

# **Who Goes to University? And why it matters**

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## **Abstract**

Educational performance is affected by individual characteristics – gender, social class and ethnic group. This matters because performance at school is a major determinant of opportunities in adult life. In this lecture I want to look at what we understand about these issues and how they impact on access to Higher Education. Being educated to degree level benefits individuals, and society, in a range of ways. I want to unpack what this University (and others like it) does to provide access for a broad range of students, and some imperatives for the future in the brave new world of September 2012.

## **Introduction**

Soon after I started here at the University as Vice-Chancellor, I gave a lecture 'Gender, Performance and

Learning Style' and it was, in effect, my inaugural lecture. This evening I want to talk about issues around access to University, and it is, in effect, my valedictory lecture. To me it seems like a seamless progression in topic – much of my early career research was on assessment, and teaching and learning in primary schools. Gender was linked with learning style; social class and ethnic background were, we came to understand, linked with performance. These things matter, because performance at school is a major determinant of opportunities in adult life.

When I was doing my research in the 1990s gender differences were an issue because it was becoming clear that, overall, girls were performing better than boys at both GCSE and A level. This was causing concern and a range of reasons was given from, too many female teachers in primary schools, feminisation of the curriculum, too much coursework in public exams. A meeting with Michele Cohen – a historian of French teaching – made me realise that this is anything but a recent phenomenon. Her work shows that various HMI reports and education commissions have been articulating girls' better performance since 1868.

“Comparing girls and boys, the Assistant Commissioners found, again and again, evidence that girls outperformed boys. Assistant Commissioner Bryce, for example, found that they were better in reading, spelling, geography and history.” Though girls were found less ‘quick and accurate in arithmetic, algebra and Euclid’, when they had been prepared for the same maths exam as boys, they did better than the boys.

(Taunton Commission 1868: I 549,500)

Assessing girls’ capacity to follow the same curriculum as boys, the assistant commissioners noted in particular girls’ greater eagerness to learn and the female mind’s tendency to develop more rapidly than the male’s (vol. V 952). (This soon became ground for concern not about how boys would keep up with the girls, but about the danger of overstrain for girls.)

‘Girls come to you to learn; boys have to be driven’ noted one of the witnesses to the Schools Inquiry Commission.

(Taunton Commission 1868: V 952, Q. 11874)

...the boy's 'breezy attitude to life.... successfully secures him from morbid concentration on the acquisition of knowledge'. By contrast the girl 'broods over her tasks and reproaches herself for her imperfections'.

(Grant and Hodgson, 1913, p. 272)

'.... it is well known that most boys, especially in the period of adolescence, have a habit of "healthy idleness"'

(Board of Education 1923: 120)

(Michele Cohen, 1996)

## **Current Patterns of Performance**

Looking at the most recent data on the percentage of the student cohort aged 19 which is qualified to Level 3 (the equivalent of 2 A levels, all qualifications included) the minimum entry requirement for HE, we find the gender differences persist, but pale into insignificance compared with differences due to poverty/deprivation.

**Table 1. Percentage of 19 year old cohort qualified to Level 3 by characteristics**

	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>
Males	46.0%	48.8%
Females	57.5%	59.8%
gap	11.5	10.9
No FSM	51.2%	53.6%
FSM	26.7%	29.4%
gap	24.6	24.2
Deprivation Index		
25% most deprived area	32.1%	35.2%
25% least deprived area	64.8%	60.7%
gap	32.7	31.6

(from DfE/BIS SFR 31/3/11)

There are various statistical analyses of performance available by gender and social class. But whichever you

use the 'gap' is steady at around 10 points for gender and between 25 and 30 for poverty/deprivation

The picture for participation by ethnic group is complex.

**Table 2. Percentage of 19 year old cohort qualified to Level 3 by ethnic group**

Ethnic group	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>
White	46.9	49.4
Indian	72.0	74.5
Pakistani	50.4	53.2
Bangladeshi	51.4	55.5
Chinese	79.8	81.5
Afro Caribbean	43.9	49.8
African	56.2	59.9
Overall	48%	50.5%

(from DfE /BIS SFR 31/3/11)

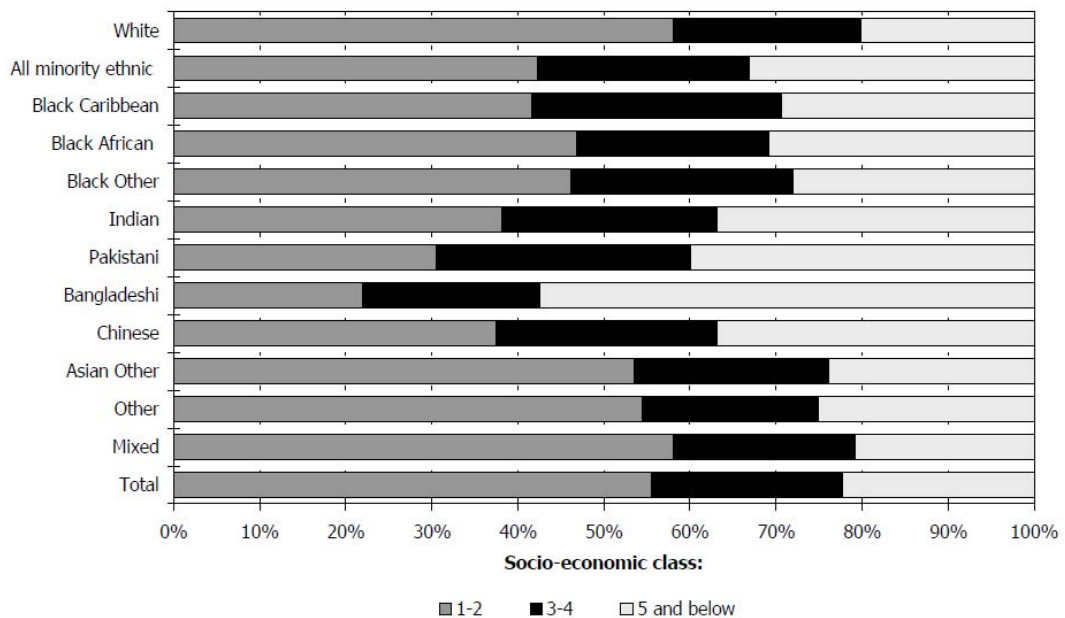
At school level, if we look at gender, ethnic group and social class all together it is clear that white working class boys and Afro Caribbean boys do least well.

In 2002 ethnic minority students made up 16% of the total English HE population (in HE and HE in FE). This is nearly twice the minority ethnic proportion in the overall population of England (just over 9%). So ethnic minority students are more likely to go to HE.

As Figure 1 shows there are significant variations in the socio-economic profile of minority ethnic and white accepted applicants to degree courses.

**Figure 1**

**Figure 3.2: Socio-economic profile of minority ethnic and White accepted applicants to degree courses, 2002 year of entry**



*Source: UCAS*

(in Connor et al 2004)

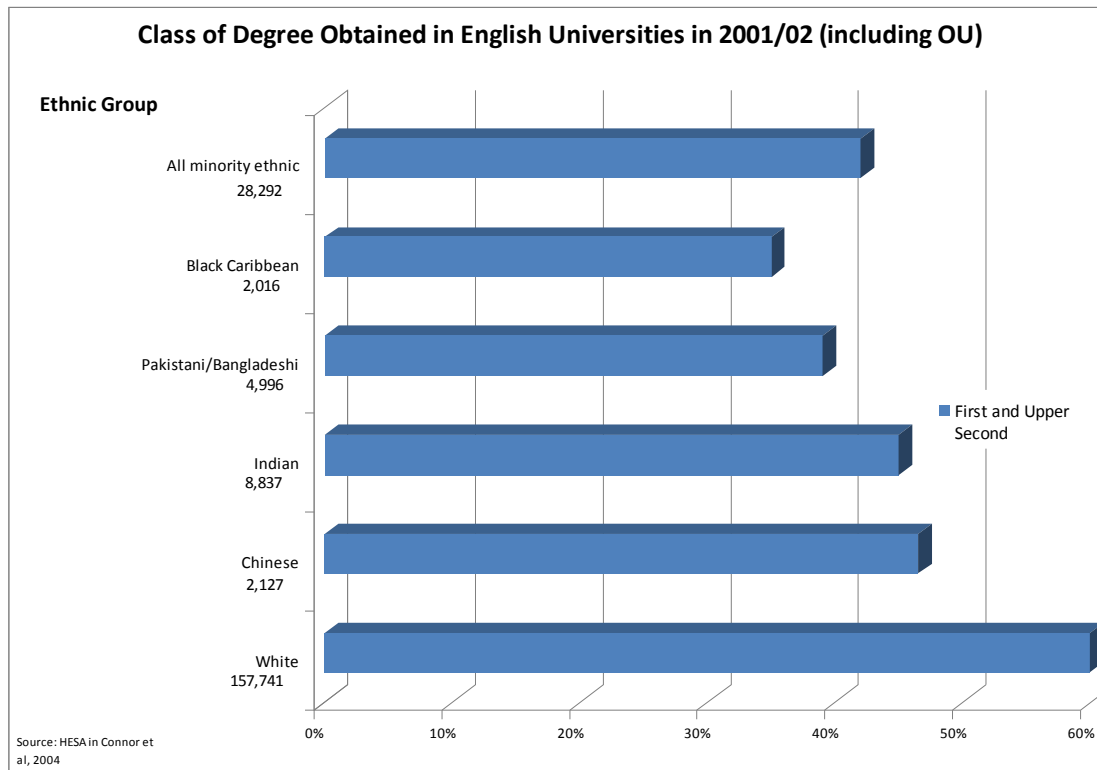
- Overall, minority ethnic students on full-time degree courses are more likely to be the children of parents from lower socio-economic classes, compared with all students. This would indicate that they are doing better on average in accessing HE than their socio-economic class would suggest.

(Connor et al 2004)

This may also indicate that the standard social class categories do not work so well across the range of ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, class of degree, i.e. output, also has an ethnic gradient.

**Figure 2**

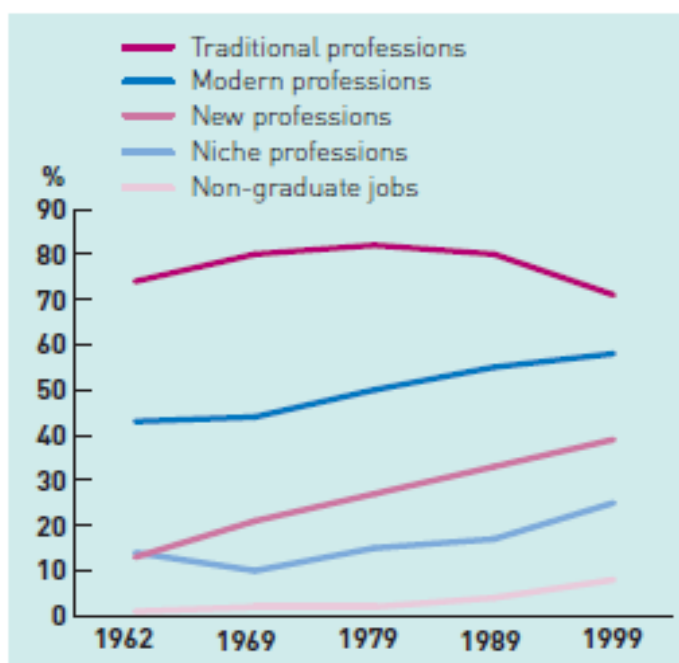


Sixty percent of white students get a first or upper second degree, while none of the other ethnic groups reach this level.

We don't understand fully why ethnic minority students achieve less well at university – but it's a national picture. We have a research project (with Coventry University) funded by the HEA to try to understand the picture better.

## Why does going to university matter?

**First**, it is the major (often now the only) access route to the professions. And being in a profession gives one (broadly) status, career progression, opportunities for professional development, and more autonomy.



**Figure 9a:** Percentage of jobs requiring a degree by professional type<sup>42</sup>

(7/2009 Panel on Fair Access to the Professions)

On the back of this data one of the recommendations of the Milburn report on Fair Access to the Professions is that

each profession should establish clear progression routes from vocational training.

**Second**, graduates, on average, have life-time earnings of £160k more than individuals with two A Levels who do not get a degree. [ There has been no erosion of the salary differential over 15 years despite an increase in supply of graduates].

**And** graduates

- are more likely to be employed
- are more likely to return to employment after unemployment/economic inactivity
- provide considerable benefit to the taxpayer (through higher and rising tax receipts) (PWC/Universities UK 2007)

Will this continue as graduates have to pay off high levels of debt?

But, Graduates are also:

- healthier
- contribute more to their communities and voluntary organisations
- less likely to be involved in crime

- more likely to pass on their social capital to their children

(Brown, CIHE, 2009)

### **Widening Participation in Higher Education**

When I moved out of the – rather elite – Institute of Education to Kingston University I became aware for the first time of widening participation. The Vice-Chancellor at the time – my boss - Sir Peter Scott was an avid proponent of open and fair access to university. The issue at Kingston was not so much gender or social class but ethnic background, and by the time I left the ethnic minority population at Kingston University was over 40% - significantly higher than it was here at Wolverhampton.

The Higher Education Funding Council has for many years had a policy position of supporting widening participation.

‘It has been argued that HE is already fully accessible to those with the requisite entry qualifications regardless of background, and indeed, various studies have demonstrated that there are no biases in admissions processes in this regard. **Yet, such arguments tend to ignore that the opportunities to acquire such**

**qualifications at the required level are not evenly distributed across different groups in society.'**

(Draft consultation on future widening participation priorities, 24/9/2010)

As HEFCE points out, over the last ten years the overall participation rate has increased, as has that for students from the lowest participation areas. This increased participation rate builds on improved attainment at GCSE, as well as the availability of significantly more student number places.

'Participation has both increased and widened over the last 15 years and widened significantly over the last 5 years.' 24/9/10

However, the **gaps** between advantaged or less advantaged groups remain and little progress has been made in closing them. With a reduction in the number of places available in future, because of the cost of the fees and loans subsidy to the Treasury, the future participation rate of less advantaged groups is of particular concern.

And, HEFCE puts its money where its mouth is – this institution, which has one of the highest percentages of students from the lowest social class backgrounds, from ‘low participation neighbourhoods’, and from families with no previous background of higher education, receives around £7m-8m a year to support the education of these students on top of our standard grant. This funding recognises the extra resource needed to support the learning of these students (who by and large will come in with lower entry grades) and ensure their retention.

What will happen to this funding stream in the brave new world of September 2012?

### **Where does the University of Wolverhampton fit in this story?**

Put baldly, this University, and others like it, do the ‘heavy lifting’ of widening access to higher education and thereby social mobility. If we did not exist thousands of people with lower qualifications, and/or from lower social class families/backgrounds would not have become graduates, would not have entered the professions, and gained the other advantages I have described. That would be a loss

to them, and to the region – which so desperately needs more people with higher level skills.

Around 50% of our young undergraduate entrants come from the lowest four social classes, compared with around 30% nationally, while just over 20% come from low participation neighbourhoods, compared with around 10% nationally. (HESA 2011)

The number of ethnic minority students has increased from 27.4% in 05/06 to 32.3% in 09/10.

### **What have we been doing?**

So do we provide Mickey Mouse degrees and produce graduates who can't get a job? No, around 90% of our graduates each year go on to further study or employment. The unemployment rate for our June 2010 graduates 6 months on was 7.5% compared with the national average of 11% - and that in an area of high unemployment.

We have brokered and supported Black Country Challenge to raise GCSE performance in the sub region.

We have encouraged progression to higher education among scores of school students.

We are sponsoring three Academies to support, and raise, aspirations and achievement.

We have worked with FE colleges to offer pre degree and degree courses.

Over the last five years our completion and retention rates have improved, while employability has stayed high despite the recession.

And along the way, we have improved our research performance (a raison d'être of a university) and become an outstanding Knowledge Transfer player.

### **So what does the future hold?**

The coalition government of course has a problem. The Conservatives believe that too many students are going to

university, while the Lib Dems are committed to social mobility. Social mobility is hard to achieve without higher levels of qualifications.

At the recent launch of the Coalition's Social Mobility Strategy in London I was chatting with a senior staff member of one of the big 3 accountancy firms. He said that they took on 1300 graduates a year, even in the recession. When I asked what sort of universities they came from the response was 'A 2.1 from a Russell Group university, plus the Duke of Edinburgh award, and they've usually rowed the Atlantic twice.' So, I asked whether they might widen this in the interests of social mobility and the response was that they might accept a 2.1 from another type of university but they would still have to have the Duke of Edinburgh award, and probably have rowed the Atlantic once.

Then there is 'fair access' – getting students with high A level grades to the 'top' universities. This is a fine aim and the Russell Group universities are excellent institutions. But we are talking here about tiny numbers.

The University of Wolverhampton had 275 students in 2007/8 who had had Free School Meals at school, while

Oxford and Cambridge had 40 between them. And we are not the highest – Manchester Metropolitan and the University of Westminster – both had 425.

No, the key role in widening participation is of universities like ours who take much larger numbers of these students. In particular those mature learners who are taking a second chance, who don't have high A level grades, and need to live at home.

I am not trying to say that everyone should go to university – far from it. Yes, we need more apprenticeships and vocational routes into the professions. But I do believe that people who have the ability and motivation should be given the opportunity to benefit from Higher Education.

The percentage of adults holding a degree has increased to 32% in the UK, but is still low compared with the US at 40%, or 48% in Canada. The world's great emerging economic nations of China and India are investing heavily in HE and sending their students abroad if their needs cannot be met in country. The Chinese believe, of course, that 'Any man can become a sage' through diligence and application. While here in Britain we will have a struggle just to maintain HE numbers.

What the Coalition seems to be missing in the move to charge students the full cost of fees, is that getting a degree is not just an individual good. It benefits society and the economy. Do people train to be nurses and teachers in order to become rich and successful? No – it's because they are good, worthwhile careers that help others.

So, number 1 this University (and its mission) must survive.

We must:

- Make clear what the benefits of getting a degree are, along with an honest account of the costs.
- Give students an excellent experience with high completion rates.
- Become much more of a broker in moving our students/graduates into employment (via internships, incubation facilities, placements etc)

- Lobby for funding for more HE numbers so we don't cut off the opportunity for less advantaged families.

But most importantly,

We must hold our nerve about the importance of this University and the value of what we do. We have been here for 150 years doing good work and I am sure we will be here for another 150.

### **Post Script**

In 1992 I gave my Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association. It was in the middle of what turned out to be a ten year period of a hostile policy climate for education and educational research. My concern then was our reduced ability to conduct research which might have unwelcome policy outcomes, and indeed to be able to publish politically inconvenient findings.

I am sure that social scientists here today feel embattled in a similar way.

But let me give you a little test. This is a 'cloze' reading test of the sort that was popular twenty years ago at primary level:

I have just got back from a conference in New York on \_\_\_\_\_ associated with social deprivation. We may have our problems in this country, but the Americans, as is customary, have far bigger ones.

And all this, in spite of the most expensive \_\_\_\_\_ system in the world. Two years ago in *The Guardian* I asked, why should we be seeking to imitate the American system? The question remains unanswered.

It is my belief that until they adopt, and we restore, a \_\_\_\_\_ system grounded in equity, and not one which allows market forces to dictate a shallow entrepreneurism, \_\_\_\_\_ problems will not be tackled in the most economic and efficient way. Good \_\_\_\_\_ cannot be achieved for the rich or the poor, unless there is good \_\_\_\_\_ for all.

The missing word is healthcare.

This is an extract from a letter from the then Chief Medical Officer, Sir Douglas Black, to the Guardian in 1992, and I was making the point then that it was not only Education that was being re-formed. And that remains true today.

About four years ago, I was walking through the Harrison Learning Centre entrance to the campus, probably to get a coffee, and I walked past a rather rowdy group of students. I slowed down to listen to what was going on.

One young woman was telling the others about a lecture she had been to. She said, 'I have just been to the most fantastic lecture – it was on the Enlightenment. It was mind blowing.' I just thought that was wonderful.

The Enlightenment was that period in our history when philosophers began to critique the idea that there was a natural order of things, god-given and not to be questioned.

The hope of the Modern age was that, through tying progress to reason, and bringing systematic human

intervention to social institutions, more democratic and equitable social arrangements would be created. The natural order was created by man and not only could, but should, be questioned.

Immanuel Kant was, I gather, responsible for calling this period the Enlightenment and coined the motto 'Dare to Think'. Have courage to use your own reason, he urged. That is exactly what the lecture had got this young woman to do, and it encapsulates what we aim to do – to get people to think.

In my 1992 lecture I also talked about the Enlightenment because I was trying to put post modernism into context.

Never easy and I'm not a philosopher, by the way....as Dr Johnson's friend Edwardson said,

"I have tried all my life to be a philosopher, but cheerfulness keeps breaking in."

I made the point then that the catechism that I learnt as a girl at school committed me to the statement that I as an individual "shall do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me." (Book of Common Prayer)

Even then as a girl I felt this was limiting. In my 1992 lecture I described it as 'a profoundly non-Enlightenment project'.

We owe our future students an Enlightenment project, not one where people know their place and stay there.

That is the challenge for the future. That is the challenge I hand on to you. If any university can do it, this one can.

Thank you and Good Luck.

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