



# ACCESS TO SUCCESS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

A Curate's Egg?

Edited by **Stuart Billingham**



**GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

ACCESS TO SUCCESS  
AND SOCIAL MOBILITY  
THROUGH HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2018

Editorial matter and selection © the Editor, individual chapters  
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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78754-110-8 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-78743-836-1 (E-ISBN)

ISBN: 978-1-78743-992-4 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## FOREWORD

The story of widening participation and promoting social mobility to and through higher education (HE), so powerfully illustrated in this volume, has a proud history, where leaders and players have come together at different times and in different places to forge new ways of engaging social change. In charting our successes, partial successes and unfinished business, it is salutary to look back on half a century of what we popularly term ‘struggle’ but is in practice a now normalised way of aligning people, places and political action through creative educational strategies that aspire to promote progress for the many not the few.

My personal story begins in 1973 as a ‘mature’<sup>1</sup> student and parent at the University of Surrey – this, the re-housed and re-badged Battersea Polytechnic Institute, which began life in 1891, offering science and technology to the ‘poorer inhabitants’ of London. Six years later, I moved to my first, short-term contract-researcher post in the Polytechnics world – at the famous Polytechnic of North London (PNL). This drew on the combined and powerful legacies of the Northern Polytechnic Institute (1896), ‘promoting the technical skill, general knowledge, health and wellbeing of young men and

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1 The now-familiar descriptor ‘mature’ was neither articulated, nor conceptually understood in the early 1970s.

women'; and the North Western Polytechnic focussing on social sciences, humanities and arts.

In the 1990s, I progressed to Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) with its traditions firmly rooted in regional development. The Sheffield School of Design was founded in 1843 'to provide skilled designers to support Britain's industries'. Finally, in 1999, I joined the College of Ripon and York St John as Principal. The College would become York St John University, but would never neglect its nineteenth century mission, shaped by the Dioceses of York and of Ripon, to construct a cadre of teachers imbued with moral rectitude and high levels of learning, who would educate and create opportunity for the children of the poor.

Importantly, these staging posts in my career suggest that the twenty-first century universities are, literally, well placed to build on firm foundations, translating Victorian educational legacies into a contemporary vision for an inclusive society. The appetite for this challenge, however, clearly varies across institutions. Arguably, it is through leadership at all levels that we realise the vision of HE's founding fathers.

The 1980s will not be recalled as a period in which public services were best placed to secure the public benefit demanded by their communities. The phrase 'rolling back of the welfare state' became a *leit motif* for savage financial cuts to local services; marketisation; strangely, centralisation of control; and a lurch towards a form of harsh modernisation experienced by many as a negation of past contributions to community wellbeing. The PNL was not isolated from such a change.

Notwithstanding the dismantling of the Greater London Council (GLC), we did initially retain the unquestioning support of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). A particular lead by ILEA, then the HE funder for inner London Polytechnics, was sponsoring access through a generous

budgetary allocation to the five HEIs for ‘affirmative action funding’.<sup>2</sup> This annual budget line was not hypothecated for particular activities – but it was, of course, accountable. At the PNL, this enabled working with our neighbouring Boroughs, particularly Islington, Haringey and Hackney, to address the aspirations of newer and diverse communities – African Caribbean, South Asian and Irish.

Accordingly, partnership and cross-agency working became the new norm and early innovation produced the first important tranche of social workers and teachers who reflected the experiences and ambitions of their own communities – supported by introductory Access programmes. As the fate of ILEA echoed that of the GLC, Polytechnics typically resolved (both within management and through the trade unions) to protect the ever-widening concept and practices of access and Access.

At the PNL, I was supported within Natfhe (the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, now UCU) to take on roles both within the Union and on the Board of Governors – which provided developmental opportunities both for me and for the PNL. As the Polytechnics Secretary for Natfhe’s Inner London Regional Assembly, I was able to share and shape policy developments for part-time study in HE; for the establishment of research programmes in Polytechnics to underpin an excellent student experience (then a radical idea); and for the protection of budgets to acknowledge the needs and contribution of new kinds of learners (see also, e.g., Marr & Butcher in this volume, Chapter 4).

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2 Following 1970s, equalities legislation, a tangible expression of political desire (by some) for a fairer society was the introduction of affirmative action strategies to support marginalised groups – as opposed to positive discrimination.

Looking at specific activity, it is not insignificant that the acclaimed access/Access work of the redoubtable Maggie Woodrow was located, at this time, at the PNL. Both a sponsor of well founded initiatives and a myth buster for inappropriate attempts to short-circuit necessary investments in social inclusivity, Maggie's early evaluation of two-year accelerated degrees aimed at mature and/or non-traditional students identified the significant barriers, both for students and HEIs, in achieving successful outcomes. As learning about widening participation started to accumulate, one important legacy from that optimistic moment when change seemed possible is the Irish Studies Centre at London Metropolitan University.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, this small but influential exemplar of public benefit celebrated with the Irish Ambassador and the Leader of the Labour Party (among other eminent guests) a proud 30-year history, which has attracted global recognition. In 1986, as the PNL Director of Research, I secured support to establish the first University-level Centre to acknowledge and explore further, through teaching, research and community partnerships, the specific experiences (contributions and conflicts) of the Irish in Britain. This was not just through glorious literature, drama and history but as a force for productive economic and social change in the widest sense. This serves as a powerful signal of how scholarly excellence, university relevance and community benefit can come together when underpinned by the values and commitment of an institution to its continuing access mission (see also, e.g., Gaskell & Dunn, Chapter 12; Newton & Rowe, Chapter 10; Thomas in this volume, Chapter 14).

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3 In 2002, the former PNL, subsequently University of North London, merged with London Guildhall University to become London Metropolitan University.

One of the lessons learned concerning effective leadership is to network, become visible and secure a positioning where you are noticed! This is not an endorsement of individual, aggressive self-promotion, but more a recognition that active pursuit of significant goals requires significant action.

Therefore, the access leadership journey does typically involve joining up different roles and relationships and placing access explicitly at the heart of them. When my junior research role at the PNL shifted to whole institution Director of Research in 1986, it enabled cross-faculty conversations and developments, always asserting excellence with relevance, and learning how that might be interpreted across disciplines and delivered with an access orientation. This, in turn, led to an invitation to join the Postgraduate Awards Panel of the Economic and Social Research Council. In addition, my concern with teaching excellence (and a new role as Faculty Dean) led to a position on the Council for National Academic Awards and a role as quality auditor with the Higher Education Quality Council – all places in which to confront access dilemmas. The mid-1990s, however, brought a new, political, clarion-call to pursue ‘education, education, education...’<sup>4</sup>

Helpfully, this post-dated the Polytechnics’ shift of title to be named universities and secure greater autonomy. This enabled a new and positive dialogue for policy makers and practitioners alongside their partners in the communities they served. Arriving at SHU as Assistant Principal in 1993, I encountered a city and sub-region in transition. The language of ‘industrial upheaval’ fails to capture the deep decimation of traditional skill-based employment and community lifestyle around coal and steel. The urgent need to re-skill redundant workers and their children, and to meet the expectations of

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4 The pre-election promise of New Labour.

the women who had developed new confidence and ambition as they supported their families through painful challenge and change, was high on the 'to-do' list of my new colleagues and collaborators in diverse outreach activities.

Access can appear in many guises. The Sheffield Hallam that I joined was both an instigator and an early adopter of much innovation. A particular leadership style espoused by the Vice Chancellor, John Stoddart, was 'to enable great people to do great things'. In other words, he facilitated through his senior team, his Board and his external connectivity, a permissive environment where participation in HE by the wider community was of primacy. The curriculum was designed in ways that would facilitate entry to the emerging economy of new technologies and cultural industries, yet also respected traditional strengths and excellence as in materials science and urban studies; it also supported public services. Entry to and success within the University was encouraged and enabled through:

- outreach in schools and further education;
- curriculum structure offering flexible study (an early example of combined studies that really worked for learners);
- the visibility and popularity of town and gown lectures; and
- the creation of a student-friendly, one-stop-shop support infrastructure building confidence and achievement across the student 'life-cycle': from 'getting in'; to 'getting through'; towards 'getting out' and getting a good graduate job; and ultimately getting 'back in' for further study.

The 1990s were especially important for highlighting gender difference in HE and exploring diverse ways to challenge

barriers, and improve opportunities for women. SHU was one of the first Polytechnics/Universities to introduce and achieve scholarly recognition for Women's Studies – both within the curriculum and as an area of research. In the City of Sheffield, a motivational initiative called 'If I can, you can', brought together women leaders for mutual support and, importantly, to go into schools and support teachers and pupils.<sup>5</sup> Talks with classes of girls (and often boys) generated unexpected dialogue around what counts as being a leader and how do I get there! Moreover, of course, it was in the 1990s that – Through the Glass Ceiling – led by the exceptional Chris King addressed the question 'Why are there so few women leaders in our universities'. Hence, the 'clarion call' from political leaders found traction with SHU leaders and beyond. And whilst a 50% participation rate in HE continues to underpin the thought leadership of many government agencies today, the new millennium would bring new challenges requiring new vigilance and new resolution.

At this propitious moment, in mid-1999, I joined the College of Ripon and York St John as Principal. Tellingly, a fellow (*sic*) Principal observed, warmly, whilst congratulating me: 'Isn't it great to be running your own train set?' Therefore, this was the pivotal moment when I might draw upon the influences and experiences of peers and mentors, projects and partnerships across my former university lives – and yet remember that male imagery and metaphor had not yielded up their grip with respect to ideas of leading change.

The decade began for me as a tale of two proud Cathedral cities and two modest and unassuming Colleges of fading Victorian grandeur, Colleges that must merge into one in order to

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5 Visits usually occurred as part of what was then tortuously badged, 'PSHE' – Personal, Social and Health Education, now more commonly timetabled 'citizenship education'.



protect the values and mission of access for the wider community. In particular, there was a longstanding commitment that was acknowledged tacitly, and would be nurtured further, to open our doors (literally and metaphorically) to those for whom HE had no self-evident attraction or relevance. Moreover, rationalisation to a single site in York would facilitate change and growth. York with its world-class heritage, great connectivity, glorious countryside and an exceptional tourist draw was chosen as the future base for investment. Yet, this beautiful city also concealed significant pockets of deprivation; and across the hinterland, an emerging imperative towards rural and coastal access was highlighted by voices from the soon-to-become York St John College, subsequently, University (see also, e.g. Gaskell & Dunn, Chapter 12; Noble & Grant in this volume, Chapter 5).

As a small college with a big agenda, partnership (both of necessity and by choice) was at the heart of the forward strategy – led by a senior team seriously skilled and experienced in the policy and practice of enabling social inclusion, including the Editor of this text! The City of York, in dialogue, supported plans for a fit-for-purpose campus regeneration to support new learning styles and engage new learners. National HE agencies such as the Leadership Foundation (LFHE) and the Higher Education Academy embraced and utilised our expertise, both on their Boards but also as their trainers and facilitators – and as early entrants into the esteemed hall of National Teaching Fellows. During the passage of the Higher Education Act 2004, it was helpful to have the College Principal positioned as Chair of what is now GuildHE<sup>6</sup> – working with Ministers to defend the best outcomes for the

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6 The Standing Conference of Principals, founded in the 1970s, was one of two formal representative bodies for HE in the UK alongside what is now UUK. In 2006, it changed its name to GuildHE.

widest range of future students as the new and controversial tuition fees regime came into play. Importantly, this was mitigated, in part, by the introduction of a new regulatory force in the form of the Office for Fair Access.

Other partnerships at subject level, at professional level and around research interests ensured that the engagement of scholars from across the college contributed to the wider HE debates. For example, about what counts as widening opportunities for a particular subject, for the neighbourhood or city, and for the college/university. Importantly, this was not the task of a single heroic leader but one that was shared. One unifying theme which elicited different views and provoked different responses was our identity as a Church Foundation and its relevance for the social inclusivity agenda. A group of some 12 Church Colleges would meet under the banner of what came to be known as the Cathedrals Group in HE. For College leaders, this served as both a challenge and support group, exploring diverse policy and practice issues – including the boundaries of Church connectivity and the impact this might have on access missions, as subscribed to by all. In different geographies and different social contexts, it became clear that Christian values had underpinned significant thought leadership around access.

At York St John, the identification of faith advisers from seven world religions (seven women and seven men) contributed creatively to the understanding and celebration of diverse cultures for both a significantly white student community and a significantly white city. And it enabled successful outreach initiatives via workshops in West Yorkshire where Muslim mothers looked with confidence to York St John as a safe and respectful environment for their daughters. Yet, perhaps the most influential collaboration, shaped and sustained in large part by York St John, has been Higher York. This was the UK's second lifelong learning partnership and

is still active today. Yet, it began very nervously with a secret meeting in a basement bar in York between three CEOs: from University of York, York FE College and York St John.

There was anxiety about status and excellence, takeover/merger, standards dilution, mission distraction and loss of face – unspoken sentiments that might be attributed to academic communities rather than to the leaders themselves. In reality, the leaders had an emerging high ambition for a seamless education system available for York and North Yorkshire to offer students a comprehensive curriculum from (e.g.) Archaeology to Zoology – with scenic routes linking options and levels across institutions, as students journey towards their academic goals.

One measure of success is the swift move from project-plotting to consultation and effective bidding; then through to ‘delivery’ – with an enhanced membership to include the local agricultural college. A measure of impact is the naming and full incorporation of the work of Higher York into the City of York Local Strategic Plan where the virtues of widening access to HE for economic, social and cultural gain are explicitly articulated. And a measure of the positioning of York St John in this mix is the routine reference by civic leaders to ‘our two universities’ – where the particular access role of York St John is seen to complement the global reputation for research excellence of the University of York.

Meanwhile, in 2008, an exciting opportunity to forge new pathways and new thinking beyond York was secured through the Vice-Chancellor’s membership of the HEFCE board and associated chairing of its Widening Access and Participation Committee. Notwithstanding the seemingly benign climate for HE engendered by the commitment to ‘education, education, education’, the economic clouds of financial failure were hovering over part-publically funded bodies as the decade was drawing to a close. Leading social inclusivity

through uncertainty and turbulence became the watchword for success. Performance indicators for the opening of doors were threatened and, as my retirement beckoned, supporting the ambitions of the next generation of leaders became my key goal. As my Leadership Consultancy business cards arrived and the home office took shape, my retiree diary for 2010 started to reflect my continuing passion for challenge and change towards widening participation and social mobility. A social justice imperative links with my Trustee roles at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in Health and in the Arts. I have enjoyed developing for the LFHE their well-regarded Governor Development Programme. Moreover, I returned as an enthusiastic Trustee to the regenerating London Metropolitan University. Clearly, in diverse geographies and sectors, there exist multiple opportunities for shaping change.

This narrative demonstrates that leadership across different time frames can manifest itself in different places and in different ways – and that leadership qualities do not depend on status or title. In the case of widening participation, this is evidenced across this series of essays. We see that political and historical contexts help to shape the particular form that leading change will follow: whether operating under the radar of reactionary forces, or riding with the tide of good intentions! But an effective leader, in their turn, will seek to reinvent and shape that environment, for the better. Influence on social inclusivity is best exerted through positioning and partnerships where common interests unite governments, local or national, and where shared goals with arms-length-agencies, labour movement leaders, students, employers, fellow providers of FHE and many more can exert a multiplier effect on successful outcomes.

In conclusion, I observe that the ‘Curate’s Egg’ of the title might be said to mask a sustained and often heroic series of endeavours that make a reality of access to success and social

mobility through engagement with a rich and diverse community of protagonists. Inevitably, impact remains patchy (as signalled by the ‘Curate’s Egg’ metaphor) and in part unproven but, most encouragingly, the appetite to address unfinished business is illustrated powerfully throughout this volume.

Professor Dianne Willcocks, CBE, DL

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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**Dr Nick Rowe** is Associate Professor at York St John University and Director of ‘Converge’ – an initiative offering higher educational opportunities to people who use mental health services, which he founded in 2008 and now being adopted by the Universities in Leeds and Newcastle. Nick trained as a psychiatric nurse and dramatherapist. Since the launch of Converge he has written extensively about the model and the lessons to be learned from it.

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