



Wright, C. (2017). Claire Crawford , Lorraine Dearden , John Micklewright and Anna Vignoles (2016), Family Background and University Success: Differences in Higher Education Access and Outcomes in England, Oxford: Oxford University Press, £25.00, pp. 176, hbk. *Journal of Social Policy*, 47(2), 428-430. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279417000885>

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[10.1017/S0047279417000885](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279417000885)

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Claire Crawford, Lorraine Dearden, John Micklewright, and Anna Vignoles (2017), *Family Background and University Success: Differences in Higher Education Access and Outcomes in England*.

1. Introduction

Using up to date longitudinal data from England, this book addresses many pertinent questions regarding participation in higher education (HE), in England. Among these, it explores the extent to which social disadvantage predicts participation and why (with a particular focus on prior attainment); how well students from different social backgrounds do once they're at university; how advantageous participation in HE is for young peoples' job prospects; and how much changes to the funding of HE have impacted on poorer students' likelihood of going to university.

The book begins with a poignant narrative regarding a family member's admission to the University of Oxford, at the turn of the 20th century. The writers' emphasise how unlikely an outcome this would have been, given his background, and further exemplify the issue of inequality by drawing on gender and social class. This use of anecdotal evidence presents an often-lacking personal perspective on HE participation and effectively draws the reader into what is a very interesting and engaging read.

2. Summary of argument

This book highlights the large and persistent socio-economic inequalities in access to higher education in England. Crucially, it argues that while funding for HE in England has shifted considerably since the mid-2000s, concerns about the negative impact of increasing the cost of HE on poorer students, has by and large, not been realised. Indeed, the fact that such large gaps in HE participation pre-exist the introduction of tuition fees signals that the predominant drivers of these gaps lay elsewhere.

3. About the authors

Claire Crawford is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick and Research Fellow at the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS); Lorraine Dearden is Professor of Economics and Social Statistics at UCL and Research Fellow at the IFS; John Micklewright is Professor Emeritus of Economics and Social Statistics at UCL; and Anna Vignoles is Professor of Education and Director of Research at the University of Cambridge.

4. Summary of contents

Chapter 1 provides an excellent introduction to this area of research, presenting current HE participation in its historical context; the socio-economic gaps that are present in HE participation; how these gaps have changed over time; and how England's participation gaps compare to those of other countries. Chapter 2 gives an important (if rather dry) overview of (i) why governments fund higher education; and (ii) different ways that funding might be achieved. Chapter 3 outlines how university teaching is funded in England. It compares the English system with those of the other home nations and then further afield, highlighting just how distinct (and expensive) England's HE system has become. Chapter 4 addresses the question of whether changes to funding have widened family background gaps. Chapter 5 explores how much prior attainment explains these socio-economic gaps in university participation,

including analyses of both type of institution and choice of subject studied. Prior attainment is analysed in more detail in chapter 6, by addressing when these socio-economic gaps in academic achievement emerge, and how much school influences these differences. Chapter 7 discusses the extent to which socio-economic differences persist once students have been admitted to university, by examining differences in drop-out rate and degree outcomes. It also provides compelling evidence that universities should implement contextualised admissions. Chapter 8 considers whether socio-economic differences persist beyond higher education, by estimating socio-economic differences in labour market outcomes. In conclusion, chapter 9 outlines the policy and other implications for key stakeholders of the main points made throughout the book.

5. Strength(s)

This is an incredibly comprehensive and thorough examination of the current state of play within the English higher education system - essential reading for anyone in the field. It uses robust methods to capitalise on detailed, longitudinal data and uncovers complex answers to multiple questions of participation.

Easy to read, the book maintains a good pace throughout and provides a sweeping history of higher education in the 20th and 21st century. It presents the reader with a lot of information, without ever feeling overwhelming, and intersperses text and graphics very nicely and provides clear explanations of new ideas and arguments.

The calibre of expertise present among the authors is exemplified by the gradual building up of an increasingly complex picture of higher education participation. In particular, they uncover the caveats implicit in such research that are often overlooked. Each chapter leads neatly to the next and rather than feeling overwhelmed by the level of detail, you are urged to read on to find out the answers to questions posed in the previous chapter.

6. Weakness(es)

Whilst it may not be the key driver of inequalities in HE participation, I would like to have seen further consideration of the unfairness of the new funding system. The authors argue that the 2016 system is much more progressive than the 2011 system, because there is a stronger positive relationship between the amount of payments and lifetime earnings. However, there is little discussion of the unfairness of a system, which will see poorer students accruing larger debts and paying more over their lifetimes, than richer ones.

7. Conclusion

Throughout the book the authors' reiterate the centrality of prior attainment to understanding and ultimately challenging the inequalities present in the current educational system. By presenting such comprehensive and unequivocal evidence, this book will hopefully shift the debate from university-centred widening participation strategies that have dominated this area, to the development of effective school interventions aimed at improving educational attainment among the most disadvantaged.