

UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION: THE IMPACT OF CAREERS, INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE.

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Abstract

The growth of higher education is a global phenomenon and provides challenges for educational leaders in schools and universities. Raising aspiration and participation requires an understanding of the sources of advice and information available to potential participants and this is used in making the decision to participate or not.

The ESRC funded ‘Non-participation in Higher Education’ (NPinHE) study, based at the University of Southampton, examined the nature of decision-making amongst individuals who have chosen not to participate in higher education despite possessing educational qualifications and experience which would enable them to achieve admission to a university programme. The research seeks to identify the processes and inter-relationships in their decision-making environment within the ‘networks of intimacy’ that are their family, friends and significant individuals in their educational and/or working environments, past or present.

This paper examines the role of information, advice and guidance (IAG) in the decision-making of those individuals, both in relation to their decision not to participate at age 18 and their continuing reflection upon their non-participation decision. It considers the IAG experience that individuals had at school, and explores the experience of career decision-making that individuals engage in outside the school environment, and beyond the age of 18. It draws out the implications for educational leaders and managers in schools and universities as well as policy makers concerned about improving participation rates in all sectors of the community.

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Introduction

In recent years, expansion in higher education has featured in social policy in many countries and this provides challenges for admissions managers in universities, colleges and schools. It has also exercised governments to ensure that, within this overall aim, they tackle social exclusion and ensure that expansion is not just a result of more, privileged people taking advantage of the programmes on offer. Raising participation requires an understanding of the decision-making processes that applicants go through and the sources of information, advice and guidance (IAG) that are available. The provision of careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) has often been regarded as a key element of the decision to participate in education and training beyond compulsory schooling. For example, research by Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), Payne (2003), Foskett, Dyke and Maringe (2005) and Blenkinsop *et al* (2006) has shown how IAG contributes to the decision-making process about pathways at age 16 years; while Roberts and Higgins (1992), Connor *et al* (1999) and Ball (2005) have shown its role in choice of higher education.

The decisions people make are only as good as the information they base them on and so an important element of expanding applications to higher education and increasing participation from socially excluded groups is a better understanding of the IAG available before application. A recent research study at the University of Southampton, funded by the ESRC (Fuller and Heath *et al*, 2008), examined the nature of decision-making amongst individuals who have chosen not to participate in HE despite possessing the qualifications for admission to a university programme. This paper will examine the role of IAG in the decision-making of individuals in the project, both in relation to their decision not to participate at the point at which they left school and their continuing reflection upon their non-participation decision. It will consider the experiences of formal IAG that the individuals had, for example, at school or college, and explore their experiences of informal sources of IAG gained from *inter alia* friends and family. The implications of this for education managers in schools, universities and government departments will be discussed particularly in relation to improving participation rates in all sectors of the community.

Career information, advice and guidance

Defining what we mean by CIAG provides a number of challenges. OECD defines career guidance as:

“... services and activities intended to assist individuals of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational training and occupational choices and to manage their careers.”

(OECD, 2004)

This definition recognises that people can make career decisions at any point in their lives and indeed are likely to need to revisit such decision-making many times. Definitions can be very narrow focusing only on preparing young people for the next step in their career pathway. Such ideas underpin the view that there is linearity in this progression driven by the hierarchical nature of qualifications and the main duty of educational managers becomes providing people with guidance at determined intervention points (for example at entry and exit points in institutions).

There are a number of problems with this approach. Decision-making about career and participation in learning needs to be situated in a broader context. Hodkinson *et al*'s (1996) careership model emphasises the situatedness of individuals within family, institutional and socio-economic contexts. The individual is seen as making rational and pragmatic choices based on an information base which is dynamic and incomplete. In addition, individuals gain their information from both formal, official sources, sometimes termed 'cold' sources, and informal or 'hot' sources such as friends and the grapevine (Ball and Vincent, 1998). The current policy context, both in the UK (eg HEFCE, 2004/34) and internationally (eg Thomas and Quinn, 2007), is concerned with the continuing under-representation of certain parts of the population in HE despite efforts over a significant time period to improve access. There is a need for new insight and new solutions to this intractable problem.

The Non-Participation in Higher Education project was founded on the premise that empirical research has been too narrowly focused on the transition of 18 year olds from school or college and individual decision-making. Existing research has also tended to explore the experiences of those who enter HE or at least apply (Ball *et al*, 2000; Brooks, 2003; Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 2003; Reay, *et al*, 2005). Much less has explored the experiences of those non-participants, although work by Archer and Hutchings (2000) is an exception. The research on which this paper is based also focused on mature students across the age ranges and not only the 18-30 year old target group identified in recent UK government policy (Fuller and Paton, 2006).

This paper specifically considers the outcomes in terms of the situated experiences of participants of CIAG and the possible lessons that educational managers and policy makers might learn from this. In order to do this, the research methodology will be briefly described and the approach illustrated.

The Non-Participation in Higher Education Research Project

The research examined the potential of social network analysis in understanding the decisions people make about whether to participate or not in HE. It explored how decision-making is socially situated, embedded and co-constructed within ‘networks of intimacy’ (Heath and Cleaver, 2003) consisting of family and friends. Indeed the team wanted to explore the multi-factorial nature of decision-making in education and career and how far career paths reflect positive choices rather than the ‘barriers’ that feature so much in the literature.

The research focused on older people (21 years+) who have level 3 qualifications and therefore are potentially recruitable to HE but have chosen not to participate so far. It aimed to explore how far these people saw HE as within the ‘bounds of the possible’ for them. The primary qualitative research was undertaken in southern England during 2006-7.

The team identified individuals fitting the criteria in terms of being mature (over 21 years), qualified for HE, of diverse backgrounds and life stages (Giele and Elder, 1998). Sixteen individuals were identified who were willing to grant access to their network of intimacy of six to ten people who were important in their decision-making about education and career. From an initial entry point interview, information was gathered about education and employment history and about the network members. Then the network individuals were interviewed about their own educational and employment histories, their view of the decisions made by the entry point person and information regarding influences on and from other people. Finally, the entry point person was re-interviewed for more detailed narrative and probed for influences on decision-making raised by the network members.

The Networks

The analysis involved detailed scrutiny of the processes operating within individual networks. Figure 1 shows one of the networks, that of David Upton (aged 52 years) and his network comprising his mother, father, wife, sister, and his two adult daughters both living in the

family home. The network, therefore, consisted of three generations. David has a level 3 BTEC and is therefore qualified to enter HE. Two people in his network have experienced HE, his sister Janice and his younger daughter Michelle, and his elder daughter (Jenny) is qualified to enter HE but has chosen not to go.

One of the themes that has been analysed in detail is the experiences within the networks of CIAG and the impact this had on education and career decision-making. In terms of their experiences relating to CIAG, each network was examined for four elements:

- Experience: the key experiences in the network which influence the decisions made about education and career
- Information: the main sources and types of information used by network members
- Abilities: particular aspects about the ability level and educational/ skills sets
- Preferences: how the individuals express preferences and act on decisions within the network of intimacy.

INSERT Figure 1: David Upton's network

The Upton network is used here as an example. David and Christine Upton have always lived and worked in the same town and the family has a limited action space. Apart from Janice who lives about 40 minutes away, the whole family lives in adjoining roads. Overall the family has low aspirations and there isn't a strong push for people to continue in education. Figure 2 shows a summary of the experiences relating to CIAG and career decision –making for this network.

The view taken by Kathleen and Michael was that their children (David and Janice) were not clever enough to go to HE and 'getting a good job' with security was the main aspiration. As a child, David had not enjoyed school and had tried to "just get through it". He was keen to leave and there was no push from his parents, or from the school or careers service, to encourage him to stay on. For example, in response to a question asking him about the CIAG he experienced, David said:

"I don't remember having any...I know...in the last year of school ...I went to a couple of colleges with my dad, just to see what the college was like you know, they

have an open evening...but I don't remember ever having any careers advice at school as such, no...I think it's one of those things ...if you wanted it, you asked for it. If you didn't ask, you didn't get." (David, network entry point)

INSERT Figure 2: David Upton's network: a summary of CIAG and decision-making factors

The interviews in the Upton family demonstrated gendered and standardised biographies. All members, except Michelle, were early entrants into the labour market and followed gendered jobs. Information about careers was highly influenced by the knowledge of family. For example, David's career path as a draughtsman had been introduced to him through an open day visit to see where his uncle worked.

However, despite the fact that the family were unwilling participants in formal learning, all of them were engaged in community activities and were enthusiastically pursuing informal learning. This was valued highly and seen as on a par with, or better, than HE, as demonstrated by a quote from Jenny:

"The picture over there ...is one of the best pictures ever. That's on the day that I got my Gold Duke of Edinburgh's award and I went up to the Palace. Mum even cried a little bit ...they're very proud of me for that...that day was ...my graduation day, because I didn't go to university." (Jenny, elder daughter)

The analysis of the experiences, information sources, abilities and preferences of the Upton network and those of other entry points provided the basis for consideration of a range of CIAG influences that affect people's decision-making.

CIAG Influences and Influencers

The analysis of the networks was followed up with a meta-analysis to examine themes relating to non-participation. In CIAG, it was possible to identify the main influencers instrumental in providing guidance. Some of these were within the network (eg parents and friends) and some came from outside (eg work or the media). In addition, information had

come from formal sources (eg school) and from informal sources (eg chance chat in a bar). The matrix in Figure 3 summarises these influencers and in Figure 4 the characteristics of the sources are summarised.

INSERT Figure 3: CIAG Influencers

The four quadrants have quite different characteristics in terms of the CIAG influences. In quadrant A, the CIAG that individuals receive is based on family traditions so that pathways are influenced by the family's status, class and history. Many networks demonstrated family dynasties where generations followed similar paths in, for example, the armed services or banking. These influencers provide strong direction to choice but information will be partial and incomplete. We can look at this in terms of the social capital available to individuals. Putnam (2000, p19) defined social capital as "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arises from them". In this quadrant, the individual's choices will be affected by bonding capital, the strong ties which link individuals with others in the network (Putnam's "sociological superglue", 2000, p23).

INSERT Figure 4: CIAG Characteristics

In quadrant B, information is informal and dominated by the individual's peer group. It is partial and incomplete, and is again a form of bonding capital tying the individual to the group. However, by inclusion of members from other families (partners and friends) there will be an element of 'bridging capital' which brings diversity of 'norms' into the individual's experience and may broaden horizons and allow them to move into areas beyond the influence of their authority figures (Putnam's "sociological WD40", 2000, p 23).

In quadrants C and D, the individual is getting CIAG from outside the network. In C, the main influencers are from school, work or some other formal source. The information provided will be influenced by societal norms of the time but, with luck, will be more impartial, complete and diverse. The interviews show that people's experiences of the formal services, both today and in the past, do not always live up to these ideals and there were many personal stories of

poorly delivered and inadequate advice. In some cases, the formal CIAG was by-passed, ignored or discounted as shown by this quotation from Michelle:

“I ... find the careers people a bit depressing. Well it was, in school at [school name], she was a bit hopeless. I went to see her a couple of times because like you know you don't have a clue...and then when I went to [college name] I realised that it was the same lady and I was like, oh no, okay I'm not going to go and see you then.”

The influencers in this quadrant can provide bridging and linking capital (Woolcock, 1998). Linking capital is the ability to access resources from formal institutions including universities, schools and careers organisations. These are the ways that individuals have traditionally been supported in their decision-making but they depend on the information being received, understood and not discounted.

Quadrant D includes informal sources which an individual can access beyond their network. The internet phenomenon means that information is more available to people, and younger people in particular use such sources as a first point of information. These sources will reflect broad societal attitudes and will be impartial, diverse and more complete. They may also contain biased and unregulated information. Individuals need skills to use these unmediated sources to make good decisions. However, in addition to bridging and linking capital, this quadrant can also provide “imagined” capital (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p60) which is the “benefit produced by imagined and symbolic networks which people create to re-imagine themselves and their lives”. In other words, individuals may be able to imagine a different future for themselves away from their family norm.

CIAG and (non) participation – some reflections

If these ideas are related to the experiences of David, his network of intimacy is rich in the bonding capital seen in quadrants A and B. Family tradition is important and many of the Uptons work in areas associated with the sea: Kathleen (secretary shipping line); Janice (RN nursing); David (cartographer); Jenny (marine accident investigation). Most members have followed pathways and display attitudes to education and careers which have been cemented early on in their lives. Education is seen as valuable only in terms of getting a ‘good’ job

which means in this case a 'secure job for life'. The network members have little linking capital and, in the older generations, there is little demonstration of imagined capital.

In terms of the extra-network perspectives, the experience of CIAG services was universally poor and, where it was accessed at all, served only to reinforce family attitudes to education and work. The school experience also acted in a reinforcing way. In all, the 'cold' knowledge provided by the formal systems did not overcome the strong bonding provided by the 'hot' knowledge from friends and family. CIAG was not making a big difference to whether HE was being seen as within the bounds of the possible for members of the network.

Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions of use to those working in widening participation. It seems that the current models of CIAG at the interface with HE do not provide enough linking and imagined capital for individuals to overcome the conservatism inherent in their networks. Raising aspirations needs to involve helping people to imagine their lives lived differently from members in their networks who have not experienced HE. For young people, current interventions in terms of CIAG, particularly in terms of putting HE within the bounds of the possible, come too late in secondary schooling. Targeting CIAG at those in the upper years of school means that career education occurs after attitudes and aspirations about education and work have been fixed.

For adults, formal CIAG services are scarce, and if governments are serious about up-skilling the workforce, then providing services for adults should be a priority. Some participants were accessing good quality CIAG from their workplace but this was rarely impartial and complete. However, where it was provided, participants were grateful, particularly if linked to career development schemes and training.

The experience of participants suggests that, at best, access to good quality CIAG is patchy. Many of the older people had no recollection of useful formalised guidance and even the younger members reported that, although access to CIAG had improved, it hadn't necessarily improved in quality. One of the things that the 2008 Nuffield Review has identified as a priority is the need for better training for CIAG professionals and teachers and this research echoes that need.

Finally, for HE there is a tension between meeting recruitment targets and providing impartial CIAG in the admissions process. This study found that, for mature people qualified to enter HE, the universities are invisible in providing information of relevance to them. When they do make contact the process is seen entirely in admissions terms and not as part of an individual's career planning. There may be a case then for ensuring that there is more joining up of CAIG services across the HE, FE, employment interface to better serve the people universities hope to attract.

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Figures

Figure 1: David Upton's network

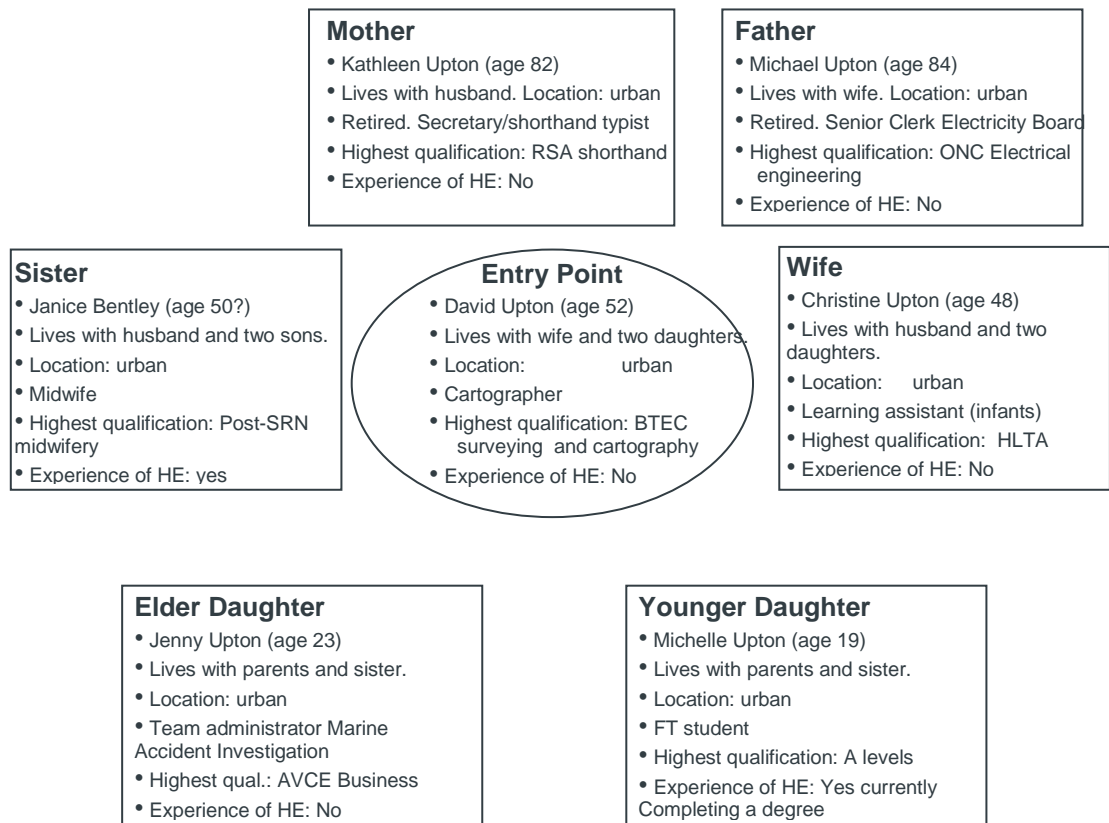


Figure 2: David Upton's network: a summary of CIAG and decision-making factors

<p>The Upton Network</p> <p>Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family goal of 'getting a good job' (secure employment)/Naval dynasty• Did not like school• Low aspirations in family <p>Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Little CIAG (and poor experiences)• Sourced within the family for younger generation (CA in family now) <p>Abilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Qualifications gained (unwillingly) through work• Importance of Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme <p>Preferences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family emphasis on 'making own decisions'/Follow path of least resistance• Education seen purely in 'instrumental' terms – to get a job/a better job• Strong learning ethos in family (LLL)

Figure 3: CIAG Influencers

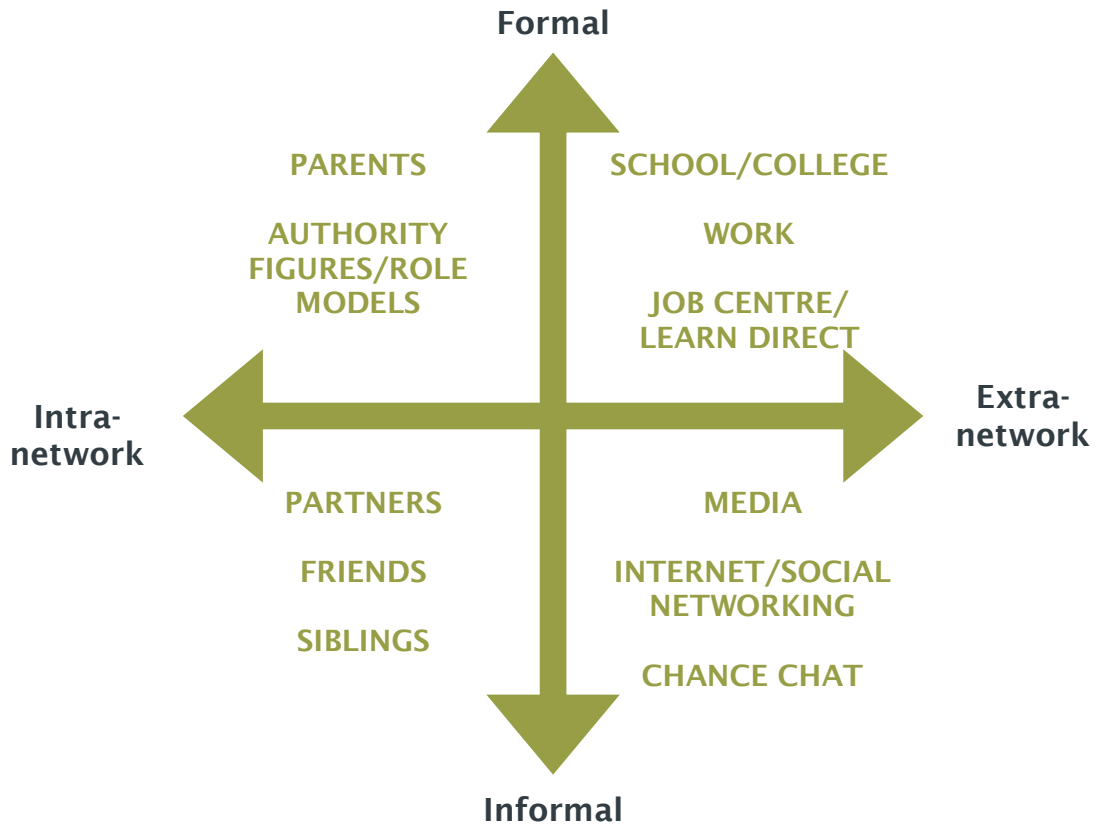


Figure 4: CIAG Characteristics

