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Neoliberal Meritocracy: How ‘Widening Participation’ to Universities in England Reinforces Class Divisions

Chris Cunningham and Colin Samson (University of Essex)

Abstract:

This essay details the processes through which English universities reinforce existing social class divisions while at the same time extending access for populations that had historically been excluded from universities. Practices commonly referred to within higher education policy as ‘widening participation’ that purport to show solidarity with previously excluded student populations, we argue, function to maintain not diminish inequalities. While the meritocratic ideals underpinning the social mobility narrative of widening participation encourage economic and employment aspirations as prime motivations for applying and entering university, widening participation has not coincided with meaningful mobility. Through an analysis of major shifts in higher education policy, we argue that categorisations of the ‘disadvantaged’ student are manufactured to assist universities to fund and legitimate themselves as vehicles of social mobility. In this context, we argue that a precarious legitimacy exists because social mobility operates within a wider culture of embedded class privilege, and this is constantly managed by state regulatory frameworks which reshape and repurpose universities to fit a neoliberal meritocratic image of the larger society and the role of universities within it. Ideas of ‘disadvantage’ service solidarity not with the ‘disadvantaged’ but with educational service providers, as they offer a target for the promotion of neoliberal meritocracy. In the course of this, class differentials are reinforced by channelling ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘advantaged’ students into different niches of the labour market, preserving existing inequalities, and sorting graduates into winners and losers.

Keywords:

British universities; neoliberalism; social class; social mobility; solidarity

Up until the late 1990s, British universities were largely state funded and students were provided with government and local authority grants for attendance, expenses and even Study Abroad opportunities. Although not immune from political and public criticism, universities were widely perceived as a public good and traded largely on their academic reputations. However, by the time of the Blair government, the once cherished and often idiosyncratic universities were being configured into a corporatized ‘sector’, and this was done through drastic changes to their financing. This movement began with Margaret Thatcher’s policies in the late 1980’s to increase competition between universities for state funding in the form of block grants. In turn, the government promotion of individualised economically focused narratives of ‘value for money’ and ‘consumer choice’ challenged and undermined the collegiate culture of universities in ways that were deeply hostile to the exploration of free intellectual inquiry as a public good (Hall & Jacques, 1983). Indeed, the hegemonic construction of economic individualism that guided the privatisation of the public sphere assumed that competition and economic gain were at the root of human nature (Samson, 1994). This

ideology posed a radical challenge to the pluralistic and non-instrumental cultures in British universities. In line with these assumptions, government-subsidised university tuition for students declined with the introduction of greater monetarisation. The aim was to create ‘a much higher level of accountability for public funding and greater accountability for students as customers’ (Kealey, 2013, as cited in Lambert, 2019). Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Education provided the ‘ideological dynamic for what came to be known as Thatcherism’; an ideology that went on to influence the neoliberal educational agenda of Tony Blair’s New Labour government (Bogdanor, 2013).

Ideas about widening participation came into public discourse at the end of the 1990s. At this time, universities more aggressively aimed to recruit ‘non-traditional students’, meaning those who due to class background, family situation or age had not been able to either consider university education or meet the academic entry requirements. While this was ostensibly an attempt by the British state to show solidarity with populations which the class system had consigned to almost permanent subjugation, it did this by

marketizing their access to universities. Following the Dearing Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education in 1997, tuition fees for home students studying at UK universities were introduced, and the expansion in university participation reconfigured through changing the ways higher education in England was funded. The wheels of a new loan system were set in motion, whereby the student would enter into an ‘obligation to make contributions to the cost of their higher education once they are in work’ (Dearing, 1997, p.2). Widening participation as a policy directive was overseen by the regulator the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE), and later, the Office For Fair Access (OFFA), which was established in 2006. The emphasis on *Fair Access* promoted an expectation of individual economic success following from a university degree; a narrative central in Dearing’s Report 9 years earlier.

The ‘obligations’ that students were entering into following Dearing were essentially business transactions through which the government could create a market of financially self-sustaining institutions that trained workers, and were depicted to reward the student, and the nation, with economic security. The market model redirected the costs of universities away from the state and onto the individual student, who through the loan system was committed to financing their education through tax returns on future earnings. At the end of March 2020, the student loan debt in England/UK stood at £140 billion (UK Parliament, 2020), and it has been suggested that:

for the average graduate, at no point would the total value of their debt decrease. Due to the high rate of interest, the debt will keep climbing some years after graduation and they would be unlikely to repay that loan for 15 to 20 years or even longer. At the end of this period, when the debt is written off, they would eventually have accumulated £164,000 of debt and paid a total of £75,000 (Baroness Jenkin, 2019).

Higher education was therefore repositioned from a publicly financed collective good with broad educational and intellectual aims for a smaller student body to a commodity sold within a distinct economic ‘sector’ to a widened population. As we shall see, it was intended to be purchased by students as a ticket to future economic elevation.

‘Disadvantaged Students’

As public funding of universities was being gradually withdrawn following the Dearing Report, higher education policy in England introduced a standardised classification of ‘disadvantage’ for the purposes of student recruitment and a homogenised group of ‘disadvantaged students’ (OfS, 2019) was constructed. The broad and varied range of indicators for the ‘underrepresented groups’ that were considered disadvantaged included: students from lower household income and/or lower socioeconomic status groups; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME); Mature students;

Disabled students; Care leavers; Carers; People estranged from their families; people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; Refugees; Children of military families (OfS, 2020, p.16). Students in these categories would offer universities a steady flow of income from new student loan schemes. By the time of the Browne Report of 2010 when the university regulator enabled institutions to raise the cap on tuition fees to £9,000 a year, a transactional relationship between student consumers and university service providers had been cemented, and university cultures changed accordingly.

In a dizzying series of regulatory alterations to steer universities away from broad academic and intellectual missions and towards a transactional culture, in 2018 HEFCE and OFFA were merged under a new umbrella organisation called the Office for Students (OfS), following the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Tuition fees for home students had by this time risen to £9,250 per year. The OfS, continuing with traditions set out in Dearing, which correlate widening participation with tuition fees and funding, constructs students as economic ‘investors’ in education, and institutions as ‘providers of skills’ that can offer an economic return. This suggests that ‘disadvantaged students’, through their investment, have an enhanced opportunity for upward social mobility. Access and Participation Plans, which stipulate how institutions aim to widen participation to disadvantaged students became a requirement of registration with the OfS. In turn, these Plans were required of institutions wishing to raise tuition fees to the maximum amount.

Making the raising of tuition fees dependent upon widening participation then turned ‘disadvantaged’ students into an ever-expandable currency. The range of typologies used to categorise ‘disadvantage’ has been continuously in flux, mushrooming to such an extent that many English universities now have a vast majority of their student body being considered ‘disadvantaged’. These students are often identified through the POLAR quintile system, which compares rates of higher education participation in different postcodes (OfS, 2019, 2020). In 2020 the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) reported a record number of 18-year olds from ‘the most disadvantaged backgrounds’ being accepted into universities across the UK. However, this record 28,030 intake, up 8% from the previous year (UCAS, 2020), is likely to be an underestimate since it only considers ‘disadvantage’ in terms of one indicator – the POLAR4 quintile system – and does not take into account of the full range of indicators mentioned above.

The Promise of Social Mobility

The allure of mass higher education that is apparent today was first catalysed by Tony Blair in his famous Education Speech of 1997, when the Prime Minister pledged to give access to university to 50% of young people (Coughlan, 2007). This was an important step in legitimating the

expansion of universities as a vehicle of equal opportunities, and thus attacking the widely held image of Britain as a class ridden society symbolised in education by its school ‘streaming’ systems (Willis, 1978) and its grossly unequal public and private schools. The image of ‘Cool Britannia’ under Blair, instead, was of a neoliberal meritocracy in which notions of aspiration, social mobility and equal opportunity were all connected to a belief in the benevolence of capitalism, while the language of social class became ever more attenuated. This representation continued through Gordon Brown’s ministry, and onto the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, when Conservative leader David Cameron coined the term ‘Aspiration Nation’ (Littler, 2018). Supporting the meritocracy narrative, in 2012, a progress report entitled *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility* conducted by Labour politician Alan Milburn, acting as an independent reviewer, suggested that universities play a crucial role in enhancing social mobility and providing an economic good to the country within an increasingly knowledge-based economy (Milburn, 2012). *University Challenge* documents the successes of Britain’s higher education sector, claiming that it was ‘world leading’, and noting its ‘unprecedented growth’ over four decades. Conveniently, students themselves literally had to buy into the meritocracy by paying fees, and this was much harder for those with less social and actual capital. However, the student loan system enabled these investments in ambition to become an achievable reality.

The promise of social mobility has since become a powerful driver of increased university enrolments. University outreach activities have worked to facilitate the promise alongside multi-agency initiatives promoting ideas of aspiration and opportunity and linking these firmly with the completion of a higher education degree. To reaffirm linkages between education and economic success, the OfS National Collaborative Outreach Programme, recently renamed Uni Connect, today operates partnerships between schools, colleges, and institutions of higher education with the aim of supporting ‘disadvantaged’ or non-traditional students, helping them to transition to higher education. The website of Uni Connect (OfS, 2021), and subsequent regional partnerships depict education in terms of an economic return on investment.

To enable a greater number of students to enrol at universities, rules around entry level requirements have been relaxed for students coming from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds’ (UCAS, 2021a). Referred to as ‘contextual admissions’, institutions were given added autonomy to reduce entry requirements and offer extra consideration to applicants based on ambiguous factors, such as ‘if money is tight at home’, under the guise of fairness (UCAS, 2021a). For universities keen to increase the number of fee-paying students, this procedure allowed institutions to admit

virtually any applicant, especially given the lifting of the temporary student number cap in 2020 (McIntyre, 2020).

However, university admission of ‘disadvantaged students’ alone is not sufficient to make such students think they are on the path to economic success and social mobility; they must also believe that they are succeeding in academic terms. Therefore, the marks of students have been gerrymandered upwards to meet growing expectations (Lambert, 2019) prompted by institutional aims to ‘raise aspirations’ as detailed in their Access and Participation Plans submitted to the OfS to demonstrate commitment to widening participation. It is no surprise that the number of students receiving a first-class degree has risen considerably; from 16% in 2010/11 to 27% in 2016/17, meaning almost one-third of students in the country are ‘first class’.

The Legitimacy Crisis

Despite the inculcation of economic aspiration among young people, marked increases in first class degrees, and burgeoning university enrolments, government goals of ‘advancing social mobility’ (Milburn, 2012) remain unmet. Consecutive reports from the Social Mobility Commission demonstrate that while there are ‘more disadvantaged pupils staying in education for longer, more disadvantaged students going into higher education’, there is also ‘a greater chance of disadvantaged young people getting stuck in low paid jobs’ (Social Mobility Commission, 2020, p.6). A 2017 report from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) found that just under half of graduates were working in graduate level employment 6 months after leaving higher education (CIPD, 2017). This suggests that the exchange of tuition fees for an economically rewarding career is to a large extent immaterial, rendering the transactional model of English higher education barely credible. Furthermore, the 2019 report *Elitist Britain* by the Social Mobility Commission in collaboration with the Sutton Trust, detailed entrenched class stratification, made up of networks that connect private schools, high ranking universities, and powerful positions within society (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Neoliberal meritocracy, it would seem, merely ratifies existing class privilege and elite entitlement. It does this, in-part, by reframing the education narrative: humanities based education which encourages critical thinking in celebration of knowledge for its own sake, is redirected away from the lower class ‘disadvantaged’ students, and replaced with skills based functional training that serves an instrumental purpose of channelling workers into the labour market.

The implausibility of the social mobility narrative within what is still a massively unequal society was underlined in UN Special Rapporteur for Extreme Poverty and Human Rights Philip Alston’s (United Nations, 2018) report on the human rights implications of UK austerity policies. Alston’s report, substantiated by over 300 submissions, depicted

Britain's poor as including up to almost fifty percent of children in the country and called social welfare, 'punitive, mean-spirited and often callous,' noting also large cuts in public funding for schools, that disproportionately affects Britain's burgeoning numbers of poor people. The coexistence of austerity and dubious appeals to social mobility could easily lead to a legitimacy crisis. One way to avert this problem has been to reshape universities by reinforcing the hierarchies between them.

Access and Participation Plans agreed with OfS, which allow universities to charge maximum fees, require a commitment to widening participation for disadvantaged students. Yet, this commitment is unequally shared by universities. One of the key recommendations of the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission report (2019) is that 'selective' universities that are in far less need of state funding, such as the Oxbridge colleges, do more to increase access for 'disadvantaged' students. At the same time however, pressure was being applied to the 'sector' itself, as interior ministers of the Johnson administration worked to reinforce the framing of education in narrowly economic terms. In July 2020, speaking at an event aiming to widen participation to higher education, Universities Minister Michele Donelan announced that by promising social mobility through education, universities were 'taking advantage' of students (Donelan, 2020). This sentiment was reiterated a week later by Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, whose speech on Further Education centred on encouraging students to study subjects that would offer 'skills to get a good and meaningful job' (Williamson, 2020). Neither of them mentioned the vast inequalities between England's universities or the huge discrepancies in the starting points of 'disadvantaged' and 'advantaged' students.

Comments such as these from current government ministers also illustrate a conveniently vapid notion of what social mobility is. Without any meaningful articulation of what social mobility might mean, the transactional model of education pursued by Donelan and Williamson simply preserves rather than reduces inequality by encouraging the channelling of different categories of students into specific careers, and thereby limiting the possibility for genuine social mobility. Students graduating from private secondary schools are not encouraged to study vocational courses at Further Education colleges in the same way as the 'forgotten 50%' that Williamson claimed to 'stand up for' in his speech in July 2020, which correlated Further Education with 'levelling up' the nation (Williamson, 2020). Meanwhile, social capital operating through 'old-boy networks' connecting elite public schools with high status professions and areas of business, works to ensure that powerful positions in Britain remain preserved for a select few and can be handed down to following generations (Watters, 2016).

One symptom of a legitimacy crisis triggered by scepticism towards neoliberal meritocracy is evident in the

new pressures to reduce tuition fees. In January 2021 a petition for a debate in Parliament calling for a dramatic reduction of university student tuition fees from £9,250 to £3,000 gathered pace. Although the debate about student tuition fees has been ongoing since the implementation of fees, the impact of the pandemic on what university marketing departments and the OfS call 'the university experience' and the job prospects of graduates has given it renewed energy. Towards the end of January 2021, the petition stood at over 570,000 signatures (UK Government and Parliament, 2021a).

Similarly, the impact arising from the pandemic upon the learning experiences of international students brings further questions about the true value of tuition fees. The majority of international students pay much higher fees than home students, with prices differing depending upon the institution or the course taken; on average, tuition fees range from £18,000 to £29,000 each year (Fazackerley, 2021). Another petition to Parliament, calling for tuition fee compensation for international students in UK universities, stood at around 30,000 signatures in mid-March 2021, with 25,000 of these being signed within the first week (Fazackerley, 2021). However, while the petition for home students calls for a reduction in fees, thereby positioning the institutions of higher education as being responsible for cost, the petition for international students calls on the UK Government for compensation, in recognition that 'many universities cannot afford to refund these students' (UK Government and Parliament, 2021b).

Tuition fees for higher education in England are among the highest in the world (Augar, 2019), and with the value of outstanding loans in UK/England standing at well over £140 billion (UK Parliament, 2020), this national debt adds further pressure to the debate; yet for many institutions operating as they now are in a highly marketized environment, lowering fees would be fatal. The financial success of the universities literally depends on the debts of students. The role of the OfS here in representing the interests of students, broadly conceived, is crucial to negotiating this extremely precarious legitimacy.

Higher Education as a Reinforcement of Class Society

Contradicting what has been an ideologically crucial representation of a link between university participation and upward social mobility, the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson (2021), recently asserted that 'encouraging more and more students onto courses...serves only to entrench inequality.' In order to bolster this, Williamson's (2021) statements assumed that there were 'right choices' with regards to the education which universities should provide. Therefore, universities choosing to focus on subjects that encourage critical thinking and humanistic values are likely to face fines if not delivering on 'successful graduate outcomes', or worse still, they could even lose their ability to

award degrees (Morgan, 2021). England's most prestigious universities, however, remain to serve as a pipeline for a privileged class (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019), and are set to be less bound by OfS regulation (Morgan, 2021), and therefore will be free to offer these subjects without penalty, while lesser institutions will be tasked with training 'disadvantaged students' into employment pathways that simply validate the inequalities present in British society as a whole. Such a move is already underway, illustrated by a trend towards specific degree schemes connected to labour market domains and many other degrees fitted out with compulsory 'employability modules' that have replaced intellectual content. This coincides with a drastic slide in the entry marks needed for applicants applying to lower ranking institutions, which often consider the ambiguous concept of 'life experience' as an alternative to having the required grades for entry (UCAS, 2021b). The solidarity that was briefly signalled towards excluded student populations to benefit from the varied types of knowledge imparted and absorbed in universities is now fully exposed as a failed method to manage the appearance of inequality. Williamson's admission that university expansion only entrenched inequality was simply replaced with a more transparent way to entrench it. But these U-turns also exposed the fact the government has had no intention of having 'disadvantaged students' experience social mobility and achieve highly skilled employment. This was underlined by the introduction of a post Brexit Immigration Bill based on a points-based system that prioritises highly skilled migrants (Home Office, 2020). Ambitions to 'deliver a system that works in the interests of the whole of the UK and

prioritises the skills a person has to offer, not where they come from' (Home Office, 2020) highlights that government aims of increasing social mobility through university participation for UK nationals, are either misleading or generally recognised as being unrealistic. Plugging gaps in a skilled-labour workforce by filling vacancies through immigration policies, reinforces class divides not only within the UK, but also globally, as workers without points are denied access and sending countries are depleted of skilled workers.

With neoliberal meritocracy and the social mobility it promises transparently implausible, solidarity *within* the 'sector' becomes reinforced as institutions of higher education work to perpetuate the class-based school streaming systems of English society. Meanwhile, prospects for solidarity of class-based activism are curtailed as the hegemonic construction of neoliberal meritocracy, implausible as it is, continues to shape educational discourse and works to increase competition among students, who scramble to grab limited opportunities. Whether Williamson's watered-down visions of 'success' for the 'disadvantaged students' who continue to accumulate large loan debts will mean anything remains to be seen; yet, it is highly likely that whatever the outcome for universities, the superficial modification of existing economic and power structures will work to ensure that the solidarity of the advantaged continues in-tact.

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About the Authors

Chris Cunningham is a PhD candidate of the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex. As an emerging scholar within the field of ‘critical social mobility studies’, his thesis questions: what is the purpose of a university? Research interests include: the marketisation of higher education; the British class system; identity politics; knowledge creation power relations. Living a transient lifestyle from youth and working in a variety of occupational settings, Chris entered university in 2007 employed as a security guard. In 2013 he returned to education as a mature student and continues to work a number of different job roles alongside his studies and being a parent to three children.

For most of his career, Colin Samson has researched and been an advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples. He has worked with the Innu in northern Canada and also with Arapaho and Shoshone people at the Wind River Reservation in the US while he was a Visiting Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Wyoming in 2015-2016. His latest book, *The Colonialism of Human Rights: Ongoing Hypocrisy's of Western Liberalism* (Polity, 2020) looks at non-universal human rights which have been embedded through the colonial process, the persistence of racist thought and manifest in contemporary iterations of imperialism. Colin was educated 30 years ago at the University of California at Berkeley and has great admiration for public sociology and civic-minded pedagogy. He has been alarmed at the aggressive re-shaping of knowledge to fit commercial imperatives that, as his collaboration here with Chris Cunningham argues, has made university participation in England an economic transaction that can reinforce class inequality.