

‘What a difference an A makes’: Towards a typology of university entry routes (0127)

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## **Part Two - paper**

*I didn't know if I should be reading or anything beforehand... No-one in my family had really been to university before and I was like "I don't know what to do". It was really strange. But it's fine. You get used to it.*

*(Abigail, working-class, UWE)*

*I was always going to go to university. It wasn't a question of not...both my parents went to university and everyone from my school went to university.*

*(Elliot, middle-class, UoB)*

## **Background**

The cohort discussed here are a subset of the *Leverhulme Trust* funded *Paired Peers* project, which mapped the experiences of 88 mixed background male and female students through their three years at the two universities in Bristol, an English provincial city. The University of Bristol is a research intensive member of the Russell Group, whilst the University of the West of England is a large post-1992 institution which traditionally prioritised teaching and the quality of the student experience; it is within the University Alliance mission group. The cohort were all studying one of eleven degree subjects taught at both universities, and were paired up according to subject studied and social class background. We interviewed the participants at six points during their undergraduate studies, twice annually, following them from induction week in year one to their final exams in year three. Other data was gathered in the project too, including personal journals, focus groups, time-sheets and photo diaries. We also mapped their use of the city for various activities including study, paid work, socialising and leisure pastimes.

The data presented here draws largely upon the early interviews, especially from their first year, and in particular focusses on two key questions:

‘Why did you choose to attend the university that you did?’, and ‘Who and what was influential in your decision making process?’.

Previous research tackling this issue includes Ball *et al.* (2002) who proposed two types of higher education ‘chooser’ – the ‘embedded chooser’ (someone more likely to not go onto university) and the ‘contingent chooser’ who was likely to do so. Others such as Leathwood

and Hutchings (2003) examined the entry routes into HE, and in particular the influence of what they referred to as 'pathways, qualifications and social class', although they did not come up with a typology as such. Both of these studies were undertaken at a period when a relatively small proportion of young people, especially those from working class backgrounds, progressed to university, unlike in the period of our project when almost half of all young people did so.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

The project generally draws heavily upon the theories of Bourdieu, especially his notion of capitals (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986), and in the project we were concerned at how the students acquired and mobilised their economic, social, and, of particular relevance here, cultural capital, as they moved into and through university.

### **Findings**

Using the interview data we constructed a typology of six entry routes into university:

- **The taken for granted pathway:** going to university is seen as normal, majority in family has a degree, siblings are already at university, most people at school are going. Many middle-class students fall into this category, particularly the upper middle classes.
- **The planning pathway:** going to university was a long-term goal and choices and actions were deliberately taken to achieve it. Aspirant and academically gifted young people from the working class may follow this route, as may highly motivated middle-class students.
- **The drifting pathway:** people could not really give an account of how they decided to go to university, they lacked aims and objectives, but ended up there regardless. Drifters can come from all classes.
- **The rescue pathway:** the young person did not envisage going to university, was drifting, possibly falling into bad habits, but somebody – often a teacher – took an interest and motivated them into applying. Rescues may involve less academic working-class and some demotivated middle-class students.
- **The derailment pathway:** the opposite of rescue. The young person starts off on a positive course towards university but something happens - illness, exam failure, family breakup - which disrupts their progress, resulting in dropout or setback. This can affect all class groupings; a number of middle-class students who had ended up at UWE fell into this category.
- **The disorganized route:** an extreme version of the three former routes. Because of their own or family actions - such as moving around the country, moving between schools, etc., - the trajectory is disrupted, even ruptured. The young person may start a degree, leave it, return to another course later in life, or enter into employment for a

time before entering higher education. This pattern is often associated with mature students, although we did not include them in our sample to limit the number of possible variables impacting on our findings.

These trajectories are strongly linked to class, as are choice of university and the outcome of selection processes. In all six routes, there may be 'critical moments' and/or 'significant others' impacting on the trajectory and affecting the outcomes, as this paper demonstrates. We also consider the role of schools, parents and the universities themselves on students' decision-making processes.

It was particularly striking to us that getting into university is often not just an individual but a family endeavour. Middle-class young people and their families draw on a broad array of capitals, while those from the working-class must frequently rely on their personal resources and determination, alongside emotional support from their families.

## **Implications**

These findings have implications for social theory in terms of understanding the motivations of students and the influence of their personal backgrounds to enhance or limit personal aspirations within a mass higher education system and wider neoliberal economy.

It also has implications for policy and practice, including at an institutional level around information, advice and guidance before and during higher education, for university admissions, and for the provision of student support services.

## **References**

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