



Justice, Privilege and College Access

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How does (elite) higher education benefit participants?

Increases competitiveness for desirable positions and the benefits attached to them by:
*developing capabilities and
credentialling*

Provides enjoyable college experience

Facilitates the intrinsic value of learning

Three principles for higher education access

Excellence: academic merit should be the sole standard of access

(desert, tradition)

Fair equality of opportunity: access mechanisms (admissions, funding, outreach, information) should correct for background social inequalities

Social benefit: access should depend on what the students are likely to do with the education they get

Problems with excellence

Merit is socially constructed

Merit is (at least mostly) undeserved

The external reward schedule is unjust

Targeting merit may be socially wasteful

Problems with fair equality of opportunity

FEO is indeterminate

FEO is problematic

Access to higher education is far too late to compensate fully for background inequalities

And universities have a poor record(UK)

1940: 8.4% of social classes I,II, IIIa participated, but only 1.5% of social classes IIIb, IV, V

1950: 18.2% and 2.7%

1995: 45% and 15.1%

Ratio of UK upper class to UK lower class entrants to university: 3:1

Children in private schools: 6%

Oxbridge domestic undergraduates from private schools: 50%

even in the US elite sector

Percentage of students in 146 elite colleges from top quartile of socioeconomic status: 74%

Percentage from bottom quartile: 3%

Percentage in next 256 colleges from top quartile: 46%

Percentage from bottom quartile: 7%

(Carnevale and Rose, "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions")

even in the US altogether

	Decile (of origin)		Quartile (of origin)	
	bottom	top	bottom	top
Share of cohort graduating HS	56.8	97.7	64.1	96.1
Share attending college	19.5	78.2	21.6	71.2
Share graduating college	6.3	49.1	5.6	42.1

(Robert Haveman and Kathryn Wilson, “Economic Inequality in College Access, Matriculation, and Graduation” using Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) data)

The cynical view

“Critics of higher education, and to some extent higher education itself, have misunderstood the core business of these institutions. Whereas most believe the task of universities and colleges is to supply quality educations at reasonable prices, their real business is to sell competitive advantage at necessarily high prices”.

-- Zemsky, Wegner, Massy, Remaking the American University

The very cynical, but likely accurate view

We admit children from relatively privileged backgrounds and prepare them to occupy relatively privileged positions in society, increasing their chances in the competition for unequally distributed social resources, using public subsidies inaccessible to children who do not attend college.

The view from Oxford Today

“The past few months have seen the University attacked by the ruling coalition. In one instance, concerning the admission of black students, the Prime Minister got his facts badly wrong. On another occasion, a minister suggested that extra places at UK universities might be paid for in cash.

Both instances appear to target Oxford's recruitment of students solely on the basis of merit. The University needs to stand firm on this matter. It cannot be expected to mend inequalities that are deeply rooted in society.

Equally, however, its long commitment to meritocracy has already led the way to a wonderfully diverse, richly globalised student body.”

The difference principle

DP: Inequalities in the distribution of social goods should be arranged to the maximum benefit of the least advantaged.

(John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971)

Social benefit

Directs attention to third parties – especially non-participants in HE – and to what participants in HE learn and how they, subsequently, use what they learn.

Some social benefit criteria

How much will the admitted class likely to learn from the institution and each other?

Are its members likely to become:

bankers, or nurses?

marketing executives or social work administrators?

philosophy professors or primary teachers?

private school primary teachers or urban state school primary teachers?

Strict and lax versions

Strict: Social benefit is understood in terms of maximising the institution's contribution to benefitting the least advantaged, given circumstantial constraints

Lax: Social benefit is understood in terms of increasing contribution to benefitting those less advantaged than those who attend

Whom and what might an *admissions* system affect?

Composition of the college student body

Behaviour of secondary schools

Values of prospective students

Values of admitted students

Values of non-admitted students

Behaviour of parents of prospective students



Unhelpful concluding comment

Justice in education is complex; excellence, fair opportunity and social benefit each have a role

Meritocracy should not be the main aim (or even much of an aim)

The highest achievers are not always those who will learn the most

Institutions (elite higher education) complicit in social closure have obligations to optimise their contribution to the social commonwealth.