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Completion of a qualification in higher education: The individual and institutional factors that explain the inequalities in educational attainment across English Universities

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Background

Although the expansion of higher education in the UK has provided new educational opportunities to students from different social and ethnic backgrounds, it has not necessarily decreased inequalities in educational attainment. The evidence patterns of participation in different strata of the higher education shows stark social class and ethnicity gradients, with the lower social classes and ethnic minorities over represented in the lower status institutions (Archer, Hutchings et al 2003; Blanden and Machin, 2004; Boliver 2005). On the other hand, inequalities also operate in completion of qualifications, with evidence of significant variations between universities in average continuation rates and, on the other hand, between students from different social backgrounds (HESA, 2007; Yorke, 1999; Smith and Naylor, 2001; Ball, Davis, Reay; 2003).

There are few studies that had examined in depth the reasons or causes of the variations between students and universities in average continuation rates in the UK. In fact, very little is actually known about the effect of institutional factors in educational attainment in higher education, since most of the studies in the field have tended to explain the role that individual characteristics play in determining students' chances of completing a qualification.

Research Questions

This paper attempts to move beyond describing patterns of association between social background characteristics and educational attainment in higher education, focusing its attention in analyzing how students' background and institutional factors explain the completion of a qualification at universities. The questions that this paper attempts to answer are: in what extent individual and institutional factors (universities) affect student's chances of completing (or not a qualification); what are the main individual factors that affect completion of a university qualification and; on the other hand, what are the institutional characteristics that affect student's chances of completing (or not) a qualification at British Universities.

Methods

Using longitudinal student-level data (that follows the cohort of students enrolled at university programs in 2004/2005) and institutional-level data (universities 'performance indicators)-, I carry out a multilevel analysis (hierarchical linear modeling) to give account of the existence of inequalities in completion of qualifications across English Universities and, on the other hand, to test for the existence of contextual/institutional effects on students' educational attainment

Frame

I use rational choice theory and contextual/institutional theories to give account of how individual and contextual mechanisms explain the different chances of completing a qualification at English universities. On the one hand, Rational Choice theory posits that there is an association between children's class background and their average levels of academic performance. Hence, students' expectations of success in higher education (stay on/drop out) are strongly related to students' previous educational achievement. On the other hand, contextual/institutional theories, suggest that the quality (selectivity, teaching, research, etc) at universities might increase students' likelihood of completing a qualification.

Research findings

The analysis shows that after controlling for individual characteristics (social class, previous educational attainment, ethnicity, etc.) there is a significant association between institutional characteristics -student body composition and institutional selectivity- and the likelihood of completing a degree at universities. The findings suggest that students from less privileged backgrounds have higher chances of completing their degrees if they are enrolled in more selective institutions. Likewise, the results show that students that are not minority at their institutions (socially or ethnically) have higher chances of completing a university qualification.