Undergraduates' Perceptions of how Post-secondary Education Characteristics Shaped their Transition to University

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that privately educated young people benefit from access to competitive degree programmes at the most prestigious universities. Less is known about how stratified post-secondary education provision and socio-economic differences impact upon state educated young peoples' transitions into higher education. Using interview data from twelve undergraduates reflecting on their journeys into higher education, differences in post-secondary education experiences were explored. The findings indicated that middle-class university entrants who had studied at selective sixth-forms and sixth-form colleges were exposed to a range of cultural practices to maximise a successful and smooth entry into higher education. Conversely, the working-class participants studying at small school sixth-forms and further education colleges were more likely to encounter structural factors which resulted in complex and difficult transitions into higher education. However, for working-class students who had received individualised and tailored support from their teachers, they experienced similarly smooth transitions as middle-class entrants, highlighting the impact teachers can have in supporting working-class university applicants. These findings indicated that whilst universities are doing much to widen participation, this cannot be done in isolation of consideration of post-secondary education characteristics which may (or may not) facilitate smooth transitions for *all* young people wishing to access higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Seminal work (Tinto, 2012; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Yorke, 2001) has identified the significance of the transition to university for first year students. Studies (Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Gravett & Winstone, 2022; Kahu et al., 2020) have considered the impact of: learner identity, friendships, assessment practices and levels of alignment with university cultural practices, as all impacting upon the likelihood of a successful transition to university life. Typically, socio-economically advantaged students are perceived to benefit from a number of factors which can make this transition easier – favourable past academic performance shaping a stronger learner identity and a greater likelihood of living away from home and therefore more able/willing to make new friends (Bathmaker et al., 2013). In addition to this, they are more likely to have attended post-secondary educational institutions which emphasise helpful types of preparation for university in terms of expectations about assessments and more detailed explanations of how university works, giving these students greater confidence when they start university (Christie et al., 2008).

Those from privileged backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to enter a prestigious university (Boliver, 2013; Worth, Reeves & Friedman, 2023). Seven per cent of young people are privately educated (Millar, 2020), however '60% of those from independent schools in higher education attend a Russell Group university, compared to just under a quarter of those from comprehensives and sixth-form colleges' (Montacute & Cullinane, 2018: p. 3). Lu (2021: p. 472) also highlights the 'differentiated post-18 access of different social groups' to university. Less is known about the transitions into higher education for state educated pupils, complicated by the fragmented nature of state post-secondary education. Jones (2018: p. 919) contends 'In the structural context of stratified schooling systems and widening socio-economic divisions, further research is needed to understand the nature of individual students' transitions to university so that gaps can be closed'. The table below (Table 1) presents data for A Level results by institution using the last available set of pre COVID-19 data in England.

YEAR	INSTITUTION TYPE	NO. OF STUDENTS	% OF A*– C A LEVEL GRADES	% OF TOTAL STUDENTS BY INSTITUTION
2018–2019	FE Sector Colleges	48,692	67.7%	6.7%
2018–2019	Sixth-form Colleges	100,444	75.2%	13.8%
2018–2019	State funded schools	475,757	74.0%	65.4%
2018–2019	Independent schools	102,433	87.2%	14.1%
Total:				727, 326 Students

Table 1 A level grade cumulative percentage distribution for each academic year across all subjects by institution type in England between 2017/18 and 2021/22 (adapted from Gov.uk., 2022).

The data indicates that A Level students are less likely to study for these qualifications in a further education college, however Lewis & Bolton (2022) acknowledge additional funding available for 16–19 provision to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Sixth-form colleges and independent schools combined take just under one-third of A Level students. The data suggests that state-funded school sixth-forms are the most likely option for most students with 65.4% of students taking their A Levels at this type of provision. However, there is significant diversity in types of state schooling, for example comprehensive schools are not academically selective, while Academies can select a small percentage of students based on 'aptitude' and Grammar Schools are academically selective. For state educated pupils attending Grammar Schools, Lu (2021) contends that their early academic attainment and demographic characteristics explains their greater likelihood of both going to a university *and* going to a Russell Group institution in comparison to those experiencing a comprehensive school education.

Furthermore, social class divisions in post-secondary education can largely be explained by differential academic performance at GCSE level (Dilnot, 2016). The entry requirements for A Level study vary by institution and it is likely that higher entry qualifications are requested by selective sixth-forms and independent schools compared with non-selective school sixth-

forms and further education colleges, which may explain in part the socio-economic skew of where students choose to study their A Levels. The variation in different types of post-secondary educational institutions available to young people is as a result of historical changes in educational policies.

EDUCATION POLICIES CREATING FRAGMENTED STATE POST-SECONDARY PROVISION

Sixth-form colleges largely offer A Level qualifications and they emerged as an option for local authorities as part of the 10/65 circular. The 10/65 circular (DES, 1965) encouraged schools to become comprehensive schools as the Labour government sought to replace the socially divisive tripartite system (in reality a bi-partite system as so few technical schools existed). The 11+ exam had resulted in a disproportionate number of middle-class children attending a grammar school because they had passed the exam and a disproportionate number of young people from less privileged backgrounds being 'relegated' to a secondary modern school. The option to take exam qualifications and 'stay on' to study A Level was significantly more likely at a Grammar School. However, a small number of Secondary Modern pupils started to demonstrate that they too could pass exam qualifications given the opportunity challenging the socially divisive system (Williams & Rosen, 2017).

Not all areas of England followed the recommendation of the 10/65 circular with Grammar Schools remaining in some parts of the country. This meant that these selective schools effectively also had selective sixth-forms. For those parts of the country which chose to follow the 10/65 circular, one suggested option was for schools to offer t11–18 provision with the inclusion of a school sixth-form. Another option was to offer provision for young people aged 16–19 years at another institution that they could transfer to upon leaving schooling. These were typically described as 'sixth-form colleges'. The sixth-form colleges were encouraged to carry on the Grammar School culture and were modelled upon these principles: high achievement, pastoral care and preparation for higher education (Shorter, 1994). Further education colleges had traditionally offered vocational programmes for 16–19 year olds, but they expanded into offering A Level provision also. Lumby (2003) notes that further education colleges predominately have students who are destined to be employed upon completion of their course, whereas the major pathway for students from sixth-form colleges is university. Therefore, the fragmented nature of post-secondary educational institutions is likely to offer varying levels of preparedness for young people embarking on higher education.

THE STUDY

This study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on the structural disadvantages experienced by working-class university students (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016), through a focus on the participants' journeys into higher education. The study was based on a life history approach (Perks & Thomson, 2016). The original study had a particular focus on the experiences of working-class women, but compared and contrasted these experiences with middle-class women and working-class men, with this paper analysing interview data related to the sub-research question:

> Sub Research Question 1: What are the social, cultural, educational and economic factors that influence working-class women's decisions and experiences of university?

Of the larger qualitative, exploratory study (Shields, 2021) of 20 participants, this paper specifically considers the experiences of twelve students who started university before the age of 21, and who had undertaken A Level study (omitting other types of Level 3 qualification). The predominant focus on experiences of women in the primary study means that the data analysed largely represents the experiences of young women (eleven of the twelve participants). Participants were recruited through voluntary, purposive sampling (Denscombe, 2017) self-identifying as 'female' and/or 'working-class'. The researcher sent out an initial email to Education BA undergraduates at their own institution. In addition, two 'gatekeeper' academics at two universities also sent out an initial email to their undergraduate students (Education Studies BA and Primary Teaching BA). Those interested in participating were invited to contact the principal researcher.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Mann, 2016) were audio-recorded (lasting between 30 minutes and one hour). Later interviews were conducted online (via Zoom) due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted between the end of May and early July to ensure that students had completed their assignments for the academic year. This timing also had the advantage of enabling participants to reflect over a longer period of time about their experience of the transition to university. The semi-structured interview schedule contained ten questions which did not asked directly about 'transition' but focused on key points in the journey into higher education: prior experiences of education, why they had chosen to go to university, their experiences of university and their future plans. The interview schedule was underpinned by the theories of 'internal conversation' (Archer, 2003) and Bourdieu's (1983) social, cultural and economic capital. Interview transcripts were sent to participants for 'member-checking' (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

The data from the A Level participants was analysed thematically (Gibbs, 2018). Two overarching themes emerged 'smooth transition' and 'complicated transition'. The conceptualisation of a transition as 'smooth' has been used by a number of studies in higher education (e.g., Bayfield, 2023; Richardson et al., 2012) and this is applied inductively to capture a sense of seamlessness in moving from one educational context to another without any obstacles. This is in contrast to an understanding of transition, more typically conceptualised as an 'uncertain series of changes and movements through time and space' to become a university student (Hordósy, 2023: pp. 190–191).

Qualitative data analysis can be queried for 'subjectivity' (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I addressed this concern through asking another researcher with a social science background, but independent of this research study to also 'audit' the transcripts (see Shields, 2021). In addition to this, I shared the initial data analysis with participants via email to ensure that it was an accurate reflection of their experiences and their meaning-making. The study received ethical approval from the researcher's institution via a two-stage process. The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences gave ethical approval on 18th December 2018. The School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences confirmed and agreed ethical approval on the 29th January 2019. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of participants.

PARTICIPANTS

The social class divide in the type of post-secondary education institution participants studied their A Levels was distinctive. Participants were defined as 'middle-class' or 'working-class' for the purposes of the study. Students' definitions of their own social-class background were correlated with the demographic information that they shared about levels of parental education and also parental occupation (mapped onto the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) system) (ONS, 2021). In addition, it was noted if participants were one of the first members of their family to attend higher education. Of the six middle-class participants – three attended a sixth-form attached to the selective state school that they had attended (two of the participants were at a Grammar School sixth-form and one participant was at a state Girls school sixth-form). Two middle-class participants attended a sixth-form college. One middle-class participant attended a newly formed sixth-form using the teachers from her school. The six middle-class participants experienced a smooth transition into higher education (although two middle-class participants changed degree course at the same institution). Table 2 below provides an overview of the research participants.

Of the six working-class participants – four attended a further education college (Lucy, Florence, Lily, Jo). None of the middle-class students attended a further education college. Two working-class participants attended a small school sixth-form. The six working-class participants were all the first person in their family to attend university. Five out of six working-class participants had challenges in being offered a place at university, for example going through Clearing or course cancellation. The one working-class participant with a smooth transition to university had benefitted from individualised guidance and support from one of her sixth-form teachers.

NAME	TYPE OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION INSTITUTION	SOCIAL CLASS	TYPE OF UNIVERSITY ATTENDED	SMOOTH TRANSITION INTO HE?
Chloe	Grammar Sixth*	Middle-class	Post-1992*	Yes
Hattie	Grammar Sixth	Middle-class	Russell Group*	Yes
Nicola	State Girls' Sixth*	Middle-class	Russell Group	Yes
Kerry	School Sixth Form*	Middle-class	Russell Group	Yes (but changed degree programme)
Tabitha	Sixth-Form College*	Middle-class	Russell Group	Yes (but changed degree programme)
Amelia	Sixth-Form College	Middle-class	Russell Group	Yes
Lucy	FE College*	Working-class	Russell Group	No (offered a different programme at Confirmation).
Florence	FE College	Working-class	Russell Group	No (*Clearing)
Lily	FE College	Working-class	'Red Brick'*	No (Clearing)
Jo	FE College	Working-class	Russell Group	No (original HE in FE degree cancelled, Widening Participation Summer School and changed degree course).
Beth	School Sixth Form	Working-class	Russell Group	Yes
Matt	School Sixth	Working-class	Russell Group	No (Clearing)

Table 2 Overview of the research participants.

Notes: **Clearing*** is a process used by UK higher education institutions. Students select a first and second choice university based on *predicted* grades from further education qualifications, such as A Levels. Students are then placed with their first or second choice institution depending on the grades they achieve. *Predicted grades* do not always translate into *achieved grades*. If a student finds that they are not holding a university place at their first or second choice university, they are eligible for Clearing. This involves contacting universities with spare places shortly after receiving their grades, to try and obtain a place on a different course and/ or at a different institution. It is generally perceived to be a very stressful experience for young people as they cope with the disappointment of their grades and with the added time pressure of the most popular courses closing very quickly after reaching their quota of students set by their institution.
Post-1992* a UK higher education institution granted university status in 1992.
Russell Group* a select group of UK universities with a focus on research.

Red Brick* typically a former university college granted university status in the first part of the twentieth century.
Grammar Sixth* educational institution for 16-18 year olds attached to a Grammar School.
State Girls' Sixth* single-sex state educational institution for young women.
Sixth-Form college* focuses on qualifications for entry into higher education.
School sixth-form* focuses on qualifications for entry into higher education, with the majority of their intake generally being pupils who have attended the school up to the age of 16.
FE College* one strand of FE College provision is to offer qualifications for entry to higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The next part of the paper discusses the themes that emerged from the data analysis. For the middle-class participants who experienced a smooth transition into higher education via a selective sixth-form three characteristics were evident: university 'cultural capital', 'directed subject choice combinations' and 'directed university applications'. For the two middle-class participants attending a sixth-form college, two themes emerged: 'lots of subject choice' and 'providing information about universities'. However, for all middle-class participants there was a strong emphasis on the additional 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) that they could access beyond information provided by their educational institutions.

SMOOTH TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

The three middle-class students (Nicola, Chloe, Hattie) who attended a selective sixth-form went to their first choice institution and did not change their degree programmes. All three participants reported a culture of expectation of university entry at their sixth-forms and provided examples of active sixth-form strategies to ensure successful acceptance at university. Three characteristics in particular appeared to facilitate a smooth transition into higher education for these participants: university 'cultural capital', 'directed subject choice combinations' and 'directed university applications'.

University 'cultural capital'

So I was always really aware of how university worked, how you can do well, how you can succeed there. Like you need to do a lot of independent work and even like at sixth-form, they'd reference university all the time. And then what I got to university I realised quite quickly that not everyone had had that support from their parents and the kind of university reinforcement from their sixth-form or college or whatever. I realised quickly that a lot of people had very different backgrounds and so like with money as well, not just school. (Chloe, Post-1992, Grammar sixth-form)

Oh my gosh they barely mentioned anything but university. They'd do assembly after assembly on university. A good handful went to Oxbridge. They mentioned at the end, they'd talk about apprenticeships but the main focus was university. They helped you do your applications. They did- I'm pretty sure they paid- well they had specific lessons in our timetable for doing UCAS and everything. It was really that way inclined. (Hattie, Russell Group, Grammar sixth-form)

But it does really impact what you know already because I already knew from my sixth-form, from my parents they don't like it's not huge favouritism, but like if you meet up with tutors and engage in the seminars, like if you do the extra readings that was just drilled into my mind at sixth form and that was just how you succeed, you can't just do the bare minimum, the tutors do say that now but if you haven't heard it for two years from sixth-form, you might just be learning it, but I already had all of those skills and techniques of how to succeed at university I figured that definitely came down to my social class and background. (Chloe, Post-1992, Grammar sixth-form)

Alongside providing information about how university 'worked' or in Bourdieu's terms 'playing the game' (Bourdieu, 1990; Bathmaker et al., 2013), the selective sixth-forms were keen to ensure that 'facilitating' A Level subjects were studied. This was well-intentioned advice about how to be successfully accepted into university.

Directed subject choice combinations

Selective sixth-forms offered fewer A Level subjects but these were predominately 'facilitating' A Level subjects (those most valued by Russell Group institutions). Analysis by Dilnot (2018) indicated that the A Level subjects offered by different types of post-secondary provision may vary with selective sixth-forms offering fewer subjects, but mostly 'facilitating' A Levels. Sixth-form Colleges are likely to offer a broad range of A Level subjects due to their larger size. Further education colleges may offer less A Level subjects (due to having a large number of vocational courses) and they are less likely to offer subjects where prior attainment at GCSE is a requisite, such as the Sciences.

Yeah because I did two sciences [Biology, Psychology) all the unis said, say it's AAB – they'd drop it to ABB. So that was maybe why school got us to do it... there is a lot of psychology in our course. Like some of the essays I find there's a lot of theory within behaviours and stuff in teaching. I looked at the modules. (Hattie, Russell Group, Grammar sixth-form)

The students who had attended a selective sixth-form were also more likely to study a coherent combination of subjects and this was demonstrated as they discussed how their A Level subjects mapped onto a degree programme:

I did Philosophy and Ethics, Health and Social Care, and Sociology at A-Level. So, I felt like my A-Levels were really suited toward the Education degree, and when I looked at the modules. (Nicola, Russell Group, Girls' state sixth-form)

The students attending the selective sixth-forms appeared to have received the most direction with guidance about appropriate subject choices.

Directed university applications

All three of these participants commented on the intensity of their selective sixth-forms in terms of the focus on applying to university and the sense that there was not any alternative to going to university:

But my school because it is from quite a wealthy area as well, my school was quite heavy on university and they didn't really give much of other things that you could have done. And they pushed it a lot. And I wanted to go anyway so I wanted to go, but I always knew I was always that for people who definitely didn't want to go it must have been quite difficult for them. (Chloe, Post-1992, Grammar sixth-form)

And to be honest at the time I think I felt a bit pressured to go to university from the school because the school was very much like, this is the only route you're supposed to go, is university. They never really talked much about, well you could get a job, or you do an apprenticeship. The majority of people that went to my sixth form did go on to university. But I thought like the school just wanted you to go to university because they wanted that to look good for them. ...But I think, yes, we were all driven towards doing a UCAS application. I think we just all went along with it without much thought. Really, it's the process because when you think everybody's doing the same thing you just think, oh well if everyone's going to university, I have to go to university too. And I know that's sounds really bad, but I think that there wasn't enough options given to people. So, I went to university but I possibly could have went down the job route as well if I'd been given a bit more information about that or approached, say, by if companies had come into the school. Because there wasn't very much of that. (Nicola, Russell Group, Girls' state sixth-form)

This meant for the middle-class participants at selective sixth-forms there was also a keen awareness of being offered information about the prestige of different institutions:

They were obviously like the red brick ones are really good. Because you don't really know when you're that age do you. (Hattie, Russell Group, Grammar sixth-form)

The selective sixth-forms then went further in providing guidance about suitable university applications in some cases:

I think it's because I didn't always get the highest grades, I didn't think I could get into those universities. I think because my school, well my sixth-form prides itself on everyone getting into their top university, they don't really let, they are really careful who they let apply to the Russell Groups. Does that make sense? So, if they don't think you can get into to them they'll steer you towards the 'metropolitans' and the 'polytechnics' and things like that because then you, that is still in their statistics of you getting into your top choices, but then it's not as high (Chloe, Post-1992, Grammar sixth-form).

Like 'the moderate attainers' in Burgess's (2021) study Chloe was also discouraged from making any 'aspirational' applications to elite institutions, such as those categorised as 'Russell Group'. Instead, it was strongly recommended that she should apply to 'new' universities. Therefore, Chloe's Grammar sixth-form framed applying to university as having a personalised 'top choice' institution. There appeared to be less denigration of Post-1992 institutions by teachers compared to those in the study by Burgess (2021) with the use of positively framed terminology, such as 'Metropolitan'. However, the Grammar sixth-form teachers appeared to not have the same knowledge of less competitive Russell Group universities and established non-Russell Group universities compared to some teachers in the Burgess (2021) study. Ultimately, this meant that Chloe found herself studying at an institution where she felt that the academic expectations of students were much lower than that of her friends who were studying at an established non-Russell Group university. The ethos of the selective sixth-forms appeared to be the development of a culture which focused on tightly framed choices and information drawing upon 'knowing what was best' for A Level students in terms of entry to university and being able to 'play the game' when they started university. However, in the case of Chloe, this appeared to be a choice that was 'best' for the Grammar Sixth-form, as her application to an institution with a lower entry tariff (grades) had mitigated the risk of finding herself in Clearing.

Lots of subject choice

The sixth-form colleges appeared to reflect a different approach to ensure a smooth transition into higher education, focusing on a culture of choice and autonomy with two themes emerging: 'Lots of subject choice' and 'Information about university'. Two middle-class students attended a sixth-form college (Tabitha, Amelia). The participants reported a high degree of choice over A Level subjects and a strong focus on providing information to support independent decision making. Furthermore, sixth-form colleges due to their larger size are likely to offer a broader range of subjects, some of which may not be 'facilitating' (Dilnot, 2018).

I never really felt like I knew what I was doing. So, I think it was just, oh I'll pick it because I kind of like it or I'm kind of interested. I went to quite a big sixth form, it was 3,000 people so it means that there are, yes, it's big... Well, that's how our college actually marketed itself, specifically. It was like, we're a college with a university feel. That was how it was marketed to everybody I think because it's huge... And so it meant there were a fair few courses on offer there, which is a good thing. But I just...I don't know, I think it was more me blindly choosing as opposed to. But then I suppose if I'd really, really thought about it it's like I didn't have any idea what I wanted to even do at uni then so, it was tricky. (Tabitha, Russell Group, sixth-form college)

They just did A-Levels, so I did English Literature, Biology, and History, because I figured very generic, opening doors kind of ones. (Amelia, Russell Group, sixth-form college)

The sixth-form colleges appeared to focus on university through the provision of information or experiences to allow students to make independent choices. The sixth-form colleges had the advantage of being large and therefore could offer a lot of choice and flexibility as to what subjects could be studied. However, this choice was not 'guided' which could potentially mean that for students who were unclear about what they wished to study at university, they may find that their choices were not cognisant with the subject entry requirements for specific degree programmes.

Providing information about universities

The sixth-form colleges provided information about different universities.

And they were really good at advertising when open days and stuff for uni were. And we used to have this fair at the beginning of the year where all the unis would come, and they'd have different stands and you could chit chat to them which I thought was quite helpful in terms of the options that were available. (Amelia, Russell Group, sixth-form college)

The sixth-form colleges modelled themselves as preparation for higher education through a focus on autonomy and independence. For middle-class students it appeared that although information provided about university was useful and generally appreciated, it was not essential as it was possible to draw upon the knowledge of family and friends.

HOT KNOWLEDGE

The advantages that middle-class students had in terms of 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) at both the selective sixth-forms and sixth-form colleges may have mitigated for any incidences when the advice provided was less helpful with all six middle-class participants referring to some form of 'insider' information.

I've also been lucky in the sense that both of my parents went to university, so they had a lot of guidance and wisdom to offer and having experience of the student life. I think that's made a big difference. (Amelia, Russell Group, sixth-form college)

My grandma went to university and she's a doctor... So, she's 84 now so she was one of the first. She went to the University of *[Name] and was a full-on doctor. She was a surgeon. She tells me about her university experience, and it was so intense, everything she did...And my dad did Sociology ... and my mum...did Environmental Health. (Hattie, Russell Group, Grammar sixth-form)

And my Dad went to *[Name of] University and my Mum went to *[name of] University. (Chloe, Post-1992, Grammar sixth-form).

This informal information or 'hot knowledge' came from families' which had prior experiences of higher education. For students with access to this 'hot knowledge', they were less critical of the 'cold' formal knowledge provided by post-secondary institutions as they did not need to rely on this information when applying to university. Smith (2011) discusses the benefit of 'hot knowledge' for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in terms of higher

education aspirations. The advantages of having this 'hot knowledge' to draw upon becomes significant when the more complex and difficult journeys into higher education of the working-class participants are analysed.

COMPLICATED TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

Timetable blocking

A key factor in having a difficult journey into higher education for some A Level students appeared to be not studying subjects that they were likely to excel in. Kerry as the only middle-class participant in this study who had studied at a small school sixth-form, experienced the same limitations in the A Level subjects on offer as the two-working-class school sixth-form attendees Matt and Beth. For all three participants, issues with blocked timetabling resulted in a lack of options in relation to subject and/or preferred A Level teacher. Abrahams (2018) argues that school sixth-forms may not offer as wide a range of subjects as indicated/advertised due to timetabling constraints.

> And my teacher basically, they were trying to work out all the timetables like it wasn't planned (interviewer laughs). I remember going to my Maths teacher and saying you're not in my timetable, so she said there's no way I can physically take you *Kerry unless you do Further Maths. Because of the way it's laid out you would need to be doing Further Maths for me to be your teacher…I was like well I'll take Further Maths even though I wasn't interested in the level of Further Maths. So, I took it, ended up dropping French because it was like my weakest. And compared to RE which was probably easier just to get on with. So, I ended up doing Maths, Further Maths, RE. And all the boys…they were like why are you doing Maths and RE? It just didn't really fit (participant laughs). (Kerry, Russell Group, school sixth-form)

> There was me and around ten students and we all studied the same subjects even through A-Level we were all in the same classes. (Beth, Russell Group, school sixth-form)

> Got onto to my History A Level, but then my plans to do Law and Politics were curtailed because there wasn't enough students…So I ended up with History, Biology and Psychology…and the other rag tag subject to fit the timetable was Maths so initially I was sort of immediately disenfranchised with the whole process. (Matt, Russell Group, school sixth-form)

This ultimately led to Matt going through Clearing due to not studying A Level subjects he excelled in. Kerry also realised that she would not gain a place at her first-choice university and doubted her university subject choice.

Navigating university entry without institutional support

The quotes from the working-class students did not suggest that the school sixth-forms or further education colleges had provided robust mechanisms to support students who had not gained access to a university place smoothly. Clearing appeared to be an experience which was not unusual for working-class participants. Three out of the six working-class participants came through Clearing.

> So I was in Clearing which was sort of like the big giant killing the sixth form, it was the talk of the sixth form in that *Matt who gets all As and all the rest of it is then scuppered and on the phone to Clearing. (Matt, Russell Group, school sixth form)

> Yeah I applied first, this was one of my options. And then when it came to deciding I put *[Post-1992] University down and *[Plate-Glass] University I think. And then I didn't get in to either of them so I got here through Clearing. (Florence, Russell Group, further education college)

> Yeah. I was accepted like 3 days before [the start of course] I got in. There was a problem with my reference, and I was still doing my QTS skills tests as well. I was like really on edge. (Lily, 'Red Brick', further education college)

A Level grades for those studying at state schools and further education colleges may achieve lower grades than those who have studied at a Sixth-Form College or Independent School (gov. uk., 2022). Therefore, it is not clear from these narratives about gaining a university place, what type of 'protective' mechanisms school sixth-forms and further education colleges did/could put in place to enable students to enter their preferred institution and/or reduce the possibility of A Level students experiencing the stress of Clearing.

'Choosing' local institutions

The working-class participants' challenges of gaining access to a university were further compounded by their desire/need to attend a local institution.

> *The woman actually did Transition at the school in the college…she said to me you do know that you could apply to the University of London with these grades and I said 'no, I'm not interested', but she said 'but why aren't you interested because this is like the top cohort of universities – why don't you want to go?' and I said 'I'm sorry, but how I'm going to afford to live in London?' I said, 'It's not appealing to me because if I move that far away from home I have to try and live in the most expensive city in this country – how I'm going to afford to do that?' And I think she was quite baffled by that, I think she was just quite pushy and they wanted you to at least try and get that into that university, but I was like I wasn't interested in anything down South because I knew it was expensive.* (Lucy, Russell Group, further education college)

One participant had their original degree which was offered by a local further education college cancelled and the student's wish to 'stay local' again resulted in a constrained set of choices.

> *And I found out that they actually did a degree in the same sort of area, and I received an offer from the college…But they had made me an offer for the degree. They hadn't actually told me that it changed because [the university]…they had pulled the validation…It can't be anything other than Foundation [degree]. I didn't want to do that… well my mum rang around like… and asked if I would be eligible… I applied for English language at [*North-East Post-1992 University and *North-East Russell Group University]… because that was my favourite academic subject I was doing in my A levels…but going to start the actual course after a week I realized, it was incredibly different to like while I was studying at A level… I looked into the Education course, one of the girls from my school was on it.* (Jo, Russell Group, further education college)

These narratives indicate that for many working-class students, they have limited their options to institutions in the locality, often to enable the possibility of being a 'commuter' student and thereby reducing the financial implications of being a university student. However, this constrained set of choices shown in these narratives that the 'best' option is in relation to a set of criteria related to locality, rather than a specific focus on a preferred subject or institutional characteristics beyond geographical proximity. The narrative of Lucy indicates an experience of guidance which was not deemed relevant or helpful to the individual student. In the case of Jo, there is an absence of any narrative about support from the further education college she is studying at, particularly as this is the institution which cancels the full degree course she had applied for. Instead, it is the local knowledge of institutions of Jo's Mother that is utilised to gain a place at university in the area where she lives. However, in contrast to these narratives of complexity and challenge in gaining access to higher education, one working-class student received tailored support on her university application from her school sixth-form.

ETHICAL TEACHER HABITUS

One working-class student benefitted from a personalised approach to gaining a place at a suitable university. Beth came from a very small sixth-form and it appeared that teachers at that school on an individual level were keen to support their students in successfully accessing higher education. There were examples of teachers operating with an 'ethical' teacher habitus. 'Teacher habitus' refers to teachers' dispositions in relation to their prior experiences, as well as their moral and political beliefs. Teacher habitus will influence how they engage with students (Oliver & Kettley, 2010). An 'ethical' teacher habitus can be likened to the ideas of Noddings

on an 'ethics of care', suggesting 'teachers who act in what they suppose to be the best interests of their students…may be said to care' (2016: 231). Burgess (2021: 370) 'points to the transformative potential of teachers for any group of HE applicants marginalised by policy discourses and formal school practices.'

> *My school wasn't particularly academic. Apart from me and my friends I don't really know anyone who was interested even as far as the teachers. I feel like I had a few teachers who I had extremely good relationships with… So he was like, look I've got a couple of people who I know go to *Russell Group University, I'm just going to try, ask them to invite you over and just for one day. He's like, give me one day and see if you like it.* (Beth, Russell Group, school sixth-form)

For sixth-form students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, a teacher choosing to play this role, is noteworthy in providing information about university to a group of students with less familial expertise of higher education. The significance of teachers with an 'ethical habitus' is stated by (Oliver & Kettley, 2010: 750):

> 'Yet the variation in the degree to which teachers engage in these processes can be understood through close attention to teachers' own convictions about whether these are important and worthwhile processes in which to invest'.

This small-scale study indicates that within the sample of twelve working-class students they were more likely to study in a post-secondary educational setting, where there are fewer transition safeguards and/or buffers to facilitate a smooth entry into higher education. Therefore, teachers adopting an ethical teacher habitus play a substantial role in offering meaningful and tailored guidance for a successful and positive transition into higher education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study indicates that stratified post-secondary educational provisional in conjunction with socio-economic differences are likely to shape an individual students transition to university. In particular, it appeared that factors such as timetable blocking and limited guidance about university applications resulted in experiences such as Clearing. This was confounded by working-class participants' university 'choices' focusing on universities in the locality only. The one example of a working-class student, Beth, who experienced the guidance and advice of a sixth-form teacher, resulted in a smooth transition into higher education akin to those of the middle-class students. For middle-class students, there appeared to be either tightly framed choices around A Level subjects or extensive choice. Furthermore, applying to university was a cultural expectation of their post-secondary education institutions and this was reinforced by the 'hot' knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) of their families, alongside their greater flexibility in applying to universities in a range of locations. These factors supported successful entry into higher education for these middle-class participants. The contrasting experiences shaped by type of institution and socio-economic background suggests that further consideration should be given to how an ethical teacher habitus can play a significant role in individual experiences and could potentially counteract some of the ways in which school structures and culture can disadvantage working-class students aspiring to higher education. Of course, as a small-scale study it is difficult to generalise a set of findings across four different types of post-secondary education institution and as such these findings should be interpreted with significant caution. However, the ways in which an ethical teacher habitus can reduce the likelihood of a challenging a complicated entry into higher education for working-class students should be the focus of future research studies.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENTS

Data has not been made accessible for this publication due to times the sensitive nature of the conversations and concerns for the anonymity of the participants. Participants were not asked to give their consent for their interview transcripts to be placed within a research repository.

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