

Social mobility and higher education: Emerging insights from a study of South African young people (0057)

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Abstract

The link between higher education participation and social mobility is an expectation held across many contemporary societies, and a key driver for ongoing growth in participation. This study focuses on young people in contemporary South Africa, a context which is beginning to massify and where higher education does indeed promise possibilities for a better life. The reality is a bit more complex. Drawing on interviews with 73 young people who entered bachelors study some six years before, the study shows how young people navigate the opportunities and constraints of the possibilities they encounter. The role of family cultural capital is shown to be significant, as well as the institutional context they encounter in university. Following them into the workplace, the role of community networks is shown to play a key role in access to work opportunities, but this is also mediated by individual agency. Overall the study shows the transformative role of participation in higher education, beyond matters of employability and through to the broader aspects of the public good.

Extended abstract

The expansion of higher education during the 20th century, particularly in the early post-war economic boom, brought with it an understanding of the relationship between participation in higher education and social mobility (Marginson, in press). This has been intensified by further patterns of growth in higher education more recently across much of the globe, although the evidence on the private returns to higher education, particularly in systems of high participation, is now mixed (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010).

Africa is the one continent where higher education is yet to massify (Cloete & Maassen, 2015). In South Africa, even though student numbers have doubled since the onset of the democratic era, the majority black African youth are only just approaching the 15% level of participation defined as 'mass higher education' (no longer elite) as per Trow's original analysis (Trow, 1973). In South Africa, the private returns on higher education are some of the highest in the world, on average, and societal expectations on the value of higher education participation are high (Cloete, 2016). Yet economic growth is slow, and it is understood that averages mask wide disparities in opportunities for young people especially across racial and class lines (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013). There is little research at present though

which interrogates these macro findings more closely, to show the variation and detail within which these overall trends function. There is also little work to date which characterises the experiences of students who leave a programme before graduating – what they make of the learning to this point and how they proceed from there.

In this article we report on a study that conducted close-up interviews with 73 young people who had started studies in either a BA or BSc programme some 6 years before at one of three South African universities. The analysis, informed by realist sociological theory, captures the constraints and enablements that frame the life course of the young person, while also accounting for individual intention and agency. The impact of social class, in the South African context mediated by race, is evident across the study. Specifically, the following aspects of young people's life courses are analysed:

- The choice to do higher education and how family economic and cultural resources play into this
- The experience of studying and whether or not this allows for a progressive honing of interests and skills
- The experience of being at university and whether or not the institution fosters a sense of belonging
- The experience of transitioning into the workplace; strategies used for obtaining jobs
- Deliberations over whether to do postgraduate study

The work is informed by a theoretical perspective from the sociologist Margaret Archer (2000) and the analysis sought to determine the structural and cultural conditioning that influenced students' experiences both during and after higher education, as well as to identify students' exercising of agency in response to opportunities and constraints. At university, the institutional culture was seen to develop a sense of either inclusion or exclusion. This then linked to the experience of curriculum, with the more rigid curricular structure in science playing a significant structural role on students' experience. Academic failure and the exercising of agency in crafting a course beyond this were noted.

Key findings of the study centre on how individuals grapple with their options in order to determine courses of action. The resources of the family and community are shown to be key in supporting young people in their early life trajectories, not only in material support and access to information and networks, but also in supporting the individual in testing out options, and in reframing plans when initial ideas do not work out as intended. This is shown to be especially significant for first generation university students. The key finding of this study is a strong counterpoint to traditional ideas around career advice and goal setting. Rather than knowing what they want to do and working forward from there, young people, especially those who ultimately are successful at getting traction on a life course, are engaged in a series of processes where they try out alternatives and where failure is often provoking of deeper insights and better future plans.

This study brings important insights to bear on contemporary deliberations around higher education and society in South Africa and elsewhere. Even for students from relatively well-resourced families there are no simple trajectories through life, especially in times of economic and social flux. The study confirms the possibilities of social mobility for many young people but also the 'messiness' of how these trajectories work out. For those many in South Africa who come to higher education with less well resourced backgrounds, there are especial challenges but also huge potential growth in working this forward. The university has a particular role in the distinctive experience it provides to young people, with a space that needs to be safe enough to explore, but also sufficiently engaging to provide the necessary challenges that are centrally formative. The engagement with knowledge is central in the formation of young graduates who go out into the world with an emerging sense of purpose and responsibility. By implication this work also extends into a broader consideration of the contribution that these young people make in a dynamic society, thus speaking to a growing literature characterising the public good purposes of higher education.

The study thus provides fresh evidence on the transformative possibilities in higher education – recognising significant structural and cultural constraints on young people as they enter university, especially those not from middle class backgrounds, but also identifying the modes in which agency is exercised. The study offers a closer look at what students are actually doing in existing systems of higher education and existing job opportunities in an emerging economy, in order to provide a more nuanced sense of challenges and possibilities than are sometimes offered in more superficial critiques of the contemporary South African higher education system.

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