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Making the most of ourselves in the 21st century**

**State-of-Science Review: SR-A4
Participation in Learning; Barriers to Learning**

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Summary

The extent to which individuals participate in learning varies considerably over their lifetimes. There are also variations between social, geographic and economic groups. In general, participation declines with age and is lowest for those with the least overall advantage, including individuals living in poverty, with learning difficulties, in remote areas, and with the lowest levels of initial qualification. This review sets out some of the evidence on these patterns of participation and discusses the idea that they are produced by barriers to learning. It ends with a consideration of the type and quality of current research in this area and some suggestions for future work. The review is drawn chiefly from UK sources, with some US and European work included. Although the conclusions drawn are directly relevant to the UK, experience of work on other projects suggests no reason to assume that the same kinds of patterns and barriers to learning do not also exist in other countries (e.g. EGREES, 2005).

1. Participation in learning

For as long as we have accurate records, it appears that certain groups in the population of the UK have been more likely to be non-participants in all forms of post-compulsory education (Pettigrew et al., 1989; Beinart and Smith, 1998; NIACE, 2003; HEFCE, 2005). Over a third of the adult population regularly report not having participated in any formal episodes of learning at all since reaching school-leaving age (Selwyn et al., 2006). Those individuals who do participate in post-compulsory education are heavily patterned by 'pre-adult' social, geographic and historical factors such as socioeconomic status, year of birth and type of school attended (Bynner, 1992; Marsh and Blackburn, 1992; Macleod and Lambe, 2006).

These inequalities are attested to by all relevant research studies, using whatever approach, over decades (Sargant and Aldridge, 2002). Individuals from families with less prestigious occupational backgrounds, with lower incomes, the unemployed or economically inactive, the elderly, severely disabled people, and ex-offenders, with lower literacy skills or with negative attitudes to institutional learning, are all less likely than average to participate in any episodes of formal education or training after the age of 16.

Establishing the precise pattern of under-representation is not easy (Gorard and Smith, 2006). It is dependent on a sequence of less-than-perfect analytical steps. The first requirement, and perhaps the hardest step in the calculation, is an agreed definition of what we mean by 'participation in learning'. Learning is largely an individual and internal process that takes place every day, even when we exclude trivial instances such as 'learning what the time is'. It does not require a course, a teacher, a curriculum, an institution, fees, registration or certification (Livingstone, 2000). One can participate in an educational course without learning much, and one can learn a lot without participating.

Adults obtain much of their education through private reading, informal sources such as friends, and cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries, and have long done so (Lowe, 1970; Gorard et al., 1999a; European Commission, 2001). Informal learning is clearly valuable, but because the 'control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner' (Marsick and Watkins, 1990, p.12), this means that it is not susceptible to targeting or even measurement. From this, it can be seen that how much learning is taking place and who is excluded will always be imprecise.

The second step in deciding that a particular social group is under-represented in learning is a suitable definition and method of measuring membership of the group. Unfortunately, the categorisation of social groups by occupational class or ethnicity is a matter of judgement over which experts disagree (Lambert, 2002; Lee 2003). The categories themselves are somewhat arbitrary, and they tend to change over time (Gorard, 2003; Croxford, 2006).

For young people, their classification by ethnicity or occupation is often based on their parental background since they may have no work history. But, if we use two different classification systems for younger and older students, when should the cut-off point be? Can we reasonably aggregate the classifications based on the two different systems? There is no simple answer to analytical questions like these. Yet every analysis covering patterns of participation must make, even by default, a bewildering number of these decisions, and every analyst might quite reasonably come to a different set of decisions.

A third step is to find a suitable definition and characterisation of the relevant population. Unfortunately, when researching episodes of post-compulsory learning it is not clear what the 'relevant population' really is. An analyst using figures for all adults is open to the charge that the inclusion of people over the traditional working age is irrelevant, since so few of these are currently participating in learning. An analyst using only younger adults, however, is open to the charge of excluding from the analysis precisely those to whom access could and should be widened. Using population figures for all ages may lead one analyst to conclude that working-class students are under-represented. Another analyst, using the same figures for participation, but using population figures only for younger adults, may equally correctly conclude the reverse because the proportion of working-class families may have been decreasing over time in the population.

A fourth requirement is an accurate measure of the prevalence of the social groups in the relevant population. The population census of the UK provides the most complete coverage to assess the characteristics of the relevant population. But this census only happens every 10 years, and some of the most relevant questions for this analysis are only asked of a sub-sample of 10% of the cases. Despite it being a legal requirement, not every household takes part, not everyone is in a household, and not everyone who takes part responds to the class and ethnicity questions even when asked them.

Further, the categories used for the class and ethnicity questions are not the same between years such as 1991 and 2001, nor are they always the same as those used in other large data sets such as the individualised student records (ISRs).

We next need to know the prevalence of the social group that is participating in learning. Even if we define this as formal episodes, the records are incomplete, and, for some years of the data, the ISRs are not actually linked to individuals but to courses. Thus, a part-time student taking two courses in two different institutions may not have a unique identifier and is in danger of being counted twice (Gorard and Taylor, 2001). One of the key constraints when analysing rates of participation is the availability of data that provides an accurate baseline or population figure with which to compare the number of students.

All existing datasets suffer from one or more defects: they include only participants; have incomplete coverage; have substantial proportions of missing data or cases; have changed key definitions over time; or are incompatible in range or aggregation with other datasets. Even some of the most visible and best-recorded episodes of adult learning, such as higher education, have a considerable volume of missing cases and data. For example, other than 'white', 'missing' is officially the largest ethnic group among HE students in the UK.

Some of the ethnic minority groups are quite small, meaning that very small changes in their absolute numbers can make differences between groups appear more volatile than they really are. Similarly, the single largest occupational classification for HE students is that of having 'no occupational category'. In 2002/2003, 45% of first year undergraduates were unclassifiable in terms of occupational background according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency figures.

From the results of these five steps, we could calculate the difference between the proportion of each social group in the relevant population and the proportion of the same group participating in learning. As may be imagined, the margin for error is enormous. These difficulties lead analysts to focus mainly on young participants in formal, full-time episodes.

2. Potential barriers to learning

Despite these difficulties, Sargant (2000) points out that a number of powerful, large-scale studies such as those from Glass (1954) to Gorard et al. (1999b) have shown clear patterns of under-representation, and that the determinants of participation, far from being easily fixable, are often long-term, and rooted in family, locality and history. Therefore, to understand the patterns of participation post-16, we have to take a life-course view. What then of the conventional explanation for this inequitable situation – that of barriers to access?

To the extent that participation in learning opportunities depends upon the actions of individuals, people are deemed to participate according to their calculation of the net economic benefits to be derived from education and training (Becker, 1975). Therefore, in order to attain fair access to learning opportunities for all, government policy focuses on the removal of the impediments or 'barriers' which prevent those people from participating in education who would benefit from doing so. Justifications such as these have been made repeatedly in a succession of official and semi-official reports (Dearing, 1997; Fryer, 1997; Department of Trade and Industry, 1998; Kennedy, 1997; National Audit Office, 2002).

This metaphor of barriers to participation is an attractive one that apparently explains differences in patterns of participation between socioeconomic groups, and also neatly contains its own solution – removal of the barriers. So, if it is observed that participation is costly and that potential students from lower-income families have lower rates of participation, then it can be hypothesised that cost is a barrier, and removal of cost a solution, to widening participation.

Research has suggested several barriers that potential learners face, and to widen post-compulsory participation these need to be recognised and faced (Calder, 1993; Burchardt et al., 1999). To a large extent, the barriers proposed are presaged by the patterning of adult learning, such as buildings not adaptable to handle disability, or lack of transport for students in rural areas (Hudson, 2005). There are institutional barriers, created by the structure of available opportunities, and dispositional barriers in the form of individuals' motivation and attitudes to learning. However, the most obvious barriers are situational, stemming chiefly from the life and lifestyle of the prospective learner (Harrison, 1993).

Transport is a barrier that might apply to all forms of participation. In one small study, a major reason given for not continuing with further education was distance to the nearest college (Hramiak, 2001). For the ethnic minority women involved, it was perhaps more about psychological distance from family responsibilities than the actual travel involved. Proximity to home, and convenience for travel, were strong factors influencing adults learners using learndirect centres (Dhillon, 2004). In particular, the learners valued the flexible opening hours, the lack of a specific requirement to attend at pre-specified times, and the ability to arrange to drop in for learning at times to fit in with their other commitments.

Not having enough time, particularly for a social life and education, is another potential barrier to participation (FEU, 1993). Taking a course often involves an adjustment in lifestyle which may be more of a problem for those with dependants or in long-term relationships. Partners as well as children can reduce the time available for learning in women's lives more than for men (Abroms and Goldscheider, 2002). The most vulnerable women from the most disadvantaged backgrounds seem to face the greatest barrier in terms of time.

Perhaps the most important barrier is the relative cost of education (McGivney, 1993). Some students continue with extended education because they report believing, in accord with human capital theory, that they will gain in the long term through enhanced earnings (Kay and Sundaraj, 2004; Glover et al., 2002). Others leave for the same reason: they see education as a poor alternative to earning money in a job (Ulrich, 2004).

But perhaps more important than these motivations is a calculation of the cost of education. The costs of continuing in education can be of the direct kind, such as fees, and they can be indirect, such as expenditure on transport and child-care, or foregone income (Hand et al., 1994). Benefit entitlement in the UK has been generally incompatible with formal learning episodes, even when all of the costs of training are met by the individual. Many people have left learning episodes before completion because of uneven interpretation of the rules by benefits offices. Payment of fees to institutions by instalments is not generally allowable, or increases the overall cost, and many new learners are surprised by the level of other expenses, such as examination fees and stationery costs.

The costs of formal, full-time study may disproportionately affect potential students from low-income families and non-traditional students in general (Education and Employment Committee, 2001; Metcalf, 2005). In one study, those who were most debt-averse tended to be from low-income social classes, lone parents, Muslims, and black and ethnic minority groups (Callender, 2003).

For some individuals, part-time work is considered essential to enable them to complete and finance their course (Thomas et al., 2001). Some students work for considerably more than the maximum 12 hours for full-time students recommended by the Select Committee on Education and Employment (Noble, 2004). So the pressure of having to work could also lead to individuals missing sessions, which may then play a role in some of them subsequently deciding to leave university (Bamber and Tett, 2000). These studies relate to full-time students with part-time jobs. If anything, the situation is even worse for many part-time students with full-time jobs, and who may also have childcare responsibilities (Winn, 2002). Employer support in the form of fees payment or time off for those undertaking study whilst in employment can be a crucial factor (Schuller et al., 1997).

During the last two decades the costs of adult, further and higher education in England have, according to many breakdowns, gradually been shifting from the general taxpayer to the students and their families. Restrictions on access to unemployment and housing benefits were later accompanied by reduction of grants for HE and, in 1998, the introduction of means-tested contributions towards fees. The latter rose substantially in September 2006, when universities started charging fees of up to £3,000 per year for full-time undergraduates. The increase in students continuing to HE has been accompanied by an increase in the number reported to be in debt. The debt situation is often worse for mature students (Gorard and Taylor, 2001), as a result of the ending of the older students' allowance, so that by 2004 the average debt on graduation was £12,000 (NatWest Money Matters Survey and Barclay's Annual Graduate Survey).

The education system in England and Wales has compulsory schooling for all, based loosely on a comprehensive and egalitarian model, until age 16. A greater element of selection is introduced for continuation at 16+, such that prior attainment begins to influence how, and even whether, an individual continues in formal education and training. This is despite growing pressure for everyone to continue formal education in some way. Some individuals leave formal learning at, or even before, 16, and never return¹. On one reading of the evidence, this is a key target group for the widening participation agenda – those least likely to participate again. But, of course, those least likely to participate again are largely ignored as poor bets in practice, in favour of those more like the usual suspects for FE and HE.

Institutional barriers to participation in post-compulsory education come from the procedures of the providing organisations themselves, in terms of advertisement, entry procedures, timing and scale of provision, and general lack of flexibility. Colleges of FE, for example, have traditionally assumed a 17-year-old norm and are having to adapt to more flexible opportunities for learning, because people often have interrupted patterns of participation and diverse progression routes (Gorard and Rees, 2002).

¹ Since this review was completed, the 14-19 reforms in England have raised the effective participation age to 16. It will be interesting to monitor the consequences for immediate and later lifelong learning.

Non-completion of some courses is so high that it must be partly seen as an indictment of the quality of provision at all levels – schools, further education, youth training and beyond.

3. How much do barriers matter?

Plausible as these ideas about barriers sound, it is important to recall that the research evidence above is almost entirely based on the self-reports of existing participants in education. Whatever those participating say about finance (and it obviously has not totally prevented them from accessing education), non-participants usually cite other reasons for not continuing with formal education (Selwyn et al., 2006).

Importantly, the case presented here for barriers does not provide evidence that overcoming barriers makes much difference in practical terms. In fact, much of the available evidence points the other way. A recent survey by the Adult Learning Inspectorate suggests that the widespread provision of free tuition for adults without Level 2 qualifications did not increase numbers. Rather it changed who did what where (Lee, 2006). This attraction or re-direction of the 'usual suspects' is common. In the UK, the school-leaving age was raised in 1972 from age 15 to 16, producing an inevitable but not total increase in staying-on in education past age 15. A very similar growth in post-16 participation took place in the 1990s, despite the lack of further legal compulsion. The Youth Cohort Study shows a steep growth in full-time education post-16 after 1989 (Payne, 1998). However, this is largely a question of robbing Peter to pay Paul, because government-funded training showed an almost equivalent drop over the same period (from 24% of 16-year-olds in 1989 to 12% in 1994). Other commentators have observed the same, and even today increases in staying-on rates in FE often replace work-based training, full-time participation replaces part-time participation, and so on (Denholm and Macleod, 2003). The total proportion of the 16-year-old cohort remaining in education, government schemes, and employment-based training combined has remained almost constant for decades, even though the balance between routes varies according to the local history of funding and availability. And the proportion remaining in education and training continues to be stratified in terms of social class, ethnicity and region.

Finance is unlikely to be an important factor in generating stratified access to HE, for example (Dearden et al., 2004; 2005). Financial incentives and income-contingent charging systems seem to increase the overall participation rate but leave the proportion of students from poor backgrounds largely unchanged (Taylor and Gorard, 2005; Chapman and Ryan 2002). The introduction of tuition fees and the replacement of grants with loans did not significantly affect entrant behaviour (HEFCE, 2005; Metcalf, 2005). The proportion of students leaving their course who report finance as the problem is very low – around 1% (Gorard and Taylor, 2001).

Furthermore, when HE was free to students and living costs were more fully covered by a grant, participation in HE by social class was not more proportional, nor more equitable, than it is now. One explanation is that all of the potential students qualified for entry to HE are anyway relatively advantaged (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). Similar doubts can be cast on the purported barriers of time, travel, and institutional behaviour (Gorard et al., 2007).

Overall, the idea of barriers to learning is elegant, both as explanation of the differences in participation and as the basis for their abolition. However, there is little clear evidence of their impact in creating stratified access. Indeed, there is a consequent danger that they tend towards tautological non-explanations at the expense of more far-reaching institutional, lifelong and societal change. The relatively low level of participation from lower-income groups, for example, gives rise to the explanation that cost is a barrier. If this is so, then removal or reduction of the cost should lead to increased participation from lower-income

groups. This is the logic underlying grants, fees remission, and means-tested bursaries. But there is little direct evidence that these approaches are differentially effective for the groups for whom they are intended².

4. A life-course approach

There is a pattern of typical learning ‘trajectories’ which encapsulate individual education and training biographies. Some people leave formal education at the earliest opportunity. Some of these leavers return to formal learning at some time as adults, but a high proportion do not. Other people continue into extended initial education, but never return to formal learning once this is over. Others remain in contact with formal learning for a large proportion of their lives. Which of these ‘trajectories’, from lifelong non-participation to lifelong learning, an individual takes can be accurately predicted on the basis of characteristics that are known by the time an individual reaches school-leaving age.

Replicated analyses, conducted with several different datasets totalling 10,000 adults across the entire UK, have shown that the same determinants of post-compulsory participation appear each time (Gorard et al., 2003). This does not imply that people do not have choices, or that barriers have no impact, but rather that these choices occur within a framework of opportunities and expectations determined by the resources which they derive from their background and upbringing. The selection of individual educational experiences themselves reflect ‘learner identities’ built up over the life of the individual.

Qualifications and route at age 16, and subsequent life events, make much less difference, because often a ‘learner identity’ has already been formed, with a subjective opportunity structure that either includes or excludes participation in learning. Gorard and Rees (2002) entered variables measuring five determinants – time, place, sex, family and initial schooling – into a logistic regression function in the order in which they occur in real life. Those characteristics that are set very early in an individual’s life, such as age, sex and family background, predict later learning trajectories with 75% accuracy. Adding the variables representing initial schooling increases the accuracy of prediction to 90%.

After this, none of the measurable variables of adult life makes any difference to the quality of the predictions. Once background and early schooling are taken into account, there is just not enough variation left for barriers to make any difference to participation.

Of course, there may be important variables as yet unmeasured to explain these findings. But one possible explanation is that family poverty, lack of role models, and a sense of ‘not for us’, coupled with poor experiences of initial schooling, can conspire to create a kind of lifelong attitude to learning – a negative learner identity. In this case, the obvious barriers such as cost, time and travel are largely irrelevant. In the same way that most of the population is not deterred from higher education by lack of finance (largely because most young people with the requisite entry qualifications already attend HE – see Gorard, 2005), so most non-participants in basic skills training are not put off by ‘barriers’ but by their lack of interest in something that seems alien and imposed by others.

2 The ‘barriers’ metaphor assumes that the kinds of formal learning opportunities on offer are incorrigible, while existing non-participants are imagined merely as a pool of potential punters who just need to be tempted in. But an individual who has not investigated the possibility of participation in a local opportunity, for example, cannot have been put off by the fees, travel, accessibility, arcane language, or unrealistic time commitment they might encounter if they did. There are people ready, willing, motivated (and qualified) to take part in any adult learning opportunity and there are those who are currently not. Sometimes this is a rational choice based on the irrelevance of what is on offer, sometimes it is the long-term impact of poor teaching, social disadvantage, prejudice, or simply a hierarchy of needs.

To deal with this, we have first to understand it. In the relative social and economic situation for any individual, the choice not to participate could be completely rational. We need to revise any complacency that the existing set-up for learning is appropriate for all, and that the reluctant learner need only be lured back 'on track'.

Individuals with similar social backgrounds from different birth cohorts exhibit different tendencies to participate in education and training. Therefore, when they were born determines their relationship to changing opportunities for learning and social expectations (Rees et al., 2006). Time may represent a variety of factors such as changes in local opportunities, economic development, the increasing formalisation of training, the antagonism between learning and work, the age and maturity of an individual at any period, and the changing social expectations of the role of women.

Similarly, where people are born and brought up shapes their social expectations and access to specifically local opportunities to participate. Those who have lived in the most economically disadvantaged areas are least likely to participate in lifelong learning. This may be partly to do with the relative social capital of those in differing areas, or differences in actual local opportunities to learn. However, those who have moved between regions are even more likely to participate than those living in the more advantaged localities. It may not be much of an exaggeration to say that those who are geographically mobile tend to be participants in adult education or training, while those who remain in one area, sometimes over several generations, tend to be non-participants (Gorard and Rees, 2002).

Family background is influential in a number of ways, most obviously in material terms, but also in terms of what is understood to be the 'natural' form of participation. In one large study, for a number of those who had participated actively in post-school learning, this is seen as a product of what was normatively prescribed within the family or, less frequently, the wider community, rather than their own active choice (Gorard et al., 1999c). Families are universally acknowledged as a key determinant of educational performance in primary and secondary schooling and, by extension, in higher education too. In compulsory education, similar educational routes within families are widely recognised. For example, the occupational or class background of parents is routinely used as an explanatory factor in analyses of educational attainment or progress through the compulsory educational system (Halsey et al., 1980). Similarly, the influences of ethnic background are recognised as being mediated through families (Wilson, 1987).

An individual's sex can also make a considerable difference. Men consistently report more formal, post-16 learning than women. Although the situation is changing over time, these changes are different for each sex. Older women are less likely than men of the same age to have participated in learning lifelong, but younger women are more likely to have undertaken extended initial education. Indeed, extended initial education appears now to be relatively gender-neutral, while later education or training is increasingly the preserve of males.

Any choices made are perceived to have been heavily constrained by external circumstances. Perhaps most obviously, many older women describe the ways in which the learning opportunities available to them were limited by local employment, social expectations as to what was appropriate, or by a 'forced altruism' with respect to family commitments (Gorard et al., 2001). Younger women respondents provide similar accounts (Beck et al., 2006).

In a review of evidence on the impact of parental education on early-life, Feinstein et al. (2004) showed that key influences on a child's educational attainment in the early years include parental education and income. Occupational status and family size are also relevant, but here the causal pathway is less clear. Once parental income and education are accounted for, then measures such as family structure, maternal employment or teenage motherhood are not important, in isolation, as determinants of child attainment.

One explanation for this pattern relies on an assumption of the inheritability of 'talent'. If parents are talented (in these terms), then they may be more likely to have higher levels of attainment and income, and pass this talent on to their children. Another explanation would be that the income and education of parents affects their beliefs, values, aspirations and attitudes, and these are 'transmitted' to their children via proximal interaction. In fact, of course, trying to separate out these types of explanations is almost impossible on the basis of the kinds of data available to us.

The experiences gained during initial schooling appear to be another important factor in shaping long-term orientations towards learning, and in providing the qualifications necessary to access many forms of further and higher education. State-funded compulsory education for all children is an intervention intended to equalise life opportunities and remedy inequalities such as the number of books at home or the reading ability of parents. However, because this intervention is universal in the UK and is now so mature, it is very hard to decide what effect it has had on educational mobility. 'Success' or 'failure' at school affects the choice of what to do post-16 – and there even appears to be a school effect on choice (Pustjens et al., 2004). Experience of school lays the foundation for what could be an enduring 'learner identity'. It is striking, for example, how those who experienced the 11-plus examination testified to its major and often traumatic effects (Gorard and Rees, 2002). For respondents too young to have gone through the tripartite system, although 'success' and 'failure' are less starkly defined, it remains the case that they identify positive experiences of schooling as crucial determinants of enduring attitudes towards subsequent learning.

In contrast, those who 'failed' at school often come to see post-school learning of all kinds as irrelevant to their needs and capacities. Participation in further, higher and continuing education is not perceived to be a realistic possibility, and even work-based learning is viewed as unnecessary. Whilst this is certainly not confined to those whose school careers were less 'successful' in conventional terms, it is a view almost universally held amongst this group (Selwyn et al., 2006).

5. Some suggestions

There is a problem in identifying high-quality research in this area. Much research writing is not actually research-driven. Other than these, and weakness in reporting evidence, the most common generic defect is the link between the evidence presented and the conclusions drawn from it. There are a number of repeated problems, including lack of controlled interventions to test what works, lack of suitable comparators even in correlational and observational designs, and the exclusion from research of those not participating in education – even in research about non-participation.

A typical piece of work in this field involves a small number of interviews with a group of existing participants in education, often from the same institution as the researcher. Such a study cannot uncover a causal model, is difficult to generalise from, and tells us nothing about non-participants – the group that much work in this field is ostensibly concerned with. There is lack of agreement about how to compare differences over time and place. There is a general abuse of the purpose of statistical tests of significance. So common are these flaws, and not specific to research concerning participation, that they are not generally remarked on by authors, picked up in peer-review, or taken into account when attempting to draw warranted conclusions from one or more studies.

There are also some intractable problems. If some of the determinants of adult participation truly lie in early childhood, then interventions in post-16 participation face a greater challenge to make much headway in changing the subjective opportunity structure of an individual. But interventions in earlier life set up in the last decade will take a long time yet for the participants to be old enough to see the impact. But, even where enough time has elapsed, it would be scientifically misleading to attribute an outcome to an intervention taking place so far in advance, and with so many confounding, intervening variables.

Perhaps discrimination in terms of qualification and prior education will, in the near future, seem as unnatural as discrimination by sex, class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and age do now – all of which were once considered acceptable (Walford, 2004). There is, of course, a correlation between school-level qualification and later educational success, and between educational outcomes and success in employment, but we have to be very cautious about what this signifies. The correlations exist largely because we make them so. Students are only encouraged to stay at school if their GCSEs are ‘good’, only accepted at university if their Level 3 qualifications are ‘good’, and more likely to be offered a ‘good’ job if they have a ‘good’ degree from a ‘good’ university, and so on. In addition, Level 3 qualifications are highly predictable from earlier attainment, life events and personal characteristics (Gorard, 1997).

Taking a life-course view, qualifications are not seen as a causatory agent at all but as a substitute variable summing up the prior individual, social and economic determinants of ‘success’ at school and beyond. Educators do not select their potential students, nor employers their employees, on the basis of their SES, ethnicity or age, as this is both unfair and illegal. However, they do select them on the basis of a substitute variable – prior education – that sums up, and is very heavily correlated with, such background factors. What is the sense in that?

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