

7-3 Advisors: “He said, how about media?”

Introduction

I think it depends upon what messages that they are getting at home from the family. (Participant 13)

Over the time I was at <university name> I saw a massive change and suddenly it's a sea of parents isn't it? (Participant 10)

This analysis considers the participant responses in relation to the ways potential students seek and act on advice from others before selecting a media studies course and higher education institution and making an application. This aspect of the admissions process has become increasingly significant with institutions noting a growing number of friends and families attending open day events alongside prospective students (Lepkowska, 2011). This is often attributed to the 2012-13 rise in tuition fees and changes to the student loan system (ibid.) which whilst securing the debt against the students' future income, also takes account of family income when setting the maximum amount a student may borrow as a maintenance loan (HM Government, 2014). This anomaly appears to signal an expectation that families will contribute to the overall cost of studying the course.

The significance of family and other influencers was recognised in the government's *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) as part of the rationale for increasing the public data requirements of higher education providers:

“We will ask the main organisations that hold student data to make detailed data available publicly, including on employment and earnings outcomes, so it can be analysed and presented by private organisations in a variety of formats to meet the needs of students, their parents and other advisors.” (ibid, p.6)

Without making it explicit, this requirement also makes a commitment to supporting commercial organisations in the production of league tables, a much discussed element of public discourse that may impact on prospective student decision making although their direct impact may not be as high as providers sometimes assume (Slack et. al., 2012 p.217).

On this basis, a consideration of three of the participants' perceptions of this phenomenon can contribute to an understanding of the ways public discourses around fees and loans intersect with the practices enacted by the participants.

Analysis

The analysis here considers this three-way relationship (student, advisor and course lecturer) from each of these perspectives. The participants were prompted to talk about their experiences of the impact of parental and other advice on student decision-making. Some participants are media studies graduates recalling their own experiences; others are academic staff who have been involved in the admissions process. Participant 13 is the headteacher of a non-selective Eleven-Eighteen state secondary school (academy) with experience of advising Year Twelve and Year Thirteen pupils as they apply for higher education or leave to pursue employment or other education/training routes.

These first participant responses demonstrate some of the implicit criteria that are being deployed in making a decision to study a media course. Participant 03, a media studies graduate, relates a fairly informal discussion with a career advisor:

I went to see a careers advisor and they asked me what subjects did I really enjoy? And I said, “Well, the one particular one,” was designing models and photography and photography especially. And they said, “Well, how about you consider then going into (...) a degree within media? ...and I said, “Well, what do you suggest?” And when we got round to it, he said, “How about media?” and that’s how we came to that... ...I’ve never looked back. (Participant 03)

This conversation is based on a decision-making process centered on preference and enjoyment of the subject (“*what subjects did I really enjoy*”) and then a suggestion that the participant should consider studying media. In this response the participant makes no reference to any consideration of his aptitude for the subject or to a discussion of what the outcomes might be in terms of employment or further education/training. However, this participant graduated in 2003 and so probably applied for university entry in 1999 making him liable for the £1000 per year tuition fees introduced in 1998 but not part of the cohorts that paid £3000 per year from 2004 or £9000 per year from 2012. This is in contrast to the response from Participant 13 describing her experiences of advising potential applicants under the current arrangements:

(...) I mean in the end we don’t (...) we don’t advise them to do anything we just...make them think- “make sure you’ve thought through your choices at the end.” (...) Y-you have to turn round, I mean some, some of the highest employment is in history graduates I think, isn’t it? And actually English literature...and we’ve already said to him “that’s fine but it will be on a course that actually you know is going to mean he’s got a better chance of employment at the end...you can choose what you like but! (Participant 13)

This response shows much greater concern for the instrumental value of the degree and whilst making it clear that the applicant makes the final decision, the emphasis is on employment outcomes. However, she demonstrates that she looks carefully at data regarding graduate destinations rather than making any assumptions. This does correspond to the discourses identified around the

current arrangements for student finance discussed in Chapter Seven, Section 7-4.

The next response from Participant 13 graphically demonstrates some of the pressures on both applicants and their advisors at the point where they receive their FHEQ Level 3 results and discover whether they have fulfilled the requirements of their conditional entry offer from their first choice institution:

...and we were there just trying to pick up the pieces...whereas at least now sometimes they're coming in and they already know they've not got in (angry) (...) so from our point of view and we know they've not got in...so we're ready (angry) we- we have certain people who when they walk through the door all the staff are ready...and we know which ones, you know as I say staff are ready so that- you know the- okay they go open their envelope, going to have a look (...) but there'll be a member of staff pretty (angry) close nearby...and we are getting them straight over to Connexions 'cause Connexions will be there. (...) So you can sort of do that already Urm but yeah the- it is, it's a bit easier if they know they're not going. (happy) [slight laugh] It- it's just so sad watching these people, these children just disintegrate in front of you. You know this is what they've worked towards the last two years and all of this and then you know (softly spoken) but then you get those that are absolutely delighted. (Participant 13)

From an institutional point of view, admissions can become a macro process of meeting multi-level recruitment targets from an institutional level down through Faculty and Departmental targets to individual courses with budgets contingent on meeting them (See Chapter Seven, Section 7-2). This participant response demonstrates the impact of these macro admissions decisions on individual students. Despite prolonged policy discussions and consultations, initiated by the New Labour government in 2006 following the recommendations of the Schwartz Report (2004, p.44) and a report by Sir Alan Wilson (2005) that considered the implementation implications, a move to post-qualification

applications by 2012 (BBC, 2006) has made little progress. Most students still receive conditional entry offers and must then wait for the results of their FHEQ Level 3 studies to be released, just a few weeks before their proposed course starts. If they fail to meet the conditional offer or exceed it by a significant margin then they face the prospect of still registering at their first choice institution if they will accept them, accepting their second choice insurance offer or entering the UCAS Clearing process that matches unplaced students with unfilled places.

Participant 13 then proceeds to a picture of the scope of the advice students seek before making an application:

I think some forget to ask their parents how they're actually going to get to and from (...) you know [slight laugh] they haven't actually thought about that side of it, you know (happy) [slight laugh] parents having to take days off work to go and collect them and things like that. (Participant 13)

Whilst institutions may spend a significant amount of time and energy in carefully honing their '*proposition*' and '*verbal brand strategy*' to appeal to prospective students, this response suggests that practical issues such as the location of an institution relative to the student's home are the concerns of their advisors. Her perception is that only the Russell Group have sufficient presence within the public discourse to have any impact on students' and their parents' decision making process ("*will listen to this and think it must be true*”):

It's the messages that we are getting so, you know and those are the messages that parents are listening to and students are listening to and what they hear on the news, you know and if- what the Russell Group Universities are saying (...) you know (softly spoken) and it- because in the end their parents will listen to those and think well it must be true. (Participant 13)

Summary and Conclusions

These responses give some insight into the individual experiences of students entering the higher education sector. Oppositional discourses, discursive practices and public policy can appear as esoteric macro phenomena but the underlying social practices impact profoundly on individuals and their future lives (*“it's just so sad watching these people, these children just disintegrate in front of you”*, Participant 13). This demonstrates the significance of understanding the impact of higher education and the ways in which it is changing. The discourse of ‘*consumer power*’ does not appear to be reflected in the experiences of all.