

'Elite' higher education participants and civil society. (0120)

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Paper outline

It is well recognised that the administrative system of higher education (HE), which describes the policies and institutional forms characteristic of HE, has been transformed in recent decades, reflecting wider shifts in patterns of governance at the UK level and, indeed, more widely. The project investigates the extent to which these changes in HE as an administrative system have brought about significant shifts in the character of HE as a social system, meaning the relationships between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the wider societies in which they are located (Rees and Istance, 1997). More specifically, the changes in the administrative system of HE have been paralleled by the very substantial expansion and diversification of HE that characterised the latter decades of the twentieth century. This expansion has been described by Trow (1973) as a transition from an 'elite' system of HE (enrolling up to 15% of the relevant age group) to a 'mass' system (enrolling up to 50%).

Indeed, the expansion of higher education has been one of the most profound institutional changes in the UK of the past few decades. Research has thus far considered the effects of expansion on patterns of entry to HE (Rees and Taylor, 2007) and on economic outcomes for graduates, (the diversification of graduate employment) and on economic development more generally (the purported shift to a 'knowledge economy') (Brown *et al.*, 2001). Yet, there has been much less consideration of the way in which HE contributes to the structuring of specifically *social* relations. This study therefore aims to explore the relationships between one particular institutional change – the expansion of higher education – and the social relations that characterise local civil society.

There is general evidence to suggest that participation in a 'mass' HE system remains an important – although declining - factor in shaping the extent of participation in formal associations, as well as other forms of social organisation (despite the changes taking place in patterns of participation of this kind) (Li, Savage and Pickles, 2003); even if the effects of HE participation are difficult to separate out from other closely related influences (class background, social mobility, etc.) (Egerton, 2002). However, very little is known about the

social processes underpinning these relationships between ‘mass’ HE and the structuring of the local social relations of civil society. As a way of exploring this, our preliminary analysis has focused on the relationship between participation in an ‘elite’ HE system and participation in formal associations, addressing a key research question, *what is the nature of (elite) graduate engagement in civil society?* In order to address this, we drew upon data derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-sample of respondents of the National Child Development Study (NCDS). These respondents were born in 1958, were age 50 and all were living in Wales at the time of interview. Specifically, the study compares 15 of these ‘Welsh’ respondents who participated in an ‘elite HE’ system with 15 non-HE participants in terms of their engagement in civil society organisations at the local level. The aim of this analysis is to provide the basis for comparison with graduates of a ‘mass’ HE system, thus addressing the project’s overarching research question: ‘To what extent has the shift from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ system of higher education influenced the roles that graduates play in local civil society?’ The paper discusses some of the emerging findings from the analysis of qualitative data derived from these interviews with 30 ‘Welsh’ respondents with a particular focus on the nature and quality of respondents’ participation in civil society organisations.