Socio-economic disadvantage and access to higher education

During the past two decades, the provision of higher education within the UK has been greatly enlarged. Despite an overall increase in representation across all social groups, the gap between the levels of participation of affluent and disadvantaged young people has remained. This research, by Alasdair Forsyth and Andy Furlong of the University of Glasgow, details the barriers to fuller participation in higher education faced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The researchers found that:

- **Under-representation in higher education was primarily due to poorer school performance by disadvantaged young people, rather than to any systematic bias in university admissions policy.**

- **Even within schools near the bottom of the government 'league tables', those young people who attained sufficient qualifications for university entry were *relatively* advantaged in comparison with the majority of the school intake.**

- **Few qualified but disadvantaged young people forewent the opportunity to progress to higher education. However, as a result of the extra financial, geographical and social barriers they face, such students were more likely to enrol in less advanced or prestigious courses than their more advantaged peers. Specifically:**

  - **lack of funds and reluctance to take on debt limited the length of courses that many disadvantaged young people felt they could afford to enrol in;**

  - **the costs of leaving home and daily commuting limited the range of institutions that some disadvantaged young people felt they could attend;**

  - **the economic need to assure a job at the end of it limited the range of subjects which many disadvantaged young people felt they could study.**

Background

The under-representation of disadvantaged young people within higher education (degree and diploma courses) has become an important issue in recent years. Despite, the expansion of higher education during the 1990s, representation remains greatest amongst young people from affluent areas and lowest amongst those from deprived neighbourhoods.

This research aims to distinguish between the factors which *qualify* young people for higher education and those which predispose them to attend. What factors govern levels of qualification and which factors may act as barriers to the progress of qualified but disadvantaged young people? The study tracked final-year pupils attending schools with below average numbers of leavers entering higher education. All these schools were in areas of disadvantage, either in socio-economic terms or because they were remote from institutions of higher education.

The young people

Over five hundred young people, who had remained in school until age 17, participated in research. More than half were female, reflecting recent trends indicating relative under-achievement in school by boys.

Despite living in areas of disadvantage, around half were from 'middle class' backgrounds, according to their parents' current or last occupation. These 'middle class' parents were predominantly nurses, primary school teachers and sales assistants rather than more affluent professionals. Nevertheless, this group of relatively advantaged young people were more likely to be preparing for higher education than their 'working class' peers. The study found that achievement at school was also strongly related to social class. The research was unable to allocate a small group of young people to a social class (primarily because their parents did not work); this group fared particularly poorly.

The existence of pockets of relatively advantaged residents within disadvantaged school areas masks the true level of educational disadvantage experienced by less affluent young people in such communities, most of whom have already left school by the age of 17.

Participation in higher education

Existing school qualifications primarily determined whether people entered post-school education and if so at what level (i.e. type of course, subject or institution). However, these qualifications were themselves linked to pre-existing advantage, particularly social class and having working parents. In other words, the gap in representation in higher education between the affluent and the disadvantaged was primarily due to underlying differences in levels of school achievement.

Other significant factors, all of which exerted a negative influence on levels of participation, were having parents who did not work, living in a deprived area and being from a small town. All in all, the most disadvantaged young people were the least likely to be studying for a degree at an 'ivy league' university (e.g. St Andrews or Durham), but the most likely to be studying for a non-degree qualification (e.g. NC or HND) at a further education college.

As well as being less 'middle class' and more likely to be female than most higher education entrants, students in the sample tended to be more likely to enrol in courses in vocational subjects and at diploma (rather than degree) level. In other words, the students in this research tended to be in courses which led directly to a specific job, such as nursing.

> "I can at least go and apply for a job to be a medical secretary and say I have got the qualifications for this, could you please give me a job."

Many non-student respondents were merely deferring their entry to post-school education (for reasons such as saving money, being on a waiting list or gaining work experience) rather than forgoing the opportunity to progress to higher education or taking a year out through choice.

> "I took the year out was because of the student loans being introduced. My parents can't afford to support me, so I'm saving up this year so I've got some money behind me when I do go."

Financial barriers

The costs of higher education, particularly the prospect of large debts through student loans, were a major negative influence on these young people and their parents. This often resulted in disadvantaged

young people trying to minimise their debts by enrolling in shorter, less advanced, courses. The other way of financing their higher education was by taking part-time work. However, this often clashed with the demands of full-time studentship. From the outset of their student lives, these young people displayed high levels of part-time work and borrowing.

> "I did like being at university. I liked the people. I enjoyed the course. I thought it was really good, but at the end of the day it just got back to money again. That was the thing that was going to stop me."

The abolition of up-front tuition fees in Scotland will not make much difference to disadvantaged young people, as they currently have their fees paid by an awards agency. Indeed, such students saw the move to payment of fees in arrears as a disincentive for people in their situation.

> "Now it is going to be £2000 extra and because you have to pay it at the end, that worries me more because if it was for me £144 I could work that off in the summer, but now it is just a big lump sum at the end."

Geographical barriers

This research included young people who lived in remote areas, far from any higher education institution. For young people from these areas the need to move created additional difficulties. These included both extra financial costs and cultural upheavals which similar young people from the cities did not face. Young people who lived in some small towns, within commuting distance of universities and colleges, also felt that their local areas were culturally distant from 'middle class', 'urbane', academia. Some young people had a strong desire to escape such communities, but this could be offset by the costs of either moving or long-distance commuting. In areas where commuting was less of a problem, few young people chose to leave their parental home. This had the advantage of minimising costs, but restricted participation in student life. Only five respondents enrolled in institutions outside Scotland. None of these were at established 'red brick' or 'ivy league' universities. This lack of willingness, or ability to afford, to move must, at least in part, be

responsible for the relatively low numbers in this study who attended more prestigious institutions.

Social barriers

Few of these young people applied for the most prestigious institutions. Only three individuals applied for 'Oxbridge'; none were successful, including a 'straight A' student who received an outright rejection by interview. Some high-achieving respondents felt that there was an element of favouritism towards independent school entrants within the most prestigious institutions and subjects (e.g. medicine). During face-to-face interviews, many students - particularly those enrolled in advanced courses – said they felt were atypical of higher education students. Some felt that their social background was a barrier to their future progress both within and beyond higher education.

> "I mean there is a definite thing for the [private school] group. I find that definitely exists so if that still exists in your working life then that's obviously going to be a problem for me."

This was particularly the case with students enrolled in more prestigious courses, some of whom were finding it difficult to 'fit in' with students from more advantaged backgrounds. On the whole, however, most disadvantaged students were more concerned with securing a job, rather than aspiring to academic excellence by way of prestigious studentships.

Conclusion

This survey confirms that disadvantaged young people are not enjoying an equal level of participation in higher education as their more advantaged peers. At the most basic level, attainment at school governed access to higher education rather than any systematic biases in entrance procedures. Beyond this, disadvantaged young people in higher education, particularly those enrolled in more prestigious courses, faced an array of interrelated barriers which undermined their prospects of achieving equity with their more advantaged peers.

The researchers conclude that two sets of measures could increase participation in higher education by disadvantaged groups:

- Policy might better be focused on improving

school achievement rather than on university entrance policies. Increasing quotas of pupils from schools in deprived areas entering the most prestigious institutions is unlikely to be particularly effective, as this seems likely only to reach the more advantaged minority who attend such schools. There is a need to encourage all disadvantaged young people to value and aspire towards post-compulsory education.

- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds currently face a range of deterrent factors to continued participation in higher education, beyond the minimum point necessary to 'get a job'. Financial assistance might help such people (who would not benefit from the abolition of up-front tuition fees). Such measures might include housing or travel assistance (particularly for those from remote areas, but also to encourage enrolment at often distant prestigious institutions) and the introduction of non-repayable bursaries.

About the study

This report is based on research conducted in Scotland between January 1999 and December 2000. A number of complementary methods were used, including a classroom survey of 516 final year secondary school pupils. These young people were contacted again in a postal survey conducted approximately nine months later, from which 395 questionnaires were returned. This follow-up survey looked at whether or not they had progressed to higher education. From the results of these two surveys, 44 in-depth interviews were conducted with particularly disadvantaged but qualified young people, selected to represent the full range of school-leaver destinations, from non-students to those in degree courses. Finally, a postal survey of the parents of those young people who participated in the follow-up study was also conducted, to assess their attitudes towards higher education.

How to get further information

The full report, **Socioeconomic disadvantage and access to higher education** by Alasdair Forsyth and Andy Furlong is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 296 9, price £12.95).