

The role of Work Experience in the UK Higher Education admissions process

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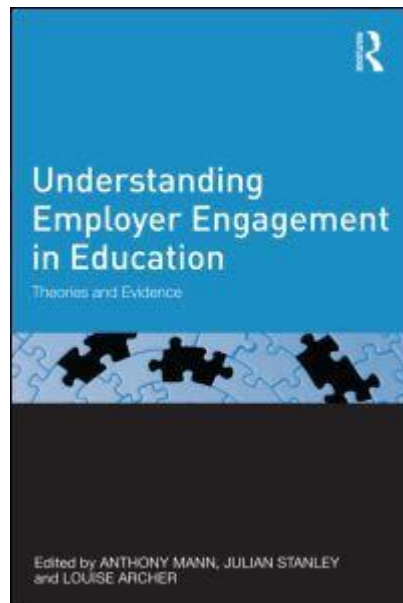
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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to approach the issue of work experience from a new perspective, that of access to leading UK universities. I have two related aims: firstly, to quantify differences in the work related activity reported by applicants from a range of educational backgrounds; secondly, to consider the ways in which work experience is conceptualised within the higher education admissions, both by applicants and within the sector, with a view to assessing wider implications for social mobility and social justice.

In the UK, the agency responsible for processing admissions is the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). As part of the admissions process, a 4,000 character personal statement is submitted. The statement is a ‘free response’ composition, meaning that applicants are able to write about themselves and their suitability for higher education in an unrestricted fashion. This contrasts with the US equivalent, the Common Application, in which applicants must respond to one of five set questions.¹ Following Jones (2013), the personal statement is used here as a means to learn more about young people’s work-related activity. UCAS prompts applicants to ‘give details of any relevant work experience, paid or unpaid’ (ucas.ac.uk) and

¹ The Common Application is used for undergraduate admissions by most leading US universities and colleges.

responses reveal much about the differing levels of activity to which they have had access. However, personal statements also provide an insight into the ways in which young people understand the role of work experience and are able to articulate what they have gained from it.

The backdrop for this research is the Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011), which proposed that work experience for under 16s should no longer be a statutory requirement,² arguing that ‘virtually everyone stays on post-GCSE, and an overwhelming majority participate to age 18’ (2011: 9). The focus of the Wolf Review is on young people following ‘occupational’ routes and those at risk of NEET status, not on those looking to enter higher education. This chapter considers the consequences of shifting opportunities for work-related activity from pre-16 to post-16, particularly among academically able students who rely on their school to facilitate experiences. Specifically, it explores whether a move from universal engagement to a policy focused more on those planning immediate entry to labour market may leave some young people further disadvantaged in the higher education admissions process.

I begin with a brief summary of the literature to contextualise this research. I then outline how data was collected and analysed. Finally, I summarise the key findings of the chapter and offer a number of observations about young people’s opportunities, both to access meaningful, professionalized work experience and, partly as a result, to access the UK’s leading universities.

Background

The body of research into work experience is beginning to grow, as this collection attests. Some of this research examines the role of work experience in the higher education admission process, e.g. Neilson and McNally (2010) in relation to nursing degrees or Hamill and Hodgkinson (2010) in relation to civil engineering. However, the focus has mostly been on the value of work experience in helping young people gain employment. This is not surprising: vocational qualifications are often seen as an alternative to academic progression (e.g. Wolf 2011) and do, of course, provide many young people with the skills and experience needed to move directly into the labour market. However, work related activity plays another key role in shaping young people’s futures: many competitive undergraduate programmes use non-academic indicators, such as the personal statement, to distinguish between equal achievement candidates, and work related activity forms a central part of this statement. Indeed, many programmes require candidates to demonstrate relevant experience as part of the selection process (Mann 2011). Work-related activity can therefore make a real difference to a young person’s chances of attending a leading university, and may

² ‘Government should ... remove their statutory duty to provide every young person at KS4 with a standard amount of ‘work-related learning’’ (Wolf Report, 2012, 17).

provide a partial explanation for reported differences in success rates among equal attainment applicants of different socioeconomic backgrounds and school types (Boliver 2013).

Indeed, with rising pressure on universities to widen access (Milburn 2012), questions arise about whether a focus on non-academic indicators, such as work experience, brings greater fairness to the admissions process, as some commentators have suggested,³ or actually has the reverse effect, shutting some high-achieving students out of top courses because – through no fault of their own – they have not enjoyed the same opportunities or benefited from the same guidance.

According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, in the year since most GCSE-equivalent vocational qualifications were removed from school performance league tables as a result of Wolf's recommendations (2011), '60 per cent of school leaders said their school had either already reduced the number of level-two vocational qualifications on offer or was planning to do so,' (Muir 2013: 1). Those who lose out on work experience opportunities, either because formal qualification routes are closed or because other work experience opportunities are limited, lose out on the know-how, skills, practices and understanding of the world of work. They are less able to make informed opinions about their own careers, and less attuned to the unspoken demands of the workplace (Mann, 2012). As noted by John Hayes, then the UK Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, during the second reading of the Further and Higher Education (Access) Bill, 'it is not aspiration or ambition but wherewithal that limits working class people from achieving what they might.' (Hansard, 4 March 2011).⁴ However, this chapter argues that 'wherewithal' is also crucial in the university admissions process; without access to meaningful work related activity, academic opportunities for less advantaged young people are restricted further.

How are UK University Applicants Assessed?

The primary way in which universities select students is through academic achievement, typically A-level grades. However, when competition is high, or when several candidates are equally qualified, universities often turn to non-academic indicators. In the UK, this can involve interviews or, occasionally, assessed work; however, the most ubiquitous non-academic indicator is the personal statement.

³ 'British universities have always looked beyond A-level grades to other things such as applicants' CVs, personal statements and their potential to benefit from a particular course. As long as it is done in a very transparent way, these sorts of schemes have the potential to identify talented young people who can really benefit from higher education' (David Willetts, UK's Minister of State for Universities and Science, Paton, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 August 2010).

⁴ Similar arguments are made by Menzies (2013).

Admissions tutors may examine statements for fluency of writing and relevant extra-curricular activity, and, as Jones (2013) noted, there is strong evidence that school type is a key predictor of both features. For example, applicants from sixth form colleges were found to make almost three times as many clear linguistic errors (misused apostrophes, run-on sentences, etc.) as their equal attainment private school counterparts. More qualitatively, whereas the hobbies listed by sixth form college applicants often have little value in the admissions process ('sometimes I just go on walks and listen to my iPod'), those listed by private school applicants reflected more appropriate cultural capital ('I did a Cordon Bleu cookery course at the Tante Marie School, in London'). The focus of this chapter, however, is on work-related activity: how it varies between applicants of different educational backgrounds; how it is understood and articulated by young people; and how it may advantage some applicants more than others in the higher education admissions process.

Data and method

Previous research into the personal statement is scant, as noted by GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) and Brown (2004), among others. Where statements have been examined, evidence has not pointed towards them being accurate predictors of future performance. (Pelech et al. 1999, Ferguson et al. 2000, Norman 2004). No research has been undertaken into the ways in which work experience, in particular, is described. Therefore, though the methods used here build on previous studies where possible, improvisation was often required.

The data set is the same as that used by Jones (2013): 309 personal statements, all submitted to a leading UK university by applicants who would subsequently achieve identical A-level results, and each tagged according to the applicant's school type. In order to arrive at this sample, all 5,276 applications made to one department within one Russell Group UK university for 2010 entry were accessed.⁵ To control for academic attainment, only those personal statements submitted by students who went on to achieve A-level grades of BBB⁶ (excluding General Studies) were included. School type was then noted: comprehensive school (88 applicants), sixth form college (83), grammar school (45); and independent school (93).⁷ To ensure anonymity, details of the host university and department are not made public, applicants remain fully anonymous, and where text from a personal statement is cited, information is omitted or modified.

⁵ Applications from overseas students and mature students (aged 22 or older) were not used in this research.

⁶ The decision to use BBB is arbitrary. However, selecting a trio of identical grades avoids the need to control for higher achievement in a 'preferred' subject (for example, ABB applicants holding their A in Economics may be considered more academically suitable for an Economics degree than ABB applicants holding a B in the subject).

⁷ The remaining 18 applications were disregarded either because the school type was unknown, or because the institution was a tertiary college, special school or agricultural college.

Distributions of Work-Related Activity

When applying to university, most young people follow UCAS advice to ‘include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work, particularly if it’s relevant to your chosen course(s)’. This section assesses the quantity and the quality of the work-related activity that applicants from different educational backgrounds draw upon, and looks at how they characterise it in the personal statement.

Quantification of individual, work-related activities is difficult because applicants include full-time jobs (‘I work full-time at Aviva Insurance as a commercial claims advisor’) and school-based initiatives (‘I help mentor year eight maths students’), as well as more typical work experience placements (‘I spent a week in a City reinsurance broking firm shadowing one of the brokers’). However, to begin with, all-inclusive counts were undertaken (by the author and, independently, by a second coder). These counts took in voluntary work, internships, work shadowing, day trips to industry, and anything else that related to the applicant’s work-based, non-academic profile. The totals, per school type, are recorded in Figure 1.

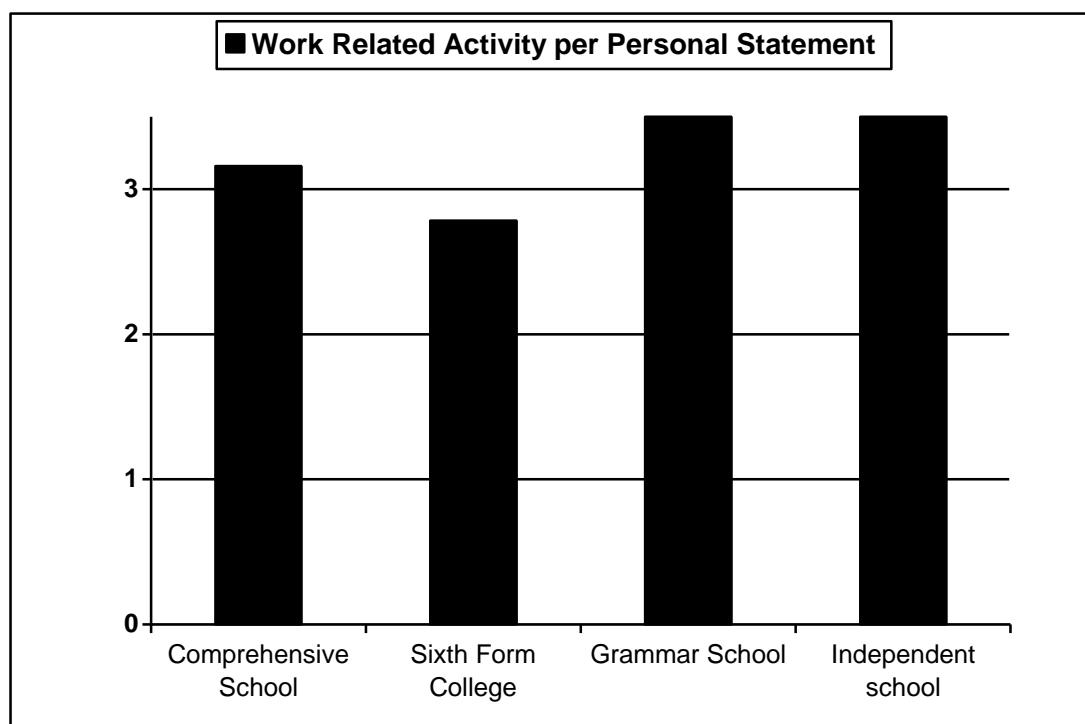


Figure 1: distribution of work-related activity, per personal statement, by school type

At first glance, the distribution seems fairly equitable: approximately 3.63 activities per personal statement are mentioned by independent school applicants, fractionally more than those listed by grammar school applicants, about 15 per cent more than those by comprehensive school applicants and about 30 per cent more than those from sixth form colleges. However, this global similarity masks important differences in

the nature of the activities, as can be seen when the quality of work related activity is compared.

To do this, all of the work-related activities were sub-coded as either a ‘job’ or an ‘experience’ (again, by the author and, independently, by a second coder). The primary criterion was whether or not the activity was (likely to be) paid: if so, it was coded as a ‘job’; if not, it was coded as an ‘experience’. The purpose of the exercise was to distinguish stereotypical ‘Saturday jobs’, often undertaken to finance studying, from genuine ‘work experience’, undertaken to enhance one’s prospect and learn more about possible careers. Examples of each activity type are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of ‘jobs’ and ‘experiences’

‘jobs’	‘experiences’
‘I have a part time paid job as a customer checkout assistant at Tesco PLC.’ (SFC)	‘I work-shadowed a stockbroker at the London office of the Credit Suisse Group.’ (IND)
‘I work part-time at a kitchen sales company where I am a telephone salesperson.’ (SFC)	‘I have arranged a week’s work experience in July to shadow Kate Hoey, a Labour MP in the House of Commons.’ (IND)
‘I am currently employed in a newsagents.’ (COMP)	‘My fervour for economics has led to organised work placements in a leading bank in India and accountancy firm in New York.’ (IND)
‘Since leaving Abingdon School in Oxfordshire in 2009, I have been working as a research assistant for a management consultancy firm called Berkeley Partners Ltd on behalf of the Carbon Trust.’ (IND)	‘I have also been on a Price Waterhouse Coopers taster day; I was able to see how economics plays such an imperative role in the firm.’ (SFC)
‘Out of school I have employment as a lettings negotiator.’ (IND)	‘At school I was co-editor of the school newspaper and part of the team that created the Yearbook.’ (SFC)

A correlation clearly arises between the nature of the activity and the level of skill and prestige involved. In general, the ‘jobs’ are low prestige and low skill, while the ‘experiences’ tend to be higher prestige and higher skill. However, it should be noted that some exceptions arise. For example, independent school applicants sometimes report ‘jobs’ of a different kind from the retail and clerical work generally experienced elsewhere (e.g. the ‘research assistant for a management consultancy firm’ and the ‘lettings negotiator’ cited above). Conversely, not all ‘experiences’ are high prestige and high skill. For example, some state school applicants report visits to

local businesses, taster days and roles undertaken internally for the benefit of the schools.

When all work related activity is sub-coded as a 'job' or an 'experience', a more polarized picture emerges. Contrasting ratios show that although the total amount of work-related activity reported by applicants is not greatly different, the nature of the activity is. While applicants from sixth form college applicant report twice as many 'experiences' as 'jobs' per personal statement, those from independent schools report over five times as many. In absolute terms, independent school applicants rely much less on paid work than their state educated counterparts⁸ and much more on voluntary activity. Indeed, some personal statements contain as many as nine instances of meaningful experiences of the workplace, and some applicants (from private schools in particular) are able to reel off a long list of high-prestige placements undertaken with a range of sought-after employers.

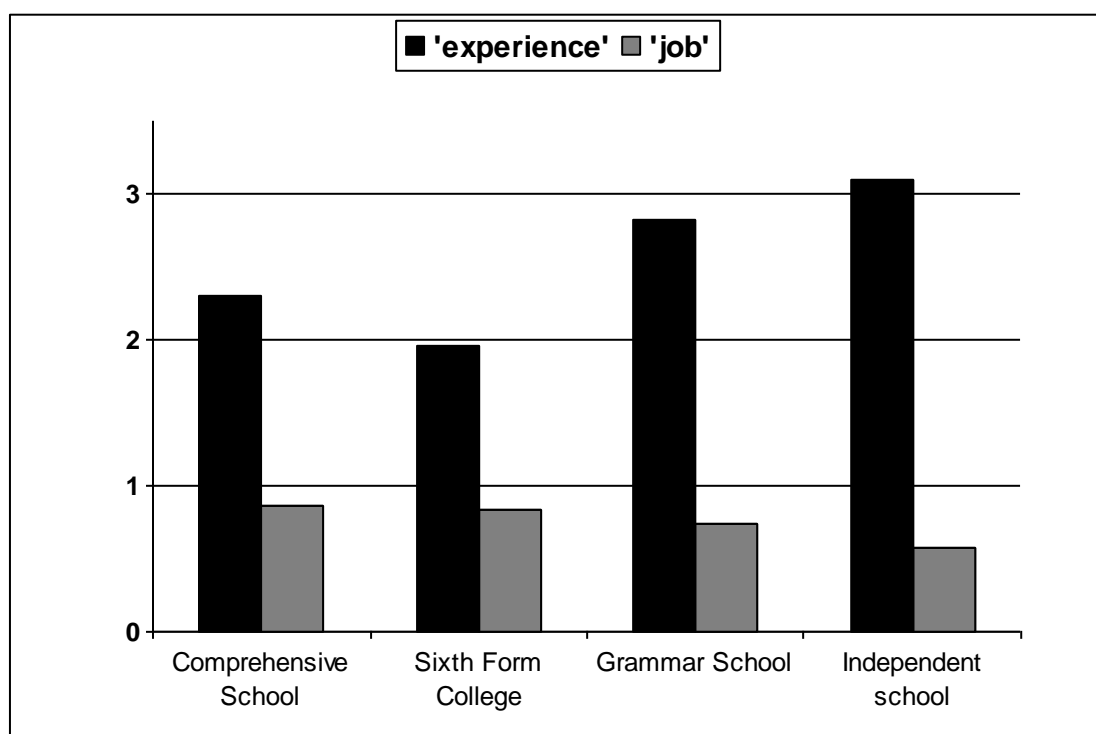


Figure 2: distribution of work-related activity, per personal statement, sub-coded as 'job' or 'experience', by school type

The next section reports on what Figure 2 means in practice, and suggests that equal attainment applicants from different school types may not be competing on a level playing field when it comes to work related activity. I begin by looking at one argument often put forward in defence of asking applicants to discuss their work related activity as part of the university admissions process: that it is not the quantity

⁸ Note that Jones (2013) does not attempt to distinguish between selective and non-selective state schools. Work experience opportunities for very low performing state schools could well be even more limited than Figure 2 suggests.

of the experience is not important but what the candidate has been able to learn from the experience.

Conceptualisations of Work Related Activity

The purpose of this section is to consider how applicants talk about the work related activity that they have accumulated. It could be argued that, in an ideal university admissions process, admissions tutors would all be consistently and equally sensitive to the disparate distributions of work experiences opportunities, and would carefully contextualise every application so as to make offers according to future potential, not past achievement. Unfortunately, those activities with the highest prestige tend also to be the ones that allow the candidate to advertise their suitability for a particular course with the greatest ease. For example, consider how the independent school applicants in examples (1) to (3) are able to make their experience relevant.

1. 'Having obtained a work placement at an accountancy firm, Grant Thornton UK, I was given the task of inputting and interpreting data using accountancy software such as Sage and Iris. My interpersonal and organisational talents were also put to the test, where I was often responsible for scheduling appointments and liaising with clients. At the end of my experience, I was invited for a one-on-one meeting with the manager.' (IND)
2. 'I have enjoyed work experience at James Hutchings & Co. a law firm situated in Norwich. I was able to observe the day-to-day running of the business and also, importantly, how to handle opponents and clients. Through work shadowing I had the opportunity to see one particular manager's style - how he dealt with authority and delegation.' (IND)
3. 'The two placements I undertook in the summer of 2008 brought the reality of working in a business alive for me. One of them was at Forshaw Asset Management, Brighton, where I attended presentations by EMX (a fund dealing platform) and internal meetings. This enabled me to observe first hand the intricacies of a small to medium sized enterprise. I received instruction and practical experience in the trading of shares and I discussed the various aspects of the broader investment climate in the UK, such as the likely impact of the falling GBP/USD rate. I also gained work experience at 7 Essex Court, London. This afforded me an insight into the world of law as a commercial barrister. I spent time with different members of the chambers at both junior and senior levels. I sat in on a client meeting, attended a small claims civil trial at a county court in Kent and watched as the barrister I was shadowing delivered the case for the claimant.' (IND)

In all three cases, applicants not only have professionalized, high prestige activity upon which to draw, they also have the skills necessary to exploit this activity in the

admissions process. Each statement refers to the responsibility that the applicant was given, mentions direct dealings with clients, and makes implicit connections with the courses for which they are applying. When state school applicants attempt to do the same, the outcomes are often less convincing, as examples (4) to (6) demonstrate.

4. 'I've recently been working as a part time sales assistant in a local retail outlet. I realise that this job may have little relation to my degree course but I hope this experience will help me appreciate the work of others, no matter what their job or status; everyone deserves respect.' (SFC)
5. 'I have had a part time Sunday paper round job for the last 5 years, which I have enjoyed, and which displays commitment and dedication.' (SFC)
6. 'I also work at a call centre which helped me to work as a team giving me better communication skills with the general public by talking to customers. In addition I made new friends at work and I love meeting new people. Working in a call centre has improved my I.C.T skills and made me a much faster typist.' (SFC)

In example (4), the applicant presents paid employment as a means of learning to respect co-workers. The lack of relevance to higher education is acknowledged, and a persuasive attempt is made to argue that the benefit is not skills-based, but rather developmental – a greater appreciation for others has emerged. Usually, however, applicants discuss their part-time jobs in more practical ways – talking about self-discipline ('I've learnt how to get up on time'), hard work ('the shifts I do can last all night') and financial self-awareness ('I now understand the value of money'). Note that the applicant in example (5) cites 'commitment and dedication' as the skills associated with their job. In example (6), the value of the working at a call centre is expressed in terms of forming new friendships and becoming a 'much faster typist'. Honest responses to UCAS prompts though they may be, it is difficult to imagine independent school applicants being advised to market themselves in such terms.

The Role of Schools in Facilitating Work Experience.

In this section, I argue that state school applicants, unlike their independent school counterparts, are reliant on their educational institutions to provide opportunities for work related activity. This can make a big difference to their university applications, allowing them to talk about something more than paid, part-time employment, and often helping them to construct a clearer narrative about their decision to study a particular course.

7. 'In Year 10 I undertook a weeks work experience at a solicitor's specialising in the insolvency department. I was able to see where financial problems had arisen from and how businesses and individuals were affected. This gave me a

greater understanding of how businesses need to be run in order to avoid becoming insolvent. This enhanced my organization skills as well as furthering my understanding of the financial aspects of a business. I feel these are vital elements to understand in the subject.’ (COMP)

8. ‘My interest in studying Economics and Business began during my Year 9 work experience with KPMG insolvency department when I was able to get a small insight into the impact that decision makers have on a business and on what information these decisions are based.’ (COMP)
9. ‘The work experience I participated in whilst I was in Year 10 is closely related to business. I worked for one week at the Glaxo factory in Cumbria. Whilst I was based here I worked in the accountancy section completing various tasks such as inputting spreadsheet data, researching the business and its aims etc. The experience of working in a successful business with a worldwide profile has given me a better understanding of a business's everyday operations and improved my ICT skills.’ (COMP)

When talking about school-mediated work experience, state school applicants begin to express themselves with the confidence and self-assurance associated more with independent school applicants (Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008, 77). Though some state school applicants exert ‘considerable personal agency to secure high-quality placements’ (Waller, Harrison, Hatt and Chudry 2012: 1), for most, school-mediated work experience is the only route to meaningful experience. This experience is therefore vital not only for their own personal development, but also in order to make an impression on university admissions tutors. For independent school applicants, such facilitation is less important because, as the next sections shows, recourse to very different levels of social capital is available.

The Role of Social Capital in Gaining Experience

It is noticeable in many work-related activities that family and other personal connections play a major part in securing access to the professions. These connections are almost twice as common in the personal statements of private school applicants as those of other applicants. Often, as examples (10) to (12) show, the family ties allow valuable insight into the world of work.

10. ‘For the majority of the last two years and currently during my gap year, I have worked for my family business in the retail sector. Responsibilities included, assisting in sales, stock control and website advertising. Often accompanying my father on nationwide and international business trips, it has given me an insight into the operations and workings of a business.’ (IND)

11. 'I am lucky enough to have gained a valuable insight into the business world, as my father is director of a large wholesale and retail company, showing me a useful experience of a commercial environment.' (IND)
12. 'I am particularly interested in this field after I met one of my father's friends who has become hugely successful in the financial sector and as I have grown up I have watched his career develop.' (IND)

State educated applicants also mention family members who have inspired them or provided opportunities for experience. However, not only is the frequency lower, the applicant's ability to make the experience relevant to the program being applied for is more restricted. For example, one sixth form college applicant notes 'experience working with my father in Spain, where he runs a property business'; however, no further details are provided and no connection is made to the proposed course of study.

It has long been acknowledged that the family plays a key role in reproducing social advantage (Bourdieu 1996; Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008). Huddleston, Mann and Dawkins (this volume) report on independent school students benefiting both through reputation, because local employers are keen to be associated with their school, and through alumni, because former pupils want to offer experience to current pupils. Work related activity is therefore available, sometimes in abundance, rather than needing to be actively sourced.

Accessing Experience: an issue of fairness?

Evidence from personal statements shows that while some young people have the necessary social capital and school type advantage to access a range of activities that are professionalized and high-prestige, others have limited access to any relevant experience. Wolf argues that 'vocational education has been micro-managed from the centre for decades' (2011: 9), adding that 'this is a bad idea, and not just because it is inherently ineffective.' However, a system in which young people are reliant of advantages of school type and social capital is equally ineffective if the goal is to conduct university admissions processes in a fair and transparent fashion.

The findings presented here bring to mind those reported by Mann and Kashefpadkel (this volume), showing that independent school students have the widest – and most professionalized - range of work experience to draw on. From the perspective of equity, important questions are raised about the disadvantage faced by state school applicants to higher education because of the nature and quantity of their work related activity. Referring to a survey of almost 1,000 young people, Mann and Kashefpadkel (this volume) note that when asked whether their work experience activity had helped them to secure a place at university, 42 per cent of those who had attended

independent schools said yes. The corresponding proportion for those at comprehensive school was only 25 per cent.

The analysis of personal statements presented here is entirely consistent with these findings: state school applicants are unable to access the most prestigious and relevant forms of work-related activity, and are also least well guided (Reay et al. 2005) when it comes to writing about their experiences in the personal statement. As Waller, Harrison, Hatt and Chudry note, ‘more effort is needed to push academically-able working class young people towards placements that will increase motivation and widen horizons’ (2012: 1).

Conclusion

This chapter has used evidence from a new source – the UCAS personal statement – to confirm that work experience opportunities are unequally distributed among young people in the UK, and that socioeconomic status, as proxied here through school type, is the primary predictor of both the quantity and quality of activity undertaken. It is interesting to note that, in his foreword to the Wolf Report, Michael Gove⁹ acknowledges that ‘many of the best courses – like those [apprenticeships] offered by BT – hold open the door for further study in higher education’ (2012: 4). However, the findings reported here suggest that other doors are being closed to many potential university applicants.

The most obvious solution is increase opportunities within the state sector for meaningful, appropriate work experience. The benefits of such opportunities stretch far beyond access to higher education, and would allow all young people to make better informed decisions about their careers. However, an important secondary measure is for the admissions process in the UK to reconsider the role that work experience should play in choosing between equal attainment applicants. Both Schwartz (2004) and Milburn (2012)¹⁰ recommended that universities assess applicants ‘holistically’, and this inevitably involves the use of non-academic indicators, including work experience. However, Boliver (2011, 2013) notes that state school applicants are less likely to apply for leading universities than their identically qualified peers, and less likely to be accepted when they do. Clearly, the explanations for this are complex and several. However, the current system allows those applicants that already enjoy advantages of school type to profit further from access to more prestigious work related activity and from better advice on how to capitalise on this activity in the admissions process.

It is vital to remember that the personal statements examined in this research were composed by students of comparable educational attainment. In terms of work related

⁹ UK Secretary of State for Education.

¹⁰ Note that Milburn is more guarded: ‘Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to ... have opportunities to gain experiences’ (2012: 53).

activity, however, the differences are stark. Some applicants appear to have access to a network of individuals –family members, teachers, careers advisors, alumni, friends, etc. – who can provide top quality work experience opportunities, as well as valuable advice on the statement itself (Schwartz 2004, Kirkland and Hansen 2010). Note that not all nations’ admissions agencies place as much emphasis on work experience as the UK’s; many are much more cautious and transparent about the use of non-academic indicators of potential (Jones 2014). This is partly because the distribution of work experience opportunities ‘tends to reflect and reproduce existing patterns of social class inequality’ (Hatcher and Le Gallais 2008, 77). The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that such reproduction will continue apace unless opportunities for meaningful work related activity become more evenly distributed, or the UK university admissions process places less weight on an indicator to which applicants have very different levels of access.

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