

‘Home and Away’: higher education, mobility and localities (0105)

The social science of higher education has been dominated over recent decades by approaches which take the individual student as their basic point of reference. This is well illustrated, for example, in research in the tradition of human capital theory; as well as in sociological approaches to analysing differential access to higher education according to the social characteristics of applicants/entrants. This paper aims to widen this theoretical scope by trying to understand the role of higher education in shaping broader patterns of social transformation. It does so, in empirical terms, by examining the relationships between participation in higher education, spatial mobility and locality.

The paper focuses on the Welsh experience of higher education in order to explore these theoretically-defined issues. Welsh HE is especially appropriate to use as a case-study in this context. Hence, the emergence of a modern HE system in Wales during the latter part of the 19th. century illustrates many of the features associated with Gellner’s account of the relationships between universities and the development of administrative and technical elites in the process of national development. It equally illustrates the relationships between national cultural development and the emergence of a model of HE based on traditional liberal education. However, what has previously not been remarked upon are the important implications of HE’s role in producing professional cadres on the development of social reform and the sustaining a local civil society. These latter processes continued well into the 20th. century.

More recently, the ‘massification’ of HE in Wales has disrupted these established patterns. Local recruitment has been replaced by significant geographical mobility, especially to and fro across the border with England (although to varying degrees at different periods during the years since the Second World War). The paper presents a detailed analysis of these patterns of spatial mobility, defining newly emergent relationships between mobility, type of university attended and locality of residence. More specifically, it explores how different types of locality within Wales are characterised by distinctive patterns of mobility in relation to HE; patterns which cannot be wholly explained by reference to models based on economic rationality (although this plays a part), but also by reference to wider normative considerations, especially with respect to notions of national and local identities. Moreover, the effects of these differential patterns of mobility have important consequences for the social relations of the localities from which HE entrants are recruited. This has been a somewhat neglected aspect of social science research on HE hitherto.

This analysis has a number of important implications. It casts new light on policy, particularly with respect to student fees; but also with regard to the use made of HE in strategies for local area regeneration. This is significant in the context of the development of devolved policies for HE across the UK. It also has implications for our understanding of the role that HE plays in

shaping the social relations of local civil society. This, in turn, points to a new agenda for research on HE.