

What effect does going to university have on social mobility?

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A three year study which compared the university experiences of students of different social classes found that the opportunities and benefits experienced through a university education were not necessarily equal between different social classes and different individuals.

The results of the Paired Peers Project, a joint research project between the University of Bristol and UWE Bristol (University of the West of England) were presented at an event held at the Headquarters of Universities UK on 3 July 2013.

Professor Sir Eric Thomas (Vice Chancellor, University of Bristol) will make the opening comments. A panel discussion will include Melissa Benn (journalist and writer), Les Ebdon (Director of OFFA), Aaron Porter (ex NUS President), Danny Dorling, (Professor of Human

Geography, University of Sheffield), Professor Steve West (Vice Chancellor, UWE Bristol). Students who took part in the research will also be on hand to talk about their experiences.

The Leverhulme Foundation funded project, tracked 40 pairs of undergraduate students from different socio-economic backgrounds from two contrasting universities in the same city - the University of Bristol and UWE Bristol. Students were matched across subject disciplines, with two from 'traditional' university backgrounds and two from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, with a balance of men and women. Students were interviewed twice a year about their motivations, academic progress, social life, accommodation etc, and also about their pathways to employment and career plans. Other forms of data were collected too including photographs, maps, diary and journal entries, and information on their use of social media. The study aimed to highlight the conditions that help or hinder access to equal opportunities.

Amongst other things, the team found that getting in to university was seen as normal, even expected for many middle class students, while for working-class students it was usually a choice that required more consideration, effort and strategic planning, and was often a hope rather than expectation. Many working-class parents were unable to help with the university application process but did provide emotional support and encouragement.

Once at university working-class students faced considerable economic hardships, while middle-class students were cushioned by their parents' financial support. Financial constraints limited working-class students in terms of extra-curricular activities, with many of them having to work in mundane jobs during term time, unlike a lot of those from wealthier backgrounds. However, for many working-class students, the difficult process of getting into and staying at university helped develop a resilience which proved valuable to their experience of studying and has

prepared them for the world of work. There was a social chasm between private and state school students, often exacerbated by university accommodation costs.

Middle class students at both universities were far more able to draw upon family resources and had access to influential social networks to help them get work experience or internships. Female students at both universities had a tendency to limit their career aspirations in consideration of managing employment and childcare. Internships, placement and voluntary work were crucial in facilitating movement into jobs.

Joanna, a middle-class student at UWE stated that CV building had been her major preoccupation: "The reason I volunteer at St John's Ambulance now is because it will look good on my CV. And obviously I enjoy it, but the reason I started it was because it looks good on my CV and the guy I work with is brilliant for giving me references and things like that... But yeah, that's what I've spent my 3 years doing, is making sure I've got a CV worth having when I leave because obviously there's a lot more competition for graduate jobs than there used to be and graduate is a sort of baseline that you then look at your CV to build upon."

Professor Harriet Bradley, Professor of Employment Research at UWE Bristol who led the research said, "Our main finding is that class and gender make a difference to the way the benefits of a university education are accessed. We found that the social, cultural and economic capital that middle class students arrive at university with can be used to smooth the path through university and into work at the end. For example some students had a network of connections with relevant professions acquired through family prior to university, along with economic capital which provided a financial buffer during their university career – these were not evenly distributed amongst students

from the outset and the presence or absence of these factors had an effect on the way students were able to use the opportunities on offer at both universities.

"We also found different types of students - some were strategic in how they used the resources and opportunities offered at university and others were less focused. However, few students felt that they were getting value for money in relation to higher fees, and almost all [students](#) wanted more small-group contact time."

The Paired Peers team will present their findings and discuss the implications for education policy on 3 July 2013 at Universities UK Headquarters in London.

Provided by University of the West of England

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