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Pathways to Higher Education: the effect of different prior qualifications on institution and field of study

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Students applying to study at university have to make two choices: what subject to study and at which institution. These decisions are influenced by a range of factors, for example personal interests, socio-economic background and, principally, prior qualifications and performance.

In a climate of significant reform in education, this work provides quantitative evidence to understand how different types and combinations of qualifications (AS/A Level, Cambridge Pre-U, Extended Project, IB diploma, Cambridge National, Diploma, BTEC) are used by young people to progress to higher education.

The issues researched in this paper were addressed, in the first instance, through descriptive analyses. Subsequently, an assessment of the universities and courses in which the different prior qualifications were over or under represented was made using odds ratios derived from multilevel logistic regressions. Data was extracted from the HESA student records and covered all full-time first year undergraduates studying at UK universities in the 2011/12 academic year.

Overall, this work showed that prior qualifications were represented in different proportions in higher education and, particularly, in the different institutions and courses. Specifically:

- AS/A Levels were the most popular qualifications held by undergraduates, followed by BTECs.
- The highest percentages of students with A Levels and other academic qualifications (e.g. Pre-U; IB diploma) were found in universities of the Russell and 1994 groups. Holding an Extended Project alongside A Levels significantly increased the probability of attending a university in the above groups, whereas having a Cambridge National or a BTEC increased the likelihood of attending universities in the Million+ Group and in the University Alliance.
- The highest percentages of students with A Levels (and to a certain extent students holding other academic qualifications such as Pre-U, IB diploma or the Extended Project) were in courses related to languages, history/philosophy, sciences and medicine.
- The most popular university courses for students with vocational qualifications (e.g. BTECs; Cambridge Nationals; diplomas) were closely aligned to the subject of the prior qualification. Accordingly students with BTECs were more likely than average to have opted for arts and biological sciences, and less likely to study languages, history/philosophy, medicine or sciences.

These differences in progression routes between students with different prior qualifications could be cause for concern as the prior learning of the students might steer them towards universities and courses that could bring fewer economic benefits later in life or cause a disadvantage in the labour market.

Full paper

Vidal Rodeiro, C.L., Sutch, T. and Zanini, N. (2015). Progressing to Higher Education in the UK: the effect of prior learning on institution and field of study. *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication*, 20: 13-21.