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SOCIAL CLASS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY : are we relying on unreliable statistics? (0103)

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Although widening participation in higher education forms part of the strategy to increase social mobility, evaluating its impact is clouded by missing data on the social class of HE entrants. This session reports on the initial findings from a study to explore the social class backgrounds of students at one English university from different perspectives. The initial findings indicate that those with missing social class data are likely to be over 21 on entry, to be studying below honour level, to come from deprived neighbourhoods and from minority ethnic groups, raising the possibility that widening participation initiatives have had a stronger impact than previously thought and that universities are beginning to provide a route for improving upward social mobility.

SOCIAL CLASS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY : are we relying on unreliable statistics?

OUTLINE

Background

The drive to increase and widen participation in higher education (HE) has been part of the wider policy agenda to increase social mobility (Cabinet Office 2008). The persistent under-representation of lower socio-economic groups within HE in England continues to cause concern and has prompted the launch of policy initiatives to narrow the social class gap.

Despite concern about the social composition of HE students, the concept of social class and the ways in which it has been conceptualised and measured have rarely been questioned. Accurate and comprehensive measures of social class are needed to assess the extent of widening participation and social mobility. Social class is a multi-faceted concept. It includes occupational, cultural, financial and geographical dimensions which affect the attitudes, aspirations and other aspects of the lived reality of people's lives. Socio-economic status has usually been based on occupation, categorised since 2001 through the eight point NS-SEC scale. Those in NS-SEC groups 1 to 3 are classified as upper social groups while those in NS-SEC 4 to 7 are defined as lower social groups. Those in NS-SEC 8 are the long term unemployed or those who have never worked.

The HE sector has adopted these categories and noted the under-representation of those from NS SEC 4 to 7; NS-SEC 8 is often ignored. For full-time students, social class classifications are predominantly made at the point of application through the UCAS system, using their parents' occupations for those aged under 21 on entry, and their own occupation for mature students.

Over recent years, these social classifications have become unreliable due to the large and increasing proportion of students for whom data is either missing or unclassifiable. At national level, a quarter of students applying to HE through UCAS in 2007 were coded as 'unknown', with even more missing data once direct entrants are taken into account (NAO, 2008). Harrison & Hatt (forthcoming) argue that the absence of social class data makes it impossible to assess the impact of widening

participation initiatives or the extent to which upward social mobility is increasing. These concerns are replicated at institutional level, and will impact on the evidence institutions will be able to provide to support their WP Strategic Assessment documents (HEFCE 2009).

The study

This session will report the initial findings from a study exploring the social class backgrounds of students in a mid-ranking university with a diverse intake using both data and their lived experiences. The study will include interviews to explore the concept of social class from different perspectives and to obtain more information about social class than the recorded data alone permits. The initial findings report on the analysis of the social class data for a single student entry cohort, comprising full-time UK undergraduates (N = 4,845), of whom 57% were female, 75% aged under 21 on entry, and 11% being drawn from minority ethnic communities. Just over two thirds of the sample (69%) had NS-SEC data recorded.

The findings

The most striking feature of the data was a strong relationship between the age of the student and the presence of social class data. Whereas nearly three out of four students aged 20 and under had social class data, the proportion fell to half for those in their thirties and fell still further for students aged 40 and over, as Table 1 shows.

TABLE 1: AGE AND SOCIAL CLASS DATA

Age group	Social class data recorded
Under 21	74%
21 to 24	58%
25 to 29	52%
30 to 39	50%
40 and over	46%

Although there were no significant relationships between the availability of social class data and sex, disability, proximity of home address, the deprivation levels or the HE participation rate of their home neighbourhood, mature students from minority ethnic communities were more likely to have missing social class data than their white peers (57% c.f. 42%).

Students aged under 21 on entry were more likely than mature students to have recorded social class data; ethnicity was once again a significant predictor for the presence of data. Geography too was a predictor. Those with missing data were more likely to be drawn from the local area and from deprived areas. Only 69% of those from the 40% most deprived neighbourhoods provided codeable data, compared with 77% of those living in more affluent areas. Even taking these factors into account, social class was less likely to be known for students on courses below honours degree level (e.g. DipHE, Foundation Degrees). Sex, disability status and university participation rate of home neighbourhood had no significant relationship with the presence of social class data for younger students.

Patterns and implications

This analysis shows a number of clear patterns which affect whether students have missing social class data. The first is that mature students are much more likely than younger students to have missing data. The second pattern is that younger students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to have missing social class data. As this data is drawn from their parents' occupations, this suggests that those living in deprived areas are less able to provide information which fits neatly into the NS-SEC categories, perhaps because the parents are unemployed, disabled or benefit-dependent. The third pattern is that those studying courses below honours degree level are more likely to have missing data, and finally students of all ages from minority ethnic communities tend to have missing data.

These patterns point towards some interesting hypotheses about the implications for the evaluation of policy. If mature students, those from neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation, those studying below honours level and minority ethnic groups are over-represented amongst those for whom social class data is missing, the HE student body in 2008 might include a larger percentage of those from lower socio-economic groups than the official statistics suggest. This in turn raises the possibility that widening participation initiatives have had a stronger impact than previously thought and that universities are beginning to provide a route for improving upward social mobility.

(9995 words)

References

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