

Understanding the students of tomorrow: how young people think and feel about Higher Education (0275)

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Background information, the context of the study and how it relates to previous research and literature in the field

This paper will explore the how young people's form their views of Higher Education (HE). To understand the changing patterns of demand for HE in the UK, in particular the trend toward massification and how participation rates in different subject areas are shifting, it is essential that stringent efforts are made to understand how young people understand & view HE. There is a history of work in this area that has centred on the importance of socio-economic background in mediating preference formation. Work looking at 'opportunity structures' (Furlong & Biggart 1999) (Roberts 2009), and Bourdieu's ideas on habitus, (Reay 1998, Reay et al 2001) depart in their interpretation of the role of social class, but both schools take it as their starting point. However, most of the empirical work supporting both sets of arguments focuses mainly on the qualitative in the latter case, or draws on research primarily pre 2000 in the former. Furthermore, in both cases there is little focus on the temporal and how if at all, preferences evolve over the teenage years. There has been large scale quantitative work on temporal understanding via the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) in recent years (Goodman & Gregg 2010). However, this work focuses primarily on the preferences young people display rather than the principles that underlie them. This paper draws on recent empirical research that attempts to re-examine the dominant theoretical assumptions of the two schools above (Atherton et al 2009), and augment the national data that is coming on stream into the 2010s via the LSYPE.

The theoretical approach or methodology adopted

The paper will use the theoretical frameworks described above to orientate the analysis & discussion of a survey conducted with 1524 young people from year 9 – year 13 (13-17 years old) over January to July 2010. These young people were drawn from schools/colleges in two different areas of England and the survey examines their future occupational & educational preferences and where HE sits here, levels of 'aspiration', perceptions of academic subjects & opportunities/constraints here, knowledge of HE, attitudes to cost, ideas of 'success' and their views on who/what influences them. The data will be interrogated to identify where relationships exist between social class, gender, geography and school/college. The results will be considered in the context of how HEIs work with young people, schools and colleges. The relationship between the evidence on how young people view and understand HE will be compared to prevailing models of how HEIs engage with this group. The objective will be to explore the extent of synergy and disjuncture.

Results and other findings and conceptual arguments

Analysis of the data described above indicates that there is relatively little shift in young people's views regarding HE entry from year 9 – 11, with bigger relative changes in years 12-13 as for many HE entry becomes a reality. However, even these changes are not drastic. Where there is greater evolution is in subject choice but this is most commonly a function of employment preference. The 'aspirations' of young people are uniformly high but their knowledge of the future educational & employment landscape is limited and does not advance greatly over the early-mid teenage years. The importance of parents/carers as influencers is high and again while decreases with age remains the dominant influence on young people.

The data implies that young people have high employment/educational aspirations and HE is perceived as the key route to achieve these. As they get older, the influence of social class is felt more acutely but it is not the differentiating factor in terms of what young people *wish* to do, that may be implied by the theoretical schools described above but of course may still be the most accurate predictor of what young people *actually* do. The main deficit appears to be in knowledge and understanding of routes to HE and while there is some association with the actions of HE in addressing the deficit via its outreach work – the gap remains significant and a space where HE may be able to profitably intervene to shape their future student body

The implications of the study (eg for theory, practice and further research)

This study aims to add to theoretical understanding regarding how young people's future preferences are constructed & how this relates to practice in HE. The growth in demand for HE per se, in the UK and abroad, and its subject manifestations is not mainly a result of what HE itself does. HE researchers, managers and deliverers must as an imperative, aim to understand as far as possible how their main (at the moment anyway) body of future students forms views of HE, and what informs their views if they wish to develop greater control over their entrant profile and hence their overall strategic planning. This will allow possible interventions with young people, schools and colleges, both strategic and operational, to be assessed more accurately against their likely effects.

References

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