The market, sixth-formers and post-school choosing

Nuala Burgess *looks at who wins and who loses.*

A few years ago I conducted a doctoral study of the types of support school sixth-forms provide for students' university applications. The original focus of the study was to examine the ways support differs between different types of school. However, the myriad of formal, informal and covert ways in which support for post-16 students' decision-making was being differentiated *within* school sixth-forms suggested this might be a more fruitful area. I became especially interested in how young people with 'middling' attainment - mostly Bs and Cs (grades 4-6) at GCSE - were supported with their post-school choosing, whether they aspired to university or an alternative.

To be clear, I have no issue with those who feel the need to support higher attaining state-educated students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access Oxbridge. However, I came to feel - and I still feel - that the post-school aspirations of hardworking middle band students from disadvantaged

backgrounds should also concern us. Current media and academic research appears to focus almost exclusively on rates of access for higher attaining students to 'elite' universities. This completely ignores the accomplishments of the 'invisible majority' of mostly working-class and minority ethnic post-16 students - those who choose to complete their education in a school and who apply to less prestigious universities, or seek an alternative post-school destination.

My research was conducted in a range of school sixth forms in Greater London including the independent sector, but my key focus was a CofE academy in a commuter suburb and a comprehensive school in an area of high social deprivation. Both schools were located in areas with a heated sixth-form market. In this context, I found that levels of support for students' decision-making was differentiated according to the 'status' of students' post-school destinations. Specifically, I

found a disproportionate amount of teacher time and school resources invested in the relatively tiny minority of higher attaining students applying to 'elite' Russell Group universities. Not only were these students' UCAS applications micro-managed by senior teachers but they also benefited from a host of resources designed to boost their applications. For example, personalised reading lists, school and Sutton Trust-funded university visits, and one to one support for personal statement writing from both university academics *and* senior teachers. Opportunities for high-quality work experience were also reserved almost exclusively for higher attaining students applying to 'elite' universities.

Pecking order

Next in the pecking order came students applying to less prestigious Russell Group universities. Generally speaking, these students were helped with their UCAS applications by a form tutor or subject teacher, depending on the time a teacher could spare. Students applying to 'new' (post-1992) universities in a variety of different schools gave very similar accounts of feeling teachers did not 'care' about their university applications, or were 'too busy' to help. As one student explained, students applying to less prestigious universities were 'at the back of the queue'. Many turned to family and friends for advice on university choosing. Mothers and older sisters featured prominently in accounts students gave of the help they had with personal statement writing. In one school, higher attaining students sensitive to the disproportionate amount of help they received helped their less high attaining friends. They passed on tips picked up during Oxbridge and Sutton Trust summer schools and taster courses. In particular, how to structure a personal statement and explain interest in a chosen degree course.

Right at the bottom of the hierarchy of differentiation, however, came post-16 school students seeking an alternative to university. Students in this group were found to be most marginalised when it came to the allocation of teacher time and school resources for their decision-making. Having attained the GCSE grades necessary for entry to their school sixth form, some students found they did not enjoy post-16 study or struggled with A-levels. Some used confidential interviews to tell me they could not see 'the point' of university, often citing an under- or unemployed graduate sibling saddled with a student debt as evidence that a degree did not guarantee a job and higher earnings.

Some of the students in my study who sought an alternative to university left school at the end of year 12 to go to college. Others stayed on and applied for apprenticeships in, for example, Transport for London, Virgin Media and BT, as well as industries such as accounting, beauty, engineering, and media design. One progressed into nursing and another went into retail management. All relied on family and friends with 'inside' information about apprenticeship schemes, and often it was an adult within the extended family who gave advice on written applications. In all of the schools where I conducted research, only one teacher was found to have the kind of expertise and contacts in industry to be of real value to students seeking advice on alternatives to university. However, none of the ten students I was able to track through school to a non-university destination received any advice or support from their school.

When I started my research I felt schools were to blame for discriminatory practices which marginalised working-class 'middle attainers' and their aspirations. By the end I realised that a toxic combination of a per capita funding formula ('bums on seats') combined with sixth-form performance measures inextricably bound to progression rates to Russell Group universities were fuelling school competition and selective practices. Coupled with a lack of serious investment in good, post-16 careers advice, the result has been an extraordinarily unfair system whereby the very students who fund their school sixth-forms are least likely to have time and resources invested in their post-school choosing. For every newspaper article about the one-in-a-thousand state-educated student from a disadvantaged background who makes it to Oxbridge, there are thousamds of post-16 school students who serve as collateral damage as schools battle to beat their competitors.