

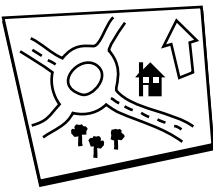
SOCIAL CLASS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

ISSUES AFFECTING DECISIONS ON PARTICIPATION BY LOWER SOCIAL CLASS GROUPS

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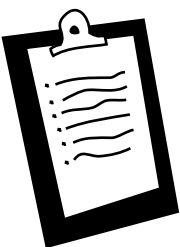
CONTEXT



Since the 1960s there has been a huge expansion of higher and further education in Britain. Despite the opportunities that now present themselves to people of all backgrounds to study at a higher level, there remain very large differences in participation rates. Many universities have policies that attempt to widen access from people of different backgrounds. In over forty years, however, the participation rate has only increased from 3% of people in 1950 to 17% in 1998. The authors of the report note that in certain areas, such as those of gender and ethnicity, there has been a widening of participation, but this does not extend to social class differentials. 45% of people who come from higher social classes tend to take up courses that lead to higher educational qualifications; this contrasts with a less than 20% take-up among the lower social classes. In certain subjects and institutions, the participation of lower social-class groupings can be as low as 10%, though in others it may rise to 40%. In late 1999, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned this research in order to understand in more detail the factors influencing people of lower social-class backgrounds in their decision to go to university.

This research took place in the context of major changes to the funding of students who choose to undertake higher education. Whereas before the 1990s students were often given grants to attend university, by the time this study was undertaken students were expected to contribute to their own funding via cheap loans. Many students leave university carrying a burden of debt that they are expected to pay off through their increased life-earnings as graduates.

METHODS



The research focused on groups of people who were qualified, or on the point of qualifying, for higher education. This meant that the decision-making process itself became the primary focus of study. Obvious questions about the failure of all members of lower social groups to participate in higher education study would be beyond the brief of a single research team.

The Methods Appendix of this survey merits further attention from anyone studying sociological methods because of the detail offered about the research process and the clear explanations of the choices that the research team made.

The aims of the study are clearly stated. They were to:

- explore factors that encourage or prohibit participation in higher education by students from lower social-class groups.
- assess the relative important of these factors for different sub-groups of students (e.g. ethnic-minority groups, mature students, with different entry qualifications, studying different subjects of types of courses).
- make appropriate policy recommendations.

There were three groups of respondents.

- 1 Potential entrants** who were those in post-16 education on courses that would lead to university entry-level qualifications. 223 students from 20 colleges and schools in England and Wales on A-level, BTEC, GNVQ and Access courses participated in 29 focus groups. These were predominantly young, but there were some Access-course students who were older. One-third of this group came from minority-ethnic backgrounds. Two-thirds of the students were female. Geographically, they were drawn from targeted regions: the north of England, the East Midlands, London and South Wales. The majority of students had already decided to go on to further education.
- 2 Current students** in higher education. These students came from higher and lower social-class groupings. They were questioned by a large postal survey with follow-up interviews. A sample of institutions were selected according 'to type and geographical location' and then a sample was selected at each institution according to social class. Fourteen institutions were approached: an older university, a newer university or a college of higher education in each region. Four further education colleges with large numbers of higher education students were contacted. Nearly 4,000 questionnaires were sent out and 41% were returned. The total number of actual responses was 1,677, of which 574 could not be identified to a type of institution. There were 20 follow-up interviews with respondents on full-time courses. These were chosen on the basis of: age, disability, ethnic-minority status and lone parents.
- 3 Non-HE students** were those from lower-class backgrounds who did not choose to enter HE but who have qualifications that make them eligible for higher education. This study group was difficult to identify and contact so the description of the method used makes interesting reading. They were identified from a previous sequence of studies conducted by the National Opinion Poll (NOP) and contacted via telephone. 176 people were contacted, but a proportion of these were now in higher education and so invalidated from the survey. Only 112 interviews were achieved despite there being a higher target. The majority of these were in employment, but some were in work-based training. There was one unemployed person and a small number of people who were looking after children.

KEY FINDINGS



The report uses the terms 'higher' and 'lower social-class grouping' throughout. The class system used is that used in most governmental research which is known as 1992 Standard Occupational Coding. Classes I, II and III non-manual were agreed to be higher social classes and Classes III manual, IV and V were agreed to be lower. The allocation of class was on the basis of father's occupation – if no father, then mother, and then own occupation. There are issues with this operationalisation of the concept of class that the study group acknowledge, but as most secondary data uses this classification then the findings of this research could be more closely integrated with data already gathered by official groups such as UCAS.

Students are influenced in their decision to participate in higher education by a range of factors including the following.

- Entry qualifications and school experience.
- Family background and support.
- Financial factors.
- Institutional factors relating to access and recruitment policies of the universities and colleges.

Lower social-class groupings are under-represented in higher education. Not only are they under-represented, but this is a continuation of a long-standing pattern of social exclusion. This is despite 50 years of legislation that attempted, at least in

theory, to make Britain a more equal and meritocratic society where people progress on the basis on ability and not wealth.

There is uneven distribution of social classes across the higher education sector, in particular by institution and by subject choice. Lower-class students are less likely to be found on degree courses, and more likely to be on HND courses than higher-class students. They are less likely to be found in traditional universities and more likely to be discovered in institutes of higher education. There is a tendency for them to apply to their nearest colleges, particularly if they are mature students. Lower-class males are more likely to find their way onto engineering courses, but females tend to target business and social sciences. This reflects patterns in male and female employment.

Low rates of participation among lower social classes are due to the following factors.

- **Educational background and qualifications.** Students from lower-class backgrounds are likely to have difficulty in achieving entry qualifications. Fewer students from poor backgrounds achieve two or more A-levels and many non-traditional vocational qualifications such as GNVQ are not highly regarded by universities, despite their being popular with students.
- **Family background and geographical location.** Parental education levels can affect students. Affluent parents have the means and the knowledge to support children in school. Children who live in wealthy areas and attend schools in those areas have a higher likelihood of attending university.
- **Affording the costs of further study.** Many students feared debt. Students were also concerned that they would need to have work in order to support further study.

Lower-class students entering higher education are more likely to be mature students who enter universities via the Access course route.

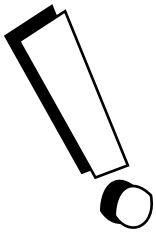
Qualitative evidence taken from interviews makes interesting reading. Lower-class students were slightly more likely to go to college to increase earning potential, whereas higher-class students were attracted to a specific subject area. It is clear from this study that financial considerations exert both a pull and a push factor in the decision of lower social classes to attend higher education. The pull factor is the possibility of better and more interesting jobs or highly paid work. Other social factors include confidence and independence. The push factor away from higher education was the risk of specific financial difficulty. Single parents, for instance, feared loss of benefits. Interestingly, not all of the people who rejected higher education accepted the common view that a degree leads to a better job. Many felt that even if they gained higher level qualifications, they would not necessarily improve their employment prospects. One referred to the previous experience of a sister who had three jobs to support her studies and had also acquired a 'huge overdraft'.

Lower-class students often had negative experiences of school and had seen no point in their studies. They were therefore influenced in their desire to participate by family members or friends. Careers education in schools was considered to be less than helpful in advising potential students. Lower-class students felt particularly in need of advice at this stage. Gender and relationship dynamics were important in the decision to progress to higher education for lower-class students. Some female students had faced problems with their partner, whereas there was no opposition from the partners of male students.

The chapter on student finance and funding is enormously important and extremely detailed in its analysis of student funding and attitudes towards to debt. Many students made decisions about their future educational progress on the basis of finance. This could be both an incentive and disincentive to further study. However, information about the newly introduced student-loan system was not particularly good, and not clearly understood. In addition, it seemed to be unequally applied so that students formerly on benefit became at risk of the burden of large debts.

Students feared debt and were also worried about workloads, if they felt they would have to take on paid work to subsidise further study. References to finances also appear in the section on choice of institution, where students from lower-class backgrounds suggest they would feel out of place in universities that attract wealthy students. Here, however, lack of wealth translated into a lack of confidence and self-esteem or a fear that they would be seen as lower class and discriminated against. Very little comment is made about government policy, but it is clear that the funding system provides a barrier to poorer students taking up the chance of higher education.

IMPORTANCE



This study reports that students were dissatisfied with, and poorly informed about, current funding arrangements for higher education. This is politically significant because it is critical of the very government who funded the research work. It is important because it illustrates in very few pages something about the nature of our society in terms of social policy and planning that, although well known, is still rarely seen to such clear effect. The government states that it wishes to expand lower class participation in education, it sets targets for institutions and yet it still creates policies that are intended to appeal to voters and that actively dissuade the lower classes from applying to universities. This is a case study in social and political incompetence, written in impartial and measured terms, which is supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

EVALUATION



There are few surprises for anyone involved in education in terms of the conclusions and findings of the study. That the education system seems to benefit the higher social classes, possibly at the expense of the lower social classes and the disadvantaged, is a pattern that is so well established that it barely raises an eyebrow! More importantly, this study offers a clue as to some of the processes that occur which have this effect on members of the lower classes at the point of entry to higher education. The problem is slightly less one of culture, as many theorists argue, than one of finance and sheer practicality. Lower-class people are not patronised by the assumption that they do not appreciate the benefits of higher education; rather, they are treated as rational people who fully understand their social situations and who make informed and sensible decisions on that basis.

One of the major strengths of this research is that it is clearly written and is about an interesting and relevant topic for many students. It acts as a model of quantitative research backed up by qualitative understandings – this is triangulation in action. While a small amount of theory is present, the focus of this study is on how people behave and how they make decisions.

In terms of reliability, this study is a remarkable piece of work. A wide range of institutions and students participated in this work. Equally, the study is valid. We learn of the opinions of the respondents, which gives a human dimension to the data. The most interesting results to read are the interview findings, but obviously the evidence has been selected. The quotations offer an insight into individual decision-making processes. However, there is also abundant graphical material which shows through the numerical data provided that the information in the interviews is representative of the views of a wide selection of students.

In addition to the previously mentioned strengths, there is a serious attempt to broaden the scope of this study beyond events in London: this study acknowledges the existence of a world beyond the M25.



QUESTIONS

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 Who commissioned the report? Why?
- 2 What was the social context of the research?
- 3 What were the aims of this research?
- 4 What three samples were used?
- 5 What four factors influence lower-class students in their decision to participate in higher education?
- 6 In what ways do lower-class students differ from higher-class students?
- 7 Explain how considerations of finance can affect a person's decision to participate in higher education.

ANALYSIS

- 1 What practical problems did the Institute for Employment Studies team face in conducting this study?
- 2 Outline and explain the significance of the concept of triangulation to sociological study.
- 3 Evaluate the research under each of the following headings: practicality, reliability, ethics, validity, and representativeness.