

Socio-economic disadvantage and experience in higher education

Although there has been an increase in the numbers of university entrants from more disadvantaged backgrounds in recent years, such young people have been enjoying less success within higher education. This research, by Alasdair Forsyth and Andy Furlong of the University of Glasgow, details the barriers to success within higher education faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The researchers found that:

f Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to prematurely reduce their level of participation within higher education, by dropping out of courses or by foregoing the opportunity to progress to more advanced courses.

f They were also more likely to follow complicated paths within higher education, including deferred enrolment, gap-years and switching, repeating or restarting their courses for non-academic reasons.

f A number of factors seem to lie behind these difficulties:

- a lack of familiarity with higher education, which often resulted in such young people enrolling in inappropriate courses or at unsuitable institutions;
- a lack of funds, which limited their choices of course or institution and also the length of time which the young person was willing to remain within higher education;
- a fear of debt, which could exert a much greater deterrent effect on disadvantaged students' continued participation than could actual debt, especially when this fear was coupled with a lack of confidence, about both their chances of academic success and their chances of finding a job at the end of it all to pay off this debt;
- feelings of cultural isolation, particularly at the more prestigious institutions, which could compromise the disadvantaged students' identity, lower morale and lessen their commitment to continued study.

Background

The disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged family backgrounds who prematurely discontinue their careers in higher education has become an important issue in recent years. Despite the expansion of higher education during the past two decades, representation, level of participation and likelihood of success all remain greatest amongst young people from affluent areas and lowest amongst those from deprived neighbourhoods.

This research builds upon an earlier JRF project, *Socio-economic disadvantage and access to higher education* (JRF Findings Ref: N110, Nov. 2000), which explored why few young people from areas of disadvantage access higher education in the first place. The current project aims to identify the factors which affect the careers of the minority of disadvantaged young people who do actually enter higher education. The project examined which factors govern levels of success and which factors may act as barriers to the progress of academically talented but disadvantaged young people. The study tracked the school-leavers, recruited in the previous project, from schools with below average numbers of pupils entering higher education. All the schools involved were located in areas of disadvantage, either in socio-economic terms or because they were 'remote' from institutions of higher education. Although carried out in Scotland, at the time of this research the contemporary system of student finance more closely resembled the current system used in England, than that now used in Scotland.

The young people

Over three hundred young people participated fully in the research. More than half were young women, reflecting recent trends indicating relative under-achievement by disadvantaged young men. Despite living in areas of disadvantage, around half were from *relatively* affluent backgrounds, according to their parents' current or last occupation. These *more* 'middle-class' parents were predominantly nurses, primary school teachers and sales assistants rather than more affluent professionals. Nevertheless, there was more likely to be a higher level of entry into higher education among this group of *relatively* advantaged young people compared with their *more* 'working-class' peers. School achievement was strongly related to social class, even amongst leavers from schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Success in higher education

School qualifications, which were strongly associated with social disadvantage, primarily determined whether the young people accessed post-school education and if so at what level of participation (e.g. degree, diploma or further education courses). School qualifications also predicted likely future success within higher education – particularly in non-degree students.

Continued success in higher education was measured by seeing which of the young people had continued within post-school education two to three years after they had left school. As expected, many had reduced their level of participation, by dropping out or by completing a course and forgoing the opportunity to advance to another course. Others had reduced their level of participation in less obvious ways, including repeating a year of study, restarting from the first year in another new course and deferring entry to higher education in the first place.

At the other end of the spectrum, around one-third of the young people in this research could be described as being on the direct route towards success in higher education, having enrolled in a degree course after leaving school and having advanced directly to their degree (i.e. third) year of study by the end of this research. Another successful group of students were those who had begun their career in other courses, but who had progressed into a degree course via qualifications such as HNC and HND.

During this research it became apparent that those who had been successful in degree courses were a very heterogeneous group. For example, those who had accessed a degree course via an HND qualification found that only some types of university would let them enrol directly into third year. This reflected a three-point hierarchy within universities, roughly equating to the periods of university construction within the UK. The oldest universities, which were seen as the more prestigious, appeared to be the most difficult to access and also tended to offer more advanced courses or subjects. Disadvantaged young people were less likely to enrol (or continue) at such institutions. Thus when measuring the barriers to success within higher education, this research took into account these differences between types of institution.

Educational barriers

Many of the young people who participated in this research were the first in their families to have entered post-school education. As such, these young people were unfamiliar with the mechanisms of higher education including institutions, courses, subjects, study methods and student finance policies. Additionally, some in this situation felt that they had been poorly advised at school by teachers, guidance staff and the careers service. Much of this poor advice was put down to high-achieving pupils at schools in areas of disadvantage being viewed as 'success stories', who, unlike the majority of non-achievers attending their school, did not need help.

"Every time I asked anyone for advice they just looked at my grades and went 'Oh you've got five 'A's, you don't need any advice, you can do anything you want' and that was the problem, that I didn't really know what I wanted to do and I needed someone to advise me."

(Jessie, 20, degree dropout)

In addition, many of the young people in this research spoke of low aspirations operating both within their schools and within their local communities in general, which could push potential students towards more vocational courses or non-academic careers.

"The expectations that everybody at the school has of you is quite low. Like at our school I felt there was a big emphasis on how to type... Sciences weren't the priority that I thought that they should have been."

(Ellen, 20, degree student)

Economic barriers

As might be expected, many of the disadvantaged students in this research felt that the length of their student career would be limited by their finances, rather than by their academic ability.

"I didn't find the learning curve for learning as hard as the learning curve for money."

(Fergus, 20, degree student)

To overcome their financial problems, various sources of income - particularly paid work and debt - were budgeted against hardship and study time. Interestingly, it was often the fear of debt, rather than

actual amount of debt which led to reduced participation.

"Probably the biggest factor why I left the college, well my mum and dad don't work so there isn't a lot of kind of financial support at home, plus the student loans, the fact of getting into debt every year and then you aren't guaranteed a job at the end of it."

(Loretta, 20, diploma dropout)

Cultural barriers

Students from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds could often find themselves at odds with certain aspects of their non-academic background. In some cases, particularly males, an anti-education ethos seemed to be operating against participation in higher education. Such pressures could also emanate from friends and family, to whom higher education may be an alien concept.

"At their [my family's] time, there wasn't a lot of university courses, it was you go get a job, you work hard and they're all working class and I'm working class as well, so I understand their position, so when they don't see you, when you're reading a book, they get the idea that maybe 'let's chase him'."

(Callum, 19, FE student)

Similarly, disadvantaged students, particularly those who enrolled in more prestigious courses, could feel at odds with their new environment and had trouble fitting in at their chosen institution.

"I don't want to open my mouth in class because they're gonnae hear my accent and know that I'm not coming fae, you know, somewhere like that. That's why I chose [former-polytechnic university] cos' all the professors spoke like me, you know they all had this kind of a voice, and everybody that went there, was just like me."

(Evelyn, 20, degree dropout)

Conclusion

This survey confirms that disadvantaged young people are not enjoying an equal level of success within higher education as their more advantaged peers. Not only are such young people less likely to reach degree status, but even those who do are likely to have suffered from a number of barriers which may have hindered their progress and deterred them

from continuing any further. The researchers conclude that two sets of measures could increase participation within higher education by disadvantaged groups:

- There was clearly a need to raise aspirations and achievement in schools serving disadvantaged areas. However, this has to be combined with a greater level of advice and information targeted at those disadvantaged school pupils who are already aspiring towards higher education. Mechanisms need to be put in place to familiarise potential students, from schools where few leavers enter higher education, with all aspects of academic life, to ensure that these young people are able to manage their study time, budget their finances and 'fit in' to their ideal courses.
- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deterred from both entering full-time education in the first place and from continuing within higher education long enough to reach their full academic potential because of the economic hardships they suffer, in particular debt. More financial help, especially non-repayable bursaries, would aid such people, particularly those enrolled in longer, more prestigious courses.

About the project

A number of complementary methods were used, including two postal surveys of 395 school-leavers who had participated in a previous JRF research project in 1999. These young people were contacted in October 2000 and again in October 2001. In the final survey 308 questionnaires were returned. This survey measured how successful these young people had (or had not) been in higher education since the time of the previous project. From the two postal surveys, 81 in-depth interviews were conducted during the spring of 2001 and 2002, with a sub-sample selected to represent the full range of student career paths from dropouts through to degree year students.

How to get further information

The full report, **Losing out? Socioeconomic disadvantage and experience in further and higher education** by Andy Furlong and Alasdair Forsyth, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 508 9, price £14.95).