

Collegiate consistency? An exploration of the application and transition experiences of non-traditional entrants at an elite, UK university. (0328)

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PART 1 – Abstract (150)

Global research in HE is now creating a critical mass that can inform our understanding of the characteristics of sustainable and effective systems of higher education (Deem 2015). There remains tremendous sector diversity and, parallel to this, debates regarding how best policy can be researched, theorizing and applied. This paper offers a case study with both a strong theoretical flavour and empirical exploration. It puts together the intensity of competition for student populations in the slightly unusual context of an elite university's recruitment policy relating to access. Recruitment policy and practice in this HEI is then placed within its unique historic and cultural context. The paper borrows from human geography and sociology literatures that emphasize the importance of space and the cultural imaginary. The empirical data draws upon the retrospective experiences of graduates via unstructured interviews and cohorts from the late nineteen sixties to the present day.

PART 2 – Outline (1000 not including references)

Overview Global research in HE is now a specialist sub-disciplinary field with its own critical mass (Deem 2015). Given the fantastic diversity within the sector, research that can inform our understanding of the characteristics of sustainable and effective systems of higher education is much needed. However, debates have also emerged as to how best policy can be researched, theorizing and applied. This paper is a working-in-progress of an on-going study that contains both a strong theoretical flavour and offers new empirical insights. Using the issue of widening participation, or access, it puts together the intensity of competition for student populations in the slightly unusual context of an elite university's recruitment approach to access.

The project The results discussed here form part of a wider project with a remit to explore the delivery of the wide participation agenda within one HEI's current system and framework. The focus was initially expressly upon those who are the first in their family to go to university. This original target sample was further expanded, for the section of the project discussed here (graduate's recollections and experiences), to also include those outside a traditional, elite HEI intake (such as middle class, white, male and British). In summary, the task here was to explore the 'outsiders' experiences of an elite university, what they found, thought, reacted to and coping strategies.

There are a variety of *theoretical models* available. The theoretical challenge is to understand the complexity of the unique historic and cultural context of the case study elite HEI. To do so, the paper borrows from human geography and sociology literatures that emphasize the importance of space and the cultural imaginary. Within the neo-liberal model of new managerialism, which in essence holds that NPM be internalised by those leading HEIs, themselves – an equivalent to Hochschild's 'managed heart'. However, here the Open Day experience and collegiate system (or difference/ USP) seeks to generate resonances with space that generate a sense of familiarity/ appeal. Here, Thrift's (2012) work on the expressive infrastructure will be applied alongside Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy and its longer-term implications for individual's sense of self. Goffman (1959) here allows the student career

in a place to be analysed and scales or success to whether students experience a 'mortification of self'. Recent work by Burrows (2012) on metrics and academic values suggests (paraphrasing Burrows) that academics are being played or are now players. Rather an alternative suggestion is explored here that explores whether traditional HEI's have the same autonomy to move and adjust their recruitment strategies, or whether the cultural legacy is self-generating and resistant stage-management.

The data explores these questions via the descriptions of their university careers by a series of graduates, from the 1960s to the present day via unstructured interviews. Graduate experiences were explored via unstructured, extended interviews, but secondly – and key to the analysis – situated within an organisational (/ institutional) context. That is, this paper argues that the analysis of individual actors' accounts cannot be fully understood without reference to the given cultural and historical context. Both the institution and individual possess a cultural history and, in effect, are more than the sum of their parts. The paper therefore advocates an ethnographic approach that attempts to explore the actor within the institution, rather than institutions constituted purely by actors. This approach is informed by an ethnographic approach to social research that, too, places a strong emphasis upon spaces as an agentive force.

The findings suggest that what was distinctive was the informality of initial contact and/ or some form of familiarity with the HEI prior to application amongst the sample. The *content* of these associations varied across the accounts offered by the sample, but the *form* was the same – some link that overcame the mystic of an established, elite University. For instance, staying in college beforehand for sporting events, or where a former teacher had attended in the past. These added to established links, such as fathers and grandfathers attending. In stark contrast, one PGR had never even visited the city nor university. Common in the findings is a valuing of the branded 'Durham Difference' (Watson 2007). What is the collegiate system difference and its definition and negotiation by non-traditional applicants across their university career is where the contribution of this paper lies.

The conclusion attempts to see the broader context and the very possibilities of continuity and consistency in the student experience within a collegial system and, perhaps, advocating the significant role intermediate players (such as SU's) may possess in delivering WP agendas. Whilst the findings do not speak to the negative case – the individual who looked at, but rejected, Durham. It does, however, include interesting exceptions – attendees who failed to graduate, those who attended without having visited and local graduates who sat outside the conventional collegiate experience.

References

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