

Lies, Damned Lies and Irrelevant Statistics?

In recent weeks the *THE*, in company with *The Daily Telegraph*, has given space, in its letters pages and short articles to what is undoubtedly the oldest policy chestnut in English higher education. – the social composition of the undergraduate student population. Although the concept of ‘widening participation’ is a recent invention, 19th century commissions showed due recognition of the obstacles faced by poor scholars in winning a place at Oxford and Cambridge, and they offered proposals to mitigate the perceived problem. It is interesting to reflect why this should be a particularly English obsession given that similar patterns of social bias are experienced internationally. Universally higher education is a social good that is more accessible to some rather than others, but raises most concern in Britain, with social class as the traditional focus, and in the US, with race at the centre of the debate.

Of course what is different about the contemporary situation is that we do indeed have a widening participation agenda, promoted by the state and underwritten, perhaps more parsimoniously than it should be, by the taxpayer. And, consequently, we witness the construction of targets, the monitoring of outcomes and the distribution of rewards, which bring a return of not only comparatively modest amounts of money but also the gratification than comes from at least attempting – if not actually jumping over – the hurdles. The successful universities can boast their accomplishments, and perhaps even win ‘a university of year’ award from the *THE*. But historically it is an agenda that has widened its goal posts over time: from social class to gender to schooling to race and ethnicity to disability to residence (and where next?). HEIs face the problem that this is a policy agenda that they cannot possibly

satisfy: the reasonably successful negotiation of one hurdle (essentially true, for example, for gender) merely throws up another.

It is fascinating that the recent interest surrounds one of the traditional targets – schooling - and in particular the extent to which the pupils of so-called independent schools (one of the great examples of successful, and misleading, institutional re-labelling) gain an unfair advantage in securing entrance to the supposed elite universities. Now statistics has come to the aid of promoting social equity. We find that some students educated in independent schools are in fact less successful in their final university examinations (that is, they are awarded degrees of a lower class) than students who attended state institutions with equivalent, perhaps even somewhat more modest pre-university qualifications. The policy message is apparently self-evident: this justifies HEIs showing a degree of preference to applicants for undergraduate degree places from state schools by making offers to them with lower grades than applicants who have been educated privately.

This is not seen as positive discrimination, which at one time was very much in vogue in the United States, but the construction of an admissions policy on the basis of the available data – evidence-based policy implementation. As political scientists, with a well-established interest in exploring the making of social policy (in education and medicine) we find this an extraordinary position to adopt. Even a rudimentary examination of the social policy-making process would demonstrate the important role of ideas in influencing its development, especially when governments and powerful interests are bent upon introducing a change of policy direction. Moreover, there is absolutely nothing exceptional about this. Intrinsic to the policy-making process is the need to engage in a battle of ideas with the intention of making sure that policy outcomes maximise the values embedded in those ideas. And, as

would be expected, if there are critical compromises that have to be made this will occur in the transition from policy formation to policy implementation.

This is not to say that evidence, especially quantitative evidence, is irrelevant but rather to argue that policy gurus tend to find the evidence that suits their policy biases. We are not questioning the good faith of those well-entrenched members of the higher educational establishment. They are either victims of their own ideology (without realising it) or they are economical with the truth in as much as they do not reveal their own policy preferences. If the evidence had demonstrated that students educated at independent schools with lower pre-university entrance qualifications obtained better final degree results than state-educated pupils with higher grades would we be hearing a very different story – that the elite universities need to discriminate in favour and not against applicants from the independent sector?

We suspect that we would be deafened by a wall of silence. A critical further question that arises is, if action is to be taken then how far the process of change should go? Is the intention to tweak the admissions process only until you have the social outcomes you consider desirable? Moreover, it is important to recognise that social goals invariably have in-built tensions. If the evidence demonstrates that certain relatively excluded social groups (we have no need to name them again) are the particular beneficiaries of independent schoolings, but unfortunately their degree performance is weak, is the logic of the evidence to be followed to its ultimate conclusion? Thus we squeeze ‘weak’ females who have been independently educated out of the maths courses (for example) but not the ‘strong’ males who have been similar educational backgrounds? But, of course, the conundrum is that degree results cannot be predicted, so while the evidence may be suggestive of the likely outcome for social groups it cannot predict the outcome for a particular individual

However, in spite of the apparent angst of the independent sector at the alleged discrimination its pupils face in securing a place at an elite university (with the temperature somewhat lowered by a raft of mollifying letters to *The Telegraph* in response to an article, which it published trumpeting their apparent concerns) this is clearly a phoney war. The obvious strategy for the schools is to make sure that those seeking a university place apply to a number of universities that offer the course they want to pursue – that they do not target just one or two universities where the demand for their chosen subject is very high and the entry requirements are particularly stringent. This may mean pointing some of their pupils in the direction of the less prestigious universities, but we are talking about adjustments at the margin, which is unlikely to pose a problem for institutions that are well-accustomed to operating in the market, and in many cases have established good relations with the more prestigious universities.

For the universities the issue is how far should they tilt the balance in favour of state-school applicants with respect to entry qualifications? Or, to put the question differently, how are admissions tutors to know whether the independent school applicant is the genuine article or more paste than diamond? No one is suggesting that the performance in finals examinations of undergraduates who have been educated in the independent sector is a *major* problem. Moreover, it remains (at least for time being) part of the English commitment to institutional autonomy that universities select their own students. The ‘well-meaning’ higher education establishment may apply pressure in the guise of evidence-based research to support its subdued moral crusade, but at least for the foreseeable future it is unlikely to have a significant impact because, ironically, the evidence suggests that there is no reason

for it to have a *significant* impact! We may indeed wonder therefore why this has become a *cause célèbre*.

Although we may be witnessing the periodic repetition of a phoney war, nonetheless, there is something deeply depressing about the current saga. If independent schools do confer an unfair advantage with respect to some of their less able, or less industrious, or less self-motivated pupils then it needs to be explained how this is achieved, with the obvious implication that the state sector should have the resources to secure the same advantages for its pupils. It may be old-fashioned to say so but universities should not be in the business of social amelioration or, as apparently in this case, compensating for the failure of schooling. Universities have other, albeit less important, purposes to fulfil than acting as a social welfare service. Moreover, the ‘attack’ (or is it in fact the ‘non-attack’) on the assumed advantages of privately educated pupils is underwritten by a clear ideological premise – that entry to higher education needs to be determined solely by narrowly-defined meritocratic criteria accompanied by a compensatory mechanism that enables those who may not be able to compete so effectively in these terms can still gain entry. And what is the hallmark of a successful undergraduate career – success in finals? Indeed, we are well and truly in the age of the utilitarians and still a long way from ‘recovering the idea of a university’.(1)

(1) G. Graham, *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*, Imprint Academic, 2002