

Social and ethnic inequalities and institutional differences in entry to UK higher education (1996-2010)

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Number 61, 2013

Students from different social, ethnic and educational backgrounds tend to apply to, and enter, different universities and sectors of higher education (HE). This Briefing reports on a study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which used Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data on entry to full-time undergraduate HE. The study provides new evidence on changing patterns of institutional differentiation and hierarchy in the HE systems of the UK.

- Institutional hierarchies have been strong and stable. They tended to become stronger in the late 2000s, especially in England and at the top of the hierarchy.
- The status of Scottish post-1992 universities improved very slightly during the 1990s.
- Levels of segregation – that is, of the variation across HE institutions in the ethnic or social mix of students – are higher in England than in Scotland or Wales.
- Ethnic segregation is high but it declined slightly over the period. Ethnic minority students, especially from Asian backgrounds, have increased their representation in older (pre-1992) universities.
- Independent-school pupils are unevenly distributed across HE institutions, especially in England, where they have increasingly been concentrated in older universities.
- Much of the variation among institutions is represented by a single status hierarchy associated with the qualifications, age, social class and school backgrounds of students.
- Institutions are more important than subject areas as the basis for status differences in HE.

Introduction

Recent research has shown that more working-class people enter HE than ever before, but their chances of doing so relative to middle-class people have improved only marginally. Ethnic minorities have made more progress: most minority groups are at least as well represented in HE as the white majority.

However, students from different social and ethnic backgrounds are still disproportionately concentrated in particular institutions. The focus of widening-participation debates has shifted from access to HE as a whole to the different institutions attended by students from different backgrounds.

The research summarised in this Briefing examines differentiation in UK HE from 1996 to 2010, a period of expansion and organisational change. It offers three perspectives on differentiation across institutions and, where appropriate, subject areas within institutions.

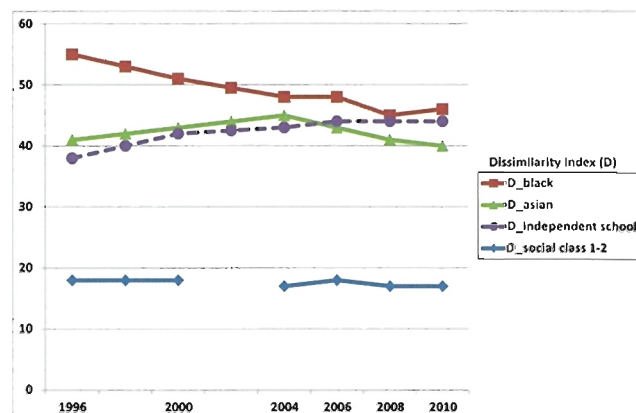
We use UCAS data on applicants to full-time higher education at HE institutions in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010. We focus as appropriate on the UK as a whole and/or its 'home countries' (although Northern Ireland, with only four institutions, is too small for most analyses of institutional differentiation).

Segregation

Figure 1 shows segregation indices for social class, independent schooling and ethnicity for each cohort. Each index measures the extent to which students with a given characteristic are disproportionately distributed across institutions.

Hitherto, segregation indices have mainly been calculated for schools. Values below about 30 are considered low, and values above 60 are considered high. We might expect to find lower values for universities as they are larger than schools and less affected by residential segregation. Figure 1 does indeed show relatively low and stable values (17 or 18) for the institutional segregation of middle-class students. (Indices for other social-class categories are similar.) The social-class mix of students has varied across institutions, but only moderately, and with little change over time.

Figure 1: Indices of segregation between UK HE institutions



However, other indices of segregation in Figure 1 are much higher. Independent school pupils have tended to concentrate in particular HE institutions, increasingly so over time. UK-domiciled students from black and Asian backgrounds have also tended to concentrate in particular institutions; however, ethnic segregation declined, over the whole period in the case of black students and in the late 2000s in the case of Asians.

Some commentators argue that differences between universities have become less important and that the important differences are those between subject departments and faculties. However, our research suggests that institutional differences continue to be more important. We recalculated the segregation indices for 'faculties' – subject areas within institutions – based on seven broad subject areas. This produced almost identical estimates of segregation with respect to social class, and only slightly higher estimates with respect to independent schooling and ethnic minorities. However segregation indices for other indicators, such as gender, age or non-UK domicile, are higher when based on faculties

Levels of segregation have tended to be higher in England than in Scotland or Wales.

Dimensions of variation

Our second perspective maps the differences among universities or 'faculties' on the basis of the educational, social, ethnic and demographic characteristics of their students. Many of these characteristics are related, and our research suggests that faculties can be ranked on a single

dimension which reflects the educational and social status of their students. 'High-status' faculties recruit high proportions of entrants with high qualifications, aged under 21, from professional and managerial class backgrounds, from outside the region of the institution and/or from independent schools.

Academic status and social status are closely linked and they do not constitute separate dimensions. However, our analysis does find two further dimensions associated respectively with high proportions of (UK-domiciled) students from Asian backgrounds and from black or Bangladeshi backgrounds. Institutions and faculties in London tend to score highly on these dimensions.

These three dimensions have been stable over time, and they are similar across England, Wales and Scotland (although the ethnic-minority dimensions are more important and more stable in England). They are not strongly associated with the subject of study, although medical faculties score more highly than other subject areas on the status dimension. As with our analyses of segregation, they suggest that institutions are more important than subject areas as the basis of differentiation in HE. When we repeat the analysis based on institutions rather than faculties we find the same three dimensions described above.

However, the analysis based on faculties finds a fourth dimension, associated with students who are male, from outside the UK or from Chinese backgrounds. This dimension *is* associated with subject areas, and especially with engineering and technology.

Institutional sectors

Our third perspective takes established hierarchies of English and Scottish universities as its starting point. In England the hierarchy comprises the Oxbridge-London 'golden triangle', other Russell Group universities, other pre-1992 universities and universities created after 1992. The first two categories are restricted to members of the Russell Group at the first (1996) data point. In Scotland the hierarchy comprises 'ancient' (pre-1600), 'old' (other pre-1992) and 'new' (post-1992) universities.

Some commentators claim these hierarchies have lost their significance since the 1990s. We test this by comparing trends in the level and spread of four indicators of the status or attractiveness of institutions in each sector. We also look at trends in two system-level indicators of preferences between pre- and post-1992 universities (see box).

Institution-level indicators of attractiveness:

- The ratio of entries to applications
- The proportion of entries through 'clearing'
- The average qualification levels of applicants
- The average qualification levels of entrants

System-level indicators: ratio of choices of pre- and post-1992 universities by applicants receiving:

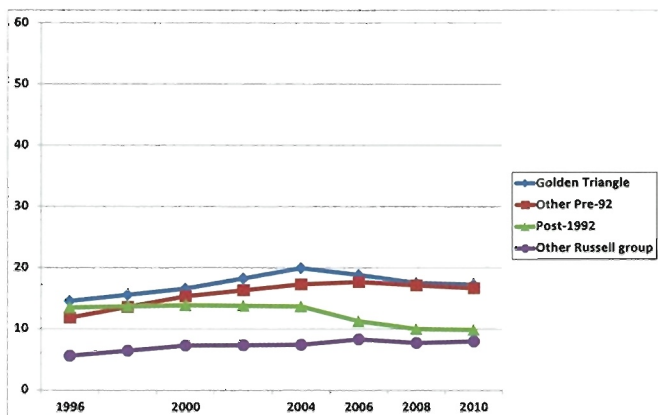
- Unconditional offers from both sectors
- Conditional offers from both sectors

The six indicators tell a broadly consistent story. The differences between sectors remained stable over time, and they even tended to widen (especially at the top end of the hierarchy) in the late 2000s. There is one partial exception: post-1992 universities in Scotland improved their relative status slightly during the 1990s. This may reflect their distinctive history: university status involved a greater mission change for Scottish central institutions than for English polytechnics.

In both England and Scotland higher social-class entrants tended to enter the higher-status sectors, and the differentials remained steady over time. Independent schooling was even more strongly associated with sector, and the differentials tended to increase, especially in England, where a small and shrinking proportion of post-1992 university entrants came from independent schools.

In England black students continued to be concentrated in the lower-status sectors but they increased their representation in older universities. There was even more change in relation to Asian students who, by 2010, were most strongly represented in 'golden triangle' universities and in non-Russell-Group pre-1992 universities (Figure 2). There was no similar trend in Scotland, where fewer students were from ethnic minorities.

Figure 2: Average percentage of Asian entrants per institution by university sector: England



Discussion

Our study confirms that institutional differences in UK HE have been hierarchical (almost monolithic) and stable, and they continue to be linked with the social backgrounds of students.

The main exception to this picture of stability relates to ethnic minorities, who increased as a proportion of all HE entrants (see *CES Briefing* 62) and became less concentrated in particular institutions or sectors. However, there are differences between the different minority groups, and black students have remained under-represented in higher-status sectors.

Social inequalities have been slower to change, especially if we use independent schooling as an indicator of social advantage. However, we may question whether independent schools really advantaged their students by encouraging so few of them to enter post-1992 universities.

Differences across the UK reflect the different scale and different histories of HE in the home countries. The institutional hierarchies strengthened most in England, over a period when English HE moved furthest towards market-

led policies. Our research supports other evidence that educational markets reinforce rather than challenge academic hierarchies. It remains to be seen whether the further marketisation associated with 2012 fee changes will have the same effect.

References

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About this study

This Briefing is a product of the research project on Changing Transitions to a Differentiated Higher Education System, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. It uses data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). UCAS cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties. The views expressed in this Briefing are those of the authors and not of the Nuffield Foundation or UCAS.



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