

Does university reputation affect working-class graduates' access to professional occupations?

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Abstract

University graduates' access to the professions is under close scrutiny across countries with mass higher education (HE) systems. In the UK, evidence shows that many professions remain dominated by a small elite section of society, and have become less representative in recent decades, and that working-class students fall behind their middle-class peers throughout school and university education. While policymakers are concerned with access to prestigious universities, research looking at the effects of university type on graduate outcomes suggests the subject studied and degree results have a larger influence on labour market outcomes than does university reputation (McGuinness, 2003). However, recent work on UK graduate employment outcomes (Purcell et al., 2013) suggests that university reputation may still have a role to play.

This paper explores whether attending a university perceived as having an 'elite' reputation evens out the chances of entering a professional occupation (e.g. doctor, scientist, teacher, etc.) for working-class graduates, using detailed information about HE experience and transitions into employment from the Futuretrack dataset. Futuretrack is a longitudinal survey of people who applied to full-time HE in the UK in 2005/06, and the latest available survey wave was conducted in 2011/12, when most graduates would have been in the labour market for up to two years. Using multinomial logistic regressions, this paper estimates the effects of perceived university reputation on graduate employment outcomes. The outcome of interest is accessing a 'professional' occupation, which has traditionally been seen as a 'graduate job'. The main variables of interest are university reputation and social class. Other control variables include prior attainment at school and university, engagement in extra-curricular clubs and activities while at university, subject studied, and other personal characteristics.

Initial findings suggest that working-class graduates are underrepresented in professional-level occupations. However, when university reputation and graduates' prior attainment are taken into account, the social class effect is diminished. This research will improve understanding of the complex factors that affect access to graduate-level employment for students from working-class backgrounds, in a changing and increasingly fragmented labour market and HE context. Such understanding is timely as students are increasingly bearing a higher burden of the costs of HE and take more responsibility in shaping their own paths into employment.

References

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