

Graduate views on access to higher education: Is it really a case of pulling up the ladder? (0145)

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It has become largely accepted in recent decades that widening access to higher education (HE) delivers positive benefits to individuals and society. Agreement on this general point has emerged in spite of bitter discord over more specific areas of policy. The strength of the apparent consensus became especially evident in 1997, when the new Labour government fully endorsed the Dearing Report's recommendations to increase capacity and expand opportunities in HE.

The resulting government-backed initiative, AimHigher, set out to channel more students from minority groups and lower socio-economic backgrounds into HE. The coalition government scrapped the scheme in 2010, but the decision was rooted in concerns over approach rather than any misgivings about underlying ethos. A belief in broadening access has remained absolutely central to the policies and initiatives that have followed, with the National Scholarship scheme that replaced AimHigher enjoying similar levels of funding and the Social Mobility Strategy unveiled by the Deputy Prime Minister in 2011 retaining education as a key driver (Cabinet Office 2011).

Commentators have now started to challenge the notion that this enthusiasm for providing more opportunities in HE exists across society. Gorard (2013) and Mountford-Zimdars, Jones, Sullivan and Heath (2013) have been especially notable in casting doubt on the contention. By examining the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, Mountford-Zimdars et al. unearthed thought-provoking evidence that graduates in particular might oppose the continued expansion of access to HE.

In the first part of their paper Mountford-Zimdars et al. examined the evolving emphasis and semantics of questions regarding HE in Britain. They then considered the personal socio-economic characteristics of respondents to the following question: Do you feel that opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education – to a university or college – should be increased or reduced, or are they at about the right level now?

Using a multinomial logit with 2010 data, Mountford-Zimdars et al. analysed the answers of individuals who agreed that opportunities should be 'increased', were 'about right' or should be 'reduced' (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2013, page 804). They found 'graduates were both

less likely to support an increase in opportunities and more likely to support a reduction in opportunities' (page 804). Although this result was not fully investigated, Mountford-Zimdars et al remarked in their closing comments that graduates are rational economic agents who are 'in favour of pulling up the ladder behind them and decreasing opportunities' (page 809).

The current paper revisits these findings, using Mountford-Zimdars et al. as a foundation on which to examine attitudes towards access to HE and the social characteristics of respondents. Focusing on the hypothesis that graduates are in favour of 'pulling up the ladder', we propose using an alternative and more robust methodological approach that allows a deeper investigation into the intensity of opinion regarding attitudes towards access to HE. We also develop the analysis in a number of different ways in an attempt to tease out clarity and to further examine the robustness of our own results and those of Mountford-Zimdars et al.

Firstly, we extend the dataset to include the years 2000, 2005 and 2010 of the BSA survey. We thus cover a period that witnessed participation in HE increase by more than 15 per cent. Expanding the period under scrutiny allows for a more complete analysis in a time of change and also permits a cross-section investigation of the percentage of graduates in the sample and an examination of regional data. Secondly, we delve deeper into the 2010 dataset, using additional perception variables to break down graduates into types.

Overall, our approach allows for a more thorough inquiry into attitudes towards widening access to HE. As well as building on the methods of Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2013), our findings offer some statistical evidence to support the work of Brown (2013) and the notion of social congestion and the work of Bates and Kaye (2014) regarding internal institutional experience and levels of student satisfaction.

We find that Conservative-supporting, privately educated males are more likely to favour a reduction in opportunities. In addition, by adding a 'supervisory' variable, we provide support for the notion that those in supervisory roles are more likely to report wanting an expansion in HE than those in non-supervisory roles. Most interestingly, we find that all respondents in 2005 and 2010, at all levels of education, are more likely to support significant reductions in HE opportunities. We therefore conclude that it is doubtful that Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2013) are picking up 'pulling up the ladder' effects: instead we interpret this result as evidence of the effect of internal disaffection, the rise in tuition fees or, as posited by Brown

(2013), the notion of social congestion. Consequently, we encourage further research that uses a mixed-methods approach to examine attitudes and shed further light on this important and complex subject.

References

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