

Young people's perceptions about post-18 education and training options – commentaries

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Gender and social grade

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University applications from females outnumber those from males by a significant margin (Adams and Page, 2014). In turn, females comprise the majority of all higher education [HE] students - representing over 56% in 2012-13 (Matthews, 2014). However, the consequent under-representation of males is unevenly distributed across social classes. Males 'from poorer backgrounds are less likely to progress to HE than their wealthier counter-parts; they are also less likely to go onto [university] than females from the same backgrounds' (Raven, 2011a, 15). According to a Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS] study, 'advantaged men in 2013 were 3.1 times more likely to enter [HE] than disadvantaged men'. In contrast, the difference between advantaged and disadvantaged women was 2.5 times (UCAS, 2013).

As this UCU report shows, these patterns in HE participation have clear antecedents in the aspirations and intentions voiced by 13-17 year olds. Young men are less likely to state an intention to progress to HE than young women. Moreover, whilst those 'from higher social grades are more likely than those from lower ones to say that they plan to go onto HE', the decline in the desire to progress to university is steeper amongst young men than young women as the social grades are descended. This trend warrants attention since, as Woodfield (2011a, 3-4) observes, HE participation can bestow benefits such as 'enhanced employability', increased 'earning potential, improved long-term health, and an enhanced sense of citizenship' (see also Department of Business, 2013).

In identifying reasons behind these patterns, this report also alights on solutions. There is a need to address the paucity of information, advice and guidance (IAG) which is especially acute amongst learners from lower social grades and for males more generally, who 'tend to source fewer types of IAG'. The lack of IAG and the need for its improvement chimes with other recent studies (Pearson, 2013). A further solution indicated by the report relates to the increased tendency of young people from lower social grades to take vocational qualifications rather than A-levels. Other research suggests that boys are more likely to opt for BTECs and to start and complete apprenticeships than girls (Jin et al., 2010, TUC and YWCA, 2010). As the UCU report notes, the vocational route into HE is a less well-travelled and comparatively poorly signposted one. Some work has been conducted in this area; more needs to be done (Raven, 2011b).

However, whilst technical and structural changes may begin to close the gap there is reason to believe that differences in HE ambitions and participation by gender and social class are deeply embedded and relate, in part at least, to the social classification used in the report. This is based upon the occupational status of the head of household. Those in grade AB, representing 'higher managerial and professional occupations', are more likely to have experienced HE than the 'supervisory' and 'skill

manual workers' represented in C1 and C2, and far more likely to have gained a university education than the 'unskilled manual workers' comprising groups D and E. Indeed, an element of the classification scheme takes account of the head of household's education (Market Research Society, 2014). The relevance of these differences is evident in recent research, which highlights the significance of parental education in influencing a child's propensity to progress to HE (Gorard and Smith, 2007, Davies et al., 2014). Moreover, this is not merely in terms of being better informed about the HE application process. It is also about inculcating values associated with a university education; values, and an accompanying culture, which, it is argued, working class boys may find particularly challenging to relate to (Woodfield, 2011). Accordingly, there is a need to engage and inform youngsters from an early age and, in doing so, acknowledge wider social and cultural forces. There is also a need for further investigation, including qualitative studies that explore learner journeys and decision-making processes. This report is very timely and valuable in drawing attention to this important subject.

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Gender, social grade and aspirations

Professor Penny Jane Burke

Penny Jane Burke is Professor of Education at Roehampton University, London, where she is co-Founder and Director of the Paulo Freire Institute-UK (PFI-UK). Penny is particularly dedicated to the development of methodological and pedagogical frameworks that support critical and transformative levels of understanding of issues of access, equity and social justice in the field of higher education.

The University and College Union's recent report on young people's aspirations of post-18 education and training provides an important overview of the ways that aspiration-formation continues to be gendered and classed. It confirms that young women are more likely to aspire to and access higher education than young men. It reveals that this pattern is also classed by looking at the relationship between gender and social grade (as well as other intersecting differences such as age, ethnicity, educational attainment and school type). The quantitative data involved a survey of 1000 young men aged 13-17 and 1000 young women of the same age group. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with 20 young men and 10 young women, all of whom were aged between 13-17.

The quantitative data shows us that aspirations and choices are highly gendered and classed, with young men being less likely than young women to aspire towards completing a degree after leaving school. The qualitative data highlights the gendered nature of aspirations including the different kinds of subjects that feature in boys' and girls' accounts of their future hopes. Subjects that are associated with masculinity, such as mathematics and mechanics, are more likely to shape young men's aspirations, whilst feminized subjects, such as teaching and nursing, continue to be seen as more available to young women. For example:

"University is generally academic, with subjects being Mathematics, Physics etc. Apprenticeships are for more practical minded people like mechanics, plumbers, electricians etc." – Young man, aged 13, state school

"Most likely [I'll go to] university however I may take an extra year out working as a teaching assistant abroad to gain experience before studying teaching full time. However this can be costly so I am unsure, it all depends on my AS results to be honest." – Young woman, aged 17, state school

The report raises some significant issues that could be further investigated and analyzed in order to get beneath the kinds of discourses at play in young people's accounts of their aspirations, as cited above. We need to better understand why aspirations are gendered and classed, and how educational systems, structures and frameworks might address such inequalities. There is existing research and literature that might help shed light on some of the main findings from the UCU report. The UCU research reveals that girls tend to form their aspirations in relation to constructions of 'being academic' (but in subjects and institutions that 'fit in' with femininity and their

social grade location) and boys appear to imagine their future choices more in terms of work and apprenticeship (again this is shaped by discourses of masculinity and class). Research in the field suggests that this could be connected to the gendered construction of masculinities and femininities in school contexts. For example, the research literature highlights that boys' identities are often constructed in relation to lack of discipline, a tendency towards laziness and an inability to organize, and working-class boys tend to construct manliness with paid work, whilst girls are often seen as naturally diligent and studious (see for example Epstein et al, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Reay, 2001, 2002; Burke, 2006, 2009, 2012). The patterns emerging from the UCU research suggest that boys imagine their futures after schooling much more in terms of work and apprenticeship than further academic study, whilst girls are more likely to see themselves as university students, however this is profoundly shaped by social grade and class location. In order to develop policies, practices and strategies that are able to address such issues, we need to draw on the rich insights of feminist theories and gender studies, to make sense of the ways that gendered constructions, often reinforced by the hidden curriculum at school, might lead to the formation of gendered and classed aspirations. Such theoretical insights will help to analyze the intersections of gender with social grade, class, age, ethnicity and race as well as other social differences and inequalities.

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Engagement once in higher education

Ed Foster

Ed Foster is the Student Engagement Manager at Nottingham Trent University. His work focuses on identifying and overcoming barriers that prevent students from engaging with their studies. He is currently working on an NTU student dashboard: a learning analytics resource for students and their tutors.

Since 1992/93 more female students have entered higher education than males (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2009). In the most recent Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2013) report, 57.1% of first year higher education students were female and 42.9%, male (data from the 2011/12 academic year). This is partly because the pool of male students with the necessary qualifications to actually study in HE was also smaller. For example, in the 2010/11 academic year, 53% of students taking a level 3 qualification (typically A level or BTEC) were female and 47%, male (Department for Education, 2014).

However that only partially explains the disparity. This report identifies that fewer males would actually choose to study a higher education course. The researchers found that 74% of young women wanted to study a higher education course, as did only 65% of young men. Other factors appear to compound this perception, such as the young person's social grade and the type of educational establishment they are studying in. Nonetheless, just being male appears to be a barrier to considering entering higher education.

Why is higher education less appealing for young men?

Amongst both male and female students the perceived cost of HE and the lack of guaranteed employment at the end of the process were the most commonly cited reasons for not wanting to study for a degree. However, female students were more concerned about these factors than males. Young males were interested in the option of an apprenticeship: 46% compared to 36% of females. Although less frequently cited by all young people, male students were more likely to report that studying is too academic, too difficult or not for people like them. The researchers report that female students had a greater sense of understanding as to how higher education could help them with their future plans.

This report therefore also hints at issues for those males who do progress into higher education. For example, amongst those students reporting that they were planning to study for a degree only 14% of males reported that they were an 'academic person who likes studying', compared to 18% of females. If this finding is more generalisable, it may be one of the factors explaining poorer male success in HE. Male students are marginally less likely to progress from the first year at university than their female counterparts. However, by the time of graduation the gap is more noticeable: 63.2% of male students achieved a 'good' degree (2:1 or 1st) compared to 67.9% of females (ECU, 2013).

The American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013) found that male students were less likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities such as

reviewing notes after class. In the UK, Foster & Lefever (2011) reported that male students placed less emphasis on their studies than female students and reported that they were working less hard than their female peers. Further details about how the sexes perceive and engage with higher education are likely to arise from the forthcoming UK Engagement Survey (due to be published November 2014 by the Higher Education Academy).

Discussing problems with masculinity in education is fraught with dangers. Ultimately, males appear to engage less well in higher education, yet still remain more likely to be in graduate level jobs than their female peers (ECU, 2013). No other educationally disadvantaged group (for example students with disabilities or from widening participation backgrounds) has this get out of jail free card. Nonetheless, it is important for the individual students and for society at large that we find ways to make the values and benefits associated with a degree appealing to young males, both before and during their time at university.

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Age and qualifications

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Women make up the majority (56%) of students going on to higher education straight from school (HESA, 2014), and have done so for some years (HEA 2011). Furthermore, young men who do not go on to higher education from school are less likely to return to it later on as women comprise over 60% of HE students who are mature (HEA 2014). Overall, women are more likely to participate than men across every type of higher education institution from post-1992 through to Russell Group Universities (HEA 2011), and the men that do attend university are more likely to leave their courses without their degrees or to attain a lower degree (HEA 2014).

This is background against which this valuable UCU report is published. Its substantial data-set gives voice to over 1000 male and female students at a critical time in their educational journeys, in order to understand how they perceive higher education and to explore the context of information and influences within which they are making decisions about education and work that will affect the rest of their lives.

Existing research has indicated that, overall, boys and girls differ in the degree to which they perceive higher education to be an opportunity. Young men, especially those from work-class backgrounds or backgrounds without a tradition of higher education, have been shown to orientate to the occupational sector and to earning a wage, and may perceive a university course to represent a greater risk for them, and a disruption to a solid post-school work trajectory (Aimhigher Midlands 2007; Cleary 2007; HEA 2011). Girls and young women, on the other hand, have been shown to have increasing academic and career aspirations over recent decades, and, in the context of these, they perceive higher education as representing a greater opportunity (HEA 2011).

Research has also shown that it is commonplace for all young people to lack sufficient or accurate knowledge to provide realistic assessments of what educational and career paths they might best select (Mann et al. 2013). The UCU report amply demonstrates this, and suggests that learners might be selecting qualification types and routes without understanding whether or how these might restrict future options; the understanding of the suitability of qualifications for higher education would seem to be particularly low. The report supplements this insight with the further finding that teenagers are likely to feel well informed about their future options, even if they have little access to adequate information and guidance. The finding that young people are often making decisions based on information from family, informal contacts and teachers is underscored here and provides us with guidance as to where we might target attempts to improve information quality and flows. The *Nothing in common: the career aspirations of young Britons mapped against projected labour market demand* report of 2013 (Mann et al.) suggested that school-mediated information is more valuable for teenagers, and this is also confirmed here.

The UCU report further confirms earlier findings (Mann et al. 2013) that teenagers become more realistic as they become older, in the years between ages 13 to 17. The key issue here is that important decisions about qualification types may have already been made, and young people can feel that the university option is increasingly unrealistic because of their past educational choices. Young men are of particular concern here, as the evidence is that young women, more readily focus on identifying the 'next steps' of progressing through school to higher education or training opportunities, and to selecting a career path suited to the subject areas that they enjoy. The UCU report identifies a key window of opportunity for more informed intervention.

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