

## **Researching class in higher education**

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### **Summary**

This resource is aimed at people who are relatively new to educational research and are unfamiliar with educational research on widening access and participation and social class inequalities in HE. It provides an overview of social class research in relation to widening access and participation, and to HE experiences once students are at university, including processes of retention.

### **Introduction**

The most researched aspect of social class in HE is not about the HE experience itself but the processes and practices, both individual and institutional, that prevent certain social groups

accessing, in particular the more elite, universities. Unsurprisingly, this body of research is underpinned by a strong social class discourse. In contrast, the research that focuses on student experiences of HE, and in particular drop out and retention, draws on more individualised explanations, and has traditionally taken a psychological rather than a sociological perspective. The next two sections examine in more detail first the research that looks at issues of class in widening access and participation, second, that which focuses on the impact of social class on student experiences and retention.

### **Widening access and participation**

Before we can understand class issues in widening access and participation it is important to comprehend how social class is used in the research. A number of terms are used that operate as proxies for social class: first generation, non-traditional, and free school meal students all approximate to varying degrees with being working class but are not the same.

However, the most rigorous categorisation is a compilation of parents' educational level and socio-economic classification as it allows for recognition of the joint importance that occupation and parents' own education play in determining their children's access to higher education and takes both economic and cultural capital into account. It is also important to point out that nearly all the contemporary research examines the ways in which gender, ethnicity and age intersect with and compound the consequences of class.

Traditionally, widening access and participation research has focused on choice and access of HE, but more recently there has been a growing emphasis on the impact of widening access and participation on social mobility (Cabinet Office 2009). This is because, in spite of the relative success in increasing participation in higher education, concerns remain about the social class gap in entry. Official statistics show that despite increases since the mid 2000s of working class students entering HE there have been greater increases in middle class participation, leaving working class students still considerably less likely to participate. Research has consistently demonstrated a steep and persistent social class gradient in overall rates of participation in higher education. Additionally, students from working class backgrounds have been shown to be

particularly poorly represented in higher status, old universities, and in particular the research-intensive Russell Group and Oxbridge.

There is also a key difference between research focusing on application to HE and research on admissions. Research on choice and applications has largely been qualitative, and has typically found that choices are based on much more than purely economic weighing of costs and benefits. Rather, students are seen to draw on intuitive, affective responses to higher education institutions, often revealing the importance of going somewhere where they feel they will fit in and have a sense of belonging (Crozier et al 2008). Here, class identities and identifications play a key role, the research clearly shows that students' choice of where to study is a classed choice. For working class students in particular, serendipity and chance make an important contribution to choice (Reay et al 2005). This body of research studies has also found that the more elite universities are perceived by working class students to be the preserve of the middle and upper classes (Reay et al 2009).

In contrast to the research on choice and applications, research on admissions has predominantly been quantitative, and it suggests that working class applicants are less likely to be admitted to elite universities even after taking prior attainment into account (Boliver 2011). Not only are they less likely to apply to such institutions in the first place but also less likely to be admitted when they do apply. And this disadvantage is compounded for certain working class minority ethnic groups, in particular, Black British applicants.

### **The HE field and social class: student experiences and retention**

A number of perspectives on higher education, for example, *The Browne Review*, effectively deny a relationship between higher education and social class by taking an economic approach, treating students purely as individuals and seeking to measure their personal gains. In contrast to such approaches there are a range of different types of research that focus on social class and the higher education experience. In addition to quantitative research into the participation rates of different social classes, often undertaken by government bodies such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there are a growing number of studies that explore the experiences of

students from different class backgrounds using narrative accounts and life histories elicited through in-depth interviews, focus groups and other qualitative participatory research methods. This work, like the studies on widening access and participation, finds that the feelings of belonging and fitting into an institution are important in the retention of students. For example, Quinn et al (2005), focusing on university dropouts from lower socio-economic backgrounds, concluded that working class young men in particular, felt they had been channelled by school career services into stereotypical subjects that did not engage them. Recent research (Purcell et al 2009), has found such social class inequalities of access to careers information and advice prior to attending university, are largely reinforced rather than reduced once at university.

Traditionally, the research and writing on student retention has largely overlooked the influence of social class. Vincent Tinto, the leading expert on student retention for the last thirty-five years, still only mentions social class in passing (Tinto 2006). However, social class is increasingly seen to be a concern in the retention of students. Although overall the link between social class and retention is not clear-cut across the research, drop out rates are much higher in post-1992 universities where students from working class backgrounds are concentrated.

Much of the research on student experience is on the working class experience of higher education and is located in single institutions (Archer et al 2003). Less common are longitudinal studies that track students over time, and studies that look at the experiences of working class students at Russell group universities, (although Crozier et al 2008 and the Paired Peers research based in Bristol are exceptions on both counts). Overall, the research highlights significant class differences in student experience of university. Working class students, who have already experienced fewer opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital than their middle class counterparts, find that this relative disadvantage persists once they get to university. For instance, working class students are more likely to work long hours and feel that they have insufficient time for their studies. They are also more likely than their middle class peers to worry about finances and have less spending money and resources for extra-curricular activities. Class inequalities are visible in the restriction this relative lack of income places on working class students as they have more limited opportunities for summer internships, networking and volunteering as well as limiting the time they have for academic work. Of further concern, in view of these greater difficulties that

working class students experience, there is evidence of a relative lack of support for students for working class backgrounds (Purcell et al 2009).

Much of the qualitative research on student experiences, as well as that on widening access and participation, have drawn on Bourdieu's conceptual tools in the analysis of data (see David James' online Bera Resource on Bourdieu). Most have drawn on concepts of capitals, field and habitus, with a smaller number extending the concept of habitus to include notions of institutional and family habitus, examining the disjuncture or convergence between the two in relation to the higher education experience (Reay et al 2010).

## **Conclusion**

As John Field (2003) asserts, there is a remarkable persistence of social class inequalities within mass higher education. This is despite the expansion of higher education to over 45 per cent of the age cohort. The research shows that social class inequalities still exist in relation to widening access and participation, and to students' experiences of higher education and retention. Instead of reducing social class stratification and enhancing social mobility, recent and current research reveals that mass higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is replicating the social class inequalities found across the school system and wider society.

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### **Further Resources**

<http://www.hesa.ac.uk/> (HESA) has statistical data on the percentages of students from different social classes attending university.

<http://www.pairedpeers.com/Home.html> 'Paired Peers' is a three-year study (2010-2013), funded by The Leverhulme Trust. It compares the experience and benefits in attending the University of Bristol (an elite research institution) and the University of the West of England, Bristol (a post 1992 institution geared to mass education and with a strong local focus).

<http://www.futuretrack.ac.uk/> 'FutureTrack' is a major study jointly carried out by Higher Education Career Services Unit (HECSU) and Warwick Institute for Employment Research. The research started in 2006 and follows 50,000 students from UCAS application until they get their first job.