The influence of teacher habitus on the university applications of moderately-attaining students

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ABSTRACT
Much of the research examining students' university choosing in England focuses on rates of access to 'elite' universities for high-attaining state-educated students. By contrast, the experiences of students applying to 'new' universities remain under-researched. This paper considers moderately attaining 16–18 years olds as a discrete group and highlights how a combination of England's Higher Education (HE) policy and school performance measures may influence levels of support for students' university applications. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a London state school, it finds that support for students' university applications was differentiated in ways which overwhelmingly disadvantaged moderate attainers. A competitive school market, combined with a policy focus on 'fair access' to 'elite' institutions, meant high attainers' university applications were consistently prioritised. Some teachers were found who navigated dominant HE discourses, drawing on an ethical teacher habitus and their social and cultural capital to support students applying to less prestigious universities.

Introduction
This paper examines the support given to a range of academically diverse 'sixth-form' (post-16) students in a multi-ethnic London comprehensive school to show how a range of informal teacher practices and formal institutional selective practices influenced the level of support for students applying to Higher Education (HE). It differs from existing studies by focusing on the experiences of moderately-attaining students applying to less selective universities. Although this group forms the majority of students in most school sixth-forms, they remain under-researched as a discrete group, their experiences made invisible by studies focused on the influence of race (Weekes-Bernard 2010; Boliver 2016) and/or class (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Reay, Davies and Ball, 2005) on access to HE, or an evaluation of the 'Fair Access' policy and rates of access to 'Russell Group' universities by disadvantaged, high-attaining state school students (The Sutton Trust 2010; Boliver 2013). The experiences of moderately-attaining sixth-formers highlight inequalities within students’ HE
choice-making and how support may be differentiated for students’ Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) applications.

Previous studies of students’ HE choosing have compared quality of support across different school types (Reay 1998; Pugsley 2004; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). By contrast, this paper compares levels of support within a single school sixth-form and points to the importance of teachers and the influence of ‘teacher habitus’ in the HE application process. Building on Oliver and Kettley (2010) work on the influence of teacher habitus on students’ applications to ‘elite’ universities, I show how teachers use their agency to act as ‘facilitators’ or ‘gatekeepers’ for students’ applications to non-Russell Group universities. This paper also develops Reay, David, and Ball (2005) work on the influence of the ‘institutional habitus’ on students’ HE choosing. While the school’s aspirational institutional habitus is seen to ‘permeate’ (Reay, David, and Ball 2005) students’ HE choice making, teacher agency emerges as a powerful determinant on the level of support given to differently-attaining HE applicants.

The empirical data collection for this study took place between 2014 and 2016, a key moment in post-16 policy reform which saw the school leaving age raised to 18 and the introduction of sixth-form league tables. These changes both increased the size of school sixth forms and heightened the focus on sixth-form performance, of which rates of access to Russell Group universities form an important part. By examining the experiences of students and teachers involved in the HE application process in a London school (‘Hallingford’), this paper offers an ethnographic perspective which complements Boliver’s (2004, 2013) quantitative research on the ‘unfairness’ of the ‘Fair Access’ policy.2

I start by considering Brown’s (1987) concept of ‘ordinary’ attainment at lower secondary level, and argue that ‘ordinary’ sixth-formers have been similarly neglected in the research literature. Following a review of the literature on HE choosing, I document how a research focus on the choice-making of different social groups and the efficacy of ‘Fair Access’ has led to the relative neglect of moderately-attaining HE applicants, as a discrete group. After outlining my methods, the rest of the paper presents an ethnographic analysis of teacher practices and students’ experiences in Hallingford sixth-form.

**Moderate attainers**

The terms ‘moderately-attaining’ and ‘moderate attainers’ are used to describe students who enter sixth-form with ‘good enough’ grades in their General Certificate of Secondary Education exams (GCSEs), characterised by mostly Bs and Cs (Archer 2008, 93). Brown (1987) conceptualised pupils who were neither ‘high flyers’ nor rebels, as ‘ordinary’, arguing that as an ‘invisible majority’ they formed a discrete group deserving of sociological enquiry (Brown 1987, 3). As Roberts (2012) argues, ‘middle-ground’ students have been overlooked in the literature because of a tendency to view them as ‘politically and socially unproblematic’ (204).

As a consequence of policy preoccupations with rates of access to Russell Group institutions, research has tended to focus on high-attaining, state-educated students, rather than the more typical, moderately-attaining HE applicants who progress to non-Russell Group institutions. Such students form the majority of most school sixth-forms and around two thirds of all HE applicants (Department for Education, 2018). However, influences on the HE choosing of moderate attainers, as a discrete group, have aroused little research interest. The substantial body of work produced in response to the New Labour policy of widening
participation, saw moderate attainers’ experiences subsumed within a research focus on minority ethnic HE choosers (Ball, Reay, and David 2002a; Weekes-Bernard 2010; Boliver 2016) and the influence of social class on choice-making (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Ball et al. 2002b; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). That ethnicity and class intersect in students’ HE choosing is indisputable. Nonetheless, missing from the research literature is an examination of how student attainment may influence levels of support for HE choosing. With sixth-form performance inextricably bound to rates of access to Russell Group universities, many schools operate an ‘economy of student worth’ (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 1998) whereby moderate attainers and their non-Russell Group destinations are deemed to hold less ‘value’ to schools than high attainers applying to Russell Group universities. In a competitive sixth-form market, a focus on how student attainment and the ‘status’ of their university choices determines levels of support offers important insights into post-16 educational inequalities.

**Influences on students’ HE choice-making**

Bourdieu’s thinking on the role education plays in reproducing social inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) is useful for understanding how moderate attainer’s HE choices are shaped within a marketised education system. Reay, David, and Ball (2005) used the Bourdieusian concept of institutional habitus to examine the influence of the school on students’ HE choosing. Understood as a complex interplay between the school’s ‘expressive order’, reputational status and organisational practices, the institutional habitus may be ‘inclusive’, with a high collective commitment to the educational success of all students, or ‘exclusive’, characterised by a meritocratic and individualistic conception of students’ educational trajectories (Tarabini and Curran 2019, 61). What the concept of institutional habitus embraces and ‘school effect’ and ‘school culture’ do not, is an understanding of a school as a conglomerate of its particular history, ethos and values, as well as its practices, and how all these combine to position it in the field, or social space, in which it operates.

Reay, David, and Ball (2005) argue that the institutional habitus has a greater influence on HE choosing than family background (36). They found it was ‘mobilised differentially for different groups’ with applicants to ‘elite’ universities receiving ‘a significantly greater input’ than those to ‘less elite’ institutions (Reay, David, and Ball 2005, 47). Findings from Ball et al. (2002b) study of habitus and HE choice-making led them to make the distinction between HE ‘choice-making’ and ‘decision-making’ for working-class and BAME (Black and minoritised ethnic) students. They identified two key ‘constraints’ on decision-making: the need to match academic performance to an institution’s selectivity, and personal ‘taste’ (Ball et al. 2002b, 51–52). These constraints apply equally to moderate attainers, added to which we might add an institutional marginalisation of their HE choices, experienced by students as a lack of interest in their UCAS applications.

The role of teachers, and specifically the influence of teacher habitus, on moderate attainers’ HE choices and applications, is an important new area for examination. Conceptualised by Oliver and Kettley (2010) as something which combines an individual’s ‘histor(y), prior experiences, moral and political beliefs and social capital’ (739–40), a teacher’s habitus influences their acceptance of school practices and the quality of support they give differently-attaining students for their university applications. Highlighting the importance of teacher agency to navigate school practices, Woollen and Otto (2014) argue that the
‘durability’ of a teacher’s habitus means they are capable of moving between ‘active producer/reproducer of social divisions and change agent challenging inequitable educational practices’ (95). Oliver and Kettley (2010) appear alone, however, in examining the role of teacher ‘as change agent’ in the HE process, and finding that a teacher’s habitus, characterised by their ethical and political beliefs, can influence them to act as ‘gatekeepers’ or ‘facilitators’ for disadvantaged high-attaining students’ applications to ‘elite’ universities. Equally, as my research shows, a teacher’s habitus may influence them to act as facilitators for disadvantaged moderate attainers applying to non-elite institutions, or in ways perceived by moderate attainers as gatekeeping.

The usefulness of habitus for exploring the interplay of structure (school) and agency (student) has, nonetheless, been challenged. Atkinson (2011) questions the extension of the concept of habitus to the ‘collective level’ (336), arguing in common with Donnelly (2015) that institutional habitus conceives the school as homogenous. Defending the ‘collective’ or ‘institutional’ habitus, Burke, Emmerich, and Ingram (2013) explain that the habitus is both collective and individual, allowing for the analysis of a social group and its ‘dispositional qualities’ (166) as well as the range of social influences on the formation of the individual’s habitus (178).

In spite of the body of work on students’ HE choosing, research into the types of support provided for students’ UCAS applications remains slight. Shuker (2014) and Jones’s (2012) studies of students’ personal statements, a key part of the UCAS application, compare the quality of support across school types. How support may be differentiated for differently-attaining students within school types, however, remains underresearched, and also the role of teachers, on whom most students rely for support during the application process.

**Methods**

This paper draws from a larger ethnographic study of three contrasting school sixth-forms and the influences on students’ post-school destinations. It was inspired by Reay, David, and Ball (2005) ethnographic study of students’ HE choosing. Here, the focus is on the experiences of a group of high and moderately-attaining students who were tracked through Hallingford sixth-form to their HE destinations. The background to the study was the shift in the HE policy discourse from New Labour’s emphasis on ‘widening participation’, formalised with the establishment of the Office of Fair Access (Department of Education and Skills, 2003), to the reshaping of ‘fair access’ and a more exclusive policy focus on fair access to ‘elite’ institutions (Bowl and Hughes 2013, 8–9).

Data for the wider study was gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations of sixth-form assemblies, tutor group and classroom teaching, and HE and Careers events. While observations and field notes were essential for recording formal practices, student and teacher interviews provided the richest sources of data on how formal and informal practices determined levels of support for students’ HE choosing and UCAS applications. Apart from my observation of Hallingford’s UCAS preparation day (UCAS day), this paper is based primarily on interview data.

Student participants were interviewed three times. First interviews took place in the first term (semester) of sixth-form (year 12) when they were asked about their experiences as moderate or high attainers, if they aspired to university, and their approach to decision-making. At the end of year 12, second interviews allowed students to reflect on their first year
of sixth-form and their university aspirations. A final interview was held in the first or second term of year 13, the final year of school, and focused on levels of support they received for their UCAS applications.

The head of sixth-form was interviewed once in year 12 and once in year 13. The aims of the first interview were to establish rapport, gain insights into the socio-economic and academic characteristics of Hallingford’s sixth-form, and find out how support was delivered for students’ UCAS applications. The second interview took place after most students had submitted their UCAS applications and re-visited how support for students’ HE choosing and their UCAS applications (the HE process) was allocated. Four form tutors were interviewed about their support for students during the HE process during the final year of fieldwork.

My student sample comprised nine moderately-attaining students who entered Hallingford sixth-form with a mix of ‘higher end’ (As and Bs) and ‘lower end’ (Bs and Cs) GCSEs and six high attainers, with at least five A/A*s.4 Reflecting the diversity of Hallingford’s pupil population, 14 of the 15 students came from working-class BAME families, with key earners working in the service industry or skilled and unskilled manual labour. The sample comprised South Asian, Somali, Nigerian, Chinese and Afghan and one white student. For reasons already explained, although ethnicity and class play a role in students’ HE choosing, these are not the focus of analysis in this paper. Of the nine boys and six girls, eight studied Science and Maths A levels, five studied Humanities, and two students studied BTECs in Business and in Media. At the time of my research, Hallingford’s senior teachers and teachers responsible for tutor groups (form class), were predominantly white, male and middle class. My teacher sample also included a middle-class, black male. Teachers who agreed to be interviewed all taught sciences. The head of sixth-form taught humanities.

Coding of student transcriptions began with a thematic focus on the ways in which students experienced and evaluated formal and informal support for their HE choosing and UCAS applications. I also coded for student self-concept and post-school aspirations and established concepts in the literature of institutional choice such as ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ knowledge (e.g. Ball and Vincent 1998). Coding was cross-referenced with field notes of observations of formal support. My analysis indicated some significant common influences on students’ HE choosing and the usefulness of certain Bourdieusian concepts for exploring these, in particular family and institutional habitus (Reay, David, and Ball 2005) and the influence of teacher habitus (Oliver and Kettley 2010). Transcripts were then re-coded for these theoretical concepts. Further analysis pointed to the different ways the institutional habitus, as expressed through formal practices, school culture/values and HE aspirations, influenced differently-attaining students’ HE aspirations. The significance of different types of teacher habitus also emerged at this stage. Interviews with teachers were coded for types of support given for students’ HE choosing and UCAS applications and cross-referenced with field notes of observations of staff/student interactions (for example, school UCAS days and form group periods). Transcripts were also coded for views on school practices and discourses. Following analysis of student interviews, teacher transcripts were coded for indications of their teacher habitus, such as educational and career background, opinions, beliefs and/or values. Analysis pointed to the importance of teacher habitus on their motivation and ability to support differently-attaining students’ HE choosing and applications, and the role played by their cultural and social capital.
The school context: Hallingford comprehensive

Hallingford is a multi-ethnic comprehensive located in an area of high social deprivation in Greater London. The school sixth-form is typical of a significant proportion in England where progression to university is strongly encouraged, and numbers accessing Russell Group universities important for attracting students. Hallingford was last inspected by England's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 2011 and rated 'Outstanding'. At the time of my research, Hallingford sixth-form numbered 600 post-16 students with a year 13 of 271, of which around 48% progressed to HE and 26% to Russell Group universities. The strength of Hallingford’s HE discourse was evident throughout the sixth-form block where photographs of students accessing ‘Oxbridge’ (Oxford and Cambridge) and Russell Group universities were prominently displayed.

First encounters with Hallingford’s institutional habitus

An introduction to Hallingford’s institutional habitus, of which sixth-form selective practices and attainment-based segregation formed an integral part, came with my observation of UCAS day. Held annually at end of year 12, UCAS day was used to familiarise students with the university application process. In the morning, every student attended a series of undifferentiated talks designed to encourage progression to HE delivered by senior teachers and university personnel. Students spent the afternoon in their tutor groups to learn about the UCAS application process. It was at this stage that I first observed differing levels of support for high and moderately-attaining HE applicants, made possible by Hallingford’s hierarchy of tutor groups in which students were grouped according to GCSE attainment on entry to sixth-form.

My first observation was of a 90-minute workshop for a ‘top’ tutor group of high-attaining students expected to progress to Russell Group universities. Students were attentive while the form tutor gave a PowerPoint presentation with a step-by-step guide to creating a UCAS account followed by detailed advice on writing a personal statement. Students were then asked to start drafting while the form tutor circulated the room offering one-to-one support. At the end of the session, students were invited to email their first drafts over the summer holidays for feedback. The form tutor explained Hallingford did not provide resources and that she created her own UCAS guide.

I also observed a lower-ranking tutor group comprising students studying for a mixture of A levels, Applied A levels and BTECs. When I arrived, the form tutor was busy on his laptop. None of the students, except a group of three girls, appeared to be working on their UCAS accounts. Others surfed the internet or chatted. A group of students explained that their form tutor had already ‘done’ the UCAS application process before I arrived. However, they had not understood some aspects and asked for help. Having learnt that I was researching students’ HE choosing, several started to quiz me on which universities I would ‘recommend’, and appeared to believe I possessed ‘hot’ (insider) knowledge about admissions over and above the ‘cold’ official information of university websites (see Reay, David, and Ball 2005, 152). By the end of the afternoon, little had been produced by any of the students.

Other than Hallingford’s annual year 12 UCAS day, there was ‘no official programme’ (form tutor, Mr Derbyshire) of support, although form tutors were expected to advise students on their UCAS applications during tutor group meetings. Sixth-form tutor groups
were large, comprising an average of 25 year 12 and 25 year 13 students, with different year groups meeting on different days of the week. In year 13, students met twice weekly for periods of 20 min. As well as advising on UCAS applications, form tutors were expected to register students and give out school notices. Moderate attainers’ final interviews suggested the arrangement was inadequate, with only Adela helped by her form tutor. Other moderate attainers reported form tutors being too ‘busy’ to help them, giving rushed and perfunctory advice, or skim-reading their personal statements. Mahnoor’s form tutor said she lacked the ‘relevant subject knowledge’ to advise on Mahnoor’s application to study aviation studies.

None of the moderate attainers in my sample could afford to travel to university open days outside London. By contrast, high-attaining students benefited from trips to ‘elite’ universities paid for by the school and/or The Sutton Trust educational charity. When asked to explain how they chose their universities, moderate attainers described a process of decision-making using a combination of ‘cold’ official knowledge in the form of abstract data (Ball and Vincent 1998, 380) provided by university websites and HE league tables, with rumour and ‘gut feeling’. Ball (2012) explains that in the absence of more reliable sources of information, rumour ‘is a way of filling in missing information or explaining the inexplicable’ (p.219). Interviewed at the end of year 12, moderate attainers appeared especially susceptible to mistaking hearsay or rumour about universities from friends and family with limited knowledge of the HE field, for high order ‘hot’ knowledge (see Reay, David, and Ball 2005, 62). Birmingham was described as an ‘amazing’ university because a friend who visited said it was. Chichester appealed because it sounded ‘homely, from what I’ve heard’, and Kent was considered for History because ‘it’s meant to be a lovely area’. Naz’s reasons for dismissing Brighton University were because, ‘It’s on the coast [and] I’m not sure I’d really like that. No-one I know’s been there.’ (Interview 2). Sometimes, students appeared to conflate the academic institution with its geographical location, and did not appreciate that a university might be more, or less, attractive than the surrounding area, or have more than one campus. Without one-to-one support from someone able to ‘decode’ the cold knowledge of league tables and university marketing (see Smith 2011), moderate attainers struggled to make well-informed HE choices. An exception was Maya whose brother was at a Russell Group university and helped her to compare different universities using league tables:

I looked up the top 10 unis for adult nursing and took a high, middle and low one. Then, I checked their open days. My brother said you need to be careful though, [open days] are how unis sell themselves to you.

(Maya, Interview 3)

**The influence of senior teachers on high attainers’ HE applications**

The lack of formal support for moderate attainers contrasted strongly with the intensive support Hallingford provided for high-attaining HE applicants by an unofficial ‘Oxbridge Team’ of four senior teachers led by Mr Nelson, the head of sixth-form. All were Russell Group educated, including two Oxbridge graduates. The teachers’ possession of ‘high order’ academic, cultural and social capital were believed by Mr Nelson to equip them with the potential to recognise ‘Oxbridge potential’ and facilitate applications (see Oliver and Kettley 2010). High attainers in my sample confirmed they benefited from exclusive, informally
arranged one-to-one support. School ‘sponsorship’ (Reay, David, and Ball 2005) also came in the form of ‘curriculum enrichment’ tutorials, high quality work experience and bought-in specialist advice for personal statement writing. In addition, high attainers attended Sutton Trust summer schools and taster courses. Most significantly, high attainers could rely on teachers’ proactivity: the progress of their applications was regularly checked and time generously given. The work to secure Oxbridge places appeared to stem from Mr Nelson’s desire to compete with a local academy ‘allowed to select for sixth-form’ (Mr Nelson) and which annually sent high numbers to Russell Group universities. In order to remain competitive, sixth-form practices at Hallingford exemplified Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (1998) ‘economy of student worth’: high attainers and their HE applications were prioritised and moderate attainers, whose HE destinations were deemed to hold less ‘value’, marginalised.

All six high attainers described receiving intensive support for their UCAS applications, although Sumeer and Fahima felt under pressure to apply to Oxford. Sumeer, a high-attaining, working-class Hindu boy, described ‘a heavy two-hour meeting’ during which Oxbridge Team members Mr Nelson and Miss Williams persuaded him to apply for Oxford even though it did not offer single honours Politics, which Sumeer wanted to study.

I was annoyed [but] I changed my personal statement to make it more for History. Once they decided I should go for Oxford, they both helped a lot…One time, [Miss Williams] put on a DVD for her year 7s and spent all afternoon going through my personal statement.

(Sumeer, interview 3)

Sumeer described Mr Nelson as ‘a friend’ on whom he could ‘drop in’ whenever he liked and who had arranged work experience for him with a personal contact in a leading media company. When I asked Sumeer if he thought Mr Nelson helped less high-attaining students in the same way, he responded:

Not as much. He’s dedicated to the Russell Group, Oxbridge. I think maybe he can relate to them more…Mr Nelson is more for the A* star kids. The others, they don’t have as much help. When there’s opportunities, like stuff advertised that you can do, it’s only for the A* kids.

(Sumeer, interview 2)

Sumeer’s observation of the type of students to whom Mr Nelson could ‘relate’ pointed to Mr Nelson’s ‘proactivity’ (Oliver and Kettley 2010) towards students applying to prestigious universities, and an alignment between Mr Nelson’s teacher habitus and Hallingford’s institutional habitus. Sumeer implied that Mr Nelson, a middle-class teacher and graduate of a leading Russell Group university, was more at ease with students likely to access prestigious universities.

High attainer Fahima also talked about Mr Nelson’s preference for Oxbridge applicants. In our final interview, she described how Mr Nelson ‘went on and on’ at her about applying to Oxford, and how out of place she had felt as one of only three BAME students on interview. In the middle of her account, she suddenly broke off and said: ‘Do you know what, Miss? I think [Mr Nelson] is elitist.’ When asked to explain, Fahima said:

It looks good if you send disadvantaged students to Oxbridge and encourages people to come here. I don’t know if [Mr Nelson] specifically wanted me to apply [to Oxford] to help me, or if it’s for his stats.
Although grateful for the help she received for her application to Cambridge, high-attaining Kirti also felt that the way support was allocated at Hallingford was ‘elitist’:

I feel I’ve gotten the better end of the stick, but that’s because I applied to Cambridge. I feel that’s elitist. I’m not happy about the way some of my friends were treated. A lot of them aren’t Oxbridge and they have to wait or come in after school.

(Kirti, interview 3)

While all six high attainers in my sample group came from working-class backgrounds, their HE aspirations meant they were ‘in sympathy’ (Reay, David, and Ball 2005, 79) with Mr Nelson’s aspirations for his sixth-form and like ‘fish in water’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127) in a school where pupils as young as 14 were selected for visits to Oxbridge to ‘encourage aspirations’ (Mr Nelson). Nevertheless, the ‘fit’ between some high attainers’ HE choices and that of the school’s Oxbridge Team appeared less snug than the ‘seamless fit’ between the HE choices of middle-class students and their schools identified by Reay, David, and Ball (2005, 39). In addition to the pressure felt by high-attaining Fahima and Sumeer, sixth-form tutors in my sample expressed views suggesting they believed Hallingford’s ‘push’ to get students to apply to Russell Group universities was influenced by a desire to maintain competitive in the local sixth-form market. In my next section, I discuss form tutors’ views on Hallingford’s focus on Russell Group universities, and examine how this focus influenced levels of support for students who were considered unlikely to access selective universities.

**Institutional habitus and dominant HE discourses – the challenges to moderate attainers’ university applications**

A key part of Hallingford’s institutional habitus was an assumption that students should aspire to university and an HE discourse which valorised progression to Russell Group universities. As Ball (2006) argues, discourses structure the language, perceptions and practices of teachers, managers and parents. They set boundaries to what is deemed legitimate and important in everyday social and professional contexts, and privilege certain practices whilst marginalising others. In the context of Hallingford sixth-form, discourses which marginalised moderate attainers and their applications to non-Russell Group universities were normalised.

Interviews with form tutors who supported students during the HE process revealed the kind of tensions which existed for teachers wanting to act in the best interests of their students while also fulfilling their ‘duty to the school’ (form tutor, Mr Riley). Form tutor to a ‘second rung’ tutor group in Hallingford’s ‘unofficial hierarchy’, Mr Riley’s reflexive approach to our interview revealed a disposition governed by ‘a continuous internal dialogue about [the] moral, ethical and political commitments’ (Oliver and Kettley 2010, 740) of his role. Initially, he appeared proud of Hallingford sixth-form’s success describing it as ‘the best state school sixth-form’ in the area. However, his tone became ironic when describing Hallingford’s aspirational culture explaining, ‘There’s a big emphasis on: ‘We get this proportion of students into university! And we get them into Russell Group universities!’ Mr Riley questioned certain practices integral to Hallingford’s institutional habitus. Referring to the ‘cherry-picking’ and ‘grooming’ of high attainers for applications to ‘elite’ universities,
he implied such practices were instrumental to the school’s performance. His distaste for the pressure put on students to apply to Russell Group universities suggested something deeply felt, and a teacher habitus with an ethical disposition: ‘I really detest the way certain members of senior staff push our kids [when] it’s in the interests of the school.’ Although more circumspect than Mr Riley, Mr Derbyshire, form tutor to a ‘top’ tutor group, was concerned that the ‘very good advertising’ given to the Russell Group undermined ‘middling’ students’ confidence in other HE choices: ‘Many of our pupils see it as either a Russell Group university or failure without knowing what Russell Group universities are, or what it means…’

The focus on Russell Group universities meant moderate attainers applying to ‘new’ (post-1992) universities struggled to get help for their UCAS applications, compounding feelings that their HE choices were ‘second rate’ (Zane). Gesturing to a display of photographs of former students who had accessed prestigious universities, Neena sounded dispirited: ‘Obviously, it’s all about the Russell Group and Oxbridge kids around here…I mean it’s all around the sixth-form…the charts and photos and stuff.’ (Interview 2). Confusingly for moderate attainers, Hallingford’s HE discourse also contained an inherent contradiction. Although Russell Group universities were strongly encouraged, moderate attainers who wanted to include a Russell Group institution as an HE choice, found their aspirations dismissed as unrealistic. Without the type of personalised support given to high attainers, however, they were unaware of the range of university choices open to them. Moderate attainers Adela, Naz, Neena and Shafia all aspired to Russell Group universities, but all assumed ‘Russell Group’ meant London universities, and few could name a selective university in the North of England. Adela and Neena believed Oxford Brooks was part of the Russell Group. For cultural and economic reasons, many Hallingford students wanted to study at an institution which would allow them to live at home. However, there was a horror of ‘new’ universities, even when travel would have been relatively easy. Moderate attainers’ ignorance of the range of universities available, and especially of long-established, non-Russell group and less selective Russell Group universities, indicated the extent to which they lacked support and guidance throughout the HE process.

As discussed, the structural weaknesses in the way support was formally delivered for the HE process appeared to stem largely from the inadequacies of a system which relied on busy form tutors finding time over and above their teaching and other scheduled duties. Like Reay’s (1998) working-class HE applicants, moderate attainers were forced to be more autonomous in the choice-making process (526). Only three in my sample found a teacher or form tutor willing to give advice on their UCAS applications. In final interviews, Maya and Neena turned to older siblings for help with their UCAS applications, while Hari and Zane reported being helped by friends. ‘Higher end’ (As and Bs) moderate attainer Tim applied to a Russell Group university and was helped by Mr Nelson. However, when ‘lower end’ (Bs and Cs) moderate attainer Adela approached Mr Nelson for advice believing ‘he’d know the smart thing to do with unis,’ she felt rebuffed: ‘He told me to choose averagey unis, not the ones you want to go to, and then go through Clearing.’ By ‘averagey’ Adela believed Mr Nelson meant ‘rubbish places’. She was hurt that he would not allow her to include a Russell Group university as her ‘aspirational’ choice, and wondered if Mr Nelson ‘cared’ about her UCAS application.

Moderate attainer Naz’s dreams of applying to a Russell Group university were also dismissed by his form tutor. Naz’s anger and hurt when describing the type of support he
received for his university choices came from feelings that his form tutor did not take his aspirations seriously, compounded by the perfunctory way in which his choices were ‘given’ to him by a piece of computer software:

> I wasn't given any help in the choosing process. He said, 'Ok, we need to talk about your grades [and] we need to look at these unis.' Boom! Boom! Boom! (striking an imaginary keyboard)
> And that was it! Unis like, no disrespect, but I think [...]shire was one.

(Naz, interview 3)

Oliver and Kettley (2010) note the ‘unique position’ teachers are in to challenge ‘restricting self-beliefs’ of ‘highly able’ students, adding that ‘the proactive behaviours of individual teachers (are) decisive factors in disadvantaged students’ choices to apply to elite universities’ (Oliver and Kettley 2010, 739). Equally, this may be said of the role teachers play in moderate attainers’ HE aspirations. Teachers who advise on UCAS applications hold positions of significant power, with the potential to either encourage or disincentivise students. While Adela’s previous academic attainment suggested a successful application to a Russell Group university was unlikely, her account of Mr Nelson’s response to her HE choices gave the impression he was uninterested in investing in her UCAS application the same kind of cultural capital (‘know how’) and time, as he gave high attainers. Similarly, Naz’s hurt might have been mitigated had his form tutor given him more personalised care when advising on his university choices.

My first interview with Mr Nelson, held at the start of my fieldwork, revealed some contradictions. Although he seemed proud of Hallingford’s ‘comprehensive ethos’ he was frustrated that his sixth-form was not more selective in order to compete with a successful local academy. He referred to moderately-attaining sixth-formers as ‘B kids’ and high attainers as ‘elites’, while universities were either ‘selectors’ or ‘recruiters’. He was especially critical of Russell Group universities’ failure to see the potential in less high-attaining applicants:

> It’s the B kids that get ignored. Everybody’s rushing to get the students that come out with 10*s, or 10 As. Nobody cares about the others – there are some very diligent, very hard-working BBC or BBB candidates.

Although apparently sympathetic to moderate attainers, students’ accounts indicated Mr Nelson prioritised high attainers and, by the time of our second interview, Mr Nelson’s attitude towards moderately-attaining HE applicants appeared to have shifted. Conducted towards the end of my fieldwork, the interview was complicated by Mr Nelson’s jocular mood. He grew attentive, however, when I mentioned my research in ‘other schools’ where I observed high attainers ‘generally’ receiving more help with their UCAS applications ‘than students applying, for example, to Derby’. Asked whether he thought the same ‘kind of thing’ occurred at Hallingford, Mr Nelson replied:

> Well, we have students who quite clearly don’t have the grades to get into the universities that we want them to go to…and then I say, ‘You have to go to Derby or de Montfort (bursts out laughing) and they say, ‘Why would I want to go there? You’ve told us they’re no good.’

Mr Nelson added he would point out that Derby and de Montfort ‘aren’t too bad, and you’re only getting Bs and Cs…which is a sad state of affairs, isn’t it?’. When I asked if it was possible that Hallingford’s ‘elites’ received more help with their UCAS applications than the
'B kids', Mr Nelson's good humour disappeared. In a tone that indicated the matter was closed, he told me form tutors were responsible for students' UCAS applications but if students brought them ‘in time’, he checked them.

The uncomfortable interview gave me the impression that moderate attainers fell outside the aspirations of Hallingford's institutional habitus and Mr Nelson's ambitions for his sixth-form. His reference to students who failed to access ‘the universities we want them to go to’ indicated a teacher habitus ‘in synergy’ (Reay, David, and Ball 2005) with the institutional habitus. Mahnoor was the only moderate attainer overtly critical of Mr Nelson, explaining that while he spent ‘hours’ with Oxbridge applicants, ‘If you're going to other places, he doesn't have time.’ Others appeared to accept that Mr Nelson's help was ‘not for the likes of us’ and adjusted their expectations (Bourdieu 1984, 471). Neena said there was ‘no way’ she would approach Mr Nelson for help and laughed at the thought. Naz believed Mr Nelson was ‘only interested in helping Oxbridge [applicants]’. Zane was philosophical about his failed attempts to get his UCAS application checked by Mr Nelson, ‘He's busy, I guess’. As Bourdieu (1990) observes, ‘even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it much more acceptable than one might imagine’ (131).

In a way which usefully develops Oliver and Kettley (2010) research into the influence of teacher habitus on students' HE applications, this study finds that while some teachers use their agency to act as ‘facilitators’ for disadvantaged higher attainers' HE applications, they may not be as strongly motivated, or may feel less able, to advise disadvantaged moderate attainers. Nonetheless, whenever Hallingford teachers gave rushed and perfunctory advice, or failed to counter the institutional valorising of the Russell Group by offering alternative HE choices, they were felt by moderate attainers to act as 'gatekeepers' to their aspirations. Off-putting and demoralising, such practices denied moderate attainers the opportunity of making the same kind of well-informed HE choices and high quality UCAS applications as high attainers.

The influence of teacher habitus – ‘facilitators’ for moderate attainers’ HE applications

Two sixth-form tutors, Mr Riley and Mr Douglas, and senior teacher Mr Austen, were singled out by three moderate attainers as teachers who ‘cared’. All three teachers possessed highly relevant cultural capital including a sound knowledge of the HE field. Both Mr Riley and Mr Douglas entered teaching after first careers as research scientists in Russell Group universities, while Mr Austen's long teaching career included working as an advisor for the Local Education Authority. These three teachers appeared able to navigate Hallingford's HE discourses and practices to provide practical and emotional support for moderate attainers' university aspirations. Their actions suggest a shared type of teacher habitus prescribed by an ethical disposition. Bourdieu (2005) describes habitus as ‘a system of dispositions’ which reveal themselves through the ‘permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking [or] structures of perception conception and action’ (42). The teachers were all motivated to support moderately-attaining HE applicants, but did so in different ways, suggesting that different teacher dispositions can be equally effective in supporting students marginalised by formal school practices.
In her final interview, Mahnoor explained taking her UCAS application to Mr Austen after failing to get help from her form tutor. Mahnoor described Mr Austen as a teacher she could ‘really talk to’ because he did not ‘put you down’. She was proud of the interest senior teacher Mr Austen showed in her university choices and the care he took with her personal statement: ‘He actually took time to read through it…He didn't just skim-read it, like some teachers do.’ Naz was also taught by Mr Austen and decided to approach him for help after ‘waiting weeks’ for his form tutor to check his personal statement. To his amazement, Mr Austen ‘turned it around in a day’, emailing Naz with detailed advice on improvements. Like Mahnoor, Naz implied that Mr Austen’s help was exceptional:

I don’t know if I’m meant to be saying this, but [Mr Austen] does help kids like me way more than other teachers…Like, I’m not Oxbridge but he still helped me.

(Naz, interview 3)

Form tutor Mr Riley’s previous university career meant he possessed a type of cultural capital especially helpful for supporting would-be doctor, Adela. In her final interview, Adela described the time Mr Riley took to ‘talk through’ her options. Drawing on his specialised knowledge of applied and social sciences, Mr Riley gave Adela the necessary ‘wake-up call’ (Adela) about studying for medicine after attaining Es in Biology and Chemistry in her year 12 exams. Adela’s account indicated Mr Riley’s emotional skills. By identifying her strengths, he tactfully pointed her towards a more ‘realistic’ degree.

He looked at my grades and said, ‘You’re obviously good at Psychology, and you’re an intelligent girl who knows how to talk to people and be there for others. I can see you doing social sciences’.

Mr Riley’s ethical disposition, shown in his questioning of Hallingford’s ‘push’ towards Russell Group universities (see earlier), combined with his practical and emotional skills and his knowledge of the HE field, all suggest a ‘facilitator’ teacher habitus (Oliver and Kettley 2010) especially helpful for moderately-attaining Adela. Nonetheless, as the only moderate attainer in my sample helped by her form tutor, Adela’s experiences and those of Naz and Mahnoor, highlight the inherent weakness in a system which relies on students coming into contact with a form tutor or teacher in possession of relevant knowledge and skills to support their HE applications.

Mr Douglas, a form tutor to a group of ‘lower end’ moderate attainers, spoke passionately about motivating students ‘made to feel dumb’ in a school which put a premium on high attainment. An enthusiastic social networker, he described building relationships with local industries to create opportunities such as high-quality work experience placements for non-high attaining students, and working closely with a local school to compile a list of universities which offered less selective degree courses. Former students studying at ‘new’ and long-established non-Russell group universities were invited give talks to his tutor group: ‘We have to dismantle the nonsense we have here that if you don’t go to Oxbridge you’re not any good.’ Of all three teachers motivated to support moderately-attaining HE applicants, Mr Douglas was the most proactive, exemplifying a ‘facilitator’ teacher habitus. Drawing on his social and cultural capital, and networking beyond the domain of the school, he was able to find ‘room for manoeuvre [and] a point of possible resistance’ (Oliver and Kettley 2010, 750) to encourage and promote moderate attainers’ HE aspirations.
Mills (2008) argues that the habitus has both reproductive and transformative traits, suggesting possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students (79). This study points to the transformative potential of a teacher’s habitus for moderately-attaining HE applicants who may be disadvantaged by both a family background lacking experience of the HE field and formal school processes. The actions of facilitator teachers demonstrate the important influence of an ethical teacher habitus and the possession of relevant cultural and social capital when supporting disadvantaged moderate attainers applying to less prestigious universities. Such teachers made a significant difference to the quality of three moderate attainers’ UCAS applications, and their confidence in their HE choices.

Conclusions

This study differs from previous research into students’ HE choosing in two important ways. Firstly, it focuses on moderately-attaining school sixth-formers, as a discrete group, and the quality of support given for their applications to non-Russell Group universities. Secondly, it throws light on the role of teachers in the university application process. Both offer new perspectives on the practices and processes of students’ HE choosing and their UCAS applications. In particular, how a school under pressure to compete in a heated school market is encouraged to enact current HE policy in ways which marginalise many of its HE applicants.

Employing teacher habitus as a conceptual tool highlights the key role played by teachers in the university application process, in particular how teachers use their agency to act as facilitators for differently-attaining students’ HE applications. Hallingford teachers willing to act as facilitators for moderately-attaining HE applicants appeared exceptional. Sensitive to both the recognition and distribution dimensions of social justice, and the relations between them, such teachers used their agency to enact what Fraser (1996) has termed a ‘bivalent’ social justice. By giving the same quality of care to three disadvantaged moderate attainers applying to less prestigious universities as that normally given to disadvantaged high attainers, these teachers addressed both the imbalance of formally allocated resources and the lack of recognition of moderate attainers and their HE aspirations.

In a school with a predominantly working-class, BAME student population from families with little experience of HE, the quality of school support available for students’ university applications is particularly important. Boliver’s (2013) quantitative research into rates of access to ‘elite’ universities by school type demonstrates ‘the unfairness of fair access’. This qualitative study finds that HE policies which encourage access to ‘elite’ universities may encourage unfair practices within schools. The Bourdieusian concepts of institutional and teacher habitus proved especially useful for unpacking both the influences of formal school practices and teacher agency during the university application process.

In a competitive sixth-form market where a school’s status is intimately bound to numbers progressing to Russell Group universities, disadvantaged students applying to less prestigious universities risk becoming collateral damage. This study points to the transformative potential of teachers for any group of HE applicants marginalised by policy discourses and formal school practices.
Notes

1. The ‘Russell Group’ comprises 24 selective and ‘elite’ UK research universities.
2. ‘Hallingford’ and the names of all participants are pseudonyms.
3. At the time of the research, GCSE grades were graded alphabetically. B and C roughly equate to grades 6-4 in the new system (Gov.UK, 2019).
4. At the time of this research, a minimum of five GCSEs A/A*s was necessary to be eligible for widening participation programmes run by ‘elite’ universities.
5. Applied A levels – a qualification which ranked between traditional A levels and vocational BTECs. They were discontinued in 2016.
6. Clearing – part of the UCAS application system whereby students who do not attain the grades for their first and reserve university choices apply for universities/courses with availability.

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