

in brief...

# Mismatched students and universities

Higher education has long been thought of as a tool to equalise opportunities. But according to research by **Gill Wyness** and colleagues, if we really want to improve the life chances of disadvantaged students, we need to pay much more attention to the types of universities and subjects in which they enrol.

Higher education has long been thought of as a tool to equalise opportunities, with governments spending billions a year on encouraging disadvantaged students to go to university through financial aid and other 'widening participation' strategies. Indeed, the Office for Students in England has recently set ambitious new targets for universities to widen access. But is simply getting poor students into university enough?

Our research examines the 'quality match' between students and the courses they attend, using data on a cohort of students who enrolled in university in 2008. We are interested in whether certain groups (such as disadvantaged students) are more likely to 'undermatch', by attending courses that are less selective than might be expected given their A-level grades. We also examine whether certain types of students 'overmatch', attending courses that are more selective than might be expected given their grades.

We examine this phenomenon of mismatch along two dimensions of course 'quality'. First, we consider a student to be well-matched to their course if they have similar A-level scores to others on the course. For example, a high-attaining student would be well-matched if they attend a

course with equally high-attaining students. They would be under-matched if they attend a course where their fellow students have lower grades than they do (suggesting that they could have attended a more academically prestigious course); and over-matched if they attend a course where the other students on their course have higher grades than they do.

Second, we rank courses based on the average earnings of their graduates five years later, and consider a student to be well-matched if that course has a similar ranking to their own individual ranking by attainment. For example, a high-attaining student would be well-matched if they attend a course with high earnings potential, and under-matched if their course has low average earnings.

We find a significant amount of mismatch in the system in England, with 15-23% of students under-matching and a similar proportion over-matching. Importantly, we find that students from backgrounds of low socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to undermatch than those from rich backgrounds.

Comparing low- and high-SES students at every level of attainment, disadvantaged students attend less

Many disadvantaged students attend less academically prestigious courses than their A-level attainment merits



academically prestigious courses, and courses with lower earnings potential, than those from high-SES backgrounds. So these students have the same A-level attainment, but they are attending lower 'quality' courses. This has obvious implications for equity and for equalising opportunities.

But economic disadvantage is not the only dimension of inequality we study. Examining mismatch by gender, we find that female students attend courses that are just as academically selective as male students, but they attend courses with lower future average earnings than men, comparing students with the same A-level attainment. This has important implications for equity and for the gender pay gap.

So what should policy-makers do? We examine three important factors that might drive this mismatch in an attempt to work out potential policy solutions. First, we consider the choice of subject studied at degree level: comparing students of similar academic attainment and studying the same degree subject, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students remains. This tells us that low-SES students are studying at lower 'quality' institutions relative to high-SES students, rather than choosing lower 'quality' subjects for their courses.

What about the role of geography? It is well-known that low-SES students are more likely to attend universities close to home, but does this drive them to choose a less selective institution? If we just consider the group of students living close to home, we still see differences in the institutions that disadvantaged students attend compared with more advantaged students. High-attaining, low-SES students tend to enrol in post-1992 institutions near home, whereas high-attaining, high-SES students are more likely to attend a nearby Russell Group university.

There may therefore be scope for some outreach work for high-ranking universities to attract local disadvantaged students. Interestingly, those low-SES students who move further away from home to attend university appear to be as well-matched as similar attaining high-SES students.

Our third factor is school attended, which accounts for the majority of mismatch among low-SES students. The implication is that factors correlated with school (such as peers, school resources, information, advice and guidance at school, and sorting into different types of schools) play an important role in student match. Unpicking what is driving this schools channel is an important step for future research.

Turning to our gender gap in earnings mismatch, we find no role for distance to university or schools attended. But we do find a very important role for degree subject. The fact that women attend courses with lower future average earnings than men is largely driven by the subjects that women are studying rather than by the institutions they attend. For example, a high-attaining male student

## Widening participation units at high-ranking universities could do important outreach work to attract local disadvantaged students

might choose a subject such as engineering, which is typically high returns, whereas a high-attaining female student might choose a subject such as English or history, commanding a lower average salary.

So what can we do? The evidence suggests that an intervention that may help to reduce SES and gender gaps in match would be to improve the level and quality of information available to under-matched students – for example, on the attainment profile of students on each course and labour market returns.

Some recent studies have investigated the importance of providing information to low-SES students specifically to improve match. Our results highlight that it may also be beneficial to target women in a similar way, providing information on potential earnings associated with both institution and field of study. But as with most studies of mismatch, we have no information on the preferences of students: women may be well-informed on the earnings potential of subjects, but simply prefer not to study them.

Similarly, it may be the case that low-SES students prefer to attend less academically challenging institutions even when their attainment levels suggest that they are academically prepared. This could be down to perceptions about institutions not being a good fit for them. Our finding on geography suggests that universities' widening participation units could do some important outreach work in these cases to challenge perceptions.

This article summarises 'Inequalities in Student to Course Match: Evidence from Linked Administrative Data' by Stuart Campbell, Lindsey Macmillan, Richard Murphy and Gill Wyness, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1647 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1647.pdf>). The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

**Stuart Campbell, Lindsey Macmillan** and **Gill Wyness** are at UCL Institute of Education. **Richard Murphy** is at the University of Texas at Austin. Murphy and Wyness are research associates in CEP's education and skills programme.