

# Social class and higher education



## Louise Archer

Despite the expansion of higher education in the UK over the past 20 years and numerous initiatives aimed at widening participation, the proportion of working-class students at university remains stubbornly low. Why are such students so under-represented?

### Signposts

There is much in the news at the moment about 'widening' working-class access to higher education, and this timely article looks at some of the reasons for the relative lack of working-class students in British universities. It provides material for gaining marks for evaluation, for example by criticising the notion that the main reasons lie in the so-called 'poverty of aspiration' among working-class pupils. The two studies used in the research provide useful examples of different research methods, and there is helpful discussion of the concepts of 'pragmatic' and 'identity-based' aspirations. Louise Archer suggests that the reasons for low working-class participation in higher education are structural, social and cultural — use the article to identify the nature of these. This article is useful for the topics of 'Education', 'Stratification' and 'Culture and identity'.

Government education policy in the UK, under both New Labour and now the coalition, has tended to assume that the problem of access for working-class students stems from a 'poverty of aspirations' and a lack of information about higher education (HE) among working-class young people.

As illustrated by initiatives such as the AimHigher programme ([www.aimhigher.ac.uk](http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk)), policy has assumed that the solution must therefore lie in 'raising' working-class young people's aspirations by educating them about the potential benefits of HE. For instance, it highlights the 'economic rate of return' (the additional amount one might expect to earn as a result of gaining a degree) as an important motivator of participation.

However, researchers have criticised such assumptions for being overly simplistic and for failing to recognise the role of social inequalities in producing unequal patterns of university participation. Indeed, mainstream policy has been criticised for 'blaming the victim' (by focusing on changing young people, rather than the system) and for failing to appreciate how wider social inequalities may actively prevent working-class young people from accessing university — or from seeing it as a realistic, achievable and desirable option.

### Unequal access to information

This article draws on data from two research studies (see Box 1). In both studies, many participants appeared to lack detailed information about HE — such as what it is, what it costs and the entry requirements. For example, Laura (aged 30, white woman, bank worker) claimed that: 'It was never explained to me fully what it [university] entailed or the difference between college and university and what you would get at the end.'

Given that most of the participants came from families with little or no experience of HE, a lack of clarity in their knowledge about universities is perhaps unsurprising. There is also evidence from other research studies to suggest that some schools and colleges supply less information about HE to working-class pupils, especially those that they consider unlikely to continue to degree level.

Indeed, participants in both our studies complained about being explicitly discouraged from applying to HE by their

school or college, who implied it would be a 'waste' of time and money. This was reported most by black women, suggesting that institutional racism and class prejudice can play a role in the differential discouragement of particular students.

### 'Not for me'

In contrast to education policy assumptions, as discussed above, even among those urban working-class young people identified by their schools as 'at risk' of dropping out of education we found some evidence of 'high' aspirations (for example, to law, accountancy and medicine). However, we also found that these higher aspirations tended to be abandoned or 'managed down' over time. This occurred gradually, as numerous experiences and influences combined to persuade the young people that they should 'know their place' and not aspire to become upwardly socially mobile.

These influences included explicit discouragement from friends, family and schools, suggesting that high aspirations are unrealistic and/or 'not for the likes of us'. For instance, Jane (a white working-class schoolgirl) came to reassess her earlier ambitions to go to university and become a journalist, saying: 'My goals are too far-fetched.' She described how her mother had warned her that sixth form might not 'suit' her and had encouraged her to try to get a job instead.

Participants in both studies tended to base their aspirations and career paths on 'known' routes, often following stereotypically gendered and classed routes,

with girls expecting to enter hair, beauty or childcare professions and boys aspiring to manual trades such as electrician, plumber or builder. These aspirations had two key features:

- They were *pragmatic* — knowledge and experience within their family and friends meant they had access to suitable contacts and resources to help them achieve their goals.

- They were *identity-based* — these routes were seen as fitting with what are perceived to be desirable and respectable forms of working-class masculinity and femininity.

By contrast, university was widely perceived as an unknown, 'alien' environment — and the preserve of the middle classes. It was described in negative terms, as somewhere that is not usual, appropriate or comfortable for 'people like me'.

Interviewer: What type of people do you think go to university?

Tina: I think snobs, trendies.

Lucy: Trendies, yes.

Kim: But with money. Hippified people who smoke pot in the toilets and just get stoned every night and drink.

(Discussion group: white working-class women, not in education)

The notion of university students as 'different from us' was widely echoed and was often associated with undesirable (for example, 'uncool') forms of masculinity or femininity.

### Box 1 The research studies

#### The higher education and social class study (Archer et al. 2003)

This study involved three forms of data collection:

- A nationally representative quota sample of 1,278 working-class adults in England and Wales
- Sixteen group discussions with 118 working-class 'non-participants' (aged 16–30) living in London (including students attending urban FE colleges and adults either in employment or unemployed)
- Seventeen group discussions with 85 first-year undergraduates from a range of courses at an inner-city, post-1992 university

#### The urban youth and schooling study (Archer et al. 2010)

This was a 2-year longitudinal study involving 89 working-class, ethnically diverse young people, drawn from Years 10 and 11 (aged 14–16), from six London schools. All were included on the basis that they had been identified by their schools as 'at risk of dropping out of education' and/or 'unlikely to progress into post-16 education'. Fifty-three of the young people were tracked and individually interviewed (up to four times each) over the last two years of compulsory schooling. A further 36 young people took part in group discussions. Interviews were also conducted with five parents and 19 education professionals (e.g. teachers and learning mentors).



### Half of the working-class youths in the Urban Youth Study would rather be 'earning than learning'

When I see it [university] in the media, I can see pure books. People is walking with their books on their arm all the time, looking all sad and cold and that. They should just like relax, be, like, cool! Put some shades on, maybe a little cap, cut their hair... (Patrick, 18, black Caribbean young man, FE student)

HE participation was felt to be particularly at odds with working-class masculinity. Half the boys in the 'Urban youth' study claimed that they did not want to continue in education after the end of compulsory schooling and that they would much rather be 'earning' than 'learning': 'I can't wait until I go and get my job and that's all' (Ben).

This reflected how work (especially in the form of 'hard' manual labour, or 'graft') is still commonly evoked as a defining feature of working-class masculinity. As Derek (29, white Irish labourer) put it: 'If you've got to be there swotting over a book, you can't be out grafting, can you?'

Even among those who did enter HE, many working-class students explained that they did not want to personally 'change' their identities as a result of going to university. As Fela (black male student) explained, he intended to adopt his friends' strategy: 'They go through university, uni doesn't go through them.'

### A riskier choice for working-class students

In addition to the cultural and identity-based factors discussed above, structural inequalities remain a key barrier to working-class participation in HE. Put simply, evidence suggests that for working-class young people, university remains a riskier and costlier life 'choice', with less certain rewards. As Beck (1992, p. 35) explains, 'Risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom.' Consequently, working-class and middle-class students make their choices from unequal starting points — access to university does not happen on an equal playing field.

The economic costs of participating constitute a key factor influencing the decisions of working-class young people on whether to continue in post-compulsory education. In the 'Urban youth' study, young people were trying to decide if their families could afford to support them to continue studying. Many felt a strong obligation to find a job to contribute to family finances. Mature students in particular experienced strong financial pressures and costs, which contributed to the 'riskiness' of their participation. As one young Bangladeshi man explained, his family knew that 'If you fail, we all fail.'

Working-class young people in both studies also felt that they were at risk of not completing university due to their own previous experiences of educational 'failure'. Social inequalities meant that they were also more likely to experience family problems (such as ill health) and a lack of money and cultural, social and educational resources that tend to facilitate educational success within middle-class families.

Due to a combination of economic, cultural, social and educational factors, working-class students tend to experience greater restrictions of their choices (for example, of subject, course, institution) and are more likely to attend post-1992 'local' institutions.

### Universities are not all the same

The hierarchy of universities was perceived to be a key factor which weighted the risks of participation against working-class students. Participants in both studies were aware of differences between universities, for instance in terms of status and resources. This hierarchy was seen as both widening participation (post-1992 universities being seen as accessible for working-class students) but also increasing the risks.

This was because the most prestigious UK universities (which offered the greatest potential returns in terms of the economic and social value of a degree), such as Oxford and Cambridge, were seen as largely closed to working-class students. Moreover, the increase in the number of students

within HE was felt to have created a more 'crowded' graduate market place, in which working-class students were likely to be at a disadvantage.

It's getting overcrowded; there's too many people going to university and how many jobs are there for those people? There's none, there's hardly any, especially nowadays. (Liam, 22, white male)

### Conclusion

The factors underlying the continued under-representation of working-class students in HE are complex. It is not simply the result of a 'poverty of aspirations', but includes a mix of structural, social and cultural factors.

The studies briefly discussed here suggest that the 'solution' will also necessarily be complex: consideration needs to be given to how social inequalities might be addressed within schools, universities and wider society in order to enable working-class young people to enjoy the same opportunities, resources and 'choices' as their middle-class peers.

### References and further reading

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: issues of exclusion and inclusion*, Routledge.

Archer, L., Hollingworth, S. and Mendick, H. (2010) *Urban Youth and Schooling: the experiences and identities of educationally 'at risk' young people*, Open University Press.

Ball, S. and Vincent, C. (1998) "I heard it on the grapevine": hot knowledge and school choice', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19: 377-400.

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society*, Sage Publications.

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*, Trentham.

**Louise Archer** is a professor of sociology of education at King's College, London. Her research focuses on identities and inequalities of 'race', gender and social class within education. She is currently director of a large longitudinal study of children's science attitudes and aspirations.

# AZ HANDBOOK

- All the terms you need to know for the very best grades
- Clear concise entries, related terms and examiner's tips
- Written by leading examiners and authors

Plus the whole book online, with additional exam support and a desktop widget for definitions at the click of a mouse!

~~£9.99~~

Just **£7.99** with your **20% off voucher** (see September issue)

Visit [www.philipallan.co.uk/a-z](http://www.philipallan.co.uk/a-z) today for information on all the titles in the series and simple online ordering, or contact our customer services department on **01235 827827**