for accessing higher education and how students and staff engaged with those processes.

This paper uses data from a UK ESRC-funded project (the FurtherHigher Project) which used both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the changing shape and experience of HE in England. The qualitative strand of the study included interviews with 80 students and 50 staff, involved in vocationally-related further and higher education in four different FE/HE institutions. For this paper these interviews are analysed in relation to how the admissions process is experienced in different sites in the study by students and staff, what gaining admission to HE involves, and how the process is shaped by and also helps to shape the changing field of HE.

Bourdieu’s use of the concept of field is used to analyse the field, and to ask: How does the field operate; what are the rules; what is the infrastructure; how does the field function and what allows or disallows a particular positioning within it? It is argued that different people (here particularly students and teachers) with different habitus and resources can function differently in the field and in terms of positioning themselves in the field, and gaining entry to the field is part of the process of positioning. Focusing on the admissions process therefore provides insights into how the field of HE is responding to the changes that are brought about by widening participation policies.

Increasing and diversifying participation in higher education (HE) are key goals of education policy across a wide range of countries. Such goals have resulted in new and evolving institutional arrangements to break down barriers to participation in HE, including new procedures for admissions which operate in some parts of the wider HE field. While these procedures are intended to ease the transition of 'new' 'non-traditional' students to HE, they also serve to distinguish vocational and new forms of HE from more traditional and also more valued forms of HE. The admissions process can be seen as one of the regulatory mechanisms of the field, which allows expansion and widening participation to occur at the same time as maintaining inequalities within the field as a whole.

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