Tackling socio-economic inequalities in Higher Education

Emilia Del Bono
with Adeline Delavande and Angus Holford

ISER 30th Anniversary Conference,
9th December 2019
Socio-economic inequalities in Higher Education

- Large differences in Higher Education outcomes according to social and economic background

![Graph showing differences in good degree and dropout rates between High SES and Low SES](image-url)
Socio-economic inequalities in Higher Education

- Only partly explained by demographics, prior educational performance, or subject of study

![Graph showing Good Degree and Dropout rates for high and low SES students]
• A cohort of UK undergraduates

• ~2000 students enrolled (75% of target)

• 12 incentivised surveys online or in a computer lab
3 randomised interventions

- One each year
- Aim: reduce SES inequalities
Year 1: First intervention
Beliefs about intelligence (effort)

- Pilot survey and previous evidence
  - Low-SES students more likely to believe that intelligence is fixed
  - Lower perceived return to effort
  - More likely to be discouraged by poor performance early on
Year 1: First intervention
Beliefs about intelligence (effort)

Our research questions

1. Can we reduce gap in beliefs?
2. Does this lead to more effort?
3. Can it improve marks?
4. Do low SES benefit most?
Your brain grows with exercise!

- Video showing brain connections forming under stimuli
- Experts discuss evidence
- Study tips
- Essay (incentivised)
Larger benefits for High SES

- Beliefs ability is malleable (growth mindset)
Larger benefits for High SES

- Attendance

- Bar chart showing higher attendance for High SES compared to Low SES.
Larger benefits for High SES

First year GPA

- High SES
- Low SES
Our research questions

1. Can we reduce gap in beliefs? Yes
2. Does this lead to more effort? Yes
3. Can it improve marks? Yes
4. Do low SES benefit most? No
Year 2: Second Intervention

Attendance & goal-setting

- **Regular attendance** is important for performance

- **Low self-control** could lead to missing a class/lecture

- **Setting a goal** can increase attendance rates
  - **Important**: task-based goal (not performance-based)
Year 2: Second Intervention
Attendance & goal-setting

Our research questions

1. Can goal setting increase attendance?
2. Does this lead to better marks?
3. Do low SES benefit most?
Choose your attendance goal!

- **Information** about the benefits of regular attendance on learning and grades
- **Video** showing why setting a goal helps to achieve objectives
- **Ask them to set a weekly goal** for attendance to lectures and classes
- **Essay** on attendance, reasons of absenteeism (incentivised)
Improvement in attendance

Percentage events

---

Proportion of lectures attended

Lectures

Spring Term

Control

Treatment window

Treatment

week

Control

Treatment

Week

16 18 20 22 24 26
Larger benefits for Low-SES

- Attendance and study

![Attendance and Log hours of study graph]

- Attendance
- Log hours of study
Larger benefits for Low-SES

- Second year GPA

![Bar chart comparing second year GPA between High SES and Low SES]

- High SES
- Low SES
Year 2: Second Intervention
Attendance & goal-setting

- Our research questions
  1. Can goal setting increase attendance? Yes
  2. Does this lead to better marks? Yes
  3. Do low SES benefit most? Yes
Year 3: Third Intervention

Employability skills

- Graduate employers look for a wide range of skills:
  - Negotiating and Influencing
  - Commercial Awareness
  - Problem-solving
  - Interpersonal skills
  - Teamwork
Year 3: Third Intervention

Employability skills

- It is not enough to have these skills. Graduates need to signal them to prospective employers.

- Intervention aims to:
  - Increase participation in work experience or extra-curricular activities.
  - Increase awareness of how these activities translate into employability skills.
Our research questions

1. Can we increase awareness of the importance of these skills?
2. Can we increase participation in extra-curricular activities?
3. Do low SES benefit most?
Get the skills!

1. **Video**: what recruiters look for
2. **Quiz**: match skills to definitions
3. **Information** about:
   - Skills that are essential
   - Skills in short supply
   - Employability events
   - Big Employability Award
4. **Essay/Mock interview question** (incentivised)
Acquire these skills to distinguish yourself!

- **Commercial awareness**: 15% of graduate intakes have this skill, but 71% of employers want it. There is a large gap between what employers want and what they find.

- **Negotiating/influencing**: 11% of graduate intakes have this skill, but 51% of employers want it. Similar large gap.

Legend:
- Blue bars: Share of graduate intakes who have this skill
- Dark blue bars: Share of employers targeting their recruitment to find graduates with this skill
Treated students

- Increase their participation in the Big Employability Award
- Understand better the importance of commercial awareness
- Attach more value to their non-academic experience
- Some effects are larger for BAME students, but no significant low/high SES impact
Black students benefit most

- Importance of Commercial Awareness
Year 3: Third Intervention

Employability skills

Our research questions

1. Can we increase awareness of the importance of these skills? Yes
2. Can we increase participation in extra-curricular activities? Yes
3. Do low SES benefit most? Not necessarily
Did it help in the longer term?

We are surveying this cohort again as graduates in 2020, so will find out!
Lessons learned

- 1\textsuperscript{st} intervention on beliefs was “successful” but did not reduce the SES-gap in achievement.

- 2\textsuperscript{nd} intervention on attendance reduced SES gaps although not by much.

- 3\textsuperscript{rd} intervention on employability skills had most of its impact on BEMA students.
was funded by the ESRC through the open-call grant “Inequality in Higher Education outcomes in the UK: Subjective Preferences, Expectations and Access to Information”.

B.O.O.S.T 2018