'I didn't really know the reputation of any of them to be fair': widening participation and higher education choice

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Abstract:

Student choice of higher education (HE) institution has been identified as problematic, reflecting class based positions and re-enforcing perceptions of an HE hierarchy (Shattock 1996). Universities are increasingly involved in a 'game' in which their status in a wider educational field is frequently used by students as they consider where they will study. This research takes this theme up and explores influences on university choice of students who have been identified as 'first generation' students across three post-1992 institutions. Semi structured interviews were held with a total of 16 students at the beginning of their first year of study. Findings presented here reflect students' views on the main influences on their choice of university, further contributing to debates that centre on differentiated higher education experiences according to class.

Rationale:

It is widely reported in existing literature that university choice is influenced by social background (Archer and Hutchings 2000) where students with increased levels of cultural capital know how to play the required games that secure places in elite institutions (Byrom, 2009). Such practice leads to institutions being framed and understood by the types of students they attract (Archer, 2003) and where the field of education increasingly operates as a pseudo-market. Despite the validity of such information being widely contested, published league tables and KIS data feature as tools through which students determine the quality of a potential HE institution. In this context, students with no family history of HE are presented with a myriad of different options within which they are expected to make decisions. Given that research identifies 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 focuses on how and why first generation students tend to select post-1992 Universities and how they negotiate the complex process of higher education choice.

Research aims:

1. To further develop research in the area of first generation engagement and experience of higher education (see Rose 1989, Holloway 1997, Parr 1997, Reynolds 1997,Skeggs 1997, Reay 2001) through an understanding of students perceptions of 'choice' and 'fit'.

2. To explore how first generation students choose institutions.

3. To analyse the importance of social and academic fit to student choice.

Research design:

Three post 1992 institutions agreed to support the interviewing of first generation students. Semi-structured interviews took place at the three institutions with first generation Level 4 education studies based undergraduate students. Much research conducted within this field is qualitative in nature and this approach is taken up within this study. Creswell (1998) views qualitative research 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). Thus, methods used within this research sought to uncover the complexities of student choice of university through their perceptions and explanations of their experiences and where 'respondents [could] project their own ways of defining the world' (Cohen et al, 2011: 146). The interviews were recorded and transcribed and thematic analysis used to analyse the data.

The research was conducted in accordance with BERA (2011) ethical guidelines, including provision of participant information, consent, debrief and withdrawal protocols. Consideration and adherence was given to the ethical guidelines of participating institutions in the event they differed from originating institution and BERA. The institutional contacts were collaborated with in the creation of the questions and acted as the immediate point of contact for students, in the event of any concerns.

Any concerns regarding inequality in power between tutors and the student was addressed through clarity of communication in relation to the purpose and audience of the research and the right to withdraw without prejudice. Feedback will be provided to the contact at the participating institutions for dissemination to students.

Findings:

Whilst this was an opportunistic sample of first generation students on undergraduate education related programmes – it was noticeable that the majority of the students in the sample were commuting and part of their 'choice' was curtailed by their 'other' responsibilities. However, the findings present some tensions in relation to existing research in this area where students have reported feeling like 'fish out of water' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009: 1106) as students in this study quickly established a sense of belonging within their respective institutions. This was influenced through experiences of

open days, where students could determine whether they could establish a sense of fit with an institution as illustrated by the following:

> I just based it upon what I saw on the day, how the people were there, how nice they were, how informative and just how I felt about it really. If I'd have liked it then I'd have gone to it regardless.

> (James 1/2014)

James emphasises the importance placed on establishing a 'feel' for an institution, and 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 when considering the quality of the institution. Jo re-enforces the idea that decision-making is influenced more strongly by establishing 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.

> (Jo 11/2013).

Interestingly, Jo is exposing some issues with the information presented in league tables, identifying that they only present a partial picture of the institution. This would suggest a closer alignment with information relating to education than usually attributed to students from a background with limited experience of HE.

In attending open days, students were able to go beyond the information reported in league tables and other forms of data to determine whether a fit could be established and also whether it 'would be ok'. Specifically, open days were used to evaluate 'the type of people who are going to be there' (Sally 11/2013) and whether 'I could picture myself here…' (Jo 11/2013).

Local based information and 'word of mouth' also featured highly in student responses. For example, both Fiona and James discussed the social networks they had referred to when making their choice:

> 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.

> (Fiona, 11/2013)

> I didn't really know about its reputation I just went off word-of-mouth of what my friends said about how they thought it was. I

didn't think it was very, not like a formal reputation, just word-of-mouth off people I knew.

(James, 1/2014)

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

Both Fiona and James illustrate an alignment with those who live close by but at the same time illustrate an emerging distance with family: family members do not transmit the information needed to inform the decision. Bourdieu discusses the notion of *habitus clivé* (Bourdieu, 2004: 130, cited in Reed-Danahay 2005: 3) where the possibility of increased alignment to an unfamiliar field is possible through habitus transformation. Students in this study were aware of moving on and away from families including those who continued to live with parents and commuted to university. Through the dialogues they had with other students who lived locally to them they considered that there 'might be quite a common background between a few people….' (Sally 11/2013), therefore ensuring a closer alignment to students at the same institution. Sally is emphasizing the need for social fit – again a discussion point on much of the literature on working class students' experiences of higher education (see Wilcox, Winn et al. 2005).

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' (Sophie 11/2013). Joe re-enforces this perspective by stating open days were influential in helping him to decide: 'Not very important, I didn't really know the reputation of any of them to be fair, I just based it upon what I saw on the day' (Jo 11/2013).

Finally, another important aspect of determining 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)

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Conclusion:

Currently it is clear that students' identification of appropriate institutions is undertaken by word of mouth and open days – focussing on what could be called as 'social fit' rather than 'reputational fit'. These findings contribute to a wider body of research around university choice and where 'word of mouth' is given more weighting than official publications. Further analysis seeks to drill deeper into notions of fit to examine the extent to which we can continue to determine first generation students as 'fish out of water'. The data here suggests not. However, what is clear is that 'choice' for some students is limited by geographical immobility through family and financial responsibilities – but also by the nature of the sources they give credibility to ie word of mouth and their own experiences and friends' 'history' with the institution.

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