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Book Review

Higher Education and Social Inequalities,
University Admissions, Experiences and Outcomes
RICHARD WALLER, NICOLA INGRAM & MICHAEL R.M. WARD
London: Routledge
248 pages, hardback £105, ISBN 978-1-138212-88-6
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Education is notoriously silo-ised, even more than other public services. Primary is typically conceived separately from secondary, while tertiary is not even conceived at all but thought of as consisting of variously, and in order of priority, higher and then further, with adult/continuing, youth and training lucky to be considered at all thereafter. An instance of this is the current campaign for a National Education Service, which is actually for a national schools service. Important though it is to bring academies, free and (if possible) private schools under local democratic control, most children and many parents are unaware and do not care who runs their schools (unless there were means for them to begin to do so themselves). Their teachers, whose unions seek to maintain their members in the front of classrooms delivering the academic National Curriculum aimed at university entrance, alienate those pupils who remain (physically if not mentally) into a dulled conformity, though many (boys especially) leave from 14 on, or earlier.

This book should therefore be widely read in schools as well as by the higher education (HE) audience it is written for. (Hopefully a paperback edition would make it more affordable.) Especially as its outline follows Phil Brown's *Ordinary Kids*, a study of 'ordinary' children in a secondary school in 1987. This was an important book in that it marked the ascendency of what Phil Cohen called 'the career code' over the previously dominant 'apprenticeship code' by which young people and their minders attempted to make sense of their situations. The career code had previously only been followed by the minority of young people taking academic examinations to make an institutional transition from school to work and home to independent living via term-time residential HE. This confirmed traditionally middle-class status and so in an expanding economy became the route to limited upward social mobility. Ironically, this change in the codes of cultural reproduction occurred just as the possibility of a career was ending for many and social mobility subsequently

reversed to become general and downward by the end of the century. The self-ascription by Brown's school students of 'ordinariness' marked too the way from then on that a majority of parents and children saw themselves belonging to a new middle working/working middle class between the 'rahs' above and the 'charvas' below, as they are described by 'ordinary' [*sic*] students in one of the ethnographic chapters in this book.

It is based on a 'Paired Peers' research project that matched undergraduates at the universities of Bristol and the West of England to compare their student experiences from 2010 to 2013. By this time no one was to be found who could say, as an East London Polytechnic (as was) undergraduate told me in 1994, 'It doesn't matter where you got your degree (at university or polytechnic) – it's like if you took your A-levels at a grammar or comprehensive.' The demise of the Council for National Academic Awards that standardised degrees across the previous binary divide saw to that! Nowadays, students are very aware of their standing in the hierarchy of institutions. See, for example, the bantering in the form of football chants exchanged between Sheffield Hallam and Sheffield University students Matthew Cheeseman records in his chapter. Also, the typical expansion of a public service at reduced cost has resulted in a loss of overall quality of provision so that 'students' subjective desire to engage in the potential of education ... is washed in waves of gradual ridicule and receding promise by the tides of the night-time economy', as Cheeseman concludes.

Younger school teachers appreciate this, but perhaps not all teachers understand the readiness of HE applicants to take on debts of £50k+ so as to have at least the chance of the semi-secure para-professional employment to which they aspire. If this was not the case, would teachers agree so readily to the advocacy of a 'vocational route' that is the perpetual political and professional consensus in favour of technical as against academic qualifications from 11-, 14- or 16-plus, along the lines endorsed by the 2016 Sainsbury Report? This will predictably fail just as surely as all the other successive attempts to replace the apprenticeships that collapsed along with the rest of UK industry from 1973 on, not recognising that training and education of themselves do not produce jobs. Oddly the book does not raise the question of reducing or abolishing fees as a means of increasing access, nor does it more than point towards alternative forms of HE – though see further below.

What it does do is follow Brown's organisation of his *Ordinary Kids*' experience into three successive stages: getting in, getting on and getting out, with four chapters in each section, topped with an editors' introduction and tailed by a conclusion from David James, editor of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* – an indication of the seriousness of the publication undertaken jointly with the British Sociological Association. Most of the chapter authors follow current sociological orthodoxy by drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose short and unusually readable 1964 book *The Inheritors*, co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron, set the bar for subsequent student studies. However, Bourdieu remains a cultural sociologist in the tradition of Durkheim,

though with a firm grounding of his social categories in the French economy as it was half a century ago. Now class composition has changed, as suggested in relation to Cohen's cultural codes, and as accepted by the editors in their introduction. Bourdieusian qualitative analysis of usually small samples of students therefore remains at the level at which higher education presents itself – that is, in cultural (although not ideological) terms. In the same way, academic qualifications are largely accepted in the sector and more widely as indicators of merit rather than as proxies for more or less expensively acquired cultural capital, though the 'contextualised admissions' that compensate for a candidate's previous background and education, and that are advocated in Vikki Boliver's chapter, are a partial acknowledgement of this.

Yet Diane Reay finds 'class work in the field of higher education', at perhaps her own prestigious institution, paradoxically resulting in the higher achievement of the minority of working-class (as conventionally defined) undergraduates over the great majority of their middle-class (likewise) peers – at least once they can overcome their distaste for 'the balls and the boat race', as one student put it in explaining to me her reluctance to apply to Oxbridge. At the contrasted former-polytechnic 'Northern University', however, the majority of working-class and many minority ethnic students feel unsupported – even though the university makes a virtue of widening participation to accommodate them, and despite which they do not achieve so highly as their counterparts at the 'posh university' in terms of gaining entry to remaining secure managerial and professional posts. A mystery of Oxbridge admissions that remains unexplained is how these two institutions manage to balance their intake at roughly 50/50 (Cambridge taking slightly more women than men for the first time this year), whereas across the range of higher education institutions (HEIs) the ratio is 60/40 female to male. (Oxbridge college admissions tutors say it is because of their subject balance but equally technological and scientific institutions manage to take proportionately more women.)

This gender aspect is perhaps underplayed throughout the book, or perhaps it is now taken for granted that the majority of students are women. The nearly half of young women who apply to university are certainly usually better qualified and often more motivated to live away from home for three or four years before in many cases returning there, as well as often to the stereotypical office or sales jobs they had thought to avoid with a degree qualification. But this affects the aspirations of the more than *Half Our Future* who still do not attend university, particularly the 'lost boys' who in many cases prefer ducking and diving in precarious employment. Nor are they attracted to the much-touted 'apprenticeships', the majority of apprentices also being women. (In a predominantly service economy, these are usually far from the metal-bashing industrial activities often seen as appropriate for other people's children who supposedly prefer to use their hands rather than their brains – e.g. on the 'technological degrees' perennially proposed for further education [FE].)

However, when it comes to 'the myths of graduate employability', Gerbrand Tholen and Phil Brown argue that 'the policy drive to reform higher

education as a means of improving graduate employability and narrowing social equalities is difficult to reconcile with today's labour market'. That is because it is another attempt to improve supply to a labour market which increasingly undermines the core constituency of HE as traditional professions and managerial occupations are hollowed out by outsourcing, automation and artificial intelligence (AI). Nor, in a post-industrial economy, does increasing productivity necessarily boost employment. Therefore, '[g]raduate over-qualification and labour market inequalities will not be addressed by giving students better information about university courses and teaching them employability skills'. This is of course precisely the direction of current government reform, 'opening higher education to the market to increase quality', to quote David Willetts, architect of £9000 fees and now vice-chancellor of Leicester University. This will be achieved by encouraging students to invest in their own human capital through course fees variable by subject and institution as regulated by the new Office For Students (OFS). Under the chair of the OFS, Sir Michael Barber, HE can expect to follow Pascal's theory of prayer that the Great Deliverologist inflicted upon school teachers: get down on your knees, go through the motions and true belief will follow to deliver kwality!

As evidenced by this book, academics cannot seem to box themselves out of their silo – even Brown and Tholen do not offer an alternative, though their purview extends to the real skill and knowledge demands of the economy, beyond the 'myths' that are made of them. Perhaps because academics are committed to HE as a good thing they can only offer more of it, like former HE minister Bill Rammell, now vice-chancellor of Bedfordshire University, who has proposed a comprehensive higher education, with all 18-year-olds and older working to an equivalent level if not at an identical curriculum. This will not be popular with the many current students who would already rather be somewhere else than at 'uni', especially if they have to pay for their compulsory participation! Or if they were confined there by the learningfare of a Universal Basic Income.

Only by conceiving of tertiary-level learning as a lifelong continuing education and training entitlement open to all adults can this circle be squared. Thus, adult educationist Tom Schuller has recently proposed an entitlement of £5000 p.a. that could be taken up at any time from school-leaving into retirement and in relation to occupation, interest or recreation. Similarly, David James's conclusion to this book draws on his own experiences as a mature student to signal 'a form of widening participation that could yet be more widely utilised in the sector, perhaps especially in those subject disciplines where some post-school experiences (of work, volunteering or just life in general) can really help to enrich study and indeed help students appreciate it for the precious opportunity that it can be'. This could entail taking on fewer students, however – certainly fewer 'oven-ready' ones straight out of school – but those who attended later throughout life could be supported by an 'ecology', as it has been called, of tertiary provision. Demand (not supply)

would then be integrated with schools, colleges and universities and be related to training in and out of employment from local through regional up to national level, and with access to expertise in research, scholarship, application and creation provided by more or less specialist institutes.

This leaves primary and secondary schooling with the more general and in many ways more demanding task of providing a comprehensive non-academic general education fit for the variety of employment individuals are likely to face in the future, together with the beginnings of the understandings that they may require in order to exercise control over it.

Patrick Ainley

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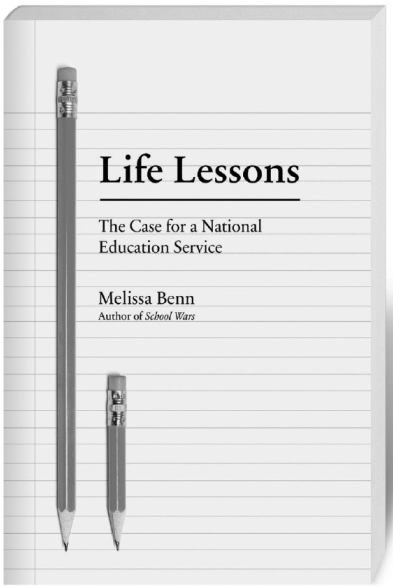

"A National Education Service confirms education as a core entitlement, a guarantee from society to each one of its members to underwrite their intellectual and vocational development. Education must be seen as a collective investment in the public good as opposed to a vehicle solely for the achievement of individual 'aspiration'."

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