

'It's the C word': Class matters in higher education

This symposium draws upon two ongoing projects exploring the continuing importance of social class on higher education experiences.

The first is a small project into the saliency of government's NS-SEC class categories and their relevance in understanding the lives and lived experiences of undergraduate students. It involved semi-structured interviews with 62 first year undergraduates, exploring family histories and dispositions to education, and routes into university for students from a wide range of social backgrounds. Problematic issues explored included the mis-identification of a significant number of students in terms of their NS-SEC category, and the mismatch between NS-SEC categories and students' lived, classed experiences. The difficulties associated with categorising class positions of young people from 'fractured' family backgrounds are discussed in the paper by Harrison *et al*, and too the appropriateness of using the NS-SEC system as both a driver for widening participation in HE policy and a measurement of its success.

The second project is a bigger one, funded by the Leverhulme Trust over a three year period beginning in Sept 2010. It looks at the experiences of undergraduate students studying the same degree courses at two very different universities in Bristol, a large English provincial city. Early findings from 82 interviews with first year undergraduates across the two universities in this project have led to two papers here.

The first (Bradley *et al*) is on routes into higher education, and the classed influences upon the decision making processes around choice of university and subject of study. The paper discusses classed experiences of transition to university, employing various theories including from Bradley's previous work in questioning assumptions about class structure and classed behaviours in the context of increasing fragmentation and complexity in patterns of social differentiation.

The Bathmaker *et al* paper considers how students mobilise different forms of capital through higher education study, and seeks to understand the implications for social mobility. It too discusses the problematic nature of assigning social class, and outlines how students are assigned a class designation within the formal administrative systems of HE. The contrasting manner in which the project sought to identify working-class and middle-class participants for the study is explored, and the differing possibilities for action arising from the fracturing of class identities are discussed. The paper offers an analysis of how students construct classed understandings of their own participation in higher education