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Vocational Transitions into Higher Education: risky biographies and institutional distinction

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Background

Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) were introduced in England in 2005 to support the regional management of vocational progression into higher education (HE) and address the social class distinction in entry to HE. The funding steer to create LLNs was designed to continue the policy trajectory of near-universal participation and to ensure this policy applied across the system in all types of institutions (Newby 2005). The social democratic objective of greater social inclusion through the benefits of HE is developed in the context of a hierarchically structured HE system (Parry 2006), with 'vocational transitions' being located in wider discussions about the process of massification of HE (Trow 1999).

Research Questions

The paper draws on an investigation into vocational transitions into one selective HEI, The University of Sheffield (TUOS). This throws up an interesting theoretical perspective. Stratified HE systems have been critiqued for their role in the reproduction of social distinction (Connor and Little 2007). Within this critique selective institutions such as Sheffield are viewed as having a vested interest in maintaining their relative advantage in relation to other universities. The research examines the notion that while different kinds of students may inhabit the same temporal space of the university they may not share the same social space. Therefore, what does 'vocational transition' mean in a selective university in a stratified HE system?

Methods

This paper draws on the student-level data, focussing specifically on key characteristics of these 'vocational learners'. The methodology builds on the work of Warren and Webb (2009), extending Bourdieu's notion of 'discursive montage' (Bourdieu 2003). On the basis of admissions statistics two Faculties were identified for intensive research. All 'vocational' entrants in these Faculties were invited to participate in an online survey, and a smaller theoretical sample of 10 students was then selected. The student fieldwork involved each student participating in two in-depth interviews and the collection of photographic images of their learning environments. In negotiation with the students two people from their networks of influence were identified and interviews conducted.

Frame

The research takes 'vocational learner' as a category of practice rather than a category of analysis (Bourdieu 2003). As such the research does not presume that the definition of 'vocational learner' is given a priori. It is part of the empirical task to identify how the category is constructed in practice in the context of policy production at both the national and local level; how it is produced institutionally through admissions, student support and learning and teaching strategies, as well as departmental learning cultures; and through the first-hand accounts of 'vocational learners'.

Research findings

The survey data reveals that while the main qualification of entry is BTEC, students often possess a broad portfolio of qualifications including Foundation Degrees, Access, and in some cases A Levels and the International Baccalaureate (IB). The data suggests that 'vocational' entry is organised by a

binary division between two circuits of education and training, a traditional circuit comprised of those schools and sixth form colleges offering A Levels, and a circuit comprising school and further education colleges offering 'vocational' qualifications.

Many of the sample students faced institutional resistance at school or college to their academic aspirations. An important aspect of the experience is that of personal or family dispositions towards success, taking the character of determination, tenaciousness and valuing educational success. These dispositions appear to be important in inculcating a desire to overcome obstacles, such as those presented by institutional resistance, and appear to enable individuals to take advantage of situations to support personal/family projects of improvement. It is the serendipity of support that appears critical to all of the stories. Chance or lucky encounters with people who can provide support at critical moments appears a determining factor. This can be in the form of personal tutors at college or individuals who act as role models.

We would suggest that the student narratives are characteristic of 'risky' biographies in that while family experience of HE may be present selective universities do not feature strongly in the narratives. University is not an assumed destination. As supportive as families, teachers and tutors are, they do not replicate the institutionalised support that studies of middle class transitions (normal biographies) describe. One important distinction between 'normal' and 'risky' biographies is the role of educational institutions in socialising young people into the 'rules of the game' – into the cultures of learning and aspiration, and as bridges into 'good' universities (Anderson and Williams 2001; Archer, et al. 2003). The distinction is between those institutions whose function is to successfully prepare young people for particular kinds of HE experience, and those that are marginally connected to this institutionally mediated progression.

In conclusion we ask whether determination, resourcefulness, dispositions to succeed and serendipity of support are enough, and whether participation goes beyond simply sharing the physical space with those who have followed a less 'risky' biography. Consequently, we ask whether vocational transitions are a meritocratic illusion.

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