



Paired Peers is a three year (2010-2013) collaborative project between the University of Bristol (UoB) and the University of the West of England (UWE). Funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the project looks at the impact of class on the experience of undergraduate university students.

Following a cohort of 80 students through their undergraduate degree, the project explored how students' class backgrounds impacted on their choices, experiences and achievements. Pairs were matched by subject discipline and social class to enable comparisons. Students were regularly interviewed to explore various aspects of their experience: courses and study, friendships and socializing, budgeting and expenditure, accommodation, term-time and holiday working, placements and internships, relationship with the city, ambitions and prospects. The overall aim was to explore whether and how higher education functions as a vehicle for social mobility.

Key Findings

Getting In

- Going to university was seen as normal for most middle-class students, while for working-class students it was a choice that required much more consideration, effort and planning.
- State schools were less well-equipped than private schools in preparing students for admission to university. However, once at university, some 'hot-housed' students struggled with the lack of 'spoon-feeding'.
- Working-class parents did not have the HE experience to provide help and information on how to get into university, but did provide emotional support.
- All students were well informed about universities, primarily through schools or colleges, but also through the internet, and were aware of institutional hierarchies .
- Degrees from elite universities were perceived to be more highly valued by employers, but specific course content and structure attracted some students to the non-elite university.



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Getting On

- Working-class students faced considerable financial hardships, while middle-class students were cushioned by their parents' financial support.
- Financial restrictions limited working-class students in terms of extra-curricular activities, with many of them having to work during term time.
- There was a social chasm between private and state school students, often exacerbated by university accommodation costs.
- Some working-class students found it hard to fit in at Bristol, but equally some middle-class students found it hard to fit in at UWE.
- Despite arguments about the individualisation of social relations, we found that student progress through Higher Education was very much a family project, with parents and other family members contributing a range of resources.

Getting Out

- Few students felt that their course would be value for money with higher fees.
- Almost all students placed a high value on small-group contact time and wanted more of this.
- Internships, placements and voluntary work were crucial in facilitating movements into jobs.
- Middle-class students at both universities were far more able to draw upon family resources and had access to influential social networks to help them to get work experience and internships.
- Female students at both universities limited their career aspirations over the period of study, anticipating the need to manage employment and childcare. A greater number of female than male students turned to teaching as a more practical, family friendly career.
- University experience, however, has other benefits than directly accessing employment: participants spoke of gaining independence, confidence, the ability to engage with a diverse range of people and broadened horizons.



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