Who you know, what you know and ‘knowing the ropes’

The continuing importance of social and cultural capital in access to higher education in England

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Outline of presentation

1. Introduction: The growth of participation in higher education
2. New Labour policies 1997-2010
3. Coalition policies 2010-
4. Barriers to participation – what does the evidence tell us?
5. Where next in policy and research?
Participation rate (API) for Britain (1950 – 2001)

Source: DCSF, 2009
Higher education entrants by social class group (1960-2000)

Source: DfES, 2003
Widening participation and ‘fair access’

• **Widening participation** is primarily concerned with narrowing the participation gap between those who have traditionally continued on to higher education and those from previously under-represented groups.

• **Fair access** refers to the fairness of admissions processes in individual institutions but it is also used to describe the broader issues concerning which type of institutions people from different social groups attend.

(Bekhradnia, 2003)
Policies under New Labour 1997-2010

- Increase participation rate to 50% (18-30 yrs)
- Aim higher for outreach work
- Tuition fees and student loans
- Office for Fair Access (OFFA)
- Access agreements
- Benchmarks for institutions
Performance against targets

- **Quantitative inequality** describes the proportions from different socio-economic backgrounds participating in higher education.

- **Qualitative inequality** describes the distribution of higher education participants from different socio-economic groups across different courses or institutions.

  (Boliver 2008)
Quantitative inequality: participation rates of those from high and low socio-economic background and their gap (2002-2008)

Source: DIUS, 2009
Quantitative inequality: trends in young participation for areas classified by HE participation rates

Source: HEFCE, 2010
Qualitative inequality: type of university attended by socioeconomic background

Source: Machin et al., 2009 in Hills, 2010
Type of university attended by ethnicity

Source: Machin et al., 2009 in Hills, 2010
Policies under Coalition government 2010-

• Abolition of Aimhigher
• Increased tuition fees
• Income-contingent loans
• More competition among universities
• Encouragement of private providers
• Destinations data as a performance indicator
Barriers to participation and fair access

- Student finance
- Aspiration and awareness
- Prior attainment
- Social and cultural capital
Educational barriers: raw socio-economic gap in higher education participation rates at age 18/19 for females

Source: Vignoles & Crawford, 2010
Educational barriers: raw socio-economic gap in higher education participation rates at age 18/19 for males

Source: Vignoles & Crawford, 2010
**Cultural capital: probability of intending to participate in higher education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student characteristic</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base case</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base case but with attainment one standard deviation below the mean</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base case but with cultural capital one standard deviation below the mean</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base case but with attainment and cultural capital one standard deviation below the mean</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base case but with attainment one standard deviation below the mean and cultural capital two standard deviations below the mean</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base case but with attainment and cultural capital two standard deviations below the mean</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Noble & Davies, 2009
## Cultural capital: contingent and embedded choosers (Ball et al., 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contingent choosers</th>
<th>Embedded choosers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance is a key concern and constraint</td>
<td>Finance is not an issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice uses minimal information</td>
<td>Choice is based on extensive and diverse sources of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice is distant or ‘unreal’</td>
<td>Choice is part of a cultural script, a ‘normal biography’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few variables are called up</td>
<td>A diverse array of variables are deployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice is general/abstract</td>
<td>Choice is specialist/detailed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal support (social capital) is used</td>
<td>Extensive support (social capital) is mobilised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic mix is an active variable in choosing</td>
<td>Ethnic mix is marginal or irrelevant to choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing is short-term and weakly linked to ‘imagined futures’ – part of an incomplete or incoherent narrative</td>
<td>Choosing is long-term and often relates to vivid and extensive ‘imagined futures’ – part of a coherent and planned narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-time choosers with no family tradition of higher education</td>
<td>‘Followers’ embedded in a ‘deep grammar of aspiration’ which makes higher education normal and necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowly defined socioscapes and spatial horizons – choices are ‘local’/distance is a friction</td>
<td>Broad socioscapes and social horizons – choices are ‘national’/distance is not an issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents as ‘onlookers’ or ‘weak framers’/ mothers may give practical support on families making the choice</td>
<td>Parents as ‘strong framers’ and active participants in choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where next in policy?

- We need to focus on narrowing attainment gaps much earlier in students’ educational careers, including primary school.
- Schools need to improve the information, advice and guidance (IAG) they provide about universities and courses.
- School-university links need to be developed for all schools.
- Parents and communities need to be involved in activities to encourage interest in higher education.
- Policy makers and institutional leaders need access to more sophisticated research and data sets.
- Contextual data should play a part in admissions at least for the time being.
Concerns about contextual data

“We should not be asking universities and professions to doctor their application criteria in order to favour a lower academic standard just because someone appears to come from a disadvantaged background”. (David Lyscom, chief executive of the Independent Schools Council, 2010).

“Students at Mossbourne Academy in Hackney would not want to feel patronised by special privileges that that admitted them [to university] with worse [school test] results than their wealthier peers”. (Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, 2012)
Where next in research?

- The creation of large datasets based on government administrative records will help us understand the challenges better, but raises new methodological questions.

- Research into higher education participation needs to involve academics from a wide range of disciplines and to draw on qualitative as well as quantitative data.

- Research into higher education participation requires the involvement of researchers who are interested in schools as well as higher education.

- More research is needed on what approaches to outreach work are most effective.
Any questions?

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