Choice, Illusion and Access to Higher Education: What K-12 Teachers Should Know

Sally Patfield explains how teachers can support their students in light of new inequalities across the higher education sector ...

In recent decades, the Australian higher education landscape has expanded significantly. Polices initially aimed at getting more people into university are now focused on widening participation; that is, encouraging a more diverse array of students to 'choose' higher education. Despite its social justice aims, however, this agenda has not resulted in a fair or socially just university system. Paradoxically, it has exposed new inequalities both *within* particular institutions and *across* the higher education sector to the point that equitable access to university education in Australia is, arguably, an illusion. This article shares research findings relevant to all teachers across K-12 settings.

The many myths of choice

In the context of the Australian Government's vision of equity, excellence and quality for higher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016), young people are seen as rational actors who simply 'choose' their post-school futures.
However, two key ideas we think require further exploration are:

1. the unequal, hierarchical nature of contemporary higher education in Australia
2. the different capacities among young people to 'choose' higher education.

Our recent research focused on the idea of 'stratification' in higher education, taken here to mean deepening inequalities within the sector, such as in terms of the institution a student might attend or the degree in which they enrol. We used the lens of 'choice' to understand what is really happening for young Australians.
The Commonwealth's assumption is that students will collect relevant information from a range of sources, weigh up pros and cons, and make well-thought-out calculations based on their preferences (Southgate & Bennett, 2016).

Lacking aspiration?

To aid under-represented equity groups in this decision-making process, universities have increasingly initiated outreach activities to build knowledge of, and dispositions towards, higher education. However, it is the newer, less prestigious universities that are frequently promoted as accessible to these students, rather than older, established institutions (Reay, 2017). To this end, students who don't take up the offer to go to university are ultimately judged as 'not aspirational enough', placing blame on them for their post-school futures (Southgate & Bennett, 2016).

This simplistic view of 'aspiration' is not what plays out in practice. By contrast, our concern was to ask: what are the processes that lead to different kinds of higher education 'choices' by young Australians?

Which university and which degree?

We analysed the complexities of choice using Reay et al.'s (2005) concepts of the *embedded chooser* and *contingent chooser*. The embedded chooser has university-educated parents and is likely to come from a highly credentialled, middle-class family, where university is deeply ingrained in the family narrative. Higher education is embedded within their world and going to university is a long-term expectation. For this young person, the choice is not about *whether* to go to university, but *which* university to choose, often as an indication of status and distinction. In comparison, the contingent chooser is a first-generation entrant to higher education, typically from a working-class, low-income family. The very act of aspiring to higher education is a break from the established family narrative, and the very idea of university – not to mention where to attend – is contingent on any number of immediate concerns, such as economic, geographic and family expectations.

This duality provided a powerful starting point for exploring how 'choice' plays out in the post-school aspirations of young Australians. We studied this process of 'choosing' much earlier (during primary and secondary school), than when young people actually apply to enrol at university, focusing on when their ideas about their futures begin to form and crystallise. This approach provided a window into the early stratification of students' post-school choices.

Early stratification of higher education 'choice'

While access to higher education for under-represented equity groups is often seen as being about overcoming crude 'barriers' (Burke, 2012) such as money, distance and achievement, our research suggests that it is much more complicated than that. These factors not only structure choice-making, but also limit the capacity to imagine 'choosing' university at all.

How do we know?

Our analysis drew on data collected as part of a larger four-year research project (2012-2015) on the formation of educational and career aspirations, involving students in Years 3-12 (aged approximately 8 to 18) enrolled in 64 government schools in NSW (Gore et al., 2017a; Gore et al., 2017b). Of those schools, 30 were recruited for a qualitative investigation involving 134 focus groups with 553 students. Students were asked about: their experiences of schooling; the formation of post-school aspirations; key influences on aspirations; and knowledge of and experience with higher education and vocational education.

The complexities of choice

We were struck by how students at two schools epitomised embedded choice and contingent choice and conducted a comparative case study to illustrate different kinds of higher education 'choice' among young Australians. We compared a metropolitan high school, Harbour View High School (pseudonym), where students are more 'traditional' entrants to higher education, with a regional central school, Mountainside Central School (pseudonym), where students are less likely to pursue university pathways and therefore more likely to be seen as targets of widening participation initiatives. In Harbour View, the median income is twice the state average and half of the adults in the area hold a university degree. In Mountainside, the median income is half the state average and one in fifteen adults hold a university degree.

Our research showed that young people at Harbour View see no choice *but* to go to university; it is a long-term expectation they take for granted, and *not* going to university is inconceivable. They have at least one parent and many relatives and friends who have been to university, and these people provide students with important first-hand information and stories. The decision to go to university is so well established that student talk of aspirations centres on *where* to go, rather than *if* they should go to university. They often name prestigious institutions where family members have gone, and even overseas universities. These students also have access to international travel opportunities and take part in high-status cultural activities at school which they can 'trade in' when competing for entry into high-status institutions.

For the students at Mountainside, in a regional area with a history of mining and logging, their talk about university is characterised by language of hesitation and doubt; they will 'wait and see' what the future brings and believe that university is 'not for everyone'. Financial concerns are prevalent when they speak about higher education; for instance, one student said they would go *only* if they got a scholarship. Some said the 'real world' is one of work, not study, and they had already excluded the very idea of higher education from a young age. Most do not have a parent or relative with a degree and have not visited a university campus; their information about higher education therefore comes from school. While these students rarely mentioned a specific institution to attend, Mountainside is an hour's drive from a metropolitan university, and that local university was perceived as the best choice for those who might go to university because of proximity to family, cost, and perceived 'fit'.

For the embedded choosers at Harbour View, there is no clear-cut moment when the choice was made to go to university; rather, the path to university is so embodied that the idea of not going is unthinkable. Given such an enduring relationship with higher education, the real choice is *which* university to attend. In contrast, for the contingent choosers at Mountainside, the decision about university manifests as deferred choice and self-exclusion (Ball et al., 2002), and the focus has already narrowed to the 'local' university. As a result, it is unlikely young people attending these schools will end up at the same university, or even the same kind of institution.

An enduring truth

The idea of equitable choice in accessing higher education can therefore be considered at best, an illusion. It is far removed from the simplistic notion of young people as rational actors making rational choices about their futures (Baldwin & James, 2000). The embedded chooser and the contingent chooser are two extremes of choice-making and higher education choice in Australia is differently experienced depending on where a young person lies on this continuum: from a wide array of global choice to a fundamental absence of choice.

Therefore, while the widening participation policy agenda aims to open up higher education to 'the masses', it has an unintended and quite opposite consequence – it is entwined with social sorting (Bexley, 2016).

Institutional status plays a decisive role in graduate outcomes, derived from varying cultural and social resources available to students (Ingram et al, 2018). Those who are already privileged tend to amass the additional benefits that come from attending prestigious universities while, for their less advantaged peers, simply 'having a degree' is often not enough to compete in the competitive graduate marketplace. In policy narratives, attending 'university' is often linked with social mobility. However, inequities *within* the academy can mean that the 'new opportunities' higher education represents essentially have diminished value (Reay, 2017).

What teachers can do now

Start conversations about university early, even during the primary years

An important implication of our analysis for teachers is that the stratification of students' post-school choices occurs early. This begins not only when young people are making the decision about whether they will apply to university, but in fact when they are in primary and high school. Most research on higher education choice has focused on the later years of secondary schooling when students choose which institution to attend (Brooks, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). However, it is during the complex period of aspiration formation in primary and secondary school that higher education choice is formed. Starkly, it is also a time when some young people have already foreclosed on the very idea of higher education.

Encourage universities to engage early

Practically, widening participation initiatives need to be implemented much earlier than they are and must provide exposure to a range of institutions and degrees, as it is at this time that the very forms of inclusion and exclusion now characterising higher education begin to shape what young people see as possible and desirable.

Reform is necessary

Our analysis shows that any improvements in qualitative equity, that is, fair access inside the system, are a distant reality without reform. This is because the capacity to 'choose' university varies so vastly among the next generation of potential applicants. In our view, this stratification must be named and addressed as an issue requiring reform at a policy level.

There are also strategies that universities can implement, such as allocating places for students from under-represented groups in prestigious degrees, offering targeted early entry schemes that do not rely solely on academic measures, and providing financial support through scholarships and fellowships. Such information also needs to be funnelled through schools to young people and their families.

In sum, while massification has fostered the widening participation agenda as we have come to know it, there is now a critical and urgent need to address the stratification and horizontal inequity hidden in this

agenda. Equity of access to university cannot simply be addressed by exhorting more young people, regardless of their background, to 'choose' university.

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