IDENTIFYING THE BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION PARTICIPATION

Selina McCoy, Delma Byrne

Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, Ireland

As economic circumstances remain difficult and CAO applications reach record numbers, there has been renewed focus on higher education. In part this reflects the severe deterioration in labour market opportunities for young people, particularly in relation to apprenticeships. Postponement of labour market entry among school leavers more generally and growing numbers of (young) adults returning to college to improve their skills also play a role. In this context, identifying the potential barriers young people face in gaining entry to college is of central importance. Furthermore, identifying barriers to higher education participation is of great policy relevance given the impact of third level education on life chances. A recent study† focuses on a group which has not shared in the general trend towards increased third-level participation – the "lower non-manual" group. This group largely comprises lower level service workers (such as chefs, bus drivers, hairdressers) and accounts for just under 10 per cent of the population. It has not been previously identified as 'disadvantaged' in terms of educational participation, but the study shows that young people from this socio-economic group are poorly placed in terms of college participation and are also the only social group to have seen a fall in levels of college entry over time. The study analysed the factors shaping entry or non-entry to college, using a combined analysis of 10 years of School Leavers' Survey data and in-depth life-history interviews with school leavers whose parent(s) were employed in such non-manual jobs.

School Experiences

Many of those who enter college reported positive orientations towards, and experiences of, their initial education – most simply they placed a value on education. Among those that do not go to college, this research identifies some important issues around self-belief and aspirations with young people typically stating that college 'is not for me'. While these beliefs to some extent stemmed from a more short-term orientation and a necessary priority on earning money in these families, they also reflected the nature of their previous educational experiences at second level. The findings pointed to a greater risk of disengagement from school among this group of young people who reported skipping school, lack of motivation and misbehaviour which fed into a negative cycle of interaction with teachers. Moreover this group of young people felt that they had been treated unfairly by their teachers and perceived that their teachers held low expectations for them. Going to college was

*selina.mccoy@esri.ie; delma.byrne@esri.ie

perceived as an extension of school for this non-manual group and hence to be avoided. Low levels of school completion and poor performance in the Leaving Certificate examination among this group were the result of these often negative school experiences, meaning large numbers were ineligible for college. However, even among those who were eligible, this group were the group least likely to apply for a college place.

Information and Advice

This research highlights how the availability of information and advice on college is another key factor in the decision to go to college. In many ways, this group of young people were far more reliant on the advice and support from their school in making college decisions, since few had parents with experience of college and their siblings and peers were also not generally familiar with the college 'process'. However, findings show that for the lower non-manual group career guidance was variously absent, only focused on certain groups of students (such as the 'honours' class), narrowly focused or directed them away from college altogether. Some young people felt they would have liked more help in evaluating the range of post-school options, rather than just receiving information.

Financial Constraints

Financial issues also influenced the post-school choices of this group of school leavers. For some, the financial commitment to study was perceived as too great or would exert too much hardship for themselves and their families. Many felt that they would not have been eligible for financial support (and in fact this group saw the sharpest fall-off in grant receipt levels over time), or if eligible, they felt the support would not have been adequate. Again there was evidence of insufficient information and understanding of the system of financial supports and the costs entailed in going to college. The research also found that perceived financial barriers also framed the aspirations of these young people and, among those who were eligible to apply to college, perceived financial barriers often shaped that final decision not to attend.

The study also pointed to the importance of focusing not only on college entry and supporting students in that regard, but also on supporting young people through their college lives. Levels of dropout from college during the first 18 months were found to vary dramatically across socio-economic groups. It is clear that, alongside initiatives promoting college entry, support for young people to fully participate in both the academic and non-academic aspects of college life is important. Ongoing monitoring of the relative position of this lower non-manual group both in terms of college entry and completion will also be important. Recent economic conditions are likely to further restrict the ability of these and other students to fund their studies through part-time employment. The current economic situation is also likely to curtail the ability of their parents, situated in vulnerable economic sectors, to support their children through college and increase the pressure on these young people to seek employment.

†MCCOY, S., D. BYRNE, P.J. O'CONNELL, E. KELLY and C. DOHERTY, 2010. Hidden Disadvantage? A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group, Dublin: Higher Education Authority.