

0309

An exploration of the school 'effect' on higher education entry: some methodological issues

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Background

There has been much concern within higher education research about inequalities within the system, and specifically, the under-representation of lower social class groups/state educated students at leading universities. The Sutton Trust found that there were 3000 state school students who 'missed out' on places at leading universities. These places were instead taken up by their equally qualified, privately educated counterparts (Sutton Trust 2004). Research on university choice, and in particular on access to leading universities, has been mainly focussed at the individual level, with studies exploring factors such as social class and identity (Archer et al. 2007, Evans 2009, Hutching and Archer 2001, Reay et al. 2005), family influences (Pugsley 2004, Reay 1998), peer groups (Brooks 2003), and finance (Callender and Jackson 2008). A further factor, the school's influence, has also been touched upon (Curtis et al. 2008, McDonough 1997, Pugsley 2004, Reay et al. 2001) but in doing so the studies have not been able to disentangle the complexity created by the matrix of influences on choice to reveal any true 'school effects'.

This paper, outlines my own research in this area including the small-scale masters study I conducted, and also my current doctoral research, both of which explore the school 'effect' on university choice. The paper has a methodological focus, in particular looking at how my methodology has developed from the initial master's study, in terms of sampling techniques and methods of data collection. The paper also explores the experience of conducting fieldwork and the methodological issues I encountered in the field.

Research Questions

My own research in this area began with a small-scale study conducted as part of a master's dissertation project which aimed to explore how school-level structures and processes may be associated with entry to leading universities. Interviews were conducted with staff from a diverse range of schools/colleges, which included three state comprehensive schools, a private school, and two further education colleges. The study identified various institutional factors which may have been associated with entry to leading universities.

Methods

My doctoral research takes these initial findings forward in order to explore further the school's 'effect' on university choice. In doing so it looks at how you determine whether a school 'effect' exists, and what may account for a school 'effect'.

The limitations of my initial study are that it did not take into account attainment or socio-economic background in determining a school 'effect' on entry to leading universities. Similarly, other studies which have claimed to have found a school 'effect' on entry to higher education (Curtis et al. 2008, McDonough 1997, Pugsley 2004, Reay et al. 2001) have also not taken into account attainment in coming to such conclusions. Given the high entry requirements of leading universities it is important to take into account attainment in order to present a fair picture. It is also important to take into account the socio-economic background of a school's sixth form intake in order to make claims about their 'effect' on choice, given what we know about the social class determinants of higher education entry. The sampling design aimed to take into account all of these issues when selecting the four case study schools, and this paper gives an in-depth exploration of these sampling decisions and the way in which the study was quantitatively framed.

The qualitative methods of data collection used within these four school settings derive from the ethnographic research tradition, and in line with this tradition, the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding 'from within' about the process of higher education choice (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). A mixture of semi-structured interviews with both staff and students, observation of key sixth form events relating to higher education, and documentary analysis were used. The paper will also explore my experience of conducting this fieldwork and in particular pays attention to issues of access, fieldwork relations, and other issues in which I encountered throughout the fieldwork.