Comprehensive Education for the 21st Century. Symposium at Newham Sixth Form College, 18th June 2018

Talk by Professor Tim Blackman

Selection is still a hot topic in secondary education in the UK, but nevertheless 90% of school students are educated in a comprehensive system, and research evidence is heavily on the side of this being a better way to educate young people than selection. In further education, comprehensive education is essentially taken for granted, but the sector is stigmatised by being seen as an inferior option to staying on at school or going to university. In fact, at every level, the true benefits of comprehensive education are undermined if selection sits alongside it.

In higher education, comprehensive education is virtually non-existent beyond The Open University, which for almost all its courses does not require prior academic qualifications. The sector as a whole is highly selective and it is taken for granted that the most selective universities are the best universities. This is an elephant in the room that compromises arguments for comprehensive education at secondary and further levels because the success of secondary and further education is partly judged by how many of their students make it into the ‘best’, most selective, universities.

Because attainment at school is so closely correlated with family income and wealth, a consequence of academic selection in higher education is that the sector is very stratified by social class, with efforts to widen access in the most selective universities only having a marginal effect. If we take the children of small employers, lower grade supervisors and semi-routine and routine workers – the ‘lower’ social classes - the proportion of these children in a university ranges from just 10% of all students in some institutions to almost 60% in others. These universities even look and feel quite different. Higher education is a big social class sorting machine.

While the proportion of disadvantaged young people in very selective universities is often discussed in policy and in the media, the lack of young people from better-off families in less selective universities is hardly ever discussed. These are the secondary moderns of the university sector; not entirely non-selective but setting entry grades at levels judged as necessary for students to succeed rather than to exclude students who need extra support.

I have enjoyed working for many years in both very selective and less selective – and non-selective – universities: Durham, the University of Ulster, Oxford Brookes, Teesside, Middlesex and The Open University. I have seen how they work. It does not surprise me that the Durhams of this world achieve better graduate outcomes even after controlling for subject mix and students’ backgrounds. Going to a prestigious university signals to employers that students are very middle class in attitudes and behaviours, and in some professions the employer will have gone to such a university and is inclined to recruit people like them. Some employers – but not most – only recruit from prestigious universities. Like schools, some good teaching academics prefer to work in more rather than less selective institutions. Surveys by the Higher Education Policy Institute also show that students in
more selective institutions on average put more hours into their study, partly because students in less selective institutions without well paid parents behind them take on more part-time paid work during term time.

The diversity bonus

So much selection, however, is bad for all universities: bad socially because students from different backgrounds are segregated, but above all bad educationally because there is a diversity bonus in education that so much selection is failing to realise. Lack of diversity in student populations at institution level means that we are failing to capitalise on the recent growth of evidence that mixed abilities and identities among student communities create a richer learning environment than more homogenous communities of the type we find in most universities, including benefits such as better academic engagement, better achievement, better civic engagement, tolerance and valuing of difference. Changing this situation requires radical measures of the type we saw with the widespread abolition of the 11-plus test in the 1960s.

Higher education access policy is currently dominated by getting ‘bright’ working class and black students into the most selective universities. That is important, but there are two sides to the coin and we need a sector-wide approach to de-segregating every institution. Universities need to do less selection by ability and more growing their students’ abilities from a range of starting points. Academics in particular are too concerned with smartness and too little concerned with developing smartness.

My main issue with the access agenda as currently conceived is that it perpetuates a very corrosive idea: that there are ‘elite’, ‘top’ or ‘leading’ universities and it is access to these universities that is the key to social mobility. Yet the reason why these universities are the key to social mobility is their role in the British class system. Graduate outcomes are not just determined by how well a student does on their degree course, or the course itself. Mike Savage and his colleagues at the LSE have shown that graduate outcomes are also significantly associated with attending an independent rather than a comprehensive school, having parents who are senior managers or professionals, and attending Oxford or another ‘Golden triangle’ university (which is best), another Russell Group university (which is second best) or any other university (which is third best and better than none).

It is the less selective universities – primarily the ex-polytechnics - that do the heavy lifting with widening access. But instead of being celebrated for driving social mobility, they are often accused of driving their graduates into debt without them getting the well paid professional jobs that mean there’s a good return on their investment. In a sector where students are stratified into universities and courses by prior academic attainment, it is obvious there will be different outcomes. Think about what would happen if all universities had a mix of abilities and backgrounds. How would you then distinguish between Oxford and Middlesex? Most obviously on research, and there I would take a more explicitly selective approach, concentrating research in those institutions that are best at it, and encouraging a more diverse approach to innovation and knowledge exchange in the rest of the sector.
Many things determine student achievement, such as home or family background, school type or performance, curriculum, and teaching and learning strategies. But the evidence from school studies points to one thing that matters most: teacher expertise and the quality of teaching. Yet there is relatively little attention paid to this in higher education, largely because the so-called ‘best’ universities can select out students who will be the most challenging to teach and who have the furthest to travel. This is so different to schools. The vast majority of our good schools – as measured by value-added progress measures – are comprehensives. There is also no evidence from these schools that a basic matriculation requirement for progressing to sixth forms, rather than the kind of selective entry requirements we see across universities, dampens aspiration to achieve well.

For the higher education system to be successful, whether in terms of driving social mobility, contributing to productivity growth or just human flourishing, there must first and foremost be good teachers. The problem is, though, that universities generally do not know who their good teachers are, and rarely have effective policies to make all their teachers as good as their best. If we reduce selection in higher education, we can increase diversity in every university. If we improve teaching in every university, that diversity of abilities and identities is a resource that expert teachers can use to improve learning. Expert teachers make use of the variation in abilities and backgrounds that diverse classes present, such as using peer-to-peer learning methods.

However, there is more to diversity than mixed abilities, there is identity diversity. Interestingly, that matters to learning too. Scott Page has demonstrated in his recent books The Difference and The Diversity Bonus how if you take two problem solving groups both with the competencies to solve a problem, one socially homogeneous and the other with mixed identities and backgrounds, it is the mixed group that is likely to be more successful solving problems. Page shows that the power of identify diversity is to introduce more perspectives and heuristic tools that come with different experiences: more ways of seeing and understanding both the problem and potential solutions. This beats competency on its own. Education studies from the United States demonstrate benefits from students being exposed to peers from different backgrounds, including positive effects on problem-solving, satisfaction, motivation, general knowledge, self-confidence, reducing prejudice, enhancing critical thinking and increasing civic engagement.

This growing evidence of a diversity dividend suggests that we should not be stratifying students by ability into universities with different levels of academic selection, because this reduces diversity. Instead, we should be creating more fertile learning environments by all universities increasing the diversity of their student bodies. This would have educational and social benefits, and save money on access schemes that actually have little effect because of how admissions are dominated by academic selection.

Policy reform

If very selective universities lowered their entry grades, as they should do for a large proportion of their intakes, this would take students from other universities because of the historic prestige created by super selectivity. This will probably be one of the problems with
the new Scottish policy of requiring very selective universities to have programme by programme quotas with lower entry requirements for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, although this is certainly a step in the right direction. The issue is that the concentration of students from low income families in less selective universities is just as much a problem as the concentration of students from higher income families in very selective universities. Students from higher income families are actively discouraged by their schools from attending universities that require lower entry grades, even though – or perhaps because - they would mix with students from different backgrounds. This is a problem because social segregation is not good for society and because these students would benefit from learning together.

Current higher education policy has a focus on access when it should have a focus on diversity. The Office for Students (OfS) currently requires universities and colleges charging above the annual ‘basic fee’ of just over £6,000 to use part of their additional fee income to fund measures to widen access among under-represented groups. This current access spend by the more selective Russell Group universities is around £250m annually, with very limited effects. It would be far cheaper – in fact it would cost nothing – for these universities to lower their entry requirements and achieve a much bigger effect.

At present, every university has a benchmark for recruiting students from under-represented groups. A better approach would be to require every university to operate entry quotas that create opportunities for students with a range of prior attainment. For example, some American high schools commit to fixed proportions of their student bodies being in top, middle and low bands on standardised tests. A policy of diversification across the higher education sector would also need either to use student number controls to prevent more prestigious universities growing at the expense of less prestigious ones, or there would need to be a financial incentive.

Such a financial incentive could be a levy on the more selective universities that replaces their current £250m access spend but is redistributed to less selective universities to support their recruitment of applicants with higher prior attainment. This would be cost neutral. In fact, the levy would gradually reduce as the highly selective universities become less selective for a proportion of their intake and the less selective universities increase their intake of applicants with higher prior attainment. All institutions could be required to agree the size of their lower grade entry quotas - for highly selective institutions - and higher grade entry quotas - for less selective institutions - as part of their annual Access Agreements with the OfS, with these scaled to drive a continuing increase in diversity until a more socially balanced sector is achieved.

**Conclusion**

We need a more diverse, comprehensive higher education system. My argument for this has attracted some media interest but the only university that has responded with invitations for me to speak is, ironically, Oxford. There has been a silence from all the other most selective universities. Some comment has been that students would not succeed on their courses if they lowered entry grades. That is just not plausible given that students succeed
on similar courses at other institutions with lower grades. It would probably increase non-
continuation – the ‘drop-out’ rate – in these institutions, but across the sector non-
continuation would be likely to fall. It would also likely increase the demands on good
teaching and student support, a far better approach than the immensely bureaucratic and
cunky Teaching Excellence Framework that’s now been imposed on the sector.

Finally, these policy reforms would mean an end to much of the marketization of higher
education we’ve been seeing. I’m not making any particular political point about that, just
an observation that marketization is unlikely to improve higher education and brings with it
heavy financial and social costs.