

# Inequality and higher education: marketplace or social justice?

## Stimulus paper

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**Professor Martin Hall, Vice-Chancellor, University of Salford**

With responses from

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# Stimulus Paper Series

The Leadership Foundation is pleased to launch its new series of 'Stimulus Papers' which are intended to inform thinking, choices and decisions at institutional and system levels in UK higher education. The papers were selected from an open tender which sought to commission focused and thought-provoking papers that address the challenges facing leaders, managers and governors in the new economic environment facing the UK. The themes addressed fall into different clusters including higher education leadership, business models for higher education, leading the student experience and leadership and equality of opportunity in higher education.

The first in the series is a highly topical and important paper, "Inequality and higher education: marketplace or social justice" by Professor Martin Hall, vice-chancellor of the University of Salford. Professor Hall's paper addresses the key social issues of poverty and inequality of educational opportunity, comparing the UK's policy history and experience with that of South Africa and identifying the important roles that higher education leaders at institutional and system levels can play. Professor Hall's paper is accompanied by a short commentary from six higher education leaders who all have a strong track-record of addressing the issues that Professor Hall's paper raises.

“Hall draws on empirical evidence from South Africa and the UK to argue that poverty is far from being the misery of ‘distant strangers’.”

**Liz Thomas**

## Foreword **Professor Liz Thomas,** **Academic Lead: Retention and Success, Higher Education Academy**

I welcome this important paper by Martin Hall which reviews the contemporary roles and challenges for higher education with regard to social justice in the context of increasing marketisation and economic efficiency. David Watson accurately casts this as a wicked issue for which ‘there are no “solutions” in the sense of definitive and objective answers’.

Hall draws on empirical evidence from South Africa and the UK to argue that poverty is far from being the misery of ‘distant strangers’, and that mutually reinforcing factors, or poverty traps, militate strongly against breaking out of inter-generational poverty and inequality in both countries. Higher education has a central role to play in addressing these issues, but to do so it must transform itself. Higher education institutions play dual roles of both gatekeepers and enablers with regard to social justice, and much of their effort is, perhaps inadvertently, spent on blaming others (as Peter Scott points out), and reproducing elitism and disadvantage. Thus, a higher education qualification has increasingly become a positional good of diminishing value, making it less attractive to historically excluded groups and further entrenching inequality.

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Amartya Sen and Melanie Walker in particular, but by no means exclusively, Hall argues for a move away from equality of opportunity and rejects the comforting but simplistic idea of a level playing field which allows anomalous working class students to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty and exclusion. To move towards equality of outcomes he advocates wide ranging institutional transformation of the selection and admissions processes, the curriculum and the organisational culture. The UK system, particularly England, is wedded to selection based on achievement which is highly determined by socio-economic status; the use of contextual data is limited and will only tinker at the edges. A more radical approach, such as the one adopted in South Africa, is required. Hall implies that curriculum change should prioritise inter-disciplinary approaches, and build on the capabilities approach developed by Walker, which enables people to take advantage of opportunities. For example, simply providing more information, advice and guidance about higher education is insufficient. Cultural change is particularly challenging, but certainly requires appropriate leadership – which Hall demonstrated at the University of Cape Town, and is reflected in Jonathan Jansen’s autobiographical analysis of institutional change at the University of Pretoria.

Hall therefore advocates a mainstream approach to transformation. Leadership is central to institutional change, but it is not sufficient – as an organisational habitus is much more than its senior management team. The Leadership Foundation has a key role to play in critically engaging higher education leaders and aspirants with this agenda to avoid being complicit in further reproducing inequality. It is tempting to argue that there is little that higher education institutions can do, especially in these financially challenging times, which Mark Cleary reminds us, may make institutions question their commitment to the communities they are situated in and to social justice more generally. Especially, as Deian Hopkins outlines, the new higher education policy environment works against greater social justice. Hall however provides challenging insights into the lessons that we can draw from the South African experience, if we choose to do so.

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# Inequality and higher education: marketplace or social justice?

**Professor Martin Hall**

There are many determinants of inequality and poverty. Together, they can constitute self-reinforcing syndromes – poverty traps – whether in developing countries or in highly industrialised economies such as Britain's. Access to appropriate education is key to breaking these cycles or marginalisation, and therefore to social justice, and universities are integral parts of national education systems, whether they are public or private institutions.

Providing access to education is a challenge to the leadership of organisations, including the leadership of universities. While national education policies may direct attention to inclusive and transformative priorities, these are notoriously difficult to achieve in the face of the collective reluctance of a university to change. Similarly, the sticks and carrots of policy levers can be overwhelmed by the complex mechanics of admission requirements, student finance arrangements and assessment systems; given the long cycle of student progression through a higher education system, it can take the life of several parliaments to know whether policies have succeeded or failed. And while vice-chancellors may talk the language of equality of opportunity, institutional priorities can be railroaded by reluctant deans and recalcitrant heads of department. Unless the imperatives of remediating the poverty traps that unfairly exclude categories of potential students are shared across the distributed leadership of a university, it is probable that little substantial progress will be made.

In this essay, I will compare aspects of inequality in Britain with the case of South Africa. South Africa serves as a limiting case, showing both that inequality and its inevitable association with poverty is not a matter just of 'distant strangers' in a different world, and that Britain's march towards increasing inequality, encouraged by current tendencies in public policy, is both destructive and dangerous to all. Universities and their practices have a key role to play. But this role is, and has long been, ambiguous. Universities serve both as gatekeepers for established orders of inequality, and as transformative institutions that enable social justice through inter-generational changes in circumstances. Because of this ambiguity, the currently prevalent metaphor of the competitive marketplace is both wrong and ultimately self-defeating. The model of the market first renders a higher education qualification as a positional good, and then devalues it as a currency. Reasserting the transformational role of higher education through universities' role in building the capabilities of a person to lead the life that they value both re-establishes the core qualities of education and provides for visionary public policy.

Given the remit of the Leadership Foundation to develop and improve the management and leadership skills of existing and future leaders of higher education, I have kept an eye on the implications of inequality for those who are accountable for the leadership of universities.<sup>1</sup> These implications can usefully be seen as a complex interplay between the external context in which a university operates, a complex combination of circumstances and public policy,

and the necessary conditions for appropriate responses within an organisation. These implications are drawn together at the end of the paper.

The penultimate draft of this essay was completed before early August 2011, when London and some other British cities experienced a wave of public violence of unusual scope and intensity. Despite quick claims of causes and consequences, there is no easy explanation for this destructive maelstrom of rage and opportunism. While areas with high measures of deprivation were certainly focal points of rioting, other equally poor areas were untouched. While many of those caught up in the criminal justice system were evidently marginalised, others were not. While Britain's August riots will not be explained by poverty and inequality alone, poverty and inequality are certainly implicated.<sup>2</sup>

News coverage of riots was followed almost immediately by the August A-level results and the unprecedented demand for places at university. Many universities had already filled all their places. Those that had places available were overwhelmed by the intensity of demand. At my own university, we took 3,000 telephone calls in the first few hours after A-level results were published. As with the anomie of the streets, the denial of opportunity to many thousands of aspirant university students is a second shadow that trails the arguments of this paper.



2

Taylor, Rogers and  
Lewis (2011), IPPR (2011)

Nick Hayes, *Guardian*  
19 August 2011

3  
Timmins (2011)

4  
Sen (1999a) p18

## Dimensions of inequality

Despite circumstances such as these, equality of opportunity is one of the shibboleths of education, often stated as a self-evident, primary value. It is also frequently assumed that it is a condition easily established and verified. In debates about higher education policy in Britain, some may claim that there is equality of opportunity for any applicant for a place at a highly selective university, whatever their financial circumstances, as long as appropriate, means-related bursaries are available. In contemporary debates about university admissions in South Africa, an athletic metaphor is often used. Whatever their race, it is claimed, the playing field is level if all applicants sat the same matriculation examination. In the USA earlier policies of affirmative action are being steadily eroded by a consensus that admissions decisions should be 'blind' to factors such as race, ethnicity and gender, and that standardised testing is a safely objective measure of merit.

At the same time, though, pronounced inequalities in life circumstances – household income, employment opportunities, health, housing, education, life expectancy – are increasingly being seen as an inevitable condition of the world. The latest British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that a large majority believes that the gap between the rich and poor is too large. But only 27% believe that this should be ameliorated by increased benefits, compared with 58% when the survey was conducted twenty years ago, and two-thirds of those surveyed are opposed to any redistribution of wealth. The same survey found that 40% believe that the government never acts in the national interest, in contrast to some 10% of people who held this view twenty years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Overviews such as these suggest an uneasy combination of discomfort with inequality, and resignation to its inevitability.

But how can this rhetoric of opportunity be reconciled with the realities of inequality? Measured in terms of household income, South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, and the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest deciles has been increasing steadily since the end of apartheid. Measured in the same way, Britain and America are the most unequal of the highly industrialised economies; here, too, inequality in household incomes has been increasing. Given the close link between attainment in education and household circumstances, how can there be any meaningful equality of opportunity in countries such as Britain, South Africa and the USA?

In much the same way that the meaning of equality of opportunity is easy to assume but far more difficult to apply, so the concept of inequality can be understood variously. It evidently has a good deal to do with money, but wealth can be measured and reported in very different ways. Similarly, inequality can be experienced through lack of access to other tangible resources as well as to intangible qualities of life.

Amartya Sen has been widely influential in his insistence that our understanding of inequality is extended beyond simple monetary indices, taking into account what a person is able to do and to be through the 'capabilities of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value'. This, Sen argues, is best achieved through public policy that is influenced by 'the effective use of participatory capabilities by the public'; a quality that the latest British Social Attitudes Survey suggests is being rapidly eroded.<sup>4</sup>



Sen argues against the use of absolute measures of poverty and inequality. The difficulty in using such absolute measures is well demonstrated by the problems with the widely used 'dollar a day' measure for world poverty. The concept of a world poverty line, expressed as the number of people in a country living on, or with less than, one US dollar each day, adjusted for parity by pricing a standard set of goods, has been given general currency through successive World Development Reports. In his 2010 Presidential Address to the American Economic Association, Angus Deaton showed how deceptive this measure can be. In 2005 the International Comparison Project, which collects price data for the World Bank, revised its estimates, resulting in a sharp increase in the Bank's measure of inequality and an almost half billion increase in the number of people across the world deemed to be living in absolute poverty. This was widely taken as evidence of changing economic conditions; Deaton shows that it was rather an artefact of the methodology that was used.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of whether to use absolute measures of poverty is particularly relevant to the politics, and therefore policies, of inequality. As David Hulme points out, absolute measures tend to make poverty a matter of 'distant strangers' in 'third world' countries.<sup>6</sup> Seen through an absolute lens, it may often be assumed that there is no poverty in countries such as Britain and America or, for that matter, in South Africa which is defined by the World Bank as a middle-income country. This has a direct effect on perceptions of the role of the university. Since no clearly identified segment of the population of Manchester, or Washington or Cape Town is living on one US dollar a day, then the role of the university may be confined to research, policy development and interventions in other countries or continents. But if relative measures are used instead then the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions can be very different, as I will argue.

Daniel Dorling's searing critique of inequality uses three criteria for relative poverty: income poverty relative to median household incomes; lack of access to basic necessities as they are understood in a person's country today; and people's own perceptions of whether or not they are poor. A person is considered poor if she meets at least two of these three criteria; in Sen's terms, such a person lacks the capabilities for appropriate inclusion in their society. Dorling finds that 16.3% of all households in Britain today meet this definition of poverty; 5.6% of households meet all three criteria.<sup>7</sup>

Poverty in Britain is closely associated with rising inequality. By 2005 the poorest quintile of households in Britain had one seventh of the household income of the wealthiest quintile. This gap had been established through the 1980s, during which decade the average annual increase of household income for the wealthiest quintile was eight times the average annual increase for the poorest quintile (4% and 0.5% per annum respectively). After 1990 average increases across all quintiles began to stabilise, and settled into a steady 2.5% per annum until the 2008 recession. But, of course, these benefits of the long boom in economic growth were distributed as proportions of baselines that became more unequal with every year. By 2007 42% of all income in Britain went to only one fifth of the country's households.<sup>8</sup>

Both inequality and poverty in Britain have a direct effect on children, which is of specific interest here because of the relationship between household circumstances and access to educational opportunities. Benchmarks for relative poverty vary across organisations; the OECD defines poverty as income below 50% of the national median, while the Institute for Fiscal Studies uses the more demanding benchmark of 60% or more below the national median. Nevertheless, the overall patterns are clear. During the long years of prosperity,

**5**  
Deaton (2010)

**6**  
Hulme (2010)

**7**  
Randeep (2010)

**8**  
Dorling (2010)

**9**

Financial Times  
17 December 2010,  
Financial Times  
28 April 2011

**10**

Seekings and Natrass (2005)

**11**

Seekings and Natrass (2005)

**12**

This paper necessarily follows the conventions used by the South African government in reporting statistics by race category. 'Black' is used collectively for all those previously discriminated against by apartheid legislation. Where distinction is made within the collective category 'black', 'African' describes descendant communities of the pre-colonial, Bantu-speaking population. Other categories used in official South African statistical reports are Coloured and Indian.

**13**

Seekings and Natrass (2005). This was further accentuated by HIV and AIDS. In 2004 an estimated 10.8% of South Africa's population of 45.9 million were HIV positive, with 46% of all deaths attributed to AIDS. There was direct impact on household income, in that prevalence was highest in the economically most active subgroup (18.7% of all adults between 20 and 64) and because the poor and unemployed are the least able to carry medical costs.

the general rise in annual household income was matched by social transfers in child support and facilities for children and parents that saw child poverty fall from 17.4% to 10.5% (against an average of 12.7% for the OECD countries as a group). However, analyses by the Institute for Fiscal Studies indicate that, with the end of household income growth following the recession, and the sharp reduction in social transfers, child poverty will increase over the next few years, with an estimated increase of 800,000 more children living in households with incomes of 60% or less than the national median by 2014.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly stark since the median income is itself falling because of declining GDP, increased taxation and rising unemployment. As with inequality, poverty – and child poverty – is an entrenched and defining feature of British society.

Poverty and inequality are inexorably linked in South Africa, where a large proportion of households would meet any definition, including Dorling's set of three criteria. The complicating factor, which contributes to making this country an instructive limiting case for education policies and practices, is of course race. These interrelationships have been mapped out in a key study by Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Natrass.<sup>10</sup>

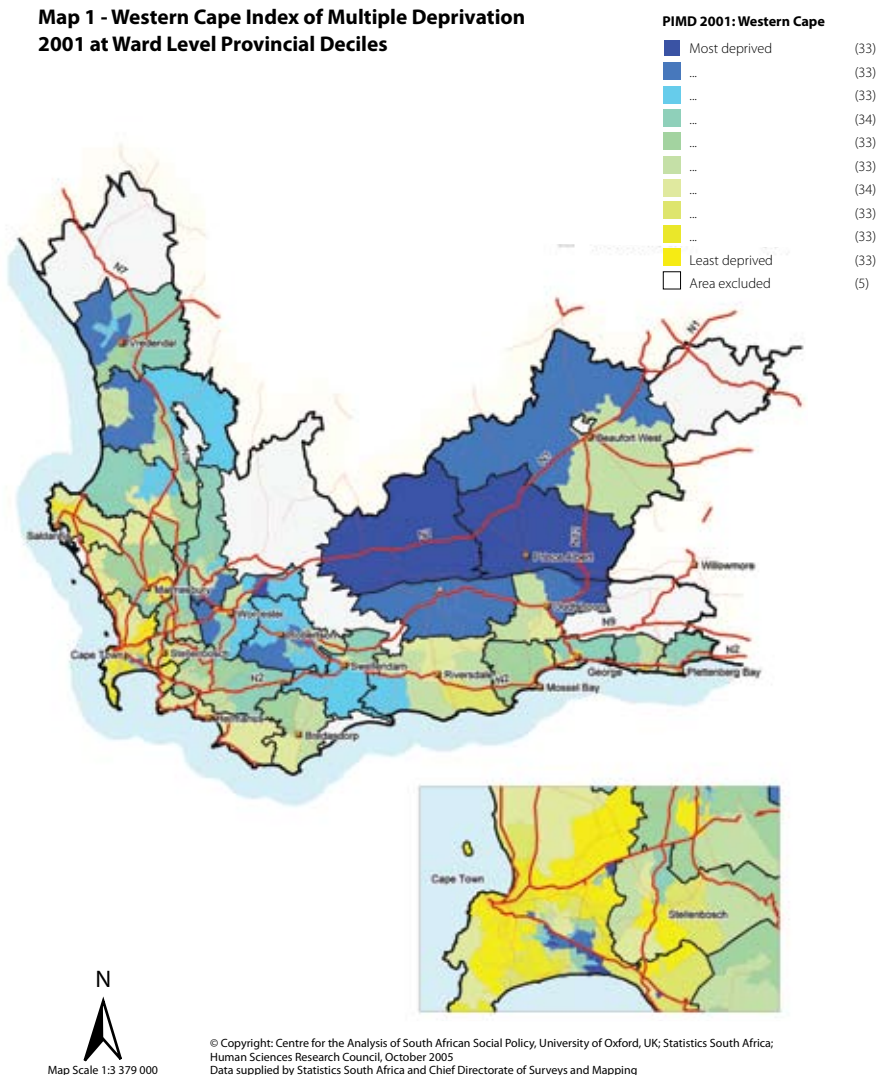
Until the first non-racial elections in 1994, and the adoption of a new constitution two years later, income inequalities in South Africa were structured by race-based legislation. But although policies have been diametrically different since 1994, underpinned by legislation and by constitutional requirements that both prohibit unfair discrimination and require redress for the continuing effects of apartheid segregation, Seekings and Natrass show how race continues to structure household incomes and therefore the nature of poverty and inequality.

As in Britain, present patterns of inequality in South Africa are deeply rooted in the past, in apartheid-era policies designed to force Africans from the land and into wage labour that, eventually, outstripped demand. The result was massive unemployment from the mid-1970s onwards, resulting in very high levels of household inequality by 1994, when average income for the wealthiest 10% of households was one hundred times greater than average income for households in the poorest decile. Faced with this situation, the ANC government introduced a range of policies that included extensive social transfers and affirmative action policies centred on the concept of black economic empowerment. These policies have resulted in dramatic changes within race categories. But, at the same time, the structure of overall inequality has persisted.<sup>11</sup>

Seekings and Natrass show how this pattern of within-group income differentiation continued to grow over the years that followed, embedding a complex intersection of race and class. Population censuses and income and expenditure surveys conducted in 1995 and 2000 show that the Gini Coefficient for gross income inequality increased slightly to about 0.7. Declining interracial inequality was matched by increasing intra-racial inequality, with the Gini Coefficient for African household income increasing from 0.56 in 1995 to 0.61 in 2000, for coloured households increasing from 0.5 to 0.54, Indian 0.47 to 0.49 and white households from 0.44 to 0.46.<sup>12</sup> This was matched by declining formal employment, and a continuing increase in unemployment. Between 1999 and 2002 the number of unemployed rose by about 2 million, and the number of people in poverty, by between 3.7 and 4.2 million.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the unmistakable imprint of the apartheid years has remained. Statistics South Africa reports that in 2006 – the latest report available – the average household income was ZAR74589 (about £6,200). However, at an average of ZAR280 870 (£23,400), the household income for white South Africans was 7.4 times the average income for black African South Africans (ZAR37 711, or just over £3,000 per year).<sup>14</sup>

**Map 1 - Western Cape Index of Multiple Deprivation 2001 at Ward Level Provincial Deciles**



**14**  
 Statistics South Africa  
 (2008)

**15**  
[www.indexmundi.com](http://www.indexmundi.com)

**Western Cape Index of Multiple Deprivation (Noble, Dibben and Wright (2010))**

Again, as in Britain, these patterns of poverty and inequality have a direct effect on children, and therefore on education policy and education institutions. This is accentuated by demographic structures. In Britain the median age is forty years. 17.3% of the population is below the age of fifteen. But in South Africa the median age is twenty-five and almost 30% of the population is below the age of fifteen.<sup>15</sup> Given high levels of household poverty this is a potentially explosive situation. This is apparent from patterns of achievement in the High School Matriculation Examination, which performs the equivalent function to British GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications in managing the interface between school on the one hand, and employment and further and higher education on the other. In 2007 there were just under one million young South Africans in the age cohort expected to write the Matriculation Examination, 83% of whom were African and 7% were white. 35% of the African candidates and 64% of the white candidates

16

Servaas van der Berg,  
University of Stellenbosch,  
personal communication.

17

Wright and Noble (2009),  
Noble, Dibben and Wright (2010)

18

Available at  
[www.casasp.ox.ac.uk](http://www.casasp.ox.ac.uk)

19

Breier (2010)

20

Bowles, Durlauf and Hoff (2006)

21

Azariadis (2006)

22

Hoff and Sen (2006)

23

Sachs (2005) pp19-20

sat the examinations and passed. Of these, 34% of the white candidates achieved an endorsement: the minimum grades in specified combinations of subjects to be eligible to apply for higher education. Only 6% of African candidates achieved an endorsement. In South Africa an A-aggregate is required for the most selective university programmes, much as A grade A-levels are required for entry into the most selective programmes in the UK. One in eleven white candidates achieved an A-aggregate. This was matched by just 1 in 640 African candidates.<sup>16</sup> As many commentators have noted, South Africa's schools chronically underperform despite government focus on resourcing, and in comparison with similar emerging economies.

These and other indices of economic and social circumstances have been brought together as an Index of Multiple Deprivation, using the same methodology as has been applied in plotting the spatial dimensions of inequality in Britain.<sup>17</sup> This has been based on evidence from a representative household survey, clustered as four deprivation domains: Income and Material Deprivation, Employment Deprivation, Education Deprivation and Living Environment Deprivation. Figure 1 shows this evidence for South Africa's Western Cape Province.<sup>18</sup>

The South African limit case suggests that factors such as household income, unemployment, race and low levels of educational attainment are mutually reinforcing. While there will always be exceptional individuals, it would be lame to propose to the large majority of young South Africans, living with negligible household incomes, no opportunities for employment and no access to schools with any history of educational attainment, that they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, Horatio Alger style, and all will be well. At the same time, the factors that constitute poverty traps are complex, and require careful analysis. As already noted, many South African schools continue to underperform, despite sustained and focused investment in education resources. For higher education, a recent study by Mignonne Breier shows that, while significant, household poverty does not entirely explain the failure of students from low-income backgrounds to graduate.<sup>19</sup> Poverty and inequality are clearly a syndrome that needs to be understood, and analysed as such in their complexity.

One approach to this is the concept of the 'poverty trap'. In setting out the concept of the poverty trap, Bowles, Durlauf and Hoff draw a distinction with what they term the 'achievement model of income determination' – the assumption that the individual controls his or her economic destiny. Their approach is rather to look for mechanisms that could cause poverty to persist in whole economies, or in subgroups within economies.<sup>20</sup> This leads to three broad kinds of poverty trap: critical thresholds that must be reached before forces identified by standard competitive theories operate; dysfunctional institutions; and influences that result from membership of a group. For example, some countries are vulnerable to critical thresholds such as inadequate investment, poor infrastructure or the consequences of fragile environments. The consequence is that events that would be temporary setbacks in economies that are clear of critical thresholds may have sustained effects in vulnerable economies, creating a poverty trap.<sup>21</sup> Membership of a socially defined group may create a poverty trap in which economic growth is suppressed.<sup>22</sup>

These concepts have been used to articulate a general approach to alleviating poverty, in which the specific causal factors are isolated analytically, and then addressed through appropriate public policy and targeted interventions.<sup>23</sup> Looked at in this way, South Africa's

education system is an integral part of a prevalent poverty trap. As Seekings and Natrass have shown, the post-apartheid settlement created a complex set of interests that, over some two decades, has continued a trend of increasing and extreme inequality within race categories. While a minority across all race categories has benefited from this, a large majority is 'stuck' in a cycle of unemployment, very low household incomes and little access to meaningful educational opportunity.

A poverty trap is any self-reinforcing mechanism which causes poverty to persist. However, one of the consequences of the prevalent focus on absolute poverty and 'dollar-a-day' type benchmarks is that the analytical concept has come to be used differently in different parts of the world. When considering 'distant strangers', poverty traps are the complex sets of circumstances very evident in South Africa's townships. Very often, part of the solution to breaking these poverty traps may be massive social transfers, as advocated by Jeffrey Sachs and others.<sup>24</sup> But when used in Britain, the concept of the poverty trap is usually understood more narrowly, as the consequence of welfare policies that are over-generous and which disincentivise employment or self-improvement.<sup>25</sup> While welfare policies and work incentives are obviously important, failing to apply the wider analytical concept in the context of a highly industrial economy may be disguising important factors.

Can the concept of the poverty trap be usefully applied to circumstances in highly industrialised economies, in the way that the concept was developed by Bowles, Sachs and others, rather than in the narrower way that it has been applied in contemporary British political discourse? Qualitative accounts certainly suggest so. One such study is Pierre Bourdieu's 'The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society', first published in 1993.<sup>26</sup> This takes the form of a series of accounts by people and families who are locked in adversarial circumstances in contemporary France. Another is Barbara Ehrenreich's 'Nickel and Dimed'.<sup>27</sup> Ehrenreich lived for a year on the US minimum wage, working as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing home aide and Wal-Mart salesperson. Here is her account of one of her better experiences:

'In Portland, Maine, I came closest to achieving a decent fit between income and expenses, but only because I worked seven days a week. Between my two jobs, I was earning approximately \$300 a week after taxes and paying \$480 a month in rent, or a manageable 40 percent of my earnings. It helped, too, that gas and electricity were included in my rent and that I got two or three free meals each weekend at the nursing home. But I was there at the beginning of the off-season. If I had stayed until June 2000 I would have faced the Blue Haven's summer rent of \$390 a week, which would of course have been out of the question. So to survive year-round, I would have had to save enough, in the months between August 1999 and May 2000, to accumulate the first month's rent on an actual apartment. I think I could have done this – saved \$800 to \$1,000 – at least if no car trouble or illness interfered with my budget. I am not sure, however, that I could have maintained the seven-day-a-week regimen month after month or eluded the kinds of injuries that afflicted my fellow workers in the housecleaning business.'<sup>28</sup>

Ehrenreich's detailed account of each in a series of low-end service jobs shows how her need for basic housing, transport and health provision reinforce one another as a syndrome that restricts any 'break-out' opportunities such as savings or the acquisition of education qualifications which could allow her to move higher than the minimum wage. This clearly meets the definition of a poverty trap as a self-reinforcing mechanism that causes poverty to persist.

**24**  
Sachs (2005)

**25**  
For example, Kay (2010)

**26**  
Bourdieu (1999)

**27**  
Ehrenreich (2001)

**28**  
Ehrenreich (2001) pp197-198

29

Beatty, Fothergill,  
Gore and Powell (2011)

30

Rajan (2010)

31

Conley (1999)

32

Willets (2010)

33

Thomas (2011)

34

Thomas (2011)

The broad dimensions of the poverty trap characteristic of Britain today can be mapped from patterns in employment within and between generations, access to equity, the quality of housing, local services, health and access to quality education. The key issue for the purposes of this discussion is the ways in which these factors interlock with, and reinforce, each other.

Levels of employment are well-known economic indicators that are frequently reported and constantly reviewed. But unemployment is not, in itself, necessarily indicative of a poverty trap; the issue is rather whether or not there are opportunities for re-skilling and re-employment. A study by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University has shown that the parts of Britain which saw the highest rates of expansion in public-sector jobs in the decade prior to the 2008 financial crisis were also the areas with the highest rates of benefit dependency. Thus in the one hundred local authorities outside London with the highest out-of-work benefit claimant rates, 78% of the 590,000 jobs added between 1999 and 2008 were in public administration, defence, education and health. By contrast, in the 142 authorities with the lowest benefit rates, 51% were in the public sector.<sup>29</sup> With the recession that has followed the 2008 financial crisis, the cuts in social transfers through benefits payments and the dramatic reduction in public-sector employment will affect the same communities, and will reinforce one another.

Periods of unemployment or underemployment can be cushioned by recourse to savings or by borrowing against household equity – a standard assumption about the way in which employment levels and economic cycles are integrated in the USA.<sup>30</sup> Household equity is also significant on an everyday basis, providing access to essential resources and providing collateral for borrowing at reasonable rates of interest. Dalton Conley, for example, has shown how persistent differences in levels of educational attainment between African-American households and other groups, irrespective of income levels, can be understood in terms of differing levels of capital accumulation in the household.<sup>31</sup> And the central argument in David Willets' 'The Pinch', published just before he became Minister of State responsible for Higher Education in Britain, is that the household should be the focus of the capital accumulation that enables opportunity.<sup>32</sup>

In Britain, where home ownership is extensive, housing equity is the key to household capital. However, housing equity is concentrated in terms of socioeconomic category, age and geographical region. The evidence suggests that these patterns of concentration are becoming more acute, locking substantial categories of people out of home ownership: 'there is a disproportionate level of wealth in the much smaller stock of homes in London and the south-east than elsewhere, with the region accounting for 25% of the total stock but 35% of its value. This compares with the north-west, which has almost 12% of the market but less than 9% of its wealth'.<sup>33</sup> In turn this pattern impacts negatively on the quality of rent-controlled housing for poorer families, of 'social housing': 'the value of homes let to social tenants has suffered. The social rented sector accounted for 18 per cent of stock last year but equated to only 3 per cent of value; the proportion having shrunk since 2000. This reflects the fact that the value of public sector housing has grown by much less than either owner-occupied property or that in the private rented sector'.<sup>34</sup> Again, then, is a self-reinforcing cycle in which those already excluded from accumulating household equity are pushed ever-further away from the opportunity for property ownership while also facing a deterioration in the quality of available rented accommodation.

Areas with a heavy dependence on social housing, a disproportionate reliance on social transfers, comparatively low house values and a dependence on at-risk public sector jobs are also taking the brunt of reductions in services provided by local authorities: 'there are few more obvious examples of how spending cuts are beginning to mean uneven service provision across council boundaries than Greater Manchester, where services differ on opposite sides of the River Irwell. Over-60s living in Manchester can swim for free at the city's leisure centres, but cross the bridge to Salford and it costs £3. Elsewhere in the north, you know you have entered Leeds City Council area when you hit a pothole. The council is scrapping all but "core road maintenance" as part of a plan to save £90m. In Burnley, public parks and gardens could become overgrown as horticultural services are reduced, while residents could suffer more antisocial behaviour as teams working in problem neighbourhoods are cut. In the north-east, potential closure of public toilets and bowling greens, cuts to support for disabled children and elderly people, and the axing of business start-up schemes are in the offing. Darlington is asking residents their views on a long list of potential economies, from scrapping cycle training to increasing car parking charges. Northumberland is even reviewing the arrangement under which charities, such as the Salvation Army, position textile and shoe recycling banks on council-owned sites free of charge.'<sup>35</sup>

Barbara Ehrenreich's year of working and living at the minimum wage showed repeatedly that levels of health were key to the ability to get by. Ehrenreich's co-workers invariably had no health insurance – in contrast, low-income families in Britain have the substantial safety net of the NHS. However, it was more chronic morbidity that contributed to the poverty trap of low-paid work. Consequently, and despite the availability of ubiquitous healthcare through the NHS, there is a clear correlation between socioeconomic status and levels of health in Britain today.

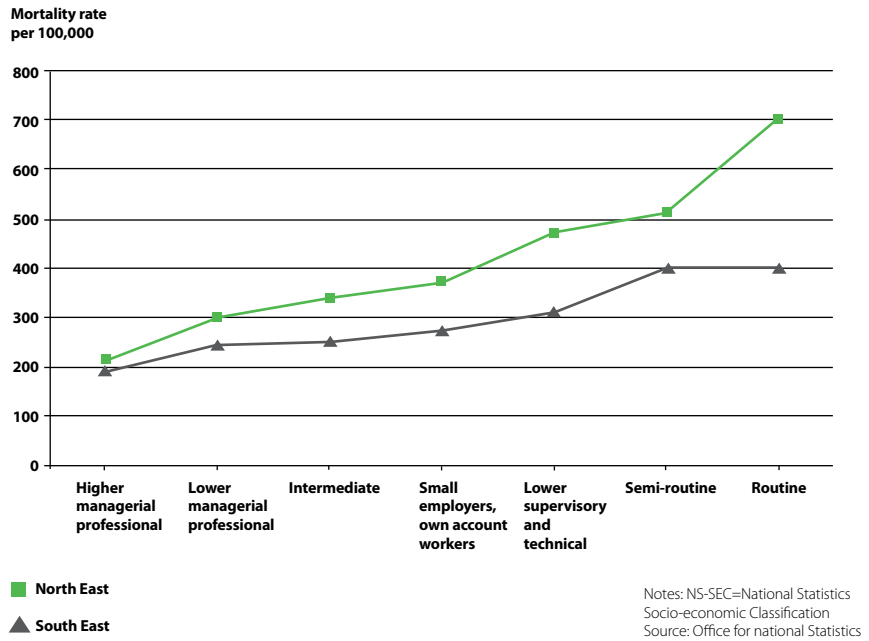
This has been documented by the Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England (the Marmot Review): 'people with a higher socioeconomic position in society have a greater array of life chances and more opportunities to lead a flourishing life. They also have better health. The two are linked: the more favoured people are, socially and economically, the better their health.'<sup>36</sup> The Review found that premature deaths that can be attributed to health inequalities are equivalent to between 1.3 and 2.5 million extra years of life each year. This is evident in the socioeconomic gradient of mortality rates. Figure 2 shows age-standardised mortality rates by the Office of National Statistics occupational classification for men aged twenty-five to sixty-four between 2001 and 2003. The graph also compares north-east England with the more affluent south-west (although it is important to note that the south-west includes areas with significant levels of deprivation).<sup>37</sup>

**35**  
Timmins (2010)

**36**  
Marmot (2010) p3

**37**  
Marmot (2010) Figure 2, p17

**Mortality rates by occupational category and region (Marmot (2010))**



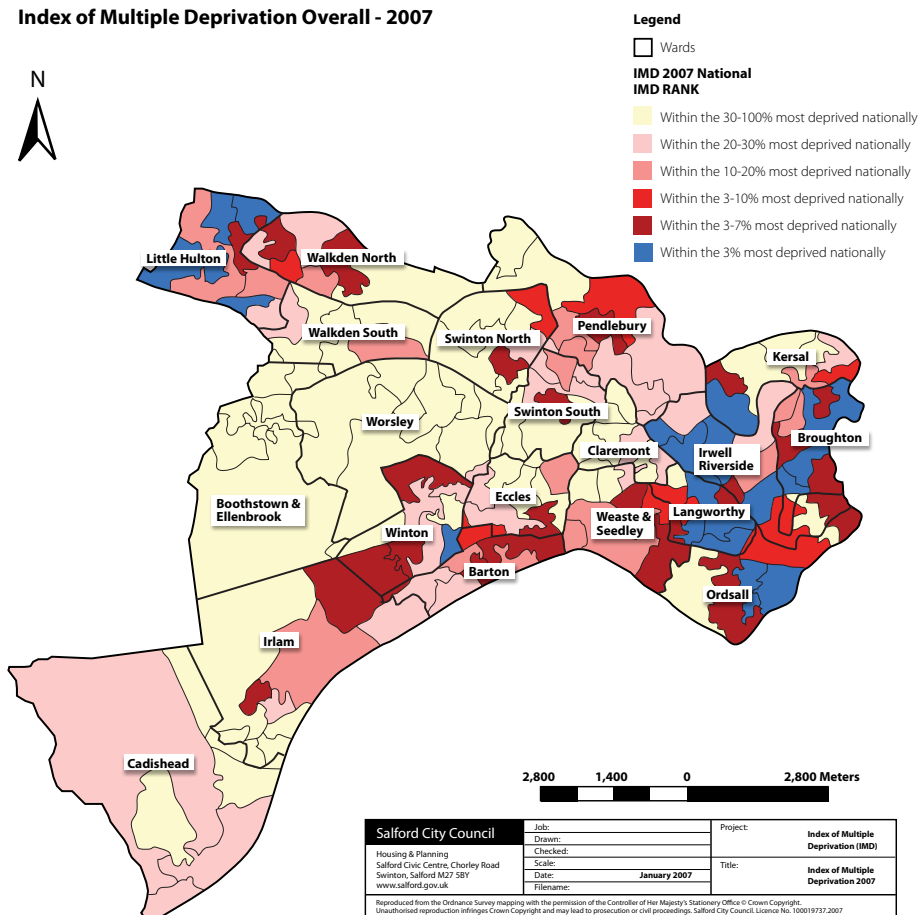
38  
Oxford Consultants for  
Social Inclusion

These factors can again be expressed as Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMDs). Applied in Britain, IMDs measure a composite of thirty-eight indicators, clustered as income, employment, health and disability, education skills and training, barriers to housing and other services, crime and living environment. They have been updated in 2000, 2004, 2007 and 2010, and therefore show change in time across local 'super output areas'. In general, the IMD for 2010 shows broadly similar results to measures taken three years earlier; areas that were deprived in 2007 are still in the main those that are highly deprived in 2010. Highly deprived areas have become still more deprived, and there have been large increases in deprivation in coastal areas and relative improvements in Inner London.<sup>38</sup> Figure 3 maps the Indices of Multiple Deprivation for the two cities and eight boroughs that comprise Greater Manchester. As for indices for the Western Cape and for Cape Town, shown in Figure 1, there are extremes of local variation nested within the more general regional patterns of comparative levels of affluence and poverty – a characteristic that has particular implications for higher education policy.

Education has a particular role in the persistence of inequality and poverty, and access to appropriate education provision is key to breaking from poverty traps, and therefore to social justice. Indices of Multiple Deprivation provide a geography of inequality and show that, whether in the Western Cape or in Greater Manchester, inequality and poverty cannot be 'distant strangers'. And since all education institutions have a significant level of engagement with their local and regional communities, whether this is acknowledged or not, it is difficult to argue convincingly that the issues that arise from poverty and inequality have nothing to do with institutional practice, or with public policies that shape institutional practice.



**Index of Multiple Deprivation Overall - 2007**



**Indices of Multiple Deprivation, Greater Manchester (Department for Communities and Local Government)**

The place that access to education plays in poverty traps in Britain is clear. One way of understanding this is in the proportion of those in a school who qualify for free school meals (FSM). Free school meals are a statutory right for pupils whose families receive defined benefits or have an annual gross income of less than £16,200. Eligibility is determined by reference to a national database held by the Department for Work and Pensions, the Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service. This means that the distribution and extent of entitlement to FSM is known, whether or not individual families take up the right.<sup>39</sup>

15.4% of British secondary school pupils are currently eligible for free school meals. Given that the median gross annual earnings for a full-time employee are £25,900, the fact that one in seven secondary school pupils is from a household in which income is at or below 60% of median individual earnings is a stark indicator of the impact of relative poverty. Not surprisingly, this is compounded by the lower probability that a pupil qualifying for FSM will attend a school with high levels of overall academic achievement. Thus the Financial Times' league table for 1,000 independent and state schools in Britain showed that the highest achieving 10% of these schools only enrolled 2.9% of their pupils from the FSM-eligible category. Independent schools, charging high fees, are self-evidently selective in this regard. But so are state schools. State grammar schools have only 2.5% of FSM-eligible pupils, and state comprehensive schools are also socially selective, with the top one hundred academically performing comprehensives enrolling 8% of their pupils from FSM-eligible families – about half the national eligibility profile. As the Financial Times points out, 'schools in more affluent areas have fewer social problems with which to cope, and house prices rise near good schools, keeping poor families away'.<sup>40</sup>

**39**  
Free School Meals Eligibility Checker

**40**  
Cook (2011)

41  
Cook (2011a)

42  
Medical Research Council (2011)

43  
Marmot (2010) p3

It also matters where you live. The Financial Times calculated the probability that a sixteen-year-old pupil eligible for free school meals would have been in the lowest 20% of national examination results in 2009. On this measure, the worst educational opportunity is in Hull, at a 68% probability. But in Newham, London, the probability is only 20%. 'Poorer children are unlikely to pass the tests to gain entry to selective schools, because they are more likely to go to weaker primary schools and lack access to private tuition. By contrast, London is a fountain of opportunity.'<sup>41</sup> In other words, the self-reinforcing mechanisms of the poverty trap.

There is, then, abundant evidence for self-reinforcing poverty traps in Britain, of a similar kind to those characteristic of developing and middle-income economies, such as South Africa's. Poverty traps shape education opportunities at all stages in life. This is clear from the Medical Research Council's National Survey of Health and Development, which has followed the life histories of 5,000 men and women born in the same week of March 1946. Among its many findings are that there is a clear relationship between socioeconomic differences, evidenced in birth weight and infant survival, and subsequent opportunities, including access to different levels of education.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the Marmot Review found a clear relationship between higher education and mortality: 'for people aged 30 and above, if everyone without a degree had their death rate reduced to that of people with degrees, there would be 202,000 fewer premature deaths each year.'<sup>43</sup>

This overview of the dimensions of poverty and inequality in South Africa, one of the most unequal societies in the world, and in Britain, with the USA, the most unequal of the highly industrialised economies in the OECD, shows the lazy metaphor of the 'level playing field' of educational opportunity to be singularly inappropriate. While there will – and should – always be exceptional individuals and groups, at the more general level educational opportunity is shaped by social and economic lineage and strongly directed from birth. Far from being a matter of the misery of 'distant strangers', categorised in terms of the purchasing parity of the US dollar, relative poverty is a pressing concern in Britain and a national imperative in South Africa. Mutually reinforcing factors – poverty traps – militate strongly against breaking out of inter-generational poverty and inequality in both countries. And educational opportunities, from early schooling to higher education, are of central significance.

# Universities: ambiguous institutions

Access to different levels of education is a strand that runs through all considerations of inequality, poverty and poverty traps. Evidently, access to education provides opportunities for individuals in their lifetimes. It is also a primary means of intergenerational economic and social change. The concern here is with higher education as one part of a spectrum of provision, and with universities as institutions.

It can be claimed that universities have a progressive role, providing educational opportunities on the basis of neutral measures of merit. But this role is inherently ambiguous. While universities certainly provide life-changing opportunities, they also serve as gatekeepers, maintaining differentiation by exclusion and ranking, and contributing to enduring inequalities. This dual role of universities is well understood from Pierre Bourdieu's compelling sociology of education in France, initially in the mid-1960s, and then twenty years later.<sup>44</sup>

Bourdieu showed how selection and categorisation work through the interactions between individual applicants and institutional processes: 'disciplines choose their students as much as students choose their disciplines, imposing upon them categories of perception of subjects and careers as well as of their own skills... the belief that one has been predestined, a conviction produced or reinforced by academic verdicts (often expressed in the language of "gifts") and largely determinative of "vocations" is one of the means by which the predictions of the institution are realised'. The result is that the university, 'with no explicit instructions and, most of the time, even contrary to the intentions both of the agents who assign it its objectives and most of those who are supposed to realise them, is able to function like an immense cognitive machine, operating classifications that, although apparently completely neutral, reproduce pre-existing social classifications.'<sup>45</sup> This is not because of a structural determinism, but is rather through the interaction of habitus, socially structured 'individualities', with the historically constituted structures of the institution. There are therefore always exceptions – individuals who defy the norm and break into elite institutions, and others who do not achieve what is expected of them in terms of their social class. This allows claims of a meritocracy. But, rather than a level playing field, Bourdieu sees a competitive dash for the finishing line, the academic cursus, 'that strange racecourse in which everyone classifies and everyone is classified, and where the best classified become the best classifiers of those who will next enter the race.'<sup>46</sup>

Bourdieu showed how this system of classification produced and reproduced what he termed a 'state nobility' – a self-perpetuating concentration of symbolic capital: 'When the process of social rupture and segregation that takes a set of carefully selected chosen people and forms them into a separate group is known and recognized as a legitimate form of election, it gives rise in and of itself to symbolic capital that increases with the degree of restriction and exclusivity of the group so established. The monopoly, when recognized, is converted into a nobility. This is confirmed and strengthened by the fact that each of the members of the group of the chosen people, in addition to sharing in the symbolic capital collectively held and concentrated in their title, also shares, in a logic that

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Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Bourdieu (1996)

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Bourdieu (1996) pp19, 52

46

Bourdieu (1996) p52

47  
Bourdieu (1996) p79

48  
Sutton Trust (2011)

49  
Sutton Trust (2011)

is truly one of magical shareholding, in the symbolic capital that each member of the group holds as an individual. Thus an extraordinary concentration of symbolic capital is effected'.<sup>47</sup>

Is there an equivalent 'magical shareholding' in Britain today? Research carried out by the Sutton Trust shows that there is.<sup>48</sup> Analysis of higher education admissions across all schools in England in 2007, 2008 and 2009 showed a first sorting by category of school: 69% of sixth form students from non-selective state schools and colleges were offered places, 75.5% from independent schools and 86.4% from selective state schools. A further sorting took place in terms of the category of university. The thirty most highly selective universities took 48% of applicants from independent schools and selective state schools, but only 18% of applicants from non-selective state schools.

Of particular interest in the Sutton Trust's study is that these differences cannot be attributed solely to differing A-level results across the three school types. In the sub-sets of thirty schools with the highest progression rates into higher education, with average scores for applicants exceeding three A grades at A-level, 58% from non-selective state schools were accepted by one of the most selective thirty universities, in comparison with 74% from selective state schools and 87% from independent schools. Put another way, an applicant from a fee-paying independent school has a 30% advantage in applying for a place at one of the thirty most selective universities over an applicant from a state comprehensive school with a comparable level of overall academic achievement.

The data show that a third level of sorting takes place for entrance to Oxbridge. Over the three-year period just 5.6% of Oxbridge entrants came from a broad base of some 2,000 schools and colleges in the UK, each of which achieved on average less than one successful application each year. These 927 successful applicants from 2,000 schools and colleges were less in total than the Oxbridge entrants from the five most successful schools and colleges, which produced 946 Oxbridge entrants between them over the same period. These five institutions were part of a set of one hundred elite schools and colleges – just 3% of schools with sixth forms and sixth form colleges across the UK – that between them claimed 32% of places at Oxbridge between 2007 and 2009.

Finally, the Sutton Trust Study shows the sorting effect of geography. At the extreme, state pupils in Reading, Hammersmith and Fulham, Sutton and Buckinghamshire are more than fifty times more likely to be accepted at Oxford or Cambridge than pupils in Hackney, Rochdale, Knowsley, or Sandwell.<sup>49</sup> Hackney, Rochdale, Knowsley and Sandwell are all in the group of local authorities with the highest multiple deprivation indices in the UK.

This pattern conforms well to the model set up by Bourdieu. The 'immense cognitive machine' of classification and selection by the system of application and admission to universities sorts potential students both by their prior levels of educational attainment, itself conditioned by their economic circumstances, and by their social circumstances, in Bourdieu's terms, their habitus. This is evident in the stark differences in admissions between state and fee-paying independent schools of equal academic merit, and in the equally stark disadvantages of applicants from state schools located in the most deprived areas of the country.

Bourdieu stresses that this complex sorting process cannot be explained simply as the forcible imposition of a dominant order on subservient groups. There is rather a

'dialectic of consecration and recognition' through which 'the elite school chooses those who have chosen it because it has chosen them'.<sup>50</sup> This is evident in those studies that, rather than concentrating on elite selection, have looked at why potential applicants from socioeconomic categories that do not have established expectations of university attendance make the choices that they do.

The publication of the research and recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997 (the Dearing Report) and the introduction of a new system of tuition fees and student loans in the following year prompted several substantial research projects that provide durable baselines for understanding how social sorting and categorisation work for those potential students who little expectation, opportunity or desire to attend a highly selective university.

The Dearing Inquiry had assumed that students across the spectrum make rational choices based on the logic of available information, and that the key to widening participation is making sure that comparable information is available to all.<sup>51</sup> However, the evidence from the Social Class and Widening Participation Project, which ran between 1998 and 2001, shows the relationship between information and decision-making to be far more complex.<sup>52</sup> While applicants from middle-class families are pushed towards selective universities, and make good use of the cultural capital of friends and family who have participated in higher education, potential students from working-class families are far more likely to gather their own information and make their own decisions, with the support of their families. Such decisions are often based on combinations of 'hot' knowledge from friends, the cultural familiarity of prospective universities and assumed self-limitations. This represents a balance between risks, costs and benefits. Archer, Hutchings and Ross write: 'issues of identity are central to the differential ways in which middle-class and working-class people (are able to) negotiate educational systems... There is no singular "working-class identity" or "view" of higher education, and data from our study reveal a multitude of ways through which working-class individuals actively resist, or embrace, higher education as a possibility'.<sup>53</sup>

In a second research project, Reay, David and Ball studied 500 university applicants between 1998 and 2000 from a range of schools and colleges, allowing them to understand in detail the contrasts in perceptions and actions of different categories of potential students.<sup>54</sup>

Those from established middle-class backgrounds, aspiring to selective universities, live out what Reay, David and Ball call 'normal biographies' – pathways that are anticipated beforehand, are grounded in the habitus of their families and often involve few decisions. These pathways are strongly supported by the institutional cultures of their schools, interlocked with the organisational mechanisms of the universities to which they aspire. Such families are 'the virtuosos of university choice' that aspire to admission to the most selective universities.<sup>55</sup>

In sharp contrast is the habitus of working-class applicants. For these potential students, pathways to higher education are characterised by doubt, ambivalence, shame and deliberative decision-making: 'choice for a majority involved either a process of finding out what you cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion.... Material circumstances meant that a majority were operating within narrow circumscribed spaces of choice, in which the location of

**50**

Bourdieu (1996) p104

**51**

Dearing (1997)

**52**

Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003)

**53**

Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003) p175

**54**

Reay, David and Ball (2005)

**55**

Reay, David and Ball (2005) p71

**56**  
Reay, David and Ball (2005) p85

**57**  
Reay, David and Ball (2005)

**58**  
BIS (2011)

**59**  
Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall  
(2005)

a university becomes crucial'.<sup>56</sup> Reay, David and Ball interpreted these potential students' situation as being 'caught between two opposing shames'. On the one hand, there was the risk of aspiring too high and then failing. But on the other hand, there was the shame of under-achieving, of attending a university of which they could not be proud.

Between these extremes were university applicants from what Reay, David and Ball term the 'novitiate and intermediate middle classes'; families that have benefited from the move from an elite to a mass system of higher education, see access to higher education as essential, but are not the beneficiaries of the 'magical shareholding' that the Sutton Trust has more recently delineated. Applicants from these backgrounds 'increasingly have to put real effort into the choice process and in doing so reveal their relative lack of distinction... Middle class factions, apart from the most privileged, have been affected by the influx of the working classes and the routine non manual middle classes (those with no immediate family history of HE) into higher education. In order to keep their distance from the newcomers, our novitiate middle class graduates have had to intensify the time, money and effort they invest in education'.<sup>57</sup>

Studies such as these serve to join up the institutional arrangements between secondary schooling and higher education. As Bourdieu's formative study of the French education system showed, these levels of provision are inevitably linked, whether or not schools and universities are part of the same administrative system, or whether universities are formally autonomous. The ambiguous functions of the university, through which opportunities are opened for some while gates are closed against others, are invariably rooted in the institutional processes of schooling, as the Sutton Trust study demonstrates and as the 2011 Higher Education White Paper recognises, in insisting on a strengthened and extended careers service in schools, enabled by key sets of information.<sup>58</sup>

As with poverty and inequality, the South African limit case is again instructive. Because the sorting effects of the full span of the education system have been so obvious, and for such a sustained period of time, institutional responses have been inevitable. The outcome has been attempts to manage the organisational ambiguities of universities that long presage considerations of widening participation and contextual admissions in Britain. This can be seen through the case of the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa's most selective university in terms of student admissions, and the only university on the continent to be ranked in the Times Higher Education top 200.

In the mid-1980s, as international pressure for radical change mounted and sanctions (including an academic boycott) began to mount, the under-representation of black students in South Africa's English-medium 'open' universities was stark. In 1986, when the first of a series of national emergencies was instituted that would lead to the dramatic unbanning of the ANC and the beginning of political transition four years later, just 350, or 3%, of UCT's 12,500 registered students were African.<sup>59</sup> An Academic Support Programme, providing focused support for the small numbers of African students studying in an overwhelmingly white environment and set up in 1980, was beginning to show successes based on 'special admissions'. Criteria were the position of applicants in their classes in the last year of school, school reports over three years of prior schooling, and subject-by-subject analysis of examination results. This approach was further strengthened through the development of additional selection criteria based on tests that were independent of curriculum content, following similar principles to SAT tests used in the USA, and known as AARP tests (after the name of the founding project, the Alternative Admissions

Research Project). This became established as a viable means for admitting students to UCT who did not meet regular entry criteria, and had the potential to succeed. As the use of AARP tests continued, longitudinal analysis could test the accuracy of students' predicted performance, using survival analysis, and comparing the performance of students admitted via AARP tests with that of students admitted solely on school leaving examinations.<sup>60</sup>

The development of the alternative admissions system was matched by complementary initiatives in curriculum reform. The approach in the 1980s had been to provide for study skills and additional tutorial support, influenced by US affirmative action policies and practices at the time. However, this approach brought the inherent ambiguity between access and gatekeeping functions to the fore: 'the university placed great store in its quality and in the international comparability of its standard, and was sensitive to any developments that might erode these, or might be seen to do so. The admission of "non-traditional" students, particularly via the affirmative action special admissions policy implemented in 1987, and the introduction of intensive tutorial programs, which were vulnerable to being negatively construed as "coaching" or "spoon-feeding", were seen by a range of faculty and staff as a threat to excellence. Even among staff who were strongly supportive of broadening access, there was unease about the implications of affirmative action.'<sup>61</sup>

In the event, this ambiguity was sidelined by the magnitude of the challenge. It became clear that the academic support approach was effective only in assisting students who were marginally unprepared. For the majority of aspirant black students the 'articulation gap' between their prior schooling and what would be expected of them in higher education was too great to be bridged by means of additional tutorial support. This resulted in what came to be called the 'extended curriculum', in which students entering university with disadvantages inflicted as a result of the schooling available to them took a year longer to complete their degrees, with structured support at each level of progression. The success of this approach has been demonstrated for qualifications such as engineering and medicine, for which degree completion standards are monitored by external professional bodies. However, the pressure on students participating in extended programmes could be immense: 'it became clear... that the performance of many talented black students would be severely constrained by various forms of alienation until such time as the institutional culture and practices came much closer to reflecting the diversity of the population as a whole. In the absence of substantive political change, a key means of progressing towards "normalization" was ensuring that there was a growing number of black students at the university who would be able to hold their own academically, and who might in themselves be the most effective agents of positive change.'<sup>62</sup> In the light of this, the concept of 'academic support' was replaced by the concept of 'academic development', covering students, staff, curriculum and institutional change. This approach was broadly endorsed in the Ministry of Education's 1997 White Paper. The key challenge for curriculum design and innovation at UCT was 'dealing effectively with diversity in mainstream provision, rather than relying as heavily as now on foundation programs'. To achieve this without compromising quality and standards it would be necessary to tap 'the high level of latent talent that can be found in the historically oppressed communities.'<sup>63</sup>

In contrast, higher education in Britain has come somewhat later to widening participation. This can be understood, at least in part, as a consequence of differing trajectories in the

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Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall (2005)

**61**

Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall (2005) p270

**62**

Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall (2005) pp275-276

**63**

Scott, Yeld, McMillan and Hall (2005) pp281-282

64  
Dorling (2010), Ross (2003)

65  
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkcapetown.htm>

66  
Saunders (2000)

67  
Dorling (2010)

68  
Ross (2003)

nature of Britain's and South Africa's respective patterns of inequality. Britain had reached its lowest levels of educational inequality in the early 1970s, when half of all pupils were in non-selective schools. The Robbins Committee had reported in 1963, recommending the expansion of higher education to keep pace with increasing demand, predicting the growth in numbers of full-time students to 390,000 in 1973 and 560,000 in 1980 (the actual numbers were to be 575,000 in 1973 and 620,000 in 1980).<sup>64</sup> But in South Africa, race-based inequalities were stark and were gaining increasing international attention. On 9 June 1966, for example, Robert Kennedy had given a public address at the University of Cape Town in an explicit challenge to the apartheid government, stating that 'we must first, all of us, demolish the borders which history has erected between men within our own nations – barriers of race and religion, social class and ignorance.'<sup>65</sup> There were clear affinities between South Africa's situation and the civil rights movement in the USA, and by the early 1980s the English-medium universities were directly challenging their government's policies of race-based exclusions from higher education.<sup>66</sup> A comparison between the two countries in 1980, when the Academic Support Programme was launched at the University of Cape Town, would have suggested very different trajectories; while South Africa appeared locked in the inexorable grip of discrimination and inequality, Britain appeared to have a higher education system that was expanding to meet the needs of all.

Political imperatives and retrospectively observed trends are, of course, very different things. Beneath the apparent egalitarianism of British higher education in the 1980s, inequality in household incomes was steadily growing on a year-by-year basis, and with the lowest rates of increase for the poorest families. We now know that, through this decade, the poorest 20% of British households benefited from an average 0.5% improvement in their circumstances. The richest 20% of households enjoyed an average annual improvement of 4%. Rising inequality of income, in turn, enabled the expansion of the fee-paying independent schools that, today, have such disproportionate access to elite universities and to Oxbridge.<sup>67</sup> In turn again, participation in higher education expanded at levels that invariably exceeded government planning. Robbins' predicted ceiling for higher education enrolment in 1980 had been exceeded by 14%. The 1972 White Paper had anticipated that all categories of higher education students would total 750,000 in 1982; enrolment in 1982 was actually 17% higher. Another White Paper in 1987 planned for an age participation index of between 16% and 18.5% by 1999; the actual age participation rate in 1999 was twice this lower level, at 33%. And the Department of Education's 1991 policy paper projected a combined total of 1.4 million full-time and part-time students by the turn of the millennium; by 1998 there were more than 1.5 million students enrolled. However, throughout this period the proportion of working-class students entering university did not change in any substantial way. The growth was rather driven by the rapid expansion of middle-class participation, and particularly by marked improvements in the participation of women.<sup>68</sup>



# Policy trends: towards the perfect storm

By the time the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education was launched in 1995 British universities looked far less secure than fifteen years earlier. The massive, unplanned, expansion of middle-class provision was unsustainable under then-current funding arrangements, while the inexorable rise of household income inequality through the 1980s had made class differences in participation rates far more evident. By 2001, when students who enrolled in the mid-1990s had completed higher education, 87% of graduates were from 'professional' households, 24% from 'skilled non-manual' backgrounds and just 6.1% from households that census data categorised as 'unskilled'.<sup>69</sup> If class is substituted for race, the dilemmas faced by British universities at the turn of the millennium were looking much more like South Africa's challenges than they had twenty years earlier.

The imperative of addressing this situation was emphasised by Universities UK, endorsing with approval the position taken by then Secretary of State John Denham: 'The procedure for admitting full-time undergraduate students to higher education institutions in the United Kingdom has become a significant policy issue since the Government published a White Paper on the future of higher education in 2003. One of the paper's focal points was the need to reduce the marked difference in the proportions of applicants from middle-class and poorer backgrounds entering higher education over the last 30 years. There has also been a strong political interest in improving "fair access" to higher education, enabling prospective students with the necessary ability to have the opportunity to attend the best and most appropriate university for them. John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, has endorsed this wider definition of fair access: "Concern for fair access touches almost every parent who wants to know their child will get a fair opportunity. In saying that, let me make one qualifying remark. Higher education is familiar with the inseparable twins of widening participation and fair access. But our language is a problem. Fair access is about the chance of getting the best. But best can only mean best for the individual. And any one of our universities can be the best place for the right student".'<sup>70</sup>

In 2010 the steering group set up by the UK's higher education funding councils four years earlier to enhance fairness in university admissions published a set of principles for the use of 'contextual data' in admissions decisions. These include the relative academic performance of the applicant's school, the proportion of pupils in the school living in relative poverty (measured by entitlement to free school meals) and relative rate of participation in higher education in the area in which the applicant lives (which is closely associated with indices of multiple deprivation). Such 'contextual admissions' are the equivalent of the 'special admissions' first used at the University of Cape Town thirty years earlier.

Will the 2011 White Paper on Higher Education contribute to addressing Britain's 'articulation gap'? Its intentions in this respect are carefully worded: 'despite the overall successes of our higher education sector in recent years, applicants with real potential are not making it through to our most selective institutions. The most disadvantaged

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Gilchrist, Phillips and Ross (2003)

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UUK (2008)

**71**  
BIS (2011) pp6-7

**72**  
Wolf (2002)

**73**  
Rajan (2010) p24

**74**  
Wolf (2002)

young people are seven times less likely than the most advantaged to attend the most selective institutions. This is not good enough. Individuals with the highest academic potential should have a route into higher education, and the most selective institutions in particular.<sup>71</sup> But the proposals that follow are not consistent with this objective. By managing and directing the allocation to individual universities of student places that are eligible for loan financing, the government seeks to increase the selectivity of a small group of elite universities by ensuring that all applicants with the highest sets of A-level results will secure places in them. In contrast, those universities that provide access to students from lower socioeconomic categories will have a substantial proportion of their student places taken away from them unless they drive down their fee levels and compete successfully with an expanding set of for-profit providers. This is designed to ensure 'efficiencies'; inevitably, cuts to student support and development that is directed to ensuring that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds realise their full potential in higher education. In turn again, this will result in Britain re-learning what South Africa learned twenty years ago: that 'special admissions' benefit applicants at the margins of standard entry criteria and are insufficient in themselves to change the socioeconomic profile of graduates.

In order to anticipate the consequences of the policy proposals in the 2011 White Paper, it is necessary to consider how a market-centred approach to higher education provision will eventually disadvantage entrants both from economically and socially marginalised families and from already privileged groups.

For potential students such as those from working-class backgrounds in and around London interviewed by Reay, David and Ball, getting a degree could represent a step-change in circumstances. Because the Office for National Statistics uses household occupations as a proxy for determining socioeconomic category, a student from a household in, say SEC5 (lower supervisory and technical occupations) who graduates and gets a graduate-level job will have the household that she or he establishes included in at least SEC3 (intermediate occupations). Similarly, a student from a black South African family, whose parents were denied the opportunity of education beyond the basic level because of apartheid legislation, will earn a significant amount more than his or her parents on graduation and employment. British men born in the 1950s and who gained a higher education qualification earned on average twice as much as men without such qualifications after twenty years in the labour force.<sup>72</sup> In the USA, the 'college premium' – the differential in median wage between those who do not have a higher education qualification and those who do – was 72% in 2008.<sup>73</sup> For students such as these, inter-generational social mobility will still be linked to a graduate premium in earnings, although this cannot be assumed to be inevitable.

But for students whose families are already in graduate-level occupations, the benefits of the graduate premium are less clear. The Dearing Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education estimated the rate of return for students' own investment in higher education at between 11% and 14% in real terms. However, the Dearing inquiry calculated the social return on investment, which estimates the value added in terms of productivity, at between 7% and 9%, against a minimum guideline of a 6% return on public investment.<sup>74</sup> This is because the significant increase in participation in British higher education over the last fifty years has been so heavily skewed towards middle-class families, diluting the transformative benefits of inter-generational social mobility. Put another way: 'university degrees are wonderful things; it is the arranging and valuing of them by hierarchy of

institution that is problematic, when people study for the label, for the university brand, rather than actually to learn. Because there were so few of them, the forerunners of today's university graduates almost all became part of a tiny elite, governing others and being rewarded with riches as a result. Because there are so many more graduates now, only a very small minority of today's university graduates can become rich at the expense of others.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the fact that it has been apparent since the mid-1990s that the rapidly increasing rates of participation in British higher education were markedly skewed, it is still widely assumed that the continuation of this trend is both inevitable and desirable. As Alison Wolf put it in her iconoclastic study published in 2002, 'questioning the automatic value of any rise in the education budget, it seems, places one somewhere between an animal-hater and an imbecile.' Is it plausible, Wolf asked, that education is functioning as something other than a measure of skills? 'Might education not be serving, essentially, as a simple way of ranking, screening and selecting people in a mass society?'<sup>76</sup>

Wolf's argument is that, for the majority of participants in higher education in highly industrialised economies, a higher education qualification is increasingly a 'positional good' that has value for competitive success in the labour market rather than for the inherent qualities that a university education confers. Such a positional good might be essential whether or not it also brings a private financial benefit. For most professions a degree is an entry requirement and a wide range of jobs are only open to graduates, whatever the remuneration. The increasing importance of the positioning power of a degree (equivalent to the significance of symbolic capital in Bourdieu's analysis) is itself a function of widening middle-class participation in higher education: 'at a certain point in what had been a steady, slow expansion, large numbers of people started to feel that they really had better get a degree, because not doing so would be such a bad move. The first wave set off another, and so on. And their parents were very likely to agree... the question becomes less "Does a degree pay well?" than "Can I afford not to have one?"'<sup>77</sup>

In a more recent study that focuses on the causes of the 2008 financial crisis, Raghuram Rajan takes a similar position. Rajan argues that the sustained demand for higher education qualifications in the USA cannot be explained by the demand for higher-order skills alone. With Wolf, Rajan sees the primary location of the skills deficit in the earlier years of education, and as a consequence of income inequality: 'the problems are rooted in indifferent nutrition, socialization, and learning in early childhood, and in dysfunctional primary and secondary schools that leave too many Americans unprepared for college.'<sup>78</sup> However, because a higher education qualification has, at the same time, become an entry requirement for higher-paid jobs, the exclusion of a significant number of people from increased earnings because they do not hold this key positional good has created a political headache for successive administrations. Government has responded by making credit more easily available, particularly for acquiring homes or mortgaging homes. Rajan sees the USA's failed education policies as a key fault line that contributed to the 2008 financial crisis: 'recent technological advances now require many workers to have a college degree to carry out their tasks.

But the supply of college-educated workers has not kept pace with demand – indeed, the fraction of high school graduates in every age cohort has stopped rising, having fallen slightly since the 1970s. Those who are fortunate enough to have bachelor's and advanced degrees have seen their incomes grow rapidly as the demand for graduates exceeds supply. But those who don't – seven out of ten Americans, according to the 2008 census – have seen relatively stagnant or even falling incomes... The gap between the growing technological demand for

**75**  
Dorling (2010) p16

**76**  
Wolf (2002) pxi, p29

**77**  
Wolf (2002) pp178-181

**78**  
Rajan (2010) pp8-9

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Rajan (2010) p23

80

Wolf (2002) p187

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Higher Education Statistics

Agency figures

[www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk)

skilled workers and the lagging supply because of deficiencies in the quantity and quality of education is just one, albeit perhaps the most important, reason for growing inequality.<sup>79</sup>

Alison Wolf was writing in 2002, well ahead of the financial crisis and subsequent global recession, and at a time when economists confidently predicted long-term, uninterrupted, economic growth for highly industrialised countries. Even so, she predicted an inevitable fall-off in demand for higher education as the comparative value of a degree as a positional good declined with ever-increasing middle class participation. She anticipated a classic S-curve: 'just where and when the curves will flatten, and for how long, will depend largely on how young people and their elders perceive the job market.'<sup>80</sup> In other words, when the possession of a qualification becomes more a signifier of status in employment markets than a validation of advanced expertise, it will not be so much the graduate lifetime earning premium that will be the key factor in deciding whether university is worth attending, as graduate unemployment.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for graduate employment in Britain over the past five years show that the immediate employment levels of full-time undergraduates shortly after they finish university are declining (although the true picture will be more complex than this simplified indicator suggests). Between 2004 and 2007 93% of graduates found employment. This declined to 91% in 2008, and again to 90% in 2009. At the same time, however, the spread between universities is widening. In 2004 the lowest performing university recorded 72% of its graduates in employment by this measure, with a set of eight universities reporting 85% or less. The spread narrowed slightly over the following three years, but by 2009 the lowest individual rate was back to 73%, this time with twelve universities below 85%.<sup>81</sup> In this same year, the national unemployment rate was 7.9%, but the unemployment rate for sixteen to twenty-four-year-olds was almost 20%. Clearly, as unemployment rates for non-graduates and graduates converge, the value of a higher education qualification as a positional good will diminish.

Taken together, these trends look like higher education's equivalent of a perfect storm. Access to higher education is consistently a significant means of inter-generational economic and social mobility, as students from households in non-graduate professions win places at university, graduate and set up their own households. But alongside this, the persistently lower rates of participation by working-class families in contrast to their middle-class contemporaries – differences that are themselves an outcome of the inequalities that widening participation seeks to address – means that the inherent value of higher education qualifications diminishes. Rather than certifying the acquisition of higher-order knowledge and analytical skills, degrees become more important as positional goods that are used to sort job seekers in a mass graduate market. However, the value of positional goods is closely related to their relative scarcity. Inevitably, as rates of middle-class participation in higher education rise, so the social value of investment in a university education diminishes; there is less return for employers' investments in higher pay costs in real returns. This is reflected in the convergence of unemployment rates for those entering the work force after secondary education, and those seeking jobs immediately after graduation. Pulling the plug on the positional value of a university degree, of course, also diminishes the value and attractiveness of university study among potential working-class participants, with the result that inequality increases. At the same time, sorting effects are further attenuated as a 'good degree' and enrolment in a sub-set of most selective universities becomes far more important for access to the job market – a scramble to be part of the 'magical shareholding'. Rather than the ideal of the California system, with a spread of integrated institutions, a new form of binary divide is established, more like France's grandes écoles that Bourdieu and Passeron first studied just before the rise of the student movement in 1968.

# Capabilities rather than commodities

The limitations of public policies that are driven by narrow and, in themselves, inappropriate measures of value are increasingly recognised. The World Bank's twenty-year series of Human Development Reports, and debates about the value of absolute measures of poverty based on comparative price indices, are part of this widening process of re-evaluation.<sup>82</sup> Another example of this re-evaluation is the report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, released in 2009, that examined the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress. The Commission's starting point was the apparent distance between standard measures of socioeconomic variables like economic growth, inflation and unemployment, and widespread perceptions of the quality of life. The Commission concluded that 'those attempting to guide the economy and our societies are like pilots trying to steer a course without a reliable compass. The decisions they (and we as individual citizens) make depend on what we measure, how good our measurements are and how well our measures are understood. We are almost blind when the metrics on which action is based are ill-designed or when they are not well understood. For many purposes, we need better metrics.' In seeking effective measures of current well-being, the Commission concluded that new systems of measurement are required to reflect the evolution of modern economies, to be marked by a shift from the dominance of measures of economic production to measures of people's well-being. From this perspective, the Commission concluded that quality of life comprised health and education, everyday activities (which include the right to a decent job and housing), participation in the political process, the social and natural environment, and the factors shaping personal and economic security.<sup>83</sup>

Given concerns and reviews such as these, is the metaphor of the market appropriate for shaping public policy that will address inequalities in the provision of higher education in Britain, and elsewhere, today? The general assumption behind current policy directions is that the quality of a university qualification will be driven up by competitive pricing. Quality is in turn taken as the predicted value of a degree both in gaining a job and in securing a premium in lifetime earnings, over and above the cost of repaying loans. It is assumed that universities will improve in efficiency and effectiveness as they are forced to compete. One university registrar well captured this belief in his response to the 2011 White Paper proposals: 'as far as I'm concerned – bring it on, as long as we're all on a level playing field – I think competition drives down price and drives innovation. From our point of view, as one of the top universities, near the top of the food chain, if we can recruit very good students and still provide them with an excellent experience, that's what we would want to do.'<sup>84</sup>

However, this approach mistakes a university degree for a commodity and flies in the face of a decade of research on patterns in student participation trends, and about the ways in which prospective students make choices in their developing life trajectories. Insisting on such over-simplified market metaphors, and competitive benefits, obscures the way in which high levels of unequal participation in higher education degrade a university qualification to the standing of a positional good, of primarily symbolic value. In this future world, an elite group of applicants, drawn from a small set of highly selective state schools

**82**

Deaton (2010)

**83**

Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (2009) p9

**84**University Changes:  
Threat or Opportunity?

**85**  
Sen (1999a) p7

**86**  
Nussbaum (1997), (2010)

**87**  
Nussbaum (2011) p35

**88**  
Walker (2006)

and fee-paying independent schools, will have the best possible opportunity of gaining access to a small set of 'good' universities at the top of the 'food chain'. Because these students will – always with exceptions – have been pre-selected by the secondary school system and will (again with exceptions) mostly have come from more affluent families, the social return on the investment in their education will be comparatively low. In essence, the possession of a positional good rewards a person for prior achievement and attainment. Since metaphors are important, the market analogy best suited to this vision of education is perhaps that of branded sporting goods. Two pairs of running shoes may be of equal quality for running a race, but if one pair has a desirable brand it can command twice the price. Or of, course, the purpose in buying the expensive pair of shoes might not be to take part in the race at all, but rather to be admitted to a desirable elite.

The foundation for a different approach to education, and part of a wider concern with issues of equality and inequality, was laid by Amartya Sen some years ago. Working within the frame of mainstream economics, Sen showed how neither the concepts of 'opulence' nor those of 'utility' were adequate in themselves as a theory of well-being. Opulence and utility approaches see either the narrow objective of increasing real income or the fulfilment of interests as both the driving force of development and the appropriate emphasis of public policy and lead naturally to the assumption that education is a commodity best traded in a market. Sen argues instead for a focus on the 'capability to function' – what a person can do and can be, on 'the achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or to be'.<sup>85</sup> For Sen, access to education and the ability to realise its opportunities is an unqualified good. Sen's approach has been further developed by Martha Nussbaum, and related directly to higher education and the central role of the humanities.<sup>86</sup> In turn again, Sen and Nussbaum are part of a broader consensus of thought in higher education, across all disciplines, that has never accepted the legitimacy of the concept of the market in framing higher education policy, either in specific operational terms, or as a broader metaphor for the interest of either staff or students.

Nussbaum – in contrast to Sen – insists on a specific list of 'Central Capabilities': the right to a life of 'normal length', good health and shelter, bodily integrity (freedom of movement, opportunities for sexual satisfaction), being able to use the senses, imagination and thought, the right to emotions, the opportunity to exercise practical reason, the right of affiliation with others, concern for other species, the right to play and laughter, and control over one's environment. These belong 'first and foremost to individual persons and only derivatively to groups... at times group-based policies (for example, affirmative action) may be effective instruments in the creation of individual capabilities, but that is the only way they can be justified'. Two of these Central Capabilities play an 'architectonic role' in organising others: affiliation and practical reason.<sup>87</sup> In turn again, Melanie Walker has built on both Sen's and Nussbaum's work in developing a first list of key capabilities and functionings for higher education.<sup>88</sup>

In addressing the pervasive challenges of inequality Walker sees that it is essential to move beyond 'fairness' – providing opportunity – to ensure that every individual in education has the capability of taking advantage of such opportunities. This requires a comparison of the experiences of students based on their own, valued, achievements. Following Sen, a capability is understood as a potential functioning, and the relationship between a capability and a functioning as equivalent to the relationship between the opportunity to achieve and actual achievement. Thus, in the context of the objectives of widening participation in higher education, a school leaver may decide to become a plumber,

'even though she has the required grades for university entrance: she has the capability to choose. But another working class student who does not have the required grades and chooses plumbing, even though he would rather study engineering at university, does not have the same capability. On the surface, the two students would seem to have made the same decision not to go to university. If one were evaluating only functionings (becoming a plumber) we would view the situation the same. However, if we look at capabilities, we evaluate choices which for one of the students would have been different in other circumstances... the first student has freedom and rationality; the second student has rationality in choosing plumbing but not accompanied by conditions of freedom... our evaluation of equality must take account of freedom in opportunities as much as observed choices. The capability approach therefore offers a method to evaluate social (and... also educational) advantage. In this approach individual capabilities constitute an indispensable and central part of the relevant informational base of such an evaluation of advantage and disadvantage.'<sup>89</sup>

In developing a capabilities approach to higher education Walker places emphasis on agency. This is particularly important for 'adaptive preferences' – situations where people learn not to want things because they are off-limits in terms of, for example, gender, race or class, resulting in the internalisation of a second-class status. As Walker notes, there are evident implications here for widening participation in higher education and for responding to the high risks involved in realising aspirations that were documented by Archer, Reay and their colleagues in their research. In stressing the importance of agency Walker shows how the capability approach can move beyond the limitations of the idea of habitus, showing how it can be ruptured and reformed: 'the capability approach offers us a means to analyse change over time, recognizing the interaction of the social and the individual and the social constraints on choice such that we might adapt to a given habitus, but also making the possibility for agency central and important.'<sup>90</sup> Her provisional list of eight key capabilities for higher education – open to participatory dialogue, contestation and change – build on Nussbaum's emphasis on practical reason, affiliation and emotions as central capabilities.<sup>91</sup>

<b>Practical reason</b>	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices.
<b>Educational resilience</b>	Being able to navigate study, work and life.
<b>Knowledge and imagination</b>	Being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject – disciplinary and/or professional – its form of academic inquiry and standards.
<b>Learning disposition</b>	Being able to have curiosity and desire for learning.
<b>Social relations and social networks</b>	Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems and tasks.
<b>Respect, dignity and recognition</b>	Being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practices and human diversity.
<b>Emotional integrity, emotions</b>	Being able to develop emotions for imagination. Understanding, empathy, awareness and discernment.
<b>Bodily integrity</b>	Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment.

**89**

Walker (2006) pp28-29; see also Unterhalter (2003)

**90**

Walker (2006) p59

**91**

Walker (2006) pp128-129

**Capabilities for Higher Education (from Melanie Walker, 'Higher Education Pedagogies: A Capabilities Approach' (2006))**

92  
Jansen (2009) p7

93  
Jansen (2009) pp172-173

94  
De Waal (2011)

95  
Walker (2006)

As Walker recognises, arguing for either a universal set of Central Capabilities, or for a ubiquitous list of capabilities for higher education, opens up the danger of misapplication. If Nussbaum's Central Capabilities are interpreted as a qualifying threshold for national systems of rights, social justice and basic quality of life, then highly industrialised countries can be seen as safely past the post, restoring the point of view that poverty is a matter for 'distant strangers' and inequality part of the natural order. Similarly, if Walker's capabilities for higher education are taken for a checklist for quality assurance, then this approach will lose its transformational potential.

Walker anticipates this difficulty by stressing the significant role that institutions – universities – have in providing the conditions that enable the development of capabilities and functionings in individuals. In developing Sen's and Nussbaum's broader emphasis education in this way, Walker builds a bridge between the individual habitus and institutional culture, and with the role of leadership. Again turning to South Africa, Jonathan Jansen's autobiographical analysis of a university undergoing intense and traumatic exchange well illustrates how the capabilities approach could be developed further as a way of understanding the complex interaction between the realisation of individuals' lives and organisational transformation. Jansen, now vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, was the first black Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria, a traditionally white and conservative Afrikaans institution that did not admit black people onto its main campus until 1989. Jansen's focus is on white Afrikaner high school and university students who carry a set of assumptions and beliefs about the past and their own position in society that are transmitted through the family, peers and shaping institutions of language schools, churches and community organisations. In the context of rapid change in South Africa, this resulted in anxiety, fear, insecurity, 'a community struggling to come to terms with loss and change.'<sup>92</sup>

Jansen's key point is that amelioration of the consequences of such 'knowledge in the blood' must remain insufficient – what has to be addressed is knowledge itself, and the ways in which it is transmitted through both the formal structure of courses and through the 'institutional knowledge' of the university as an organisation: 'what does it mean to speak about curriculum as an institution? It means regarding the curriculum not only as a text inscribed in the course syllabus for a particular qualification but an understanding of knowledge encoded in the dominant beliefs, values, and behaviours deeply embedded in all aspects of institutional life... The curriculum in this view is therefore both tangible (course outlines) and intangible (discursive patterns), but throughout it is a shaping force in the lives of those who teach, learn, administer, manage, and lead within the institution.'<sup>93</sup> His account of the slow process of rebuilding ways of learning and knowing that will allow University of Pretoria students to realise capabilities through functioning in a world very different from that of their parents and grandparents, through interactions with an institutional culture very different to the bastion of the apartheid state, exemplifies the full range of higher education capabilities put forward by Walker.

The strength of Jansen's account rests on its span of seven years of trial and error, failures and eventual, usually partial, successes – a process he has continued since 2008 at the University of the Free State.<sup>94</sup> Such longitudinal perspectives are key to tracking the efficacy of interventions to improve the development of capabilities through education. This is because, as Walker stresses, capabilities are counterfactual – an opportunity cannot be 'seen', or measured. Instead, functionings serve as proxies for our assumptions about which capabilities are being advanced or diminished through educational processes.<sup>95</sup>



This is why studies such as those by Archer, Hutchings and Ross and by Reay, David and Ball show the complex interplay of personal circumstances and opportunity, but are less effective in isolating interventions that work through time in enabling individuals to realise their capabilities through their own critical self-reflection.<sup>96</sup>

The value of longitudinal biographies is apparent in the first outcomes from the Inventing Adulthood project, which followed the lives of one hundred people first interviewed in four areas of England and Northern Ireland at the ages of between eleven and seventeen in 1996, and then again over the next decade.<sup>97</sup> The four lives from this data set, examined in depth by Rachel Thomson, a rich and nuanced understanding of how education is perceived and experienced and the intersection of family life and personal relationships, circumstances and opportunities, and institutional resources and structures.<sup>98</sup> They demonstrate Melanie Walker's point about the significance of individual agency and the ways it can rupture habitus. Sherleen, for example, is second-generation British of African Caribbean descent, the only child of a single mother, growing up in an urban environment. She was first interviewed at the age of thirteen in 1998, and finally in late 2002 when she was seventeen and on the point of applying to university. Together, these five interviews track Sherleen's changing perceptions, her relationship with her mother and grandmother, peer relationships, her attitude to school and college and her developing sense of identity. 'At the end of her fourth interview Sherleen was poised somewhat fearfully on the edge of her familiar world of school and the flat with her mum. She was ready to throw herself into the world beyond, in search of opportunities – to a college in a distant suburb, and into work experience in barrister's chambers. Twenty months later she has reinvented "home" and the "local", forging versions that she can inhabit and draw sustenance from. She continues to express concern that she may not have sufficient resources (economic and social) to achieve the ends that she has set herself... She is aware that she must learn "it all from scratch" and understands that she must pace herself in this incremental project. Her family has been a vital resource in this process so far. Maintaining her security in the face of the tensions that are inherent in the project of mobility in which she is engaged is no small feat.'<sup>99</sup> As with Jansen's account of his seven years of interactions with white Afrikaans students struggling to realise their capabilities in a massively changed South Africa, we are made aware of the complexity of these stories of personal change. We are also a very long way from the concept of education as a market in which competing educational goods are weighed and assessed for their comparative value for money.

A second project that tracks the longitudinal experiences of young adults as they develop agency and identity is Bongi Bangeni and Rochelle Kapp's work with twenty students at the University of Cape Town as they move through the successive years of undergraduate study. Of particular interest is the way in which Bangeni and Kapp explore the interplay between individual development and the formal curriculum and institutional culture of the university. This study works through the medium of a three-year programme in academic writing for students whose first language is not English and who are studying in an English-medium environment. The exercises in writing, in themselves, realise key capabilities of practical reason, educational resilience, knowledge, learning disposition, and respect and recognition. Bangeni and Kapp write that 'our data show that changes in students' identities and roles over their undergraduate years are intricately related to social boundaries, their emotional responses to the (often traumatic) events in their lives, and to the desire to achieve individual success but also the desire to belong to a social group. The students are always responding to multiple and often conflicting expectations of who they are and who they should be.'<sup>100</sup> Their ability to participate in university life – to construct

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Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003), Reay, David and Ball (2005)

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<http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthood>

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Thomson (2009)

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Thomson (2009) pp139-140

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Bangeni and Kapp (2005) p16

**101**

Bangani and Kapp (2005) pp17-18

**102**

Kapp and Bangani (2009) p590

**103**

Kapp and Bangani (2009) p591

**104****www.casematepublishing.co.uk**

capabilities and realise functionings – was shaped by the double ambiguity between their place in university life and their changing relationship with home: ‘universities have become quite good at providing the necessary academic structures to help first-year students, but they still have a long way to go in terms of recognizing and providing support for the affective dimension of students’ transitions and in terms of engaging critically with the effects of institutional discourses.’<sup>101</sup>

As with those in the Inventing Adulthood project, these personal stories are complex accounts of successes and failures. However, the educational gain – the realisation of capability as functioning – is evident. Here is Sisanda describing how her approach to argument construction shifted over the course of three years: ‘First year to me essays were about reporting what I have learnt which was obviously not a good idea ... Second year, to make things easier I told myself I will read and either support or critique the author in addition to reading ... In constructing my arguments (in third year), not only do I discuss and support/critique the authors, I compare and differentiate their views to build on my own opinions and views that I include in the paper as some point of departure or recommendation.’<sup>102</sup>

And here is Andrew, from a socially and economically marginalised working-class suburb of Cape Town, Afrikaans-speaking, and the first in his family to attend any university: in an unsolicited preamble to his reflection paper in his final year, Andrew wrote:

‘I am in an academic discourse where it is required of one to act/or to be the discipline, this is what I have come to realise over these past years. It is one thing to be in the discipline and another “to be” the discipline. And each day I find more and more evidence within myself that I am at that point where I moved from being in my discipline, to where I am my discipline. This is evident in my speech, thought, and ways I approach certain things, whether in academic or formal setting.’

Andrew’s analysis, as well as the language in which it is expressed, reflected a growing awareness that he was not only learning the skills and content of the discipline, but was also entering into new subjectivities.’<sup>103</sup>

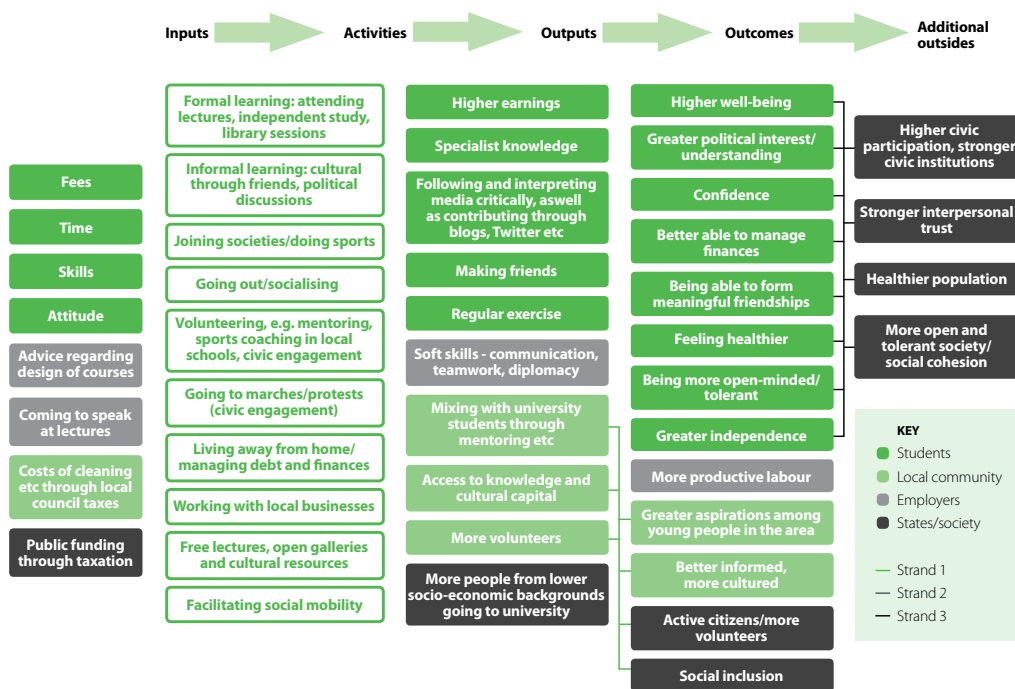
And finally, from my own university, and a conversation that I had with one of our undergraduate students, prompted by the materials that I was reading and thinking about in writing this essay. Neil, an undergraduate student in English literature and creative writing, had joined the army directly from school and served for five years with the Royal Tank Regiment, taking part in operations in Kosovo and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq. In 2004 he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and advised to do something creative to help with his treatment. Turning to university, he has had his first novel accepted for publication, and is exploring his condition and experiences through writing. In addition to his writing, his objective after graduation is to work with organisations working with PTSD, and in rehabilitating troops returning from conflict.<sup>104</sup> Again, the value of higher education for Neil can be clearly and comprehensively understood in terms of capabilities and functionings.

Can the benefits of capabilities and functionings be measured? Measurement is essential in moving from the experience of practice innovation and the biographies that track the richness of individual successes, failures and compromises, and to institutional level transformation and the reform of public policy. Sen’s development of the capabilities

approach is founded in mainstream economics and its quantitative methods, and has been consistently informed by broad forms of measurement, such as the World Bank's Human Development Reports.<sup>105</sup> A recent report by the New Economics Foundation widens the opportunities for measurement by showing how Social Return on Investment (SRoI) methodologies may be applied to the work of universities. In this study monetary estimates of the extended value of university education to students, and of broader public benefits, were estimated. The report's 'model for change' can be read as a map of capabilities and functionings, that shows the combined value of the formal curriculum and the co-curriculum. This is particularly useful because it also suggests how the individual capabilities (higher well-being, greater political interest and understanding, confidence, ability to manage finances, forming meaningful friendships, being open-minded and tolerant, greater independence, and becoming economically more productive) provide collective benefits to the local community, employers and society generally.<sup>106</sup>

**105**  
Sen (1999a), (1999b)

**106**  
NEF (2011)



The social outcomes derived from universities (after New Economics Foundation (2011))

Systems of measurement and standardised descriptions such as these will become increasingly important if new ways are to be found to ensure that that the myriad insights drawn from localised learning situations are converted into effective and appropriate institutional practices and enabling public policy.

107

Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (2009)

108

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009)

## Leading policy and practice innovation

The objective of this essay has been to examine the ways in which higher education – as a stage in the provision of education more generally – both contributes to the perpetuation of inequality and opens up opportunities that undermine the pernicious effects of disadvantages that are imposed on people as a consequence of their circumstances. As many other studies have shown, universities always have been, and continue to be, ambiguous institutions, both gatekeepers and enablers, and providers of private benefits and public goods. However, the link between poverty and inequality is evident, and is evidently part of the remit of national higher education systems. Severe disadvantage is ubiquitous; poverty is not a matter of ‘distant strangers’ but is instead prevalent in highly industrialised economies. In seeking ways for universities to address inequality and poverty, the circumstances of communities in cities such as Manchester and Cape Town are more similar than is often acknowledged.

Metaphors are rarely innocent. Lazy analogies to ‘level playing fields’, ‘competitive markets’ or ‘food chains’ come to be taken as reasonable descriptions of how educational gain is actually attained. Such metaphors may lead to the ways in which poverty and inequality are perpetuated by mutually reinforcing factors – poverty traps – being ignored. There is nothing ‘level’ about opportunity in Britain today, where the length of time a person spends in education, and their measured attainment, correlates strongly with the occupations of their parents and the income level of the household into which they are born. To insist that an education qualification is a commodity to be traded on price in a competitive market is to encourage the use of a university degree as a positional good – a signifier of status rather than a record of the value that a person has gained from higher education. And when this very uneven playing field is combined with rising panic about the positional value of qualifications in an increasingly crowded market place, a place at university comes to be a reward for prior advantage and attainment, rather than recognition for the potential to succeed.

These points are not original and have been made by many thoughtful critics of the trends in British higher education over the last decade and more. It is therefore all the more surprising that, after a period of close consideration that began with the commissioning of the Browne Review in 2009, the 2011 White Paper on Higher Education repeats the mantra of market competition without any depth of consideration, and serves to fuel status panic further by creating a new binary divide between a small, elite group of universities and a large, low-budget sector. The foundations for alternative ways of modelling public policy are in place, and include two decades of UN Human Development Reports and systematic studies, such as the report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.<sup>107</sup>

The case for the more widespread, corrosive consequences of inequality has been made by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their widely discussed overview, ‘The Spirit Level’.<sup>108</sup> Their publication of extensive epidemiological evidence that the wealthiest households are damaged by high levels of inequality has attracted the claim that this is a political agenda, unsubstantiated by the data. Wilkinson and Pickett have, in turn, responded to

these criticisms and reaffirmed the validity of the epidemiological evidence.<sup>109</sup> Their case against inequality is based on international measures of levels of trust, mental illness, life expectancy, obesity, children's educational performance, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates and social mobility. This information has been combined to form an Index of Health and Social Problems for each country, and for each US state. The result is a strong correlation with degrees of income inequality, but no meaningful correlation with national income per person.

Wilkinson and Pickett show that these patterns cannot be explained by social mobility (because there is no reason for more unequal societies to have more problems overall), or by poor material conditions (because then wealthier societies would do best). Levels of trust between people are lower where income differences are larger, and a much higher percentage of people suffer from mental illness in more unequal countries. Social mobility, measured in terms of comparison between inter-generational incomes, is lowest where degrees of inequality are highest. 'Across whole populations, rates of mental illness are five times higher in the most unequal compared to the least unequal societies. Similarly, in more unequal societies people are five times as likely to be imprisoned, six times as likely to be chronically obese, and murder rates may be many times higher. The reasons why these differences are so big is, quite simply, because the effects of inequality are not confined just to the least well-off; instead, they affect the vast majority of the population'.<sup>110</sup>

Given this, the challenge in addressing inequality, poverty and their consequences is to re-affirm the inherently transformational qualities of education, and to push hard for this to be realised through appropriate changes to institutional mechanisms, and recognised in appropriate public policy. As innumerable life histories show, education is one of the primary means by which people can break from the constraints of the circumstances into which they are born. And if education – including higher education – is understood as a capability, which provides the choice of functioning in ways that allow a person to lead the life that they value, then attention can be directed to that which education can add in developing capabilities, rather than to the status value that is purchased on admission.

Work by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and Melanie Walker moves from the general concept of capabilities and functionings, through discussion of generic and central capabilities, and to the ways in which capabilities and functionings can frame innovation in higher education practice. The attraction of this approach is that it is appropriate for all disciplines and fields of study. Walker's provisional list of eight capabilities for higher education include the capabilities of practical reasoning, curiosity and a desire for learning, and the ability to gain knowledge of a chosen subject. These are central to all disciplines. Other capabilities are the ability to navigate the requirements of study, work and living in general, the ability to establish and benefit from social relations, respect, dignity for oneself and others, emotional integrity, and safety and freedom from physical and verbal discrimination and harassment. These are qualities that place the knowledge gained from higher education in the context of life and living. This approach offers rich possibilities for extending and developing the transformational role of higher education, in contrast with the desiccated and diminishing model of a competitive market.

Taking approaches such as these further has particular implications for university leadership. Developing capabilities and functionings must require a widely distributed commitment to common purpose, for the evident reason that this is the only way of

**109**  
Saunders (2010) p6

**110**  
Wilkinson and Pickett (2009)  
p181

**111**

Jansen (2009)

**112**

Dorling, (2010), Hulme (2010), Marmot (2010), Wilkinson and Pickett (2009)

**113**

See, for example, the History and Policy webpage, 'connecting historians, policy makers and the media': [www.historyandpolicy.org/index.html](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/index.html)

**114**

Ehrenreich (2001)

**115**

O'Neill (2010)

addressing individual needs within a university that may have 20,000 or more students. This is strikingly demonstrated by Jonathan Jansen's account of his work as a Dean in a university facing radically different circumstances. While Jansen's own commitment to transformation is unwavering, and he has the ability to reach students individually or in small groups, he is ultimately frustrated by the impossibility of carrying with him an adequate fraction of the university's staff to gain enough momentum for organisational change.<sup>111</sup>

Jansen's autobiography of leadership highlights the distinction between, on the one hand, the ease of making imperative statements for change and, on the other, the unrelenting friction that can come from within an organisation that has entrenched and vested interests in staying the same.

Achieving the distributed leadership within a university to address inequality and its consequences requires, I would suggest, a number of strands.

Firstly – and because universities are about creating and disseminating new knowledge – there needs to be an evidence-based case that this is important. Making an evidence-based case addresses the core professionalism of academics across all disciplines and counters the sway of emotional responses and political opportunism. This is why informed overviews such as Daniel Dorling's 'Injustice', David Hulme's 'World Poverty', Michael Marmot's 'Fair Society' and Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's 'The Spirit Level' are so valuable.<sup>112</sup>

Secondly, addressing inequality and the poverty traps that make change so difficult to achieve requires the insight and expertise of a wide array of specialisms. The sources used in this essay span anthropology, cultural studies, development studies, economics, education, journalism, philosophy, policy studies, politics, public health, social work, sociology and statistics. Further work will draw profitably on still more areas of expertise. For example, literary theory has much to offer in interpreting narratives, and historical analysis provides critical perspective.<sup>113</sup> Architecture bears both a responsibility for hostile urban environments and the potential of redemption through designs for the future. A wide range of health disciplines are directly relevant to the amelioration of circumstances that deny people opportunity, as Barbara Ehrenreich's account of low-paid workers surviving without basic healthcare so graphically demonstrates.<sup>114</sup> As with other contemporary and complex issues such as climate change and international finance systems, poverty and inequality demand interdisciplinary analyses that are unimpeded by the protectionism of traditional disciplinary boundaries. This requires leadership that establishes and maintains the conditions and incentives that make sustained interdisciplinary scholarship feasible. As Onora O'Neill writes in a collection of essays making the case for the public value of the humanities: 'research of all sorts can change individuals and societies. It changes what we believe and what we do, the technologies we rely on, and the things we value. The changes to which it leads may follow in short order or lag for many years, and can surprise even those who do the research. And once changes that depend on research have taken place, it is often hard to remember how things used to be.'<sup>115</sup>

Thirdly, there is the more substantial challenge of changing organisational culture – the entrenched ways of doing things that have a momentum of their own. As Bourdieu puts it, 'with no explicit instructions and, most of the time, even contrary to the intentions both

of the agents who assign it its objectives and most of those who are supposed to realise them', the university 'is able to function like an immense cognitive machine.'<sup>116</sup> In a previous study I appropriated Paul Simon's paradox to express these challenges of organisational momentum in a time of transformation: 'nothing is different, but everything's changed.'<sup>117</sup> The 'substantive university' is where change catalyses and erupts and is 'volatile and pliable. It can be understood as multiple communities of practice which define academic, social and political affinities and exclusions... despite the persistent metaphor of the ivory tower, the substantive university is profoundly affected by the wider society that it is both in, and of'. It is set against the 'formal institution': 'the edifice of regulations, customs and physical structures that serves as gatekeeper to knowledge. The formal institution scrutinizes applicants, assesses and examines students, confers qualifications against the standards that it and other institutions set, determines who can be considered a legitimate "knowledge worker" and validates the form and content of knowledge through guild-like academic disciplines.'<sup>118</sup> Bourdieu would, I think, have concluded that any leadership initiative must either be compromised by complicity with the vested interests that comprise institution culture, or must fail against the sheer momentum of the machine. The leadership challenge is to prove such predictions at least partially incorrect.

## Acknowledgements

The perspective offered in this essay has been shaped by my own experience as Dean of higher education development and then deputy vice-chancellor at the University of Cape Town, and as vice-chancellor of the University of Salford. I am indebted to innumerable colleagues at both institutions who have been inspirational in their commitment to social justice in, and through, education. In particular, for this essay, I am grateful to Fiona Archer, Brenda Cooper, Jane Hendry, Deian Hopkin, Phil Hopwood, David Hulme, Rochelle Kapp, Robin Middlehurst, Rebecca Milne, Servaas van der Berg and Melanie Walker.

**Professor Martin Hall**

**116**

Bourdieu (1996) p52

**117**

Paul Simon, 'Once upon a time there was an ocean': Surprise (2006)

**118**

Hall (2009)

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**Response from Professor Mark Cleary,  
Vice-Chancellor,  
University of Bradford**

# The role of universities in the education sector: can they act collectively?

Martin Hall's essay raises important questions both in the general context of social policy and in the specific areas of higher education. The juxtaposition of a South African perspective alongside the British experience is illuminating and brings important insights as well as a sharp reminder about poverty, inequality and the potentially transformative role of higher education. As he notes early on, the role of universities as gatekeepers is crucial. Universities can reinforce the existing order – be it an economic, moral or political order – and they can equally act in a transformative way. The role of leadership, and especially distributed leadership across our institutions, is crucial.

As the essay argues, poverty is a process rather than a condition. It is a process which can be (and has been) reinforced by social and political change whether through challenges to the explicitly discriminatory power of apartheid (as in South Africa), or through the more insidious process of marginalisation and discrimination combined with a heady mix of market fetishisation, public-sector cuts and the uneven regional and urban performance outlined so clearly in the work of Danny Dorling<sup>1</sup>. Crucial to our roles of course are the mechanisms by which this poverty is generationally reinforced by schooling, family circumstance and geographical location. Education in its widest sense, and higher education specifically, can reinforce or destabilise such mechanisms and Martin rightly poses the question: which of these should it be? Juxtaposed to this view is the notion of the level playing field. There is of course an important linguistic turn here that Martin challenges. Individual examples of people 'pulling themselves up by the bootstraps' make for persuasive copy but do they reflect the kind of deep-rooted change needed if the poverty cycle is to be at least in part challenged by a powerful, diverse and transformative higher education system?

The examination of the perfect storm in which increases in participation reduce the inherent value of a degree and shift its role to that of a positional good in the market is, argues Hall, likely to lead to a reducing social value for university education precisely at a time when the cost to individual students (whether immediate or spread over twenty years is irrelevant) is rising dramatically. Headlines extolling the virtues of not going to university, or pointing to the narrowing gap between graduate and non-graduate salaries, underline the squeeze that is consequent on an emphasis on the monetary rather than the capability value of a degree. Whether this leads to a much sharper differentiation within the sector (with a 'good' subject in a 'good' university being the key middle-class target) remains to be seen but Hall's essay interestingly counterposes this against a vision of a university sector resting on capabilities rather than commodities. I am personally less convinced that this emphasis can provide a way out of the current impasse unless we are secure in how we identify, measure and contextualise those skills but as a direction of travel it undoubtedly represents a more fruitful avenue than the barren rhetoric of value-added and an ever-diminishing 'graduate premium'.

1

[http://www.shef.ac.uk/geography/staff/dorling\\_danny/papers](http://www.shef.ac.uk/geography/staff/dorling_danny/papers)

This powerful essay leaves me with a number of concerns about the sector and about our role as leaders of individual institutions and wider representatives of the sector. The first is a sense that the role of universities in providing for and building the 'public good' is in danger of disappearing with the increased ferocity of a competitive, market-driven rhetoric in which individual employability and the graduate premium is the ultimate measure of what a university does. This is not to argue that competition is a bad thing, or that market pressures can produce efficiencies in how we deliver our work, but that the market is understandably about individual choice and individual benefit. These are fundamentally important but what Hall is outlining is a view that the immense social capital within universities goes well beyond the individual. The role of our individual universities is understandably conditioned by location, by the social and ethnic mix of our staff and students and by our subject mix but the collective public role of universities has always been of immense importance. The whole has always been greater than the sum of the parts. That role needs to continue but it does face pressure from the individualised market rhetoric which underpins some areas of current thinking. How many of us in recent months have not looked quizzically at our work with local communities, with primary and secondary schools, our community events, the support we provide pro bono for local groups and asked whether we really ought to be doing that kind of activity? Is that really a fit and proper role for universities? Where does it appear on the balance sheet?

A second reflection relates directly to the question of generational change that is at the heart, I think, of Martin's essay which is our place and role within the education sector generally. All of us right across the sector, when confronted with uncomfortable truths about the social and ethnic composition of our student population, have at times fallen back on the argument that we can only admit what schools can deliver. Higher education marks the end-point of a much longer journey which begins at nursery and primary school. Of course we will work hard to admit in a fair and transparent way, but beyond that, well, what else can we do? Many universities have an outstanding record of work with disadvantaged groups and with primary and secondary schools in challenging areas. Can we continue to do that at a time when many of the benefits of such activity are both non-tangible and not necessarily of benefit the particular institution carrying out that work? Put bluntly, if such activity does not directly impact on the bottom line of my own institution why should I continue with it? I am not suggesting that is the position in which we currently find ourselves but the direction of travel is concerning.

A third reflection is prompted by the emphasis in the essay on both individual universities as communities and the wider relationships between universities themselves. We all work within different communities of staff, students and civic spaces and may be fortunate to be able to find and build shared sets of values around higher education within our own institutions. I count myself very fortunate to work in a university which has a strong sense of social justice and civic engagement. But I do wonder about the collective role and voice of our university sector. Of course a transformative higher education system can drive change in a multiplicity of ways and it would be folly to expect there to be a single, dominant view about the kind of system we want to build and how our aspirations collide or collude with political and economic reality. But it may be that a market driver which focuses on the individual student (net career earnings; the graduate premium) and individual competition between universities (league tables; the 'good' university), both things of value as mechanisms to improve what we do, is likely to erode the collective capacity and power of universities and fundamentally undermine our ability to understand and challenge in a way that universities have historically done. Are we likely to be able to speak collectively about the role and challenges facing universities in the future that Martin's essay explores? Is there a university sector any more?

**Response from Professor Sir Deian Hopkin,  
Former Vice-Chancellor,  
London South Bank University**

# Inequality – ended or postponed?

Martin Hall's paper is timely and relevant to the current debate on the future direction of higher education. It may not be self-evident that South Africa and England are comparable, but his study demonstrates the global relevance of the issue of access to higher education and social mobility more generally and shows how two countries, so different in many respects, share similar concerns and experience similar problems.

However, at the outset, it ought to be made clear that in 2011 England and the other countries within the UK are following different policy trajectories. While both Wales and Scotland have made social justice a core component of their educational policies by subsidising university tuition fees and reducing student debt, England, by contrast, appears to be in danger of regressing. For two decades we have seen serious efforts to extend opportunities for higher education to under-represented social and ethnic groups, but the evidence produced by the Sutton Trust and MillionPlus, amongst others, reveals how little progress has really been achieved. Now, with the decision to abandon Aim Higher, amongst other policy changes, there is a real danger that the momentum will be lost.

Even Universities UK, a naturally cautious organisation seeking to balance the very different interests and priorities of its members, has produced a hard-hitting report<sup>1</sup> warning against the consequences for student choice and social mobility of the current direction of government policy, not to mention the threat to institutional stability across the sector. It is interesting that the most selective universities, the Russell Group, have recently doubled their surpluses and appear in better health than anyone else; indeed according to accountants Grant Thornton<sup>2</sup>, a fifth of higher education institutions are in deficit and half have not even reached the minimum recommended surplus level. Even before we reach the new marketised system, the gap between the most and least prosperous universities is widening.

Some of the most prosperous universities appear to have made the least inroads into widening participation. Even on the crude basis of the amount of Widening Participation premium allocated to individual universities for admitting students from low-income households, the difference is marked with post-1992 institutions drawing down millions and highly selective institutions a few hundred thousand. Yet it is precisely the universities who draw down the least proportion of this premium who can also charge the highest fees and, under the new AAB policies, expand.

The perverse consequences of this are obvious. Those universities who can not attract the best-qualified and best-prepared students will be driven to reduce their fees.

**1**  
Universities UK (2011)

**2**  
Grant Thornton (2011)

3  
Baker, S. (2011)

4  
[www.londonhigher.ac.uk](http://www.londonhigher.ac.uk)

Lower fees, of course, may be good for individual students, less obviously so for the unit of resource available to teach them. If the Widening Participation premium is also withdrawn, as is speculated, these universities will find it hard to provide the most appropriate academic and pastoral care for students who really need it. This, as Martin Hall quite rightly points out, illustrates an inconsistency between the claims of the 2011 White paper over access and the ensuing policy directives.

Not everyone will acknowledge this inconsistency. Indeed an obstacle to a rational discussion on higher education is the persistence of certain myths such as the belief that attending a highly selective university produces better life-time outcomes than attending other universities or the converse claim that there are too many students enrolling on 'questionable degrees from questionable universities'. These myths are sometimes derived from the experience of those who graduated in a very different era when there were fewer students and fewer institutions. They also rely on the dubious metrics of league tables. Not every Oxbridge student will become Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition while the ranks of the graduate unemployed are not filled solely with the product of post-1992 institutions. Yet this appears to inform the thinking of those major employers who quite unashamedly confine their graduate recruitment to a few 'top' universities while ignoring the rest; what is less well understood is whether this form of discrimination extends beyond these employers. Judging by the blogging comments even in the educational press, let alone the usual suspects, prejudice runs deep.

Indeed the Sutton Trust, whose investigations and reports have provided valuable insights into the direction of travel in our educational system, sometimes appears more concerned with access to a narrow range of selective universities than with access to higher education more generally. Perhaps it is the knowledge of the relative advantages conferred by 'top universities' and the exit velocity they generate which explains the Trust's interest in them. In theory, given the UK's quality assurance system, it should not matter which university a student attends. In practice, of course, life is not like that. The recent report by the consulting group, Parthenon<sup>3</sup>, showing very clearly that many post-1992 universities generate outcomes every bit as good as some of the most selective institutions, will cut little ice with those who simply refuse to believe such evidence.

Meanwhile, as Martin Hall has suggested, the proportion of independent school pupils will rise in those universities which focus on high A-level grades. Arguably it is the very existence of the 'public school' system (an oxymoron if ever there was one) which stands in the way of developing a truly equitable system. This is not to blame these schools, but to point to the inherent advantages they already create for their expensively educated pupils, compounded by university admissions' policies. Early in his paper, Martin Hall refers to the reluctance of universities themselves to change. On the face of it, the new policy framework will do little to persuade even the most enlightened selective university to widen participation while the use of contextual data may be relegated to the list of desirable but impracticable ideas. The race for AAB students will do little for social justice.

Martin Hall has raised some key issues in his thoughtful and highly informative paper. Understanding the long term consequences of higher tuition fees, the differential resources of universities and the career prospects of students from different parts of the sector are topics which require close scrutiny, something the proposed new all-Party Higher Education Commission may well wish to follow. In the meantime we need to find ways of sustaining the kind of admirable work led by Aim Higher<sup>4</sup>. London Higher,

for example, has taken the bold step of creating a new division and advisory board which will help to steer policies towards access in London; one imagines that this initiative will be tried elsewhere in the country. Yet, relying on the goodwill of individual universities or groups may not be enough. We need a more robust and extensive programme of what some are now calling 'access and success'. Studies such as that conducted by KPMG<sup>5</sup> a decade ago in South London have shown that whole communities have been excluded from accessing higher education, largely through multiple deprivation and poor social capital. The government believes this can be tackled by creating new types of school but this is scratching the surface.

Simply improving the prospects of a few more working-class children does not address the much wider problem of extensive social, economic and educational disadvantage. This, of course, is the hard message of Martin Hall's paper, and the challenge for everyone who believes that social justice and access to education, at all levels, are two sides of the same coin. And, it would appear from all the evidence, that possession of a degree may not be sufficient in itself. Access to higher education, in this sense, may not eliminate inequality, simply moderate it.

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**Response from Professor Sir Peter Scott,  
Director, Centre for Higher Education Studies,  
Institute of Education**

## Is the university part of the problem?

The return of a Conservative government (in coalition with the Liberal Democrats) to power has given the green light to the re-emergence of elitism in UK – or, rather, English – higher education. But, to be honest, it had never been really challenged during the thirteen years of New Labour rule. In fact, a plausible argument can be constructed that the various widening participation and access initiatives merely served to mask the enduring inequality of the system. Now that mask has been removed. The latest data suggest that, despite the existence of the Office for Fair Access (now with a new tougher mandate as a feeble antidote to the tripling of fees), the dominance of entry to our ‘top’ universities by upper-middle-class (and upwards) students has actually been consolidated – and the exclusion (an entirely appropriate word) of the working-class and ethnic-minority students from these universities that confer the greatest social and occupational advantages has become more complete.

Martin Hall’s concern, of course, goes wider. His concern is not only with the comparatively narrow view of wider access as controlled cooption but with the university’s capacity to act as a transformative institution unambiguously and unashamedly on the side of social justice. Although the tone of his paper is measured and polite, it is difficult not to feel that he must be profoundly irritated by our fragile and oh-so-limited commitment to access in English higher education. Even those who believe that more is at stake than getting the twenty-first-century equivalents of post-war ‘scholarship boys’ into our ‘top’ universities still assert that the most appropriate strategy is a carefully controlled extension of higher education’s social base. Such gradualism, and Fabianism in the political sphere, is betrayed by its favoured terminology – ‘widening participation’, ‘non-standard students’ and the like. Social justice is merely nodded to – and transformation is off the agenda.

Professor Hall, of course, who was deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town before he moved to become vice-chancellor of Salford University, has experienced real transformation, the post-apartheid reconstruction of South African higher education. He knows all too well, even if he is too discreet to emphasise it, that our ameliorative efforts will have only a marginal impact – at best – on the embedded inequalities of English higher education – even when they were encouraged and supported by a notionally sympathetic government (which is no longer the case). Politely but decisively he demolishes nearly all the explanations and justifications on which we rely:

- Conservatives (and not only conservatives) blame the schools – if only comprehensive schools could match the standards achieved in the private schools, all would be well. But this overlooks the leadership role that universities play, or should play, in the education system as a whole. More fundamentally, it ignores the obvious fact that



schools and universities alike are caught up in the same reinforcing cycles of inequality. How can schools break out of a cycle which imprisons universities?

- Liberals tend to blame society. The problem, as they see it, is that Britain has become a more unequal society; how can higher education be expected to buck that trend? But this overlooks the importance that greatly extended higher education systems – the UK system enrolls well over two million students – have in determining, not simply reflecting, the social order. Universities are perpetrators first and only victims second. The paradox of mass systems seems to be that they are simultaneously both more open and more closed.
- Others again, including some Ministers in the present government, blame the dependencies of the welfare state for stalling social mobility. There may be some truth in this analysis; Whiggish reforms have always been designed to protect as well as civilise the social order (as such reforms have done, triumphantly, in the field of higher education from Robbins onwards). A market economy, they argue, has the potential to promote more flexible social structures. What they neglect to add is that flexibility can take the form of increasing polarisation as much as (or more than) of greater equity.
- Both English conservatives and liberals turn their backs on social engineering, the former out of hostility to defend their privileges and the latter out of principle to defend notions of individual worth. As a result, it has always been difficult to advance beyond the idea of equality of opportunity to that of equality of outcomes – except, intriguingly, in the sphere of gender politics (where greater radicalism is generally permitted – and, not coincidentally, where the greatest change has taken place in higher education's social base).

The view from South Africa, and Salford, is that none of the explanations or justifications, and the solutions they suggest, is likely to be sufficient. But what would work instead? In South Africa the process of post-apartheid transformation, non-negotiable in political terms, was fast and furious. The popular consensus in favour of transformation was remarkably strong, even among many of those with most to lose. The higher education system was to play a pivotal role, not only to be transformed but to transform other parts of society. Yet the results have been disappointing, at any rate measured against the utopian aspirations of the immediate years after liberation. Sadly there is not enough in the South African experience to encourage an old country like England, morally complacent and weary of ambition, to follow a similar path, and espouse radical interventionism.

So what is to be done? Martin Hall suggests three things. The first is that universities should mobilise their intellectual resources and actively use their academic autonomy to force politicians (and the public) to engage with the multiple forms of inequality through the production of rigorous evidence. Who can object? But who also cannot feel caution in the face of the constant advance of commissioned research in which 'findings' are over-determined and of the looming Research Excellence Framework where 'impact' may be interpreted very differently. His second hope is to rely on the interpretive power of interdisciplinarity, in both teaching and research. Although it is clearly true that the complex causation of phenomena such as persistent inequalities can only be understood through the insights of many disciplines, is better understanding alone enough? Is it still permitted to quote Karl Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point is to change it'?

His third suggestion is the most relevant to the agenda of the Leadership Foundation. He believes we should at least be prepared to consider the possibility that the university as an institution, and its organisational culture, is part of the problem. Instead of acting merely as a technical and therefore apolitical instrument, even if it cannot be the active carrier of progressive values, the modern university may be an obstacle. Its capacity to act as a transformative institution may be held back not simply by its inertia, which is fairly easy to accept, or even by its managerial processes, protocols and systems, but also by its values (excellence, standards, autonomy, even widening participation...) At first sight this is an almost shocking suggestion. Surely the mass university with its diverse student base and open research agenda must be a force for progress, despite the bureaucratic clutter it may have accumulated? Yet there are important issues that do need to be addressed such as the lack of diversity among university leaders (meritocrats to a man – and woman) and members of university councils, the focus of institutional strategy on business success, even the growth of corporate brands and cultures that unwittingly reward conformity rather than creativity. Having ranged widely over the reasons for the persistence of inequalities, and the obligations of the university to promote social justice (or, minimally, not to perpetuate social injustice), Martin Hall ends back at home – if not exactly in the vice-chancellor's office at any rate in the senior management suite and the council chamber. Perhaps not such a bad place to start his campaign.

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**Response from Professor Melanie Walker,  
Director of Research and Professor of Higher  
Education, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
University of Nottingham**

## The value of a broadly based approach

In a recent letter to the London Review of Books Martin Davies takes Stefan Collini to task for blaming the policy-makers and government for the state of higher education reflected in the recent White Paper<sup>1</sup>. Davies argues that the blame for the dismantling of higher education (or perhaps rather its construction) as an instrument for human capital and economic growth cannot be attributed only to government. Vice-chancellors, managers and academics, he suggests, have colluded over time with the direction of change. It is then especially refreshing to encounter a scholarly, thoughtful and compelling critique of inequality and higher education in the UK from one of our vice-chancellors. Professor Martin Hall offers a careful, evidence-rich critique of the direction of higher education in the UK and draws some especially interesting comparisons with a very different country, South Africa. Significantly, Hall broadens his term of reference beyond a narrow focus only on widening participation or access as a matter of inequality to include attention to the broader objective conditions, including poverty traps, which sustain these unequal and inequitable arrangements. In a context where debate on higher education is increasingly constrained or fragmented this expansive approach is tremendously important. Hall's excellent contribution to, in my view, a stalled public debate around higher education and broader inequalities, is therefore especially welcome.

In the end universities capture significant elements of the societies in which they are embedded and will more or less reproduce dominant features. As Hall makes clear, drawing on sociological research and the insights of Amartya Sen's work on human development and capabilities, not all students are equal choosers in the market place of higher education; yet this capacity for choice is fundamental to the arguments advanced by policy-makers. In an unequal society (and Hall notes that inequality in Britain has deepened in recent years), society and schooling do not provide the conditions necessary for each and every student to avail themselves of this opportunity to choose a university and a course of study. Not only is choice shaped by social class, ethnicity and gender, Hall notes how Sen explains that individuals adapt their choices to what they think is possible for them. When working-class students do not choose university, or do not choose Oxford, or do not choose philosophy they do not do so on the basis of equal or fair social arrangements.

Moreover, even setting aside the fact that working-class students will not be liable for fee income they will still need to find the money to support themselves while students. John Hills and his colleagues' work on inter-generational family wealth<sup>2</sup> indicates that it is rather harder for a working-class student from a family with no wealth to pass on to carry this debt burden than it is for better-off students whose parents may be able to help repay

**1**  
Davies (2011)

**2**  
Hills et al (2009)

loans or provide a deposit for the mortgage on a home, or such like. Nor will all students have equal access to the social capital which generates employment and work experience opportunities.

The comparisons with South Africa are instructive – and at first unexpected, given the different socioeconomic setup, although in both cases economic development and education are increasingly shaped by a global architecture dominated by markets and inequality. I draw two instructive lessons from the South African limit case. I agree with Hall that we need to understand poverty not only as a matter of ‘distant strangers’ but something which is close to home and ought to concern each of us if we follow Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s advocacy for the expansion of capabilities and the need to build societies which value capabilities for all as an alternative policy direction. Secondly, Hall points to the limitations of working for change at the margins – in the case of both South Africa and the UK. Here I am not wholly in agreement. What began as changes at the margins in South Africa were the necessary springboard to a more expansive understanding of educational development and, we should not forget, were undertaken by UCT in direct contravention of government policy which at that time severely limited how many and which black students could attend a white university. This was a brave and generative vision on the part of the then vice-chancellor, Stuart Saunders, and further highlights missing elements in the debates in the UK which are still to be found in South Africa – a focus on transformation and the kind of university education which is worthwhile, ethical and advances a democratic society, and is always embedded in debates about the good and right. It is also important to remember that what came out of these debates and the practical action to broaden access and participation was the understanding that access was not just about students changing but that universities had to change as well. The UK could do well to pay attention to these lessons in change and reform.

Moreover, I am not entirely convinced that working at the margins in the UK is always limited. At least some Russell Group universities, and here I have the University of Sheffield in mind, have had widening participation arrangements in place for some time which have increased access to the university by working-class students so that Sheffield has a creditable record in this respect. Of course, without a broader debate and commitment this may come down to changing universities one at a time but nonetheless again following Sen’s argument for comparative assessments rather than an all encompassing transcendental vision, this would seem to point to what is possible in a second best world.

As someone who draws on Sen’s ideas for my own work on higher education, I am delighted to see Hall drawing on Sen for a different way of thinking about universities, and hope Hall’s intervention will precipitate wide-ranging ‘public reasoning’ in universities, and dare we hope, amongst vice-chancellors and in policy circles around higher education’s contribution (or failure to contribute) to human development and making lives go better.

Sen rejects the view that improved lives can only follow from economic growth – there is a range of valued human ends, he argues, so that being a better producer is not the only evaluative end for human lives; the key purpose of development is human development. Income and economy would still matter, but the purpose of education would be to enlarge all worthwhile human choices. We might argue that a ‘quality’ university would be a university based on human development principles and the formation of students’ capabilities (understood in the expansive freedom-producing way Sen uses the concept).

Such a university would in turn promote the public good and social cohesion through forming particular kinds of reasoning graduates, equipping them to participate in the economy but also to understand their own power (and obligations) to contribute to the public good.

In the opening chapter to his last book, 'Ill Fares the land', Tony Judt<sup>3</sup> produced a compelling case for social change in the face of material self-interest and the obsession with wealth creation, privatisation, consumption, and a growing inequality gap between rich and poor. 'We cannot', he wrote, 'go on living like this'<sup>4</sup>. I do then hope that Martin Hall's paper is the springboard for more wide-reaching and democratic deliberation (unlike the Browne Review) about universities and societies, a dialogue that reaches across universities and is responsive to public engagement and reasoning about the kind of society that enables fairness and equality, the values that support this, and how universities can and ought to form graduates for full human flourishing and rich lives in work, life and society. His paper acknowledges and is clear-sighted about the compromises and obstacles to change without succumbing to a determinist and reproductive account of universities. It seeks to recover an active and hopeful role for those of us who work in universities and for universities as levers for transformation and public discussion. The question we need to ask is what are people actually able to do and be? What opportunities do they have to attend a university, to be healthy, to be creative, and to get rewarding jobs, and so on? Martin Hall has provided us with a superb opportunity to reinvigorate such debates and, hopefully, action in the direction of universities and the public good.

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**3**

Judt (2010)

**4**

Judt (2010) p17

1  
Empson (1930); see also  
Watson (1994)

2  
See Rittel and Webber (1973)  
p55; see also Watson (2000)

3  
See Schuller and Watson (2009)

4  
Young (2001)

## Response from Professor Sir David Watson, Principal, Green Templeton College, University of Oxford

# Why higher education can (and should) never succeed

William Empson's classic definition of ambiguity is about circumstances in which 'alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading'.<sup>1</sup> In 1973 Rittel and Webber first formulated the concept of 'wicked problems,' for which 'there are no "solutions" in the sense of definitive and objective answers' (their field was Town and Country Planning).<sup>2</sup> Higher education (HE) policy, management and practice represent one of the most fertile fields for analytical approaches stressing, like these, lack of certainty, multi-valence, and aversion to dogma. We shall always be a 'work in progress'.

This is because there are huge contradictions and discontinuities in what is expected of the overall HE enterprise. Minefields have to be negotiated – inside and outside the institution – for any member taking on a leadership or management role. Meanwhile there is the inescapably provisional, constantly striving, nature of the academic enterprise itself, endlessly subject to both internal and external critique.

Martin Hall shows one such source of ambiguity or 'wickedness' in stark relief: the contradictory drives between, on the one hand, a student (and a research) market that is assumed to produce more efficient goods and, on the other, a commitment to a notion of social justice that stresses fair distribution of benefits: moral and cultural as well as economic. He hopes for some form of Hegelian synthesis in the prospect of higher education assisting human 'capability,' especially as set out in the work of Amartya Sen, supplemented as it has been by scholars like Melanie Walker and Martha Nussbaum. (He could also have looked at the worked example offered by the 2009 Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL).<sup>3</sup>)

Hall's analysis is refreshing in several ways. It shows how the key structural problems are shared by systems in vastly different stages of development. In particular the new Republic of South Africa (RSA) should not be viewed (as it has often been) through lenses of condescension or pity. Substitute 'class' for 'race,' and on the critical dimension of the failure of educational outcomes to iron out economic inequalities the UK is functionally in almost exactly the same position as the RSA. In his words, there is 'abundant evidence for self-reinforcing traps in Britain, of a similar kind to those characteristic of developing and middle-income economies, such as South Africa's' (p14).

There are conceptual traps to add to this fundamental empirical truth. Not only is a naïve belief in 'meritocracy' (conceived by Michael Young as dystopia) not the way out;<sup>4</sup> nor is the policy-maker's deceitful proclamation of a 'level playing field'. As Mike Fitzgerald, then VC of

Thames Valley University, used to ask, 'when do they blow the whistle and we can change ends?'

Thirdly, South Africa could teach us some powerful lessons about 'contextual admissions' (pp 19 and 22). With Britain's so-called 'top' universities having effectively outsourced their selection processes to the A-Level Examination Boards and defined a 'threshold' (including the unstable A\* grade<sup>5</sup>) as effectively the same as the ceiling that students (from anywhere) can attain, they have also turned their backs on radically 'alternative' admissions. This approach involves choosing candidates who could potentially benefit from what the institutions have to offer while simultaneously offering something other than the 'usual' themselves. It is eloquently described in the work of Jonathan Jansen cited by Hall. Along with radical enrolment practice like this must go recognition that the beneficiaries will not only need but also deserve special support in order to succeed.

Fourth (in a category only implicit in Hall's analysis) there is a reminder that 'poverty of aspiration' may easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy for policy-makers and providers who ignore not only the 'shame' but also the anger (mostly tamped down, but potentially decreasingly so) of the excluded. His evocation of Bourdieu is timely. Herein lies another wicked issue: how do we advantage the disadvantaged without further advantaging the already advantaged?

Hall is acutely aware of how universities can feel themselves several steps away from the alleviation of poverty. To make a real (rather than rhetorical) difference they have to influence – through policy, professional practice, and general cultural sensitivity – several intermediate layers. He points to how difficult it is for higher education to connect effectively with the devastating 'whole population' analyses, like those of Michael Marmot and Wilkinson and Pickett. He is also right about the brittle presentism of the Coalition Government's latest White Paper.

Hall's core concept about the possibilities of positive HE influence is a traditional one: the rabbit out of the hat is the prospect, however hard to achieve, of 'transformation' – of the curriculum, the participants, institutional strategies, and by extension the society they serve. As such it is a bold re-statement of a powerful theme.

Perhaps it is too bold. Above all this nuanced, reflective essay underlines the asymptotic nature of the higher education business. Whatever steps are made towards objective improvements it will always fall short of its ambitions. And so it should. We are engaged, as Donald Kennedy reminded us, in an endless process of 'leading and lagging'.<sup>6</sup> Continuous improvement is a merciless business.<sup>7</sup>

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# Biography **Professor Martin Hall**

Martin Hall is vice-chancellor of the University of Salford. He is also professor emeritus, University of Cape Town (UCT), where he is affiliated with the Graduate School of Business. Previously professor of historical archaeology, he was inaugural dean of higher education development and then deputy vice-chancellor at UCT (from 1999 to 2008). He is a past-president of the World Archaeological Congress and is a fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa and of the University of Cape Town. He is an accredited mediator with the Africa Centre for Dispute Settlement.

He has written extensively on pre-colonial history in Southern Africa, on the historical archaeology of colonialism, on contemporary public culture and on issues in higher education. Recent publications include "Identity, memory and countermemory: the archaeology of an urban landscape" (*Journal of Material Culture* 11(1-2): 189-209, 2006), *Historical Archaeology* (edited with Stephen Silliman; Oxford, Blackwell, 2006), *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (edited with Noeleen Murray and Nick Shepherd; London, Routledge, 2007), "Transformation and continuity in the university in Africa" (*Social Dynamics* 33 (1):181-198, 2007), "Stitch Wise: Strategic Knowledge Management for Pro-Poor Enterprise on South Africa's Goldfields" (in *The Business of Sustainable Development in Africa: Human Rights, Partnerships, and Alternative Business Models*, 2008), and *The Next Twenty Five Years? Affirmative Action and Higher Education in the United States and South Africa*, edited with Marvin Krislov and David L. Featherman, University of Michigan Press, 2009. A full list of publications, as well as current work, is available at [www.salford.ac.uk/vc](http://www.salford.ac.uk/vc)





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