Impacts of increased tuition fees

In times of economic uncertainty, questions on the purpose, value, and investment of higher education (HE) come to the fore. Such questions have a particular relevance in the study “ The decision-making and changing behavioural dynamics of potential higher education students: the impacts of increasing tuition fees in England” (2013) written by Stephen Wilkins, Farshid Shams, and Jeroen Huisman. One of the major challenges of higher education is funding and how the government is providing the needs of the students. Due to inadequate funds, raising tuition feesbecomes inevitable(Wilkins, Shams, & Husiman, 2013, p. 126). This article focuses on the changes in the English tuition fee policies and how it correlates to student choice for higher education institutions (p. 125). Research confirms that financial considerations are the most important factors in the student-decision process when choosing a HEI (Maringe et al. 2006).

Higher Education in the UK is no longer just a public good, but a public good with a private cost. Since 2006, all university students in the UK have been charged a tuition fee andeach following yeartuition fees have increased (Wilkins, Shams, & Husiman 2013, p. 126). By 2012, the UK government decided on a £9000 tuition cap in England (Business Innovation & Skills [BIS] 2011). With the recent changes in the global economies and rising unemployment rates the question arises: how are students understanding and responding to increases in tuition fees? The study examines three scenarios as the possible outcomes of the increase in tuition fees: 1) not entering HE; 2) going abroad; and 3) looking for a cheaper alternative in the UK (Wilkins, Shams, & Husiman, 2013, p. 129).

The central focus of the study is toevaluate whether financial factors take a first priority in students' choice ofapplying to higher education institutions (HEIs). A survey was used to collectdata amongst students in their final year of secondary school, specificallystudents who were following a General Certificate of Education Advanced Levelprogramme (A-levels) in England (Wilkins, Shams, & Husiman, 2013, p. 131). To supplement the survey, two focus group discussions were conducted, eachlasting one hour. According to the study, the first group " consisted of fiveyear 12/13 students who were studying A-levels at a school sixth form, whilethe second group had four students from a further education college" (Wilkins, Shams, & Husiman, 2013, p. 131). The researchers do not go into depth asto why they choose this selective group of students. It makes one think of thepotential biases of selecting these students and if their perceptions weretailored to match the propositions. By only conducting a discussion with ninestudents the study cannot fully capture the diversity of choice within thestudent body.

Wilkins, Shams, and Husiman (2013) assess the impacts of the tuition fee increase by presenting the following six propositions:

- Proposition 1: Facing substantially higher tuition fees, financial issues will become the key influencer determining a student's higher education choices.
- Proposition 2: Facing substantially higher tuition fees, working-class students will be the most likely to consider not entering higher education.

- Proposition 3: Facing substantially higher tuition fees, working-class students will be the most likely to seek cheaper higher education opportunities.
- Proposition 4: Facing substantially higher tuition fees, females will be more likely than males to be influenced by financial issues when making decisions about higher education.
- Proposition 5: Facing substantially higher tuition fees, students in England are still not likely to consider studying at higher education institutions (HEIs) abroad.
- Proposition 6: Facing substantially higher tuition fees, students who take at least one modern foreign language at A-level will be more likely to consider studying at HEIs abroad. (language influences). (p. 129-31)

The six propositions have a focus ongender, language, socioeconomic status, and geographic considerations. However, a potential flaw within the propositions is notconsidering ethnicity. Student ethnicity is not considered within the study northe impacts of ethnic background on students choosing a HEI. This is apotential limitation when considering student choice of HEIs in the UnitedStates, specially the historically black colleges including Howard University, Spelman College, and Hapmton University. Since theseschools do not have large endowments in comparison to large prestigious HEIssuch as Harvard University, with an endowment of 36billion dollars (Mulvey, J., and Holen, M., 2016), theycannot offer as much financial aid. Therefore, many students decide to attend adifferent HEI which can offer a more attractive financial aid package, but atthe cost of sacrificing the opportunity of being part of a unparalleledcultural experience at a historically black college

(Gasman, M., 2009). In the United States, endowments are the universities' largest financial assetand serves a major determinant in student choice in HEIs. This study wouldbenefit by having a comparative approach to HEIs in the United States if timeand word limit permitted.

A further point of tension within thestudy is the ambiguity of terms. Firstly, two out of the six propositions (ie. propositionstwo and six) did not provide a description which puts into question thevalidity of the study. Furthermore, the phrase " not entering HE" occurred ninetimes throughout the study. The researchers did not specify in any of thosesentences what it means by " not entering HE." An important question to ask iswhether " not entering HE" refers to students taking a gap year and eventuallyreturning to higher education or entering the labour market and never pursuingHE. This is a significant distinction because if students are taking a gap yearbut will return to HE it shows that they are impacted by the economy and havingfinancial stability is an important consideration for them before startingtheir studies. There are no statistics in the study to outline the percentageof students not pursuing HE and no words to explain their decision. These areimportant considerations to help build depth within the study.

The epistemological assumptions of thisstudy help us to understand student choice of HEIs by hypothesizing and testingempirical approaches through a natural science lens. On the other hand, the ontologicalassumption concerns the natural world, taking in account the effects of theglobal financial crisis in 2008, and the human behavior within the global HEcontext (Pring 2005, p. 232). Wilkins, Shams, and Husiman embracequantitative methods approach to the study, using SPSS software to generalizethe findings and test the propositions. Since the data is in a numeric form, statisticaltests are applied in making statements about the data. Quantitative studieshelp to produce data that is descriptive but difficulties arise when it comesto their interpretation. For instance, it is helpful that the studyincludes the demographics and socioeconomic statuses of the participants, butthe study would have more depth if it integrated a qualitative approach inaddition to the quantitative research. The students had a one hour discussionon the questionnaire yet there is no student voice, only statistics from SPSS. With group discussion responses we can have a qualitative measure of analysisof the data caption. Without properlyinterpreting the data behind these numbers, it is difficult to say *why* studentschoose HEIs based on financial considerations.

In conclusion, the rise of tuition fees in England has altered the ways in which students choose to enter HE and if so, which HEIs. Wilkins, Shams, and Husiman mention that this study is not intended for policy reform (p. 137); however, it calls attention to the pressures placed on students in determining to enter HEIs and brings awareness to the major factors of student choice. An important consideration for restructuring this study is incorporating a mixed methods approach, by utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods. Without the necessary qualitative data, there is no authentic way to determine *why* students are choosing a certain HEI. If Wilkins, Shams, and Husiman used an interpretive paradigm and observations from the discussion groups to investigate the issues on the increase tuition fees it would create a more holistic picture of the student experience and behaviors with statistical data to prove the point. Lastly, the data used in this study was gathered before the increase in fees in 2012 (Wilkins, Shams, & Husiman, 2013, p. 129). Students were aware of the fee increase but it was not a real determining factor for them at that point in time. It would be most helpful to have a follow-up study at the same colleges from which the data for this study was collected, using the questionnaires, and group discussion in order to compare and contrast student opinions and choice patterns overtime.

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