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“Meaningful” destinations: using national data to compare progression to higher education, employment and training from different education pathways in England

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Research background and research questions

Student progression is one of many facets of education quality. Instead of looking at educational processes, or immediate outcomes such as assessment results, a progression approach to evaluating education quality could ask “What did students do next?” Measures based on student destinations are found (for example) in the OECD’s “Education at a Glance” indicators (OECD, 2016), and the European Commission’s “Education and Training 2020” benchmarks (European Commission, 2016).

Student destinations are important from both social justice and economic perspectives on education, and their relevance continues to grow. In Europe, a persistently difficult labour market for young people and the growth of the ‘knowledge economy’ make it vital to measure whether students are successfully progressing into employment as well as into further/higher education (e.g., Cedefop, 2013; Joint Report 2015/C 417/04). These factors have also driven efforts to increase the ‘permeability’ of education, that is, the potential for students to move easily between academic and vocational education, and between different levels of education (Cedefop, 2012). The Bologna and Copenhagen processes and the reforms which have followed have further increased motivation to monitor student destinations in Europe. In particular, it is important to monitor whether reforms have resulted in more frequent progression from vocational education to higher education and also how the reforms that promote permeability have affected student progression into employment and training. Powell and Trampusch (2011) show that Europe-wide processes have affected national vocational education in varying ways, and in some countries caused concerns about damaging the integrity of long-established vocational training systems.

In England, concerns developed throughout the 2000s about increasing numbers of secondary students taking qualifications that did not support progression. An extensive review in 2011 found that despite a discourse of equivalence enshrined in the National Qualifications Framework, too many vocational and vocationally-related qualifications were valued by neither employers nor higher education institutions (Wolf, 2011). The Wolf report demanded an education that enabled “meaningful” progression, whether into education or employment or training, and identified better data on student destinations as a monitoring tool. Since then, research has continued to examine progression from vocational education into higher education (HEFCE, 2014; Shields & Masardo, 2015), but other research into progression has been hampered by the lack of data linking students’ education to their destinations. Obtaining data on students’ destinations outside of education is complex, and monitoring the impact of secondary education has been particularly difficult in England due to the high number of individual qualifications (as opposed to discrete academic or vocational pathways) that students may study.

The Department for Education has recently assembled increasingly detailed data linking students’ education to their destinations after leaving school. Statistics on student destinations have been introduced as indicators of education quality at the national level (e.g., DfE, 2016), and indicators at school level are expected to be introduced soon. These indicators represent a substantial change from previous practice: previous indicators in England have focused almost entirely on assessment performance. As for performance-based indicators, however, destinations indicators at national and school level would tell only a partial story.

The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between secondary education and student destinations using student-level data. The research aims to investigate this relationship in greater detail than previous research has accomplished, using newly available linked data to compare how different pathways in England support young people’s

progression once related factors are controlled for. The main research question in our work is the following:

Do students' destinations after secondary school depend on their school qualifications, after controlling for the background characteristics of prior attainment, gender, school type, region and socio-economic deprivation?

Methods

The data analysed in this research covered all young people in England who had completed Key Stage 5 (upper secondary) education in the 2012/13 academic year. Students typically complete this stage of education at the age of 18 or 19. The data, provided by the Department for Education, contained detailed information on individual students, including socio-demographic characteristics, courses studied at upper secondary level, prior attainment in school, and destination in the year after leaving school.

As noted, researching the relationship between secondary education and destinations of students in England is complicated by the very large number of possible qualifications at upper secondary level. In order to compare students' secondary education pathways, we categorised students' secondary education according to the proportion of time spent studying academic, vocational, or hybrid qualifications. We classified students into one of five (exclusive) pathways: academic only, mostly academic, mixed, mostly vocational, and vocational only.

We first investigated the data using descriptive analyses. Previous research suggested that socio-economic status, school type, level of prior attainment and secondary education could affect students' destination after finishing school, and our descriptive analyses supported these findings. With this in mind, we therefore assessed the relationship between secondary education and destinations using multilevel logistic regression. We created models for three key destinations indicators: progression to education (any sustained education), progression to any overall destination (any sustained education, employment, training, or combination), and NEET/'no destination' (not in education, training or employment). The regression analyses differ from the descriptive analyses in that they take into account students' background characteristics when looking at the probability of progression to different destinations. This allowed us to estimate the association between students' secondary education and the destinations they progressed to, and to draw conclusions about the extent to which different secondary school qualifications supported student progression.

Results

Our findings showed significant effects of secondary education pathway. After accounting for background characteristics, the probability of progressing to any sustained destination was lowest for students on a vocational pathway, and progressively higher for students on pathways with more academic study. The same differences, only more pronounced, were found for progression to education destinations.

The probability of having NEET status after leaving school was lowest for students on an academic pathway, and progressively higher for students with more vocational study: even after controlling for relevant background characteristics, students on vocational pathways were significantly more likely to be NEET.

The differences between the probabilities of progression for academic, mostly academic and mixed pathways were generally small. For vocational and mostly vocational pathways, however, the effect on the probability of progression was substantial, and negative. In terms of previous research and policy, then, our findings appear to support the concern that vocational programmes of study do not prepare students for progression to further/higher

education, but also suggest that vocational pathways do not prepare students for progression to non-education destinations either.

A limitation of this study is the weakness in the destinations data for some subgroups of students: coverage is lower for students attending fee-paying schools, and the employment data is less robust than the data on education destinations. The newest data compiled by the Department for Education (not yet available to researchers) significantly improves robustness and coverage through new linking methods that match data across a higher number of government departments. Despite this limitation, the research suggests that analyses using national data on education and employment destinations such as the ones described here form a useful way to monitor whether the education experienced by young people at secondary level supports their progression to meaningful destinations.

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Full paper

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