

# Access in the UK: Whence, Where and Whither?

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## Preamble

The story of access in Britain is complex and long-running. The period depends on how wide or narrow a frame is given to the notion of access. Some sense of a broader social and educational history helps in understanding the past of 'access' and its particular British lineage, and also in considering what, if any, new form the continuing intent might take in future.

Some qualifiers help in asking 'whence, where and whither', especially questions about *access to what and for what*. Does access mean access to all parts of the post-binary system of higher education? Or may it in practice mean access only to certain institutions or programmes, within an emergent 'neo-binary' structure? There may or may not be known and navigable pathways between sub-systems and sectors of the mass / universal higher / tertiary system. Or, as the Queensland Minister for Education suggested at an OECD Conference in Melbourne in September 2002, are bridges so designed as to be good only for long-distance jumpers, because key centre spans are missing? Access may be only to certain discipline fields, or only to certain styles of qualification, especially with the recent establishment of the two-year Foundation Degree. In looking to a more differentiated and variegated system or systems of tertiary, higher and lifelong education, we must ask how 'access' is to be understood within this.

## Whence access?

From the first years of last century a relatively free-standing extramural tradition was created as an alternative, socially purposive higher liberal education for the excluded. This was Albert Mansbridge's answer to Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Workers' Education Association and Joint Tutorial Classes on the Oxford model were intended for social and political action as well as being own intrinsically rewarding educative end. Such study sat right outside the credit system. The tradition drifted into more recreational and individualistic liberal adult education, away from the politically sharp-edged social sciences and mainly into the creative arts, literature and other forms of self-development, from about the mid-twentieth century

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Understanding 'access' to mean access to degrees of award-giving universities or more broadly into award-giving higher education, adds to a very specific UK access story the struggles and stages whereby women entered universities and could graduate; and the geographical extension and multiplication of degree-giving institutions via university colleges, regraded technical institutions, and new foundations, through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The contested foundation of the Open University at the end of the sixties is

another relevant part of this story. Earlier generations of higher education institutions were separated as between a general/liberal/scholarly and prestigious university tradition and the more applied in a system which came to be called binary. In the sixties new universities expanded the then acknowledged university system, while the existing higher vocational sector was kept separate by Crosland, the two parts merging only a decade ago. Ironically, the absorption of polytechnics to become universities, while celebrated at the time, is now looked on with less favour, to the point that some who advocate access and equity also see merging the two sub-sectors as an error destructive to the standing and morale of the 'new universities' sub-sector.

Such a narrative is quite separate from what in Britain is normally called *access and the access movement*, but it is part of the picture of access in the sense of catering for mainly older and working class 'non-traditional' and it was assumed 'non-academic' students, including especially those who were part-time and work-based. The polytechnics were often vigorous 'access institutions' for young students, school drop-outs, those seeking a different culture, place and style for study; and for older students as well, though not described explicitly in access terms. As wrong-side-of-the tracks institutions, they were well suited to fitting students born to serve technically rather than to command, with the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to play their useful place in the life and work of an industrial society.

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Recent decades saw a widening of access to institutions with the names of universities in a rapidly expanding system – many more and many much bigger universities, with a smaller tail of colleges of higher education and a rising minority of higher education work taking place in further education colleges as well. 'Universities' thus absorbed much though not all of the higher education sector, as it transformed from an elite to a mass system. Much of the technical training tradition was absorbed within nominally unitary higher education as the emergent knowledge society demanded more and more graduate preparations for the workplace.

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Meanwhile recognition of the distinction between *more and wider* access as a central policy proposition developed in the eighties. *Access*, in the specific sense of kinds of courses and partnerships, became the 'third pathway' into higher education. It was created essentially for older 'second-chance' 'non-traditional' aspirants. The Access Federation movement and system was nurtured by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), and designed and developed mainly for these older second chance students. Central to this development was redefinition of the nature and role of further education colleges. These extended both out into adult/community and up into higher education, creating new linkages and then formalised pathways and modes of continuity and progression of opportunity. The CNAA kite-marking and validation systems gave credence to (mainly local) pathway partnerships, seeking to meet both quality audit and quality enhancement requirements.

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Alongside this the school system partly adapted to support more diversity of pathways, despite the demise of a confident comprehensive public secondary school system. Alternative examinations were devised to increase retention and raise attainment, widening the base for participation in higher education, and especially seeking to

enhance opportunity for non-middle-class and non-white students - first the CSE, then alternative advanced levels, GNVQs etc. Meanwhile as an offset the private school sector got larger and stronger. Selectivity was protected by this and other means.

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Welfare State egalitarianism was swept aside first by the radicalism of Margaret Thatcher and then by the Smilesian Third Way educational strategies of New Labour. Access acquired a harder face and a keener economic edge. Throughout this period the social, moral and civic bases of the access movement were largely displaced by economic arguments about the waste of human resource capital. Many advocates of wider access argued the economic (waste of human capital) case, adopting neo-liberal language as a means of staying in the policy debate.

Most recently, and partly influenced by new waves of economic and asylum-seeking immigration and other demographic trends, the language of social capital, social inclusion and social discourse has infiltrated policy thinking and begun to influence behaviour. Also the concept of lifelong learning reappeared, enjoying a massive surge in popularity during the nineties. It appears to be a policy proposition which has to be engaged with and refuses to go away, as happened in the late seventies.

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### **Where?**

Currently the access policy debate, now more commonly called widening participation, is dominated by '18/30' – the Blair policy commitment to raising to 50% the proportion of those benefiting from higher education in some way between the ages of eighteen and thirty. This is not identical to the age participation rate (APR). In practice however it is seen mainly as being about improving school-to-university articulation and pathways, and increasing the total numbers of young people in higher education. This may be achieved partly by altering the school curriculum and examination system, and more fundamentally by encouraging more people to think of going into higher education, and offering alternatives within it. Of these the Foundation Degree is the most obvious and probably successful thus far.

An increasing commitment to lifelong learning within policy-making across government sectors generally also favours a more comprehensive approach than hitherto. It directs the attention and responsibility of universities and the higher education system more broadly well back into the school system, sometimes to early years, with the potential to alter aspiration levels and engage families, localities, and their communities in the universalisation of higher education. So long as 'university is for other people' there will persist a need for distinct access policies and provision to ameliorate and compensate for 'mainstream' system failure.

If 18/30 is a modified and strengthened approach to raising the age participation rate, will it attract more people from socially excluded and disadvantaged categories and communities, or simply draw on a higher proportion of middle-class students from well-preparing schools? These may be performing in examination terms at or above the limit

of their true level of ability. Their motivation to work and complete in higher education may be weak. If so, this may add to an already perceived problem of rising drop-out and wastage. Seen thus, the backlash against enlarging the system and widening access ('dumbing down') may become more problematic. It should, however, be more pertinent to the 18/30 policy in general than if that policy is clearly applied to 'under-achieving' youngsters – those from 'poor schools' in deprived neighbourhoods with more unrealised potential.

The 18/30 policy now dominates and overshadows what has been the centrepiece of 'classic access' UK-style hitherto. Because of its all but exclusive emphasis on young adults, and effectively on the later school years, the new policy has alienated the broad adult education community by appearing to ignore the needs of those aged over thirty, and even, effectively, as it is being perceived, of those aged about twenty-five and over. It appears extraordinarily hard to adopt a fully comprehensive and general access strategy that considers the totality of lifelong learners. The new demography shows the need for this, but traditional economic and labour market thinking falls short of grasping the implications..

The research assessment exercise (RAE) along with financial exigency in the face of continuing growth of the sector has brought on the proposition that we are seeing, and may need, a new 'binary divide'. This poses again the old question 'access to what'? Speculation about the fate of low status, under-recruiting, 'access-type' universities sharpens the issue in terms of equity and the meaning of both university and higher education.

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As part of but also beyond 18/30, HEFCE seeks to stimulate wider participation, seen mainly in social class terms, by means of incentives for enrolling disadvantaged students. It sees its responsibilities as wider than school-leavers and young adults. The postcode premium is criticised as too inaccurate a surrogate, and for the way it works: 'dead-weighting' may mean simply moving existing 'postcode participants' around within the system mainly on the basis of institutional prestige, rather than increasing the total number. This has tended to accelerate the migration of 'new participants' from ex-polytechnic to Russell Group and other older universities, adding to institutional income inequality. A malevolent spiral is thus created.

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All this sharpens delicate and important questions about differentiation of institutional missions, role specialisation, status differential, and diversity in the whole of the higher and further education, or tertiary, system. Wealthier universities appear to be rewarded for not doing well in widening access, as well as for performing well in research and taking most of the research funds, while access proponents remain – quite properly - committed to widening access in Russell Group universities. From all angles diversity of mission is problematic.

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## Whither

At the kernel of the policy dilemma are system growth and diversification. Unless ways are found strongly to reward contributions other than research, and more specific than simply 'teaching excellence' as a surrogate for efficiently managed wealth, the solution to the dilemmas surrounding access, equity and status will remain elusive. Clarity is required as to meanings, and realism about what is hoped for. The British, and not only their politicians, are clever with words: there is an immediate word-game being played about the exact policy intent of 18/30. Outside that there is a more philosophical game about 'what makes higher 'higher''; and beyond that, clarification as to how many knowledge workers – and citizens – a sustainable UK knowledge economy needs, and how best to prepare them for an inclusive, balanced and sustainable society.

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Solutions may be sought through structural changes, such as regional higher education affiliations and systems modelled on California or Wisconsin lines, or through dual sector institutions such as are found in the Australian State of Victoria, taking care, however, to adapt our own versions and not crudely transplant overseas models. Confidently (re)connecting confident further education with higher, within a universal tertiary system, is essential, whatever the words and the modes. Connecting a formal, new-tertiary, education system with non-colonising support but full and fair recognition for extra-institutional learning in the community, home and workplace is also desirable, but harder still to understand and achieve.

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Serious social engineering, neither easy nor popular, is needed if class and other inequalities are to be addressed effectively. This appears improbable under the current Government. Compromising competitive meritocracy through a mixed but sharply hierarchical, expanded system is more probable, allowing larger numbers of talented and outstanding individuals to progress via scholarships, but not significantly *widening* participation. Moving to a differential top-up fee regime with some equity compensation payment will tend to reinforce the emergent status quo, while adding a protective meritocratic veneer.

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The future of further education, now located with the Learning and Skills Council, is vital. Further education in partnership with higher education as a growing user-friendly provider system may get pulled away from higher education. The traditional controversy over elite standards was reignited by the AS/A levels examinations fiasco in 2002. It is fuelled by a redundant 'education versus training' dichotomy which needs fully modernising in terms of the learning needs of lifelong knowledge workers. With this goes a need to rewrite the old debate about resisting academic drift. Ill-thought through exclusivist propositions apparently point to a contracted system of higher education, driving lower status universities and colleges out of *higher* and into a lower rather than a broad and generously all-encompassing *tertiary* arena. Another trimming rather than transformational possibility is to excise a small group of colleges of further education which already have significant numbers of higher education students, thereby creating yet another status 'sector' possibly alongside or integrated with the surviving non-university colleges of higher education.

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Looking further back, however, much as the old extramural equity tradition was rolled up and subsumed into the widening of higher education post-Robbins, it is possible that the tinkering and trimming approach to access will be overtaken in turn by a combination of the needs of the knowledge economy and society, lifelong learning for all, and the power of e-learning and the World Wide Web. This would represent the dawning of a third or mature phase of UK access – from extramural compensation, to fringe-dwellers building routeways into other people’s universities, to universal participation in a diversified and responsive tertiary-higher system which is more widely and socially *embedded* in its reach and modes, through all sectors of the learning society, be it at the computer, at work, in reflection or at play.

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