

Personality and place: two neglected concepts in thinking on widening participation to higher education and social mobility

Abstract

Despite sweeping changes to higher education and the cancellation of Aimhigher, the government professes continuing support for widened participation from lower socio-economic groups. This session will argue that an over-focus on the sociology of the demand for higher education has led to the neglect of the psychology and geography. It will report on and synthesise empirical studies that suggest that personality and location exert powerful influences over structure and agency as experienced by potential university students. It will aim to move the debate towards a more rounded social science approach to understanding why some young people aspire to higher education while ostensibly similar ones do not, suggesting gaps in the literature that government and academics need to fill.

Session outline

Widening participation was perhaps the most significant theme in higher education policy through the 2000s. Nearly £1bn was invested through the Aimhigher initiative in order to encourage more young people from lower socio-economic groups (and others under-represented in the university population) to apply to university. Progress was made, although the scale of this and the drivers that caused it remain unclear. At the start of the 2000s, one in seven young people from the most deprived areas progressed, but this had risen to one in five by the end of the decade (HEFCE 2010). In fact, as Coleman and Bekhradnia (2011) note, demand now outstrips supply and the Robbins principle has fallen.

However, our understanding of the demand for higher education remains cloudy. Evidence for the efficacy of Aimhigher is contested (Gorard et al 2007; Doyle & Griffin 2012), with practitioners and academics struggling to grapple with the 'what works' paradigm when interventions take place years before the decisions they are intended to influence. Some argue that improvements in GCSE outcomes are the only significant driver of university demand by increasing the pool of qualified applicants (e.g. Chowdry et al 2008), yet others report on the 'wasted talent' of well-qualified young people who opt not to apply (Sutton Trust 2008). Tuition fees and fear of debt are viewed as vital by some (e.g. Pennell and West 2005), discouraging those from poorer backgrounds, but the evidence from the tripling of tuition fees in 2006 suggests that it was richer students who were deterred much more (HEFCE 2010). Bourdieu's theories of habitus and class reproduction have been the bedrock of sociologists' contributions (e.g. Reay, David and Ball 2005), but many thousands of young people evade their structural situation.

We do not therefore have a robust theoretical or empirical model for higher education demand. As we move into an era of radically different national and institutional policy, with full-market fees, excess (but potentially volatile) demand, 'AAB' recruitment freedom, private sector providers and high graduate unemployment, it is clear that higher education in the future is likely to be quite different. Nevertheless, widening participation (now largely rebadged as 'social mobility') remains a government aim with a National Scholarship Scheme, an expanded apprenticeship programme and continuing efforts to attract young people into university and professional careers (Milburn 2012). An holistic understanding of why some young people aspire to higher education while ostensibly similar ones do not is still needed – its absence is stark.

This session will argue that scholarship and policymaking to date has neglected two key potential threads in understanding widening participation and social mobility: personality and place. Both draw on concrete fields in social science (psychology and geography, respectively), yet they have rarely featured in the public discourse. They are under-researched and the session will highlight some key research questions that need investigation, as well as presenting some of the presenter's own findings and those drawn from the limited corpus that does exist.

Place exerts a strong influence on how an individual views the world and how they perceive the opportunities available to them and the constraints that bind them (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson 1996). It provides structure and shapes agency, whether through the quality of schools, availability of the curriculum, transport links, local labour market, embedded cultural capital or prevailing social attitudes. HEFCE's research programme into participation situated within cities showed significant promise (Raphael Reed, Gates and Last 2007), but did not stretch on into suburban or rural communities or impact significantly on policy. The session will briefly report the findings of a quantitative study of application rates by local authority (*removed for review*), which attempts to identify which features of place might be most salient and specifically to highlight places that buck the trend.

Similarly, personality is viewed by psychologists as vital to determining how decisions are taken and as a challenge to economic and other forms of rationality. However, very little research has been undertaken to date to examine why young people take seemingly irrational decisions about higher education. The session will use Kahneman's (2012) work around self and decision-making as a jumping off point for an exploration of the ways in which individual personality might go some way to defining agency in regard to higher education. It will touch on two studies (*removed for review*) that demonstrate how personality impacts on the student experience, suggesting that there may be much to learn about how it shapes demand too.

References

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