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Research at the University of York St John

Research Report

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National Collaborative Outreach Programme

2019

Barriers to Accessing University in Coastal Communities:

A qualitative study exploring why young people living along the North Yorkshire Coast are underrepresented in Britain's Higher Education institutions

Executive Summary

About the Research

The research was conducted as a response to data collected by the Office for Students (2018) which indicated that there were significantly lower levels of higher education participation from those young people who lived along the North Yorkshire coast. The research was funded by the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) who focus their efforts on raising the higher education participation rates of young people in underrepresented areas or underrepresented groups (OfS, 2019). The research was an important small first step in potentially establishing a better education system in the region; an aim which was initially inspired by the ongoing efforts of the North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area (NYCOA, 2019). Such developments would arguably result in more social justice for those who are often under-represented within the higher education system within England, such as the working-class.

The Literature

Initially, the focus was given to existing bodies of knowledge which had explored similar forms of underrepresentation to build up a preliminary understanding of the phenomena. Overall, the literature suggested that various forms of underrepresentation were commonplace within higher education. Some forms of this underrepresentation included class, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age. Also, there were many discussed causes for this underrepresentation, one such being based on political bias. Specifically, a policy aimed at widening participation (WP) was argued as being based upon a false belief that underrepresented groups, like the working class, had low aspirations. However, existing research suggested that the working class had high aspirations but lacked a fundamental understanding of the processes involved in undertaking a higher education course. With such limited data on the North Yorkshire coast surrounding this topic, further research was therefore required to assess the current social and educational climate in the area, allowing potential areas for development to emerge.

The Research Process

The research adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. To gather the thoughts, opinions and emotions of the young people, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary research tool for data collection. Additionally, interviews were undertaken with policy influencers within the subject area to allow a more holistic overview to occur. The data collected was then transcribed and thematically analysed to allow the most common themes to be unearthed.

Findings

The data collected showed that there were some issues about both the social/cultural and educational climate of the North Yorkshire coast. First, an apparent misunderstanding of the nature of higher education was evident from the student responses. The students repeatedly referenced notions of a desire to remain in their hometown, thus limiting options for a suitable higher education course. Second, the students indicated that while there is provision within the area, more is needed. Specifically, they suggested that there is not enough variety of courses available within the region. When this desire to stay at or near home is matched with the limited provision, it arguably creates an environment whereby opportunities are limited, further restricting motivations for higher education participation.

Additionally, a potential area of development was positively discussed. The students indicated that more consistent contact with higher education throughout their educational experience growing up would benefit them. Specifically, benefits included a more nuanced understanding of higher education and its foreign processes (i.e. finances, course requirements) as well as a way of building more positive emotions with the idea of higher education. This is especially important amongst those who have limited information from other sources such as family.

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Introduction

General Overview

There has been a substantial amount of research and academic inquiry into underrepresentation within higher education, both within the UK and the rest of the globe (Archer, 2007; Lareau, 2015). The Office for Students (OfS) published their nationwide POLAR4*** data, indicating that there was a significant underrepresentation of young people in higher education who live along the North Yorkshire coast (OfS, 2018). According to prominent sociologists including Bourdieu (1977, 1990), underrepresentation within higher education can stem from a complex socio-cultural and socio-political process whereby certain groups are privileged and/or preferred over other groups.

As stated, under-representation within higher education has been academically discussed frequently. However, little has been considered when focusing on the North Yorkshire coast. The lack of participation from the subject area's young people could be seen as detrimental to the overall development of the area as issues arise when looking at different aspects including quality of life, realising aspirations or in terms of general upward social mobility.

POLAR4: what does it show?

- For the majority of the postcodes covered in the POLAR4 data, it shows an increase in participation when compared to the polar3 data

- Most increases are by 1 quintile. However, there are still distinct low levels of participation across the coast when compared to areas further inland for example*

Area Comparison

- Many areas of Harrogate are in the highest quintile (5), with percentage levels at or above 50%

- Many areas of the North Yorkshire coast including Scarborough, Whitby and Filey are in the lower quintiles (1-2), with participation rates as low as 13.9%**

- Overall, the POLAR4 data suggests that while participation levels have risen, they are still below what could be argued as level with other areas of North Yorkshire

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* A small number of postcodes have shown a distinct increase in participation rates

** Areas along the direct coast which are within quintiles 1 and 2

*** POLAR stands for Participation of Local Areas

What Does the Literature Say?

Some researchers suggest that the person's class is a significant contributory factor toward the likelihood they will participate in higher education. Additionally, their class is argued as influencing the institution they will be accepted into (Zipin et al. 2015).

Family/parents is another topic which has repeatedly emerged as being an important factor when higher education participation is discussed. Much of the data suggests what a person's family or parents have done; they are likely to want to do the same, i.e. the father is a car mechanic, so their son or daughter wants to be the same (Bourdieu, 1977).

Noted researchers have argued that for the working-class to succeed in higher education, a shift in values and norms is needed to align with the 'middle-class' nature of higher education. Such alterations will also include changes to what is seen as 'acceptable' behaviour as well as changes to cultural things, including their dress sense (Lehmann, 2013; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989).

Arguments have been presented by academics like Campbell and Hendrick (2017) and Spohrer (2015) who suggest that influential people in politics have created a social stigma around the working-class by repeatedly making remarks that the working-class has low aspirations. However, these academics indicated that from their research, the working-class have HIGH aspirations. This is said to have led to a situation whereby programmes aimed at Widening Participation (WP) in higher education have been based on raising the already high aspirations when they should have been focused on educating WP students on the processes and opportunities available to them.

Relating to aspirations, Bourdieu (1992) argues that some WP groups distinctly lack the fundamental understanding regarding how choices lead to a realisation of their aspirations. Specifically, they often have dreams of obtaining a high-grade career such as a doctor but lack the understanding of the educational choices they must take to actually become a doctor.

Key Points for Consideration

- Class influences higher education participation.
- Parents also influence the choices of their children when the topic of higher education is discussed.
- Aspirations are generally misunderstood.
- Working-class lack fundamental understanding of what higher education is and, importantly, how it is relevant to them.

Findings

*All names are pseudonymised

Through the process of narrowing down responses given by the participants, general themes which were present between them emerged as the basis of discussion surrounding the findings of the research. Some themes which emerged were: (i) Higher education provision, (ii) Familial influences, (iii) Local opportunities and (iv) Aspirations.

Higher Education Provision

Responses from the participants suggest they feel there is a lack of sufficient higher education provision along the North Yorkshire coast. They indicated that although there are some options when looking into available institutions when they look for a course suitable for them, the list of available institutions is reduced significantly. Furthermore, many of the students made their desires to study within their hometown well known during the interviews. Thus, this could arguably further impact on their chances of finding a relevant and appealing higher education course.

Familial Influences

Many participants referenced their parents or other family members as being an important part of the decision-making process when they discuss higher education. First, some said that because their parent(s) have been, they want to do the same, indicating that they had even discussed it with their parent(s). On the other hand, students who had parents who did not go to higher education often discussed wanting to pursue similar choices, opting for more 'hands-on' professions like car repair or service in the military. Additionally, it was evident that those students who had parents who attended university, also had a better understanding of how courses link up, creating a realistic pathway to their desired career.

> "I don't think there's much variety for me personally!"
> (Dave, Year 12 Student)

> "I'd probably say travel is something which put some people off from going to uni"
> (Sarah, Year 13 Student)

> "Well I think if the whole area got funding and they didn't scam the people who lived here for transport, I think people would actually [go to university]"
> (Mark, Year 13 Student)

> "I want to join the military to be honest, cos that's what my dad did!"
> (Chris, Year 13 Student)

> "My parents said it was good, so I've decided I want to do the same"
> (Martin, Year 12 Student)

> "I've had negative thoughts of uni because my sister went to uni and she quit because it wasn't that good, my uncle went, and he quit."
> (Dave, Year 12 Student)

Local Opportunities

Almost all participants, including students and policy influencers, indicated that there were limited opportunities available along the North Yorkshire coast. Participants suggested that the lack of opportunity available to them added to their low motivations for higher education. This indicates that their everyday lived experiences of compromising their visions for the future have created a negative environment for higher education. Specifically, the lack of available jobs in the area is suggested as negatively impacting on desires for higher education. Additionally, this lack of local opportunity was discussed about travel when the students repeatedly acknowledged the isolated nature of their hometown. They discussed the high cost in terms of both finances and time involved in traveling to a suitable institution for higher education study.

Aspirations

All students indicated they had aspirations for their lives. Additionally, their aspirations were highly varied and ranged from normal higher education study to military service. Importantly, the responses also reaffirm arguments made by Spohrer (2015) and Campbell and Hendrick (2017) who argued that the working-class do have high aspirations. This distinct misunderstanding, often portrayed in populist sources, indicates that more needs to be done in terms of better understanding the complex nature of aspirations. This revelation also reaffirms Hart's (2016) argument which suggests that there is an aspirational hierarchy within government, placing higher education at the top, while also reducing the value of other aspirations like the military desires of Chris. Some students also noted their aspirations for a highly specialised career but have limited understanding of how to realise that aspiration, indicating what Bourdieu (1992) defines as doxa fantasy. Moreover, findings also aligned with Weis (1990) when they found that working-class participants often had high aspirations but also had limited knowledge in terms of how to actually realise their aspirations.

> "Yeah, my hometown is really isolated, like there's not really much opportunity around here at all!"
>
> (Sarah, Year 12 Student)

> "I want to go into, like, a football coaching sort of thing."
>
> (Sarah, Year 12 Student)

> "There's not a lot of job opportunities here!"
>
> (James, Year 13 Student)

> "I don't know, probably, like, go abroad and get a computer job there…because it pays more than here!"
>
> (Lee, Year 13 Student)

Opportunities for Development

More Experience with HE

– Students expressed more fun and consistent experience with higher education throughout their schooling, suggesting this would help develop positive emotions for higher education participation.

– Fun experiences were discussed as being specifically important, both when HE institutions visit their college, or when they attend academic trips to the institutions themselves.
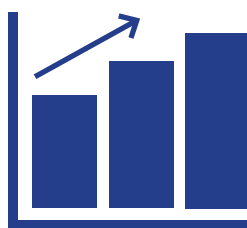
Local Provision

– Students suggested that more relevant courses are needed in the local area.

– Local variety was especially relevant as many students indicated they would prefere to study locally, rather than move away.

– It was discussed that more communication between the student body and influential personnel within the HE institution would help make positive adjustments to courses and their availability within the area.

CPD Courses on HE

– Many participants showed a fundamental lack of understanding regarding HE.

– This includes: the process of applying, finances, the grading system and housing.

– Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses would arguably help inform the students about some of the lesser know aspects of higher education.

– These courses could include other aspects to student life including cost saving tips or how to budget (something they may not have had to do before)!

Conclusion

From the research, it is evident that while the data suggests that higher education participation rates are rising, there is still a gap when areas are compared. Additionally, when student responses are analysed, it is evident that there seems to be some miscommunication surrounding a multitude of issues relating the participation rates along the North Yorkshire coast.

Some of the issues which emerged from the interviews included (i) a misunderstanding of the aspirations of the working-class, (ii) a distinct miscommunication regarding relevant local provision, (iii) alternate pathways and (iv) social/cultural factors which impact on the value given to higher education. Students who wanted to go to university indicated that they would want to move away as a way to 'escape' their local towns. On the other hand, some indicated a distinct and uncompromising desire to remain within the local area, placing more importance on the local provision. As such, with a complex and varied outlook on the area, it's resources and the provision, there is no doubt many areas which must be addressed to increase local participation rates.

Possible areas of development discussed by the participants included things like more contact with higher education throughout their time in education. Specifically, they were asked how more contact during the early years (years 7 through 9) of their secondary school education, would help with their decision. Majority of the students responded positively to the suggestion, commenting on how it would help with "normalising" higher education; this was especially significant for the students who did not have family with experience in higher education.

Another aspect of development discussed by the participants was to boost local provision within the area. Many implied they would be more open to attending university if there was a course which suited them locally. In this sense, more communication would arguably be required between various institution within the area. Some participants suggested a positive step toward this would be to include the student voice in the process of developing new courses or changing existing ones.

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