

It wasn't really where the university was in the league table.: A comparative investigation of student choice of higher education institutions

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Research on university choice suggests that young people's decisions are influenced by social background (Archer and Hutchings 2000). Given that some first generation students in particular, feel like a 'fish out of water' in relation to HE (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009: 1106) this study has the potential to inform practice in supporting their transition into university. This paper focuses on how and why first generation students tend to select post-1992 Universities and the selection of universities on the basis of a perceived 'fit' with the institution.

Research aims:

1. To develop understanding of first generation students' engagement and experience of higher education through students perceptions of 'choice' and 'fit' (Rose 1989, Holloway 1997, Parr 1997, Reynolds 1997, Skeggs 1997, Reay 2001).
2. To explore how first generation students choose institutions.
3. To analyse the importance of social and academic 'fit' to student choice.
4. To consider whether their perceptions were evidenced by their experiences at the chosen university.

Research design:

Semi-structured interviews took place, using an opportunistic sample, at three post-1992 institutions with first generation Level 4 education studies based undergraduates. The use of semi-structured interviews 'enables respondents to project their own ways of defining the world' (Cohen et al, 2011: 146). The study used a qualitative research design characterized as an 'intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material' where the fabric 'is not explained easily or simply' (Creswell, 1998:13). This enabled us to uncover the complexities of student choice of university through their perceptions and explanations of their experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and thematic analysis used to analyse the data. The research was conducted in accordance with BERA (2011) ethical guidelines. We collaborated with institutional contacts in the creation of the interview questions, and sought to address any concerns regarding inequality in power between tutors and the student through clarity of communication and the right to withdraw without prejudice. Feedback on the research findings will be provided to participating institutions and students.

Findings:

The majority of students in the sample were commuting and part of their 'choice' was curtailed by their 'other' responsibilities however there were alternative 'local' institutions which could have been chosen. Reay et al (2001) discuss the qualitatively different experiences of these 'commuting' students at HE in comparison to the 'traditional' moved away from home students, and location of the university featured highly in our students' responses. This was partially explained by 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998: 377) that could be passed on by word of mouth within a specific geographical location. For example:

'Because I live locally I knew some people who had been to T – they seem to like it so I kind of went with that really.' (TSO 11/2013)

The act of 'blind' consumption, as illustrated by this student's willingness to act on word of mouth information has a particular logic that is class related (Bourdieu 1986). Determined by habitus, university choice,

... brings about a unique integration, dominated by the earliest experiences, of the experiences statistically common to members of the same class.

(Bourdieu 1990: 60)

This student's choice ensures an alignment with those who live close by but at the same time illustrates an emerging distance from family members who are unable to transmit the information needed to inform the decision. This perception of fit is further emphasised with the following:

'...because it's quite close to home I thought it might be quite a common background between a few people....' (SJM 11/2013).

SJM is emphasizing the need for social fit as discussed in the literature on working class students' experiences of higher education (Wilcox, Winn et al. 2005).

Despite an emphasis on league tables and the publication of KIS and Unistats data, the majority of respondents did not appear to engage with this information. TSA's response reinforces the idea that decision making is influenced more strongly by a 'feel' for the institution or that it would be 'ok':

'The league tables do tell you some things but they don't tell you what it is going to be like here...I needed to know it would be ok' (TSA 11/2013).

Students stated that attendance at open days had helped them in their decision making. It was through such experiences that they were able to establish a fit and determine whether it 'would be ok'. Open days were used to evaluate 'the type of people who are going to be there' (SJI 11/2013) and whether 'I could picture myself here...'. (TST 11/2013).

Participants struggled to define reputation and in part this was because it was not the most important determiner of their choice: '...fairly important, yes, but it wouldn't have been the be all and end all' (SDA 11/2013). Our study indicated their own experiences of the institution and the views of their friends as more important in informing their decision.

Another important aspect of social fit appeared to be the support and friendliness of the tutors. Students who attended open days commented on how useful they had been in exploring how tutors were with them:

'... whereas here (chosen university) they were a lot more open and friendly so I didn't feel scared.' (SGE 11/2013)

Finally, the reputation of the course rather than the institution was important to some participants. This was tied to the importance of employability, value for money of the course, and future career opportunities.

Conclusion:

Students' identification of appropriate institutions is undertaken by word of mouth and open days, with a focus on 'social fit' rather than 'reputational fit'. For some participants, choice is limited by geographical immobility through family and financial responsibilities, but also by the nature of the sources they give credibility to i.e. word of mouth, their own experiences and friends' 'history' with the institution. Government sources of information at worst appeared not to be as trustworthy as a friend's experiences. Thus the external definitions of reputation, such as league tables, may not serve this group of students in the same manner as others.

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