The Transition from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education: A successful pathway?

Paper summarising some results of the symposium with the same name at the SRHE Conference, Brighton, 11-13 December 2007

Keywords: Widening participation, higher education, vocational education and training, access to higher education, mixed methods approach, educational pathways

1. Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a preliminary investigation into the intersection of two areas of UK education and training policy: access to Higher Education (HE) and expansion of vocational learning opportunities for 16-19 year olds. Watson (2007, p.93) argued that the far-reaching discourse about HE access ‘[…] is the most troublesome item in talk about HE’ because the research base in this area is fragmented to a degree that almost any conclusion can be drawn from it. Linked to this debate about HE participation, Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy has as one of its aims increasing access to Higher Education via this route, but there is little research that speaks to either the effectiveness or the efficiency of this policy. In particular, little attempt has been made to examine the redistributive claims made about accessing HE by young people through this route. For an individual achieving access to HE can clearly be an important good. However, from a system and policy perspective the redistributive potential of such access lies not just in participating in HE but also about where and how an individual participates: which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are accessed and which subject areas?

The present paper reports on some of the findings from the project Degrees of Success: The transition between VET and HE and combines findings from a symposium at the SRHE conference 2007 in Brighton. The project combines the analysis of large scale administrative data sets, questionnaires and interviews on the impact of an under-researched widening access policy: facilitating direct entry to Higher Education from the 16-19 Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathway.1 The work of the project reported in this project goes beyond the conventional notion of widening participation by considering institutional and subject choices of students accessing HE through different pathways. The findings are

1 See http://www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees/index.html for more information about the overall project. The research questions of the project are developed in more detail in Dunbar-Goddet & Ertl (2007a).

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For a fuller account of the topic see Hoelscher, Hayward, Ertl and Dunbar-Goddet (forthcoming in 2008).
contextualised within the policy background of the discourse on widening participation and access to HE.

Policy context

Analytically it is possible to distinguish three strands of policy concerned with access to Higher Education: increased access, widened access and fair access. Increased access means a sheer increase in the number of students, whether in absolute terms or as a percentage of the age group. However, substantial research has demonstrated that increased access does not automatically result in a more even distribution of participation across society (Connor, 2001, p.205; Schuetze, 2002, p.314; Mayhew et al., 2004); rather, middle-class students seemed to have benefited most from the increase in student numbers during the 1990s (Blanden & Machin, 2004, p.247). Widening access policy focuses on increasing access of students from formerly under-represented backgrounds into the HE sector overall. However, access to HE can still be biased due to choice of institutions and subjects. This has an impact on the redistributive force of this strand of policy especially in an increasingly stratified HE system (Reay et al., 2005), as fair access policies are necessary. ‘Fair access means increasing opportunities for people from under-represented groups to attend higher education institutions and courses which offer the highest financial returns’ (DfES, 2006, p.3). A general conclusion from previous research about the success of widening participation initiatives is mixed. At an aggregate level there have certainly been increases in participation by some formerly under-represented groups, such as women and certain minority ethnic groups. However, the long-term difference in participation between socio-economic groups remains stubbornly resistant to change. Thus in 2004/05 participation for the top three socio-economic classes stood at 43% compared to 19.1% for the bottom four socio-economic groups.²

Certainly, educational participation beyond the compulsory school age has increased in the UK constantly since 1945, with a massive increase in participation in full-time provision between 1985 and 1994 (Hayward, 2006; Hayward et al., 2004, 2005, 2006). This increase can partly be attributed to the increased availability of vocationally-oriented qualifications aimed at 16-year olds. Subsequently, the Curriculum 2000 initiative increased the flexibility that was given to students to combine different types of qualification. Furthermore, within current UK policy, a key lever for raising the perceived value of vocational qualifications (VQs) is to ensure that they provide a means for progressing into, and a solid basis for study in, HE; a strategy that has been very influential in the conception and development of the new Advanced Diploma qualifications which will be introduced from 2008 onwards. Typically educational policy strategies operating at the intersection of VET and HE are framed in terms of the acceptability of VQs to HE, with the social perception of VQs by young people and their families being based, in part, on the signals that emanate from the HE sector (Pugsley, 2004).

² Based on the use of the Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class (FYPSEC) figures. Changes in the way participation has been measured makes longer term comparisons problematic (see Kelly and Cook, 2007 for a fuller discussion).
UK and international research has, however, indicated that the connections made in policy discourse, between expanding post-compulsory participation via an increased vocational offer and participation in HE, are not necessarily realised in practice. In the UK investigations into the educational value of some vocationally-oriented qualifications, in terms of their currency for further progression, have concluded that they *de facto* only offer a ‘mirage of wider opportunities’ (Pugsley, 2004, p.28). Instead, each wave of new vocationally-oriented qualifications has contributed to the overall tendency toward educational credentialism. In terms of access to HE, despite the overall expansion of the sector, the incremental growth in student numbers remained greatest for those in the middle-class holding traditional GCE A-level qualifications (Ball, 2003; cf. also Sutton Trust, 2005).

It seems timely to investigate whether growing participation in VET has resulted in increasing participation of people with a vocational background in HE in the UK. Furthermore, given that the VET pathway is often construed as an alternative chance for those deemed ‘unsuitable’ for progression in the academic pathway, there is a need to assess how good an alternative it is, in terms of where, what and why graduates of the VET system study in HE.

2. Introduction to the data sources

Using large-scale administrative datasets, the distribution across institutions and subjects of students coming to HE, via different educational pathways, is explored. This analysis is supplemented by in-depth work at five HEIs conducted during the *Degrees of Success* project. The macro-level perspective of influences of student distribution across the HE sector is thus combined with a student-level perspective on questions regarding institutional and subject choice.³

*Large-scale datasets*

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) undergraduate dataset for 2003/04, matched with corresponding UCAS applications dataset, was used for the quantitative analysis. Only English, full-time, first year students, under 21 that were successfully matched with the UCAS data are analysed.⁴ There are two reasons for this: the first, more pragmatic, reason is that only this group had all the necessary variables available. The more substantial reason is that selecting this group of students enabled the analysis to work with a more homogeneous population, thus allowing better comparability of students from different backgrounds.

The HESA data contains different variables through which five different types of prior educational pathways could be defined:

- Academic (GCE, Highers⁵, International Baccalaureate, HE qualifications only)

³ For the more general topic of access from different pathways overall see Connor *et al.* (2006); Hoelscher & Wilde (2007); Vickers & Bekhradnia (2007).

⁴ For details of the filtering process see ‘Additional Material’ on http://www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees/index.html.

⁵ Although the analysis was limited to English students, some of them held Scottish qualifications.
- Vocational (VCE, ONC, OND (including BTEC and SCOTVEC equivalents) GNVQ, GSVQ, NVQ, SVQ etc. only)
- Academic and vocational (combinations of both, as far as they could be identified)
- Foundation and Access courses (FaA; both at HE and FE level)
- Not Level 3/not known (all other qualifications below level 3)

Case study data

Degrees of Success conducted two questionnaire surveys with the entire intake of students in three subject areas (business studies, nursing and computing) at five HEIs for the 2006-07 academic year. The first instrument, the Transition to HE questionnaire, asked students about their transition into Higher Education. The second questionnaire looked at the ways in which students described, at the end of their first year, their experience during their first year of studies. Interviews with 40 students, 29 lecturers and 12 admissions staff were also carried out at the five HEIs in order to gain insights into the students’ experiences in different HE settings and subjects, linked with the students’ educational backgrounds.

For the purpose of this paper, a sample of questions that formed part of the Transition to HE questionnaire will be discussed; these questions concern students’ rationales regarding choice of subject and choice of institution. Some excerpts from interviews with students will also be used to further illuminate these rationales from a student-level perspective.

The Transition to HE questionnaire resulted in a total of 1105 responses (359 business, 369 computing and 377 nursing), representing a response rate of just below 74%. The analysis of the sample of students covered by the questionnaire according to their educational pathways showed that the largest group of students started their studies with A-levels or Scottish Highers (41.6%), whereas about one in eight students followed an entirely vocational pathway to HE.

3. The distribution of students over institutions and subjects

Students applying for a place in HE have to make at least two choices: which subject to study and at which institution. Both decisions are influenced by a range of different objective and subjective factors, for example their personal interests, domicile, social or ethnic background, social capital, and so on (Ball, 2003; Connor, 2001; Connor et al., 2004; Furlong, 2005; Reay et al., 2002); prior attainment certainly plays a crucial role. This paper explores the influence of one specific aspect of prior attainment, namely educational background. The focus lies especially on those accessing HE with a VET background.

6 For a detailed discussion of the rationale, design and administration of these questionnaires, including the selection of institutions and subjects, see Dunbar-Goddet & Ertl (2007b).
Given the diversified nature of HE in the UK it is essential to analyse the access patterns of different groups of students regarding choice of institution (Urwin & Di Pietro, 2005). The other aspect of choice for those applying for a place in HE considered in this paper is subject choice. On the one hand, choice of subject is influenced by different factors, i.e. gender (Universities UK & SCoP, 2005, p.5) and on the other hand, the subject chosen influences future life-chances: this decision has an important impact on earnings, and on the chances of being employed (Universities UK & PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007, p.5) and, as demonstrated in the student-level analysis, on accessing a particular career. The following sections therefore analyse the distribution of students from different educational pathways across institutions and subjects.

### 3.1 Institutional choices

There are different classifications of HEIs. First, the distribution across the broader categories of pre- and post-92 universities was examined, and a third category ‘other HEI’ was introduced, comprising mostly different kinds of colleges.\(^7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Academic &amp; vocational</th>
<th>Vocational</th>
<th>Foundation &amp; Access</th>
<th>Below level 3/ not known</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>post-92 Universities</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre-92 Universities</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other HEI</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
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In the sample used for this paper, almost similar shares of students studied at pre-92 (48.3%) and post-92 institutions (46.4%). The number of students at other HEIs was quite low (5.3%). However, students from different educational backgrounds were highly unequally-distributed over the different types of institutions. Most of those with a purely academic background were found at pre-92 institutions (around 58%), while the figures were much lower for all the other groups, i.e. for students with a VET background the figure was only 13.5% but, conversely, no other group (besides those with unknown/not level 3 qualifications) had as high a proportion going to post-92 universities.

Another way of looking at the institutions was to take into account their RAE-results.\(^8\) On average, students with an academic prior qualification entered those institutions with much higher RAE-results compared to all other groups. On the other hand, those entering with a VET background only, went to those universities with, on average, the lowest RAE results.\(^9\)

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\(^{7}\) A full list of institutions and their classification can be found on our website: http://www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees/download.html

\(^{8}\) There was, however, a strong relationship between the above mentioned types of institutions and their RAE-results.

\(^{9}\) All differences are highly significant on the 1% level with the exception of RAE (FaA/not level 3).
In summary, A-level qualifications remain the major route into the more prestigious HE institutions. Whether one uses a more traditional measure of quality, such as the distinction between pre- and post-92 universities, or RAE-results, students with a VET background are seen to be disadvantaged: taking up their studies, on average, at post-92 universities with low RAE-results.

From a systemic point of view, the emphasis of the analysis was on the distribution of students across institutions that are different in terms of their research achievement and reputation (operationalised for instance by RAE results). A partial explanation for this is that learners from VET backgrounds are tracked institutionally into less prestigious HEIs. If students were acting as rational utility maximising agents, then one would expect them to apply to the most prestigious HEIs that they could. An alternative would be that individuals act on the basis of bounded rationality, thereby tracking themselves into less prestigious institutions, through a process of individual and singular choice, in answering the question ‘which is the best HEI for me’. Consequently, the Transition to HE questionnaire aimed to shed light on the motives of institutional choice. The interviews with students then aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the complex and highly individualised process of institutional choice in which different types of students engage.

Across the sample of English institutions (a post- and a pre-92 university and a FE College) the most common reason given for choosing an institution was its location. When asked ‘Please tell us why you chose to study at this university’ around one third of students\(^\text{10}\) mentioned the location as the single reason for their choice. This was

\(^{10}\) For this and the following calculations the data used is that for the three English HEIs in the sample only. The three institutions include one pre- and one post-92 university and one FE College.
valid across all educational pathways. In most cases, good location was defined as being close to home and in some cases the financial implication of being able to live at home was explicitly mentioned. However, there were a number of other factors which defined a good location in the view of the students, including proximity to a big city, being close to family, and good travel connections.

The second most important factor of institutional choice was related to the perceived quality of the institution or the course chosen, around a quarter of students gave this as their single reason. The indicators for quality (where mentioned) varied greatly and ranged from reputation of the institution or the course and the availability of state-of-the-art facilities to the perceived high quality of staff and their teaching. Interestingly, only three students mentioned university rankings and not a single student in the sample mentioned the RAE. Indeed the quality of research did not seem to play any role in institutional choice, in contrast, teaching quality, competence of teaching staff and student satisfaction were more frequently mentioned.

Answers that gave two or more types of reasons for the choice of an institution were very common. By far the most common combination of reasons was that of location and perceived quality (just under one fifth of answers). Considering all multiple-reason answers that included location as a factor, and adding these answers to the third of students which mentioned location as the only reason for their choice, it appeared that, for just under 60 percent of students in the sample, the location of the HEI played an important role; a finding that is certainly in line with previous research in this area (Heublein, 2001; Lischka, 2003).

While the identification of single or combined reasons for institutional choice seems a reasonable way to gain an overview of the questionnaire responses, many of the interviews showed how complex decision-making processes in this context are, and how single reasons for choices become amalgamated in real life situations. A quote from a first year business student at a post-92 university illustrates how personal, academic and other factors come together:

I mean my selection process, like how I chose this university, I just kind of like looked on UCAS and found all the places that did business studies and then sort of whittled the list down by like oh I don’t like that area or you know this place isn’t too good or the grades are too high or too low or something then sort of came up with this place mm I mean it got rated excellent for business, so the teaching quality is really good, which is probably one of the main factors for me choosing it, I wasn’t too bothered about how far away, I didn’t, you know, have to be away, it’s not like I hate my parents or anything.

Looking at the three institutions in the sample separately, it became clear that subtle differences in choice patterns could be identified. For instance, the importance of location (either as a single reason or in combination with other reasons) was substantially higher at the FE College (over 80 percent of students) than at the two Universities. One reason for this was that a number of students at this College indicated that they had studied there before they decided to start an HE programme: ‘I have studied here for four years so I know the lecturers. It enables me to live at home with my family while I am studying’ (0262).
In contrast, reasons for choice related to quality of the institution or the course played a minor role for the students at the FE College. The same share of students (around 50 percent) at both the pre- and post-92 universities mentioned factors related to perceived quality either as their only reason for choosing the institution or in combination with other reasons. This finding seems surprising and might indicate that the perception of quality is a relative concept and is – in the students’ perspective – not necessarily bound to ‘objective’ quality indicators. In particular, there seemed to be a process of ‘self-limitation’ at work, which led students to exclude many institutions that are located beyond perceived boundaries of physical, academic or social space. This exclusion seemed to take place early on in students’ decision-making processes.

Boundaries of physical space were indicated by the emphasis on proximity to home, as discussed earlier. Academic restrictions were exercised by the grade requirements set by institutions which affected choice patterns. In the sample, some students at the post-92 university were the only ones to indicate that they were only offered a place at their current institution (‘I found it difficult being accepted into other institutions as I did not get high A-Level grades’ 0957, ‘It was the best Uni. I could get into when I applied’ 0221). This group of students represented a sizable minority at the post-92 university, accounting for around eight percent of students. Social reasons for choosing a particular HEI were expressed regularly in the questionnaires, i.e. linking ones own decision to that of friends: ‘I also feel I can complete my course with friends in the same class however moving away would have meeting strangers’ (0261).

In summary, the data from the case studies indicated that there are clear limits for explaining institutional choices through rational choice models, which are inter alia based on the assumption of the availability and use of full information. Restrictive information strategies and other factors affecting individual choices need to be considered.

3.2 Which subjects are studied?

In a systemic perspective, different educational pathways not only lead to different kinds of institutions, but also to different subjects. This clearly makes sense, as some subjects are more vocationally-oriented or degrees in certain subjects are a necessary precondition for working in a specific field (such as nursing). However, there are substantial differences between the rates of return for different subjects (Blundell et al., 2000). Therefore, the notion of fair access in HE, for those with non-traditional backgrounds, must also take into account their distribution across different subjects. Opening up access for VET students only to certain subject groups might even be regarded as a continuation of the academic/vocational divide.

It is also interesting to explore in which subjects the different pathways are over/under-represented. This can be expressed by so-called odd-ratios, calculated in Table 2 by comparing the likelihood of someone with a non-traditional qualification, with that of someone with an academic qualification, of being in a specific subject.
Figures below 1 show a comparatively lower likelihood of being in that subject, figures over 1 show an increased chance.\textsuperscript{11}

The most extreme differences were found for ‘Medicine/Dentistry’ and ‘Veterinary Science’. The likelihood of someone with a VET background entering these subjects was more than 25 times lower (0.04:1 = 1:25) than that for a student with traditional academic qualifications. For ‘Physical Sciences’, ‘Mathematical Sciences’, ‘Law’, ‘Languages’ and ‘Historical and Philosophical Studies’ also, the chances were below a third of those for a traditional student.

| Table 2. ODD-Ratios for non-traditional educational pathways in different subjects in comparison to traditional academic qualifications (HESA 2003/04). |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Academic & vocational          | Vocational      | Foundation & Access | Below level 3/not known |
| Medicine & dentistry           | 0.44            | 0.04            | 0.09            | 0.26            |
| Subjects allied to medicine    | 1.09            | 0.80            | 0.36            | 1.06            |
| Biological sciences            | 0.88            | 0.72            | 0.32            | 0.80            |
| Veterinary science             | 0.70            | 0.03            | -               | 0.09            |
| Agriculture & related subjects | 1.05            | 3.69            | 0.77            | 2.42            |
| Physical sciences              | 0.65            | 0.27            | 0.23            | 0.42            |
| Mathematical sciences          | 0.69            | 0.20            | 0.12            | 0.32            |
| Computer science               | 2.30            | 3.83            | 0.88            | 2.48            |
| Engineering & technology       | 0.87            | 1.45            | 0.91            | 1.59            |
| Architecture, building & planning | 0.89       | 1.11            | 0.45            | 1.15            |
| Social studies                 | 0.75            | 0.47            | 0.34            | 0.67            |
| Law                            | 0.83            | 0.33            | 0.27            | 0.50            |
| Business & administrative studies | 2.03        | 1.76            | 0.86            | 1.53            |
| Mass communications & documentation | 1.02      | 1.11            | 0.52            | 1.36            |
| Languages                      | 0.53            | 0.16            | 0.19            | 0.29            |
| Historical & philosophical studies | 0.46       | 0.17            | 0.26            | 0.26            |
| Creative arts & design         | 1.01            | 2.40            | 7.90            | 1.83            |
| Education                      | 1.64            | 1.46            | 0.24            | 2.31            |
| Combined                       | 1.10            | 1.67            | 0.08            | 2.23            |

On the other hand, VET students were over-represented in ‘Engineering and Technology’, ‘Business and Administrative Studies’, ‘Education’ and ‘Combined Studies’ by around the factor 1.5, in ‘Creative Arts and Design’ by the factor 2.4 and were nearly four times as likely to go into ‘Agriculture and related subjects’ and ‘Computer Science’. Foundation and Access course students were under-represented in all but one subject (‘Creative Arts and Design’). Looking at the kinds of subjects in which VET students were over-represented, these findings support a ‘matching’-hypothesis that those with vocational qualifications are more attracted to more applied subjects.

Research is unambiguous about the fact that there are different rates of return for different subjects (Universities UK & PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007, p.5).\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} The Academic pathway as the reference group is not shown (all figures would be 1).

\textsuperscript{12} However, the absolute estimates for the returns differ as well as the ‘ranking’ of the subjects, depending on the data source or methods used (Blundell et al.)
However, there was no visibly clear pattern to the distribution across more or less favourable subjects for students with different prior qualifications. The strong affinity to more applied subjects seemed not to result in a directly observable, unfavourable choice of subject for those from vocational backgrounds. However, as the subject groups are defined very broadly, an additional more finely-grained analysis on the differences within these groups in terms of a) earnings and b) matching of prior qualification and subject would be interesting. Furthermore, there is a need to explore the interaction, between subject choice and the HEI where that subject is studied, on wage premia. This has not been done to date in the UK. However, given the lower wage premia associated with attending a post-92 institution, compared to a pre-92 one, (Purcell et al., 2005) the likelihood is that these returns do vary within subjects studied across HEIs.

From a student-level perspective, the systemic question of distribution of students across subjects can be regarded as an aggregate of individual decision-making processes and motivational factors. In the Transition to HE questionnaire, nine items investigated the underlying motivations for studying a subject. Students were asked to express their degree of agreement with a given statement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (‘very strongly’) to 5 (‘not at all’). The items represented an adapted version of those used by the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses project, in their Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire (Hounsell et al., 2005).

An exploratory factor analysis of the data generated by the nine items, produced two important factors for students’ subject choice which can be thought of in terms of capturing intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for starting the subject in question. The analysis of the data with these two factors showed a high extrinsic motivation of students across the three subjects. For instance, the mean score of students for the item underlying the factor (‘I want to develop knowledge and skills I can use in a career’) produced mean scores of between 1.31 (business) and 1.16 (nursing), showing only minor differences between the subjects. This speaks to a high level of instrumentality amongst all students in their decision-making. In addition, such instrumentality may reflect, for example, the fact that a nursing degree is increasingly becoming a necessity to access more senior posts in the profession.

However, it can also be seen that decision-making patterns for subject choice are highly individualised; the high standard deviations of the scores for all the questionnaire items in this area are a clear indication of this. Overall, subject choice is closely bound to career prospects; a finding that seems to be valid to a similar degree for students studying at different universities, in different subjects and with different educational backgrounds (Dunbar-Goddet & Ertl, 2007b). Significant differences according to subjects were found, however, in patterns of intrinsic motivation: in the sample, the decision-making processes of students in computing and business seemed to be less strongly driven by intrinsic motives than that of nursing students.

Moreover, it is important to note that, when talking about students’ life chances, the decision that precedes the choice of an institution or a subject, is the one of whether to
go for HE study at all, which adds to the complexity of the situation young people are facing when applying to HE. This quote from a computing student at a post-92 university illustrates this point:

I mean it was a tough choice to make, I mean thinking about whether or not I want to come here, be kind of out of work, not really have much money, or just go in to work, but it kind of made me think that at the end of the day if I get this degree I should get a job with a lot more money.

Therefore, the student-level investigation of decision-making processes needs to go beyond the dimensions of institution and subject choice to develop an understanding of the complex interplay between motivations and personal and social factors; an approach followed in the interviews with students with different educational backgrounds in the Degrees of Success project (see Dunbar-Goddet & Ertl, 2007b).

4. Conclusions

One explicit goal of the current widening participation agenda is to open up pathways for students from VET backgrounds into HE. This is connected with three different aims: First, an economic and national goal to increase overall participation in HE. Different international actors (OECD, European Union) have argued that a highly educated workforce is needed to be successful in the competitive global economy (Commission, 2005; Keeley, 2007). It seems that many countries follow this perception (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), and the UK Government is certainly arguing in this direction.

Second, to widen participation in order to increase the share of until now under-represented groups of society in HE. Third, a notion of fair access whereby a more even distribution of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is achieved. The second and third aims are deeply rooted in the notion of social justice, though rearticulated in New Labour social policy as a concern with individual empowerment, in order to compete successfully in a flexible and competitive labour market characteristic of a weakly regulated, liberal market economy (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Widening participation and ensuring fair access can then be construed primarily as policy mechanisms to achieve redistribution. The individual is conceptualised as an economic actor who is enabled by participation in HE to navigate on their own through an increasingly uncertain mosaic of employment opportunities and thereby maximise their life opportunities (Blair, 2007).

This paper looked especially at the third aim. It asked how different educational pathways, and particularly vocational pathways, lead to specific segments within the HE sector and how this might influence the benefits of HE participation for the individual. At the system level, it has been shown that, despite the Government claim of ‘parity of esteem’, the traditional A-level route still opens up the best opportunities, leading into those institutions with higher reputations. Those coming from a vocational background, on the other hand, mostly end up in post-92 institutions with lower RAE-results. The reasons for this are likely to be a combination of tracking within a stratified HE system and individual choice.
Tracking suggests that significant institutional barriers remain, whereby VET students are funnelled into post-92 HEIs. However, the system outcome is the aggregated result of an interaction between institutional and individual level decision-making processes. These choice processes, in terms of institutions and subjects, seem to follow highly complex and individualised patterns. The data shows that there seems to be a high degree of self-limitation which influences applications to HE. This self-limitation affects students’ perceptions of opportunities available in terms of choice of institutions and subjects. Boundaries of physical (location of HEI), academic (grade or other requirements associated with studying at a given HEI and/or a given subject) and social (perceptions and behaviour of peer groups) space have a varying degree of influence on the decision-making processes of students in the sample.

Whatever the mechanisms producing the uneven distribution of students with a VET background across the HE system, it raises questions about the redistributional logic of New Labour HE policy, and the effectiveness and efficiency of that policy for VET learners. Typically VET learners are entering HEIs which on average provide lower income premia than pre-92 institutions (Chevalier & Conlon, 2003; Purcell et al., 2005, p.221). In terms of the chosen subject, large differences could also be found, however, the relationship with future life-chances was less clear. Unfortunately, there is, to date, no study for the UK, that analyses the result of the interaction between subject studied and the type of HEI attended on economic outcomes. Nonetheless, given that obtaining at least some VQs at level 3, especially through more traditional apprenticeship routes, leads to decent returns, it is at least questionable whether the additional investment in HE is a sensible one given the current patterns of progression into HE via the VET pathway. Additional experience in the labour market might produce as good a return, or better, as investment in HE; a notion that was reflected in the complex decision-making rationales of some of the students interviewed regarding their HE access choices. However, given a highly credentialed process of access to the labour market, at least for initial entrants, holding a degree may be necessary to access even modest first employment. In addition, for some areas, such as nursing, a degree is increasingly becoming necessary to access more senior positions.

The implication of these findings is that neither attempts to create stronger links between HE and VET programmes, nor attempts to change perceptions of potential applicants through outreach provisions, have resulted in evenly-distributed access to HE. This suggests, therefore, that the policy instruments underpinning these types of initiatives are too weak to achieve the desired system outcome. Different policy instruments are needed to effect the necessary changes in both institutional and individual behaviour. If the widening participation agenda is ultimately aiming at ‘equality of results’ (Thomas, 2001) then in terms of HE participation and life-chances, policy instruments need to intervene earlier in individuals’ educational pathways. Moreover, they need to be focused squarely on the way HEIs conceptualise their role in society and how these conceptualisations translate into rationales for recruiting and selecting students.

**Used dataset from third parties**

HESA Student Record 2003/04.
HESA cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties.

Literature


