

# The Great British Education ‘Fraud’ of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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## Abstract

The role played by educational credentials in British labour market recruitment changed radically during the mid-twentieth century. Having higher or better credentials than others became a key determinant in selection for society’s best-paid jobs. The resulting race for them has had perverse effects. A large minority of graduates earn no more than non-graduates or are in jobs for which they are ‘overeducated’. In various ways, the incentive to ‘stay ahead’ has prompted large expenditures by families to improve the qualifications a child obtains at school, while there is also now huge demand for postgraduate qualifications. Not only is there resulting social waste but also social injustice; while education was understood previously as a means of breaking down barriers to social mobility, it now has the opposite effect. This article explores the causes of these developments and outlines briefly how a new centre-left agenda for education might be constructed.

**Keywords:** education, qualifications, graduates, over-education

IN HIS recent and much praised book, *Sapiens*, the historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that the agricultural revolution of 10,000 years ago was a fraud.<sup>1</sup> By a ‘fraud’ he does not mean a deliberate swindle perpetrated by identifiable people, as with the tailor responsible for the Emperor’s New Clothes. Rather, for Harari, the ‘fraud’ involved change initiated by humans that severely disadvantaged future generations of humankind, while providing some temporary advantages for the transitional generations. With such ‘fraud’, perceptions of the earlier transformation are subsequently sustained by widely held myths, beliefs and ideas that are false and misleading. In the case of the move away from human lives as hunter-gatherers, change also facilitated, necessitated and encouraged the development of less egalitarian social arrangements for humans. The central argument of this article is that there are important parallels between the ‘education revolution’—the change in the role education played in British society from the mid-twentieth century onwards—and the kind of ‘fraud’ Harari argues was perpetuated in the agricultural revolution. This has had major consequences for the politics of

both left and right, but especially for the centre-left.

From about the 1950s onwards there was a major shift in the operation of the British labour market. Previously educational credentials played a relatively small overall role in that market, although there were some careers for which having higher-level qualifications, or qualifications of a higher standard, did matter in recruitment. For both manual and non-manual jobs, hiring was usually undertaken on the basis of personal contacts, with those recruited usually having to meet a minimum standard of educational performance rather than to have better educational qualifications than any competitors.<sup>2</sup> The collapse of long-established apprenticeship systems in both the industrial sector and the professions were a major factor in the transformation. Entry to the more interesting and better-paid jobs came to depend on first acquiring educational credentials superior to those of others. For anyone in a good position today to obtain higher qualifications there is a strong incentive to do so; the massive rise in demand for university places, and more recently for postgraduate qualifications, is

perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this.

The myths surrounding the long-term change include the following: that there is an economic 'need' for all to be more highly educated; that after secondary schooling higher-level qualifications result in higher incomes for most of those who have them; that there is a good fit between the skills needed in the labour market and those acquired through Britain's education system; and that the fight for credentials constitutes a form of equal opportunity which can facilitate social mobility. None of these myths, nor various others surrounding the 'education revolution', has much basis in fact, yet education policy continues to be debated as if they were revealed truths.

A useful starting point for uncovering this is the continuing debate over university tuition fees. The decision by the Coalition government in 2010 to allow universities to charge fees of up to £9,000 per year was an example of neoliberal economic policy; in future most of the cost of a university education would be borne by the supposed beneficiaries themselves, the students. Over the course of their working lives they would repay loans taken out while they were students. Within two years of its introduction in 2012 it was apparent that under the new fee regime, a large minority of the loans (probably 43 per cent or even more) would never be repaid. A cost primarily borne earlier by current taxpayers had partly been transferred to future generations of taxpayers. The Labour party's response was to propose reducing the maximum fee to £6,000 while compensating the loss of university income by, in effect, taking the money from the pension pots of high-income earners. Although Labour's policy can be defended as being fairer than the Coalition's, it was announced without any attention being given to the problem underlying the fee issue. Why was the repayment rate predicted to be so low? One explanation might have been that it was based on the poor performance of the economy since 2008. In fact, that has merely made a bad situation somewhat worse. Another explanation might be that the income level at which graduates would start loan repayments was set too high, but in reality the loan repayment threshold was a

modest one; it was not just high earners who faced repaying. The main cause of the predicted low rate of repayment was that during the course of their working lives a large minority of graduates will earn relatively little. In other words, from the perspective of the labour market there are simply far too many graduates. Politically, though, this is a taboo subject.

Although usually ignored, official data confirm the excess. Graduates in their twenties typically earn about the same as non-graduates, though, of course, a minority are paid considerably more, while other graduates are earning less than the average person in their age cohort. For many there is no 'graduate premium'. Getting round this somewhat unfortunate fact has produced some bizarre, if elementary, statistical juggling. Thus in 2011 the Office for National Statistics pronounced publicly that the earnings gap between graduates and non-graduates increased between the ages of 30 and 51, when it peaked for graduates.<sup>3</sup> Of course fiftysomething graduates today earn more; aged 51 in 2011, they would have graduated in 1981 or 1982, when there were far fewer graduates with whom to compete for the best-paid jobs. Those who went to university in the present century, when it has been government policy to increase the proportion of graduates in the workforce, were attempting to obtain employment when the number of well-paid jobs had not increased at anything like the rate that the graduate population had. In this respect the whole thrust of education policy, especially under New Labour, was at odds with the development of the British labour market.

This becomes still more evident when examining the proportion of graduates who have jobs officially designated as 'non-graduate'. Between 2001 and 2013 nearly one third of employed graduates who had been out of full-time education for more than five years were employed in such roles.<sup>4</sup> Even in this period's best year for recent graduates (2002), 28 per cent of them—those who took a degree in 1997—were not doing jobs of a kind for which a degree was supposedly needed; by 2013 34 per cent of the comparable age cohort were in that situation. Certainly economic conditions have an impact on the fit between university qualifications

and jobs, especially for those just leaving university; in 2013, with an unemployment rate of 7 per cent, only 53 per cent of recent graduates were in graduate-entry jobs, compared with 63 per cent when the unemployment rate was 2 per cent. However, the really telling point is just how few of the supposed young elite, graduates whose undergraduate studies had been completed five years earlier, were in the graduate labour market when the national economy was strong. Most such graduates will never enter it.

It is important to be clear about the precise nature of the argument being made here, so that any charge that the author is a crypto-Luddite can be dismissed immediately. Unquestionably, the demand for the skills that universities help their students develop has increased significantly since the mid-twentieth century, and that demand will continue to grow. It is also the case that those entering careers in the middle range of skills today typically have to display higher levels than their counterparts in the 1950s in order for these jobs to be done well. That does not entail, however, that those entrants need education of a largely academic form undertaken during a three or four-year period at a university. (Estate agency, where graduate entry has become far more common, is an obvious example.) There are cheaper and shorter forms of education and training that could be supplied to those most likely to enter many of the careers that now constitute the norm for large numbers of contemporary graduates. Furthermore, the complaints by some employers that surface periodically—that they are either unable to fill some posts because of the absence of suitably qualified applicants, or that the latter lack some of the skills that they would want—are scarcely surprising.<sup>5</sup> Universities can, and do, develop a range of skills, but there are a lot of skills that for the most part they cannot develop at all or can do so only to a limited degree—leadership, teamwork, ability to take initiative and so on.

The lack of fit between the supply of and demand for graduate labour is not just a twenty-first-century phenomenon. As early as the 1980s only two thirds of recent graduates were occupying jobs where they were not 'overeducated'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, and significantly,

this data differs from ONS data in that it derives from skills actually needed for a job and not from a degree being required for entry. To put the matter rather crudely, large amounts of money have been invested in educating a large minority of young people to levels beyond those essential for their jobs without them being equipped with the full range of skills that employers seek. At face value this seems a peculiar way of managing social resources. The key to understanding why this happened is how the collapse of the earlier apprenticeship-based regime occurred.

While employers had to be sure that prospective employees had reached an appropriate minimum level of education for any particular position, before the 1960s additional academic qualifications were either irrelevant, or indeed might count against the person. 'Trainees', whether apprentices in the professions or in skilled manual jobs, would usually receive some further formal, part-time education, as well as specific training within their firms for the types of skill that they were to master. Few careers required the kinds of academic skills developed in university courses, so that most graduates had been restricted to teaching because a degree counted for so little elsewhere. The first stage of the transformation began between 1945 and 1965 with a growing, and valid, belief among public policy-makers that the skills associated with university education would benefit industry, commerce and the professions. Among the policy initiatives in those years were the introduction in 1956 of Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) and the Robbins report of 1963 which proposed a major expansion of the university sector. As with the initial transition made by hunter-gatherers to part-time agriculture, there were clear short-term benefits. No one then foresaw that during later decades academic study would become the dominating factor affecting entry, directly and indirectly, to the entire labour market.

There were three reasons why it would. First, much of the old apprenticeship regime simply dissolved, partly because of de-industrialization and partly because, among the professions and would-be professions, it became clear that there might be advantages

for 'professionals' themselves in creating a career structure for which higher-level academic credentials were demanded before entry. Second, the various institutions that could have contributed to post-apprenticeship systems, ones potentially involving close cooperation between employers and educational bodies but outside traditional academic education, could not deliver. The CATs were made universities after 1966. The next attempt, in 1965, was to create a major new educational sector (the polytechnics) initially based on technology, but with links to industry; it failed both from limited funding and from any special incentives for adolescents to study for careers that would follow directly from studying these subjects. Then there were the sandwich courses. They were supposed to provide a new interaction of education and training for specific careers. Lack of long-term financial support and prioritisation by either government or firms were factors prompting failure for an idea that had come to prominence during the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> All these inadequate initiatives left a void between the unskilled labour force and those who would enter the labour market with a degree. Third, university qualifications had always carried high status, even though most graduates had not been in especially well-paid careers. That status meant that it was ultimately the university route that could fill the void, a development that was partly formalized when, in 1992, the polytechnics were merged into the university system. Although even now it is only a minority of the young who ever obtain a degree, it is the universities that play a disproportionately large role in shaping individual and institutional behaviour for entry into the labour market. The effects of this are quite extraordinary.

'Going to uni' remains an ambition for adolescents, and parents continue to be proud of their children who do go. This attitude persists despite the fact that many will be no financially better off, will subsequently do the kinds of jobs that used to be undertaken by non-graduates and will have acquired skills that are often either in excess of those needed to perform their jobs or are largely irrelevant to them. Only those who have been to universities with the highest reputations—primarily for their research—can expect to have a serious chance of

entering the most interesting and best-paid careers. This point is of major significance, and marks a clear difference between the present era and the initial period of university expansion in the 1960s. Leaving aside continuing social snobbery about Oxbridge, it mattered little from which university a degree had been awarded; thus, for those careers for which a 2.1 degree was deemed necessary, a 2.1 from Leeds had the same value as one from, say, Sussex. Moreover, the distribution of degrees among the classes resembled a bell-shaped curve. Most students received a 2.2, and typically only about 20 per cent obtained 2.1s, and perhaps 5–8 per cent achieved Firsts; in turn, these last two classes were counterbalanced by about one fifth of all degrees being third-class or lower. This meant that for those employers who could expect to attract, and then appoint, the highest achieving students, the pool of suitable applicants was relatively small and they could have confidence, when evaluating them, that similar standards had been used in different universities. From the early 1990s this changed radically. Universities came under pressure to ensure that their graduates were as competitive as possible in the job market, and the control over standards previously exercised through, for example, external examiners weakened. There was an explosion in the proportion of degrees awarded in the upper range, with the 2.2 becoming uncommon and the third-class nearly extinct. This was a world in which many employers now demanded a 2.1 degree, but with it having become so widespread, other means had to be found of reducing large pools of applicants to manageable proportions.

Help for employers was at hand. Informal procedures for ranking university departments had begun in the 1980s, and they rapidly became more rigorous and professional. By the 1990s knowledge about differences between universities in their reputations was in the public domain. It affected the behaviour of employers and potential students alike. The former did not actually discriminate against applicants from less prestigious institutions; however, for example, their presence or absence at 'career fairs' tended to reflect their perceptions as to which universities were the most likely sources of the

supposedly 'best' potential applicants. Correspondingly, for school leavers, it became important to make certain that they went to a prestigious university because that was the most secure gateway to the sought-after careers. On the one hand, the public myth persisted that each graduate was a member of an exclusive club, and the equal of all its other members; on the other, it had actually become a club with different levels of membership, and where the likely benefits accruing varied enormously. Indeed, for those in the least prestigious universities the probability of entering one of the more desirable careers was much reduced. Many would end up in jobs that paid little more, and in some cases less, than jobs occupied by non-graduates.

Here another perverse effect of the relationship between education and the labour market becomes evident. The solution, especially for those who attended less prestigious universities and for anyone who was awarded less than a 2.1 degree, was to 'improve' their qualifications for entry into the superior careers by studying for a further qualification—usually a Masters degree. This provided the initial impetus to an enormous growth in postgraduate qualifications, but other recent entrants into the labour market now had a strong incentive to stay ahead of their peers. Thus the proportion of working people holding postgraduate qualifications rose from 4 to 11 per cent of the total between 1996 and 2013. Of course, credentialism is not only factor responsible for this growth: courses, such as some MBAs, are developing skills that might otherwise have to be developed 'in house' by firms; in a few highly technical areas, further education beyond the undergraduate level is now essential for performing a particular job, whereas previously a Bachelors degree would suffice; and, of course, in a wealthier society it is more possible to indulge a general interest in a particular subject than in a poorer society. Nevertheless, directly or indirectly, most postgraduate studies are undertaken to improve a person's competitiveness in labour markets, where the 'added value' of their qualification to their employer is relatively small in relation to the effort and cost put in by the student. In many instances whether applicants with an MA are actually

enabled to perform tasks better than those without is unknowable. The principal benefit to employers is that, alongside a good undergraduate degree from a prestigious university, it can be used as a filter to reduce the number of actual (and potential) applicants to manageable proportions. The point is not that Masters courses lack 'intellectual respectability'—most of them do not—but that their main social value lies in their helping those who obtain them get ahead of their peers in the race for better jobs.

This points to another partial parallel with the 'agricultural revolution'. The transition from hunter-gathering to agricultural production provided a short-term benefit because the latter increased the supply of food, albeit food that was less nutritious than previously. Yet that in turn made it possible for family size to increase, which meant that over time the value of the food for each person (quantity, quality and availability of access to it combined) declined. Future generations were no better off than the first transitionals. Having an MA in 1985 might have given someone a distinct edge in some labour markets, but in 2015 their successors are competing on much less favourable terms against their peers. For some careers the PhD will become the 'new MA' of the future for anyone seeking to be competitive as a potential employee; when everyone has an MA (or a PhD) it becomes worthless as a resource for career advancement. Yet not having an MA puts these individuals at a disadvantage, but without any long-term benefits being generated; they resemble a peasant farmer centuries ago who did not have a large family. Restricting the family unit's size reduced its ability to maximise production now while not providing an investment that made their own successor generations, or anyone else's, better off.

There is also a crucial issue of social justice. Harari's argument is that agricultural production both made possible more hierarchical social arrangements and provided an incentive for the more powerful in a community to construct and maintain them. With education there was a transformation towards its becoming the key mechanism for maintaining social inequality, a development that represented a marked change from the social dynamics of the early twentieth

century. The limited amount of social mobility that there had been across the divide between the working and middle classes was via education. Simply passing the scholarship examination enabled a working-class child to move from elementary school to a grammar school, and that enhanced the prospects that some form of white-collar employment might be available later. Subsequently the 'Butler Act' of 1944 modified this earlier system, so that the 11+ examination now enabled more middle-class children to compete against working-class children for free places in grammar schools. However, upward mobility was capped not just by the relatively small number of places (never more than about one fifth of all secondary school places), nor merely by competition with the middle class for those places, but also by the lack of career opportunities for the high achievers going on to university. Because most graduates had few options beyond teaching, the proportion of working-class children who eventually reached the apex of the job market was tiny. Nevertheless, it was the recognised route away from the prospect of manual labour for the few who could pass an examination at the age of 11. For that reason education came to be understood as an instrument for promoting social mobility and hence for a form of social justice. Thus, when making his famous 'Education, Education, Education' speech in 1997, Tony Blair was making an appeal attractive across social classes, but also one that meshed with the core of Labour party traditions and values. Unfortunately, by the time he was making that speech education's role had changed radically.

As noted earlier, until at least the 1950s personal contacts had been the principal means of entry into most jobs, both manual and non-manual. The demise of the apprenticeship system in the industrial and professional sectors, together with the increasing scale of firms in many sectors, was the main cause of its decline. In its place academic credentials took on a far wider and more substantial role in the early stages of recruitment. The significance of schooling thereby changed fundamentally. Previously, for many in the middle class, credentials mattered little; having been to the type of school that an employer would regard as

appropriate for a particular position was what counted. For some that would be a public school, for others merely an ordinary private school, and for the majority a grammar school. With a much expanded middle class, competition for the best jobs was transformed into a fight to acquire the best academic credentials. As a result private education now thrives, although the proportion of children attending such schools has not risen much above 7 per cent of the total. But there has been change. By charging proportionately much higher fees to fund recruitment of the best staff and to supply the best educational facilities, these schools compete now to enrol the supposedly most promising children academically from among the wealthy, rather than the socially prestigious. However, because of rising fee levels many sectors of the middle class that traditionally had entered these schools, including for example the children of doctors, were slowly being squeezed out. Instead, money was now used more than it had been earlier in two other ways—the purchase of extra-school tuition and of housing in the catchment areas of highly ranked state schools. At least a quarter of all children receive private tuition, while the price premium for houses in areas that facilitate access to the best primary and secondary schools is a subject of continuing public interest.<sup>8</sup>

The fight to get ahead for access to the upper reaches of the job market begins in school. Only by obtaining suitably high GCSE and, subsequently, A-level grades is entry to the more highly ranked universities possible. With about 45 per cent of adolescents now entering university, putting a child in the best position to enter the higher echelons of the university system has become a major objective, especially for middle-class parents. Planning for that outcome commences increasingly early, although Britain has not yet emulated Japan, where it is pre-school achievement that is the effective key to eventual labour market entry. In this fight for advantage money becomes significant in obtaining educational credentials in various ways. By buying better teaching (whether at private schools or through tutoring) or school facilities, parents can directly put their child in a better position to obtain

the required grades. The indirect effect is via the housing market. Normally a state school recognised as superior will continue to attract into its catchment area parents who can afford to buy there, so that the price of that housing continues to rise proportionately more. Similarly, in catchment areas with low-performing schools, those who can afford to exit often do so. That is why today nearly a quarter of sixth forms and colleges do not have a single pupil who has acquired the A-level grades demanded by the leading universities (two grade As and a B).<sup>9</sup> The public outcry by successive government against 'failing schools' masks two unfortunate, and related, truths. One is that the sheer number of schools that fail, in the broad sense that none of their pupils obtain the grades demanded by leading universities, is such that pouring resources into all of them would entail a huge increase in government expenditure, well beyond the kinds of programmes implemented to date. The second, and more significant, truth is that it would not solve the problem anyway. This is because what matters in the competition for educational credentials is not *absolute* performance by a child but *relative* performance. If you could raise the performance of all these schools, all that would happen is that more money would be spent by those who could—in tutoring and so on—to ensure that their children stayed ahead. As house prices in areas with the best schools soared, parents would then start to purchase increasingly in areas where they were merely good; social sorting by geography would thereby continue apace.<sup>10</sup>

Residential relocation is another aspect of the mechanism that also drives the demand for Masters' courses. Educational credentials are worthless if everyone has them; their value is related to the extent that others do not. That is why credentialism generates social waste. Nevertheless, this educational regime is not merely wasteful, it is unjust; the proverbial playing field of education has become inherently uneven. If money is a key resource in the pursuit of the best educational credentials—and it is—then anyone who, relatively, lacks it is in a worse position to compete. Those who nostalgically yearn for the return of the grammar schools or something resembling them are right in one

respect, though wholly wrong in another. Post-1944 grammar schools never facilitated much social mobility, because only a fifth of children ever went to them and because the 11+ examination was biased towards testing skills that middle-class children could more easily display. Thereby they then obtained disproportionately more grammar school places. Yet for those working-class children who did obtain places, their own ability to make use of the education available was an important determinant of how far up the social ladder they might advance. The constraints on them were not primarily those of their school. By contrast, today, working-class children who live within the catchment areas of the (relatively) worse-performing schools do not even get to the starting line to demonstrate their ability fully. If their parents cannot afford to move or to pay for private tuition—and few such parents can—then their ambitions are necessarily constrained in ways that are different from previous constraints. The earlier policy provided for grammar schools within every LEA; there is no comparable requirement for schools today, and geography is thus becoming a major impediment to social advancement. Of course, it might be argued, some students in the weaker schools will still have an opportunity to go to a university; but it will nearly always be at one of the less prestigious universities—the universities whose graduates are much less likely to secure the top jobs. The spirit of Blair's cry for 'Education, Education, Education' is pernicious because it disguises just how much it is unfair competition for academic credentials that lies at the heart of the contemporary education system, and which is itself the key institution preserving social stasis. Until the centre-left recognises this it cannot hope to develop policies that might actually enhance social mobility.

What might be the alternatives to which progressives could turn when looking to counteract the pronounced conservative social bias of Britain's education system? One shibboleth of the traditional left can be dismissed immediately: abolishing private education. Even if it were feasible legally or was practicable, it would solve nothing. Private education is more a symptom of the injustice in British education rather than a

cause. The cause is that private money helps significantly in acquiring better educational credentials, and there are ways other than private schooling of using it.

Two main strategies in particular, both of which had a central place in progressive thinking a century ago, may be worth re-examining. The first would depend on there being a recognised minimum standard of competence that anyone entering university (or other forms of post-secondary education) would have to meet. This would require replacement or modification of A-levels and the Baccalaureate, whose grades merely act as a filter for university admissions; there is no direct connection between grades and a demonstration of competence for future study. In the case of universities the required standard would be that a student meeting it could successfully complete a course without remedial or additional teaching of any kind. Those who did so and were from families with lower incomes would be eligible for state scholarships to pay for their subsequent education, on a sliding scale depending on family income. In the case of all universities it would be a requirement that such scholarship students constitute a certain minimum proportion of those admitted for study. They would not be in competition for places with anyone ineligible for scholarships. In essence, this was the principle underpinning the Education Act of 1907, which created access to grammar schools for some working-class children. Obviously, for its future deployment a scholarship-based system would have to be far more generously funded than its predecessors. It would also entail providing additional major resources so that all schools were able to produce pupils who met the minimum standard. While scholarships in the secondary system went out when free education entered in 1944, there is nothing inherently defective in basing a socially just education system on what are essentially quotas for the financially disadvantaged.

Second, working-class organizations had a long history in promoting adult education. The notion that those disadvantaged in their upbringing might have access later to the education system was then incorporated by Harold Wilson in his advocacy of an Open University. As late as 1994 the Commission

on Social Justice was advocating 'Lifelong Learning' and a 'Learning Bank' as ways of partly countering social bias that is inevitable when educational opportunities are confined to the young. However, within just a few years such ideas were marginalized by New Labour's focus on supposed increased opportunities for the young. Yet if the young are operating within an educational regime in which private money aids educational access, then progressives might do worse than look at ambitious schemes that could enable those past adolescence to re-enter education when they might be better able to take advantage of it. Like scholarship schemes, for this to have any impact the funding arrangements would have to be more generous than previously for adult education.

Nevertheless, educationalists might argue that the entire argument presented here is misleading and that the source of educational 'fraud' lies elsewhere. By focusing over many decades on policies designed to facilitate the development of skills for the labour market, public policy has ridden roughshod over a traditional ideal that the purpose of education is to develop more general skills, intellectual and practical, with which people can lead a rewarding life. Certainly this 'liberal education' principle has been perpetually devalued by governments and in public debate, and unquestionably that is a major loss. Yet in various ways liberal educationalists themselves helped to generate the dominance of educational credentialism. That there are major advantages to all school leavers in having access to a general qualification demonstrating that they have reached a certain minimum level of competence in basic skills required for entry into the labour market was often rejected by them. In the interwar years, for example, they tended to oppose the introduction of a school-leaving examination to which most could aspire.<sup>11</sup> Only the few staying on at school were eligible to obtain a nationally recognised qualification—the School Certificate (and, after 1952, the successor GCE). Not until 1972, when all children remained at school until 16, was there a qualification to which many could aspire (the CSE, introduced in 1965). Even then the CSE, which would be merged with the GCE in 1987 to



form the GCSE, never came close to being the equivalent of high school graduation in America. At least in theory, and irrespective of its many inadequacies, graduation does indicate to employers that its recipients have met a certain minimum level in a range of basic skills, many of which are not strictly 'educational' in form.<sup>12</sup> For the past thirty years about 85 per cent of American school leavers have graduated, so it is a qualification that can both help facilitate first entry to the labour market and is one that is within reach of most. It is also a credential that, with relative ease, can be obtained later by those who failed to do so when leaving school.

Then there is the liberal educationalist argument against credentialism within the university system, which holds that it detracts from one of the main functions of a university education—broadening the mind and providing an interlude in which, while studying, a young person can come to understand what they most want to do in their lives. Hardly anyone doubts the value of this to young people, but in a socially just society these would be opportunities available to all, and not just to the minority studying for a degree. Were the social waste created by there being too many graduates, and too much over-education, to be counteracted by new forms of less-time consuming post-school educational qualifications, this point would have to be addressed directly. Restricting partly subsidized 'time out' for the young just to those attending university is elitist, and would appear still more so were the proportion of those in degree courses to be reduced radically. The truly liberal principle of education is to separate valuing the benefits of 'time out' for all from maximising both the number who receive a university education and also the quality of the conditions in which they obtain it. To link the two, as many liberal educationalists have in the past, is potentially elitist and perpetuates socially unfair aspects of the real education 'fraud'.

If British society is to escape some of the consequences of that twentieth-century 'fraud', then the initiative has to come first from the centre-left. Obviously, social waste is of concern to the right too, but its solutions might well generate further injustice via the education system. The first step,

however, for those on the centre-left is finally to come to terms with the fact that for decades it has been propagating an idea that is indefensible. This is the assumption that more Britons having yet more educational credentials, especially in the form of university degrees, provides a route to a more socially just and wealthier Britain.

## Notes

- 1 Y.N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London, Harvill Secker, 2014.
- 2 R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 119–23.
- 3 'News Release: Graduates earn £12,000 a year more than non-graduates', Office for National Statistics, 6 April 2011.
- 4 Office for National Statistics, *Full Report – Graduates in the UK Labour Market 2013*, p. 14. Unquestionably, on graduation former students take non-graduate roles on a temporary basis, with a view to entering graduate employment later. But after five continuous years outside graduate employment, entry becomes more difficult and subsequent entry less likely.
- 5 For example, in July 2013 the CBI argued that the skills gap in Britain could not be met by 'traditional' degrees and that shorter or part-time courses were needed.
- 6 For people in their first job in 1980, 38 per cent of graduates were overeducated while 30 per cent were still overeducated six years later; Peter Dolton and Anna Vignolesa, 'The incidence and effects of overeducation in the UK graduate labour market', *Economics of Education Review*, Vol. 19, 2000, pp. 179–98.
- 7 The Wilson Report of February 2012, 'A Review of Business-Collaboration', pointed out that sandwich course placements had declined still further during the present century and that there were major barriers to establishing such programmes; [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32383/12-610-wilson-review-business-university-collaboration.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32383/12-610-wilson-review-business-university-collaboration.pdf)
- 8 The research of Professor Judy Ireson has revealed the extent of tutoring, which varies significantly between regions; in London and South East England considerably more than a quarter of all children have been tutored at various times.
- 9 'Schools miss top university grades', *BBC News*, 24 January 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/education-21162960>.
- 10 The concept of 'sorting' was introduced by Charles Tiebout in a seminal article published

in 1956, and since the 1970s it has been used increasingly to explain geographical factors in the relationship between private decisions and public policy; 'A pure theory of local expenditure', *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 64, 1956, pp. 416–24. Data on the willingness of British middle-class parents to sort themselves into catchment areas for good schools is provided in a Report by the Sutton Trust using YouGov polling; B. Francis and M. Hutchins, *Parent Power*, December 2013.

- 11 This widespread view was reported, for example, in the Hadow Report: *Education of the Adolescent: Report of the Consultative Committee*, London, HMSO, 1927, p. 150.
- 12 See, for example, R.H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 195–6, which draws on the research of A.M. Spence, *Market Signalling: Informational Transfer Hiring and Related Screening Processes*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1974.