



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Students' choices in Higher Education

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increase in the Higher Education (HE) options available to students in the UK. Given that the choice of HE institution and field of study is crucial for students' future lives and careers it is important to understand the process by which students choose their HE studies. This is a topic of particular interest in the UK, where the HE sector is characterised by a vast subject offer and substantial diversity among institutions.

Most studies published to date focus on the relationship between students' characteristics and participation in HE. Very little research has been carried out to directly model participation and choice in the UK, particularly at the level of institution and field of study. The aim of this research is to add to the body of research in this area, answering the following questions:

- Which attributes of HE institutions and courses (e.g. prestige/quality, subject of study, distance from home) determine students' choices, once individual characteristics of students are controlled for?
- How do these attributes interact with the individual characteristics?

A dataset provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency was used to investigate these research questions. It includes student characteristics (e.g. gender, prior achievement, school type, deprivation), the degree course and institution of study and the distance from home to institution. It covers all students who started a first degree (expected not to last more than three years) in 2010/11. The analysis was undertaken using a conditional logit model, which assumes that students compare the expected utilities (e.g. usefulness, satisfaction) they can obtain from different alternatives (defined by HE institution and course) and choose the one that gives the highest.

We found that the prestige of the institution and the subject area played an important role in students' choices, with those in a better position to attend elite/prestigious universities or take subjects with higher labour market returns (for example, because they have a higher UCAS tariff, a specific specialism at A level, or they are more affluent) being more likely to do so. Furthermore, distance from home was a very important factor and it interacted with individual characteristics, subject of study and prestige/quality of the institution. This could be a cause for concern, as more socio-economically deprived students could have less choice in terms of institution and field of study because they are less willing (or are not able) to travel far.