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Editorial

Widening participation, social mobility and the role of universities in a globalized world

RICHARD WALLER, JOHN HOLFORD, PETER JARVIS,
MARCELLA MILANA and SUE WEBB

A university education has long been seen as the gateway to upward social mobility for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds in countries the world over, and a well-educated working population is presented as a pathway to national prosperity for both developed and developing nations alike (e.g. Leitch, 2006). Given the higher number of socially advantaged young people who have traditionally entered university then, which in many developed nations has effectively been at saturation point, any expansion in numbers of higher education students must be achieved by broadening the social base of the undergraduate population, or ‘widening participation’ as it is usually known.

The so-called ‘widening participation agenda’ has been driven by the twin objectives of social justice for the individual and greater economic prosperity for the wider society, objectives that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Political rhetoric and media discourse have supported and reinforced these notions, and government policy in the developed world has, at least until relatively recently in the last half century or so, sought to ensure the expansion of higher education (e.g. Dearing, 1997; Robbins, 1963). At the heart of this policy is the need to reach out to people from social groups not traditionally associated with university study (Milburn, 2009; National Audit Office [NAO], 2002). This social justice project continues to be supported by recent national and international initiatives since the financial crash of 2008. The 2011 UK Government White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*, (BIS, 2011) for instance, suggested that ‘... widening participation for students of all backgrounds remains a key strategic objective for all higher education institutions’. Whilst in Europe, the position is also similar, the *Bucharest Communiqué* (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2012) suggesting that ‘(T)he student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations’. Readers of this journal will have their own interpretations of what such laudable declarations may mean in practice (e.g. see Holford’s article in this issue) and that will vary from not just regional, national or continental perspectives, but also in terms of other ‘demographic’ factors impacting upon groups of individuals, including gender, ethnicity, dis/ability, social class, religion, sexuality, rural/urban locality and, perhaps most pertinently in the pages of *IJLE*, age.

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The objective of increasing numbers experiencing university education has been achieved in many countries and this expansion continues apace. The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's* (OECD) September 2014 publication *Education at a Glance* (OECD, 2014) demonstrates how higher education has recently expanded significantly within that body which represents the majority of the world's most economically developed nations. Across the 34 OECD countries, which range from relatively modest economies such as Luxemburg, Slovenia and Iceland, to the economic powerhouses of Germany, Japan and the USA, some 32% of the 25–64 age group held a degree in 2012. This figure had grown from just 22% at the turn of the millennium. The numbers for the younger adult group are predictably greater still, with 40% holding degrees, a figure which is increasing annually in most of the nations involved. And let us not forget that the OECD data excludes significant 'BRIC'¹ rising economic superpowers, notably China and India, which have also undergone massive expansions in the numbers of their (predominantly young) citizens studying at university both at home and abroad.

This expansion of numbers experiencing universities inevitably comes at a significant cost to the nations and people involved. The OECD report highlights how during the 2000–2011 period, the average level of GDP expenditure committed to tertiary education rose from 1.3 to 1.6%, although this average inevitably masks local differences across the 34 nations. The additional monies spent were not just to facilitate the expansion of student numbers, but also to increase the spending per student. Even during the 2008–2011 period which was characterized by the global economic downturn, average expenditure per student rose by 2.5% across the OECD, though this again masks local inequalities—with 11 of the 34 nations actually reducing the figure as national exchequers struggle to meet the enhanced cost of public provision of higher education. Some of those cutting the public investment in universities shifted the cost to private individuals, for instance through tuition fees as in most of the UK; indeed, as the OECD's Dirk van Damme highlighted, the public contribution to the cost of universities fell from over 75% in 2000 to below 70% in 2011 (van Damme, 2014).

In addition to the anticipated expense of expanding university education, there are also unforeseen implications of this expansion, including higher levels of graduate unemployment, 'credential inflation', whereby jobs require ever-increasing levels of qualifications from applicants, and the diminishing salary premium for graduates. van Damme's (2014) analysis of the OECD data referred to the latter two phenomena as 'relative over-schooling', and suggests countries as disparate as Canada, Israel, Estonia and Japan could suffer from this in the near future. However, in an era of neoliberal economics, transnational corporations, globalization and reduced barriers to trade and migration, any such issues now become an international concern. The work of authors including Phil Brown and various colleagues (e.g. Brown, 2003; Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011; Brown & Tannock, 2009), for instance, highlights how the explosion of higher education across the world has also led to changes in graduate recruitment markets, with competition for the truly elite graduate roles becoming an increasingly globalized one. Transnational 'blue chip' companies with bases across the world recruit graduates on an international basis from 'top' universities from far and wide. For a more detailed recent discussion of this topic, see also Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013).

Meanwhile, at a local or national level, there is continued evidence of traditional inequalities of graduate outcomes in terms of who gets which jobs, with the various reports from the Milburn Commission being to the fore in the UK, (e.g. Milburn, 2009, 2012, 2014). In the most recent of these, UK Prime Minister David Cameron suggested that 'You only have to look at the make-up of the high levels of parliament, the judiciary, the army, the media. It's not as diverse; there's not as much social mobility as there needs to be' (2014, p. 7). The irony of this of course being that David Cameron himself was educated at Britain's most elite school (Eton College) and university (Oxford), and that he's in a position to appoint people to many of the 'top jobs', notably those in the UK Parliament. The *Education at a Glance* report demonstrates how wider access to higher education and social mobility are not the same thing, with the UK leading most OECD counterparts in terms of university participation rates, but still painfully lagging behind in terms of graduate career outcomes.

It has long been a charge on the political right that state interference in the university admissions processes is something akin to 'social engineering'. In the extended review of a book on the history of Australia's University of Western Sydney in this journal, Chris Duke suggested that, for the university in question, 'Growth in student numbers is seen as a fall in quality rather than a triumph for a people's university'. This can be extended to universities more widely, especially those seeking to join or remain in the group of global elite institutions. And it is from such institutions that the people holding the most-powerful roles are drawn. The *Elitist Britain* study (Milburn, 2014) demonstrated how, for instance, nearly half of those born into families in the top quartile of earners' group remain there, whilst only about one in seven children born into families whose income level is in the lowest quartile end up in the best-paid group. In most highly paid, high-status graduate careers, the differences are stark in terms of the type of university those occupying such offices in Britain attended. Some 75% of senior judges, 59% of Cabinet Ministers, 50% of diplomats and even 47% of national newspaper columnists went to either Oxford or Cambridge universities, compared to significantly <1% of the population as a whole. It is a far from meritocratic society despite the claims of some politicians and sections of the media to the contrary. The notion of a 'glass ceiling', an invisible barrier preventing those from disadvantaged social groups reaching the upper echelons of society is well known. However, that of the 'glass floor' (Waller, 2011) explaining the strategies by which those at the top ensure they pass on their advantages to their children are perhaps less familiar. As the *Elitist Britain* report suggests, it is the universities' ongoing role in maintaining these damaging inequalities that are themselves a form of social engineering, but one we rarely hear trumpeted in the media, who are often quick to condemn efforts to tackle social inequality.

The issue of just *who* enjoys access to *which* university and the employment outcomes of graduates from different institutions remain central to the question of social mobility and must also be tackled. It is no longer enough to expand the number of university places, nor to broaden the social base of the undergraduate population, as laudable as these aspirations may be; we must look at who goes where in terms of both universities and careers upon graduation as the Milburn reports do. The notion of altering the 'free market' in university admissions, for instance trying to compensate for the educational advantages

purchased and enjoyed by the 7% or so of young people attending independent fee-paying UK schools in terms of university entrance could be addressed by contextual offers in the grades required for admission. These might include, for instance, comparing a given student's attainment with the average for their school peers to recognize the inequality of opportunity that exists.

The target for the top universities in countries around the world should not be to perpetuate long-standing social inequalities, but to challenge and overcome them. Why do the 'best' universities have first choice of the 'best' students? Why not take on academically lower performing younger people (and their older peers), who have nonetheless demonstrated the capacity to benefit from university study, and turn them into the best graduates? Being able to perform such 'academic alchemy' would indeed be a demonstration of merit and go some way to tackling wider social inequalities that riddle developed and underdeveloped nations alike.

Note

1. An acronym used to refer to Brazil, Russia, India and China.

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