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Applying to Higher Education: comparisons of independent and state schools

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This paper reports on research into the ways that schools and colleges engage in university application processes. Questionnaire and interview data were collected from a sample of independent and state schools/colleges in two geographical areas in England: 1400 Year 13 students from 18 schools or colleges were surveyed and 15 in-depth interviews were carried out with school/college-based teachers or advisors on HE application procedures. The analysis presented in this paper compares independent and state schools with respect to: the types of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that students applied for; the way the process of HE application was managed in their schools; and how their teacher advisors explained and managed the HE application processes and outcomes for the students in their schools. We associate specific patterns of university choice with the institutional conditions within which they took place. Informed by Bourdieu's relational sociology, our discussion focuses on how schools in the two sectors mobilise different forms of capital in the competitive processes of university application. We also use the notion of doxa to explore how these micro-institutional processes and teacher advice relate to observed differences between state and independent sector students' HE destinations.

KEYWORDS higher education; school-leavers; independent and state schools; doxa; capital.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of a changing Higher Education (HE) landscape in Britain, including the promotion of widening participation and, more recently, the lack of an adequate number of university places, this paper reports findings from empirical research into the ways that post-16 schools and colleges¹ engage in the process of university application. Both questionnaire and interview data were collected from a sample of independent and state schools in two different parts of England. In all, 1400 Year 13 students from 18 schools were surveyed and 15 of their teacher advisors were interviewed. Our analysis in this paper compares independent and state schools with respect to three aspects of the wider process of HE application: the types of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that students applied for; the way the application process was managed; and how the teacher advisors explained the HE application processes and outcomes for their students. Our research design and methods enable us to explore the particular institutional conditions which form the context within which the students made their HE choices.

We begin by locating the study within recent debates on HE applications and destinations in England. In this section, we specifically refer to the work of Bourdieu and related research. The succeeding section describes our research methods and the data collected. The central analytical theme is our comparison between the state and independent school sectors. This is used in the three main areas of the study: the results of the Year 13 survey on HE choices; school organisation of the University and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) process; and the perspectives of school HE advisors. The

substantive parts of our paper address these three research themes. The concluding section summarises our results and discusses their implications for the widening participation agenda, educational mobility and social equity.

BACKGROUND

Over the last few decades, supported by government policy, higher education in the UK has moved from elite to mass provision. The widening participation agenda has worked towards the target of getting 40% rising to 50% of school-leavers into higher education, at degree or sub-degree level (DfES, 2003). Efforts have specifically aimed at increasing the proportion of students from backgrounds that traditionally had not considered entering HE. This has stimulated growth in HE student numbers, accompanied by increased numbers of HEIs and a broadened curriculum to include vocational courses (Reay *et al.*, 2005). In the longer term, sustained growth of the sector is anticipated in response to the demand for graduate-level qualifications in the workforce. Following the Education and Skills Act of 2008, pupils entering secondary education from September 2009 will be the first cohort to remain in education or training until they are 18 (DCFS, 2008). In both 2009 and 2010, the policy push to encourage HE enrolment has resulted in the demand for university places exceeding supply (Curtis, 2009; BBC, 2010a).

Alongside the commitments to growth and widening participation (WP), the last Labour government introduced tuition fees. This produced potentially contradictory effects in which fees act to impede the transition into higher education of the very same students that WP seek to include. By 2006/7 the participation in HE of those aged 17 to 30 reached 40%, well short of government's 50% target and with much lower participation of lower socio-economic groups (Findlay *et al.*, 2010). More recently, changes in the economic and political climate, including the economic downturn and a change of government, have brought issues of the funding and operation of the HE sector into the limelight. The Browne Report (2010) reflected the dual aspirations of growth in the sector alongside increased student fees. Its recommendations prescribed reduced state support to the HE sector, removal of a cap to fees, availability of student bursaries, and mechanisms to recoup and deal with student debt accrued while attending HE. Subsequently, the government has implemented proposals to allow universities to charge student fees of up to £6,000 per annum, increasing to £9,000 if certain other intake criteria are met. When the White Paper was issued in early 2011, student demonstrations to protest against fees were seen across the country, some breaking into violence (Taylor *et al.*, 2010). Although the effects of the increased HE fees and related conditions on universities are just beginning to emerge they are not yet known, it is highly likely that the risks of lifelong debt and unemployment will impact unevenly on who goes to university as well as the university and course they apply for (Elliot-Major, 2010).

Within the changing national dynamics described above, questions about university access have constantly highlighted equity concerns which have particular significance in a country with low levels of social mobility (Blanden *et al.*, 2008). There are ongoing concerns about how opportunities for university are distributed and more specifically about the inclusion of students from a broad range of social-class groups in more elite universities. In the face of widening participation in HE, the question about which types of university (Oxford or Cambridge; Russell Group; Pre-1992; Post-1992) students from different socio-economic status (SES) groups apply for remains an important aspect of the equality debate. Indeed WP, as specified in the Browne Report (2010), is an intake condition for universities intending to charge the new higher fee levels.

With Gorard *et al.* (1999) pointing to multiple determinants of HE participation rooted in family, locality and history, the persistence of social-class patterns has generated substantial research interest (Archer, 2003; Pugsley, 2003). Much recent analysis has referred to the work of Bourdieu (1984; 1986) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1997), which uses the interdependent constructs of capital, habitus and field to highlight the significance of education to social reproduction and the protection of class privilege. The interaction of these three central constructs have been used variously to explain and link the instantiation

of social class, individual choices, social-class patterns (e.g. in educational choices) and ultimately educational and social stratification (see for example, Webb *et al.*, 2002; Naidoo, 2004; Smyth and Hannan, 2007; Oliver and Kettley, 2010; Devas, 2011). Through these constructs Bourdieu integrates objective social structure with subjective agency providing a dynamic and relational theory of practice. He describes how, through history and in practice, capital, habitus and field influence one another and in turn reproduce the conditions for legitimating and sustaining prevailing class privilege and relations. In reference to habitus he comments,

This disposition, always marked by its (social) conditions of acquisition and realization, tends to adjust to the objective chances of satisfying need or desire, inclining agents to ‘cut their coats according to their cloth’, and so to become the accomplices of the processes that tend to make the probable a reality. (Bourdieu, 1984:65).

Other researchers, in their efforts to understand social and educational stratification, have extended Bourdieu’s theories beyond the individual level, using organisational or institutional habitus as a way of describing the life, internal structures and disposition of institutions (McDonough, 1997; Reay *et al.*, 2001; 2005). Insofar as it addresses a gap in Bourdieu’s work that connects people with institutions (Jenkins, 2002), this conceptual framing appears to be useful. Recently, however, it has been subject to a carefully worked critique by Atkinson (2011) who describes three specific flaws of the concept – substantialism, anthropomorphism and homogenisation. He argues that extending habitus to the collective level works against the relationism of Bourdieu’s social theory. Further he refers to Bourdieu’s use of ‘doxa’ to move beyond individual habitus but also capture the multiple positionings and social complexities within an institution or (sub-)field (Atkinson, 2011). This reframing of institutions as fields or sub-fields re-introduces stronger social dynamics, as ‘the field is the crucial mediating context wherein external factors – changing circumstances – are brought to bear upon individual practice and institutions’ (Jenkins, 2002:86). The use of doxa, on the one hand, re-inserts possibilities of ambiguity and contestation in the local practices in different sub-fields; on the other it reminds us of their connection to the broader hierarchical field of the education system and a recognition of its work in sustaining wider social hierarchies.

Working with this notion of doxa, our interest here is a comparison of the post-16 State and Independent sector schools in the competitive process of university application. We add an extra dimension to other studies that have pointed to sustained social-class differences and the consolidation of middle-class educational privilege in the transition to HE (Smyth and Hannan, 2007; Waters and Brooks, 2010; Oliver and Kettley, 2010). While institutional types in the post-16 and HE sectors are central here, they do not map neatly onto any of the current ways of estimating social class (e.g. occupational schema, parental education or measures of cultural capital; see Noble and Davies, 2009). Nevertheless, along with others, we are convinced that through our comparative analysis we are highlighting important class processes which contribute to debates about social class and educational equity (Read *et al.*, 2003; Sullivan and Heath, 2003). Indeed, it is the existence of clear evidence that the class composition of independent and state sector schools or of different universities types is not homogenous that begs questions about the work of schools in the transition to HE. We see this transition as a site of struggle in a moment of instability in the succession of class privilege and position.

To be more specific, we compare the HE choices made by the Year 13 students in our sample and link the particular outcomes with school doxa of each sub-sector or sub-field. We accomplish this by considering the institutional arrangements through which schools in each sector mobilise different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1997) to sustain or gain privileged positions for their students within the field of education. This is followed by a comparison of teacher advisors discursive framing of the application process and outcomes for their own students and the ways they articulate and position themselves with

respect to the school doxa and the institutional position within the broader educational field. The point is not to claim that institutional processes alone influence HE choice but rather to highlight these, alongside other factors (e.g. family background), make an important contribution to educational stratification.

This discussion is guided by three research questions:

- What types of university do students from the state and independent sector apply for?
- How do state and independent schools manage the university application process?
- How do state and independent teacher advisors explain HE application processes and outcomes for their students?

We begin our analysis by presenting descriptive statistics on application data across the school sectors from the large dataset gathered in our survey research.

THE RESEARCH

This survey was carried out as part of a DIUS/BIS- funded project designed to examine the attitudes and plans of Year 13 pupils towards studying at university abroad (Findlay *et al.*, 2010). In this paper we have examined the data from only one part of the study that investigated how the process of university application was carried out in independent and state schools, drawing data from two main sources: a questionnaire survey of 1400 Year 13 students in 18 schools in two different areas of England (Brighton and Sussex, and Leicester and Leicestershire); and face-to-face interviews with teacher advisors in 15 of the schools in which the survey had been administered. The sample comprised schools in city, suburban and small-town locations and included 13 mixed and 5 single-sex schools, the latter all from the independent sector. There were 11 independent schools and 7 state sector institutions across the two regions with half of the student respondents in the state sector and half in independent schools, with equal numbers of girls and boys. It is important to note here that this does not represent the proportion of students in each sector nationally but provides us with an equal, and hence statistically comparable, number of respondents within each sector. It also provides us with a range of schools from each sector affording us wider scope to explore and compare the institutional conditions within which the HE choices were made by the students.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections and involved simple-to-answer, closed questions, with a few spaces for elaboration where it was thought necessary or useful. Section 1 asked respondents to document their current studies – A levels taken, plus other qualifications. Section 2 referred to their previous studies – mainly GCSE grades. Section 3 asked about universities applied for. Section 4 concerned the students' previous links outside the UK (travel, holidays, residence abroad). Section 5 requested general demographic data, both for respondents and their parents, including the education and occupations of the latter. The questionnaires took around 15-20 minutes to complete and were filled in on hard copy by Year 13 students who were applying to university. They were administered by school staff in a special session either in a large assembly hall or in tutor groups.

The second research instrument was the teacher advisor interview schedule which was used with 15 individuals with good knowledge of students' HE applications. They were often very experienced staff who had been responsible for university applications over many years. In total we recorded interviews with eight teachers advisors came from the independent schools and seven from the state sector. The three missing advisor interviews were all from small independent schools. In one case we conducted an unrecorded telephone interview (PB5) and in two small independent girls' schools (PL1 and PB2) we were unable to arrange a mutually convenient time for the interviews. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and took place and were recorded with informed consent. Consistent with ethical guidelines, we do not name interviewees or schools. Instead a code was devised in which the initial letter indicates whether it is a State (S) or (P) Independent sector school and the second letter indicates the geographic region,

Brighton/Sussex (B) or Leicester(shire) (L). Hence, PB6 is a Private sector school in Brighton/Sussex, number 6 on our sample list, whilst SL7 is a State school in Leicester(shire), number 7 on that sample.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from the student survey were entered into SPSS in order to compare and cross-tabulate the background, the HE choices and examination performance of state and independent school students. Advisor interviews were transcribed, and then repeatedly read in order to identify dominant themes. With a relatively small number of respondents, we hand-coded the 15 interviews to isolate responses that referred to: resources used, extra-curricular support and timing. We also focused on how the HE choices made by students were realised; this included Advisors’ advice to their students, and their views and explanations of student HE aspirations.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research reported in this paper. Firstly the sample for the survey includes Year 13 students drawn from a range of different institutions and in two regions of England. These regions were included so that our research accessed a broad range of respondents; as such the regional differences are not a key focus for analysis in this paper (for this, see Ahrens *et al.*, 2010). We wanted to compare the experience and outcomes of the HE application process in the state and independent sectors. Second, it is important to reiterate that this is not a nationally representative sample as we deliberately collected responses from equal numbers of students in each sector in order to maximise rigorous comparison.

Our main interests in this analysis was in investigating how institutional processes around HE applications contributed to educational stratification. As discussed earlier, we wanted to explore how schools managed HE applications and its contribution to sustained social class differences in transition to HE. Although our later analysis compares independent and state schools, to guard against assumption that attendance at an independent or state sector institution can be mapped on to SES, we also used parental educational background as stronger proxy for social class to further analyse the sample in each sector. This data was derived from a student questionnaire item asking whether both, either or neither parents had attended university. Fittingly, it is those students without a family history of university attendance that are targeted in WP strategies.

Table 1 shows clear distinctions in the educational background of parents in the independent and state sectors. Just less than half of students in the independent sector had both parents with university level education which was far more than double the proportion for students in the state sector. At the other end of the spectrum neither parent of nearly 60% of students in the state sector had been to university compared to less than 25% in the independent sector. This analysis indicates that the students in the independent sector tend to come from backgrounds in which they enjoy both greater educational and economic privilege than those in the state sector. With this more nuanced understanding of the student sample, we turn to consider the main questions which circulate around how schools in the state and independent sectors contribute to sustaining or gaining privileged educational position for their students the in the competitive process of transition to HE.

Table 1: Parents with university-level education and school sector (n=1370)

	Both		Yes, my father		Yes, my mother		Neither of them		Total	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Total	447	32.6%	249	18.2%	116	8.5%	558	40.7%	1370*	100.0
Independent	317	46.3%	144	21.0%	57	8.3%	166	24.3%	684	100.0
State	130	19.0%	105	15.3%	59	8.6%	392	57.1%	686	100.0

UNIVERSITY APPLICATIONS

Our first research question is a comparison between the university application choices made by students in the state and independent sectors. For this analysis we divided the HE sector into four: Oxbridge, Pre-1992, Post-1992, and Other. These represent a loose hierarchy within UK universities. The analysis of the survey responses was based on the dominance of the university type within the student HE choices. More specifically, we entered all five UCAS choices and recoded them by the dominance of university types. For pre- and post-1992 categories it was three or more in one category that produced the final composite code. If, however, students made an Oxbridge application this was deemed to override all the other choices and they were simply coded 'Oxbridge'.

These data are presented in Table 2. Results show that the proportion of Independent school students who applied to Oxbridge is almost three times that of State sector applicants. In contrast, nearly four times the proportion of State school students applied to Post-92 universities compared to the Independent sector students. This substantiates findings from other research (Archer, 2003; Pugsley, 2003; Noble and Davies, 2009) that point to inequalities in university application by school sector.

Table 2: Type of universities applied to by school sector

	Oxbridge		Pre-1992		Post-1992		Other		Total	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Total	144	14.2	659	64.9	192	18.9	21	2.1	1016	100.0
Independent	108	20.5	365	69.1	41	7.8	14	2.7	528	100.0
State	36	7.4	294	60.2	151	30.9	7	1.4	488	100.0

As some authors suggest that these differences might be explained by examination performance (e.g. Gorard, 2008), we explored HE choices of high-performing students in both sectors. Using the same university types, we selected the students who had achieved 7 or more A* - B grades at GCSE and compared them to students with lower GCSE results. This analysis is presented in Table 3. As expected, a much higher proportion of independent school students attain high grades than those in state schools. Importantly, however, high-performing students in independent schools are more than twice as likely to apply to Oxbridge as high-performing students in state schools. The reverse pattern is observed in the post-92 university sector, where nearly four times the proportion of high-performing students in the state sector apply to these institutions compared to the independent sector. For the lower attaining students too, the tendency is for independent school students to select higher-status universities.

Further analysis of the survey data revealed other differences between the school sectors. Firstly, 20.6% of the Independent students compared to only 5.8% of State students had included three or more of the 'top ten' universities in their HE application choices.² Secondly, students in the independent sector were twice as likely to consider applying to university abroad (5.5%) as those in the state sector (2.8%). The evidence strongly indicates that children attending independent schools are more likely to apply to the most elite universities in the UK and abroad, even if this means studying far away from home.

Table 3: Type of university applied to by high-performing students by school sector

GCSE results		Oxbridge		Pre-1992		Post-1992		Other		Total	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
7 or more at A*, A or B	Ind.	108	22.0	343	69.9	27	5.5	13	2.6	491	93.0
	State	34	10.4	222	68.1	67	20.6	3	0.9	326	66.8
Less than 7 at A*, A or B	Ind.	0	0.0	22	59.5	14	37.8	1	2.7	37	7.0
	State	2	1.2	72	44.4	84	51.9	4	2.5	162	33.2

The opening of international HE markets highlights the significance of

globalisation to discussions of educational equity and stratification. Recent research shows growing proportions of students moving beyond national boundaries to seek world-class university places and join a global educated elite (Findlay *et al.*, 2010; Waters and Brooks, 2010). Current estimates in England suggest this group comprises around 5000 students annually, disproportionately drawn from independent sector schools (Findlay *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, research indicates that children of working-class parents are more likely to attend 'local' universities in order to defray the costs of moving (Holdsworth, 2006; Christie, 2007). Although this research evidence might represent the extremes, our interest in this paper is to explore how schools work to produce such polarised patterns of university application.

Application to university is a site of struggle within the field of education which is exacerbated in the current context in which academic qualifications, which are forms of symbolic capital recognised as 'legitimated competence', are being eroded in terms of their scarcity value. In order to sustain and transmit social position and distinction in the field of education, the symbolic capital of examination passes needs to be supported by economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1997). As more students from across the social spectrum gain qualifications that technically make them eligible for admission to prestigious UK universities, other social mechanisms (e.g. personal statements, applications to elite HEIs outside the UK) are put in place that effectively safeguard the advantages of more privileged groups. Given these changing requirements for university admission and the prevailing context of widening participation, our analysis now turns to how schools within the two sectors manage the processes of university application to produce the patterns described in the data presented above. We first explore how schools work to produce and mobilise different capitals to facilitate their students' access to the more elite HEIs (Webb *et al.*, 2002). Secondly we use the notion of doxa as 'sustained by multiple habitus as shared beliefs and orientations' (Atkinson, 2011:340), to explore what is 'taken for granted' as regards the social orthodoxy operating within schools in each sector with respect to HE applications.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS IN STATE AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

The empirical data discussed here is drawn from interviews with HE advisors in the schools. The UCAS application is a key focal point. Each student applying for a place in a UK university is required to complete and submit the UCAS form during the final year of schooling, Year 13. As the UCAS forms are submitted before the students take their A2 (A-level) examinations, universities use grades predicted by teachers as the basis for an offer of a place on a specific course. Prior academic record (e.g. GCSE results) and the student's personal statement may also be taken into account. Generally, the more popular the university and/or programme, the higher the A2 grade demand. Admission to Oxbridge or Russell Group universities or for medicine will usually require higher grades than other universities or courses. Students will be admitted to a university listed on their UCAS form if their result grades are equal to or exceed the offer they received from their chosen university. If they do not attain good enough grades then they are moved into the 'clearing' system in which they may have opportunities to take a place at a university or on a course not listed on their UCAS form.

The level of risk of not achieving particular grades or being offered a place at specific university or on a desired programme makes this a fraught process. The stresses associated with getting an appropriate place in HE are exacerbated by news that demand exceeds supply with limited places available through the clearing system (Curtis 2009). The following discussion highlights three key areas of institutional activity that bear on the applications process.

Staff resources

Examination results and university admissions data are important to the reputation of schools. These indicators of school performance are especially critical for the independent sector to attract fee-paying students in an exchange of economic for symbolic and other

forms of capital. So, while there is no statutory obligation for schools to provide careers advice to their students, it is common practice for formal procedures to be in operation and for specified members of staff to have a responsibility for student applications to university. All the Advisors interviewed described the arrangements in their schools. Especially in the Independent sector, there were several staff involved in staged application procedures that included, for example, helping with the completion of UCAS application forms, providing information or advice to students, checking applications, or co-ordinating the school arrangements.

The main person advising them for university admissions is the Form Tutor. ...So the Form Tutor will have a form of 10-12 boys and he or she will advise on university destinations coordinated by the Head of Year, who is me. I coordinate the UCAS forms and the Headmaster is there to check every reference which is drafted by the Tutor. (PL4)

The following quote illustrates differences in resources that inevitably means reduced personal support for students in the State sector.

I get a good idea of the ones that go for a UCAS course. I would know their progression plans; they give the tutors an indication. I have two tutor groups this year; 53 of the 57 in the two groups are doing a university application. (SL6)

In addition to the range of staff available to advise students, all HE Advisors described the basic information made available to the students. In both sectors, schools had library collections and available web-connectivity to allow students access to university prospectuses and other information.

... first of all we organise to get prospectuses of universities – we do that. We have a fair that comes to Brighton... we send all the students down and me and my colleague go with a very large bag and pick a prospectus from each university. So we have a complete set of all prospectuses and more than one set, which students can use. (SB7)

Alongside the provision of university prospectuses and publicity, in all schools, students were guided in a range of formal group and individual sessions. There were, however, significant differences in the ways that students were led through the process of course and institutional selection. Firstly, as indicated by PL4 and SL6 above, the size of the groups in independent schools tended to be smaller than those in the state sector. This afforded more time and attention to advise individual students in their HE choices. Secondly, the engagement between the students, the university information and the staff tended to be driven in rather different ways, as illustrated by the quotations below. The first is from a boarding school with 'houses'.

I will see them in the plenary thing several times and then in smaller groups. Then I go around the houses and we talk about things there....And after that it tends to be on an individual basis, so it narrows itself down. (PL3)

We make full use of the UCAS system which has all the search facilities... we always encourage them to visit the places once they have drawn up a short-list... and people like me – well mostly me – talk about the types of universities that they have chosen and then tell them to go and check them out... But we don't chase people up at all; they would have to come and talk to us about it (SB7).

The HE selection process was recognised by all Advisors as difficult as the students were required to identify the university and course they were applying for. While in all schools students were encouraged to talk to relevant subject teachers or departmental heads to get help, it was the independent schools that were more pro-active in illuminating different aspects of the process for their students. Two examples:

... we also run our own careers fair which is supported by past pupils of the college. They actually come back and man a little stall on their particular career, so it creates a little mini-careers fair. It's all about stirring the pot of imagination and opportunity to see what comes out of the pupil when they get to the start of Year 12 when you start to try and firm up their ideas. (PB6)

We tried to get academics and Admissions Tutors to talk to the boys...but the main area we have had past students come in is Medicine... so students that are currently studying Medicine come... we have a Medical careers night which is run by the parents who are doctors... and these undergraduates... and they mock interview the boys. (PL4)

The involvement of former students who had gained admission to a specific course and/or universities within a highly competitive HE field was both a practical strategy for students embarking on the application process and a means of building social capital by activating informal networks.

Extra-curricular activities

Beyond the specifics of course and university selection, there are other ways that schools support students with their HE admissions. The competition for good university places in a context where there are increasing numbers of students achieving top A-level grades has brought with it a demand that students demonstrate a wider set of attributes, experiences or skills (forms of social and cultural capital often accumulated through exchange of economic capital) alongside high-grade examination passes (symbolic capital).

We are very much a whole person philosophy and we like to promote the transferable skills element... the extra-curricular, the leadership and the vocational. We are a very, very happy school. (PB1)

The purposive use of extra-curricular activities was normalised by the above Independent school Advisor and justified in terms of an institutional philosophy although this may also be understood as a means to accumulate assets to bring to bear in the struggle to gain or sustain position in the field HE applications. The personal statement, an essential part of the UCAS application form, provides an important forum for explicit reference to the social and cultural capital accumulated through extra-curricular activities. This was handled very differently across schools. For example, in some independent schools the Advisors described a thorough process in which students drafted their personal statements which were subsequently checked by their form tutor and often another member of staff.

The level of teacher and website support available to students has more recently brought into question the value and reliability of personal statements for university admission. The Director of admissions at Cambridge University, for example, has stated that the university no longer scores the personal statements, alleging that they can no longer be sure that the students write them themselves. Without research evidence it is difficult to assess the extent to which personal statements still influence university admissions in a direct sense. That they are required and that some schools continue to expend resources on their development would suggest they have some value. Even if they have no direct bearing, they do function as a means to make students more self-aware and confident in using a particular narrative style to describe their own experiences, personal potential and comparative strengths. This is an expressive order or writing genre that is

clearly useful for future education and labour market applications and is a form of explicit social positioning.

Furthermore, extra-curricular activities and the development of soft skills have become important in supporting student HE applications. These experiences are used to provide content for a personal statement and have been emphasised by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009) as contributing to the personal and social development of young people. All schools within our study offered extra-curricular activities that ranged from sports teams and community work to trips abroad and cultural programmes. But the accounts varied between school sectors: first an advisor from an independent school, then one from an inner-city sixth-form college.

If I look back to the summer, we had a group that went out to Nepal...a mixture of hiking and community service. Our sports people toured. Our musicians went to South America... (PL5)

There is one exchange link that was set up in 2001, a school in [names town in US]. We have taken three groups of students...to give them an experience of education in a different environment. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to stump up the money... [At the beginning] we did it with the 'Excellence in Cities' money, which helped us provide grants to attend the programme. That doesn't exist anymore, and we are asking £400-500 which is just beyond what the majority can afford. (SL7)

Some state-sector advisors appeared to underestimate the exchange value of social and cultural capitals and questioned the educational relevance of extra-curricular experiences not directly related to a specific course:

Every year the Performing Arts people have a New York trip and they all go over for a week... and that is related to the course and I think they go to studios and things like this and do Performing Arts sort of stuff. Apart from that it is ski trips... it's not really to do with education. (SB7)

Both the state and independent school Advisors showed appreciation of the value of experiences outside the formal curriculum. Our evidence, however, shows a more concerted and co-ordinated effort to provide these experiences and capitalise on them within the independent sector. In the competitive HE applications process, the capital flows (economic to social/cultural) facilitated through various extra-curricular activities and mobilised through in-school processes provide key support to the symbolic capital legitimated in top-grade examination results.

Time and timing

Timing was another significant differentiating dimension of the HE application process in schools. There are three deadlines for UCAS forms. The earliest, mid-October, just over a month after the start of the school year, is for students applying to Oxbridge and for medicine and veterinary courses. The second, mid-January, is for most other universities and courses. The third deadline, in March, is for art and design.

In most schools the UCAS preparation begins before the students reach Year 13,

... so round about the end of the summer term [Year 12] they start... in fact before that really... probably about Easter the personal tutors start delivering information on how to get started on their UCAS form. Because we like to get the UCAS forms up and running to get as many as possible ready by the end of November to avoid the rush... We do all of that quite early... we start that in Easter time [in Year 12], so they hit the ground running. (SB7)

Most Advisors in the State schools described a similar process to the one above, whereby UCAS preparation began towards the end of Year 12, when most students are studying AS-level subjects. In Independent schools there was a stronger focus on UCAS and future study at university much earlier on, often in advance of GCSE examinations.

Myself and the Head of Careers we have for all our Year 12s a programme which is called 'After School X' – a one-period session which takes them through the whole process. Their tutor facilitates and guides that. So when they move into Year 13 they have already have seen a UCAS form... So that guidance is continuous and to some extent it starts in Year 10 and Year 11 in terms of what are you going to do post-GCSE, so this is to create a coherent curriculum for where they want to go. (PL5)

The early focus on an educational future in university was characteristic of the independent sector. As pointed out by Smyth and Hannan (2007), the timely provision of such career advice enables students to make strategic choices about their A-level subjects which in turn can enhance their chances of a successful university application.

That is done on the back of a Psychometric profile. The parents can opt out, but virtually all of our Year 10 and 11 would have done that. The advisors would sit down with a de-brief about their profile and tell them about their options and what subjects would help them with that. (PL5)

Associated with the early focus on university destinations, many independent schools had advisors who dealt specifically with students applying to Oxbridge. While most state-sector schools also identified potential Oxbridge applicants, many of the independent sector teachers who took on this role were Oxford and Cambridge alumni well-placed to provide insights into the separate application and interviewing procedure at these institutions. This exemplifies the highly focused way that schools in the independent sector draw on available social and cultural capital; in this case, in preparation for the most highly-prized university places.

The Oxbridge group will be identified in some way as you come through your Year 10s and Year 11s. It's almost done on a kind of... it's almost an automatic thing. As a teacher interacts with other teachers you know... it is a hackneyed phrase but you see the 'cream rising to the top' and then... you might say that you keep an eye on it. (PB6)

The comparison of the HE application processes between the state and independent sector described above shows that there are certainly some similarities. However, the institutional approaches are strongly contrasted in terms of how the process is driven with respect to resources and timing. Changes in the wider educational field, including increasing numbers of students applying to university and achieving high-grade examinations have provoked stronger responses within the independent sector where considerable efforts are made to accumulate other capitals mobilised in securing elite university places. Further, the cyclical nature of the application process and the associated activities for specified year groups over successive years normalise these procedures as shared orientations embedded in the institutional regime. We suggest these are important parts of the explanation for the HE destinations of students from different school sectors.

THE TEACHER ADVISORS' PERSPECTIVES

Our earlier analysis of the university choices made by Year 13 students showed a pattern in which independent school students are more likely to apply to Oxbridge, 'top ten' and pre-1992 universities than those from state schools. Evidence in the previous section

showed preparation for UCAS applications handled differently between sectors. School-based HE advisors have a critical role in overseeing UCAS applications (Oliver and Kettley, 2011), and in this section we focus on their views about patterns of university choices made by students in their respective schools. One independent school Advisor elaborated:

100% go on to university. We are a selective school and they are quite high achievers and they seem to... it's a difficult one, it's part of the culture of the school. Without it ever being stated, it is part of the expectation of the school that you do go on to university. (PL1)

The articulation of an automatic social orthodoxy of the transfer to university is important in the construction of the doxa that at one level legitimates student access to higher education, and at another consecrates hierarchical positions of the social order that make particular courses of action (e.g. application to elite universities) 'natural' or 'thinkable' (Jenkins, 1992; Webb *et al.*, 2002). As Deer (2008) explains,

Doxa is the cornerstone of any field to the extent that it determines the stability of the objective social structure through the way these are reproduced and reproduce themselves in a social agent's perceptions and practices (2008:121).

This confluence of subjective perceptions (e.g. appropriate university choices) with objective relational structures is a critical moment for social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Atkinson, 2011). At the same time it is also a moment of instability offering transformative possibilities and generative social action in shifting aspiration and expectation (Thomson, 2008; Mills, 2011). So, in the competitive process of HE application, in addition to what is done – the specific practices for preparation in schools – the pedagogic work of Advisors has a vital influence on what is thinkable in the choice of university.

Negotiating choices

The UCAS choices made by a student are a negotiated outcome influenced by the institutional doxa, the range of available information and resources, and pedagogic action in the form of teacher advice. As PL1 indicates above, the advice offered is influenced by the institutional orientation but also by formal and informal knowledge and assumptions about each student and the appropriateness of specific HE destinations for them. For both students and teachers, the university application process comprises a series of options and distinctions which result in the final selection entered on the UCAS form. Reay *et al.* (2005: 160) comment that choice is rooted in fine discriminations and classificatory judgements of 'places for us and places for others' – 'social structures in the head'. Thus, we were interested in how Advisors thought about and supported their student applications, especially as our quantitative analysis (Tables 1 and 2) indicates patterns of HE application in which state school students, even those with predicted high performance, tend not to opt for the more prestigious universities. This was especially pertinent as the data was based on questionnaire returns from students whom this sample of Advisors had advised.

At the basic level, the expectation of an educational future in HE was different across the two school types. As PL1 above demonstrates, some schools have a strong tradition of sending entire cohorts to university. The doxic experience in which all students assume and are expected to enter HE will inevitably have influence students' assumptions and aspirations. And PL1 was by no means unique:

So they all go to university, if not immediately then following a Gap Year. I don't recall any boy in my Sixth Form that went straight into the working world...none of them at all. (PL4)

The assumption of progression to HE in the Private sector contrasted with the State sector where, for some, remaining at school after GCSEs had not necessarily been an expectation.

And for bright buttons... their aspirations are not to go on further than here... I mean they got here so that already is enormous for them, but it is actually the encouragement that you can do something and it is about making a realistic decision about what is available to you. That doesn't mean that all of them make that leap to go on to university, but if they have come here [to sixth-form college] I think that they realise that they can achieve. (SB9)

These quotes reflect clear differences in expectations and aspirations for students. Advisor SB9, above, clearly appreciates the transformative possibilities of pedagogic action that is in line with a widening participation agenda. For those in state schools who did apply for HE, however, Advisors often described a lack of student knowledge and cast this as individualised deficit without comment on the social conditions producing this absence. This was not evident in the independent schools where, our research shows, students are inculcated earlier with the expectation of university entrance and have greater exposure to university types and courses from an early age. The two quotes below also illustrate the way that, in the state sector, university choice was framed largely in social terms which occluded knowledge or suggestions that some universities might be regarded as better than others. This implicit denial of any HE hierarchy was compounded in their descriptions of a neutral stance towards particular institutions in their advice to students.

I think they come with no knowledge at all of the universities, that is the first thing... and I mean I have a big map in my office and I am always using it to show them where these places are, because mostly they don't know where they are. So they enter it rather blind. . . . I think a lot of them just want to go to university. . . . But in regard to institutions, we don't push universities for certain subjects either. . . . I always think that in the end they have to try to get the place that they are going to be happiest. . . . I think they are more concerned about what the nightlife is like, which is fair enough because they are going to live there for three years.... We have a simple line that basically you should go to a place that you like the most and that has the best course for you. . . . I think you know up to a point it's a rather random thing... at least from the student's point of view ... (SB7)

Actually the first thing is to draw up a shortlist by going through the UCAS search thing and then come to someone like me and I'll talk about the different places. But we don't concentrate on any places, no. I always think that people should apply for the place where they would like to spend three years, wherever that is. (SB9)

The aspiration reflected by the two interviewees above was dominated by getting into university – perhaps any university. These views have some resonance with recent research in the state sector that suggests teacher advice is, in part, an affective response to welfare concerns (Oliver and Kettley, 2011). Nevertheless such advice remains an acceptance of the limits of possibility for their students, the boundaries of the thinkable. Though perhaps not explicitly realised by the Advisors, their claim to a neutral stance as well as the orientation of their students to 'any' university effectively reproduces the existing educational and social hierarchy (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Webb *et al.*, 2002). Thus, 'the *doxa* in each field operates to misrecognize its contribution to the overall field of power and to the (re)production of social inequalities' (Thomson, 2008: 73).

In contrast to this rather *laissez-faire* approach, a sharper and more strategic perspective – that acknowledged an educational marketplace, the HE hierarchy and strong competition for places as well as high aspirations – was explicit within the independent

sector.

As regards general university destinations the school loves the Russell Group, or I mean Russell Group and equivalent... those places. (PL4)

Yes, if we can get 10 [into Oxbridge] we will think that is a good performance, because it is an independent school, this is a major reason for other people from the outside looking in. You might find that another [independent] school will be broadcasting that it has 20+ and that will very much be its marketing statement. Parents will always be looking at that. (PB6)

The above contrast between school sectors illustrates how aspirations, usually individuated as a personal characteristic (often cited in terms of working-class deficit) are strongly located in the social nexus and produced by institutional conditions and doxa of schools. Locating the HE applications within the social field rather than in individuated differences is an important distinction that has direct bearing on, for example, initiatives and practices supporting the WP agenda.

Social constraints

All advisors recognised a range of social factors impacting on student choices. Whilst economic concerns were rarely articulated within the independent sector, these were often highlighted by advisors in the state sector.

I think that it is true that some want to stay close... I think it is because they are worried about the expense. But generally I would think that it's not ideal to live at home when you are going to university, because it's not really the experience. . . . I notice that you do get students that only put down Sussex and Brighton. Maybe a couple of courses in each place because they really want to stay and you do notice that some of them tick the live at home. That I presume is deliberate... a strategic judgement that it is going to be cheaper that way [...] I can well believe it being socio-economic circumstances... (SB7)

In more diverse Leicester, alongside socio-economic factors, ethnicity and culture were seen to impact on choices, especially of girls. Here the divide was between the local pre-1992 (Leicester) and post-1992 (De Montfort) universities:

Yes, the vast majority ... certainly higher than 60% in the last two or three years have applied to De Montfort University. . . . The reasons for that are very varied... they stem from financial issues and cultural issues where they are required to... particularly the girls... to stay at home. (SL7)

Yes, and some Leicester [applications], especially for Medicine, because I think they are relatively successful. . . . So Leicester University knows that the girls here have a sound scientific base. We never had anyone rejected by Leicester University. So, quite a few of them apply to Leicester as well. (PL1)

Within these acknowledged geographical limits for their students, independent school advisors remained strategic, and as the above quote immediately suggests, they tend to remain focused on prestigious courses in pre-1992 HEIs. Referring to established links with certain universities (social capital) and an exemplary record of admissions, some HEIs were included, again strategically, as a safe option to ensure that their students studied high-status subjects at a good university.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have used empirical evidence to argue that institutional processes within

schools have a significant influence on patterns of applications to HE. Informed by the work of Bourdieu (1985; 1986; 1997), Reay *et al.* (2005), Atkinson (2011) and others, we have illustrated the contrasts between state and independent schools using the notion of doxa to illustrate key ways that school practices and processes are imbricated in the transitions to HE in ways that contribute to wider-scale patterns of social differentiation in HE. In particular, we have highlighted the ways that social practices in independent schools concentrate on the development and accumulation of a range of capitals to support the symbolic/academic capital of high examination passes.

Our research shows clearly differentiated patterns of HE application. Across the range of examination performance, independent school students have a much greater tendency to apply to higher status universities in the UK and abroad. Our analytical focus on institutional procedures and advice within each sub-field/sector provided a social contextualisation of HE choice and a shift away from individuated deficit accounts of those with lower social, cultural and economic capital that often characterise approaches to WP. Our illustrations of the different kinds of advice and support for students showed sharp contrasts between the two types of school in the ways they approached the HE application process. It is evident that, in contrast to state schools, independent schools assume a HE career for their students, invest more resources, start the process earlier, are more proactive in increasing their students' capital and aspire to get their students into higher-status universities and courses. These elements are reflected and sustained in the school doxa and in the discursive repertoire that framed the advice offered to students by their HE Advisors. In the same vein, our research illustrates how lower aspirations characterise the doxic experience in state sector schools in which the approach to HE applications appeared to be less ambitious even for the high achieving students. In Bourdieu's terms this situation may be understood as a tacit acceptance of place in the hierarchical educational field in which teachers' orthodox practice and engagement in the 'rules of the game' suggest that 'the way things are' in the application process is 'the way they ought to be'. In other words, teachers' practices (whether conscious or not) work to legitimate the cultural arbitrary that structures relations within and between the educational and social hierarchies.

We are in changing times in HE, with uncertainties about HE sector funding, student fees and the effects on student applications. The Browne Report's (2010) recommendation that admission of less privileged students becomes a condition for charging higher-level fees is likely to put greater accent on strategies for WP, especially in the higher-status HEIs. The suggestion from our research is that an individualised approach to improving examination performance and encouraging less privileged students to apply will not be sufficient. This approach strips the social from the production of individual choices and makes invisible the connection between habitus, field and capital. Our analysis suggests that more needs to be done within the sub-fields at the institutional level. One conservative suggestion found in the Browne Report is for better advice to be provided within schools, including specific training for teacher advisors. Acknowledging the potential of such strategies for change, without recognition of the application process as a field of struggle (Mills, 2011), this is far short of what is required to address educational inequalities. There is nevertheless room for manoeuvre, which is to suggest that institutional processes that appear to feed educational stratification would be an appropriate focus for WP attention. At one level the 'rules of the game' need to be made more explicit; and at another the recognition of the significance of multiple capitals could work to shift the narrow focus of state schools, teachers and pupils beyond only the examinations.

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NOTES

¹ While our sample included Year 13 students and HE advisors in both schools and sixth-form colleges, we will refer to all of them as schools both for ease of reference and to distinguish them from third-level education providers that might offer degree level courses.

² Top 10 UK universities are Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College, UCL, King's College London, Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol, LSE, Warwick (Times Higher Education, 9 October 2008).

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