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The Widening Participation Blame Game: Tuition Fees or Parental Engagement?

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract:

Geography matters. Pupils from the most advantaged areas are more than twice as likely to attend university as those from the most disadvantaged. This paper looks at how we might rapidly narrow this entry rate gap. It asks whether changes to tuition fees and loan arrangements could provide the answer. It questions whether parental attitudes are to blame and whether universities can fill the gap by becoming information beacons nurturing student aspiration. Using various quantitative techniques, it confirms the prominence of parental attitudes for education decision-making. However, rather than being an impediment, working-class parental valuation of higher education is found to boost widening participation. Barriers are instead structural, reflecting income distributions and resulting inequalities of opportunity. Our analysis, linking human capital and cultural capital, has important consequences for the current national policy debate. It concludes that the recommendations from the Augar Review, at least for widening participation, are overtly conservative.

Paper:

Introduction

Britain's Higher Education (HE) has boomed, with graduate numbers more than doubling in 30 years. Hidden within this growth, there are notable shifts in widening participation. Entry rate gaps, measured across the most advantaged and most disadvantaged areas, have narrowed every year since 2006 (UCAS, 2018). Despite this positive outlook, those from the most advantaged areas remain 2.36 times more likely to attend university. What drives this distinction in HE participation? Given the ratcheting up of tuition fees, a popular explanation is debt aversion: "an unwillingness to take a loan to pay for college, even when that loan would likely offer a positive long-term return" (Cunningham and Santiago 2008). Numerous papers highlight its importance: Callender and Jackson (2005) find that lower-class students are warier over taking on HE debt; Callender and Mason (2017) conclude that its

role in deterring participation is intensifying. However, the literature does not yield a consensus. Dearden *et al.* (2010), for example, find that the tripling of tuition fees in 2006 had no impact on participation rates.

Rejection of debt aversion is congruent with a human capital perspective. Income-contingent loans minimise any perceived financial loss threat. Competitive labour markets then advertise the importance of acquiring a degree for career success, such that “students from working class backgrounds may feel compelled not to lose out and therefore opt to enrol” (Wilkins *et al.* 2013). To spur further university attendance, we then need only to refer to marginal changes in costs and benefits associated with the investment decision. For benefits, graduate employability is key. For costs, we switch to price and student loan generosity.

An issue missing in this approach is how the pupil’s understanding is influenced by parental attitudes. First, parental attitudes over debt may prejudice the ambition of the prospective student. Both Burdman (2005) and Perna (2008), for example, refer to how parental debt aversion is transmitted to their children such that it impairs HE decision-making. Second, there are issues introduced through Bourdieu’s (1977) ‘cultural capital’. The middle-class parent may engineer an education-friendly environment by attending highbrow cultural events (Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997). Hypothetically, those parents who do not create such an engaging environment have children who become less motivated into skills acquisition. Moreover, parental involvement in their child’s education can improve information flows. Higher engagement could generate greater understanding of graduate premia. A low interest in attending university may therefore reflect a parental deficiency in understanding the value of a HE degree.

Our paper poses a simple question: Do parental attitudes or tuition fees impact on the probability of a child attending university? We use this to test whether these issues threaten additional reductions in the entry rate gap.

Data and Method

We use British Social Attitudes 2017 data, initially giving us a random sample of 3,988 respondents. Focusing on parental attitudes, we restrict this data to those who have answered the question ‘how likely that any of your children who are still at school will go to university?’. This gives us a dataset of 575. Given its size, we also check for robustness by comparing findings with a unique independent online survey of 2,500 parents of 6 to 18-year olds.

Using this data, we construct a two-stage analysis that takes advantage of parental opinions over HE, skills acquisition and income perceptions. Our first stage is to distinguish between depth of parental attitude. We derive four groups, distinguished by the likelihood that their children will attend university: Definites (i.e. child/children will definitely attend); Maybes (i.e. child/children are likely to attend); Hindered (i.e. parents who believe HE is important but do not think their child/children will attend); Nays (i.e. parents who do not believe HE is important and do not think their child/children will attend). This allows both graphical and econometric analysis. Attendance likelihood is graphed across widening participation criteria. This is used to forecast the future entry rate gap. Our econometric analysis, in contrast, conducts an ordered probit. We use this to test numerous

hypotheses, including income sensitivity for HE attendance.

In our second stage, we construct a bivariate probit methodology that enables a sequential breakdown of parental influence. We start with parental attitudes over the perceived value of a HE degree. Numerous control variables are included, allowing us to isolate issues relevant to the widening participation agenda. This attitude variable is then included within an empirical specification which models a high likelihood of HE entry. To sufficiently test for the importance of parental attitudes, we also include income controls.

Results

Our analysis predicts that the entry rate gap will continue to fall. While the recently published Augar Review may generate changes to the tuition fee and loan system, we do not find evidence that it will have a significant impact on participation rates. Overall, we reject previous research which highlights higher price-sensitivity from those from lower income backgrounds (Leslie and Brinkman 1987; Heller 1997). We find no evidence, for example, that tuition fees are harming HE participation.

Our results from the two-stage analysis are dominated by the importance of parental perceptions over the importance of university education. However, we fail to find any cultural capital effect which could explain class-based distinctions in pupil ambition. Working class parents are more likely to perceive university attendance as important. Instead, we find that families with income constraints are much more pessimistic about their children being able to attend university.

Conclusion

Does lower HE participation reflect a parental failure to create an aspiring youth that understand the opportunities available to them? Alternatively, does it reflect debt aversion? We reject both scenarios. Parents are key influencers, who are already ensuring reductions in entry rate gaps. Tuition fees are not found to significantly impact on these attitudes. Instead, our analysis leads to a focus on how perceived inequalities of opportunity can significantly impair the education investment decision. Given it is family poverty which limits HE engagement, any marginal change in either tuition costs or the loan system will be of little value.

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