From the quantitative to the qualitative: Learning from student insights on Higher Education

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# Introduction

In recent years the higher education landscape has changed markedly with institutions increasingly competing against each other. Students use a range of resources to select an appropriate course, not least league tables and their personal contacts. Researchers likewise access an increasing number of data sources to assess performance (including student success, retention and achievement) along various axes such as widening participation. While valuable for some purposes, we suggest that larger scale quantitative methods require unpacking and interrogating by using qualitative ‘close-up’ research; seeming simplistic accounts often contain far more complexity. We argue these qualitative accounts are valuable in giving insights into: potential policies to support widening access and student retention and success; processes of social change; and are useful in interpreting statistical trends and patterns. Overall, we advocate an ongoing interaction between evidence collected by different methods as simultaneously improving evidence quality and enhancing understanding of educational inequalities. Consequently, the paper moves from numbers … to narratives … and back again.

## Theoretical and methodological framework

The theoretical framework adopted refers to Bourdieu’s (1990) concepts of capitals and habitus. For example, an individual’s access to financial resources and social networks (capitals) shapes their way of ‘being’ in the world (habitus). Understanding reproduction of privilege and disadvantage in higher education (HE) requires an account of inequalities beyond social class. The framework is thus informed by disability studies, feminism and others who take into account intersectionality where individuals’ social positioning (e.g. in relation to gender, ethnicity, and disability) influence, though not determine, their life decisions and chances.

This paper draws on findings from a larger evaluation of Office for Fair Access (OFFA) funded activities in one university that seeks to examine the impact of measures to improve access, student success and progression. The wider project uses various methods (including statistics at a national, regional and institutional level, reflective accounts, interviews, focus groups and observations) to develop a comprehensive account of the student life cycle and, in so doing, ultimately suggest ways to better address inequalities. The data collected is part of the pilot Lancaster University Cohort Study (LUCS) with a sample comprising of 470 first year students (14% total undergraduate cohort) responding to an online questionnaire during their first term, nineteen of whom expanded on their experiences providing a close-up account of their transition and first year experiences.

# From numbers…

Overall the HE landscape has changed significantly over recent years. One change is the increasing pervasiveness of measuring performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) through various indicators. In the UK, these are collated in Key Information Sets that draw upon the National Student Survey, and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) performance indicators including Destination Leavers HE survey. There is also more extensive use of metrics internally allowing institutions to monitor across the student lifecycle of recruitment, engagement, drop-out and achievement over time and across disciplines. Students considering HE now have a range of resources to draw upon in selecting between HEIs and courses. For instance, established sources such as the Times Higher Education[[1]](#footnote-1) rankings now exist alongside more recently introduced resources, including Unistats[[2]](#footnote-2), which offer detailed breakdowns to assist in decision-making. As neatly summed up in a recent report (Universities UK 2016: 2):

There is a growing public and policy interest in the experience of and outcomes for students studying at university. Students need information so that that they can make informed choices about where to study. Universities need information to review and innovate in their teaching and learning practices. Government and the public want to be assured that the sector delivers value to students, wider society and the economy.

A further change relates to the overall increased participation rate in Higher Education. However, the issue of *who* has benefited most from this change is debatable. As the numbers show, some inequalities have not dramatically decreased. For example, eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), one proxy measure for social class, shows that although the gap in participation has narrowed it remains large as shown in table 1.

Table 1: HE participation by free school meal status (2005/06 to 2012/13)

|  |
| --- |
| **Estimated percentage of maintained school pupils aged 15 by Free School Meal status who entered HE by age 19**   |
|  | FSM  | Non-FSM | Gap (pp) [2] | All |
| 2005/06  | 13%  | 33% | 19 | 30% |
| 2012/13 | 23% | 40% | 17 | 37% |

Other proxy measures for social class indicate students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods or living in remote rural areas have lower HE participation rates than students from more privileged and urban locales (POLAR3 data, HEFCE). As Finnegan and Merrill (2015) observe based on biographical narratives of 139 Irish and English students HE remains a ‘highly classed space.’ A differential participation pattern based on class and neighbourhood is also common elsewhere, for example, Australia (Lynch et al, 2015). Although inequalities by disability and minority ethnic group similarly persist their prominence in policy debates and institutional outreach activity fluctuates as the emphasis and student groups HEIs are encouraged to prioritise changes over time. For example, current OFFA guidance highlights the need for outreach to white working-class men and students with mental health issues and greater attention to the achievement of Black and Minority Ethnic students (OFFA, 2016/01). Recent Conservative Government policy changes in England (e.g. abolishing maintenance grants) potentially threaten to undermine the progress achieved thus far though their impact is currently unclear (McCaig, 2016).

The influence of ‘statistics’, or rather the importance attached to them, increasingly shapes our educational landscape. Vast and ever expanding pools of data are available via, for example, government departments (DfE and BIS) and other institutions such as HESA, and in response to ongoing pressure from the sector the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) have extended the admission data they release (June 2016). Institutions review these metrics to inform planning and budgetary decisions and young people (and/or their parents and carers) use the information to make decisions regarding choice of HE provider.

Even though there are strong arguments for the use and value of more qualitative data (e.g. OFFA) numbers or ‘the quants’ tend to dominate in offering quick headline grabbing ‘facts’; neat packages of data telling simple stories. However, this data arguably represents a simplistic and potentially detrimental source of information; the need for approaching with caution highlighted in the 500 most fortunate universities league table[[3]](#footnote-3). The reality is that performance indicators reinforce competition, with a poor outcome in a league table resulting in negative press whereas an improvement signals good fortune for student admissions and funding allocations.

Evidence from a short online survey of undergraduate entrants (2015/16 LUCS study) compared findings from a large-scale survey conducted as part of the ‘Futuretrack’ longitudinal study (Purcell et al, 2008) appears to reflect the growing influence of rankings and league tables in students’ decisions regarding their choice of university. In response to the question: Who/what was influential in me reaching HE?’ the top four influences selected by LUCS students were:

1) ‘Good Universities’ Guide / League Tables / Teaching Quality Information (368)

2) Visit to institution (308)

3) The teaching reputation of the university or department (281)

4) Reputation of the institution generally (276)

In contrast, the same question in the Futuretrack study suggested the most influential factors on university choice were: It offered a particular course (1st); visit to institution (2nd), and reputation of institution generally (3rd), with Teaching reputation in 5th position and guide/league tables ranked 7th. An earlier study suggested even less importance attributed to such rankings by previous cohorts (Connor and Dewson, 2001). In their ‘Paired Peers’ project, Bradley et al (2013: 4) note the increasing influence of league tables commenting:

… we were surprised at how knowledgeable our participants were about universities. They were well aware of the ‘pecking order’ and many had extensively researched on websites, which now make information about higher education institutions (HEIs) much more accessible.

Reasons for entering HE, however, appear more comparable over time with factors ranked highly in both LUCS and Futuretrack including: ‘*To enable me to get a good job*’; ‘*I want to study the particular subject/course*’; and ‘*it is part of my longer-term career plans*’. Overall then, the above suggests a context of growing instrumentality to education amid continuing patterns of privilege and disadvantage albeit with some indications of progress and change arising from participation in widening access initiatives (Torgerson, et al, 2014). However, as always in social worlds, the experiences comprising this simple portrayal are far more complex…

# To narratives…

Whereas numbers offer insights into participation rates and what influences students’ decisions, we believe it is the close-up qualitative accounts that provide insights into the reasons for their decisions and help to explain the influence of unequal access to social networks that shape their habitus and impact on sources of support, initial concerns and levels of preparedness for university. To illustrate the more nuanced explanations we focus on stories from four LUCS students with respect to instrumental orientation, disadvantage, privilege and change:

* Harry: both parents manual workers, neither parents nor his older siblings went to university;
* Eliza: parents with intermediate occupations, who didn’t expect her to go to HE, in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA);
* Anna: parents with HE experience and expectations she would go to HE, with EU status;
* Mark: parents with lower managerial jobs and HE experience who expected he would go to HE.

## Instrumental orientation

Some of the findings from interviews with respondents to the survey above appeared to confirm the influence of statistics; for example, one student commented: ‘*Most of my uni choices were driven by league tables*’ (Eliza). However, it’s possible that other factors were more influential during later stages of decision-making, for instance, Eliza went on to say, ‘*… it was a campus and I wasn’t going to be thrown in to another world*’. Perhaps more explicitly, Anna’s description highlights the importance of size and a sense of community, she explained how:

Lancaster was very quick to respond. They cared about me, I didn’t know what it [university campus] looked like only from the website … being on campus is being more protected. It’s already difficult being away from my family.

Harry was attracted to the university and its location because it contrasted from the North West city where he lived, it was ‘*quiet, rural, good, sleepy town and also a good university, but the main thing was not coming too far from home but far enough*’. Initially Harry commuted attempting to retain his home networks and employment but moved onto campus to ‘*feel part of the university rather than coming in on the train and flying off again*’ which was both tiring and isolating. The attraction of the familiar was evident in the narratives of other students who referred to seeking advice and reassurance from ‘*siblings who have been to university*’ or ‘*my brother [who] has just finished university so I could learn from his experiences*’.

The Paired Peers study (Bradley et al, 2013) also found that, while being aware of the ‘pecking order’, there are other important influences on choice of institution (e.g. individuals choosing institutions on the basis of where they would feel comfortable and from talking to friends and relatives). While the LUCS survey indicated students saw their degree as a means to the end of getting a ‘*good job and good salary*’, suggesting a somewhat instrumental orientation to education, a large proportion also indicated a desire to continue studying at postgraduate level which may imply an enjoyment of education in and of itself. Tomlinson (2015) similarly points to the co-existence of contradictory views that he conceptualises as ‘social ambivalence’.

## Disadvantage: risks and rewards

Here we share examples of ‘exceptions’ to broad patterns suggested by the numbers. For example, Harry was not necessarily following the trajectory suggested by the above statistical trends and patterns, nor as the first in his large family to go to HE, was he following family traditions. His desire to go into HE was linked to the fact that, ‘*from a young age I wanted to be a teacher, from an early age I loved to read and write, I wanted to be like a sponge and soak it up*’. Similarly, the risk of a lower degree classification might be suggested by his entry qualifications, for instance, the 2012/13 results for students entering (A\*AA-A\*A\*A\* and AAA-AAB) compared with students like Harry entering with non A-level qualifications show a 26.2% difference in the percentage gaining a 1st or 2.1 degree. Yet, despite the numbers (which may not be familiar to students entering HE) Harry recognised both the weaknesses and strengths of his own educational experience with respect to preparation for independent university study.

I think colleges don’t prepare you as well as they think they do … its little things like getting you to think about journals and referencing which can help when you come to university, … I’m not a big fan of 6th forms, I can see the benefits, the close ties, it’s a comfort blanket, but they are missing out on a lot, … I think 6th form is like laying a Band-Aid over a cut whereas college is like taking it off and letting you sort it out yourself. (Harry)

As other research has found, coming from a working-class background may result in students being better equipped for university life. For instance, Bradley et al (2016) comment that while working-class students overall confront more constraints than their middle-class peers the experience of striving to get to university may build a certain resilience and resoluteness. As one LUCS student explained, ‘*being the first person in my family to go to university I did feel unprepared, but to remedy this I chose to do my own research until I felt comfortable*’. Findings point to the importance of students’ habitus in particular students’ concerns about whether ‘*I will fit in*’ or their surprise at how they were responding to the disadvantages arising from their previous life experience. As Eliza observed, ‘*I was least prepared socially by a mile, I haven’t gone out, I don’t drink, there was that moment of thinking what have I done … I don’t know how I’ve done it*’. These examples demonstrate dilemmas associated with being educated out of one’s class, cast adrift, with a potential lack of belonging at home or university.

## Privilege: from spoon to cupboard?

Close-up accounts show students who appear advantaged in a number of respects may experience this sense of isolation not only those regarded as lacking the social and cultural capital required for success at university. Mark, who had a relatively privileged background where progression to university was expected, commented:

I was expected to go to uni, since secondary, always put in higher sets, both parents went to uni, they said it’s the best thing to do. From a young age, I never thought anything different, didn’t consider other options… [pre university attended] a week at Cambridge…chemistry week, residential, although I already knew at that point I was going to apply to Cambridge, I knew which A levels I was going to do.

But is it so straightforward and smooth once at university? Students’ experience suggests otherwise. Mark referred to the difficulties, or challenges, arising during his transition to HE:

irrespective of the number of people and the number of support services, it’s always going to be difficult [adjusting to university life]. It’s more of a mature atmosphere, I think it can be more difficult for people to transition especially those if they’ve gone to public school where you have people doing things for you…it’s a lot more responsibility when you are doing all stuff off your own back. You’re no longer a kid, you’re an adult. Because [for] first time in life you’re dumped on [your] own, … I don’t think there’s anything you can do to prepare yourself for the amount of independence you can get because your parents are always gonna be there.

Although those with cultural and social capital may be expected to have a smooth transition to university Mark’s experiences suggest that whilst capitals may be productive of privilege in certain respects, the ‘spoon feeding’ that several students referred to can be a hindrance. Students who are seemingly ‘privileged’ according to one axis of social positioning may be ‘disadvantaged’ along another. In other words, it is necessary to take into account the cross-cutting nature of social statuses as well as considering the process of changing circumstances over time.

Harry, who was not able to call on the ‘bank of mum and dad’, recognised the need for taking responsibility for managing his money and ensuring his cupboard was not bare; in response to some follow-up questions he wrote:

Although [managing money] is equally important I try not to dwell too much on my financing other than to set myself a weekly budget. I know plenty of people who set themselves specific amounts for certain areas, food, evenings out etc. but this does not work for me. I work part time in order to fund my spending and also to encourage a work/life balance which I believe is fundamentally important to the individual self in all aspects. Monetary matters should always be carefully thought out with realistic intent applied in order to manage and not find yourself in any sticky situation! (Harry)

## Change: the student life cycle

Moreover, important changes occur during the student life cycle, insights difficult to capture adequately using quantitative methods alone. For example, an individual reflection drawn from the wider project indicated that while the motivation to do voluntary work may stem initially from strategic reasons (e.g. enhancing CV), through experience, an individual may come to value participation as an end in itself rather than only a means to an end. In other words, there appeared to be a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.

Disability, sometimes hidden and not easily defined, raises a number of implications for transition. As well as an absence of common definitions across educational sectors, the disability categories, nature of funding and support and an individual student’s status may change over time which can disrupt their habitus and impact on the benefits of their capital.

For example, Eliza has a chronic health condition that she and her social capital network did not perceive as a disability and, like many students, she was reluctant to acquire the disability label. From her story it became clear that she, her family and her school lacked awareness of the alternative funding arrangements for support in HE and her entitlement to DSA, ‘*my teachers didn’t seem to know about student finance [including DSA] so left us to sort it out ourselves*’. It was during her transition journey that she gained awareness which she was keen to share with others. What had started as a disadvantage and risk to her participation in HE was, as a result of serendipity, personal determination and access to the necessary advice (from her expanding social capital network) enabling her to pursue her personal goal of a degree. Eliza’s story illustrates the intersecting identities with social contexts and unexpected life events that reflect a complex mix of factors accounting for whether a student enters HE, their experience once there, and the anticipated destination upon graduation.

# And back again…

Within the context of LUCS the interaction of quantitative and qualitative data offers a practical approach for gathering a panoramic view that is enhanced by a close-up consideration of specific issues. The institutional numbers featuring in league tables provide a point of comparison for prospective students and a basis for monitoring the influence of current marketing and recruitment, admission and outreach practices. The LUCS questionnaire data provides insights into 14% of the first year undergraduate population that can inform general guidance to academic departments and the Colleges regarding student concerns and ideas for staff and students’ union who are responsible for welcome week and induction. The twenty close-up interviews permit a more nuanced account that may enrich the general guidance and enhance understanding of the complex ways in which individual habitus influences engagement with the university. Furthermore, whilst the numbers are likely to remain broadly the same (recognising there will be changes resulting from drop out) we plan to collect further narratives to enrich the close-up accounts of the whole of the student lifecycle.

# Conclusions

Overall, there has been rise in the importance of metrics with regard to students’ decisions about their choice of HEI and course. The extent to which students and their families make sense of the Key Information Sets of numbers available, or find them informative, is open to debate. For researchers, the paper highlights the limitations of a sole focus on the ‘stats’ and the value of more in-depth analyses.

Methodologically the value of close-up research is in learning more from students’ insights to help us explain ways individuals select between institutions, secure positions of advantage and struggle for upward mobility; such understanding is difficult if not impossible to achieve using statistical indicators by themselves. From the LUCS pilot (and previous research) it appears that the qualitative evidence nuances the quantitative material; however, the extent to which individuals diverge from the route expected on basis of social background and the barriers they confront in so doing could be seen as ‘exceptions proving the rule’. Nevertheless, by avoiding what McArthur describes as a false dichotomy, there appear to be merits to a mixed method that brings together evidence that represents patterns and stories depending on the aim or purpose of research.

As we have seen, however, students’ journeys are influenced by significant others such as family members and peer groups; differential access to hot knowledge is a key factor in reproducing patterns of privilege and disadvantage. There are however unexpected challenges, serendipitous events, and resistance along the way.

What is worth reflecting on is the speed of change, and who influences how the capital available to a family evolves. Although this evolution isn’t evident in the numbers, several of the LUCS students referred in their narratives to siblings who were the first in their family to attend HE and were already perceived as providing what might be described as bridging social capital based on their experience of HE. So, for example, ‘*having a family member experience it before and the reassurance from them’* and another who felt more prepared for university because of ‘*the fact that my sister attended the same university so I had a person to talk to and seek advice*’.

Theoretically, our findings suggest the importance of attending to the multiplicity of belongings to different social groups simultaneously. It is not sufficient to discuss individuals as one-dimensional since while they may be privileged on some measures those same privileges can become disadvantages at other points or their relative advantage becomes transformed by intersections with another strand, such as belonging to a minority ethnic group, such that they are disadvantaged in specific contexts. However, having other family members able to offer ‘hot knowledge’ illustrates one means for reproducing patterns of advantage.

To conclude, despite the driving influence of numbers making the headlines, a close-up focus may be of far more value to researchers, policy-makers and, indeed potential applicants themselves. Even though such findings may not be as easy to digest, they are well worth the investment and, in turn, prompt a more nuanced look at the statistics, and back again; mixed methods are the way forward.

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1. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.fortunate500universities.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)