

# Pathways to success?

The influence of class on transitions into  
higher education.

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# Background: is HE a vehicle for social mobility?

- Current furore over HE policy
- Failure of elite universities to meet their WP targets
- Concern about deterrent effect of fees hike for students from poorer families
- Increasing social inequalities
- Debates about the value of a degree (couched largely in economic terms)
- Hills: economic premium from HE in labour market
- Stark levels of youth unemployment
- Increasing graduate unemployment (est.45 applicants per graduate job in 2011)

# Literature

- Focus on capitals provided by parents, schools
- Less on the agency of young people themselves
- Parents (Devine, Riseborough et al, Reay, Crozier, Connor etc)
  - Economic capital: private education, travel, educational resources
  - Cultural capital: knowledge of system, advice and guidance, help with schoolwork
  - Social capital: contacts, interventions with teachers, placements and internships

# Literature: the role of schools

- Reay, Ball and David (2001)
- Private schools offer substantial careers advice, including visits from professionals.
- Process of choosing universities start early at private schools: at state schools often done in a rush and at last minute;
- Private schools guide students to Oxbridge and elite universities: state schools often have links with local institutions including post 1992s;
- Private school teachers often have been to Oxbridge themselves and have personal links with with colleges;
- A harmony between institutional private school and m/c parental 'habitus' , while at state schools there may be dissonance: parents did not always see the value of university and did not want their children to leave home .
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# The Paired Peers Project

- 3 year project funded by Leverhulme
- Following cohort of students from UoB and UWe for 3 years, c 40 from each institution
- Matched pairs by class, university, course
- What capitals do students bring with them and what do they acquire?
- Methods Year 1:
  - 90 students recruited from 11 disciplines
  - 90 narrative interviews (how did you get to Bristol?)
  - 7 semi-structured interviews (adapting to student life)
  - + photos, diaries from some participants

## The project team

- Harriet Bradley (University of Bristol), Ann-Marie Bathmaker (UWE Bristol), Jessie Abrahams, Phoebe Beedell, Lucy Collins, Tony Hoare, Nicola Ingram, Jody Mellor (all University of Bristol), Judith Stewart (UWE Bristol), Richard Waller (UWE Bristol)
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# Decision-making pathways

- 1 **The taken for granted pathway** : going to university is seen as normal, everybody in family has a degree, siblings are already at university, most people at school are going. Many middle-class students fall into this category – has become the default transition to adulthood
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- 2 **The planning pathway** : going to university was a long- term goal and choices and actions were deliberately taken to achieve it. Aspirant and academically gifted young people from the working-class may follow this route, as may highly motivated middle-class students
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- 3 **The drifting pathway**: people could not really give an account of how they decided to go to university, who lacked aims and objectives, but ended up somehow going there. Drifters can come from all classes.
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# Decision-making pathways

**4The rescue pathway:** the young person did not envisage going to university, was drifting, possibly falling into bad habits, but somebody happened to take an interest and motivated them into applying. Rescues may involve less academic working-class students and some demotivated middle-class.

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**5The derailment pathway:** the opposite of rescue. The young person starts off on a positive course towards university but something happens - illness, exam failure, family breakup - which disrupts their progress and results in dropout or setback. This can affect all class groupings.

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**6The disorganized pathway:** an extreme version of the three former routes. Because of their own or family actions - such as moving around the country, leaving school, moving between schools, etc, - the trajectory is disrupted, even ruptured. The young person may start a degree, leave it, return to another course later in life, or enter into employment for a time before entering HE. This pattern is common with mature students, who, however, are not included in our sample

# Distribution of students among pathways (N=82)

	TFG	Planned	Planned + TFG	Drifting	Drifting +TFG	Rescue	Derailed	Disorganised
UoB m/c (24)	8	7	5	-	1	1	1	1
UoB w/c (19)	4	8	1	2	1	1	2	-
UWE m/c (18)	2	2	2	3	2	2	4	1
UWE w/c (21)	1	9	-	7	-	2	-	2

# Examples: P1 Taken for granted

*It's kind of just a standard thing for my school, everyone went to uni.....and then my parents both went to uni, both my sisters went to uni, so it's just kind of a standard thing that I would go to university as well I suppose. ....It was one of those things that everyone did their UCAS application, everyone just went to uni.*

*(Joel, m/c UWE)*

- *It had always been assumed that I would. My sister went to university and it was kind of always assumed that she would, but then my stepbrother hasn't, but it was, he was never really the university type whereas me and my sister were a bit more kind of into the academic side of things.*
- *(Melissa, w/c UoB)*
- M/c – often mention school, general environment, parents
- W/c – more often mention siblings

# P2 Planning: Craig, engineering, UoB

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*I've kind of known like since I was small I wanted to do engineering because my dad was an engineer and so there was always things being taken apart round our house, whenever anything broke we never got a man in, it was always he'd fix it. So I'd always be there, sort of watching to start with and then helping, and fixing cars and all that. ...So I always knew engineering was somewhere that I wanted to head to. And that worked as well with the subjects I liked and was good at, maths, physics, numbers things, logical things all worked, so I was set on that. So when it got to the time to look for a university, so I just looked for where was good at engineering, basically, and where was somewhere I would want to go and live. Internet and then...started with just like one of those league table things of the top twenty-ish unis and thought where looks good, where sounds like a decent place, ordered a few prospectuses and read through them, basically, just simple enough. So just read the book and saw whether it took my fancy or whether it just put me off*

More common among the more vocation-oriented subjects.

# P4 Rescue: Arthur, w/c biology UWE

- Double rescue – mother, then friend intervene
- - *Year 4 I had a little run-in when I was pretty badly behaved in Year 3 and 4, and then Year 4 I got put on report, and then that sorted me out basically....just got into a bad group and....also you thought it was cool to get in trouble. But then my mum found out, stopped some stuff and I buckled down.*
  - *I didn't think about university until half way through my GCSEs when I was like.....at one point I was going to do a sporting qualification, probably full time sport and I thought I'd do that until about six months before I did my decisions. And I thought like "what's the point in doing a sporting degree, it won't get me anywhere , a sporting qualification". One of my friends said to me "sporting qualifications don't work, you won't get a job or anything like that" and I was like "yeah that's a fair point" so I changed my ideas to do A levels instead. Yeah, I wasn't going to do A levels at all.*
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# P5 Derailed: Nicholas, m/c engineering

## UWE

- Father is a professor of engineering
- Nicholas showed an early interest in that subject, plus an aptitude for maths.
- At an academically strong state school, identified as a 'gifted and talented' student. Wanted to go to Nottingham, failed to get the grades, was forced to resort to clearing: ended up at UWE
- Offers some kind of version of teenage rebellion – played guitar in a rock band- but narrative does not feature drink, drugs and social distractions, as others do, instead over-confidence born of high expectations.
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- *Well, lack of effort in a way, not being able to concentrate myself on one thing and always wanting to read books and novels instead. The sense now in retrospect that I wasn't as clever as I thought I was, or other people thought I was. There was another thing I saw. People are told they're clever at a very young age constantly by their parents, as I was, and I was encouraged by my teachers telling me I was a very bright person. They (ie I) seemed not to want to test themselves.. they don't put in the effort because they want to think they should (succeed) through intelligence and then they can always blame it on not putting in enough effort.*

# Conclusions

Life choices are played out in classed contexts.

M/c students generally get more support, help and guidance from schools and parents.

W/c students lack cultural & social capital provided by such parents and schools - may struggle to achieve

M/c students may follow smoother routes into HE (P1 and P2) and thus predominate in the more prestigious HEIs

W/c students more likely to go to post-1992 university, stay within the area where their parents live, drift into wrong courses, drop out (3 of our UWE students did).

BUT Some m/c students screw up, drift , follow Ps 3-6

Those on precarious pathways more likely to be rescued by families than w/c who lose their way, however.

AND w/c students who take P2 may do very well, get into elite unis

View of university as the 'default mode' has trickled down to some sectors of w/c

Such students may have cultivated resources of independence, work ethic etc which stand them in good stead against the more spoonfed of the m/c, less likely to 'go wild' in party culture on arriving at uni.