Degrees of Injustice: Social Class Inequalities in University Admissions, Experiences and Outcomes

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Introduction

As Waller et al. (2014: 701) noted, in the UK and beyond ‘a university education has long been seen as the gateway to upward social mobility for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds’, and as a way of reproducing social advantage for the wealthy. The number of young people from the highest socio-economic groups entering university in the UK has effectively been at saturation point for several decades since the Robbins Report (CHE, 1963) and subsequent growth of higher education (HE) from the late 1960s onwards. As a consequence, the expansion in youth participation rates from around 15% in the mid-1980s (Chowdry et al., 2010) to something like three times that currently (Department for Business, Information and Skills [BIS] 2015) has been achieved by broadening the social base of the undergraduate population in terms of both social class and ethnic diversity. That said, this ‘broadening’ still leaves significant inequalities (as this edited collection outlines), and also much of it can be accounted for by the changing class composition of the UK in the last 50 or more years.

Meanwhile, a growing body of evidence exists which illustrates the continuation of unequal graduate outcomes in terms of employment trajectories in the UK (e.g. Milburn Commission, 2014). Internationally, the OECD’s (2014) Education at a Glance report recently demonstrated how wider access to higher education and social mobility are not the same thing. Whilst the UK leads most OECD counterparts in terms of university participation rates, the country is still painfully lagging behind in terms of graduate career outcomes. 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. 2009; 2012; 2014; 2016). In one of these reports, then 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’ (2014:7).

The issue of just who enjoys access to which university, and the experiences and outcomes of graduates from different institutions remain central to questions of social justice, notably
higher education’s contribution to social mobility and to the reproduction of social inequality. It is no longer enough to simply expand the number of university places – ‘more bums on seats’, 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 university study and post-graduation careers – i.e. ‘whose bum on which seat?’, and understand just how these processes happen so they can be challenged. We must also understand how peoples’ experiences of both coming to and being at university contribute to ongoing social inequalities. (See Bathmaker et al., (2016) and Savage et al., (2015) for recent detailed discussions of this topic).

In organising this book we employ a structure first used by Phillip Brown in his 1987 book *Schooling Ordinary Kids*. Brown’s study was, as the book title suggests, one of young people at school. However, the three phases in the lifecycle of an undergraduate – admission to university (‘getting in’), progression through university (‘getting on’) and graduation from university (‘getting out’) offer a coherent way of organising otherwise disparate chapters into clear sections.

This introduction chapter now offers an overview of the content of the three sections – there are four chapters in each – and these are followed by a concluding chapter from Prof David James, Executive Editor of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, who offers a view of where the preceding contributions take us, and where both research and reforms might go next in a context of increasing marketization.

**Section I Getting In: Higher Education access and participation**

Section one considers the practices, processes and issues students encounter whilst applying to and entering higher education institutions (HEIs). The four chapters focus on ‘getting in’ to university, in slightly different ways, but all take social class as a starting point and as a key element in terms of participation.

The section begins with Coulson et al.’s chapter which explores issues around non-traditional students’ experiences of HE. In this chapter these authors reflect on their own experiences as social agents who, willingly or not, have participated in the reproduction of class in HE

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1 Other monographs or edited collections have adopted a similar approach to structuring the content, for instance, see also Haselgrove (1994) and Bathmaker et al. (2016).
institutions. As Access Summer School Co-ordinators, Admissions Tutors, Examinations Officers and former students, they combine diverse observations in a case study which looks at examples of the underlying processes and social mechanisms governing university access and shaping student experiences and academic success. Using a discourse analytic approach, Coulson et al. illustrate how social class is separated from personal identity and biography in admissions procedures, restricting the relevance of socio-economic background to questions of access, not experience. Two case studies are then used to explore how expectations of the ‘Student Experience’, particularly around friendships, impact on academic performance in ways that consolidate class identities. The first case study looks at the experiences of a widening participation summer school scheme and the second focuses on interview data from a small sample of Third Year undergraduates. The unsettling evidence presented in the chapter points to the importance of the small, taken-for-granted social mechanisms which sustain social class differences in, and through, HE.

In chapter two Busher and James take a closer look at non-traditional mature students’ experience of higher education. Their focus is on how non-traditional mature students on Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses have to struggle to assert themselves by entering university and escaping from precarious economic circumstances despite the social and policy contexts they face and their prior experiences of learning, which were often unsuccessful. This chapter draws on a study that was carried out in seven further education colleges in a region of England. It used mixed-methods, collecting questionnaire data from over 500 AHE students and interview data from seven student focus groups that ran in each college three times during the academic year as well as from 20 AHE tutors across all colleges. Busher and James clearly show that students’ struggles with their socio-economic contexts helped them to identify and express what they wanted to achieve and find ways of achieving it. Their experiences on the AHE courses and their relationships with tutors, fellow students, family and friends helped them to change their identities as learners and as people during their time as AHE students.

In chapter three Boliver explores the widening access debated further by focusing on the participation rates of those from more and less socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, in relation to highly selective universities. Boliver finds that historically, policy makers and researchers have focused on the barriers to wider access which occur prior to the point of application to university, but increasingly the impact of HE admissions decision-
making is coming under closer scrutiny. This chapter explores empirically the extent to which admission to highly selective, highly prestigious Russell Group universities can be said to be meritocratic, in the narrow sense of determined by applicants’ prior attainment alone. It also advances the case for a greater shift towards meritocratic admissions policies in the broader sense, via the widespread use of contextualised admissions’ policies which take due account of the often challenging circumstances in which people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve the qualifications required to go to university.

In the final chapter of this section, Harrison’s focus turns to the more traditional university attendees, young people aged 18-21. Harrison suggests that while a huge change in the funding of higher education from the public to the private sphere has occurred over the past twenty years, this has not coincided with a drop in the demand for HE. This demand has especially increased among working class communities and others with limited economic resources. Counterintuitively, as the cost of higher education has risen it is higher socio-economic groups that have tended to see falls in demand, while low income students have proved largely immune to financial incentives (e.g. bursaries and fee waivers) designed to influence their choices. This chapter begins by employing quantitative data from official datasets to chart and explore classed patterns in participation. Harrison then turns to draw on related statistical data around qualifications and unemployment to build a more rounded picture of the choices facing young people and other prospective students and suggest some alternative hypotheses for why participation patterns have not followed the predictions made.

**Section II Getting On: Classed experiences of Higher Education**

Section two considers how a students’ classed background affects their experience of fitting in and ‘getting on’ at university. It involves four studies of different groups of students experiencing life at various types of higher education institutions, and how their experiences are framed by their family backgrounds.

The section begins with Diane Reay’s chapter looking at the experiences of 17 working class students at two very different types of English universities, one of which is a financially struggling new university (‘Northern’), and the other a wealthy university in the prestigious Russell Group (‘Southern’). Reay employed both questionnaire and interview data in exploring a more nuanced notion of student identity than is often presented in the literature. She employs theoretical tools from a range of authors including Bourdieu and Lave and
Matt Cheeseman’s chapter is an ethnographic study for which he immersed himself into the lifestyles of students to explore their role in Sheffield’s night time economy. Cheeseman undertook follow-up interviews with some of the students whose lives he was studying, and had regular meetings with them as well. Unusually for a study of this nature, he also interviewed people in a range of other related roles associated with the night time economy, including police officers, university porters and staff from the pubs and clubs that the students attended. He looked at how universities themselves marketed a picture of student life as hedonistic, and the role that the residential tradition and spaces of HE supports the *habitus* of student life. Cheeseman found that the colonising of the night time economy by the geographically mobile middle class undergraduate body, resulted in the students distancing themselves from the less socially valuable or ‘authentic’ stay-at-home university experience of some working class undergraduates. As well as employing theories form Bourdieu to understand his findings, Cheeseman utilises theories of ‘performance’ from Goffman, and of contemporary relationships from Giddens, Beck and Bauman to explore the nature of friendships at universities. He also explores the inter-university rivalry and associated class stereotyping through an analysis of public performance and social rituals.

The third chapter in the section is from Berenice Scandone, and focuses on the experience of a group of 21 British born young women of Bangladeshi heritage, and their attempts to ‘fit in’ at a number of different universities. The young women, all of whom lived with their families in London and attended universities in the city, came from both working and middle
class backgrounds. Scandone illustrates how perceptions and experiences of fitting in are informed by class, ethnicity, gender and religion, and she also highlights how these social inequalities are produced and reproduced through higher education. The young working class Bangladeshi women in the study who attended more prestigious universities were frequently ‘othered’ by, and from, the majority of students by their ethnicity and their religion as well as by their social class. However, such processes and experiences aided the development of a high degree of resilience and self-reliance for a number of the cohort. Meanwhile, those at less prestigious institutions felt more ‘at ease’ at university, and that they fitted in better. However, Scandone highlights how both symbolic violence and their self-perception of cultural capital in particular impacted on the students’ experiences of fitting in and getting on in higher education. Religion played a role too – the fact that cultural mores meant they lived ‘at home’ and did not consume alcohol, means the focus of the chapter is in a sense the diametric opposite of most of those in Cheeseman’s study. There was evidence of a social mix at the universities where Scandone’s students studied, but very little social mixing.

In chapter eight, the final one of the section, Vicky Mountford looks at how class differences are ‘performed’ through the choice of clothing brands by working and middle class students in the north east of England. Mountford explores the lived experiences of ‘fitting in’ and ‘standing out’ at two contrasting universities in one UK city, and how clothing brands and the associated lifestyles are seen as signifiers of classed identities, and what particular types of student normativities may consist of. She employed in-depth one-to-one interviews and focus groups with a total of 27 young British undergraduates across the two institutions. Mountford highlights how ‘different brands work as prestigious objects’ in the two institutions, and that the significance of the branded clothing is relative to the wearer and the context. The chapter highlights the surveillance and policing of representation of individual identities, and the processes by which value is attributed to items of clothing through their association with brand identities and the students’ own classed values. The economic capital of the better off upper middle class ‘rah’ students was converted to the cultural capital represented by particular fashion brands and ‘looks’. This process was often further denied to the generally working class students who needed to go straight to work after their day at university, a fact which itself had framed the type of clothing they could wear on campus.

**Section III Getting Out: Social class and graduate destinations**
Section three considers the processes involved in ‘getting out’ of university, which we argue is fundamental to understanding the fuller picture of inequality in Higher Education…

The section begins with Tholen and Brown’s chapter, providing an overview of the issue of ‘employability’, which has recently become a key focus for HEIs within the UK, not least of all because they are now measured according to their success in graduate destinations. The chapter questions whether the delivery of ‘employability’ skills by universities can overcome or compensate for the reality of the congested graduate labour market. The myth of graduate employability and the exaggeration of claims to a ‘graduate premium’ on earnings are explored through a review of the evidence. The authors argue that the employability agenda is bound to fail because it is ultimately flawed, and because the problems of the graduate labour market are structural, rather than as a result of a graduate skills’ deficit.

In chapter 10, Hunt and Scott consider the issue of paid and unpaid internships for creative and communications graduates several years after the point of graduation. They explore the role social class plays in early labour market opportunities. Drawing on data from a survey of 616 creative and communications graduates from a range of UK Higher Education Institutions the study post-university labour market experiences, including participation in internships. The findings show that class background does not play a significant role in the acquisition of an unpaid internship in these industries. However, it crucially impacts on access to paid internships, which in turn are more likely than unpaid internships to lead to a graduate job. Graduates from working-class background are less likely to gain a paid internship even when educational performance is taken into account, putting them in a disadvantageous position compared to their middle class peers.

Chapter 11 deals with an often neglected area in graduate destinations, that of further study. With a steep increase in postgraduate participation there is a need to consider whether there are inequalities in access at this level. Wakeling’s research draws on three large scale UK datasets to investigate the relationship between social class and postgraduate study in Britain. He reveals that there is social class disadvantage at this level and although this is not as stark as at undergraduate level it is compounded by the type of institution attended for initial degree. The chapter further shows that working-class educational disadvantage in postgraduate access increases when further study is delayed beyond first-degree graduation. The findings highlight both the continued educational advantage that is conferred by
undergraduate access to elite institutions and to the advantage of the privileged classes in gaining access to postgraduate study regardless of their attainment.

The final empirical chapter provides an in depth qualitative analysis of the complex labour market transitions of graduates from the Paired Peers longitudinal project. In a congested labour market both working-class and middle-class graduates face great competition for jobs. This chapter shows that, by and large, the 2013 graduates from this study faced these challenges with both apprehension and hope but that the pathways to employment were influenced by class, gender and type of HE institution attended. The chapter provides insightful reflections on the processes involved in entering desired employment post-graduation, including continuing education, seeking a work-life balance, seeking high status employment, and having the capacity to wait for the right opportunities. By exploring the details of these processes the gender dimension of aspiration and job seeking practices are strongly revealed.

Together these chapters bring together a range of research and insights into the various stages of Higher Educational experience and practice - through a focus on access, participation, and outcomes. They shed light on the landscape of social class inequalities within the UK Higher Education system, a picture that remains deeply etched despite continued policy efforts within the sector to narrow the gaps between the privileged and the disadvantaged. In what follows we see evidence of a system that continues to support and reproduce class-based inequalities regardless of policy initiatives that are supposed to alleviate disadvantage (such as OFFA access agreements). For those of us working within the sector, whether as teachers, practitioners or researchers, with a commitment to social justice, it is difficult to see how significant changes can be made to this picture without a drastic reworking of the canvass. The layering of soft policy initiatives (at the level of government and at the institutional level) on top of a selective system that separates the classes on the basis of supposed meritocratic processes is akin to ‘putting a Band Aid on a bullet hole’ (to paraphrase Taylor Swift). Higher Education receives less criticism about academic selection than any other area of the UK education system. There is a tacit acceptance of the ‘necessity’ of academic selection at this level and a lack of critique of the hierarchical system that ensues from these and other elitist practices. This book presents a range of rich data that provides evidence for the need for changes across the Higher Educational sector if equality is indeed a genuine goal.
References


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