FRAMING HIGHER EDUCATION: QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES IN THE BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES SURVEY, 1983–2010

Steven Jones, Anna Mountford-Zimdars, Alice Sullivan, Anthony Heath


We focus on questions and attitudes towards higher education in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey series. Our presentation is aimed to be of interest for those working on access to higher education, public attitudes to higher education, public policy and the changing landscape of higher education funding and social mobility.

The annual BSA survey targets 3000 British respondents and tracks their social, political and moral attitudes. New questions are added each year to reflect current issues, but many questions are repeated periodically to chart shifts in attitudes over time.

We analyse the BSA data in two ways. First, we provide a linguistic content analysis of the changing BSA questions over time. Second, we analyse the BSA responses over time, and the social basis of responses in the 2010 survey.

Our linguistic content analysis of the BSA questions (1983-2010) illustrates how changing social and political discourses and realities determine the questions posed by researchers as much as they determine public responses to them. The early BSA survey questions tended to carry positive presuppositions, enquire about social justice, and assume that higher education was a public good rather than a private investment. However, in more recent surveys, cynicism about higher education expansion has crept into questions, with respondents being increasingly reminded of its expense and possible devaluation as a result of massification. Questions about fairness in the admissions process have largely disappeared. This shift in questions is not mirrored in a shift in survey responses supporting the private good character of higher education.

Second, we focus on the 2010 BSA survey responses to investigate how attitudes towards higher education are related to respondents’ characteristics. Respondents’ socio-economic position predicts attitudes towards higher education. Graduates and professionals are most likely to support a reduction in higher education opportunities, but those who have so far benefited least from higher education are supportive of expansion. One interpretation - with potential implications for social mobility - is that those who have already benefited from higher education are most inclined to pull the ladder up behind them.

In conclusion, we highlight the widening gap between public and policy discourses regarding higher education and social mobility on the one hand, and public opinion on the other. Support for higher education as a public good and route to opportunity remains strong, especially among those who have so far benefited least.