The Relationship between Socioeconomic Classes and Higher Education Entry in UK

Dongxia Pan

School of Foreign Studies/ School of International Education, Anhui Xinhua University, Hefei, China

Abstract: *There is distinct discrimination in higher education entry for pupils from different socioeconomic classes. This study focuses on the relationship between higher education participation and students' socioeconomic statuses in UK. It aims to investigate reasons why students from underprivileged family backgrounds have less opportunities for university entry compared with young people from better-off families. This study also aims to explore solutions to mitigate this problem, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of these mentioned solutions. Worse academic performances and low educational aspirations may explain that disadvantaged students have less opportunity to continue their university study. Using contextualized admission practices and organizing aspirations-raising activities for students from poor family backgrounds seem to narrow the entry gap. However, it is still a long way to solve this problem and different parts, including the government, universities, other educational organizations and even parents, need to work together to mitigate this university entry gap.*

Keywords: *Higher Education Entry, Higher Education discrimination, Socioeconomic classes, Contextualized admission practices, Aspiration-raising activities, UK*

1. Introduction

The number of individuals who are progressing to higher education (HE) has undergone constant increases (Blanden & Machin, 2004). However, students from low socioeconomic status are not able to enjoy the same opportunities for university entry compared with their advantaged peers (Gayle, Berridge, & Davies, 2002). In other words, it means that discrimination in higher education entry still exists for pupils from different socioeconomic classes[1]. Giddens and Sutton (2013) point out that discrimination refers to actual behaviors held by one group of people to the other and it includes treatment of one person or a group of people, based on their perceived membership in a certain social category, in a way that is worse than others or other groups are usually treated. Therefore, discrimination in higher education entry may mean that different groups have unequal chances for attending universities for different reasons. Higher education is important for individuals and the purpose of tertiary education is to ensure the continuity and integration of scientific knowledge in both educational and academic fields. In addition, Vignoles and Murray (2016) point out that higher education palys significant role in one's lives and it can help people transform lives in the future[2]. This may be because that university education can offer students professional qualifications that are recognised and respected all around the world, which help them to succeed in today's competitive work places, academic fileds, etc.. Thus, finding effective responses to narrow this higher education entry gap is essential. This essay will focus on the discrimination in HE entry for students from different socioeconomic classes in UK. Firstly, the current situation of discrimination in university participation will be described, followed by possible reasons for this problem and then two mentioned potential solutions will be given and evaluated. One of the resolutions is popularizing contextualized admission practices, and the other one is organizing aspiration-raising activities. Both of these two measures seem to work, but they need time to become more effective[3].

Post-compulsory education participation has been expanded in UK (Blanden & Machin, 2004), as Crawford (2012) shows that in UK the proportion of participants accessing to HE increased from 5% in 1960 to 47% in 2010. Research shows that although tuition fees in England have been increased repeatedly in recent decades and costs of continuing higher education have experienced constant rise, there are no declines in university enrollment, at least among these young full-time university students (Crawford et al., 2016) [4]. In fact, recent decades have been witnesseing the growth of higher education participation for young people who are under twenty one years old in UK, and the entry rates for students from underprivileged families have been rising more rapidly than those of advantaged students (Crawford

et al., 2016). In other words, higher education participation disparity caused by socioeconomic classes have been declined somewhat recent years[5]. However, teenagers from deprived families still have fewer opportunities for university entry than their peers from better family backgrounds (Nikula, 2018). For example, the official statistics collected by Department for Education show that in UK only 24% individuals from underprivileged backgrounds attend universities compared with 41% of their advantaged peers (DfE, 2017), despite the equivalent figures for 2005/06 are 13% and 33% respectively. Therefore, although university participation has been widened, less advantaged students still face discrimination in higher education entry, and the disparity between people from different socioeconomic classes cannot be overlooked[6].

2. Reasons for HE discrimination relating to socioeconomics status in UK

Two main reasons may explain this discrimination caused by socioeconomic status. The first one may lie in the low academic achievement obtained by students from deprived families (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013). This is because how well young individuals do in their earlier educational lives has significant influences on their future access to tertiary education (Crawford et al., 2016) [7-9]. Crawford et al. (2016) also demonstrate that children raised in households where parents have low educational backgrounds and low incomes tend to have low academic achievements in schools when campared to pupils from more socioeconomically privileged families. For example, at the end of primary school, only 66% of the disadvantaged children can obtain the target goals, while 83% of their affluent peers can make it. In addition, by the age of 16, the figures are 33% and 61% respectively (Allison, 2020). Because of this worse educational performance, numerous less advantaged students may not meet the existing requirements given by higher education institutions when applying for universities and eventually cannot be admitted[10].

Different educational aspirations which refers to the likelihood of going to university between individuals may be the second factor of this entry gap. James (2002) and Konstantinovskiy (2012) note that parents from poor families seem to complete less formal education, show fewer interests in higher education and fail to realize the importance of universities, which may exert negative influences on children's educational aspirations and study decisions. Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) note that it is on the basis of attitudinal factors and more precisely, it is because of lack of expectation for universities. Despite of similiar academic performances, less advantaged studnets and those parents having less education are still less likely to enrol for a Bachelors degree[11]. However, the situation may be reversed for advantaged parents, as Nikula (2018) reports that these parents can support children by sharing their knowledge and promote children's expectations to universities. This shows that pupils and parents from deprived family backgrounds appear to show skeptical attitudes to university learning, while their privileged peers seem to see higher education as a wise decision for future decisions (James, 2002). Since two reasons mentioned above may explain this discrimination in HE entry, two solutions are also accordingly developed to address this issue[12].

3. Solutions to mitigate HE discrimination relating to socioeconomics status in UK

Different interventions are put forward by British policy makers to bridge university entry gap, offering studnets from low socioeconomic statuses more entry routes (O'Sullivan et al., 2018). One is to encourage higher education institutions in UK to use contextualized admission practices. Mountford-Zimdars, Moore and Graham (2016) explain that contextualized admission means contextualizing the previous academic achievement of applicants for university access and the key is that selectors in university institutions need to take other indicators, such as family backgrounds and prior educational experiences into consideration when choosing suitable candidates. This means that disadvantaged learners may have lower university entry requirements than those from privileged backgrounds. For example, Scottish Government has mandated all Scottish universities to reduce entry requirements for applicants who are contextually less advantaged (Boliver, Gorard, & Siddiqui, 2015). This may widen tertiary education participation for numerous underprivileged students in Scotland. Additionally, contextualized admission practices have been used by other universities and colleges in UK as well. More than one third of the higher education institutions in UK have considered socioeconomic factors of applicants when selecting participants and half of the universities agree to practice this measure in the future (Boliver et al., 2015).

Another solution is to promote aspiration-raising activities in UK. Harrison and Waller (2018) say that this measure has become an important policy in UK to expand higher education entry for young

people from underprivileged backgrounds. These activities include campus visiting, residential summer schools, meeting with student ambassadors who are considered to be the successful models for participants etc. and the aim is to help those who are unfamiliar with universities gain an overall understanding of higher education (Rizzica, 2020) [13]. Therefore, when disadvantaged students from families without a tradition of continuing universities and having low educational aspirations participate in these activities, they may learn about the university experiences and increase expectations of tertiary education[14-15]. In order to promote these outreach activities, amount ofmoney has also been invested. For example, in the year of 2014 and 2015, the total investment on these activities is £174.5 million (OFFA, 2016) [16]. It seems that these activities may increase higher education applications among disadvantaged students (Rizzica, 2020)[17].

4. Effectiveness of mentioned solutions

As for contextualized admission practices, evidence shows that these practices can help underprivileged students gain more opportunities for accessing to higher education (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016), since students from low socioeconomic status may have less strict university entry requirements than their affluent peers. However, potential risks of contextualized admission also exist, one of which is that it may have negative influences on degree completion for disadvantaged entrants (Boliver, Gorard, & Siddiqui, 2019) [18]. This is because these students may be not qualified in learning in prior schools and have problem in achieving academic goals. Additionally, Boliver et al. (2019) note that contextualized admission can work accurately only when the indicators used to judge people's socioeconomic backgrounds are valid and reliable. In other words, some indicators to identify contextually disadvantaged learners may cause errors. For example, Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) developed by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is an area-level measure to identify individuals' backgrounds, which takes the area people live in as the identifying measurement. This is not accurate enough, since different socioeconomic classes may live in the same place[19]. Therefore, more reliable measurements, such as School Meal Status (SMS), are recommended to judge applicants' socioeconomic situations (Boliver et al., 2015, 2019). Above discussion show that although this practice may make it easier for deprived individuals to attend universities, it still needs to be improved and reformed constantly to work more accurately.

As for raising aspirations of the youths from less advantaged families, it appears to exert positive influences on individuals' future educational choices. This measure has increased the number of disadvantaged pupils who would like to apply for universities and colleges from 63.3% to 68. 1% (Rizzica, 2020), since these outreach activities may broaden participants' horizons and increase their motivations[20]. For example, Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2016) note that campus visiting provided by universities help individuals gain a general picture of higher education; summer schools improve learners' academic attainment to higher education; meeting with student ambassadors may simultaneously motivate students to work harder[21]. However, no apparent effect has been found on increasing the number of applicants who are eventually admitted by universities (Rizzica, 2020). Although outreach activities may improve students' motivation and increase university applications, these initiatives fail to work in improving participants' final academic performance. Therefore, in order to widen higher education entry for teenagers from underprivileged backgrounds, simply raising students' educational aspirations is not enough. Other measures are also necessary to be taken to help disadvantaged pupils attain better school achievement.

5. Conclusion

Expanding higher education opportunities is essential for improving employment as well as productivity and narrowing social class gaps. It is necessary to widen university participation for disdavantaged groups. The above discussion shows that individuals from low socioeconomic status face discrimination in higher education participation in part because of worse school performance and lower academic aspirations. This disparity seems to be a significant issue, which needs to be addressed. Therefore, measures which include contextualized admission practices and aspiration-raising activities used to widen participation are offered. Although the former measure appears to help individuals from low backgrounds reduce higher education entry requirements, it is difficult to find suitable and effective measurements to identify students' socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, outreach activities seem to work in improving participants' self-confidence and also encouraging numerous learners to apply for universities. However, these initiatives cannot increase the number of disadvantaged students who

are admitted by universities. Therefore, in the future, governments and university institutions need to collaborate to explore reliable identifying measurements for contextualized admission practices, and also reform raising-aspiration activities to make this measure work effectively.

References

[1] Allison, R., The Hub the Education Network for Waltham Forest. Walthamforest, (2020).

[2] Blanden, J., and Machin, S. Educational inequality and the expansion of UK higher education. Scottish journal of political economy, (2004) 51, 230-249.

[3] Boliver, V., Stephen, G. and Nadia, S. Will the use of Contextual Indicators make UK Higher Education Admissions Fairer? Education Sciences, (2015) 4, 306-322.

[4] Boliver, V., Stephen, G. and Nadia, S. Using Contextual Data to Widen Access to Higher Education. Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, (2021), 1, 7-13.

[5] Bruce, M. and Bridgeland, J., The mentoring effect: Young people's perspectives on the outcomes and availability of mentoring, (2014), A Report for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership (Washington, D.C., MENTOR).

[6] Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A., and Vignoles, A. Widening participation in higher education: Analysis using linked administrative data. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, (2013), 176, 431-457.

[7] Crawford, C. Socio-economic gaps in HE participation: How have they changed over time? Institute for Fiscal Studies, (2012).

[8] Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Micklewright, J., & Vignoles, A., Family background and university success: Differences in higher education access and outcomes in england (First ed.), (2016), Oxford University Press.

[9] Department for Education, Widening participation in higher education. Department for Education (2017).

[10] Gayle, V., Berridge, D., and Davies, R., Young people's entry into higher education: Quantifying influential factors. Oxford Review of Education, (2002), 28, 5-20.

[11] Giddens, A., and Sutton, P. W. . Sociology (Seventh ed.)., Polity Press, (2013).

[12] Harrison, N. and Richard W. "Challenging Discourses of Aspiration: The Role of Expectations and Attainment in Access to Higher Education." British Educational Research Journal 44, (2018), 5, 914-938.

[13] James, R., Socioeconomic background and higher education participation: An analysis of school students' aspirations and expectations. Dept of Education, Science and Training, (2002).

[14] Konstantinovskiy, D. L., Social inequality and access to higher education in russia. European Journal of Education, (2012), 47, 9-24.

[15] Mountford-Zimdars, A., Moore, J., and Graham, J. Is contextualised admission the answer to the access challenge? Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, (2016), 20, 143-150.

[16] Nikula, P. Socioeconomic inequalities in higher education: A meta-method analysis of twenty-first century studies in finland and new zealand. Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames), (2018), 43, 2305-2320.

[17] OFFA, Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2014-2015, Office for Fair Access, (2016).

[18] O'Sullivan, K., Bird, N., Robson, J., & Winters, N., Academic identity, confidence and belonging: The role of contextualised admissions and foundation years in higher education. British Educational Research Journal, (2019), 45(3), 554-575.

[19] Rizzica, Lucia. "Raising Aspirations and Higher Education: Evidence from the United Kingdom's Widening Participation Policy.", Journal of Labor Economics, (2020), 1, 183-214.

[20] Shebashev, V., Nizova, L., Andrianov, Y., Furin, A., and Andreeva, E, The importance of higher education in training of academic personnel, JOURNAL OF APPLIED ENGINEERING SCIENCE, (2020), 18(3), 333-337.

[21] Vignoles, A., and Murray, N., Widening Participation in Higher Education. Education sciences, (2016), 6, 1-4.