

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Social Mobility and Higher Education: The Life Experiences of First Generation Entrants in Higher Education

By Mary Stuart

(London, England: Trentham Books, 2012, 164 pages)

Do you wonder at the unexpected way your life has unfolded? Are you amazed by the twists, turns, and good luck you have encountered along your journey? Did you have a firmly set goal from an early age, and all the pieces fit neatly into place to take you to this destination? Or has it been a struggle every step of the way, and your persistence, rather than any favours or good luck, has placed you where you sit in life at this moment? What role has education played in arriving at your destination?

In this book, Mary Stuart, Vice Chancellor at the University of Lincoln in the United Kingdom, has compiled life histories of 139 first-generation university graduates now employed by universities. She has linked the biographies of these 96 females and 43 males with extensive research and analysis to provide a thought-provoking picture of the people, life events, policies, and economic conditions that enhanced access to and completion of university for these individuals. Ranging in age from 23 to 73 years, all “authors,” as Stuart refers to them, have enjoyed upward social mobility that came with employment in higher education as a result of obtaining a university education.

This book, which focuses largely on the expansion of higher education in Britain, appears to be written mainly for a British audience of educators and policy makers who understand the British school and class system. The author adds a valuable dimension to our understanding of class and mobility by using a “life histories” approach. This approach adds a depth and richness by exploring personal case studies through the eyes, words, and expressions of the very individuals who experienced them. Quotations from the life histories are presented in groupings that highlight the issues of different

periods of higher education development, while also drawing attention to common themes and differences identified in relevant research.

In Britain, “researchers Blanden, Gregg, and Machin argued (2005) that social mobility ‘is not only declining but is also significantly lower than in some other developed countries.’” Furthermore, they “concluded that ‘the big expansion of higher education in university participation has tended to benefit children from affluent families more’” (p. 4). Stuart examines what opportunity looked like for a group of “widening participation students” from working-class backgrounds and how they experienced becoming middle-class academics and administrators (p. 2). It appears that children from less affluent families indeed have benefited, but one wonders if conditions are in place for upward social mobility to continue in the current economic climate.

The book contains eight chapters, with all but the first two being interwoven with life histories. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the problem with social mobility and higher education as the author sees it and provide relevant history of class and social change. The subsequent chapters present a chronological sequence, moving from 13 life histories that discuss education pre-1963 to 28 histories for the period 1997–2007. The majority of the life stories, 52 in number, relate to the 1980–1996 period of “massification” or expansion of higher education. Chapter 7 revisits mobility and class, and provides further exploration of two key themes: “the role of significant others in supporting or hindering social mobility,” and “the development of an aspirant identity” (p. 111). Chapter 8, the final chapter, discusses the future and the challenge of setting policies that enable social mobility through higher education. Approximately 180 references are cited, dating from 1958 to 2012, and there is a one-page index.

The life histories of these first-generation university graduates include moments that are familiar to most university continuing educators, whether through personal life experiences or vicariously through students, clients, or customers. Many authors spoke of their early love of reading. Stuart points out that reading is a means of social mobility, albeit in one’s imagination. Reading also develops a key skill required for academic life. Some authors spoke of a working-class parent who criticized them for wasting time reading or staying late at school to complete homework when they were needed at home to do chores. A female author, Alex, shares her story of an unsupportive father and the significance of friends who were committed to learning:

He kept saying his kids wouldn’t be bright enough . . . I was downhearted. My father asked me if I was lying when I said I got three As. He was shocked—just couldn’t believe I could do it . . . I really didn’t know anything about it [getting into university] but my friends said it was easy . . . (p. 100–101)

These life histories point out the importance of parental support. Where it was lacking, successful students often deliberately filled the gap with an alternate source of support, such as friends and friends’ parents.

Although class structure has not been as evident in Canadian culture as in the UK, we still deal with issues of discrimination, inequality, and immobility. For example, the low number of Aboriginals in our universities and lower high school completion rates in rural areas come to mind. University faculties in Canada have proportionately fewer women at higher ranks and low representation by ethnic minorities. Insights can be gained from analysis of other regions such as Britain.

A concern highlighted in this publication is the necessity of relevant employment to facilitate upward mobility for the educated. Can upward mobility happen through education alone? Or is it actually the stable, relevant employment of graduates that delivers the upward mobility? The stories recounted are from individuals who had the benefit of an expanding university system in which to find employment and improved socioeconomic status. Most Canadian universities are facing declining resources and therefore hiring few tenure-track professors or permanent managers or administrators. Large public sector layoffs are announced frequently. Where will our university graduates find the employment that will provide the security and income to maintain or improve social status? As a university educator, this is the issue that Stuart's work has left me to ponder.

Although I found references to the British school system and policies to be confusing due to my lack of familiarity, it appears that the author intended the work for a British audience where explanation would be unnecessary. An appendix with an overview of the school system would quickly broaden audience appeal. I thought the book might also have been improved with an introductory chapter to set the context and perhaps briefly describe the organization of the chapters.

There is much that a Canadian university educator can gain from reading this book. It has taken me on a reflective journey through my childhood and schooling, on to university, and then to my professional position in a Canadian university. The personal histories and analysis provide an opportunity for comparison between the British and Canadian experience. Notwithstanding the differences in the systems, a reader is reminded that youth everywhere develop the dream of making a better life for themselves, often through education. The journeys are varied and jig-jagged. Educators must be prepared to offer support and inspiration in various forms and at many places along the journey. A similar publication with Canadian "life histories" would indeed be an interesting and enlightening read.

Reviewed by Susan Holmes, Dalhousie University