THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE:

ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY IN MASS HIGHER EDUCATION

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…ideas of the universal school and notions of widening social access for all were born and adopted, particularly in societies of settlement such as Australia…Education seemed to promise much. It partly overcame boundaries of gender and class, though not the division between Indigenous populations and new settlers.

The Cambridge History of Australia

It is richer now, and its population is growing; it has the industry, the complexity and sophistication of metropolitan life; its self-assurance is increasing. Equality between human beings was at the centre of the Australian dream – the most noble of the aspirations that sprang from its early hardships. The problem today… is to make that dream become a reality.

Norman MacKenzie – Women in Australia

Despite widespread beliefs that higher education could be a driver of inclusion and egalitarianism in Australian society, we have ended up with a university system that reproduces and legitimises social stratification.

Michael Wesley – Universities in Australian Life

…no disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life. Working people would have to develop their own ways of framing the world, their own political goals, their own strategies for achieving those goals.

Jonathan Rose – The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class

Optimism is an indulgence (albeit a helpful one at times) but hope is a discipline. While there is much to alarm us… there is always hope…The idea that whoever or wherever we are on earth, we are all born with shares in the planet, gives us the most enduring principle we have as a species.

Jane R. Goodall – The Politics of the Common Good: Dispossession in Australia

It's not enough to ask what successful people are like… it is only by asking where they are from that we can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who doesn't.

Malcolm Gladwell- Outliers

This book is dedicated to

Emer and Joanne

Contributors

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Professor The Honourable Verity Firth AM is a Member of the University Accord Panel and Chair of Engagement Australia - both entities have prioritised Equity and Engagement as the twin pillars for the future of focus of Australian Higher Education.

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Access and widening participation: the promise of learning for diversity, creativity and transformation.

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National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)

National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy

Regional University Study Hubs Programme

Regional Education Commissioner

Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships Programme

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GULL *– Global University for Lifelong Learning*

Setting the Scene

Future in History: the importance of continuity
James Nyland

We can choose to understand Access as part of a historical and on-going debate about how learning and education can change lives and the societies in which we live. Equality and social justice objectives have long been part of the movement for the extension of access to higher education. This process has been a long one and it has been, as this volume shows, a contested one. There was always a tension between economic and egalitarian objectives and between individual benefits and social advance and a social result for education. Prosperity for everyone was always an objective of educational change and reform, though this has been remarkably difficult to achieve even though standards of living and lifestyles are immeasurably improved on those of our grandparents. We should never underestimate the weight and significance of history as it shapes all that we do. The history of the Access movement which is charted in this book reflects the growth of a platform for the development and delivery of higher education for a broad population, whether that is in the United Kingdom, Australia or the wider world in which the idea of mass higher education has become normative. It is the expectation of nearly everyone who must work in a burgeoning and increasingly internationalised economy and culture, and the future of the emerging generations will inevitably need to engage with the themes of this book.

There are relatively few of those who have worked within educational development for higher education who perceive learning to be a type of human capital with its roots in a market which prevents or limits access to learning. Almost everyone in modern society acknowledges the need for learning and that it should be for the benefit of all who can benefit. The problem

lies in what kind of knowledge and learning is best provided and who gets access to it? This is not a new problem, hence the importance of each successive generation in defining for itself what is really useful knowledge – a theme taken up in this volume. Higher education can operate as a powerful engine for growth but it creates inequality at the same time as it opens up opportunities for the selected groups and elites. But the argument that not everyone can succeed is not one that motivates educators. We have constantly striven to extend the boundaries which limit access to learning and opportunities. Our modern universities have been at the forefront of such change both in terms of the subjects we teach and the students we reach. This is why we have worked to ensure that access and participation impacts on as wide a population as possible and seeks to be inclusive rather than exclusive. We have struggled to develop our universities and colleges so that equality of access and equity (fairness) are not seen to be different spheres. If we have not yet achieved full equality of outcomes in higher education, then we are working towards that goal at national and international levels. The access university in the coming decade will be a distinctive teaching intensive, research informed university committed to a first class higher education.

In this context, this book shows how rising popular expectations, demand and struggle for learning opportunities shaped the growth of mass higher education in an era of neoliberal economic policies and globalisation. Selection and meritocracy became the driving ideas legitimating growth and differentiation in higher education. These ideas were extensively supported and were just as intensively opposed. Access as a movement demonstrated that ability and talent were not simply 'natural' but were determined by social forces and what we call social formations. Its successes and outcomes showed that upward social mobility was still a widely shared social aspiration and could be achieved via education. Indeed for most people it was the only option.

Access education was originally powered by a sense of egregious injustice. Wealth empowers yet in itself it does not confer merit. What we do with our social wealth and especially within the public sphere, where we are custodians of public value, is an intensely educational matter. And these matters have taken an increasingly urgent turn in recent years. The social order cannot exist without education and this is the only way to address the unmet urgent needs of, for example, climate change, existential ecological breakdown, poverty and war. This book asserts the need for democratic societies to create political agency to redistribute resources and the need for their educational institutions to create fair, equitable and critical curriculums to address these wicked issues. Access is seen as a prism which reflects both the individual libertarian and the social 'commonality' of education traditions. Universities are locations which house competing values; they sponsor individual achievement and encourage socially progressive enrolments (widening participation and Access). As such higher education will need to play a pivotal role in setting and evaluating the limits of equity and access as these new and challenging circumstances face us.

Knowledge is a catalyst for change, but knowledge alone is not enough to bring about desired change. We need to overcome the ideology of inevitable dominance and the 'comfort of obedience' in passing the responsibility for change to someone else. To address this, the book examines the idea of critical thinking in its Access context and what is called a 'universal critical literacy' – including the need for concepts and ideas about the role of really useful knowledge. The book examines lifelong learning, women in education and the problematical issues of race and ethnicity in higher education and Access as examples of what is called a 'social theory approach', which looks for the specifically social significance of educational change. The implications for university engagement and the social purposes of a university education are brought into focus. The attempt to reform and transform Australian higher education via the Accord process is examined in this context.

Access is seen in this volume as part of a new settlement that is needed where the connections between individual freedom, equality and social solidarity are in better balance. The creation of one should not diminish the other. Access tests and extends the limits of unfair social selection and opportunity. Free market systems do not necessarily mean we must create poverty or deprivation for some and the enhancement of Access should mean a fairer and more socially just higher education system that serves all people in a nation. Access is in fact part of a long tradition of radical and transformative education which has gone beyond the boundaries of just national schooling and university systems. It asks questions about why some people are at the margins of acceptable social life and what learning might do to change this. This book on Access acknowledges the fact that tradition and authority can silence some narratives in the name of progress and that the untold stories and unchartered paths have their own validity and value if we can bring them into the learning process.

Those who believe that our history is important

for our present and future will find in this book not only interpretive accounts of past achievements but some indicators of potential futures. These futures will be shaped by the fact that we are making our future history right now. The burning issues that are alluded to throughout the volume testify to the vitality of debate and concern within and beyond education that are impacting now and will do so ever more urgently. This means we must find the new access curriculum; one which does not conflate luck (either of birth and circumstance) with talent and ability. This means we need learning which enables individuals to search and find what they can be good at so that with support they can be great at it. Mastery of what society affords as opportunity to succeed should be available to everyone and is a challenge for each young person. This is part of the new Access agenda; it is what a learning university is for.

Our industrially based society was built on the exploitation of technology and skills and many of our universities and colleges still relate strongly to this great tradition but expect the new technologies to provide democratic knowledge and to liberate us rather than live in what John Stuart Mill called a life of 'drudgery and imprisonment'. However, it is increasingly clear that we cannot take the modern digital-technological world for granted. Many young people have their disposable income consumed by the impact of these technologies and only those with wealthy parents can afford to invest in a house or a degree. A new relationship with the workplace is needed, especially for those who are pre-disposed to being alienated from social networks and any collective sense of identity. This problem is part of what it means to pay attention to what is happening around us. We cannot live a stimulating life just through artificial intelligence or our communicative devices and aps. Our new access learning must address this as we move forward so that each student gets an outstanding experience. New and meaningful links to employment and to engagement with communities is our new Access agenda and we necessarily look to the future.

We now inhabit a world where mass higher education is the norm. This is a democratic achievement of the highest calibre and it is one of the great success stories of modern times. Nevertheless, it is a narrative where a differentiated hierarchy of learning opportunities continues to exist which serves to stratify and separate out the levels of performance and success in modern western social democratic societies, and also in other systems which make different claims to those of the democratic nations. The question of how to legitimate and validate such systems continues to raise the question of Access across the national boundaries and systems of education. It does this in ever more challenging and sometimes in dire circumstances which threaten human futures in ways quite unanticipated in previous eras. Climate change, ecological disasters and human catastrophes throw their shadows over human progress. Engagement and Access in higher education can surely have no greater task than to help address this challenge?

Introduction

The word Access was originally applied to 'special courses' for adults and still is, but its generic meaning now refers to learning opportunities and challenges which go far beyond any institutional boundaries. Access has come to stand-in for participation in the mass university systems which shape our education and futures.

The growth of mass higher education is one of the great stories of our time and it embraces the opening up of learning opportunities for literally masses of people and the re-centering of inequalities and injustice for those at the margins of prosperity – creating what we term the Access movement. In the period mainly covered in this book – the 1970s up to the 2020s – higher education had in fact brought about a revolution in attitudes towards education and higher qualifications and created a massively present industry and economic generator in most advanced industrial societies. The social meaning and significance of this involved an explosion of learning possibilities and is part of an ongoing debate about the meaning of change and the possibilities of democratic societies in general. Access and opportunity within higher education are central to this concern.

This book describes what has become known as Access to higher education at a time when mass higher education in Australia and the United Kingdom and in many other countries became the norm. From being an exclusive club of elite institutions, closed to the public and sometimes immersed in medieval practices to being a visible and accessible presence across the land, universities have come to represent a possible and increasingly likely future for a majority of people. Among those people in both Australia and Britain are generations of ordinary, yet extraordinary people, who wanted to be educated in a university; they struggled often for a voice and a place where their lives and aspirations could be recognised through higher learning. Their experience had been of exclusion from this learning and from the opportunities it can offer. For themselves and their parents, access and participation had been beyond the boundary. The influential writer C.L.R. James used this metaphor to explore the greater significance of cricket as a game that opened up perspectives on how we understand the wider world and Access, as part of the struggle for inclusion and participation we suggest, is a neglected aspect of our understanding of both mass higher education and of how it contributes to the social and common good. Access is coterminous with mass higher education but is not equivalent with it; it has a distinctive identity yet is within the margins whilst being beyond the boundary.

Access describes both a set of ideas about policies and educational practice designed to bring about greater equality – an idea taken to be central to many public and state education systems and often crucial to what universities take as their core missions. What is meant by 'equality' is however a complex and often controversial social and political issue which has reverberated down the generations and continues to divide opinion to this day. Access has developed mainly within the existing higher education systems of which it is a part and thus reflects to a degree the national outlook and values of its host communities, but at the same time it poses a question which challenges the existing system – Access to what and for whom? This double-barrelled question is now asked within a mass higher education system which itself can be divided into three parts: a high value, self-declared elite of universities which can afford to select their students on the supposed basis of their excellence and abilities ; mass universities where students are from middle-class and working-class aspiring families; and the excluded people who do not have qualifications and whose children do

not attend higher education. In many advanced and developing nations this third category are in fact a minority. Those who are at the boundaries of inclusion are often referred to as 'equity groups' in the Australian context whilst in Britain the term the 'Access movement' is used. The concept of a movement refers to a wide variety of learning opportunities, ideas, curriculums, courses and people whose focus was the opening up of higher education to those who had been excluded. There was never a unitary or linear organisation at work in this field. No such organisation ever existed, nor could it, given the boundary-crossing intentions of those who subscribe to its philosophy. Access was anchored in a critique of the wider and deeper economic and social divisions that emerged as an intrinsic part of mass higher education.

The story of Access is less well known than it should be but it deserves recognition in the narrative of educational and social progress as its concerns continue to resonate with us in an age shadowed by public anxiety which go beyond even the mutability of inequality which has been with us since time out of mind. Inequality has taken on new dimensions in relation to the wicked, existential issues such as climate emergencies, geopolitical instability and the threat of species extinction, all of which require critical thought and educational solutions. These will become increasingly the concerns of the mass of the people and the seismic instabilities of the western democracies will require a 'New Access' curriculum and a radically re-shaped framework for learning which we are convinced can draw lessons from the narratives in this book.

Since the authors of this volume have lived and worked in Australia and Britain and because of historical associations between the two nations, its contents reflect this connection and share some of the characteristics of a case study. However, this work is a descriptive and analytical account of educational growth and change which we hope has significance for higher education students and teachers beyond the two nations and the USA, which feature as its main empirical source.

That higher education is now a global enterprise cannot be denied. An encounter with changing conceptions of education and the recent history of mass participation is unavoidable if we are to grasp what is happening now and where it takes us in the future. We intended to explore the past and ask questions about Access and opportunities and education which critique old perspectives and as a result open up new ones for the future and so our time frame is one that intentionally pivots between the foundational period of mass higher education in the last third of the 20th century and reaches into the first third of the 21st century.

This book is a narrative account and an analysis of what we conceive to be a type of education and a set of ideas about access and widening participation in higher education. Its contemporary significance can be demonstrated by the recent debates and concerns of the Australian Accord which published in 2024 a series of recommendations that are far reaching in their implications for access and higher education as a whole in Australia. In looking to the future though, we are mindful that the past and tradition collectively exerts an influence which can valorise one perspective and anathematise another. We are aware that for some the past is another country and that for others the past isn't even past. We acknowledge that history and the history of education is contested terrain and also that some things are not contested, such as the persistence of inequalities in modern societies that lie at the heart of concerns for educational opportunity.

The empirical basis for this book references Australia and Britain most explicitly and suggests that there are significant 'resonances' and connections between the two national entities which persist long after the colonial legacy has receded for both. Australians once had, in the words of the original 'Advance Australia Fair', a British soul, though we surely cannot ignore the Irish 'heart' that was profoundly influential in the evolution of Australia into a separate and distinctive nation. That during the colonial period and beyond the Indigenous peoples of Australia were written out of this history and their lives often brutally suppressed and cultures eradicated, serves notice to us today not merely not to repeat such crimes and wickedness, but rather to acknowledge both historical and contemporary injustices rooted in our culpability for racism and ethnic discrimination. These issues have not simply disappeared with the arrival of modern sensibilities about the need for multiculturalist policies -and the need for tolerance of differences. The modern Access agenda will of necessity have to address and engage with the new forms of ethnic, racial and cultural difference but also of persistent social inequality and injustice.

Whatever the past sources of cultural nationalism and identity were, the shared realities of today are of multiracialism and multiculturalism and a commitment at least in theory to the removal of barriers to inequality. Shared also is the notion that universal education is there to establish and safeguard a system of social selection where success is based on merit not on social origin. All of this is based on a formal commitment to liberal democratic norms of legal and citizenship equality whose origins and values were a shared though often contested endeavour between and within the relations of Australia and Britain. The shared histories and struggles are of course one perspective that sits also uneasily with relations of social class, characterised by socio-economic inequalities and relations of domination – subordination which also persist. These are very different now between the two nations but a shared preoccupation with social class, social inequality and the meanings of national identity owe much to shared ethnic origins in the British and Irish Isles. The differences between the two societies are palpable and obvious but there is also something less tangible but real in the notion that here are two very different cultures which somehow recognise each other. In the development of mass participation and access to higher education there were close parallels in the methods chosen to fund and support political and educational policies but also in respect of the way neoliberal economic views on the creation of a mass consumer market for services was created, including education. The implications of this for both Australia and Britain were far-reaching and the details diverged, but the similarities are striking.

The analytical focus of this volume is on the ideas and conceptions which drove and continue to develop education as a socially progressive and transformative aspect of modern society. Its empirical focus is on the policies and practices of access and widening participation rather than on specific courses or programmes of learning. Our focus is thematic, concentrating on what was an 'Access movement' but it was a movement without a leader, without a centre, without an organisational structure and without a single philosophical or sociological theory. As part of this movement there were many inspirational educational leaders, many centres of innovation and creativity, many critical and transformative approaches to knowledge, and many progressive teaching methods and learning strategies. This movement was, in brief summary, a re-imagining of what higher education can be and what it could do. It describes a historical process through which the dispossessed and marginalised can define their own interests and can for themselves express their own view of what really useful knowledge might be. Access allowed for the expression of feelings and experience which was shared and inherited from the collective past and which imagined a different and fairer future for individuals and for communities. If we can think of education as being one aspect of the way in which working people actually create their own histories and their own consciousness and create themselves as active agents in their own lives, then Access was not merely a programme of learning or instruction. It was rather a means of creating power and agency and of shaping the future.

Widening participation and the creation of a near-universal, mass higher education reality was the defining context for the development of Access and as such is a framework of national

differences and diversity, yet displaying common features. But the content of the Access movement was in fact the attempt to validate aspirations and desire to achieve what we understand as the common good through education. This was entirely commensurate with individual aspirations which were valid for individual experience at a time when the individual self became prominent in public discourse as well as social theory. The valorisation of self was also one of the great stories of our time and this found an echo in the world of learning. The story of Access is, however, one of achievements at both the macro-societal level but also of frustrated ambitions and contested outcomes at the social group level where individuals lived their lives as part of communities. The history of educational entitlement is one of struggle and agitation for educational resources in which growing expectations fed on each other. The roll call of the 'left behind' and marginalised people became notorious as wider social, economic and geopolitical events made their impact on national and domestic economies. In some senses and in both Australia and Britain there seemed to be a perpetual crisis in education as the forces of globalising change rolled on, admitting no resistance.

The purpose of this book is to critically assess what this growth and change actually means for higher education itself and for the wider society which has bought into the belief that universities and all that they offer are essential to our future well-being. In this book the prism or lens through which this transformation occurred is that of access and widening higher education participation and nested within that is the distinctive set of practices, learning and teaching programmes and ideas about the importance of knowledge which affords and supports social progress and challenge to inequality through education – and is commonly called Access.

The 21st century in its third decade is entering an era of grave problems and challenges and for which only a critical and engaged education can offer hope for the future. The failures in globalism, the existential issues of climate change and global warming, the persistently embedded racism and social inequalities and injustices in our communities, the move to the digital world of communication and control, the presence of devastating global health pandemics and the threat of war and nuclear destruction all challenge us to find a better way of knowing and an improved curriculum; one that is capable of comprehending and overcoming the 'wicked issues' which will destroy our civilisation if left unchallenged. This is the evolving context of the contemporary 'learning society' though it does not shape the knowledge economy which focusses instead on profitability at the expense of social need and purpose. We need an education system and culture which is fit for purpose to meet the challenge of change. In other words, we are confronted with the dire need to find an education and curriculum to meet this overwhelming sense of systemic change and its threats to our sheer existence. There are dire warnings that we literally face extermination of human species events within our lifetimes and these wicked issues are surely an alarm call for change. This agenda can no longer be implicit, however, since the existential issues facing humankind demand a more radical, conscious and transformative response. If this book stimulates some debate and concern about these matters and can draw some lessons from the recent development of our knowledge base in the 'exploding' world of higher education then it will have been a worthwhile endeavour.

Chapters 1 and 2 of Part 1 explore themes and issues around the growth of mass participation and access in higher education with particular reference to Australia and the United Kingdom. In Part 2, chapters 3 and 4 develop the themes in respect of the two nations, suggesting that across the very forms of access and participation there was something recognisable as a movement for change and renewal that was more than individuals seeking personal advantage from learning. Chapters 5 and 6 in Part 3 engage with mass participation as change in the wider society generated what we term as an Access movement. Part 4 of the book deals with the making of privilege in higher education under the impact of neoliberalism as a social philosophy, and the unresolved question of educational opportunity and meritocracy. Part 5 outlines three aspects of Access which we believe illuminate the empirical variety and conceptual richness of Access provision, especially in what are contested areas of social analysis – women and education and race/ethnicity. Part 6 returns to questions of how critical knowledge is formed and can yield insights for how we can create and use frameworks for the educational challenges facing us. Verity Firth authors Part 7 of the book which engages with an account of the Australian Universities Accord – a major intervention on behalf of the Australian Government to re-orientate higher education for a vision of future growth and prosperity.

Our book is about an aspect of modernity – the growth of mass higher education and Access – and therefore is about what society might expect from an account of education as a mass phenomenon but also as a specialist reckoning with Access and widening participation. Our focus in time is on the period from 1970 to the mid-2020s, some half century of change and disruption on a global basis by any estimation. This means in our view that there must be some accounting of how theories of society and modernity are understood at this point in time. Which raises the immediate question of whether Access and the engagement with educational disadvantage is a minor narrative in a larger story of social and educational transformation?

Our answer to this question is that the undeniably 'great issues' and themes of our time have education embedded but often unrecognised at their heart. The economic crises of 2008-09, the climate change and ecological crisis and the sense of what some have seen as a crisis of knowledge or epistemological and ontological uncertainty and the increasing concern with the intensification of social inequality, have shaped our views of the 'big issues'. All of this requires us to be critical of ourselves and of our understanding of what is happening in this wider world and this requires some attempt at 'theorisation', meaning that our concern with social inequality and education is in fact no minor narrative but is one of the crucial linkages between the practical, everyday matters of learning and teaching and developing education and our understanding of the bigger picture.

The actual and practical realities of distinctive, empirical Access courses and initiatives are the meat and drink of the Access movement and are vitally important for those experiencing them. Our concern was on some of the social developments that shaped our time which is why we have touched upon globalisation, modernity, the consequences of digitalisation, economic transformations and stressed the need for social analysis and critical thinking. It is also why we have engaged with the issue of the public management and accountability of universities which has led us down the path of uniformity of missions, has diminished diversity of provision and funding, and produced a stratified and highly unequal HE system which perpetuates social divisions and inequalities whilst claiming to offer opportunities and equity on behalf of society.

We argue that by acknowledging the social purposes of universities and by re-asserting the validity of Access concerns we can go beyond resistance to much needed change and help build alternatives within the existing system. The question of how radical a re-imagined university curriculum and higher education system might be is not yet determined and there are many who are yet to speak. We believe one thing is clear, however, it cannot be done without theory-based analysis and cultural critique in relation to learning. New ways of knowing and new points of departure are required and we hope that our understanding and narrative on Access and access can contribute to this endeavour.

Part 1

Situating Access and Opportunity

Threads through time: Mosterton School, Dorset – 1912

For generations education was viewed as the key to unlocking the barriers to social mobility and change.

All Hallows School founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1861 and was the first secondary school for girls in Queensland. Its original enrolment was 16 pupils and its student number today is 1650.

Chapter 1

Threads through time

In Australia in 1974 there were 18 universities and a wide range of diverse higher education colleges across the Commonwealth and by 2023 this had become 42 universities including two private institutions. In 1964 there were 76,188 people studying at university in Australia and by 2001 the total had reached 842,183. In 2012 it was 1,257,722 and by 2021 it topped 1.6 million, including significant cohorts of overseas/international students (AGDE 2023).

In Britain student numbers almost doubled between 1997 and 2010 – the period of the Labour Government whose mantra was 'education, education, education' – when almost half of school-leavers were bound for university. By 2023 the total number of higher education students in the United Kingdom was approaching 3 million (HESA 2023). Over 160 UK universities existed by the third decade of the 21st century with the proportion of students on higher education courses at other providers of higher education such as local colleges declining to around 6 per cent of the total. Peter Scott (2021) has asserted that UK higher education, in effect in the 21st century, is a university monoculture as diverse colleges closed or were amalgamated with the larger universities. A similar trend is observable in Australia: driven by competition in pushing to broaden access to universities over the past seventy years, along the way variations between different types and missions of universities have been erased or suppressed (Marginson 2016: 263-4; Wesley 2023: 22). Access and widening participation in higher education is not a single, coherent and unilinear story of progress from small to large and from diverse institutions to a monoculture, though both of these trends were true. It is rather a story of contested and competing perspectives with complex and sometimes contradictory outcomes.

The current condition of higher education resonates with the language of crisis, which has been the case over an extended period (Barnett 1990; Barnett and Griffin 1997; Ashwin 2020; Scott 2021; Wesley 2023; Featherstone 2023). One key aspect of this is that many people are facing a loss of the future in that they believe their children may have less successful futures than they had themselves. Until recently it was a commonsense understanding that each successive generation would improve on the past. The post-Second World War period had seen the emergence of a more democratic and humane order in Britain and Australia (Mcintyre 2015: 272-273) and in the United States an explosion of consumer driven growth was about to demonstrate the power of the American productive economy. Simon Marginson in his extensive analysis and theorisation of higher education argued that… 'The larger significance of the New Deal programs in the United States, and the postwar reconstruction in all three countries, was the common premise that the capitalist economy and its erstwhile political order had failed, that these had been unable to provide for either the basic conditions of life or the greater aspirations opened up after the war' (Marginson 2016: 57). Large scale state planning and interventions, including for the extension of the education franchise became the order of the day. Keynesian economic management was allied to beliefs in the value of home ownership, better and fairer schooling and the possibility of higher education for the children of the masses. Aspirations for education and social progress became identified with ideas of making social progress through personal merit. In the industrialised nations the decades that followed the Second World War were infused with the belief and the reality that educational achievement and work were the routes to the glittering prizes in life rather than inherited wealth, the traditional method of elevation to the top. (Picketty 2014: 241).

Situating the Access movement

We believe it is possible to re-assert the democratising and emancipatory features of the expansion of education in the post 2nd World War period in the era of modernity in which we find ourselves. To do so necessitates a re-evaluation of the current demand for access to HE in the light of developments which emerged fully in the late 20th century and have evolved in the early decades of the 21st century. One significant but under-valued part of this development is what we term the ***Access movement***. In this viewpoint universities are sites of contestation over access, policy and the production of knowledge. Access courses and provision we suggest are a signal that alternatives are available and that emergent possibilities exist. In outlining such possibilities we are both connecting with a long past of struggles for learning and education and to a future of democratic inclusiveness. Wherever we look in the economically advanced world mass higher education systems have developed or are in the process of developing. Many of the outcomes of these systems are ***unequal and unjust***. The continuing thread of growth and development is challenged and sometimes disrupted by those who experience the unequal outcomes of education directly themselves. When people believe that education is not a fair or even neutral enterprise in terms of its economic and social outcomes there have always been dissenting voices and attempts to invent alternatives. An important aspect of this finds expression in the notion of Access, which asserts the contested nature of education and learning and asks for an alternative rooted in the people's own social experience and agendas.

Access with a capital A, as described in this book, denotes the existence of special courses and programmes of learning, usually set up for designated communities or targeted groups. In Britain and Northern Ireland such courses began to emerge in the 1980s at a point in time when expansion and sometimes contraction or limitation of university places was highly contested and politicised. At that time and since, there has been in existence what can be loosely called an Access movement which embraced special courses and HE provision for what in Australia are understood as equity groups and in Britain even more loosely as the Access agenda . The borders and demarcations between 'Access', 'access' and 'widening participation' were never strictly policed, though it would be fair to assert that the most elitist of universities were less focussed on equity concerns or defined these matters in ways which supported their own distinctive and discriminatory selection practices. The general growth in higher education, which became later known as widening participation and was part of the growth of mass higher education, is also referred to as 'access' but in the lower case. Both meanings of the word refer to deeply held values and principles of learning and connect with debates and competing interests around the meanings of social justice. Access, however, as a ***movement*** is about learning and a curriculum which has this concern at its heart and is the subject of this book.

As universities adapted and developed in response to the demands for mass higher education the questions of who would be entitled to its benefits and what costs would be involved and for whom, came into greater public awareness. Those who had been educationally disadvantaged and excluded sought alternative ways into the educational system and educators and people of goodwill within the system itself sought ways to open up access and participation. And in case we forget, there was never a single model of provision; diversity and difference was the hallmark of progressive and creative education. Access became part of the increasing awareness amongst a wide public that higher education should be available to them and their families. The hallmark of aspiring people everywhere found expression in educational achievement. As universities developed their own perspectives and practices on engagement with their own communities and stakeholders, Access made its mark as a dependent yet distinctive part of the learning agenda of higher education. This diversity was incorporated in different ways within HE, reflecting local and regional factors and no single model was adopted or enforced at national levels but there was no denying its near-universal impact.

This book is concerned with growth and change in the provision and meaning of higher education. It has a necessary empirical basis for the

descriptions and accounts it gives of developments in educational thinking and practice and inevitably reflects the experience and perceptions, values and modes of thought of its authors in both Australia and Britain. These were the countries and cultures in which we were formed and in which we were able to develop our intellectual ideas and practice. These nations are themselves diverse and amazingly varied in terms of the types and forms of education that are available. Both have world class universities, internationally significant and leading research and the practical capacities to engage with the equally disturbing disparities and inequalities which characterise their wider societies and communities. The real, concrete and empirical basis of Access and the realities of mass growth in higher education, however, require a locus in the constituent parts of the population. It is the people after all who are the object of policies and practices and even philosophies of education. Yet the people, actual living common people, are also the subjects of their own development. This was one of the key lessons of Access: the common good that might be achieved through learning and education was in fact a deeply personal and political matter rooted in the lived experience of learners.

Therefore, in order to understand the realities of Access we need to explain and illuminate the actual constituent parts of social experience including the different types of people involved, the racial and ethnic aspects of lives, the sex/gender disparities and inequalities of experience and the questions of age and generational difference. These plus other characteristics which may in fact be less stable signifiers of identity and belonging such as social class, religious affiliation and group membership are all part of the rich mix of national communities which may in the continuing present place demands on the Access agenda.

Time and space limit what can be described in detail in this volume but behind the analysis there always will be the real lives for whom access to higher education was life-changing and life affirming. The Australian and British illustrations which are given are not a proxy for a detailed case study; neither is the account given here a strictly comparative one though comparisons are often inevitable and helpful. It is hoped that the narrative does yield insights and understandings so as to re-affirm the values of Access itself and points to future knowledge which can be foundational to practical change and progressive theoretical thinking. The different nations stand independently apart with different national trajectories, identities and interests. However, for Australia / Britain/Northern Ireland (where we have lived and worked as educators) there is a certain commonality which derives from a shared past, a recognition of certain key shared values and traditions and from a mutuality of shared and contested cultures. We agree with the suggestion that there is a reciprocity of recognition of the 'familiar other' that suggests … there goes a part of ourselves which we recognise in the 'familiar stranger' (Meaney 2013: ch 3; Hall 2017).

Transitions via access

Though learning always has to have a specific learner and an Access route demands a focussed and often local narrative, there can be little doubt that Access and mass higher education was and is part of a *universalising* phenomenon. It is delivered for many at the local campus or centre yet the content and methods used reflect the growth of mass experience and aspirations that go far beyond any national borders. The 'massification' (Bramson 1961) of social and political life ensures that we experience and share the mass products of the consumer age. We produce and consume much of our lives in common. We live in the global, cosmopolitan bubble that it sustains and is sponsored by the internet and which has diminished and sometimes destroyed the local character of our lives. Mass communication, mass travel, mass migration and mass consumerism of products and services have transformed our world within the living memory of relatively young people alive today. The prospects for future transformations through artificial intelligence and hyper-automation and the exponential acceleration of change (Noys 2014) suggest further mass social and psychological transformations will be needed to match the economic and political implications of these changes. Charting the growth and meaning of Access in some of its recent manifestations, we hope, will facilitate thinking and insights into the kinds of knowledge which will be needed in the future as the social purposes and meanings of universities and their learning agendas are tested. We have transitioned educationally already from the few to the many but the journey is by no means ended and the kinds of critical education we need mean an on-going encounter with the structured knowledge and social authority of learning systems in the age of mass learning, mass communication and a highly fractured and precarious social life in which inequality and uncertainty loom large.

For many advanced economies and societies the first two decades of the 21st century marked the later stages of a long 50 year transition from a relatively un-planned elite system of higher education to a mass market in learning and qualifications. Those countries that strove to succeed in the globalised and libertarian economy saw a shift from education viewed as a social and public good to one where the consumer's perspective was paramount. Governments had often indicated their preferences for a shift towards vocational learning but the massive investment in social and educational strategy and policy to bring this about was rarely undertaken. Individuals were encouraged to 'invest' in themselves and their own futures as a private and personalised choice, as if education was a commodity to be bought in the market-place. Britain was a paradigm case in this adoption of the ideology of the free individual, able to choose a future and to think of education as a means to do so. Australia had its own and perhaps earlier route to a similar end point. This supposedly involved an act of free choice in a marketplace of opportunities and the articulation of values that modern citizens had chosen to adopt. In Britain it was signalled by the election of Conservative governments after 2010 dedicated to the 'free market economy' and neoliberal economic and social policies (Vogel 2017). This was at least the position in England which accounted for around 83 per cent of the UK's undergraduate population. The national systems of Scotland and Wales, however, diverged from England at least in terms of student financial support and other elements during this time though the underlying philosophy and policy considerations which shaped their higher education did not.

Many of the developments destined to bring higher education into a mass market originated in Australia and served as a test-bed for mass higher education well beyond its own shores. Education and higher learning was always *sui-generis*, in that it existed in and for itself, yet in modern times it is increasingly a form of social policy designed to produce change and development which is commensurate with political values and positions. These positions have increasingly been identified with national economic policies which viewed higher education as an essential element of the national economy, rather than as a symbol of modern nationhood with its need to engage with social exclusion, multi-racism and multiculturalism (Meaney 2013: 36). This problem signals in our view the vital and emergent possibilities of Access and widening participation in Australia – possibilities which remain to be completed but which cannot be separated from the wider issues which shape social and economic realities.

The global expansion of higher education

Within the lifespan of a single individual universities have been fundamentally transformed and the purposes of universities have likewise been thoroughly re-shaped as they have been brought under public scrutiny. This has been a contested and argumentative process and it is

by no means finished. What is undeniably clear, however, is the fact that higher education is a keystone in our evolving and changing society and economy. As a key to the future its significance is controversial and demands greater understanding and analysis. Universities are now a near-universal phenomenon and contain arguably our greatest minds and thinkers. Yet this extensive knowledge system with its world-wide scope and reach, its diversity and potential is challenged as never before as we seek the educational means of overcoming what many now see as existential crises facing modern societies. Charting the changes that made mass higher education possible involves, we believe, grasping the realities of a mixed-up world and one whose continuing existence is called into question by the wicked issues of climate change and environmental destruction. This is the true and deeply disturbing context of modern concerns with learning and the basis for continuing to ask – what are education and universities for, if not for this? These are issues ultimately of social justice and express the core values and goals of a decent and democratic society. Without a fair and commensurate higher education, we believe, there can be no proper advance towards this goal.

How and why mass access to higher education became possible contains two narratives related to our themes: we, the educators and the learners, struggled with ourselves about the meaning of learning and the striving for knowledge that could transform social life; and recognition of the need to re-imagine the social purposes of a university education. These were fundamental impulses driving the access agenda, although for many of the learners and teachers involved directly in the Access movement, the subtext of the narratives were not immediately accessible. At the level of personal experience how something was actually taught and assessed and the benefits of difficult study were the objects of attention. How the knowledge gained could articulate with a life lived perhaps at the margins of the educational establishment was not a matter for speculative fantasies about the glittering prizes of academia. Results and outcomes were expected and a utilitarian attitude perhaps prevailed for people who sacrificed their time and energies in the hope of winning a desired place in higher education. At the end of the day the curriculum matters most for the learner. Yet beneath the life and learning in the classroom ran the life and learning of people in their communities of aspiration and identity. How knowledge was organised and won was always a struggle for the marginalised and for the educators the purposes of higher education was a prize still to be won. These narrative subtexts were present in the historical 'genesis' of Access and widening participation, they were present in the evolution and maturing of higher education in the later 20th century and they continue to drive *engagement* with the fundamental social values of a shared ideal of what universities should be and how they should relate to their communities.

To fully grasp the significance of educational and social change we believe it is vital to understand the driving forces for change and, to borrow a phrase from the social and feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham (1999), identify the 'threads through time' which yield the context of our understanding. We identified these as being focussed on meritocracy and the growth of free market and neoliberal thinking, the significance of elite privilege in education in a world of mass higher education, the evolving shape of university engagement and the need for critical and engaged thinking. All of these require conceptual and intellectual frameworks within which we can understand the social purposes of education in a changing and volatile world where our ecological and social survival is at risk and our social worlds are precarious and unstable. The period with which we are engaged involves pivoting between the last quarter of the last century and the third decade of the 21st century – a half century during which education played a crucial role in both conserving and changing the modern world.

The period of educational change we reference in this book was also a time of social and cultural change when new ways of behaving, of sexual freedoms and of the possibilities of new identities for some were realised. Education was a crucial part of this mixture as a discourse emerged around the need to remove 'barriers to access' which were well documented in research including that achieved in Australia which addressed access and social justice concerns which were then current (Atweh and Bland 1999; Ferrier and Heagney 2000) and arguably remain with us today. The historical barriers have been recognised in recent times and efforts made to remove the most egregious and unjust discriminations against excluded groups as mass higher educational access has been rolled out. Nevertheless, those who do not get a private school education, a wealthy inner-city upbringing, the social confidence and 'habitus' passed on within middle-class life and a sense of belonging to the best colleges and universities, do not achieve, in the main, access to the best universities and the most desirable and rewarding jobs and futures… 'Despite an expansion of access to greater proportions of Australian society over the past generation, universities remain exclusive institutions, their prestige and social value determined in large measure by whom they choose to exclude. This has resulted in the paradox that while the Australian higher education sector has become much larger and socially more inclusive and elitist, it has also become a more intense creator of socially divisive hierarchies in Australian society'. (Wesley 2023: 167).

Barriers to access – then and now

We have used the notion of a thread through time to indicate our belief that to fully understand the growth and meaning of access to higher education and widening participation in its context of social and economic change, we must grasp what happened in the immediate generational past and be able to assess its importance for the current debates and controversies. We believe, for example, that the causes of exclusion in the past cannot be individualised and that the roots of social and educational disadvantage lie in the systemic educational and social systems which impact on groups and collectivities of people. The barriers to access in the last decades of the 20th century were real enough and we must acknowledge both the progress made in removing the worst and perhaps most obvious of the discriminations against working people and communities. We need also to acknowledge the persistence and 'hidden' forces which are still unavowed and unrecognised in the reproduction of educational inequalities. The schema at Table 1 summarises these barriers as they continue to impact our higher education systems.

The removal of barriers to Access and access to a more egalitarian higher education was viewed as part of a rising tide of social equality and change. It was known that accessing knowledge was both a survival strategy and a means for changing a dysfunctional and unequal society into something better. This brought into question the viability and practices of the older elite and academically highly selective institutions. Universities were once thought by some to be truly civic institutions, neither state controlled nor market driven. Collegial control and guild membership by academics blended shared learning with prestige and it was assumed that higher learning contributed to the public good. Universities were generally admired and the ancient ones commonly thought to be idyllic places where ivy-covered cloisters and well-endowed libraries enabled scholars to think the best thoughts. A civilised society encouraged its universities and allowed culture to flourish. As mass participation was rolled out across the world from the 1980s onwards, the removal of the formal barriers to access was accompanied and driven by the globalisation of higher education itself, which would profoundly impact the older 'cultural' values and capacities of the universities, catapulting them into a more competitive environment which was more open to access but more vulnerable to market forces and paradoxically government control over student admissions and fees.

Table 1 Main barriers to access and widening adult participation in higher education: a summary

Barriers to access	Issues and problems experienced
Personal attributes	attitudes, perceptions and expectations that affect the ability to participate, low aspiration, low self-esteem, absence of motivation lack of a culture of study, negative previous educational experiences, lack of incentives to study
General tendencies	under-valuing of one's own abilities, a sense that learning is not for 'our kind of people', the perception or belief that one is too old to learn, lack of knowledge of the benefits of returning to learn, working class students lack a 'habitus' or disposition towards acting and thinking about higher education
Situational	costs of study and attendance, lack of time, distance from educational facilities, absence of appropriate study facilities and support
Informational	difficulties in accessing information about the educational provision available in the locality, difficulties in accessing technical and computing support
Institutional	rigid admission criteria, rigidity of programmes and programme delivery, selection of students in favour of the 'regular' or 'traditional' student, lack of student services and support catering for the needs of adult learners (e.g. ethnic minorities, other underrepresented groups), lack of supportive institutional cultures to embrace adult learners (e.g. adults' experience of a sense of alienation), buildings not adaptable to handle disability, organisational resistance to change
Professional	lack of awareness amongst academic staff about diversity and adult learners' needs, staff fears about lowering standards
Systems level	divisions at all levels between vocational and academic study and training creates lifelong obstacles to learning, lack of government support for adult learners in higher education, lack of resourcing/funding of institutional commitment to include students from underrepresented groups in higher education, lack of transport for students in rural areas

(sources : McGivney 1991; Williams 1997; Woodrow 1998; European Commission 2013)

Globalisation, market forces and hierarchies of elites in the learning society

What was not well understood, as the 20th century came to its end, was the impending impact on education of globalisation and an era of neoliberalism in economic and geo-political life across the industrialised world. Market forces were beginning to play an ever more assertive role in social and educational life. On the one hand the commercialisation and monetisation of consumer demand for education and qualifications could offer previously unattainable places in universities for some, but on the other hand new forms of selection and exclusion were evolving out of the old system and some new old inequalities were installed and some old ones confirmed. Change was accelerated as nations competed in this new world order which coincided with the invention of digital economies and surveillance capitalism along with the rise of China as the major world manufacturer of consumer goods. The growth of mass participation in higher education occurred at precisely the time globalisation and cosmopolitanism was taking off, though the *systemic* change that was about to impact was less easily discerned. One criticism of the response of universities to such pressures focussed on the way universities old and new created new courses, which it was claimed by some gave neither a rigorous intellectual education nor a well-founded vocational training. The elite tradition in universities claimed there was a dumbing down of standards whilst at the same time many bemoaned the loss of vocational learning associated with technical institutes and polytechnics which became 'up-graded 'to university status.

Mass higher academic education for all was a response to the realities of what was referred to as the 'learning society' or sometimes known as the knowledge economy in which tertiary education was to become the sine-qua-non for an individual acquiring a decent job or training in a world of economic change and uncertainty. A world where China became the manufacturing hub of world production and where in the older industrial societies whole industries could disappear almost overnight yet where skills shortages could cripple a nation's economic growth. In this unstable yet burgeoning world of growth and change, higher education credentials were the means of getting ahead of the competition and securing a place in the scheme of things and the onset of massification of HE was the signal that alerted people the world over. Unfortunately a system of competitive universities with limited places for the few at the top and few high value jobs generated inequality right at the heart of the mass system. The number of elite places does not increase in proportion to the increase in student places in general and not everyone can have a top job. Higher education institutions responded by creating a hierarchy, in effect a league table, of performance, where 'quality' and 'excellence' were judged through research capacity and outputs. This created a steeply graded, stratified, vertical system of universities associated with research excellence (Davies and Zarifa 2012; Marginson 2016). This was not only an elite system with a steep gradient at the top, it was also a highly differentiated mass system where many different institutions claimed high value status based on their particular location in a place, or for an academic or professional specialism. It was also a highly managed system with little scope for localised managerial autonomy and decision making within or across a university. It was far from the idea of a democratic university (Rustin 2023; Davies 2023). It is clear that not every institution can be excellent in the same things and it is equally clear that the frequent claim to world class leadership in academic fields cannot be true for all. This was the context in which the claims of Access and equity groups met the widening participation and growth intentions of what were to become mass higher education institutions (HEIs). Most of these institutions were universities or aspired to become universities, which in the course of time they did. The Access agenda wished to both modify the

terms of competition for entry to higher education in favour of excluded groups and also to question the rightness and fairness of elitism itself. Private advantage, gained through what was essentially publicly financed higher education, was the issue here and Access highlighted the limits of a system which, though public in reality, was dedicated in much of its thinking and ideology to the belief that educational achievement was a private good and properly reflected the talents and meritocratic abilities of the individual.

The expansion of higher education in the last four decades has been a process of global significance. In Australia and Britain it has re-shaped economies, social life, culture and aspirations for whole populations. It has made both acknowledged contributions to the social and common good and delivered benefits for the whole of society by raising the general standard of literacy and creating knowledge useful for all of us. It has enabled more civilised and highly literate life to be more widely if not universally experienced. It has delivered science and research for the public good in ways unimagined in previous generations. However, the generic character of higher education has evolved into a highly stratified and elitist system in which unfair competition is managed by governments and HE institutions. A quasi-market for publicly financed goods which benefit mostly private citizens from elite or middle-class groups, and based on competitive status outcomes, serves to reduce the capacity of education for the public good. The wider masses and the working classes are in general excluded from the elite places and positions and the value of widening participation itself is severely reduced. Australia has a broad layer of middle status universities which mitigates but does not remove the effects of the steeply graded hierarchy of universities in the top group of 8 (Go8) (Marginson ibid: 77). In Britain the stratification is both more severe and more mediated. The ancient elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge not only produce a scientific and academic elite but they reproduce the socially divisive class structure that pervades many aspects of social, political and economic life in Britain. The large number of regional and local universities ensures a measure of diversity is achieved but the overall character and ethos of the many is towards homogeneity and sameness, both in their curriculum offer and in their teaching and learning and pedagogical strategies. The high stratification of the mass system is used to manage the access to different types of education which themselves lead on to the desirable jobs in the labour market. It is the ranking and ordering of status which is portrayed as positions of value in descending order. They may be all doing the same things to establish the rankings but they cannot be at the same position in the ranked hierarchies. Only one can be the best and only one other can be next in the hierarchy and so on down to the least valued. Of course in theory the rankings can change but in reality change at the top is minimal and circulates between the elite of the elites. Middle ranking universities strive for positional advantage by manipulating the variables and outputs in the various performance categories and more movement up and down the reputational scales is possible. This can be said to be a way in which the distributional politics of education is managed as different universities fight to establish their positions in the league tables for such things as 'student support', 'student satisfaction', 'job placements after graduation' and 'value-added' and 'student progress and retention'. The realities are that the elite universities through their domination of research excellence and their possession of corporate wealth accumulated over long periods always manage to come out on top.

It has become clear that the growth and expansion of higher education has helped to reshape the modern world as part of the global reach of knowledge systems, communicative and computational rationality and the growth of education viewed as both public and private goods. In Australia it is widely held that higher education is the 4th largest contributor to national wealth production; in post-industrial Britain further and higher education are key to economic and social life. In both nations higher education is a contested field, especially in the matter of how inequality is addressed and redressed. HE growth and competitiveness, we suggest, both creates capacity for the common good yet it can through its excessive stratification and creation of hierarchies reduce the common good and the value of widening participation.

Education and a university education in particular, however, had always meant more than acquiring a passport to a profession and improved life chances. By the 21st century, at the point of *felt* and *lived* experience for its students and teachers, going to university was an engagement for a **democratising** public higher education. Its curriculum, generally if not universally, set itself against discrimination based on racism, sexism and on social class. However, traditional, elite higher education had unavowedly in its past created a system which had worked in favour of white, middle class and male students, but it was clear that this was no longer fit for purpose and change was occurring. Mass participation in higher education was a recognition that individuals lived and worked in communities and had collective interests which could not be met by simple self-advancement for talented individuals for whom 'meritocracy' might offer a route up and out of their circumstances. Admission to university was a route to a better social outcome for all involved. It was a demand for change whilst accepting that those demands were often only realisable within an elitist and relatively closed system. The expansion of universities was, we shall argue, both an adaptation to a changing and sometimes burgeoning economy bent on global expansion which rewarded those with the best education and professional qualifications, supposedly on the basis of their merit and deserved achievements, and yet containing a countervailing **Access movement** which was opposed to a dominant belief in the power and 'rightness' of meritocracy.

Access: another chance to succeed

Access with a capital A in this book denotes the existence, particularly but not exclusively in Britain and Northern Ireland, of special courses and programmes of learning for those people who had been socially and educationally marginalised or excluded. Learning programmes were built on a range of ideas and educational principles and practices, many drawn from the experiences of adult and community educators over previous generations. Myriad courses and learning schemes existed and continue under the rubric of Access and we have used the term 'movement' to suggest the affinities they shared about how learning and teaching might be organised in alternative ways to the conventional schooling which modern states imposed on their populations. Schooling, which down through the ages had itself been the object of contestation and struggle, had failed to bring learning and opportunities to ALL its students, leaving many to search for alternatives and another chance to succeed. The Access movement was then a varied and creative medley of themes and institutions; a Pandora's box of learning opportunities which differed from place to place and from country to country. It was essentially co-terminous with the rise of mass higher education yet was always distinguishable from it, offering the potential for alternative ways of conceptualising higher education through radical doubt and questioning of the types and missions of traditional universities.

Access students brought with them into higher education their sense of identity as members of excluded minorities, which in some cases was actually a majority of any given population group. They were those who, for whatever reasons, had been excluded from accessing mainstream further and higher learning opportunities and as a result had suffered real exclusion from those chances in life that were increasingly conferred only through education and the accreditation of learning. There were individuals within this broad category from every imaginable aspect of life and society,

yet most identified as members of a group. As such they became 'special groups', some of which were generic such as 'women returners', some of whom were ethnically or racially identified, some of whom had class or status designations around poverty issues, housing, disabilities or in terms of geographical and cultural differences. The Access movement which made provision for this range of people and invented a curriculum and pedagogies which were appropriate for them was simultaneously incorporated within an expanding further and higher education system offering enhanced opportunities to an increasingly diverse population. Yet this was a system which continued to subordinate those people who existed at the margins of our societies. The Access courses and forms of learning which evolved through the struggles of the excluded remained marginal to the central concerns of universities. The mainstream universities nearly everywhere were focussed on the economic value of degrees and competitive status of research rather than on the educational value of a university education and its capacity to transform the lives of people who had been educationally disadvantaged and socially excluded. There existed and still does today, a deeply entrenched view that those with the most privileged access to education tend to perform better and are regarded as the most able and talented. They tend to attend the most prestigious universities and have the most successful employment outcomes. Privilege becomes identified with academic ability and institutional prestige is mistaken for high quality education. This was the context in which access became both a demand for admission to the academy and concurrently a desire for it to change.

This book argues that the impact and success of Access as a movement within the conventional educational system has demonstrated that universities are deeply engaged generating opportunities AND in reproducing inequalities. This has meant that the contribution Access made to the educational and opportunity outcomes **within** university provision has facilitated a challenge to the wider belief that social privilege can be justified or equated to ability and educational attainment. It has also meant that Access has thrown light on other aspects of university learning such as hierarchical and standardising pedagogies, restrictive access policies which continue to disadvantage marginal groups and on the need for critical thinking about the world – what we later term a universal literacy, needed for challenging the existential issues of global warming and climate change.

The argument being made here is that a **democratic** access and university engagement should be seen as an attempt to find and construct alternative knowledge around the themes and issues that have bedevilled communities of disadvantage. Engagement and widening participation and open access implicitly challenge the existence of elitism and social division in our society as a necessary step towards social progress, equity and social justice. If education is to make its contribution to a new and progressive social contract which fits us to deal with the issues facing us today, then it must make its public purpose clear. The agenda for social transformation is necessary and never more needed than in the third decade of the 21st century and into our near future. The changeover from an industrial society to a knowledge society in the advanced capitalist and some formerly agriculturally based societies such as China and India has been relatively sudden and has bitten deeply into how the world economy and politics are organised. This has produced many losers and few winners in the 'western nations' with their roots in European cultures and economies.

The belief in the universities as drivers of change for social and economic opportunity has been challenged by those who argue that meritocracy itself has failed on broadly speaking philosophical grounds (Sandel 2021). This question is debated sociologically in relation to schooling and universities in this book and forms a crucial context for how we understand the role of education in either generating equality of opportunity or re-enforcing structural and cultural inequalities between different class, race, ethnic and gender groups. It is certain that the many older industrial societies can no longer rely on an 'achievement' culture rooted in traditional industries and their communities. Neither can they rely on commonsense ideas of 'what you earn depends on what you can learn' where a university degree is seen as the passport to meaningful jobs, life-time careers and futures with secured pensions. Mass achievement in higher education, however, has yielded contradictory results: successes for some in the elites of the economic and social strata which make up modern social life but a devaluing of 'common' qualifications at first degree and even at masters levels. The economic losers without any higher learning have been morally condemned to the hinterland between a proletarian existence and the members of the educated new classes who believe they only have themselves to thank for their successes. On the side of the dispossessed and dislocated people a nagging feeling of humiliation can be detected whose resentments have social and political effects (Goodwin 2023; Brnda 2023). In the struggle to maintain the 'achievement culture' as a reality, democratic forces the world over adopted the notion of a burgeoning learning society and culture, not least through the wide application of new communication technologies and products.

What has fanned the flames of anger has been the untruthfulness of the apparently justified success of the winners through their better use of technocratic and performance based selection. This is also a keynote theme of this book which examines the way access to elite education is in fact a degraded caricature of fair and open competition for places in schools and universities that deliver real competitive advantages to those that win them. The well-off and rich secure the future for their children through private schooling and by spending on tuition outside school hours or they secure admissions for their offspring through long-standing connections, donations and bribes. The British and American systems of recruitment to the elite universities are highly developed examples of how cultural and professional capital and actual capital, ie, money and wealth in one form or another, are used to secure privileged access for some to the exclusion of others. If one person has a place at Oxford then its scarcity value means another person cannot. A crucial question is then whether this publicly supported place is really a private positional good or is it a public good and thus should be allocated according to democratic principles and policies? When we argue that education can be the reproductive agency of inequality rooted in unequal social classes and power in modern society, this is what it means in reality.

All of this attention to education takes place within state and public sponsorship of learning; within what Jurgen Habermas (1989 and 2022; Calhoun 1992) refers to as 'the structural transformation of the public sphere'. The apparently 'private' matter of choosing the best type of education for a child is in fact a matter of deep social and public significance. Education, we have argued, is inevitably about the common good – a contested concept admittedly – and this matter has distinctive Australian and British provenance which is a key focus of this book (Marginson 2016 ibid: ch 10; Goodall 2019; Fieldhouse 1996; Nyland and Davies 2022). It involves questions and problems of how learning, schooling and university education are legitimised and rationalised within the wider nation state, across the globalisation of higher education and within the arena of individual choice. The choice of education is a political one in the public sphere because it involves the way the modern capitalistic social-welfare state works and how inequalities are combatted and hopefully overcome. This is the interface and interconnection with what we have called the Access movement and agenda, which we suggest exists to challenge inequalities (and are urgently required to face the future challenges of climate change and ecological destruction). New and different methods of learning and pedagogy are needed for this enterprise and an engagement with the pervasive ideas of individual upward

social mobility through education is required. New ways of knowing which can be located perhaps beyond the academic campus and outside of the framework of the existing academic disciplines can be imagined and brought into being (Zuber-Skerrit and Teare 2013; Teare 2018; Davies and Nyland 2022). These are the requirements of social justice in an era of great social and economic upheaval, global political uncertainty and instability and the need to recognise and act on our precarious ecological environment if the human race is to survive.

In a world characterised by divisions and differences and still marked by forms of oppression and injustice, learning and education does not decline in importance. The existentially threatening issues which have come to the fore and into public awareness and which force us all to address our future prospects for survival have come to consciousness since the explosion of mass higher education. They categorically impel us to address our future use and application of education and higher learning for the common good. We are aware of the dangers of seeming to inhabit a permanent crisis which continually defeats us, just as we know that unfounded optimism cannot be based on hope or simply trusting to a benign fate or magical solutions through new technology. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of an objective index by which we might judge the seriousness of the multiple crises impacting on our societies, though the United Nations sustainability framework offers points of departure for this (in Part 6 below). When we look for explanations and theories of our current dilemmas and challenges we encounter what Peter Scott (1997: 25) called an epistemological unravelling which has come about in the interstices of the massification of higher education. He asserts that there is no clear consensus among educational and social theorists about the validity of knowledge. A shared academic culture rooted in supposedly universal cognitive values has disappeared. The methodologies of truth-seeking have been called into question and the idea of science as robust theoretical frameworks built on empirical inquiry has been deconstructed (Scott ibid: 14). But there is contested knowledge – which is, we argue, one of the recurrent themes of Access and the struggle for democratic participation in mass higher education. Whilst we must engage with those who favour positional or subjective knowledge, we view this as part of the debate for the validity of objective knowledge and truth (Seidman 1998; Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020) which we argue was integral to the Access movement and the struggle for rational, ethical and really useful knowledge to transform the suppressed achievements of the common people into actual social results.

We need to know our history and to know ourselves to do this. Knowing how education has been transformed in the past should help us grasp the nature of such transformations so that the nature and necessary understanding for our future transformations can be constructed together. And the challenge remains: we need learning and university engagement for democratic and a more equal, progressive social change above all.

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Chapter 2

Mass higher education: charting the change

A key narrative for this book is the growth of mass higher education in society. We argue that its roots lie deep within the struggle for adult learning and intellectual life which is to be found in the history of the British working class (Fieldhouse 1996; Rose 2021) and in the contemporary demands of modern populations for credentials and qualifications which equip them for a better life. In Australia education has for long enough been associated with an egalitarian sentiment that believes in the existence of something we recognise as the common good (Marginson 2016).We do not discount the claim that higher education institutions themselves have their own effects on both the possibilities for equal opportunity for excluded groups AND in manufacturing and reproducing social inequality. The focus is on universities but also addresses learning and schooling, which are not necessarily the same. Our theme is about access and opportunity and the ideas and conditions which facilitate access and those that prevent it. Huge and diverse forces try to control this phenomenon and each succeeding generation is socialised into the life of the nation within its schools, colleges and universities. It remains topical and relevant even as education and communication systems change and adapt at speed and knowledge itself becomes ever more a part of a 'crisis' in higher education (Barnett and Griffin 1997; Ashwin 2020; Scott 2021; Featherstone 2023). There are elements of commonality and shared experience in this even though individuals and groups and certainly nations differ in how they respond to such crises. This book explores some of these factors, mainly from Australian and British perspectives whilst recognising that higher education is one of the most transformational aspects of globalisation, impacting everywhere regardless of national borders.

There are critiques of the commercialisation and marketing reform programmes of modern universities which have pictured for us the corrosive effects of 21st century neoliberalism (Thomas, 2011; Collini 2012, 2018; Nyland and Davies 2022) but for the most whilst seeking reform these have defended the traditional knowledge-generating purposes of university education – and its civic importance (Brink 2018). There are other critiques of the tendency to treat education as an aspect of human capital theory and to focus on its economic value and the marketisation of its products as private rather than public goods and manage to ignore the truly social character of higher education (Marginson 2013, 2016). This volume seeks to augment this perspective by drawing on a critique of the factors that preserve inequalities in higher education whilst delineating possibilities for resistance and solidarity that exist both within and beyond the universities themselves (Goodall 2019; Rustin 2023; Cartland 2023). It begins with the need to outline what drives the expansion of higher education.

Expectations of higher education and access

Simon Marginson in his ground-breaking work on *Higher Education and the Common Good* explores the social meaning of the worldwide expansion of HE. In 1970, he asserts, there were 33 million HE students in the world and by 2000 it was 100 million. By 2014 it was more than 207 million and in the decade since then it has grown to an estimated 235 million (UNESCO 2024). Between 1970 and 2013 world populations expanded by a factor of 1.3 and real GDP (wealth defined as gross domestic product) by 3.63 but enrolments in HE grew by a factor of 6.12 (UNESCO 2015; World Bank 2015; Marginson 2016: 24). Although it is an exaggeration there is an element of truth in the statement that higher education is for nearly everyone. Many, many countries throughout all parts of the world are moving towards what we can call universal participation in higher education. When national HE systems reach 50 per cent participation and above, which is commonly achieved, they keep growing towards 100 per cent and every student in some societies is expected to be a high achiever (Marginson ibid: 25).

This growth of education is astonishing and in one sense it encapsulates the story of our time because it is an expression of the growth of a globalised world of production, distribution, communication and knowledge production and exchange which continues to change our lives at a rapid pace. It brings with it a world of great change and uncertainty as economic growth and social progress are highly unpredictable in their effects and outcomes. The emergence of social, cultural and geo-political crises, of conflict and wars locally and regionally along with the crises of ecological breakdown and climate change threaten to destabilise an already uncertain world. Understanding what higher education is and what it can mean in such a world becomes an urgent task. It demands our attention be turned upon a range of issues which include the importance of labour markets, how populations are selected and stratified, how state policy has emerged, and how attitudes, choices and behaviour are formed around learning. There is no single factor or cause that can explain the variety and impact of higher education and no single expression of Access has ever existed. There is diversity and difference, yet there are common themes and tendencies which drive expansion and shape the meaning of learning and education itself.

The state and government policy together drive expansion and massification in many national systems. Education expansion is not separate from economic and social relations in any society and it is clear that rising and pent-up middle-class demand and the growth of relative economic prosperity as a world phenomenon explains popular instrumental aspirations for higher education (Marginson 2016: 35; Mandler 2020). In Britain a rising middle class in the 20th century was later accompanied by a fragmenting working class in the 21st century, both of which fuelled demand for change for which education was seen as the motor. Access was the form of education that gave expression to the socially excluded populations of Britain as it adapted to a post-imperial world and to a globalised, and for Britain, a post-industrial future under what was to prove to be neoliberal, small state governments committed to the idea that private goods were inherently and intrinsically of greater worth than public goods and services. This was the context for the growth of participation in British mass higher education and the emergence of Access within that wider system. Based on a belief in human capital theory, Britain along with Australia advanced and fostered HE as an opportunity framework for economic growth in a competitive world economy. How this could deliver on the myriad expectations of competing economic, social and cultural classes and groups which were arranged in hierarchies of wealth, power and culture -and in Britain's case overlaid with snobbery, elitism and class division (Savage 2015; Dorling 2018; Todd 2021) – is in one sense the foundational narrative of this book. These inequalities were present in the Access founding period and remain problematical in the 21st century as we explore the limitations of educational systems which prevent access to so many whilst simultaneously expanding the numbers of students.

Economic growth alone, however, does not cause or explain higher education expansion. There is social demand from large populations which signals a desire for change. Families and communities are sensitive to changing opportunities around them and for their children's futures. The HE systems in Australia and Britain transitioned from small but influential and wealthy elites, socialised through selective schools, to a mass participation level and putatively to a universal HE system at approximately the same period at the late stages of the 20th century and beginning decades of the 21st. In both societies the long term persistence of inequalities meant that in their different but similar ways access and widening participation 'mutated' into a mass participation system which preserved the elite institutions and allowed or encouraged them to continue to separate the deserving from the less deserving populations and so to reap the benefits of an unfair, elite education at the cost of denying

others a fair chance to succeed (Davies and Davies 2021). How this came about is the meat and drink of this book but it is a 'braided' narrative with competing strands of explanation.

What drives the system

Popular social demand around ideas of social betterment are often thought to be responsible for the growth of mass higher education, not just the needs of economic development. Modern higher education has long been viewed as a symbol of rising social status (Trow 1973: 41) and as such is quasi-compulsory for certain social groups. Aspirations must to some degree match the realities of outcomes if they are to be fulfilled and so HE systems must be aligned in some way or other to job opportunities and careers since it is still work and gainful employment which confers for most people the chance of a decent life and prosperity. In a changing world institutional and cultural change itself can shape how any given system evolves in response to its local environment so local differences matter and there is no global HE system, though there is international co-operation especially at higher levels of research which produces significant social value. In general HE is a creature of the nation state and reflects the national values, priorities and concerns (Scott 2011).

Following Marginson (2016: 47-48) it is arguable that we have reached a position where Australia and Britain have mass participation moving towards being 'near-universal' systems which are divided into a three-part structure. There are highly socially valued, elite institutions some of which are ancient in character and in Britain serve highly selected elites. Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh (the 'ancients') and London are the sites they occupy. The ancients are in addition 'mass' universities in that they have relatively large student numbers, though these numbers are small in relation to overall national enrolments. In Australia the highly selective GO8 universities occupy an analogous elite position. The second part of the structure involves the majority of universities which offer low value inclusion in comparison to the super-elite institutions and serve the middle and working class aspirations. A third sector is that of the excluded – the many people, though now increasingly a large minority, who in spite of the growth of mass provision do not get to participate in higher education (Marginson ibid: 47-48). Access and the wider participation movement have played a role in all three levels indicated here, though as a movement Access has had least impact on the elite level. The narrative of growth of the mass participation system must encompass not only those at the margins of social inclusion but it must account for the mainstream rise in participation across all social classes and groups and for the younger school-aged cohorts and the role of equity as a guiding concept for educational policy. The concerns for inclusion and equity are both an outcome of long historical developments and struggles for the extension of education to national populations at every level and an indicator of what is still to be achieved in higher education.

From low participation to a near-universal system: when equity equates with access

One of the paradoxes of the early 1980s in both Australia and Britain was the prevalence of high youth unemployment and relatively low educational retention (Dale 1985; Mason 1988; Marginson 1997). The United States had similar concerns which had encouraged the 'working classes to go to college' (Shor 1987). There was an emerging consensus that a high participation education system, combined with strategies for unemployment could alleviate the problem along with visions of economic modernisation. The social costs of socioeconomic inequality were high with youth crime, social dislocation and the waste of human capital acting as signals for the long-standing social exclusion of many black youth in particular (Hebdige and Powell 1975). In England youth rebellions, especially in Black communities, spilled over into violence and confrontation with the police and authorities with race riots in Brixton, London and Liverpool and elsewhere in 1981(Tomlinson 2019: ch 5).These events signalled the growing need for participation in education and training for the marginalised and excluded 'equity groups' in Britain. The educational expansion that began in the 1980s and early 1990s functioned as a substitute for employment and in a relatively short period of time the historical youth labour market ceased to exist. In Britain by 2015 all young people were legally in education or in some form of training up to the age of 18.

The educational policies adopted by Australian and British governments were committed to market solutions to social and economic problems. This involved targeting those at the margins – firstly for those who could be persuaded to train in vocational skills where costs were very substantially lower than those for higher education. Expansion of TAFE in Australia and YTS and vocational further education (FE) in Britain (Dale 1985) were the preferred solutions, whilst growth in higher education slowed (Marginson 1997: 182). By the mid-1980s, however, the emphasis had shifted and governments in Australia and Britain were beginning to insist that further and higher education expansion and participation were solutions to the social issues. In Australia the Participation and Equity Program (PEP) was invented and government began to move to a new strategy based on increased secondary school retention plus increased participation in higher education (Karmel 1983). The changes that took place had some of the characteristics of a more student-centred approach to learning, associated in Britain with the emerging Access agenda including a more flexible curriculum, creative and supportive assessment systems, credentialing (recognition of achievement in less traditional ways than by external examinations), improvement of parent/teacher relations, better school organisation and links with community and post-school organisations (Fraser and Kennedy 1991). Student financial assistance for school and HE students in Australia rose dramatically in this period and by the 1990s participation at year 12 was no longer academically selective but was inclusive, except in the elite private schools. Competition for entry to higher education became more intense in Australia and the positional value of elite universities in Britain began to emerge ever more strongly, reflecting the steeper gradient of inequality in class conscious Britain.

Popular demand plus government policy interventions drove the ever-increasing participation in schooling and higher education in both Australia and Britain. This was an authentic response to changing social mores, shifting values and perceptions of what might be achieved only through education by increasingly large numbers of ordinary people – of all classes. In Australia, however, it obscured, something of great significance – within the intensified demand for HE was the less visible presence of people on the margins, the equity groups, who also could not be persuaded to train for vocational skills in the training (TAFE) sector and who were likewise under-represented across the HE sector. Yet the most rapid growth in HE course work degrees was in health sciences, agriculture, science and business – that is to say, in vocational higher education (Marginson 1997: 187). It was not the focus on vocational education itself, however, that was responsible for the low participation across the designated SES groups. Other conditions needed to be factored into the explanation of differential participation and achievement. Inequalities were embedded in social, racial, ethnic and cultural communities of identity and interest. There was at the same time a striking increase in women's participation in HE, a phenomenon shared again in the British context.

Targeted financial support was given to Indigenous and Torres Island populations, though the proportion of these students rose only to 1.07 per cent of the total by 1994 and a large majority of these were enrolled in arts, humanities and social science/education degrees. By the end of the

1980s vocational (TAFE) enrolments of younger students were falling though for older teenagers it was rising. At the same time academic enrolments for degrees were increasing, reflecting the higher value placed on university qualifications as vocational credentials. High youth unemployment in Australia continued into the 1990s and eventually, as in the UK, the teenage labour market was abolished and young people were all enrolled in either education or training as a proxy for work.

The emergence of a mass post-compulsory education system into a near-universal system belied the fact that this system was highly differentiated and unequal; some forms of participation were more desirable and conveyed more social power and prestige than others. The 'vertical' hierarchy of institutions and its meaning for the wider population was hidden by the official policies which had as their objectives participation as an end in itself. Participation was never redistributed on an equal basis. Once mass HE was in place and it became clear that inequalities had not been removed and that furthermore, access to equal opportunities had not removed embedded inequalities, it became equally clear that something other than high ability was determining the distribution of opportunities (Marginson 1997: 194).

It is the continuing nature and structure of inequality, in the teeth as it were of the exponential growth of educational systems and opportunities, which provides the source of concern and critique for this book. Widening participation and the use of equality of opportunity concepts should have removed barriers to access and enabled a more equal outcome to be achieved as a stable and intended characteristic of the social structure. But this did not happen and in fact the near-universal participation in higher education actually points to the limits of the relation of equality to merit. Universal participation/access in effect, ironically, came to substitute for equal rights and equality. Marginson argues that in the government of education in Australia, access now became the whole of that equality policy. In the new language the word 'equality' was replaced by 'equity', defined as access and participation for all. Specific programmes were implemented for particular groups, including Aboriginal and disadvantaged groups and their participation was seen as one of the key measures of equity. Although such programmes might have looked like access schemes or learning programs they made no claim to change or challenge the framework of economic and pedagogical conditions. The right to an equal start now became reduced simply to the right to enter the race. (Marginson 1997: 197). The concept of 'equity' came to stand in for that of a meaningful definition of equality of opportunity and it was useful since it conveyed no determinate standard or measure of equality whilst seemingly making a statement about fairness of treatment for different social groups. It also implies a sense of ownership in that property is often referred to as equity in legal parlance. The designation of equity groups as a core concept in educational reform carried with it no signification of equalising or levelling up inequalities other than in the proportions of a group represented in a level or an institution.

This understanding is one of the foundational issues which underpin concern with Access and widening participation, that is to say, the centrality of social justice concerns for higher learning cannot be just a tool for state welfare societies to achieve their policy goals. Changing the educational participation behaviour of financially disadvantaged groups is without doubt a worthy objective, but it is a far cry from understanding and dealing with the root causes of social inequality. Fair and equal access to essential services such as education must be supported but this is not a substitute for universal rights to economic and social resources. These resources are in fact, as we argue in this book, constitutive of the educational mission of Access. Education itself in its broader context, including its pedagogical content such as critical thinking and social critique, needs Access as we have defined it as a movement in order to shift concern from the targeted minority margins of the system to the central core concerns of the socially *advantaged*. It is they who have the wealth and power to protect their own privileges in and through education systems which are overtly committed to equality of opportunity. These are the concerns of this volume, as they were of contemporary analysis of Access some quarter of a century ago (Davies 1995a, 1997, 2000), though arguably we now know more about the longer term effects of mass participation and the persistence of social inequality in its modern forms.

There is a further point in relation to universal participation underpinned by targeting, in that education equity (fair access for marginal groups via proportional representation in the hierarchy of institutions) came to be seen as the guarantor of vocational and social equity. Once access for all was secured and completion rates for disadvantaged groups were close to the norm, then success and failure was no longer the responsibility of government. Competition in the market could be allowed to run its course and upward social mobility would go to those who merited it. Equalisation and redistribution became 'participation' and 'equity' and the different ways and meanings of participation in HE were treated in policy terms as equivalents, though as everyone knew, HE participation via Eton and Oxbridge and their equivalents in Australia and the USA, are a very different set of experiences from attending a state secondary school and a middle-ranking local university. The workings of the so-called free market and meritocracy in relation to Access and widening participation are taken up in later chapters as is the connected matter of education and the elites in a system of mass participation. For the moment we can note that positional inequality in the education sector was no longer viewed as a public issue; it was now a private matter for individuals in the market for positional and hence educational goods. Under the 'hegemony' of neoliberal thinking and policies, the growth of mass higher education ensured that educational privilege had few critics amongst those in leading social and political positions of power.

The Access movement as we have attempted to describe it was based around different premises and principles – those of commonality and solidarity, rooted in communities of interest and communities of culture of which Australia provided many examples (Goodall 2019; Meaney 2013: ch 2). This approach did not accept that education was somehow neutral ground on which no social advantage could be gained because formal access had been conceded through proportional representation of disadvantaged groups in the elite institutions. The Access agenda asserted that social advantage via education was at the same time a denial of equal rights at the *social* and *collective* level of our societies. Rising tides did not raise all boats and the benefits of mass participation were unequally and unfairly distributed. The concept of equity though well intended could not be expected to redistribute wealth and power which lay behind the inequalities of the social structure. Only the abolition of positional competition in education could move the dial and ensure movement towards equality of outcomes by social group. Selectivity and privilege were therefore always in the sights as it were of the Access movement, though the challenge may have been implicit. Equity remained in Australia as a major focus for access policy development as universal/wider participation became part of the dominant framework of government policy. Within Access and university engagement itself, a more focussed force for educational change would evolve but its influence over the broader educational field would be a matter of contested perceptions. In and of itself, it could not mount an effective challenge or reversal of the growing social inequality in which it was embedded, though its force as critique should not be under-estimated.

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Part 2

Rising Tides

Chapter 3

Australia goes to college

There is a long history of widening participation and access to higher learning in Australia dating back to the mid-19th century (Gale and Tranter 2011; 2012). John Henry Newman published his lectures titled 'The Idea of a University' in 1852, with a focus on teaching rather than research as the primary role of universities. This approach was adopted by Australia's first universities at this time. The emergence of Australia's first universities in Sydney, Melbourne and then Adelaide was not as a result of local struggle for educational equality, but rather to prepare future leaders to shape, build and influence the new colony with Western ideas and practices. There was a strong link between morality and education and many of the early settlers were committed to shaping education through the prism of Christianity. Queensland's first secondary school was All Hallows founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1861. In similar fashion, the establishment of universities in Australia owed much to the perceived need at the time to prepare future graduates (and thus likely leaders of the new colony) for leadership positions grounded in Christian and Western identity and culture.

The evolution of a national identity and culture, however, did not until relatively recently engage with the brutality and exploitation of the native peoples and was not included in the curriculum at any level of education. It clearly remains a controversial subject whose under-currents still carry a potentially divisive charge as it connects questions of nativism and indigenous identity with those of race, racism and modern multicultural and multiracial Australia (Botsman 2007). The fair balance sheet of Australia's history is yet to be agreed though Left and Right appear to both believe that Australia's history was a success and that it is the 'lucky country' (Horne 1964), even though they rarely congratulate the same events (Davison 2000: 16; Meaney 2013: 29). The identification of Australians with Britishness was never in doubt but how this was expressed differed greatly. Neville Meaney states that true Australians did not allow the British to treat them as colonials and spoke up defiantly and demanded respect. Yet historically, he states, however we view the assertion of an independent Australianess …'The criticisms of Britain and British policy, no matter how extreme their form, were arguments about the empire from inside the empire' (Meaney ibid: 29). There is a further and highly relevant issue taken up by Miriam Dixson (1999) a generation ago but which retains its immediacy and currency in today's multiethnic world. Australia, she argues, is one of those 'fragment societies' which spun off from in this case post-sixteenth-century Britain and carried with it traditions and cultures containing deep meanings and values which enabled them to survive and eventually to prosper. That such a cultural inheritance is never just a unitary entity but contains different and contradictory elements within it, is not doubted, not least in the conjunction of the Irish and the English within the Anglo Celtic core culture of the settlement and its evolution into a national entity. The prior core culture, including its middle and working class components, including also the idea of the 'commons' as applied to land, locations and public institutions (Goodall 2019) and the belief in the nation of Australia, all played a vital role in holding the people together in a reasonable and stable way. Nevertheless, there is still contestation about what the national identity of Australia is (Dixson ibid: 36-7). The balance sheet of history for the British Empire shows no sign of reaching a consensus among its diverse members, *past or present* and the 'break-up' of Britain itself is a recurring theme in political and academic life (Nairn 1981; Dixson 1999; Meaney 2013: 28-29; Sangera 2021, 2024). Nevertheless Britain remains one of the oldest and most stable states whose constituent parts comprise very different cultures, languages and traditions, some of which were translated to colonial Australia and are still in evidence today.

The emerging Australian economy in the 1850s involved large numbers of migrants and settlers in mining in the wake of the Gold Rush. Australian universities had learned from different higher education systems from around the world to support the professions of the day and mining and mineralogy were among the most popular occupations and university subjects at this time. Teaching rather than research was their exclusive focus to progress the economy and society in a way that supported the establishment. That said, access was a feature among the first universities in Australia who opened their doors to the lower and working middle classes and, by 1881, were among the first in the world to allow women to attend universities. A more comprehensive approach to equity would feature much later in Australian universities as a key strategic focus across the higher education sector.

In 1857 all of the arts students at the University of Sydney could easily fit into a single photograph as could have their colleagues at the University of Melbourne, writes the historian of modern Australian universities (Forsyth 2014). After the Second World War the six small state universities, educating less than 0.2 per cent of the nation, had become 39 institutions by 2014 enrolling some 25 per cent of the high school graduates. Today about half of all school-leavers go to university according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the total number of students in Australian higher education has reached over 1.6 million including more than 500, 000 international students (AGDE 2023).

By the third decade of the 21st century the Australian HE sector was a powerhouse for both the economy and the wider culture. As well as benefiting individuals, investment in higher education also benefits the entire community and is an economic generator for the wider economy. Universities Australia through its 'Keep it Clever' campaign launched across the nation in the second decade of the 21st century estimated that graduates were worth $188 billion to the economy annually.

In 2014, Universities Australia reported that, collectively universities:

- taught over 1.6 million students including over 500,000 international students in 42 universities
- employed 115,000 staff in what is Australia's fourth largest export sector and largest service export
- accounted for most of the $15 billion annual income generated by Australia's education export industry
- spent more than $23 billion per year
- paid $10.3 billion in wages
- paid around $2.96 billion in income and payroll tax
- underpinned the nation's research capability.
- contributed significantly to global, international education and relations

Michael Wesley (2023) argues in his examination of the 'mind' of the Australian nation that a silent revolution was happening in the period in which access and widening participation was evolving into a mass higher education society. He lists a variety of indicators:

- in 1964 there were 76,188 people studying at Australian universities – just 0.68 per cent of Australia's population at the time
- by 2020 there were over 1.5 million students representing 6 per cent of the national population
- a growth of 146 per cent over two decades was recorded of graduates in Australia to some 3 million people
- a remarkable expansion has taken place, mainly enabling younger adults to gain university level qualifications.

Impressive though these figures are as Wesley himself states, they beg the question of how these high rates of participation will change Australia? One concern remains that the rise of the new knowledge class in the new 'knowledge society' may in fact be a profound threat to Australia's tradition and culture of egalitarianism. (Wesley ibid: 7). This may be a somewhat counter-intuitive way of thinking about education which has generally been thought to be a means of offering opportunities in life for those prepared to work for them.

As in Britain, Australia historically had

Education for everyone in a multicultural environment

established Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts in the early and mid – 19th century and technical education evolved as the mining economy expanded. Adult learning and education, including both formal and informal types became embedded in the Australian tradition. At university level by the late 20th century an elite system had become a mass system and a wholly different philosophy of higher education had taken root. Research had also entered the academic world for almost all lecturers and was viewed as central to the idea of a university. Knowledge and who owned it and could judge its value and worth, and for whom it was supposed to benefit, became a contested field. Battle lines over standards and quality were drawn up in Australia as they were in Britain and elsewhere. The role of university education in the public sphere meant it was engaged with the themes of knowledge and power and democratic action (Nyland and Davies 2022). Access and widening participation inevitably took on the challenges of equity as it emerged that growing student enrolments alone could not satisfy the need to bring about social justice and equality of opportunity through education. These challenges meant that 'equity representation' alone was insufficient to address the concerns of social division and exclusion as they impacted on universities. Access to what and for what purposes? was a recurring theme yet to be fully explained and the Access movement was a test of the limitations of mass higher education. Increasing and widening participation undoubtedly changed Australia but it did not threaten Australia's tradition of egalitarianism in the way suggested by Wesley by excluding those who had not acquired university knowledge. Rather it created the possibilities of including nearly everyone within the HE system, but only within a stratified hierarchy in which the lower SES groups and Indigenous people remained near the bottom of the social order.

The Australian era of expansion – education for everyone

In the mid-1970s, the Whitlam Labour Government abolished university tuition charges in an ambitious effort to spread the benefits of tertiary education to all parts of Australian society. A decade on, the Commonwealth was feeling the financial strain of free education, yet faced even greater pressure to expand educational opportunity as rates of school retention to Year 12 had doubled in a single decade, creating a very large pool of potential university applicants. Free education, it was suggested, had very quickly become financially unsustainable.

The proposed solution was The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) – an alternative means of funding higher education flagged by the Committee on Higher Education Funding established by the Hawke Labor Government in 1987. It recommended the adoption of HECS which represented a way of transferring a considerable proportion of the cost of education from the Commonwealth to students themselves, by offering loans that students would later pay back when they could afford to do so. Students were now consumers of education as a positional good, with, in theory, choices of what and where they might study and gain the best value. Students were now encouraged to invest in themselves as if they were a personal project which could bring a return on investment with enhanced future earnings. This approach to the value of higher education, which asserts that economic benefits are the *primary* motivator for learning and study, has always been contested by educators who have argued for the social purposes of higher learning and the knowledge-generating purposes of university learning and this has continued up to the present (Soundings 2023). Within that broad perspective the Access movement has advocated and defended the need for democratic inclusiveness and the desire for a more transformational curriculum. In this view universities are in fact sites of contestation where there are struggles over knowledge production and for alternatives.

The reforms of 1988, which introduced deferred payment for higher education for the first time, underpin the Australian higher education system to this day. The distinction between universities and colleges of advanced education was abolished and through campus mergers, 63 institutions became 36. By the early 2000s the contribution by students to their tuition was greater than before the mid-1970s when the Commonwealth commenced subsidising students directly. The reforms meant that the funds available to the higher education sector could be dramatically increased and more people from a broader range of backgrounds could pursue higher education without placing an undue burden on the public purse. Payment for education within a marketised system was implemented and provided something of a pilot scheme for universities in the 'anglosphere' whose traditions had been based on tuition – free, but subsidised government – funded HE study. What Australia was proposing as a solution to the issue of funding higher education was of intense interest to the British state and its constituent nations at this time as it too tried to reconcile mass access within a system divided by educational status and social inequality.

Deregulation of the higher education sector continued in the mid-1990s, in theory increasing flexibility for students and allowing lifelong learning to be developed (West 1998). The financing of HE debate continued after differential student contributions and a lowered income repayment threshold were introduced in 1998. Particular emphasis was placed on the effects on low socio-economic status (SES) students. In 2005 the Howard Government introduced a partial deregulation of student fees, such that universities could increase fees by up to 25 per cent. Domestic full-fee paying undergraduate places were also introduced, allowing universities to enrol additional students, that is, above their government-mandated load.

The Australian Labor Party's successful

2007 election platform promised Australia an ‘education revolution’. One of the first higher education policies introduced by the Rudd-Gillard Government was the abolition of domestic full-fee paying undergraduate places established by the previous government. Key universities opposed the abolition when it was announced, and argued that government compensation for the loss of funding was inadequate.

In 2008 the education minister, and later prime minister Julia Gillard announced a major review examining the direction of the higher education sector, led by Melbourne academic Professor Denise Bradley. The Bradley Review introduced the ‘demand driven’ system for Australia which allowed universities to respond to student demand and meant the funding followed the student. This was then a ‘managed market’ which succeeded in transferring significant debt onto students, based on neoliberal market assumptions about the rightness of meritocratic and ‘libertarian’ values. Targets became linked to national economic needs and on raising aspirations and achievements of future students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mass participation for all: unequal advantages for some

The main focus in the second decade of the new century was on low SES groups, which was some 25 per cent of the nation’s population. These groups along with Indigenous people were subsumed within the term ‘equity groups’ which had low levels of participation in tertiary education and were substantially excluded from elite HE institutions. In the third decade of the 21st century, however, the percentage of low SES groups attending universities remains largely unchanged in percentage terms and this has served to embolden the focus and direction of the current national government to re-energise efforts to support disadvantaged future students through a new university Accord process (Accord 2024).

Equity has remained a key concern and refers to how the student population reflects the general population in proportional terms in university enrolments. Equity was a strategy at the time, informed by a ‘belief’ about how and why the social system was unjust and unfair. This was hardly a fully formed educational or philosophical ‘theory’ but rather a commitment to a sense of ‘equity’ and fairness and perhaps the influence of pervasive and ideological ideas of Australia being a ‘meritocratic’ society where hard work and effort would ultimately reward talent and effort. The rationale for expansion and social inclusion was now on the national agenda (Gale 2012; Gale and Tranter 2012). Australian society has prided itself on having sponsored the twin concepts of the ’fair go’ and ‘have a go’, though such shibboleths do not always translate into equitable and fair outcomes. The colonial past and the struggles to tame the harsh continent may have generated a deep and nostalgic longing for a common identity and ethnic tradition, especially in the face of the modern dissolution of ties of family and kinship. Similarly, neighbourhoods, cities and whole societies have a need for a unifying idea to bind them together (Ward 1958; Meaney 2013: 68). Whether there is a national consensus on what the national identity was and is, remains a deeply contested issue, not least due to the changing local and global conditions of social and political turmoil of which Australia is inevitably a part. The role of ‘fairness’ in such a world should neither be ignored nor uncritically accepted. If, as Neville Meaney (ibid: 2013) argued, the political and social divisions of the 1970s had created an overwhelming need for a binding myth of nationhood, then the dissolutions and accelerations of a postmodern and globalised society in the 2020s need a binding myth for fairness and access to education and equality of opportunity which recognises and addresses these conditions. Critical realism should alert us to the need, however, for this to be grounded in the evidence and experience of those whose needs for access and widening participation are the most pressing. This argument suggests that ‘A fair go’ in the third decade of the 21st century may mean more than the extension of equity to disadvantaged groups and communities: it may require us to reform the structures of knowledge through which systems of inequality and exclusion are reproduced (Griffin 1983) – a theme we return to in chapters 12 and 13 focussing on questions of an Access curriculum and frameworks for university engagement.

The Australian approach to widening participation was similar in respects to that of the UK, though policy directions and options differed. Race and ethnicity, for example, played a big part in the UK (less overtly so in Australia) and the organised working class communities and the wider civic society played a substantial role. In Britain education was perhaps more about state formation, which was never wholly stable between the nations that made up the United Kingdom of Great Britain and (historically) Ireland, than it was about nation building (Archer 1984; Olusoga 2023). The composition and make-up of the British nation had always been deeply problematical and diverse, though powerful as a unifying imperial idea of commonality and belonging (Bauman 2001: 90-91; Ignatieff 1994: 6-7). Nation building in the Australian past meant for some groups, namely the Indigenous people, assimilate or perish and the objective was the annihilation of differences. Today in a post-colonialist era there is no uniform compound of national identity and ‘community’ and ethnic diversity is recognised and celebrated. Education is about nation building for a multiracial and multiethnic future. The means and policies for doing this are contested and no single unifying consensus on how this might be brought about yet exists. This book highlights this issue as a key aspect of widening participation and Access and indicates that it is an evolving context for Australia’s future policy development. Conceptions of nation, community, identity and belonging have been an integral part of cultural change and educational expansion, though the vocabularies often used to develop and justify the actual types of schooling or the role of universities have often stressed the individual’s talents and capacities and the virtues of social groups who benefitted from education rather than the social value of participation for all and its potential to challenge inequality.

In this period of growth and change Australia’s school system functioned on selective and elitist assumptions (Gale and Parker 2013). Low income families were unlikely to be able to afford private school fees. Government schools had almost twice as many students from low income families than from high income families. Catholic schools had more students from high income families than from low income families. The largest proportion of students in Catholic school in 2013, for example, were from medium income families (Preston 2013: 5). University entrance in Australia is selective and correlates to SES so that government schooling is a proxy for low SES and vice-versa for high-fee independent schools. Some Catholic schools are high fee charging and some lower, but all charge a fee though 95 per cent of such schools are publicly subsidised. In 2013 Gale and Parker (ibid: 7) asserted that … ‘Where once government schooling was the norm for the vast majority of Australians, it is in danger of becoming a residual system for students who cannot meet private school selection criteria including having parents who are unable to afford private tuition fees’. As in England spectacularly and across the British national communities in general, educational status has divided and continues to divide the wider population, not necessarily in spite of attempts to democratise Access and widening participation, but in part because of the way this growth of opportunities has been organised and practised. The resonances with the Australian experience are salutary even though the contexts and details have diverged as one might expect as the two separate ‘nations’ evolved within their geopolitical spheres of difference.

In Australia the most significant indicators of potential progression from school to HE are a student’s SES background and the secondary school attended (Gale and Parker ibid: 11). In the vocational sector students from low SES backgrounds are under-represented in

the TAFE system and in private providers of higher education. In 2013 very few people applied to university without any VET or school qualifications. This contrasts with the UK where non-traditional entry to university was extensive even in the late 20th century reflecting the different adult learning traditions of the two nations. Wesley remarks on the way in which universities in Australia are 'out of mind' in public conversations and culture which contrasts with the high profile they have in public culture in Britain and the United States (Wesley 2023: 8). He notes that Donald Horne's classic 'The Lucky Country' (1964) saw Australian society as hostile to the intellectual sophistication that universities produced and that… 'cleverness can be considered un-Australian'.

As previously mentioned, by 2009 the Australian government had removed the cap or limit on government-funded student numbers in order to create a demand-driven system. As a result, between 2009 and 2012 offers to low SES background applicants recorded the largest increase compared to other groups. Actual numbers of low SES students attending university increased significantly. However, students coming from more affluent backgrounds increased at a higher rate and as a percentage of total population the number of low SES students attending university remained largely unchanged. Thus, the system remained 'supplier driven' and clearly take up by the more affluent sections of society, especially of places in the selective and elite institutions, gave expression to inequalities that education in general and Access and widening participation in particular laid claim to combat.

Access and equity

The target groups for widening participation in Australia included:

- Indigenous Australians
- people from low SES backgrounds
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB)
- students with a disability
- people from regional or remote areas
- women in non-traditional fields such as engineering or information technology.

Since 2006, despite strong growth in the undergraduate intake (Gale and Parker ibid: 19) the target groups were persistently under-represented in higher education. Retention data suggested that adult or special entry mature Indigenous students suffer significant cultural dislocation at Australia's universities. Their retention rates are lower than younger Indigenous students. Success rates were comparatively lower for Indigenous students in general, though such generalisations always require a detailed understanding of the local context if they are to be meaningful.

Within Australia as a whole academic achievement is highly correlated with SES background and students from low SES backgrounds tend to receive lower ATAR scores (ATARs – Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks – are the mechanism by which universities select students). Students from high SES backgrounds tend to receive high ATARs and it seems clear that …'the ATAR is more indicative of socioeconomic status than it is of a student's academic potential' (Gale 2012: 246). One result of this is that progression to higher education across socioeconomic groups in Australia is significantly unequal.

The elite Australian universities have low target group enrolments of low SES students. Whilst representation of lower SES groups is lower in elite universities, retention and success rates are higher than for comparable groups. This means that institutions with smaller target group numbers and with greater access to resources are able to achieve better results for these target groups. Elite universities attract high ATAR target students who are more like the mainstream university population with more cultural capital and actual financial means, requiring less support. The leading universities, an elite with endowments and unlimited capacity to recruit, can shield themselves from the worst effects of the marketisation and crises of HE (some of which have driven the concerns of this book) but this comes at a price – a price ultimately paid for by those who experience and live out the inequalities of our society and communities. This scenario of inequality does not sit comfortably with the public commitment to equity in education which many believe characterises Australian education policy and practice. It has uncomfortable resonances with the ideologies and practices of the British tradition of selective schooling and higher education associated with social class divisions and elitism, especially those of England.

The Australian approach to widening participation was similar in respects to that of the UK

Social class or socioeconomic status (SES) does not alone define the dimensions of inequality with which access and widening participation tries to engage. Race and ethnicity, gender and age are among significant characteristics which impact on educational outcomes, as do specific Australian residential and geographical factors. These outcomes may yield surprises which themselves require research and explanation. Australian Indigenous graduates in 2011 had the highest rate of full-time employment compared with other disadvantaged groups – much higher than the average graduate (Gale and Parker ibid: 33).This is in contrast to the lower than average results of retention, success and completion for Indigenous people! By 2024 the Australian Universities Accord had asserted as a priority the critical need to raise First Nations participation in all sectors of tertiary education.

Australian government policy in the second decade of the 21st century was that 40 per cent of 25-34 year olds should hold a bachelor degree by 2025. Growth was the great challenge and a

'fair' knowledge economy the aim. Widening participation was the official policy and conceptions of access really focussed on low SES groups and on changing their aspirations so that these included higher education. Underpinning this approach were a set of assumptions that education could and should drive the needed improvement of equity outcomes for marginalised groups. On the one hand the developing mass-market universities were to be encouraged to develop and recruit the growing numbers of potential students, whilst market forces were thought capable of driving elite universities to **reduce** their undergraduate intakes in order to enhance their image of high quality in the market place (Gale and Parker ibid: 37). Many of these assumptions proved to be questionable as higher education continued to expand its student numbers whilst competing for students and funding within a more hierarchical and differentiated university system. Based on the concepts of equity and access, assistance for disadvantaged and marginalised students has been developed in a range of ways including:

- equity scholarships; placement bursaries; residential school bursaries; residential accommodation scholarships
- First Nations outreach programmes and events designed to raise aspirations
- school outreach career programmes and events, especially in the regions
- general career and employability programmes and events
- holistic support and an emphasis on the importance of financial assistance in student success
- encouragement for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to get ahead by enrolling on accredited 'UniPrep' courses or university courses in their final years of school/college study
- targeting by colleges affiliated to Universities of more mature adult learners with a range of pathway programs with entries into degrees
- support for particular kinds of Indigenous students who have gained access through special entry arrangements.

This range of programmes, courses, events and interventions around equity concerns and concepts represents in summary a significant facet of Australia's Access movement, though as in the British case there was no central organisation or singular controlling interest across the Commonwealth. The period of growth in Australian higher education certainly recognised the pressing need for new and innovative forms of access and widening participation, though it framed these within target and equity categories which themselves may prove to be problematic since the categories make hidden assumptions which may be inadequate to the issues they address. This was one of the lessons of the British Access movement, which had to cope with shifting definitions and identities within insecure economic and social boundaries in which the burden of change could not be borne by education alone. The structural and deeply-embedded issues of inequality and discrimination which underpinned the lived experience of Access students were unfortunately not resolved by the progressive intentions of Access courses and their students and teachers.

Whilst Australian higher education in the period 2014 to 2019 continued to grow, this period saw the tapering off of growth in domestic undergraduate enrolments. For Access-type students there were divergent outcomes across different equity groups. Low SES students, women in non-traditional areas and disabled students saw increases in participation, however, remote and regional students and those with non-English speaking backgrounds saw lower growth or a decline (NCSEHE 2020-23). On an encouraging note, the Indigenous share of undergraduate enrolments reached 2 per cent for the first time ever in 2019, up from 1.6 per cent in 2014. The National Centre for Student Equity noted in 2020 that while all equity groups had seen increases in their population shares since 2010, the recent relative decline of some of them indicated the considerable headwinds that progress in widening participation in Australian higher education continued to face (Koshy 2020). The issues of under-representation of target groups and the under-achievement of the elite and more selective universities in enabling access and widening participation continued into the third decade of the century. Furthermore, the persistent and unresolved questions of Indigenous people, race and ethnic heterogeneity continued to challenge educationalists and policy makers well beyond the boundaries of the university campuses.

When 'equity' is not enough for Access

'There is a wealth of activity dedicated to improving student access to and participation in Australian Higher Education' (Gale and Parker 2013: 54)

Since 1990 the focus of government widening participation has been on increasing access to higher education, particularly for people from low SES backgrounds. The intention has been to ensure that target or equity groups in HE should be the same as their representation within the broader population. So, if 25 per cent of the nation's population were from low SES backgrounds then the 2020 target of 20 per cent participation for such groups fell short of this equity target. This definition of equity recognises that social and educational systems tend to produce unequal outcomes (Gale and Parker ibid: 5) and raises the question of whether proportional representation (equity) within the broad population actually secures fairness if fair refers to equality of outcomes ? Access in this formulation is primarily about rectifying disproportions between designated social groups defined by low SES backgrounds and including factors such as residential/geographical situation, gender in respect of women working in traditional fields such as engineering, disability and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Right in amongst these categories are the Indigenous people who are certainly amongst the low socioeconomic status Australians but who probably would not seek to categorise themselves primarily as such. The issues of race, racism, ethnic difference and associated matters of belonging and identity are of course bound up within these descriptive categories and yet these are not normally inscribed within the access discourse or the policy formulations of government. Indigenous people as a concept itself embraces vast cultural variation, a large number of indigenous languages and widely varying cultural practices, but it is much less clear that social and cultural identities, attitudes and expectations can be categorised under a single rubric. The Indigenous people spread across a whole continent are not easily susceptible to single or unitary categories. The multiracial and multicultural Australia that exists in the third decade of the 21st century similarly resists simple categorisation focussed on socioeconomic status (SES).

The fairness debate and the discourse about the nature of inequality brings our attention onto the forces that shape selection and choice of education. Low SES students predominate in the state/public schools in Australia and this helps conserve what can be called a form of educational apartheid where the wealthy pay for private schooling which ensures their children eventually attend the elite and higher status universities in disproportionate numbers. As in England, where a somewhat similar situation has existed for generations, a stratified school system leads inevitably onwards to a stratified and unequal university system and inequality becomes habitualised, normalised and legitimated by usage and common, taken-for-granted assumptions that those who succeed have done so because they deserve to succeed.

In Australia the formal use of a 40 per cent participation target which required ambitious targets being set and the provision of substantial government funding was no doubt a progressive attempt to produce a favourable and more equitable outcome for the targeted equity groups. However, the reference group for the

whole student cohort is skewed by the high SES representation it embodies, and the cultural and other 'capitals' it favours. The higher social and economic status groups (SES) effectively determine what counts as valid knowledge and culture and it is their languages, cultural practices, values, beliefs and sentiments which shape judgements and selections and preferences for certain types of schools and universities. These characteristics are social and economic and they belong primarily to those groups who possess wealth, influence and power. The influence of social class and status systems which inhabit our modern western societies manifest themselves in a variety of different and often divergent ways. What is certain, however, is the fact that the social selection of individuals for the higher echelons of schooling and university study can become contemptuous of the virtue of the ordinary, the familiar, the everyday and the local in the lives of the majority of all those whose social positions or ethnicities exclude them from opportunities in learning and in life. In a sense it is what the equity categories do not contain which is problematic. The reference points are numbers driven within socioeconomic categories that effectively exclude categories of experience and types of knowledge that have driven Access. This movement has, we suggest, allowed us to ask ...access to what?... Access on the basis of whose knowledge and understanding is valued?... access for what social purposes?... what is a 'fair knowledge economy'? We argue in this book that an engagement with access and widening participation on the basis of increased attendance by equity groups is a worthy but incomplete agenda. If Access and widening participation can only be on terms already enshrined in the existing institutional arrangements and within conservative traditions of what counts as knowledge, it is only half way there since these conditions continue to re-inforce inequalities.

If we were to take one instance of what counts as knowledge we can illustrate the extent and depth of the problem. A growing body of research (Perlin 2024) has shown the importance of mother-tongue education and that for a community, maintaining their own language is a vital part of mental and physical well-being. For marginalised groups such as the Indigenous peoples of Australia who are now in such small minorities within the overall population, this possibility is being severely eroded. Most of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages once spoken in Australia are either no longer used or are down to small groups of elderly speakers. It is an act of heroism asserts Perlin that a few are still being transmitted. Small language groups are no longer in a stable world where they can be learned by children and they are being eradicated. Yet languages are the window on to the deepest levels of human diversity and represent ways of seeing and understanding – the felt experience of living – which should form part of what we understand as a viable human/social life. Yet... 'Perceptions of linguistic superiority or inferiority are not based on anything about the languages themselves, but on the power, class or status of the speakers. Every language signed or spoken natively is a fully equipped system for handling the core communicative demands of daily life, able to coin or borrow words as needed' (Perlin ibid: 6). The loss of local knowledge, in this case involving its crucial roots in language and speaking, ensures the continuing marginalisation and exclusion of a diverse people and its culture (Davies and Nyland 2022: ch 8). The specification of target equity numbers as a proportion of the overall participation rate in higher education does little to address one of the foundational cores of social exclusion – the marginalisation and disappearance of local languages and cultures. Given the sheer abundance of multi-language communities just about everywhere in the world it would be feasible for each and every Australian to learn a local indigenous language to a proficiency that would allow the endangerment of disappearance to be relieved and to help bridge the deep divisions between Anglophone society and culture and that of the Australian Indigenous people. After all, if a child in Bradford, England can learn to speak Punjabi, Urdu and English plus acquiring at least one of French, German or Spanish to a basic level at school and if in Carinthia, Austria a child can learn to speak German, Slovenian and the local dialects of Windisch and Kaerntnerisch (Davies and Davies 2021: ch 2), then Australians can engage with their own linguistic diversity as a huge and empowering opportunity to increase the common good. This approach would take us beyond the no doubt legitimate but inevitably contested demand for indigenous rights for language recognition and use. Recognising their own privilege as a native English speakers, supercharged by centuries of colonial expansion, modern business and enterprise, popular culture and the sheer power of English Literature, Australians can both be part of the progressive linguistic/cultural empire of our time and acquire the great benefits and joys of multilingual competency. It is widely recognised that a multi-lingual childhood can confer great cognitive advantages and can add whole dimensions of our understanding of the world we live in. In acquiring another language we can acquire a whole new world view!

These observations are not intended to make light of the difficulties of persuading monolingual cultures (including notably those of Anglophone England, the USA and Australia) to adopt other languages, but in cultures whose populations that are based on immigration flows and increasing diversity there can be no denying the need for a 'cure' for monolingualism. That cure is already present in the society at large; it is only not recognised as such, as the reality of an existing multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual population demonstrates. Ultimately we cannot legislate to maintain a language and culture; it is up to communities whether and how they keep using their languages. Our understanding of the issue is that meaningful options can be brought into existence and these are to found in the wider Access movement rather than in the more deliberately defined nature and structure of equity groups alone. They are not currently to be found in the overwhelmingly monocultural and monolingual university system.

The matter of target groups and equity continues to reverberate as there is an array of potential candidates who can be seen as disadvantaged. Prisoners, older people, people with identity issues who feel discriminated against, those with learning disabilities and those with mental health issues are some of the groups that might come under consideration. Representation within the broader population on the basis of proportionality may not be a solution and in some cases may be highly controversial. Some minority religious/faith and/or ethnic groups might demand equal treatment and the recognition of their own distinctive category. Such questions raise important matters of how the nation is constituted and integrated and what the role of education and higher education is in building belonging and social solidarity in an era where social fragility and uncertainty appears to be growing. The question of equity being achieved through the proper and fair use of a numerical method, ie, proportionality and reference percentages, can disavow the crucial significance of Access as a means of critical thinking about how inequality is produced and maintained.

The material issues driving inequality are about wealth, income, social class and status, but the lived experience of people, their emotions and sentiments involve the questions of how cultural and other forms of capital (professional capital, social capital, knowledge(s) capital) are actually felt and lived. In the multicultural and multiracial society that is modern Australia such issues are at the core of social and political life and are coexistent with the Access agenda. The tendency to incorporate Australia's Indigenous people, for example, as a sub-set of people from low SES backgrounds or as another black and ethnic minority (BAME) group was noted by the Behrendt Review in 2012. The Australian Government policy response to the Bradley Review (2008) had argued, however, that Indigenous Australians have a specific and distinct place as

its First Peoples and should not be treated as just another target group for access and widening participation. Furthermore the range of locations – remote geographical, rural/urban, isolated reserves, urban fringes – suggests great diversity in life styles. In 1975 a study on race relations in Australia noted… 'No population could be more varied than are Australian Aborigines today' and it also stated… 'all too often their most outstanding characteristic is poverty. Aborigines mostly belong to the under-privileged groups in any community. In almost every area they are the least healthy, the worst educated and the most impoverished of any Australians.' (Gale and Brookman 1975). Almost half a century of growth, development and change in Australian society and education has not substantially reformed this picture (Behrendt et al 2012).

The claims of ethnic groups within the general community, though not currently recognised explicitly within the access/equity categories, also provides possibilities and arguments for change. In not articulating ethnic distinctions there is a danger that cultural diversity may not be recognised or tolerated, let alone celebrated. Commitment to the sentiment of 'a fair go' for all and to the mateship image of 'we're all one' may offer a fusion, where what is wanted may be diversity and separateness. These issues test our understanding of 'belonging' and identity, especially in relation to how we view the role and meaning of the nation and the place of difference in the national community (Ignatieff 1994; Meaney 2013; Scheffer 2021). Many of Australia's immigrants over recent generations have come from societies where the claims of ethnic nationalism are unresolved, are still deeply contentious and where conceptions of civic identity and civic nationalism are weak or even non-existent. In such cases diasporic ethnic migrant communities can tend to stick together to maintain their sense of safety, security and belonging. Something of the same can be said of Great Britain and Northern Ireland where diversity and difference in relatively recent times have been seen to undermine Britain's statutory Britishness as a union of four national identities. Even the need for a new 'Englishness' has been mooted (Paxman 1999; Niven 2019). Such a concept of Englishness would also need to incorporate such a variety of distinctive ethnic and identity groups that a coherent national identity would seem impossible other than in terms of its variety and diversity itself. There are those in fact who argue that the most profound divide on the Islands is not the separation between nations or ethnic groups but between the global mega-city of greater London and the south east where wealth and power are concentrated and almost all of the other parts of the British Isles (Niven ibid). Nomatter whether power, wealth and geography work to divide people, where countries do not develop a *coherent* democratic principled and consensual policy on who may or may not join a nation there is the danger that tolerance and democratic freedoms may be threatened by the growth of ethnic essentialism and ethnic nationalism. These are essentially divisive and disruptive forces which can prevent a nation from defining a clear national interest in relation to international migration, where what is needed is a national identity based on commitment to the values of democracy and freedom. In this view there are implications for Access and the production of knowledge which can test our understanding so that we are fit to learn and teach in the inclusive societies in which we now live.

Access, social justice and widening participation

There can be little doubt that the interventions by Australian governments and regional/local authorities have over a considerable time-scale impacted positively on opportunities for equity groups (Gale and Parker 2013; NCSEHE 2023). However, it appears that the impact of financial interventions such as HECS on student participation was in fact minimal (Gale and Parker ibid: 47). Something of the same happened in England when the Labour Government introduced student tuition fee payments, backed by a loan and maintenance system in 1998. Similarly, it can be argued that interventions and funding designed to support target equity and low SES groups aimed at retention, progression and achievement do not guarantee either equality of access or equality of outcomes for disadvantaged cohorts. Nevertheless such interventions have massive importance for those individuals and the groups and communities involved and should not be under-estimated as we try to understand the structural and institutional barriers to larger scale social change and transformations which can appear to move only at a glacial pace.

The strategic purpose of widening access and participation was to enable resources to be used to create 'equity', defined as proportionality and to combat 'deficit views' of disadvantaged groups. The principles of social justice were in theory aligned with a commitment to university and student management. It was recognised that causes for exclusion were not to be found in the lives and cultures of the disadvantaged themselves but in a much more complex set of issues, relations and circumstances. No easy resolution of contested perceptions was possible but it can be seen to have enabled capacity to be built and some validation of 'local knowledge' and community purposes was achieved (Lovett 1983; Pearson 2001; Pascoe 2018; Nyland and Davies 2022). The intellectual status and value of local knowledge had long been argued by Clifford Geertz (1983) and Simon Schama (1995), and Peter Scott (1997: 24) considered it an important element within higher education, though he appeared to lament the lack of students in higher education who possessed such knowledge… 'there is no reason to believe that there are many such students in mass higher education systems – not simply Access and other non-standard entrants…' (Scott 1997: 24). The paradox of the need for local knowledge in an era of globalisation and cosmopolitanisation with internationalised mega-universities/multiversities needs to be noted, as it continues to shape our understanding of higher education in a globalised world where we lament the loss of community and social cohesion (Bauman 2001; Scott 2012, 2021).

Student support, study skills, additional finances and services dedicated to equity groups undoubtedly had positive outcomes for retention and success for significant numbers of low SES students. According to the seminal review of this period, the stand-out projects in Australian higher learning and teaching studies were about student learning and achievement (Gale and Parker ibid: ch 7) and the scale and interconnectedness they achieved were unprecedented. However, the *strategic* purposes of widening access were always bound to be problematical when the means of ensuring social justice lay beyond the boundary of the universities and colleges. The real jurisdiction was in fact a wider social framework which included evaluative mechanisms dedicated to the values of individual achievements and a belief that a university degree was a private good. There were no evaluative mechanisms by which the public value of equity in higher education could be measured, other than the proportionality of representation of any given population. This was only a partial recognition of the much wider significance of publicly funded and accountable higher education whose contribution to the common good is often denied (Marginson 2013: 105). In looking beyond the formal and government recognised categories of equity to the problematical areas of mass higher education in general, we need to consider the matter of community engagement and some questions of social justice in the context of higher education and access.

Engagement Australia – interventions for community and civic life

Whereas access as equity was focussed on individual aspirations within defined SES groups, with exceptional status given to Indigenous people, the 21st century also saw the emergence of

Enhancing Access; building on equity and engagement

concern for the 'civic impact' of higher education. The problem this addressed was defined as one of the future social purposes of HE beyond the production of graduates and research. Partnership with community, industry and government was its declared mission with great emphasis given to community engagement, including its significance well beyond education itself. This emphasis on community may well have been a counterpoint to the burgeoning development and supposed dominance of the 'multiversity' and neoliberal market model (NLMM) of a university noted by Marginson (2016: 153) and the growth of a marketised HE system at an earlier stage (Marginson 1997: 122). Universities and other providers have contributed a wide range of initiatives and interventions designed to bring about greater equity and opportunity and university engagement itself has provided a platform for scholarship and critique which can claim to be at the leading edge of change and renewal. Engagement Australia, an alliance of Australian HE institutions, has created a platform and a voice for universities and communities to connect and develop creative partnerships of all kinds around notions of extended citizenship, civic engagement and democratic participation. Social justice, the situation of Indigenous people, race and ethnicity and the impending crisis of planetary ecology have all found a platform for creative and productive dialogue (Transform 2017-24).

University engagement is a very diverse concept and is more of a framework or a field of action rather than a single entity. Engagement Australia through its activities and publications has taken this field to a broader conception of engagement beyond traditional notions of community that did not include government and industry. It has demonstrated the great merit of reporting developments and ideas but also of using 'critique' to test and explore the controversial issues of Access and widening participation around issues of social cohesion, migration and control, the role of ethnic and racial identities and the centrality of the First Peoples of Australia. A significant step forwards was the sponsoring and adoption of a national framework for classifying and engaging with communities following the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and definition of community engagement in the USA. It is intended that Australian universities will be able to use this to benchmark, reward, incentivise and achieve scaled impact across the HE sector (Firth 2018; Pink et al 2023).

Engagement Australia has published what it calls its 'Position Stand' and it claims that the higher education sector can serve as the key 'engine room' of societal progress. Its stand can claim to have advanced community-engaged partnerships and as such it marks a serious contribution to the leading edge of change in Australian higher education. A summary of its positions is below:

Summary of Positions (Transform 2023)

1. Engagement Australia recommends sector-wide adoption of the Carnegie definition of community engagement
2. Engagement Australia recommends Australian institutions engage with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification as a means to support continual reflection on and improvement in engaged practices that enhance civic outcomes
3. Engagement Australia recommends that Australian institutions pursue engaged partnerships with communities that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial as defined by the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. University-community engagement partnerships should be characterised by collaborative definitions of:
   i. Problems, opportunities, and goals
   ii. Strategies and solutions; and
   iii. Measures of success.

This requires recognition, respect, and value of the knowledge, perspectives, and resources of community partners as collaborators. As such these partnerships are typified by "co-creation of knowledge, learning, goals, and outcomes" between partners, as opposed to one-way knowledge transfer from university to community.

1. Engagement Australia supports pursuing the institutionalisation of community engagement in Australian universities as the most effective and enduring means to enable best-practice and mutually impactful university-community engagement at scale. Specifically, institutionalisation means that community engagement is:
   - clearly defined by the institution
   - explicitly and genuinely a part of the institution's identity and culture
   - prioritised in the strategic planning of the institution
   - infused into the teaching, research, and outreach activities of the institution
   - supported by workload, incentive and reward structures
   - appropriately resourced by the institution
   - evidenced by the depth and breadth of reciprocal relationships with community leading to mutually beneficial outcomes and impact
   - supported by system-wide evaluation practices that both substantiate mutually beneficial outcomes and impact and influence the nature of on-going partnerships.
2. Engagement Australia recommends that in the pursuit of best-practice community engagement, Australian universities engage in communities of practice and knowledge sharing between institutions. Beyond competition, knowledge sharing and networking can enhance practices and the cumulative civic impact of the sector.

There can be little doubt that the evolving conceptual and empirical work of university engagement in Australia has taken significant strides forward through Engagement Australia. A wide ranging and critical forum for debate

and scholarship has been constructed and major departure points for the next stages can be identified and an agenda for change has been indicated to build on what has already been achieved (Transform 2017-24). Enhancing and embedding Access within the mainstream of higher education remains, however, a daunting challenge in Australia and in Britain (Ashwin 2020).

Enhancing Access: building on equity and engagement

The conceptual frameworks for Access and widening participation tend to assume that disadvantaged students must adapt to the existing university systems which have the power and authority to admit them or to refuse entry. Access students are expected to adapt to the often conservative pedagogical and epistemological assumptions of academic knowledge. What is being accessed is the existing curriculum and the existing and long-standing institutional expectations of what a student is and can be. The onus is on the student to adapt to a system that has been shaped and developed for a very different class of people. The assumption that opportunities are enhanced by increased attendance in HE is mitigated by the fact that equality of opportunity does not solve the wider issues of inequality and social injustice. A commitment to equity may drive up participation rates for target groups and benefit enormously individuals and groups who have been previously marginalised. However, it does not necessarily produce socially just outcomes for disadvantaged populations. It is these issues that Access addresses in its modern forms and is consequently forced to address the issues raised in this book, for example, the meritocratic fallacy and the ideologies of individual and personalised achievement and the function of elites and elitism in the modern university.

The elite G08 universities in Australia take the lowest proportion of disadvantaged groups including low SES and Aboriginal people, whilst competing in the global higher education field, yet they could hardly exist without government funding subventions and publicly supported student finance. The bounded and managed system of HE that Australia has developed allows, in theory, equity policy development to be shared equally. However, the elite institutions are allowed to circumvent these policies and take the lowest proportions of disadvantaged students including low SES and Aboriginal people. Competing beyond the national boundaries the elite institutions are increasingly international in character, raising the question of whether they can serve the interests of the broad national and diverse population in addressing the structural and social inequalities of our time?

We suggest throughout this book that achieving social justice through higher education interventions requires the reconceptualization of Access and widening participation and its role within conventional university provision. There are undoubtedly several crucial aspects of this aspiration which we cannot deal with in this volume, one of which, the evolving ecological and climate crisis, may prove to be existentially pivotal and eclipse all the others. One of the most significant issues that demands our attention, however, and a 'thread through time' that arises within Access is that of race and prejudice. In Australia the Indigenous peoples have been both the cynosure and the invisible absence/presence since colonial times. The failure of the nation to formally recognise or reach a treaty with its First Peoples, unlike other colonial nations such as New Zealand and Canada, remains an outstanding blemish and reproach within the broader question of what constitutes the modern national identity of all Australians (Meaney 2013). In fact in 1835 the Governor of New South Wales on behalf of the British Crown outlawed any agreements between individuals and Aboriginal people for the cessation of their lands (Gale and Brookman 1975: 49-52). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people make up 3.8 per cent of Australia's almost 26.5 million population (UN 2023; Guardian 2023) and have inhabited the country for more than 60,000 years. Unfortunately an enhanced proportion of Indigenous people attending even elite universities will not reduce the gap in incarceration rates, child removals, poverty and the impact of racial discrimination. The striving for social justice is a key component of what we refer to as the Access movement but it requires an enhanced concept of Access to bring about educational change beyond the benefits of improved participation for disadvantaged equity groups.

A tipping point

Today over 80 per cent of school students in Australia complete secondary education. Many of these secondary school graduates contemplate higher education as a means of securing their chosen career – given the right circumstances and support. Certainly, in terms of career earnings, the benefits of higher education are indisputable: graduates earn an average $1.2 million more over their lifetimes than non-graduates.

While university enrolments have tripled in the three decades prior to 2019, on a per student basis Commonwealth higher education funding has declined significantly in the last decade. The decade from 2013 – 2023 saw funding for higher education fall by 2.4% in real terms after adjusting for inflation (Littlejohn 2023). The 2020s were characterised by border and campus closures and a significant drop in international students. This is not sustainable for the long term future. From the perspective of the third decade in this century it is important to make the necessary decisions to ensure the future stability of Australia's higher education sector. To maintain the status quo would leave the sector partially reformed, but not more fully opened to competition on the supply of places as envisaged by the 2008 Bradley Review. The future of Access and equity provision, let alone the expansion of university engagement to a more foundational level, requires something greater than the encouragement to compete in a marketised higher education system. There is an argument that the current system inhibits diversity and innovation through over-regulation. As participation increases, the sector would remain vulnerable to future cuts, due to continuing funding pressures, with limited chances to address and reform either costs or revenue. In Britain similar reforms did grow the system very substantially but produced significant financial and curriculum crises at the end of the 20th century and a repeated crisis some two decades later (Barnett and Griffin 1997; Ashwin 2020; Soundings 2023).

With a strong focus on access and equity, the new Australian Government Accord (2024) calls for universities to reinvent themselves to better meet Australia's knowledge and skills needs; to boost enrolments for our First Nations people, people with disabilities and rural and regional students. It also calls for a review of the funding model; a review of current workplace relations; and a third review of the connection between TAFE and Universities. The value position which is emerging is transparent: we need universities which exist for a social purpose, where learning can transform individual lives and whole communities in a world that is increasingly uncertain and unstable. The argument in this book is that an approach to Access and widening participation which embraces a critical pedagogy involves an exploration of the current neoliberal education landscape and which does not make invisible the minoritised experience and which validates the different meanings of achievement in higher education is necessary (Davies 2022). Access is both the historical record of the struggle for a fairer education and a vital element in the current and future development and delivery of equality, diversity and inclusion. We suggest that engaging with this agenda will shape a more hopeful future for students and young people and sponsor a lifelong learning culture with more open, plural and inclusive university spaces.

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Chapter 4

Changing Britain

In Britain schools and education had existed since Anglo-Saxon times (Leach 1915) and medieval grammar, church and public schools came to play a significant role in public life, educating generations of clergymen and public/crown servants. As feudalism gave way to a broader and more open social and economic system, the rising classes of yeomen farmers, merchants and traders sent their sons to school as a signal of their rising status and aspirations. The same social forces brought about dispossession of large numbers of 'commoners' and ordinary folk who had worked the land since time out of mind. Radical action was taken, motivated by the hope of restitution to defend the dispossessed and restore their historic rights and claims over the 'commons'. These were collective rights and traditions which gave access to shared land and property and were the historical basis of what we recognise as the public good or 'common good' (Wall 2017). These ideas continue to have currency in the modern world where what counts as the common good and private goods compete for our attention and support (Marginson 2016: ch 4; Goodall 2019). The true widening impact of increasing literacy and schooling on modern generations, however, would not be fully felt until the industrial era. Until the late 19th century most people in Britain did not go to school. Free primary education began spreading after 1870 with compulsory laws of attendance that gradually helped to end the tradition of child labour that had scarred Victorian capitalism. The 20th century saw the growth of secondary schooling for all children but up to the 2nd World War the vast majority of children left school before their 15th birthday and went to work. Where there was work to be had!

Richard Johnson (1988) has written about the 19th century struggles for 'really useful knowledge' so that working people could change their lives for the better. They struggled for learning that would change their circumstances and futures, and if not in their own lifetimes, then in that of their children. The difference between these people living in capitalist societies that had been in existence for over a century and all earlier generations was ... they were now a *majority* who needed literacy and access to schooling if they were to play their part in the political, social and cultural functions of a democratic society.

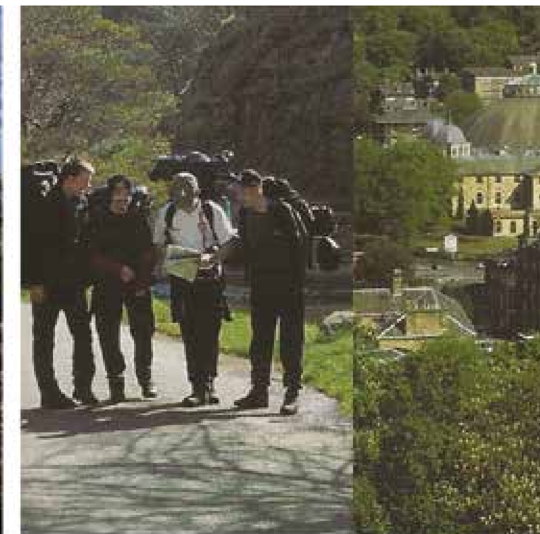
After 1870 the masses were going to school, whether they wanted to or not. The ruling elites spoke of having to 'educate our masters' and some of 'gentling the masses', recognising that schooling could contain the potentially unruly and rebellious classes before they could demand truly radical reforms. A gradual dawning occurred so that education began to be seen as an essential part of the social formation of a modern society and state. From 1972 every child had to go to school and stay at least until they were 16 years old. In 2015 young people in Britain up to age 18 had to be in full-time education or training prior to going to work or further study. Childhood and dependency had been extended from the cradle into effective adulthood.

By the 1930s, whilst there was mass literacy in the United Kingdom, there was still only a small chance for some men and even fewer women to be educated beyond school. Generally, only the cleverest and most dedicated got to benefit from higher education and few of these were from the working class.

Sorting them out: opening opportunities or closing the gates?

After the Second World War the political settlement in Britain saw the embedding of selection into secondary schooling as a defining principle of the education system. However, only some 20 per cent of British pupils could be 'creamed-off' to attend the expanded but selective grammar and high schools. The rest were to go to state secondary modern schools which were soon widely perceived to be a second class variant.

The failure to reform or abolish the independent and private fee-paying schools by the reforming Labour Government after the 2nd World War was to have dramatic consequences. These schools,



Access means creating brave spaces

the most elite of which titled themselves 'public schools' which were anything other than public or democratic in their ethos or accessibility, ensured that a key driver of social inequality and a real and symbolic model for justifying the elitism and snobbery of British class-bound society was left unaddressed. This would turn out to have a major and continuing impact in suppressing social mobility and in legitimating and 'normalising' social inequality and undeserved privilege right through the second half of the 20th century and on into the third decade of the 21st century and beyond (Green and Kynaston 2019; Todd 2021).

As expectations grew in the 1950s and 1960s and as the products of the grammar schools wanted more higher education than was available, there was an excess of formally qualified candidates. The receiving 'elite' institutions, the established universities, saw themselves as forced to select and close the gates as more candidates sought more places and alternative routes for entering higher education. By 1970 approximately half of the full-time higher education students were studying outside of universities – in further education, in colleges of education for trainee teachers and in advanced colleges of art and technology. In the years 1960 to 1970 the numbers of full-time students receiving higher education in Britain increased by 250 per cent. (McPherson 1972: 61). Adult education and continuing education both within and outwith universities was expanding to meet the growing demands of a population itself seeking change (Fieldhouse 1996). The growth of these new university-level institutions appeared to offer real opportunities denied to earlier generations as part of an aggregate growth of university places – but not on an equal basis or with equal and socially just outcomes.

The historic and unequal – inevitably – ancient universities were able to proceed with business as usual, recruiting from and for an elite who would assume it was their right to continue to rule and govern British society. Exceptions could of course be made for science where talent and creative intelligence was the measure of success rather than the social origins and status of inherited wealth and culture. Oxford and Cambridge became centres of world excellence in science and technology by recruiting in these fields well outside the favoured public schools. In these cases academic performance by grammar school boys and girls counted for more than the cultural capital endowed through the public schools. The civic universities in the great cities expanded cautiously and emulated the Oxbridge tradition of selecting entrants, though mainly on the basis of scholarly success at school examinations. Gate keeping was maintained in the civic redbricks where the creamed-off talent of the middle classes, along with a few working class children were allowed to succeed only when they had proved their exceptional ability in the grammar schools. The public schools, which were intensely and expensively *private*, provided a well-trodden path for the sons of rich and powerful elites to Oxbridge and in far fewer cases for females. In one sense it could be said the task of a traditional university was actually to *prevent* access to learning for the masses by providing a legitimate method of selection based on unacknowledged possession of middle-class values, culture and behaviour. However, times were changing. Working people began to demand some of the benefits of post-war reconstruction. A ferment of innovation was underway and the 'white hot heat of the technological revolution' was a topic of public concern by the 1960s. Change was underway and investment in the public realm meant educating children differently right up to university and beyond. National income was rising and working people wanted to see the benefits for themselves and their children.

Social needs from below and an uncertain future

As the old 20th century evolved into the new one it became clear that not only had a substantial expansion of learning had taken place in the previous two decades, but that the public perception of the importance of education had shifted. The formal recognition and engagement with the need for further and higher learning for masses of people came about when governments and the wider public came to appreciate that for most people education was the only coping strategy to deal with social and economic regeneration. The threats this posed rather than the opportunities it presented was, however, the often unacknowledged motive force for change. The reforms and growth of higher education opportunities that took place from the 1980s and into the 1990s were driven by governments whose grasp of the problems was shaped by a narrow focus on training and education for work and employment (Dale 1985). The improvement of human capital and upgrading of skills and vocational qualifications was the fundamental framework of thinking that drove educational policy change rather than the need to re-examine the unequal and often unjust social relations of a society and what new conceptions of learning might improve them.

What was becoming more clear in the 21st century was the fact that work and the labour market cannot be separated from the need to re-think the relations between the sexes, races and the generations. Higher education could no longer absent itself from these wider social concerns as it became ever more apparent that universities were active agents in the creation and reproduction of labour markets, social systems and the distribution of knowledge and its accreditation on a world-wide basis. Questions of how we organise and reward work, issues of employment/unemployment and the nature and future of work were of great concern in the 1980s and of great interest to educationalists and is one of the threads through time of this book. This was a **pivot** that linked the different and succeeding generations of the 20th and 21st centuries. In the new century these issues have sharpened as the nature of work and skills needed for the emerging economies were brought into question as manufacturing increasingly moved to low wage societies and economies such as in China and South Asia. These were some of the crucial issues that under-scored the growth of the Access movement and concern with widening participation but could not be resolved outside of the wider political framework of public policy and debate. They were issues that brought into focus the salience of identity matters such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender and age and provided the link with critical thinking around inequality, meritocracy, neo-liberalism and elitism. The question of what a university education was for came face-to-face with such matters, and these were at the forefront of much of the Access movement and the lived-experience of its students.

The onset of the 21st century saw the rise of the importance of social concern and policy development in education. The possibility of educational reform was in the air. In the UK, Labour politician Tony Blair's striking election slogan of 'Education, Education, Education' signified the concern but it lacked a clear focus on exactly what the educational problem was and how it might be resolved. There were marked differences in participation in HE between the different social groups in society and it was now clear that this was no longer acceptable. The highest status occupational groups were six times as likely to participate in higher education as the lowest. In particular it was noted, application rates for universities were notably lower from most black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. All of this had been the common currency of Access providers who for some thirty years had been responding to grass roots concerns and independent movements, and sometimes revolts, rooted in their own communities and neighbourhoods (Dhondy 1974; Martin 1996;

John 2006). Critical educators knew full well that education was a vital component of much needed reform of opportunities and access, just as they knew that issues of social injustice, historic racism and a profoundly divided society along racial, ethnic and cultural/class lines would not be resolved by schooling and universities alone (Hall 2017; Tomlinson 2019).

The new direction was to continue the expansion with an increased emphasis on 'widening participation' so the excluded and marginalised groups could be brought into the mainstream and the social inequalities addressed. One policy aim in England was to ensure that 50 per cent of all young people should have 'an experience' of higher education by the age of 30. Such a proposal was radical at its conception but was readily achieved and in comparison with some nations was relatively unambitious. California and South Korea and many other places had long surpassed this benchmark. In her history of modern Australian universities Hannah Forsyth noted in 2014 that 40 per cent of young people in Australia were expected to go to university by 2020.

The early years of the new UK Labour government after 1997 saw other significant developments. One of the first was the decision to introduce higher education tuition fees in Britain for the first time and to abolish student grants in favour of a single means-tested loan. This was to have seismic effects on the whole direction of higher education in the UK. New curricular reforms allowed the introduction of two year foundation degrees aimed primarily at workers who wanted to upgrade their skills and knowledge but who lacked entry qualifications for university. Some grants were re-introduced from 2004, limited to selected urban areas of deprivation. A continuing theme was the long-standing inequalities in elite universities' admissions practices – a topic which always generated great debate in the press and media outlets but which impacted only a tiny minority of disadvantaged students who were themselves an elite within their own cohorts.

Mass demand for higher education

Once the possibilities of HE study were widely known and internalised as normal expectations by large numbers of people, seismic shifts in provision and an explosion of study opportunities took place. The doubts many had about breaking down entry barriers to university study for masses of people were removed. At the start of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom, there were 29,000 full-time students in the whole of higher education and by 1960 this had risen to 180,000 (Edwards 1984). Considerable growth occurred in the period between 1960 and 1970 and the number of full-time and full-time equivalent students in HE was 446,000 by the end of the decade. In 1984, the number had risen to 677,000 (DES 1984). In the early 1960s some 4 per cent of school leavers went to university (Guardian 2013). By 1979, 12.7 per cent of the 18 and 19 year old cohort were participating in higher education, and by 1986 this had risen to 13.7 per cent of the cohort (TES 1986).

From adult learners and returners to a youthful monoculture?

It was not just young people who were targeting themselves at universities. In 1970-71, almost 21 per cent of the home (UK) initial entrants to HE were mature students and in 1983-84, this had risen to just over 23 per cent. A governmental DES (Department of Education and Science) report expected that the proportion of mature entry students would rise to 30 per cent by 1996-97 (DES 1984). In August 1984, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) reported that of the mature entry students, 4.5 per cent were considered to be non-standard entry. At this point in time lifelong learning appeared to be a realistic option for growth and expansion across the educational sectors. This was in fact the seedbed for the growing number Access programmes and courses across the UK.

By the mid-1990s the growth of mass education systems had opened up opportunities for study in general and it was not just the young that could benefit. The Open University became the biggest university in the UK, for example, with open entry for most degree courses and fees liable for local government support. In the UK adult learning in university extra-mural departments flourished as did adult colleges and evening classes all over the country (Newman 1979; Fieldhouse 1996). An explosion of open learning took place with the creation of 'open colleges' and open college federations all over the UK whose task was to provide and recognise through accreditation a whole raft of learning and skills which had never before been acknowledged (Black 1982; Wilson 2010; Davies 2023).

The measure of the changes underway as the new 21st century approached can be gauged by the following sketch:

- in 1960 in Britain 22,426 people obtained university degrees and by 2011 there were 350,800
- in 1967 full-time student numbers in universities were 197,000 and in 2018 there were 1.8 million undergraduates
- in 1960 there were 24 universities in the UK; in 2019/20 there were 282 higher education providers, including over 160 universities
- in 1950 participation in higher education was 3.4 per cent of the relevant age cohort; in 1970 it was 8.4 per cent ; in 1990 it was 19.3 per cent and in 2000 it was 33 per cent; by 2015 the earlier target of 50 per cent participation of some kind in HE had been confirmed
- by the year 2000 there were more women obtaining degrees than men.

(University World News 2013)

The changes and developments summarised above are indicative of the general impact that mass higher education had in the period up to the new century in the UK. Whilst they reveal a great deal about the evolving student numbers they do not expose some of the key aspects and trends of the growth picture. In essence an elite and selective HE system was being replaced by a much more open and adaptive mass system of recruitment of mainly young people. This emerging system was elitist and hierarchical and rooted in a stratified system based on old social and cultural divisions whilst simultaneously it tried to adapt and profit from the dominant discourses of neoliberal ideologies which were driving educational and social policies. These were the contexts and conditions in which the Access movement emerged as part of the massification of higher education.

By the time the third decade of the 21st century arrived the following picture had emerged:

- the overall student body had become skewed towards younger students who were mainly full-time, as disincentives for part-time study for adults were created by higher fees
- post-graduate students made up a quarter of all students
- 'other' undergraduate courses such as Higher National Diplomas and Certificates had declined in favour of degree courses
- the UK displayed a strong vocational bias and vocational subjects predominated across humanities/social sciences and the sciences
- in 2021 there were substantially more female students than males with some subjects having strongly disproportionate female or male numbers (engineering was predominantly male whilst education was predominantly female)
- the majority of students were white but there was a growing proportion of black and minority ethnic students, concentrated in post-1992 universities and colleges
- some minority ethnic groups succeeded beyond the proportion of the majority 'white' population gaining entry to elite universities, whilst others failed to do so
- students with Asian backgrounds dominated entry to many medical schools
- students remained predominantly middle class, even after decades of mass expansion of HE
- non-UK students were more than a quarter of the total number and are concentrated in the most selective universities and in those

institutions that struggled to recruit UK students

- more than 20 per cent of the income for universities came from foreign students and in 2020 they spent more than £19 billion on fees and living expenses
- UK higher education systems were now highly stratified with some institutions committed to their research missions and selectivity and others to more open access policies and approaches; there is no formal differentiation of roles or missions within British universities.
- the number of 18-year-olds in Britain will be 25 per cent higher in 2030 than it was in 2020.
- (sources – Scott 2021: ch 5; Economist 2023)

Expansion and growth-who pays and who gains: a UK conundrum?

Expanding higher education to address the inequalities and social injustices in the wider society was widely held to be unaffordable as part of public expenditure in the UK and student fees were tripled to £3,000 a year in the early years of the new century. The predicted shockwaves from the introduction of these student fees did not occur and they were to be raised again by successor governments to over £9,000 a year after 2012. Participation rates for disadvantaged groups did not rise greatly at first, however, and this became the focus for policy development (HEFCE 2005, 2007). The HE system in the UK as a whole continued its inexorable expansion in spite of a scaling back of widening participation initiatives following the financial global crisis of 2008-09 (Harrison 2018: 57). The desired economic redistribution of wealth and opportunity envisaged at the start of the Labour governments, however, did not happen. Social and economic inequality continued to grow throughout this period and accelerated after the conservatives were re-elected to office in 2010 (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Savage 2015; Dorling 2015, 2018; Toynbee and Walker 2020).

Another major change was the abolition by 2014 of student numbers controls by the UK government so that HE institutions could recruit as many students as they could handle. This was a signal to the elite universities to expand at the expense of the lower status institutions and to use their 'quality' provision to expand the market. From 2012 government signalled its willingness to allow private providers to enter the higher education market. The net effect of this was to comprehensively rebrand the notion of widening participation as 'social mobility' (Waller et al 2015). The key aims were to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering universities in 2020 compared to 2009 (Harrison ibid: 58) and to increase the number of BAME students in universities by 20 per cent by the same date. There was an assumption made here at the time and widely shared elsewhere that widening participation could be translated into social mobility. The parallels with Australia are noteworthy, though the timing and details differed, reflecting naturally the national arena of government interventions in HE policy.

The formal and public discourse had changed from universities being publicly funded institutions necessary for the continuing social, economic and cultural life of the nation and requiring selection of the brightest and best who were thought deserving of support and access to privilege – to being market-led institutions whose task was to drive economic growth and development through the knowledge economy. Privately paid fees, supported through government backed loans, generated income for the universities and took HE funding off the government's debt charges whilst allowing expansion of student numbers to occur. However, what was also highlighted in this expansion was the failure of the elite universities to recruit substantially from the most educationally disadvantaged sections of society. This was to have significant implications for the access and widening participation agenda in general because a public focus on Oxbridge in particular had political charge attached to it. It had very little impact on the Access movement itself since outside the extra-mural departments the super-elite universities made few changes to admit a more democratically selected student body (Davies 1995; Freeman 2023:180-181). It was the emphasis on elite universities and issues of high achieving young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, which dominated government thinking and served to distinguish this concern from the wider and deeper historical problems of an unequal class-ridden and socially unjust society. There were concerted attempts to persuade applicants deemed to be 'bright' from poor or deprived backgrounds to apply to elite institutions, regardless of their own priorities and engagements with local communities. These high status universities were of course more able to game the market to attract such students. The lower status institutions were financially far less well equipped to meet these challenges, yet they were historically and contemporaneously the ones that served the under-represented groups.

Between 2005 and 2014 rising participation rates for 18 and 19 year olds across all social groups were recorded with improvement rates being faster for the less affluent sectors. Some narrowing of the gap between the highest participation areas and the lower took place with demand reaching saturation levels for the affluent groups. The strong stratification of the university sector, especially marked in England, is noteworthy and after 2012 the Russell Group of some 25 'high tariff' and supposedly elite universities saw participation rise, reflecting the change in policies controlling student numbers that allowed these institutions to increase their enrolment of high achieving young people. However, the big improvement in participation for young people from the lower socio-economic groups in British society was concentrated in the 'lower tariff' institutions, including the ex-polytechnics – those which did not normally figure as winners in the dubious league and performance tables (Fowler and Wyke 1993). The growth in participation of lower socio-economic groups in elite institutions was a step in the right direction but as Harrison (ibid: 69) points out, it was modest and needs to be understood in the wider context of stronger growth and participation for more advantaged groups in the elite and elitist system (Croxford and Raffe 2015).

Ethnicity and race: opportunities for some

On the matter of ethnic categories and identities and participation, the period saw significant change. Whereas the Dearing Review in 1997 had noted BAME communities had a lower rate of participation in higher education than the majority white community, Chinese and Indian populations had strong participation rates. By 2015 the position had been reached where the white majority community had the lowest participation rates, below those of BAME communities. Between 2007 and 2015 the Black population had the fastest growth in participation of all the ethnic groups. The White British community also had the lowest increase in its participation rate in HE from 2007 onwards, from 21.7 per cent to 27.8 per cent whereas the Black group increased their participation rate in HE from 20.9 per cent to 36.7 per cent. In addition, many commentators had believed that students from low income families would be discouraged by the introduction of and increases in tuition fees. However, there was little evidence to support this view according to Harrison (2018 ibid), a pattern noted also in the Australian experience of introducing student fees for university study. The implications of income contingent changes for higher education had arisen in Australia in respect of access some years earlier with similar results (Chapman and Ryan 2005).

The early years of the 21st century saw participation increase very substantially as the whole HE system was set on expansion and rapid growth. Ethnic groupings and black populations benefitted and their participation rates improved though not all equally. Afro-Caribbean students

did less well than students from Chinese and some south Asian backgrounds. White working class students appeared to perform comparatively poorly. The system as a whole became larger but simultaneously more stratified with 'high' and 'low' tariff institutions emerging. High tariff universities could recruit the best performing school leavers and claim to be of higher quality. Eventually a whole series of performance league tables were adopted in which the elite universities (the Russell Group) out-performed the others in an unequal and unfair competition and for which the playing fields were not level. The most successful institutions received more funding than those at the bottom of the scale and a self-generated and self-serving hierarchy of universities was created. In general the older, richer and best endowed universities achieved the highest rankings and statuses and yet did least to engage with equity groups and the disadvantaged. The more homogenous, elitist and very much smaller internally egalitarian university system of the post-war world had, some 70 years later, morphed into a mass higher education system eventually hoovering up more than 50 per cent of school leavers. In doing so it had also transformed itself into an economic generator of huge significance to the wider economy and for the scientific and research communities. It was a diversified yet highly differentiated, stratified and hierarchical system. Its importance for the social and economic state of the nation could not be denied though its contribution to social justice and the social purposes of higher education was open to question and controversy.

New century – new challenges: old inequalities

This chapter has attempted to bring into focus a concept of Access as a movement and as an expression of widening participation and equity which we have suggested is shared by two very different societies but which have a good deal in common. Shared but distinctively different Australian and British histories have shaped different educational systems and ideas about the nature of inequalities, and of how to deal with such issues. Yet the commonalities are striking and the challenges in an ever globalising world are held in common whether we wish it or not. The sociocultural differences in Australia between low SES students and more affluent groups may be less than those which exist in Britain but educational and social inequality continues to demand attention across Australia and Britain. Recent austerity policies and the Brexit policies of Conservative governments have helped impoverish millions of people in Britain (Toynbee and Walker 2020) whilst many have proclaimed that Britain is still the fifth or sixth richest country in the world. This is a shocking revelation in the light of the structural inequalities that exist throughout society: at work and in the economy, the health service, the criminal justice system and in housing. People of colour, already disproportionately poor were hit hardest by the cost of living crisis in the 2020s and minority ethnic household are more likely to experience homelessness or live in poor quality or overcrowded homes (Crerar 2024). Racial biases and medical misogyny are routinely putting people in need of treatment at risk and black babies in England are three times more likely to die than white babies according to the National Child Mortality Database (Devlin 2024). In Australia, the extractive and mining economy has delivered extensive wealth yet profit and the common wealth of Australia's resources was put at the service of the makers of profit rather than into social and public services (Goodall 2019: 90). In September 2015 the Australian Prime Minister's first week in office co-incided with National Anti-Poverty Week. At that time some 2.3 million Australian households were living in poverty (Goodall ibid: 118).

The era of mass participation and the emergence of Access in both Britain and Australia was paradoxically one of hope and expectation that education would help assure prosperity and equity whilst also being a time of rising social deprivation and poverty for significant social groups within the broader populations. The contradictions in this were striking and have intensified in the 2nd and 3rd decades of this current century as there was a massive increase in economic, societal wealth and an explosion of access to mass communications as the digital economy took off which should have benefitted all, but in fact benefitted the existing wealthy elites most (Blakeley 2024: 76-77). The complex systems of modernity and modern capitalism claim to deliver economic growth and social progress (equity), however, the realities are that such outcomes are often contradictory and the masses seem destined to be denied their freedoms to learn and prosper (Wolf 2023; Blakeley ibid: 18). The salience of higher education in the turbo-charging of the difference between the rich and the poor should not be underestimated, however, as it represents both the capacity of the dispossessed to challenge inequity and is the route to personal responsibility and achievement if the barriers to access are removed.

Given the sheer diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural and identity types in both Britain and Australia, and the different social systems, comparisons are inevitably difficult to sustain. There is an argument though that the prevalence of the new information technologies and the ubiquitous character of social media are contributing to increased student engagement, both within historic borders and beyond. Does this lead to a reduction of cultural capital differences between low and high SES students and to any discernible outcomes? It is not possible to answer in detail without extensive research data, but what is clear is the continuing impact of inequality and social injustice. Aboriginal Australians, for example, are still the most disadvantaged peoples in their home country. Poverty, dispossession, social exclusion and isolation continue to bedevil communities in both Australia and Britain; countries where to our forbears unimaginable wealth now exists, yet so many live precarious and deprived lives.

As the 20th century moved towards its end it was possible to see the contours of a new system of higher education emerging from out of the old. For most of the post-Second World War period, universities formed the pinnacle of the education and training system. Their students had been mostly 18 year old male school leavers and were selected from a school system, which in Australia emulated that of the British elite public schools and state supported grammar schools. The universities in theory selected their students but much of this work was done by proxy in the selective schools themselves. There was a fairly seamless transition from a relatively small number of providing schools to universities which formed a ladder of progression into the higher echelons of society and economy. A well-known and well-trodden path upwards for the existing and aspiring upper social classes and elite groups was available for those whose values and wealth could be preserved and reproduced across the generations through schooling and the transmission of wealth and cultural capital. Universities set the standards for the rest of the education system and through their teaching and research defined what kind of knowledge and skill and understanding would be most highly valued in society and who would get to benefit most from it.

Paradoxically, and in contradiction to the prevailing ideology of education as a free and open market for learning and qualifications, the explosion of learning opportunities in the 21st century was financed mostly by governments which saw advantages in the willingness of people to learn. The new learning kept some people off the dole and out of the unemployment statistics. What else were literally millions of displaced working people to do when their factories and workplaces had closed and their jobs replaced by computerised systems and automation? Society and culture as well as British and Australian education were being re-modelled at this time and education was perceived as offering new possibilities as well as rectifying older injustices as discussion and debate around 'modernity' took

place (Giddens 1990, 1991; Hall and Gieben 1992; Harvey 1994). Both higher and further education were experiencing substantial change as mass higher education appeared to be the harbinger of increased diversity and increased educational opportunity (Davies 1998). The Vice Chancellor of the Open University stated in 1992… 'I have seen how mass higher education empowers people. That empowerment produces a greater sense of individual autonomy, which in turn makes for a more vibrant society' (Daniels 1992). Lifelong learning was in the air and as he so (in)aptly stated, parodying Wordsworth… 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive but to be a vice-chancellor was very heaven'. Personal autonomy and a vibrant society are worthy ideals but are not the stuff of a radical challenge to the deep-seated forms of inequality and the wicked issues which face us. Neither mass higher education in its conventional form nor the Open University with its radical past of open access and pedagogies were able to deliver what its vice-chancellor nominated as issues needed for the success of mass HE, namely institutional diversity, part-time study as an integral part of the system, and fair and equal funding across the system which would be fairer to the participants and more affordable to the tax payer. None of these came to pass as the above narrative has shown and a quite different narrative was invented so that homogeneity instead of diversity became dominant in HE, part-time study declined overall in the system, and the fees and funding issues eventually resulted in a consolidation of hierarchies of so-called quality and status which reinforced elitism and inequalities. The 'vibrant' learning society envisaged at the start of the mass higher education era was compatible with growth but this growth was to be based on conceptions of personal investment and the notion that a university degree was in fact viewed as 'private goods'. Its alternative, deriving from a different tradition of democratic Access was rooted in a conception of the public value of higher education for the common good, where university study was envisaged as a universal and free entitlement of belonging to a society that valued the public sphere.

The wider world meanwhile was forging ahead with world population growth and economic development re-shaping and re-constructing national economies. Globalisation and liberalisation brought an explosive growth of world trade (Wolf 2004; 2023: 64) and nations competed to take advantage of this. More economic development, including that of education, meant different, not worse, as the world moved into a globalising and cosmopolitan future (Skrbis and Woodward 2013) and whose limitations and failings were forensically challenged by Bauman's penetrating analysis (Bauman 2001: 56-61) and by Wolf's later assertion of the crucial need for democratic capitalism. The imagination needed to create *educational change* grew out of this wider maelstrom of social and economic turbulence and the wider and sometimes global social and economic disruption offered the possibility of re-thinking the role of universities and their wider social purposes (Ranson et al 2000; Ashwin 2020; Nyland and Davies 2022).

Outlined in this chapter is a sketch of contemporary and historical accounts of the growth and meaning of Access and widening participation in Britain. These continue to be the contexts and circumstances to which progressive education seeks a positive result and which drive concern for Access and widening participation in its modern settings. The past is only a partial guide to the future of course, and it has been said that the past is a different country and sometimes the borders to it are closed. There are also those who maintain that the past is not even past. The challenges of the present and future face us alarmingly now, and this book, we hope, brings some of these to the forefront of our thinking, including the social foundations of privilege and the dangers of neoliberal and meritocratic ideology as they run through higher education. The positive aspects of educational growth are palpable but we must ask whether they can protect us from the dangers of globalisation, cosmopolitanisation, and what Bauman called a community free zone and an escape from community in an insecure world which contains actual existential threats to our ways of life.

Changing technologies, new opportunities

This book suggests this is the problematical context within which we must understand the challenges which we now face. The impending ecological catastrophes which if not reversed will impact on the whole of humanity, may eclipse all of the educational challenges outlined in this volume. In spite of this and perhaps even because of it, there remains the urgent need to have a fair and just society. Education in general and universities in particular are key sites for the critique and challenge needed to bring this about. We surely need to engage with and reflect on these questions in order to think critically and engage proactively with these challenges. We believe this same focus remains true for the future. To assess and explore such possibilities we must review the concerns of the time which shaped awareness of that future and thus try to assess the widening horizons of the mass populations who continue to seek a future through higher education. What drove the social and educational changes and upheavals were pivotal events in modern social history and continue to impact on our contemporary lives.

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Part 3

Changes and the Changed

Chapter 5

Widening horizons

Among the many ways in which Britain and Australia and indeed much of the developed world was changing, the following themes and issues had a bearing on what was expected of an expanding mass higher education system in which Access and widening participation was an ever growing aspiration and increasing expectation:

An ageing and changing population

Whilst life expectancy was still rising at the turn of the 21st century birth rates remained low in many advanced industrial economies. The opportunity to put further education and higher education together in creative packages and programmes to address these issues was often not taken. The future prospects of the labour markets appeared to rely on migration flows from poorer societies which brought with them significant problems and issues of integration and assimilation (Collier 2013). The increasingly dramatic need to recognise ethnic and racial diversity as multiracial and multicultural societies emerged into consciousness became apparent (Bulmer and Solomos 2017; Davies 2022). These were matters of social justice but were concurrently challenges to the epistemological status of received and conservative views of what constituted valid knowledge. Multiracial societies were forced to engage with social and ethnic diversity in its many-sided aspects including age, sex, gender, as well as class and socioeconomic status. Educationalists also knew through experience gained in teaching and curriculum development that learning demand can be created where none apparently existed before so it was also a time of innovation and change in the world of higher education as the 21st century dawned (Daniels 1992; Duke 1992).

Changing structures of employment

The 1990s saw an increase in the number of part-time workers and casual and freelance work became more popular. This was partly driven by the needs of women wanting to work outside the home and the need for a second income in addition to a male bread-winner to sustain the family home and its ever-growing consumerism and unsustainable housing costs. In the UK in the longer term there was downward pressure on wages as British industry lost out to foreign competition and productivity fell. Immigrant labour became a more important factor in the British economy as manufacturing employment declined. The move to a service economy was being consolidated as the City of London and the financial services sector of the national economy increased their influence over government policy. Meanwhile, new forms of learning including work-based programmes and the accreditation of prior learning and experience were piloted throughout the country.

New types of work and employment became widely available as the new technologies expanded computer-based production and consumption. At the same time the new IT skills needed for many of these jobs were **not** accompanied by the creation of careers in companies that could provide not only decent salaries but pensions and job promotions and opportunities. The new industries were often dependent on new start-up businesses which were focussed on employing highly skilled young graduates who had few thoughts of a 'job for life' or career. A new 'precariat' of graduate workers came into being whose expectations and prospects were radically different from those of their parents.

Higher skills

In the UK the older industrial heartlands began to be referred to as 'left behind' as the knowledge-based industries expanded in the larger metropolitan centres. However, many areas had not benefitted from the rapid development of IT and information-based industries. It was clear that structures and fields of knowledge were changing rapidly as was computer and digital learning. It was widely thought, for example, that Britain was moving inexorably towards a 'knowledge economy' where education and qualifications would be commensurate with the burgeoning growth of science and technology based employment. The older manufacturing economy of Britain as the workshop of the world was being consigned finally and in some places it was felt, tragically, to history. Australia's development reflected that of much of the developed world of modern international capitalism. A highly skilled workforce was desired and educational provision, as well as immigration policy changed to reflect these new realities and the perceived need to compete on the world stage. The extractive industries for minerals ensured that Australia's export economy remained generally buoyant.

Changing communities into markets

Change may be said to be global but it is felt and experienced locally. The drive for qualifications and for vocational relevance in learning was felt in many communities throughout the country and this reflected the major changes taking place in labour markets and national economies. The political and economic policies of the 1980s had signalled both the growth and importance of markets and the idea that these could be created to provide and deliver social and educational services. Many local communities could no longer sustain local labour markets for employment and young people and graduates in particular moved to the greater urban centres everywhere. The fragility and oftentimes the absence of community came to dominate substantial parts of both the political and academic discourse (Bauman 2001). Consumerism seemed to offer escapes for many from the modern world and the creation of massively pervasive and extensive debt burdens, both public and private, through the use of credit and quantitative easing, offered an illusion of affluence based on what could be acquired in the market place. The great illusion was manufactured so that consumer capitalism could produce solutions to previous non-existent needs. A lifetime of economic precariousness beckoned for many as debt levels spiralled out of control and inequality increased.

Existential threats to life as we know it

Amongst the array of problems and issues facing educationalists who seek to develop improved access and educational opportunity there is one issue that if unaddressed will unfortunately outrank all the others. Global warming and the climate catastrophes that are now impacting on the world indicate that we are on the brink of passing several disastrous climate tipping points. Climate change is out of control according the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres (Observer 2023). The hottest day ever recorded on Earth took place in July 2023 and average air and sea temperatures broke all records. Heat related deaths across the world have increased almost beyond measure. Targets to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions have not been met and fossil fuel capitalism proceeds with its agenda of economic growth at all costs. The global average temperatures are 1.2 C above pre-industrial levels. That has raised average temperatures across almost all land on the planet and made heatwaves hotter and more likely and floods and droughts ensure that millions of people are regularly displaced by unlivable conditions. Vast agricultural and infrastructural losses are the result and sea level rises and severe flooding is predicted across vast areas of the globe. Climate migrants, already a major problem in parts of tropical Asia and Africa, are predicted to grow whilst in America more than 100 million Americans were under extreme heat warnings in July 2023. Gaia Vince has alerted us to the immensity and intensity of planetary destruction now underway and articulated her anger at the likelihood that her children won't get to snorkel the coral reefs of her Australian childhood (Vince

2023). Europe is the fastest warming continent but apocalyptic conditions exist everywhere with global climate chaos and ecological degradation world-wide. Natural ecosystems and human safety and even our very existence within the lifestyles we have evolved over thousands of years are severely threatened.

The rich and powerful often view the planet's ecological crisis as collateral damage in the battle to bolster their bank balances and share values. They are oblivious to the fact that global warming and breakdown will impact everyone and everywhere. But the stark reality is nobody is immune and what could better illustrate this than the great John Donne's poetic aphorism and eternal truth that no man is an island ?

World leaders signed an agreement in 2015 to attempt to limit global heating to 1.5C by the end of the century. However, current policies set by the nations of the world are set to heat the planet by 2.7C (Guardian 2023). This will provoke a crisis of unparalleled dimensions. In one sense nothing could be more important to our future than this issue. The arguments for re-shaping and devising a new curriculum to address this crucial threat overwhelm other priorities. Our ability to adapt to massive change is going to be tested as never before. Sustained critical thinking about the world we inhabit is needed as never before. We can either continue to destroy our planet or rescue it and ourselves by our own efforts. An existential choice stands before us and who can deny that this is the prime educational choice of our time. If we ask ourselves what is Access and widening participation ultimately for ? we must surely shape our response in the light of the existential danger to all.

Growth and change

In what we understand as 'modernity' in the late 20th and 21st centuries, economic growth has been thought to be a key means of delivering change. Without growth it has been asserted, tax revenue cannot be gathered and government debt can be perceived as being out of control which itself can generate crises. Fiscal and economic crises can result in destabilisation and uncertainty across the social and political landscapes. Growth, it has been suggested in theory can incentivise people and organisations to be more flexible and entrepreneurial. If we had growth then, runs the argument, consumers and providers, in fact all the stakeholders in the system, could benefit. There would be no need to redistribute opportunities or resources on the grounds of equity and fairness; instead the market mechanism would ensure this took place. In the UK this mode of thinking had a bearing on both further and higher education and for a period (which was not to last) where the boundaries between providers – between vocational colleges and universities – appeared to be dissolving. The previously different and antithetical worlds of higher education and further education were, however briefly, seen to be the beneficiaries of processes of change experienced as common. The market could provide the means of a beneficent convergence where the individualisation of choice, diversity of provision and the growth of a relevant vocationalism would ensure Britain's education was able to benefit from the inevitably globalised and competitive world we were entering. This was the providential or panglossian view that was assumed by those who wished to commercialise higher education and subject learning to the disciplines of the free market (Scott 1997; Williams 2013).

Intergenerational justice

There is both an academic and a non-academic question that ageing western societies such as Australia and Britain must face as the social and financial spheres become ever more uncertain and join the destabilised natural world in facing a troubled future. Young people have argued that the implicit moral bargain between the generations has been jettisoned as the older 'boomer' generation has sacrificed the future in favour of gains it is increasingly unable to pay forward (Mudd 2023). Past and current consumption of the earth's abundant resources has endangered the future as the earth's ecological balance and capacity to regenerate itself is threatened by climate change. Questions of intergenerational justice and equity between the young and the old come to the fore as the western democracies face multiple crises. The argument is that future generations should have access to resources and opportunities to continue life as we know it and this is a matter of intergenerational obligations and morality. The extent of this obligation is a contentious issue but it cannot be denied that we are currently creating both benefits and dangers for future generations to inherit. There is an educational agenda here which spirals out of the question of what we want Access to do and what its fundamental purposes are.

In the short term we surely wish to preserve our capacities to live a good and useful life and to reduce the risk of human extinction. This is not a utopian ambition. The good life can be made possible for the many and not just the few with our existing levels of technology and the preservation and careful harvesting of the earth's natural resources. The long term value of humanity is the moral question sine-qua-non, since existence for itself has an ultimate value. This argument rests within a discourse of western, rational, non-religious and agnostic traditions of thinking. Education plays a crucial role in such approaches and suggests that we need to ensure our intergenerational connections and principles are the right ones for the task in hand. This is where the most abstract concerns such as the meaning of our lives and existence actually contend and engage with the practical advances towards a more just society. We hope to have understood and interpreted both Access and access (higher and lower case as we have defined them) as part of the moral and practical struggle for a viable position in this current debate about the future. Uncovering our history and understanding our present is a continuum of responses towards the future which should allow communities to advance, however imperfectly, towards a more just society and improved social and educational outcomes.

The need for a re-imagined education

The themes outlined above suggest to us that it is time for a re-imagined and re-conceptualised curriculum; a curriculum which is rooted in the idea that social justice and a fairer sharing of the earth's resources are the basis of a substantially reformed capitalism – one that can deliver high standards of life and freedoms for all, not for a fortunate and wealthy few (Nyland and Davies 2022). In this context we can see in the history of Access and in contemporary practice and struggles for widening participation based on egalitarian principles, a radical re-imagining of what education might be for everyone. Our approach suggests that addressing these common challenges is part of the Access agenda which involves both the 'archaeology' of access and widening participation, knowing where we came from and how we arrived here, and fruitful and creative approaches to the future, especially in respect of the new kinds of knowledge and learning we need to be able to confront and overcome these challenges. The wider horizon of this must take in a discussion about access to natural and social wealth as we race towards a series of crises driven unfairly and disproportionately by the consumption of the rich and powerful of our social wealth as their own private property. There are common goods which must be forever held in common and these go beyond the access to unpolluted air to breathe, water to drink and use and an ecology which serves the many and safeguards the future of the earth for future generations. Human rights, social justice concerns and the right to a decent standard of life are included in this wider view of what constitutes the common good as does the right to learning and education for all. These matters are the macro context of our explorations and narratives in this volume and underpin our efforts at explaining the social, political, cultural and educational levels of change which we suggest follow from this approach.

Public versus private: the ideology of personal ownership

Among the themes which ran through the period of mass growth of higher education we have already mentioned was the way in which communities themselves became primary target-markets for the consumption of goods and services produced elsewhere and lost their own productive capacities and industries. Working class communities especially became hollowed out as traditional manufacturing either collapsed or was exported overseas to places where labour was cheaper and production costs were lower or was directed by government decree such as in China. The reconstruction of economies affected by such change in western, liberal societies was often achieved within what has become known as neoliberal policies and agendas where limiting the role of the state and encouraging the private sector of the economy to supply services and goods was the central concern of politics (Piketty 2020). The public-private division in higher education became involved in this development with governments of all persuasions in Australia and Britain ensuring that further and higher education institutions of all kinds behaved as part of a market for education and professional qualifications. The reality was that quasi-markets in tertiary education were invented by conservative political interests, mediated by government policies and manipulated through government agencies whose task was to implement national policies and priorities by controlling access to state funding for both research and teaching. Costs were supposed to be passed on to consumers (students) through fees and competition between institutions was supposed to guarantee consumer choice base on value delivered via price differentials.

In all of this the public and common interests of higher education were downgraded and no serious accountability and evaluation took place of the intended or unintended effects of higher education as 'public goods' other than the partial recognition of access and participation of equity groups (Margerison 2016: 105).The division between the public and private character and benefits of civil life and the public sphere is not simply the result of recent neoliberal market-driven policies. It emerged from the long gestation of the liberal capitalist state in which the limiting of the power and reach of the state is the central concern of political life. The place of individual freedoms in this world-view is positioned outside the role of the state and beyond the scope of social relations. Yet we can state with certainty that higher education must always be a collective effort even when achievements are ascribed to individual effort and talent or to family traits and cultural values. If the individual's access to HE is seen as a privately owned opportunity and consumer good, then this itself becomes part of the challenge of change which demands recognition of the social and equity content of all higher education.

This summary list of factors outlined above, which indicates the extent and reach of change in the period covered by this book, cannot claim to be definitive but is indicative of the complexity and inter-relatedness of social change themes, structures and the agents of change which were involved historically and which continue to shape our expectations, our perceptions and our capacities to respond to the challenges of the present and the emerging future. These factors and conditions of our existence which are effectively challenges for our generation are the deep and sometimes unconscious forces which guide and shape our perceptions and understandings of education in a changing, unstable and uncertain world. We look to a critical and insightful education to shine some light and create departure points for a better understanding and an improved social result.

Widening Participation: the context of change

The approach to the matter of change used in this book suggests that understanding educational disadvantage and equity issues requires us to 'pivot' between the events and social conditions of the last century and those of the 21st century. The 'long 1970s' was a period of great social and political disruption. Changing labour markets, the collapse of great swathes of traditional industry, changing social attitudes and popular cultures, new emerging identities, the impact of migration and acknowledgement of ethnic diversity and the disruption within and across the educational system as whole all contributed to the contested character of modern society. There was little sense of general consensus on what contemporary life should be like and a great deal of strife and social conflict took place, for example, in the industrial heartlands and in the race relations of Britain's increasingly multiracial and multicultural cities. This period also saw the onset of neoliberal economic and social policies within what was taken to be the globalisation of economic and increasingly of social life as the network society (Castells 1996, 2000) and its later digitalisation of communication and entertainment took off. Britain became a 'post-industrial' society and the 'service economy' was somehow declared to be paramount, leaving vast areas of previously industrialised Britain without investment in well paid jobs and only poor future prospects for young people. Both general and youth unemployment levels were high in the early 1980s and social and political life was extremely fractured. Under these conditions it was difficult to predict how educational expansion and democratisation could deliver opportunities and social mobility for the majority of aspiring parents and their children.

This picture is not the same for Australia of course, but there were parallel developments; education became Australia's 4th largest economic sector and the services economy grew exponentially also in the period dealt with in this book. What actually drove expansion of education in Australia in this late 20th century period were forces that were shared in common. These included a burgeoning and diversifying economy, a growing multiracial and multicultural population and the problems of destabilisation and uncertainty in a world that is no longer predictable.

In this environment some of the previous and widely held assumptions about the benefits of education were brought in question, not least by students themselves echoing the 'revolts' in the late 1960s and early 1970s against what they believed were the undemocratic and authoritarian controls used in the higher education institutions. In the early 1980s some sections of black youth in Britain, for example, were thought to be unschoolable (Dhondy 1974, 1979 ; John 1993, 2006). The validity of education as a channel for social change and mobility was up for question as schools and universities became the sites of clashes between the generations and between social and ethnic groups who wanted a better life and future and saw education as a means to that end but who often experienced schooling as oppressive and racist (Hall 1980; Sivanandan 1982).

The 1980s was a period of general and pervasive change and in many countries throughout the world the post-war social consensus on major social and political issues was in the process of being dismantled. The role of the welfare state, the extent of nationalised industries and public utilities, ownership and control of housing and transport and the responsibility for managing public investment in industrial development and renewal were put into question by conservative governments everywhere. Much of the public sector infrastructure of many countries was in fact being privatised following the strictures of the Thatcherite neoliberal project in this period. It was also a time where ***everything*** appeared to be changing, including culture and social life. Zygmunt Bauman (2001) referred to this shifting and unstable sense of uncertainty as 'liquid modernity' and the pace of change appeared to justify the alarming acceleration of capitalist change and development (Noyes 2014).

The apparent decline in public confidence that education could produce a democratic and more egalitarian society did not mean that education was taken out of the front line of

conflict and debate. Inner-city schools especially were freighted with ethnic and racial tensions and class issues regardless of other dimensions of inequality and these remained significant in determining outcomes and futures. Yet after the earlier expansion of the 1970s and1980s there was a relative stagnation in the growth of higher education and belief in social mobility through education was increasingly questioned. From the left this perception came from those who thought it was not happening and that increased social mobility could not fundamentally shift the embedded inequalities of unreformed capitalist social and economic structures. And from the right, social equality and equal opportunity policies were opposed by those who wished to re-assert the values of elite selection on the grounds that the brightest and best should be rewarded with life's prizes. From this perspective unequal outcomes demonstrated the rightness and fairness of competitive and meritocratic values. Those who succeeded in life clearly deserved to do so; so much appeared to be self-evident!

Part-time students

Perhaps the most notable negative outcome of higher education development in Britain in the period was the collapse of part-time mature adult numbers which dropped dramatically after 2012 following growth from 2006 to 2010. A significant yet inevitably more speculative reason for the decline in adult learning in universities may have been the pressures for financial control and the marketisation of education and learning which accompanied the 'globalising' of educational opportunities. Few universities resisted the lure of distance learning and the digitalisation and centralisation of the curriculum offer to students. Overseas and distance students could be recruited and brought with them lucrative fee income for cash-starved universities at relatively low costs. Full-time mature student numbers remained buoyant in the early decades of the century but the collapse of part-time numbers signalled the end of one version of the Access movement, as far as university participation was concerned. Extra-mural departments in Britain just about everywhere were eventually closed as flexible and distance learning expanded to encompass what was once considered a unique form of face-to-face adult education (Marriott 1984; Freeman 2023).

A key question – what drove participation?

Support for universal higher education remained strong and the unsettling social and occupational changes of the 1970s and 1980s meant latent demand for university education was growing, even though economic outcomes were uncertain and industrial employment in many places was in severe decline. Nobody could predict with certainty what young people wanted or would get from life and anyway they were deciding their own futures and fates in many cases in ways that could never have been anticipated by earlier generations.

The question was then to focus on whether further and higher education was a private consumer good, for which demand rose with generally rising living standards and expectations or whether it was an investment decision made by individuals who expected to gain income in the short term by leaving education. The attraction of higher education for young people in particular varies with the availability of well-paid work and future prospects. Mandler (2020: 111) notes what he calls 'the Indian Summer of manual employment experienced by Britain in the first half of the 70s' which may help explain the low rates for staying on at school and consequently the lower rates of applications and demand for higher education by young people at that particular time. This affected mainly boys and the longer term trend away from manual work and rising youth unemployment meant that by the late1980s more people wanted more education than ever before. In particular girls and women were participating in education and the labour market to a greater degree than ever. Whether this upsurge was as a result of consumer choice or as an investment decision is to pose a false dichotomy since the social and mass-psychological forces which shape individual choice are only known in the aggregated and collectively experienced outcomes. The trend was clear – more young people stayed on at school and further education colleges whilst age participation rates for higher education remained stagnant up to the late 1980s. For the young there was suppressed demand as employment prospects were suppressed by the collapse of many traditional industries brought about controversially by the neoliberal governments of Margaret Thatcher. On the other hand adult returners and learners were a burgeoning sector and for a time fuelled growth and expansion of higher education including that of open colleges and the Open University which developed credit and validation systems in partnership with vocational education providers and the creators of open colleges and Access courses (Black 1982; Daniels 1992; Wilson 2010).

In Australia the universities which had been stable in terms of their socio-economic and cultural makeup began to change in the 1970s. New migrants were more motivated to enter higher education than other groups who were at similar levels of income and increasing numbers of mature-aged students began taking the opportunity of going to university. The number of women studying professional degrees other than teaching was increasing due to the removal of fees. There was a recognition by the universities that aspiration and achievement could be enhanced if efforts were made to focus on the socio-economic and cultural conditions which helped shape aspirations to enter tertiary education. By the 1990s it was clear that higher education was growing at a rapid rate and becoming more socially inclusive (Marginson 2016: 24; Croucher and Waghorne 2020: 144-145).

From the late 1970s the Access movement in Britain and in particular the role and participation of women and members of black and ethnic groups drove many thousands into colleges and polytechnics as the harbingers of a new landscape of higher education, notwithstanding the fact that staying on rates for the young and their demand for higher learning were temporarily falling. Education, unlike normal consumer durable goods is not simply a desirable commodity subject to supply and demand relationships within a market. There can be little doubt though that large numbers of ordinary people began to view education as the means through which social aspirations could be met and this demand was experienced from below as it were, that is from large populations whose traditions had not included attending universities. The affluent middle classes already had such expectations but the onset of mass demand for higher education was new. Demand for education can be created through a range of social experiences and expectations and the different national education systems and their political approaches and policies differed from country to country. Growth and expansion was accompanied by the rhetoric of social inclusion, however, in most places and there can be little doubt that large numbers of people, and young people in particular had opportunities for study and work that had simply not been available in their parents' generation.

However, learning and knowledge have transformative capacities and self-knowledge can be fostered and created so that the conditions of its existence can be re-created or extended or be entirely reformed. Education and really useful knowledge is about more than the private decisions taken by individuals about staying on at school and attending universities. The social mission of higher education and the role of Access within that was a factor in expanding opportunities and if possible increasing social mobility, though this mission was a contested one (Pratt 1997: 28-31).

The great turn-about

The demand for higher education had been building throughout the 1970s and 1980s, exemplified by the expressions of dissent and alienation from public life that accompanied de-

industrialisation of swathes of British towns and cities during the neoliberal era initiated by the Thatcher governments. An untapped reservoir of demand from below was brought into play and the Access movement was able to tap into this as the waves of dissatisfaction were felt both politically and as the educationally deprived came to value the possibilities of further and higher education.

The mid-1980s to the early 2000s saw perhaps the most extraordinary and rapid growth of higher education in Britain. 'Nothing like it had ever been seen before or has been seen since, not only in British history, but practically in the history of any other country…' (Mandler ibid: 130). Social demand for change was effectively channelled into student demand for places. Access courses were at the margins of the formal system of further and higher education but nevertheless were a harbinger of what was to come as non-traditional students joined those staying on as the new mass entrants to higher education.

The wider concerns of politics continued throughout this upsurge in interest and engagement with higher education but there can be no doubt that post-school education was now a theme of broader political debate within the discourse of social change. The themes of who should pay for student fees, maintenance grants and loans, per capita grants to universities, capping of student numbers and who got access to which universities, all developed problematically out of the issues which student demand posed. Higher education was to take its place in the forefront of social and political discourse as its significance for mass populations exploded into public consciousness.

Driving the change: a knowledge economy or a learning society?

What drove so many more people to stay on at school and in post-compulsory education, and also underpinned the Access movement, was demand from below (Mandler ibid: 135). Supply in the form of government policy literally could not create the realisation that literally masses of people were being made aware that education might help them and their children achieve a better life. This awareness grew from within the daily lives and struggles of ordinary citizens whose aspirations could be met in no other way than through education. They accepted the prevailing beliefs that better and fairer schooling could lead to university-level education and a better future. The emerging knowledge economy and the learning society, it was perceived, had a pay-off for many whose backgrounds had not included a university education. This was not just a matter of economic incentives since there is no clear correlation between economic growth and incentives and participation rates (Mandler ibid: 136). It may be the case, however, that in certain circumstances education can create its own demand. There is an argument, for example, that in Britain the Open University in creating a new and dynamic system of open access in terms of entry qualifications, fees, study methods, open access study materials, teaching strategies, assessment techniques and student support, actually created its own demand for its products and learning experiences. There can be no doubt that black and ethnic group populations in the inner cities of Britain in the 1970s and 1980s also created their own learning cultures and opportunities, which were eventually recognised by the education authorities and institutions (John 2006). At the same time a large number of jobs everywhere became 'graduate jobs' as the employment markets changed and these carried a graduate premium. The graduate premium was, however, itself a variable factor and was greater for some occupations than for others, yet the general trend towards graduate status was upwards regardless of specific jobs and their differential rewards.

Going to university became common if not the norm and progression from school to college was viewed as a more democratic and meritocratic experience, nomatter that access and participation was sharply stratified by social class and in the elite universities in particular beset by ethnic exclusions.

At a later stage women and ethnic minorities became over-represented in the universities as higher education itself became a normalised and near-universal aspiration for young people. This might not have been the knowledge economy but it was certainly a version of the learning society; a society where striving for individualised, personal success and opportunity was applauded but where social differences and inequalities continued to be asserted and which shaped social outcomes and results. The rhetoric of equality of opportunity belied the facts of unequal outcomes and the persistence of inequality.

There can be little doubt that a form of the new 'Learning Age' (DfEE 1998) had arrived by the turn of the 21st century. A fast globalising economy, flexible employment and rapidly changing labour markets put education firmly in the forefront of public policy for change. The demand for education was driven by the structural changes in economy and society impacting greatly on working class people, women, young people and on the ethnic and racial groups in society. These were and remain matters deeply embedded in questions of social equity and social justice and these were the fundamental drivers from below, as it were; the realities of chronic inequality of opportunity. The expansion of higher education did not unfortunately obviate the felt experience of masses of people who felt excluded and marginalised by the inadequate and divisive post-compulsory education systems which emerged from the period and process of growth. This was true of Britain and Australia and many other nations whose social systems were built around inequalities, yet which looked to education to rectify what were often understood as anomalies in the distribution of fair and equal access to learning and opportunities. Of course there were theories of human capital which explained why more education was needed in the interests of the economy and competitiveness (Ransom et al 2000) and undoubtedly these factors helped shape public policy towards widening participation. But they did not explain the deepening change that was occurring and the scale of the challenges that were facing many societies. The needs of the labour market alone and the desire to develop human capital theory as a rationale for expanding higher education were not adequate to explain the growth and differentiation of HE into 'superior' elite and 'inferior' institutions for those outside the elite. This was a hierarchy of supposedly quality and status providers which purported to express authentic differences of ability and talent in its students and universities. In reality it gave expression to unjustifiable distinctions of wealth and privilege which are incompatible with notions of equality and social justice. In many countries dislocation, instability and insecurity characterised social life and the transitions to modernity were being made with ever greater social and employment insecurity and a continuing and highly unequal and socially divisive education system. This was the context for the developing Access movement as people sought more and different types of learning to overcome the disabling effects of their previous education, which had for too many failed to enhance essential skills and create motivation to go further. Enhancing employability became the mantra and prime mission of the New Labour government after 1997 and education was seen as the best economic policy that the Labour Party had (Mandler ibid: 141; DfEE 1998).

Following the years of Conservative government in Britain the Access movement might have expected more; a deeper understanding of the need for education which would re-engineer and re-think the relationship between work, education and wealth creation. This prospect was suggested within Labour Party policy documents (DfEE 1998, 1999) but no such social transformation occurred. Mass higher education and an expansion of further education was achieved more in spite of, rather than because of conservative policies because it was unstoppable. America had shown the way and Europe was catching up fast with the notion that the working people could go to university and that graduate status was within the grasp of the many, not merely the selected few.

The contradictions of growth for the HE system

The astounding generational expansion of higher education we have outlined did not occur in a vacuum but rather was a part of a globalised change in economic production and distribution of goods and services. New and transformational forms of communications based on computerised technologies created new forms of wealth and cultural patterns of behaviour shifted to accommodate the new technologies and their capacities everywhere. Higher education was itself a key player in this multiple transformation of economic, social and cultural life-styles. The sheer size and complexity of HE and the multiplicity and diversity of its functions in the public sphere for research, knowledge production and distribution, certification of professional qualifications and the selection of those destined for promotion in the worlds of work and civic life, can serve, however, to disguise the true characteristics of the system as a whole. Whereas it might be thought that the growth of HE would bring increasing diversity and encourage difference to be recognised, the reality was – homogeneity became the favoured outcome.

As mass HE grew the pressures increased on individual institutions to conform to governmental funding arrangements and to compete on the same terms as the successful ones. Monocultural and single discipline colleges along with smaller general HE institutions were encouraged to amalgamate with larger local and regional providers. The horizontal diversity of the historic HE system in both Australia and Britain was diminished in favour of the 'multiversity' in which size and diversity came to be identified with success and with the supposed financial advantages due to the lowering of unit costs and possibility of management savings across the larger institutions. Successful universities became bigger, not smaller and they came to resemble each other in their missions and organisational structures. This did not always prove to be advantageous for the providers of specialist subjects or for smaller and creatively different institutions (Davies 2023). The growth in size and complexity of universities had other significant effects which may have hidden to some degree the social functions of selection and differentiation which were simultaneously at work in the period of growth and change. This was a period of increased competitiveness and stratification, certainly amongst the middle-ranking universities where the transition by students to the labour market was often taken as a key element by which success could be judged. Increasing competitiveness and stratification, however, does not necessarily enhance the likelihood of success in the competition for a limited number of places in the top professions and workplaces. As we have already suggested and as we explore in greater detail in chapters 7 and 8, social and cultural background may be exacerbated as determinants of success in the job market, where the absolute number of places is limited but the relative number of potential applicants is growing (Triventi 2013: 48). Social mobility and meritocracy may well be intended as part of the stated mission of a university or of many multiversities, but this may well not transform the actual outcomes which are shaped by the differentiated value attributed to the different universities themselves. Where strongly elitist assumptions and practices are at work in society, steeply hierarchal differentiated value positions can come to characterise the HE system. The English 'ancient' universities of Oxford and Cambridge exemplify this trend though similar manifestations are found in other societies including Australia and the United States.

The point to be made here is that widening participation and the growth of mass HE systems does not automatically yield socially progressive change and equality of opportunity, though relatively, in comparison to the past, it may do precisely that for some socially and educationally excluded populations. The regressive aspects attach to the contention that differentiated value is the only and best way to conceive of a higher education system which is functionally complex and responsive to demand. This brings into scope a higher order question concerning the question of what kind of society and social order is presupposed by a national HE system as a whole? Simon Marginson, one of the most perceptive analysts on this subject, suggests there may be choices to be made in societies that view HE as a system of social allocation that produces positional goods (degrees and certifications) and empowers all participants, and is yet competitive and subject to market competition and high success only for the few. After all there are only so many top jobs and positions in a competitive and market-driven society. Social competition is modified by policies that ensure higher education is a citizen right and is a common good, though it facilitates private advantage through elitist schools and universities. An alternative might be a system based on what constitutes the common good and where education involves a commitment to social equality and social solidarity (Marginson 2016: 51).

Mass higher education was quintessentially concerned with widening participation and the idea that a rising tide of participation raised all boats. The difficulty lay in transferring from one boat to another. Marginson makes the disturbing point that widening participation tends to 'hollow out' the value of sub-university learning by creating a greater degree of value differentiation between different institutions (Marginson 2016: 222). The high status institutions did not in general indulge in lower status programmes associated with Access and those that encouraged Access did not draw equal to the existing elite universities. The competitive hierarchies of quality and performance took no account of Access other than to ensure that its characteristics could only disadvantage a university in the rankings for status and prestige. The allocation of fairly permanent populations to the lower reaches of society persisted and their fate was conceded mainly to the lower ranked HEIs. Often the explanation for this was given as a matter of the social differentiation of aspiration. The lower social classes and disadvantaged groups were positioned as having different aspirations which served to exclude themselves from even applying for elite places. Such explanations rested on false notions of what socially excluded populations wanted and were capable of achieving, given an equal chance – which they were in fact denied. The defenders of an unequal system could argue that the differentiated (and deeply unequal) supply and the differentiated demand of the complex HE system was a functional, self-positioning and responsive system that needed only adaptive reforms to continue *ad infinitum*.

The demands for social equity were however far from being satisfied and they continue to shape and re-define what is expected of higher education. The arguments in this book suggest that the counter-tendencies do not come from government and HEIs alone, though they remain crucially the providers of political will, finance and policy support. Our argument points to the generative and critical qualities of the Access movement and its ideas within a critical understanding of social and economic regeneration, wealth redistribution and the need for a critical curriculum – some of the threads through time we have identified as central to our understanding of Access.

Has educational change challenged inequality?

If the driving force of educational change was not simply economic development and was not due to demand being driven by either a wish to personally invest in learning or by the perceived benefit of greater income returns from work (Mandler ibid), and if human capital theory does not adequately explain the growth of demand for education (Marginson 2016; Wesley 2023), then what does? Is the answer that attainment levels have simply risen across the board and that public investment in education was increased by successive governments, regardless of their political colouring? Is it no more than just a generic growth of sentiment that wider, pervasive

economic changes alongside the wish for greater choice and diversity can be detected among modern populations? Is there an inevitable movement from the state providing education to the market doing so, and doing so more efficiently and better? Such reasoning questions the narrative that education was something struggled over within contested visions of what learning might be in a society characterised by precarious futures and uncertainty and a growing middle class which wanted what that class had always sought – privileges and protection for its own members and their children. Mandler states, for example, that … 'in any case educational inequality has not grown since the late 1980s' (ibid: 148).The reality of such an assertion depends upon how we understand and define educational inequality. If our concept of inequality is limited to participation rates and 'attainment gaps' between different social groups then it may be the case that inequality has not grown. There is more education available and more people wish to have it – so much is certain. In fact there is little chance of success in life without education in modern capitalistic society but that particular reality is far from being the whole story.

The realities are that income and wealth inequality, for example, in Britain has increased greatly since the 1980s and in some respects spectacularly since the Conservatives were returned to office in 2010 (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Dorling 2018; Brewer 2019; Toynbee and Walker 2020). As the 2020s approached, the United Kingdom had the second highest level of inequality among the countries with the seven largest economies, behind the United States (Brewer ibid: 148-149). In Europe only Lithuania was more unequal. If we go beyond the idea of equal opportunities and consider disparities of income and wealth as measures of unequal *outcomes*, we can observe massive social inequality and social injustice. In 2023 Gordon Brown the ex-Prime Minister of Britain reported that some 14.4 million people in the UK were living in poverty, including 4.2 million children the vast majority of whom were in families where the breadwinner was employed but on low pay (Brown 2023). He considered rising poverty to be a national emergency. Over and above the immediate effects of poverty it is clear that poverty, deprivation and social exclusion are forms of social disadvantage which correlate highly with educational disadvantage and unjust social outcomes at every level and at every age and stage of life.

But inequality is also about the nature and organisation of opportunities which shape those outcomes and this takes the argument beyond the fact that the third decade of the 21st century produced shocking levels of poverty in Britain, including extensive child poverty. The categories of the educationally disadvantaged continued to include black and Asian and minority learners, learners from deprived areas and low participation neighbourhoods, disabled learners, learners with mental health conditions, part-time learners, vocational learners, people with literacy and numeracy problems, refugees and socio-economically deprived learners (TASO 2022). There was, and remains, working class disadvantage all the way down the social ladder. Structural disadvantage, deeply embedded in British social, economic and cultural institutions, is diffused and extended by the ideologies of equality of opportunity, the supposed advantages of the 'free market' in education and the misconceptions of meritocracy (Todd 2021; Lynch 2022).

Inequality in Australia takes different forms and the nation has an enviable tradition of asserting its commitment to fairness and opportunities for success through hard work and engagement in a burgeoning economy in a modern diverse society. A land of opportunity with wide horizons and endless possibilities has been envisaged for generations of migrants and the native born Australians. It is a land of great wealth but also of great disparities. The transition to a viable economic future in managing climate change and ecological threats and eradicating want and dispossession throws into relief the question of how knowledge and education is to be used to achieve this. The models for doing this have been derived from British and American experience and this impact plays out in some remarkable similarities and sometimes in parallel (Marginson 2016; Goodall 2019).

The Access movement, it can be argued, was a departure point for considering alternatives to the dominant discourses and ideologies which infused our educational institutions. It allowed us to think that the elite universities might not be the only high point of intellectual development and that an alternative could be imagined which would better serve the majority of the people. However, in the imagined struggle for a better outcome the contestants were by no means equal and it was always fully known that wealth and power often wields the greater force, privileging choice and exacerbating inequality.

It has been suggested in this book so far that within the growth of mass participation, the Access agenda brought into the debate the need to re-examine the relations between the social classes and groups, between the sexes and races and generations and the need to make sure that education serves the needs of equal and active citizens within a democratic culture. Access became a curriculum expression of what was needed to inform learning and teaching for an improved future for the many. Its departure points included the following: education must be relevant to people's lives; the recognition of the needs of all learners; the development of a universal literacy and critical self-reflection; recognition of family and community life across all ages and stages of learning and the need for a pedagogy which re-connects knowledge with the burning and wicked issues of our time. These were some of the crucial issues that lay behind the defining themes of educational equality and opportunity which were to shape the emerging mass education systems in Australia and Britain.

Learning for wide horizons

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Chapter 6

Access as a 'Movement'

For three quarters of the 19th century there was no compulsory schooling but there was always a demand for learning and greater knowledge from below; from the common people (Roberts 1976; Fieldhouse 1996; Rose 2021), where education was both a demand for knowledge and learning and for change. Jane Goodall (2019) has documented the contemporary mood for change which in the 21st century can be traced to periods of radical upheaval in the English revolutionary republic of the 17th century and to the Australian history of the 'commons' and the establishment of the 'commonwealth'. She remarks that we suffer from cultural amnesia in which we have forgotten the sources and meanings of our common history and experience. Australian citizens and their British counterparts in recent times have both been 'bound together by an economy invested in the narrative of competitive individualism' and, we might have added, with the special privileges conferred on private property. We have lost touch with a deeper story – that of defining and working for the common good which includes the increasing recognition of the pre-colonial commons of Aboriginal Australia. (Pascoe 2018; Gammage 2012).

A sense of 'commonality' was also a characteristic part of the 'Great Tradition' fostered by the university extra-mural tradition in Britain. At least up to the 1960s, adult education for a social purpose was seen as a door to a better world (Fieldhouse ibid: 218; Freeman 2023). A shared literary culture, mutual learning and improvement societies, and attending WEA classes were only some of the activities which involved education as *social* learning. These activities were ... 'not essentially different from the fellowship of the pub, chapel or trade union. Knowledge was something to be shared...' (Rose ibid: 89). Arguably some substantial elements at least of this tradition were in place at the dawn of mass higher education in the 1960s as, ironically, educational opportunities opened up for working class children. In one sense the great tradition which had some of the characteristics of a social movement – that is to say, a distinctive conception of what a better life might be and the kind of society in which it can be achieved – was a movement in decline. It was being displaced by belief in the meritocratic route through the educational system which was faced with burgeoning demand for educational qualifications from the broad masses of the people. If Access was to be a 'movement' in the sense defined here (involving a distinctive conception of itself) then it would have to define itself within a more generic and expansionist world of higher and further education. This was a world in which different social movements with different types of communication was emerging. The more fixed and structured groupings based on class and social status were giving way to identities and organisations based on race, ethnicity, gender and perceptions of the 'self' rooted in neoliberal ideologies of individual value and worth. On the other hand governments were keen to sponsor utilitarian and vocational 'continuing education' which could then be recognised and used in the job market. If the older understandings of types of education such as liberal adult learning as a social movement were (and are) no longer tenable as mass higher education evolved, then it was possible to identify new and emerging types of learning such as Access courses which were part of a newer and wider educational movement of social thinking and social activism (Field 2013). This wider trend and movement challenged some of the dominant forms of knowledge distribution and the elitism of traditional and selective schools and universities. A substantial part of the working class along with the masses of the middle income population were going to college, come what may. They were going to college, however in a world that was changing; a world that was challenging the lives and communities where the politics of the common good were contested by global and local forces which in turn were reshaping the meaning of education.

Critical thinking and contested knowledge

The need and desire for something better and the demand for greater social justice signalled the failure of the meritocratic ideology to deliver better futures for generations who were less likely to settle for what was on offer. Motivation and ability asserted itself through the aspirations of ordinary people who saw education as the most likely route to a better life, if not for themselves, definitely for their children. If this was the general background for the evolution of the new demand for education and its appeal to actual and potential students, within the educational institutions and the classrooms there were notable and progressive departure points for teachers and learners. In providing a potential alternative to the dominant paradigm for entry to higher education, newer and critical thinking proposed both explicitly and implicitly a more adequate framework for lifelong learning. Drawing on a range of thinkers and theories and on education practitioners in community contexts in particular, some key principles and approaches to thinking and learning of the Access movement can be identified and although past pioneers of Access generated these principles and concerns they are intensely relevant to the need for substantial change in the future:

Valuing the learner

Learning and education have been often driven by a narrow understanding of cognitive development where different forms of intelligence and emotional well-being have been ignored. The concepts of multiple intelligence and emotional development are sources of alternative thinking which can underpin and enhance conventional learning and give recognition to the significance of self and self-identity.

Active social and community involvement

Formal education has been constructed around a narrow and restrictive conception of its purposes. These have frequently ignored the needs of communities for active and engaged citizens who can use education in the places in which they live and work for socially progressive purposes and for collective well-being and social justice.

Active and flexible learning

If educational institutions are to be the focus of change and transformation they must become centres of critical learning and of practice. Investigative and reflexive learning, problem solving and independent learning can play an enhanced role in the educational experience of the majority.

Family and community

A more holistic perspective of the learner would involve the key institutional and identity frameworks of the people and the recognition of difference and diversity as positive elements for a progressive pedagogy. The issues of race, ethnicity, faith and identity must be addressed as key aspects of modernity which impact on experience and shape expectations for everyone.

Engagement matters

Social responsibility can be at the core of an academic mission and this can allow institutions to be advocates of the political and policy issues that matter to communities. The social purposes of learning and education should drive provision and inform the curriculum. Education is part of what can be fundamental transformations of life-chances for working people and can contest unfair forms of privilege and inequality.

Critical thinking

The long and varied traditions of 'thinking differently' can be mobilised to provide for improved outcomes for those whose needs are greatest. A critical curriculum would address the great and pressing issues of the day from a social justice position and encourage a reflexive and self-critique to understand globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other.

Creative thinking for challenging times

We have already seen the impact of disruptive economic, social and technological forces that have helped shape mass higher education in modern times. However, it may be that equally disruptive forces are needed so that creativity can be released to re-vitalise and regenerate our education values and systems. More balanced and individualised and creative approaches to education are a necessity as are theories of change which can transform not merely reform the system. We have highlighted the importance of the struggle for ideas and intellectual autonomy for the common people and suggested that Access was one expression of this struggle.

A World shaped by Artificial Intelligence (AI) or social intelligence?

In using the idea of the challenge of change for this volume we have placed Access and widening participation in the context of the social and technological forces which are driving change. The new computer based information and communication technologies allowing virtual realities and relationships as well as myriad forms of communication between individuals the world over has transformed both material and cultural life. Economies now operate according to one view as one big innovation engine – around data and information technology. Transformations in life sciences, materials science, energy systems and health applications are all expected to emerge with greater force in the near future. The Application of AI to literary and cultural fields such as music and film and art may prove intensely controversial, as with those for educational purposes. The globalisation of the services economy appears to be both inevitable and unstoppable and AI adds a whole new dimension to the human propensity to communicate and produce both material and ideological goods. What it cannot do alone is determine the uses and value of such capacity.

It is likely that AI has the capacity to eradicate not only many existing professions but to ensure the collapse of human – made systems which comprise our social and communal life. Along with the threat of cascading environmental breakdowns such predictions are alarming as is the fact that change appears so suddenly and often without apparent warning. However, the warnings are there and the question for us is therefore – what kind of education will equip and arm us to understand and overcome the negative aspects of rapid and massive change? It is conceivable that the new AI technologies will add to the sense of uncertainty around what it is to be human and to live in a society dominated by technological advances. It may be that large numbers of workers including educated ones will lose their jobs as the owners of the capital using AI make substantial gains. All of this suggests that a revolution in economic and social management is required which itself cannot be generated by traditional thinking and ideas.

The crisis of schooling and higher education: the curriculum challenge

The predominance of fixed and rigid forms of thinking, the existence of rigid boundaries between subjects within schooling and university curriculums, the fixity of examination and testing systems which create artificial borders which do not exist in nature or society, the separation of academic and vocational learning and qualifications, and the lack of understanding of the centrality of environmental collapse and degradation for everyone lie at the heart of the crisis of schooling and higher education. This has profound implications for the curriculum at all levels of the education system. Instead of enforcing the boundaries between subjects and pupils who are able to study them, a critical curriculum should break down these barriers. Critical thinking which is reflexively organised is needed so that the 'meta-skills' such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-development, social and emotional intelligence and creativity will help learners acquire the new competencies that the disruptively changing environment throws up.

The need for critical thinking in the crisis of ecology

If, as we have suggested, creative, critical and imaginative thinking is required to overcome the challenges of rigid and outmoded curriculum thinking, then we must apply such an approach with even more urgency to the impending climate change crisis and the breakdown of ecological systems which are threatened worldwide. In one authentic and deeply disturbing sense, nothing could be more important for the planet and for our human existence since this issue is existential and affects us all, each one of us. This issue is taken up in more detail in part 6 of this book and its absolutely crucial significance should infuse our reading and understanding of the true importance of education both for those of us now in the emergent present and those who will follow us in the uncertain future (Vince 2023).

These outline principles and concerns are a means of thinking about forms of learning, including lifelong learning and the need for creativity in schools and universities (Ranson et al 2000; Robinson 2016), which lay behind the development of mass participation in higher education. They were not always and everywhere articulated as such, and neither students nor teachers were constantly aware of their continuing impact on what was experienced in the classroom. Nevertheless, they are relevant to our understanding of education as part of both the individual and social experience of mass access to higher education and of the Access paradigm. They helped create the conditions in which public discussion and critical thinking could take forward key issues and concerns for educators and learners and allowed working people's history and biographies to figure as part of public and academic knowledge (Shor 1980; Rowbotham 1999; Rose 2021). Access by its nature must address new directions of study and theory and we have maintained that this involves a struggle for new directions in a field that has diverse constituencies. This, we believe, is inevitable where Access addresses the key topic of social disadvantage and the exclusion and marginalisation of specific social groups. Such groups and their ideas and intellectual interventions in educational, social and political debate formed the groundwork for the Access movement.

Defining Access as a movement

In Britain in the late 1970s and 1980s special programmes designed for engagement with excluded social groups were called Access Courses and many of them drew on the felt and lived-experience of people whose identities and origins were significant factors in their choices and decisions about jobs, opportunities and futures. The barriers to access and widening participation were many and varied and they impacted on succeeding generations of the population both through the divisive and hierarchized school system and in the ways in which adult learners struggled to access the available opportunities in higher education institutions (McGivney 1990, 1991). Racial, ethnic, cultural and gender identities and social class experience and positioning all mattered and counted in how individuals and groups understood and grasped or refused what was available. Aspiration may have meant going to university and into a service sector job but this took more than a purely economic calculus to work through to a result. The social and psychological contexts of Access meant that mass higher education was in fact refracted and experienced through the lens of personal and social life as it was lived by individuals, their families and communities. Though mass higher education was a response to an economic impulse, it was a social phenomenon; and these two sets of conditions were not always aligned, creating paradoxes and space for challenges and contested views on the meanings and purposes of higher education itself. This nexus of people who were subject to the exclusions and social marginalisation and 'post-industrial' alienation that the advanced capitalist nations were producing was the source of the productive

foment of ideas, beliefs and counter-cultural trends that made up what we can see as an Access movement. In one sense the Access movement was a specific expression of the educational dimension of the wider and deeper and more generalised crisis of democratic capitalism that was experienced across the 'western world' towards the end of the 20th century and in the early decades of the 21st century (Piketty 2014; Wolf 2023).

The idea of Access was associated with the provision of dedicated courses of study prepared specifically for those who had failed for whatever reason to achieve university entrance qualifications. Access denoted provision of special courses for people who had been educationally disadvantaged. Such programmes drew on the accumulated experience of adult education colleges, university extra-mural departments, community colleges, further education and technical colleges and on the 'open colleges' and Open University tradition of open entry and student support. Such provision was never limited to one nation or tradition and the contributions of trades unions, religious and faith educators, voluntary and cooperative associations, mechanics institutes, peoples' colleges and voluntary Sunday and day schools stretches back centuries in the traditions of British, American and Australian societies. That such myriad educational experiments and reforms should have evolved distinctive ways of teaching and learning is self-evident, and the struggles for 'really useful knowledge' by working people should never be underestimated (Johnson 1988). The Access movement was an amalgam of pedagogic practice, the re-formulation of what could be thought of as knowledge for the transformation of people's lives and the provision of courses and study programmes designed to get 'the commons' into and through a university education. The modern Access movement grew within the interstices of the mass movement for secondary schooling and for access to university study and qualifications. However, it was never coterminous with it. Access came to denote a specific set of engagements and practices for teachers and learners. No single set of definitions or descriptions of organisations and institutions which provided Access can adequately describe this movement, but its characteristics are readily identifiable and discovered by those wishing to know them and hopefully this volume will aid any who seek to discover and extend these definitions and the knowledge they provided for an improved social and educational result. This was after all their reason for being and the justification of so much effort and struggle to ensure a better and socially just future.

If education for the people rather than just for elites has been connected to the demand and experience of change, as we argue in this book, by the mid – 20th century a whole set of terms had been invented to embrace these forms of education, including community education, recurrent education, lifelong learning and continuing education. Many different types of learning 'institutions' were created some of which were voluntary associations whilst the State's role in post-school learning was to grow as the 20th century proceeded. Neither can the educational role of the Catholic Church in Australia in particular be under-estimated, reflecting the cultural impact of immigration by communities that identified strongly with faith and ethnic origins (O'Farrell 1986; Hirst 2015).

The Second World War proved to be something of a watershed for the growth of mass secondary schooling and in western social democratic states it became the norm for children to remain in school until the mid-teen years throughout the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1980s demand to stay on at school was growing exponentially and the benefits of a college or university education were becoming apparent to many families whose children in the past had never expected to enter higher education. An elite recruitment model from selective schools to universities no longer fitted the bill that ambitious parents and students were presenting to governments everywhere. The era of mass schooling and mass higher education was born.

In the United Kingdom the Open University (OU) demonstrated the exception to the rule that higher education was only for those who had made a success of their school careers. From the early 1970s the OU demonstrated that thousands benefitted from a university education who had no entry qualifications except their desire to learn and their motivation to achieve a degree. There was a clear focus here on objectives for learning, a definitive curriculum, a highly organised study and assessment regime and student support at a distance and face-to-face for adult learners the like of which had never been seen in Britain – or possibly anywhere (Weinbrenn 2014). The Open University was of course exceptional in that it was conceived of as an intervention by a government committed to extending opportunities through access to higher education and to reducing inequalities which had blighted post-war Britain. It might be described as the 'last gasp' of social democratic reform in post-war politics in Britain. It proved definitively that the ordinary people – the commons – could and wished to have access to university learning and qualifications. The barriers to a university education would have to come down and an alternative to the exclusions of the elite university system was required.

The rest of the university system in Britain was gradually and partially reformed and expanded following the Robbins Report in 1963 which asserted there should be university places available for all those suitably qualified and wishing to attend. The reforms that occurred were, however, limited in scope and the creation of a mass university sector was achieved within a framework of elite universities remaining in place at the top of a hierarchical system which continued its age-old course of discriminating in favour of its traditional clients. The upper and middle classes were allowed to continue to populate the traditional and elitist institutions and the selective methods used to do this were fundamentally unchallenged and hence went unreformed right into the 21st century. The creation of a more diverse and mass higher education system was achieved alongside the protection of a hierarchical cluster of universities which conferred privileges on the children of the already privileged. The elite universities in the UK continued to operate as engines of class and racial inequity (Bhopal and Myers 2023). This was not of course how many in the universities saw themselves at the time. A civilized society was one in which universities helped maintain dissent and critical opinion, where freedom of expression and the right to publish controversial research and insights was an essential part of a free, open and democratic nation. This aspect of the western university value system should never be disregarded in the desire to understand the growth of mass participation and the struggles and 'disputes' around access to learning (Watson 2006; Nyland 2020).

The question arises at this point as to whether it is meaningful to view this growth of learning opportunities and the rise and rise of educational institutions such as universities and colleges as part of a social movement? Certainly by the turn of the 20th century there was in existence in Britain a vast and substantial adult education tradition. Organisationally this involved a wide platform of activities and a dense web of institutions including the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the Co-operative movement, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the residential Labour Colleges, the educational activities of the labour and trades union movements, many church-based groups and the emerging university extra-mural departments (Fieldhouse ibid ; ch 6; Field 2013). Many of these were to flourish right on up to the 1980s and arguably they shared a distinctive conception of what a good life was and might be and of the kind of society necessary to bring that about. Notwithstanding differences between them, a whole working class movement rooted in educational thinking was thought to be a crucial element in a progressive alliance for a better future. Middle class and upper class intellectuals and thinkers joined this alliance in the expectation that a future leadership of working people would be educated to take control of their own destiny.

This was a social movement which had effectively ceased to exist by the end of the 20th century. The working class itself and its communities in Britain and elsewhere had changed beyond recognition and the growth of neoliberal economic and social thinking had shifted social attitudes and aspirations for education away from a mutual movement based in working class communities. The conception of education as a market-led choice being bought and consumed as a positional good became a dominant, but always contested, theme of social policy. This changing consciousness impacted on both the evolution of schooling for the mass of the population which became compulsory and the provision of post-school and adult education, which became government owned and driven by policy interests and party politics.

What characterised much of the earlier 'social movement' for generic access to learning and educational progress was the principle of voluntarism. The state and government interventions tended to come later when public civic action was thought to require public funding and control. In the course of time this displaced education as a social movement and separated it from much collective and political action in the wider society. Lifelong learning, as we have argued, became associated with personal and self-development and with the acquisition of employment-related skills as opposed to social transformation of a society rooted in economic inequality and social hierarchies. A university education became a private, consumer good rather than being viewed as an expression of public and social goods which brought benefit to whole communities.

This is not to deny the validity and value of new forms of community engagement and university outreach which animated and supported Access and widening participation in the mid and late 20th century. Adult and community educators continued to apply and develop the principles through which they applied their work (Lovett 1988; McIlroy 1989; McGivney 1990). In the wider society the emergence of new social movements proceeded apace and many issues became prominent in the public sphere which had been invisible or had been suppressed in the past. Race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, identity issues and the impact of environmental concerns found expression in the specialised world of education. The growth of mass higher education was fuelled by rising participation by adult students who held many of these concerns close to heart. A new norm was emerging for both young people as the massification of higher education proceeded as the likely outcome of their schooling, whilst simultaneously adult participation in many institutions also became normative and spaces for Access became embedded in universities, mainly but not exclusively in the new post-1992 institutions.

What was beyond all doubt was the fact that there was a large pent up demand for learning from adults in the last quarter of the 20th century. The younger generations were likewise demanding access to higher education as social and economic change removed traditional routes to jobs and occupations. Modernity was impacting in unanticipated ways and few people had predicted the massive expansion and exponential growth of education as the basis of an emerging knowledge economy. Together with the impact that computerisation and digitalisation was about to have on so many forms of work and employment, there was an explosion into possibility that the revolution in information technology was bringing to everyday lives and work. As a result and at the same time, a profound shift took place in the public's perception of what was needed to succeed in the competition for skills, qualifications and ultimately the pathway to a decent life. Education was of course a key, especially for those people who had little or no access to wealth or social and cultural capital. The growth of unprecedented further and higher education provision at low or no cost to the student was to prove crucial for current and future growth and prospects, as were the ever increasing demands from many varied sections of the population for the removal of the barriers to access to higher education (Edwards 1984; Eggins 1988).

Critical thinking and ecology

From the 1970s onwards there was recognition that in Australia, for participation to increase, the four conditions of entry to higher education needed to be met. 'Availability' and 'accessibility' had been enhanced by expanding the tertiary sector coupled with the abolition of fees but two other conditions were more problematic. 'Aspiration' and 'achievement' were cultural and social-psychological matters which were less easily recognised and remedied. New migrants certainly had aspirations for higher educational achievements but achievement used matriculation as a baseline requirement and this indicated changes were needed in primary and secondary schooling. Educational equality needed something more than the abolition of fees alone (Croucher and Waghorne 2020: 144-145). As part of the widening of access, universities implemented policies to enrol and support sections of the community who had been historically under-represented in higher education and who had faced economic disadvantage throughout their lives. Although such students still remained under-represented as a proportion of all students in Australian universities by 2017, their share of enrolments had grown through the decade of uncapped student places (Croucher and Waghorne ibid: 201). The 'Fair Chance for All' policy of 1990 had defined new national equity objectives which put disadvantaged groups at the forefront of concern and gave national recognition to access and widening participation. Whether these progressive developments brought into existence a fair and socially just educational system capable of long-term transformations in the opportunities available to the broader masses of Australian society, is one of the key questions raised in this book. As are the questions of what constitutes the social purposes of a university education and how can critical and creative thinking be brought within the Access movement as we have attempted to define it?

For many who came forward to study as disadvantaged students the removal of barriers was not a second chance to learn but was in effect their first chance to study for entry to higher education. In Britain by the mid-1980s barriers to learning and educational achievement were being removed as it became clear that there was a huge demand for higher education that the educational reforms of schooling and universities of the 1960s and 1970s had not met. The conservatism of the traditional universities was to be expected – their role had been to select and sort those deemed to be fit for higher education and to exclude those who had failed to achieve the entry requirements. The greatest waste of talent arguably was amongst the working classes whose access to learning opportunities had been severely restricted historically. However, as Australia's population began to diversity and expand as a result of the jettisoning of the 'whites only' immigration policies and the emergence and recognition of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society along with the struggles for equality of treatment by Indigenous peoples across Australia, re-defined national and ethnic identities began to emerge. Significant implications and consequences for education could not be avoided (Forsythe 2014; Croucher and Waghorne 2020; Davies and Nyland 2022).

The 1970s and 1980s experienced the development of a new system of higher education which was totally different from that anticipated by earlier generations (Forsyth ibid 2014). What emerged was a mass HE system on a scale far greater than imagined by earlier educators and policy makers. In the UK, for example, within a single lifespan of say 60 years from 1960, more than 160 universities were established, three quarters of the total of UK universities (Scott 2021: 2). It was, however, a centralised system with financial power and control vested in controlling governmental agencies and after 1992 with no place for elected local authorities which had done so much to create many of the new institutions which were now universities (Fowler and Wyke 1993). The polytechnics became universities; advanced colleges of arts and technologies were amalgamated within universities; the further education colleges were made over into private corporations and many of the adult education colleges were closed or incorporated into larger entities. The driving rationale for this was a belief in the powers of the market to drive growth and efficiency. The reality was that a large share of the common and public wealth, built up over generations by local interests and communities could be privatised. The removal by conservative governments of the democratic element of ownership and accountability from elected local and regional communities in Britain signalled a profound loss of democratic rights.

The university system that emerged in the 1990s in Britain was not one of relatively autonomous and independent 'collegial' universities as intended, for example, by Robbins (1963) a generation earlier. The evolving and growing new system seemed to offer the possibility of a different system of higher education; more accessible to those communities that had been denied access to higher education and closer to the world of work and industry. At the same time, a more corporate and business-driven ethos was being developed where vocational relevance and employer needs were paramount for large numbers of the new graduates. As the 1980s drew to a close, education providers of all types and the conventional universities were faced with a quite different challenge – the onset of mass demand for higher education. This demand was driven by the perceived and widely publicised idea that we would shortly be living in a knowledge economy that would require ever-more university graduates and by the notion of the graduate premium – ie, graduates could command higher wages than non-graduates. A second assumption, widely held, was that investment in human capital boosts growth and productivity. Whether these assumptions are held to be true is a matter of continuing debate and consensus amongst economists and social analysts on these matters is difficult to find (Marginson 2016 ibid; Mandler 2020 ibid). Nevertheless, societies with high productivity and high living standards tend to have high levels of graduate workers.

The USA shows the way: the route to community college

The growth of mass education outside and beyond schooling in Australia (and the UK) almost certainly owed something to developments in the United States of America where vast numbers of people were involved in continuing education (House 1991). The 'community college movement' set up in the USA between 1951 and 1961 for working students recruited millions of adults who would not otherwise have had the opportunity for higher education (Fulton 1981; Shor 1980). Ira Shor argued that the evolving need for lifelong learning and higher education for all was, however, not a result of the discovery that learning was a benefit to humankind. The concept of greater access and the provision of available access to higher qualifications was a response to the problem of surplus labour (Shor ibid: 5). His analysis led him to believe that problems of over-production and under-employment in the American economy allowed education to be used to absorb the unemployed workers through the building and construction of colleges, employment within the colleges and by turning workers into students. College gave workers the opportunity to prepare for new careers in a rapidly changing job market. Higher education responded and changed as a result of the influx of working people into the system. It became more flexible and geared towards the needs of the people it served – both potential students and local businesses and government. Courses were modularised and classes arranged on a part-time and full-time basis during the day and in the evening. As a consequence many of those who would not otherwise have received higher education had their expectations raised. This was not to be without its problems though, as Shor argued … 'The job market used to reward college graduates with the best work, prior to the mass arrival of working people into higher education. The occupational hierarchy simply cannot now accommodate the demands of all those who successfully complete college' (ibid: 17). The growth of mass higher education in Australia and Britain from the 1980s onwards brought about similar challenges to the status and role of university qualifications which had been developed for the interests of a small minority but now were forced to address the needs of a near majority of every generation that was seeking higher education (Cantwell et al 2018).

For some of those whose aspirations had been raised by higher education there were feelings of frustration, disappointment and alienation. For some social groups in society who were previously under-represented in colleges and universities – especially women and minority ethnic groups – the widening educational franchise helped them to strengthen their identities and consciousness and perhaps contributed to their developing sense of autonomy. The development of lifelong learning and higher education opportunities in the USA was undoubtedly a momentous movement for social progress but it did not succeed, according to Shor, in equalising opportunities for working people with those of the upper classes. It was clearly an important factor in helping women and minority groups become more equal with their white male peers.

On the home front – a conservative social revolution

Changes in the employment and labour markets as a consequence of neoliberal market reforms and the closure of many industrial concerns brought uncertainty to many working class communities in these years. The reality was that societies and economies everywhere including both Australia and Britain were undergoing a transformation. The old industrial/agricultural economy was being transformed under neoliberal rules and policies

into a very different economy and society; what had been fixed and certain for generations was becoming fluid and insecure as was Australia's ethnic and racial make-up under the influence of selective immigration policies which had reversed the age old, racist 'whites only' policy and practices of the founding period (Gale and Brookman 1975; Yarwood and Knowling 1982). The industrial market economy was being rapidly re-shaped as globalisation and the rapidly developing digital and communications industries expanded, especially in the metropolitan cities. But this was a conservative revolution where change was constant but the underlying realities in respect of its class system, its racial and ethnic distinctions and its discrimination against gender inequalities remained on very familiar terrain, especially noteworthy in how individuals and groups experienced discrimination and marginalisation within the mainstream (Beneba Clarke 2019; Bhopal and Myers 2023). However, education was widely viewed as the key to unlocking the barriers to social mobility and if working class children could get a university place was that not testimony to the new egalitarianism?

The realities were that underneath the radical and rapid transformation of economy and society in the 1980s and 1990s there was also a great continuity. The unequal and unfair distribution of power and privilege, the spread of poverty and inequality, the maintenance of socially unjust treatment of racial and ethnic minorities and the continued marginalisation of women – all persisted. These were the pervasive issues from yester-year which stubbornly refused to disappear. Jane Goodall notes that even well into the 21st century neoliberal economic orthodoxies inspired government policies in Australia that played out in radical cuts to public services and civic institutions. She asserts that... 'The dispossessed society is the inevitable outcome' (Goodall 2019: 2). This is not to deny the fact that society was undergoing change. Nearly every occupation was requiring more education than before. Many roles that would previously have been learned on the job now needed a formal university degree and in many fields the masters degree was becoming the premium qualification.

The new currency for buying your way to a better future was education and many more people were intent on acquiring it. The key was in expansion and growth and the rhetoric used was of increasing social mobility and the importance of equal opportunities for everyone who could benefit. This was the unexamined message and meaning of 'meritocracy' in which working class people, and their children in particular, could move up the social scale into the managerial and professional classes. And there is no doubt that the social class system in Australia and in particular in Britain had changed over time with new groups emerging, based on newer occupational and educational achievements (Savage 2015). But the deeper story was of the remarkable successes of the middle classes and the older elites in taking the greatest advantage of the expanding education system, especially in the take up of places in the expanding and ever more stratified and 'unequal' hierarchy of universities which we have outlined earlier. This in turn generated concern and debate about the purposes of universities (Ashwin 2020; Horne and Thomas 2022) and is an on-going and unresolved issue in both academic circles and in public policy debates (Featherstone 2023). In a version of the conservative notion of a trickledown and transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor, ran the argument, working class children and disadvantaged adults got to access the newer universities in greater numbers than could possibly have been imagined a generation earlier. Their limited access to the elite institutions and to social advancement, however, was maintained in the expanding system which became a vertical hierarchy with steep access gradients for those beyond the privileged elites and groups. The Australian experience is of course not the same as that of the British or American societies but it is difficult to deny the assertion that whilst access has substantially increased, privilege and educational advantage is handed down through affluent families which have access to material wealth and cultural capital. This is a concern which has redounded down the generations and continues to present a contemporary challenge to universities in Australian life as elsewhere (Wesley 2023).

Outside of the selective university system, education and training began to be available where traditional work was disappearing and demand from below for educational opportunity was growing. The prevailing ideology held that it was self-evidently true – education was the way forward for those whom a generation earlier would have had no hope of being a university student.

It is worth noting here that the concern for the under-achievement of the working classes in education even in the relatively enlightened 1980s concentrated on the inequalities impacting mainly on boys. Gender inequalities were not considered in major works on this subject throughout the mid-20th century (Halsey et al 1961; Todd 2021: 151-55) and there is little doubt that class and ethnic inequalities were and still are accompanied by dramatic inequalities rooted in girls' and women's lives (Lynch 2022). The historical aspects of women's subordinated position in Australia was brilliantly depicted by Norman Mackenzie in 1963 for the Social Science Research Council of Australia, whilst modern developments and changing institutions ensured that 38 per cent of senior positions in Australian universities were held by women by 2017. Gender equity as with Indigenous participation were the increasing concern of Australian universities from the 1990s. Indigenous student enrolments grew by 103 per cent in the decade from 2008 (Croucher and Waghorne 2022: 200-201).

What was gained? What was changed ?

As the 20th century progressed towards its end it became ever more clear that public demand for mass higher education would impact on ***all*** universities. (Cantwell et al ibid 2018). Diversity and difference moved to the forefront of concern for education and social justice and offered some amelioration of the social and economic exclusion of working class people from higher education opportunities. If the elite universities and the older 'civic' institutions were off limits to many working people, the newer emerging institutions were very keen to recruit them and their late teenage children. The sheer expansive growth of university institutions in the 1980s and 1990s allowed for what was called 'mission diversity' among universities. Such differences as existed between them were said to be indicative of the 'unique selling points' of the different institutions which was a notion entirely compatible with the belief that a 'market' for higher education could be created. The rising tide of HE provision forced many of the new universities to give serious attention to widening access and it became the core of their marketing strategies. By the mid-1990s it was clear that widening access to higher education had become a major concern of social and educational policy globally and that it had to embrace more than an economic agenda. The question of the social value and public good of higher education had never been entirely absent or driven out of the public view (Marginson 1997, 2016).

The economic factors driving change were fundamental to changing capitalism itself (Piketty 2020; Wolf 2023) and were coexistent with world-wide trends which were changing education and knowledge production. Degrees were being turned into commodities, equating knowledge, researchers and students with financially exchangeable commodities in the global marketplace of ideas that could be turned into profitable business. There was always, and

co-terminously, a crucial social context for the expanding higher education system. It was this: people were demanding access to higher education for their children and themselves because they believed a better life could be achieved through this route (Mandler 2020; Davies 2023). However, routes to learning and achievement also meant acknowledgement of 'roots'. Where people came from and where they expected to be, continued to be a paramount feature of their lives. Although there was discussion of the increasing impact of 'cosmopolitanisation' (Ignatieff 1994: 7-9; Skrbis and Woodward 2013) and 'transnationalism' (Bhopal and Myers 2023 p.4), the vast majority of the intending student population intuited that graduates would be needed in the expanding economies of the world but mostly at home within the nation state. They were personally less concerned with how investment in human capital might boost growth, help governments pursue national industrial policy or develop civic institutions. They were concerned with how their families and communities were able to get ahead and take advantage of learning opportunities. So there was undoubtedly demand from below, as it were, for higher education, but it was constrained demand. Not everybody could access everywhere they might wish. People's choices were shaped by familial and cultural conditions and traditions. Various forms of 'capital' – cultural, professional, familial and political – were always likely to be brought into play in the choices available to individuals who were always members of social groups with shared interests and memberships.

The particular and restricted **national** dimension of education and its relationship to opportunities, both real and imagined, may have been at any given moment decisive for a majority of the emerging mass of people entering higher education. However, part of the elite context of the changing HE system was a genuine 'globalising' of the elite universities. As wealth and power were internationally spread so was the influence and power of an emerging global upper/ middle class with access to greater choices based upon their wealth and mobility (Ball and Nikita 2014). The transnational elite became a highly mobile group which fostered links between elite schools, universities and an elite globalised job market in which the mobility of students is linked to their general outlook on life and their high expectations of future wealth and success. A transnational capitalist class required schools and universities to reproduce the social and political advantages enjoyed by their parents and they possessed the money to buy this privilege. Elite education became part of the global market place. This was exemplified by the case of Rishi Sunak in Britain, UK Prime Minister from 2022 who attended Winchester public (ie, private) school and Oxford University. After post-graduate study at Stanford University in California and marriage to one of the wealthiest women in the world through inheritance, he maintained his right to residence and work in the USA long after he became a candidate for Prime Minister in Britain. His wife retained 'non-dom' status by being registered overseas thus avoiding paying much tax on her income in Britain, until the political fallout and embarrassment became too great. Sunak's erstwhile boss at an international London-based bank and finance company, Richard Sharpe, was later to become Chairman of the Board of Governors of the BBC. This was a political appointment in the gift of Prime Minister Boris Johnson who himself attended Eton public (in reality an intensely private and elitist) school and Oxford University. In fact many of those who have been Prime Minister of the United Kingdom have attended Oxford or Cambridge. The rootes and routes of privilege in Britain can be traced with certainty through the elitist private school system and the elitist and exclusionist Oxbridge university nexus (Orwell 1941). With historical links in the growth of colonial empire, race and social class have played a significant part in the emergence of global and local educational economies and hierarchies in modern times (Bhopal and Myers 2023).

Accounting for Access

The term 'Access' was originally confined primarily to those courses of study which had been designed specifically to encourage adults to return to study and to provide a preparation for courses in higher education. These courses were and remain for many people 'second chance' opportunities to learn and they are not new. Hillcroft College in Birmingham initiated a College Certificate second chance course in 1920 (Lucas and Ward 1985). From the 1980s onwards second chance learning opportunities became increasingly popular in the UK as there was growing recognition that adults who did not fulfil their academic potential whilst at school, if adequately prepared, can nevertheless cope with and benefit from degree courses. Although much changed over time in terms of funding and ownership – which is now mainly located in the vocational further education sector in the UK – Access courses continued to exist right into the third decade of the 21st century. A variant of these programmes was developed as 'foundation courses' chiefly by the new post-1992 universities with HE funding which effectively created a four year route to a degree for non-traditional entry students. A further variant was developed by even high status, elite universities in the Russel Group which allowed relatively poorly qualified overseas/ foreign students to enter four year programmes, if they paid extremely high fees. International students of this type had of course little in common with indigenous and often disadvantaged Access students. The overseas students' numbers and fees were not capped as they were for the British and these foundation courses offered privileged access to highly competitive degree courses for the offspring of the wealthy since the costs were multiples of home-based fees. By 2024 overseas students were estimated to take a third of all UK university places (Insight 2024). The Australian HE system has likewise become highly dependent financially on the recruitment of overseas/international students, which raised questions about the purposes of the national HE system and its stated intentions to serve the interests of the Australian people. By 2019 Australia had captured 18 per cent of the entire global population of international students, the third highest proportion after the United States and the United Kingdom (Wesley 2023: 81). The concept of Access as special courses designed to compensate for a lack of attainment was a malleable one when it could be adapted and co-opted to serve the interests of some of the most privileged and wealthy applicants to higher education – students whose admission grades did not match the requirements set for indigenous students, as was the case in Britain. Providers of Special Access provision for the wealthy and privileged may well have learned from and imitated the format and vocabulary of the Access movement but they did not share the ethos, values and motivations of the original.

Some Access courses were designed specifically to encourage participation by particular groups, especially women or those from minority ethnic groups. Some courses are less formal than others and have used student-centred and experiential learning to construct alternative routes to academic achievement. Some courses focussed on return to work schemes rather than university entrance. Organisational arrangements for Access have always varied considerably. Some feed their students into specific outlets and institutions and within those into specific degree schemes. The very first designated Special Access courses in the UK were in London and were designed to train teachers and social workers from the black and ethnic minority communities in the Capital. Other courses are and were part of multi-institutional schemes such as the Open College federations which existed in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s (Wilson 2010). Many of the early Access schemes were developed within the expanding 'credit accumulation' schemes which it was anticipated would help students transfer academic credit from one institution or place to another (Davies 1995).

In 1984, relatively early on in the era of mass higher education, one survey of Access courses

in England listed some 90 colleges of further education as providers of Access courses and some 32 colleges offered courses for members of ethnic groups (Lucas and Ward 1985). There were 14 separate colleges offering courses with a particular emphasis on providing study opportunities for women. In addition, the Worker's Educational Association, the Adult Colleges and the University Extra – Mural departments all over the UK sponsored return-to-learn courses and in some cases helped run Access courses of their own (Fieldhouse 1996; Davies 1997). The Open University and Birkbeck College as part of London University catered for part-time learners in particular and most other universities at this time developed more flexible learning time-tables for students. By 2019 there were 478,000 mature students studying at undergraduate level at English higher education providers, some 30.2 per cent of the total number of undergraduates (OfS 2021).A significant proportion of these students had encountered the Access agenda and had benefitted from the introduction of adult learning methods and approaches.

The impact of the Access agenda as a movement was wide and deep and 'Access' has of course always described more than just Access courses. For a period, however the Access courses in Britain were the major alternative to A Levels as an acceptable university admissions requirement. Later developments of vocational equivalents for admission and the recognition of individual achievements via prior-learning would dilute this impact but Access courses continued to play an important role in democratising university admissions. Access courses could do things that other agents of policy development could not deliver or only with greater difficulty. Access courses could be very specifically targeted on the discipline and skills base needed, for example, science for health professionals or women returners from deprived areas and disadvantaged communities. Access courses also were a useful indicator of the commitment to post-compulsory education by both local providers and local education authorities and an indicator of the partnerships between further and higher education institutions. For a time they were an indicator of how the university could claim to be a social institution, serving local communities in a variety of ways and participating in authentic civic engagement (Watson 2006).

Perhaps most importantly, but often unrecognised, is the contribution Access made to teaching and learning strategies and to an emerging sense that new and creative, critical knowledge was needed to address a range of problems and issues facing educators. It was often in the context of Access that alternatives to the traditional academic and discipline-based knowledge and institutionalised curriculum could be meaningfully debated by students whose views of what really useful knowledge meant to them were existentially important and which challenged the traditional approach to learning. The multicultural context of education and a range of epistemological issues about what constitutes valid knowledge came to the fore in Access courses. Questions of identity and belonging, of race and ethnic awareness, of gender and social justice were central to many Access programmes. Debates and discourse continue to resonate around these themes and constitute one of the threads through time we have attempted to outline in this volume (Khatun et al 2023; Nyland and Davies 2022).

A related aspect of the apparent continuing set of crises in higher education focusses on the epistemological uncertainty that has impacted on many universities in the era of mass participation in higher education (Seidman 1998; Halden 2023). This refers to the contention that in what Giddens called modernity, our reliance on objective, scientific and securely founded knowledge of the social world cannot be taken for granted. Anthony Giddens has argued persuasively that whereas once we might have expected the claims of reason to overcome for example the dogmas of tradition and religious explanation of our social life, modernity now required the principle of radical doubt (Giddens 1991: 21). The Access movement was a lived expression of potential radical doubt and reflexivity in the way education had been organised and imposed on the generations of the excluded who now wanted to be included on terms different from the past. Access was the extension and articulation of new groups of individuals who came from outside the elite student base of the traditional universities. This change required and stimulated new intellectual priorities and interests including the growth of feminism and new agendas around race, ethnicity and identity. Peter Scott (2021: 74) summarised this trend as follows... 'A similar alignment can be suggested between the increase in participation among Black and other minority ethnic (BAME) students and the interest in Black studies, post-colonial studies and world literature. Later other 'minorities' were given voice too by mass higher education and the emergence of universities as creative hubs and experimentation and the growing focus on 'identity', has arguably been one of the most significant and contested aspects of the extension of the higher education 'franchise'. Race and racism in all its social, personal and epistemological significance entered the mainstream of controversial threads through time via the earlier and arguably more simple Access movement and was to continue find a resonance in the 21st century (Bhopal 2018; Finney et al 2023).

The growth in the success of Access was more than a lucky coincidence of growth in higher education. It was a key agency; a yeast in the rising of participation and aspiration for success through higher education, especially for those who wanted inclusion in the knowledge society. These wider processes of social change were ensuring that lifelong learning opportunities were becoming part of the everyday experience of ordinary adult life, and not exclusively the expectation of young people leaving school

From diversity to market conformism...and beyond

The growth of participation from the 1980s onwards and its flourishing existence within the expansive and burgeoning higher education system in Australia (and elsewhere) as the new 21st century approached, contained a paradox. On the one hand it signalled the presence of new learners within universities and colleges and a recognition of their learning needs. These were students from the broad masses and represented working people and social groups who had been excluded from educational opportunities in the past. The power of educational reform to change prospects seemed to have been demonstrated by their very presence inside the ivory towers, hallowed cloisters and concrete and glass palaces of the educational institutions. Furthermore, the rhetoric and ideology of social mobility and meritocracy was in the air. Education, Education, Education! may have been Prime Minister Tony Blair's rhetoric for Britain but it was shared in many other places. The Dawkins reforms of 1987 envisioned ... 'leaps in participation in higher education' and the productivity, resources and sheer size of higher education was to be expanded throughout federal Australia (Croucher and Waghorne ibid: 158). On the other hand, a distinctively different mass and elitist system of higher education was emerging nearly everywhere from the confused and often contradictory policies of different governments which shared a similar approach to the perceived need to grow higher education at almost any cost. The lineaments of this were evolving pragmatically and included: the creation of unified HE funding methods for all providers which ensured the continued privileging of the oldest and richest elite universities; the emerging predominance of the 'vocational' model adapted and applied to the new mass-universities; the marketisation and commercialisation of much degree-level study; the failure to adopt and extend the model of independent universities with distinctive missions; and perhaps the failure by the liberal

education tradition itself to create an authentic and transformative curriculum – what Stuart Hall (1983) referred to as a 'universal literacy'. By this he meant a curriculum which could not simply put right the failures of the past by expressing the desires and aspirations of excluded and marginalised people but one which could represent their collective interests and identities and thus shape a better future based on inclusivity and equality.

It was the possibility of a different curriculum involving new approaches to knowledge, learning and teaching which might lead on to critical thinking and transformations which animated and enthused some of the new learners and teachers. As access to HE and widening participation more generally was rolled out in the last decade of the 20th century, many held the view that education was the key to a fundamental transformation in the life chances of ordinary people. For this to happen a transformation of the education system itself would be required. There can be little doubt that significant change took place and many commentators could be heard to state that the only constant now was change itself. However, whether this change was in any way a fundamental reconstruction of the selective and elite system which preceded it, is doubtful. Turning the tide of social and educational disadvantage would prove a formidable challenge and one that continues in the present.

It cannot be denied that access and widening participation have been part of a fundamental shift in perceptions and aspirations for the broad masses of people in advanced economies, and also in many less advanced economies. Yet this advance has not been equal across the populations of these countries, including those of Australia and Britain and Northern Ireland. The struggle for equity and fairness has been the touchstone of Access and it is by no means complete. Access necessarily remains as a point of contact and site of contestation with the deep social and cultural issues of modern times. It is a space where the issues are likely to emerge as knowledge and learning take root and grow. In spite of the reality of mass higher education there still exist deep cultural and class rifts in Australia and Britain. City dwellers contrast with rural and small town citizens; working class and middle class views can differ markedly; young and older voters can show widely differing values and the role of the nation, localism and nationalism can be deeply divisive. In Britain these gulfs and divisions were… 'brutally widened by our great Brexit schism' (Toynbee 2023). Neither can we presume that the civic nationalism officially espoused by both nations will neutralise the damaging and divisive effects of those forms of ethno-nationalism or religious fundamentalism which are intolerant of diversity and challenge. Multiracial and multiethnic societies have a propensity for conflict and dissent (Ignatieff ibid1994). Part of the price we pay for inhabiting a diverse society is the problem of integration and assimilation of differing cultures, beliefs and values into an authentically mixed national culture with high levels of respect, tolerance, trust and security (Collier 2013; Goodwin 2023). In all of this education plays a key role since it is now a key voting marker and indicator of social attitudes in many societies. The young are now far more educated than their elders and each succeeding cohort gets more educated. Older people are the least educated. In the UK graduates are the largest group in every cohort under 50 years of age. The possession of educational qualifications is now one of the most significant social divisions and these younger people are much concerned about the great and wicked issues of our time such as social inclusion, inequality, social justice, climate change and ecological breakdown. Access continues to contribute to a thinking and policy agenda which insists that higher education build a potential constituency of radical doubt and challenge focussed on change, precisely through grappling with these issues.

Continuing growth of the learning society

As the 20th century ended and the new one evolved the growth in demand for relevant education quickly outstripped what was on offer in conventional further and higher education. Routine qualifications could not satisfy an awakening demand for more relevant and useful knowledge. Inclusion and widening participation became the touchstones for university engagement rather than selection and exclusion based on elites reproducing themselves. These developments did not meet with universal approval. There were those who thought that civilisation ended where working class students en-masse walked through the doors of the academy. Some authorities considered that standards were at risk if existing minimum entry requirements were lowered. A rising middle class and a growing proportion of working class school pupils were by now making their way to university through the expanding secondary school system. In the mean-time the elite, ancient universities continued to select the offspring of the wealthy elites through the well-trodden state and private school-university escalator with very little criticism of their academic standards and quality.

University courses continued to thrive as part of a movement towards greater equality whilst the wider society was moving into a new period with a surge in income and wealth inequality that defined it as one of market supremacy. This was the era of neoliberalism and globalisation which was to be most beneficial to people with the highest human capital and cultural resources and possessing the most financial wealth (Piketty 2014; Wolf 2023 ibid). The Access movement had no single manifesto, nor did it beat down the doors of the ivory towers of academe. The elites of the academic establishment were in fact intent on safeguarding educational privilege and preferment for the wealthy and elitist groups and those selected for academic advancement. Whilst often conceding the need to widen access and participation for equity groups, the reality was that only a selective and unrepresentative small minority of the most disadvantaged groups were admitted to the higher echelons of elite university institutions. The Access movement's successes, however, helped shift the mindset and awareness of what higher education was for in a world being transformed by social upheavals and technological innovation. This was a world of change in an era of uncertainty, precarity and continuous turbulence (Halden 2023: ch 6) In such a world no advanced society could ignore the impact and significance of the Access agenda within the educational institutions. Access signalled new points of departure for learning and knowledge production for significant sections of the common people. In this wider world, a struggle was about to develop between rival concerns and ideological shifts around the nature of the 'learning society'. What counted as being worthy of merit and could be used to justify selection and preferment within the social field of education would continue to be a contested field. The role of Access within it, would be a crucial and key component.

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Part 4

Mass Participation and Elite Selection

Chapter 7

Educating the masses: selecting the elites

From an elite to a mass system

Institutions committed to Access were, as we have seen, more various, more complex and more resistant to classification than might be imagined. The relevance of both a long history of adult learning and contemporary struggles for access to education which preceded and contributed to the Access movement should not be denied. Neither should we ignore the very long tradition of people who educated themselves – the autodidacts – who from the medieval period had struggled to be literate through first appropriating the bible and then were bent on acquiring an intellectual life through reading and literature. As Jonathan Rose put it in his magisterial study of working class intellectual life '…no disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life' (Rose 2021: 7). Between 1580 and 1700 about half of the weavers in rural England had been literate and in London it may have been two-thirds. Scotland, historically it was widely known, had a thriving public sphere much of it based in the literacy of the working classes. Ireland had been renowned for its religious scholarship since time immemorial and even during religious proscription and persecution its 'hedge schools' continued a tradition of learning for the common people. Oral and literary culture was vital to the common culture and identity of the Celtic peoples across Britain and Ireland. In Wales in the early 20th century some miners levied a rate on themselves to ensure their children could study classical languages at local grammar schools.

There can be little doubt though that the modern breakthrough to Britain's version of mass higher education, and by implication the opportunities for Access, came initially through the Robbins Report in 1963. Lionel Robbins, an LSE academic and notable authority on social policy research inaugurated Great Britain's version of mass participation. His report made clear the need for a larger and fairer system of access in general to higher education. Mass participation meant *widening* participation as assumptions were made that the traditional class divisions and inequalities could be modified and ameliorated through expanding educational opportunities in higher education. Robbins though did not specifically address the complexities of race, ethnicity and gender; issues that would play a far greater role in the 21st century.

In 1963 there were 118,400 university students, including postgraduates whilst in 1980 it had risen to 560,000 (Barr 2014). By 2010 there were over 2 million enrolled. In 2022 it was reported that 667,000 applicants had applied for undergraduate entry to British universities (Guardian (a) 2022). The total number of higher education students in Britain in 2021 was 2,912,380, 57 per cent of whom were female (HESA 2022). Such a staggering growth of learning activity within a working lifetime had implications for many aspects of life and was not confined to education alone. An educational transition which was concurrently a social transition was underway which has by no means run its full course.

Following notable contributions to the critical analysis of higher education knowledge (Barnett and Griffin 1997; Ashwin 2015; Scott 2021), this book has raised the issue of whose knowledge was involved in this transition and whether it brought about epistemological uncertainty and a crisis of higher education knowledge? At the end of the 20th century there certainly appeared to be an expanding universe of knowledge, especially as the technologies of communication widened to create a new mass global consumer market for digital products and services. Mass participation brought with it, however, only a certain kind of access, and it came with caveats. There was to be no universal definition of a 'university education', but rather a differentiated hierarchy of universities and colleges was created where some degrees were of more value than others. Following government policies driven themselves by ideological commitments to neoliberal economic theories, market forces were to shape higher education as students became customers and the state became increasingly engaged in defining the purposes of education (Barnett 1997). The league tables of university 'quality' came to represent performativity, displacing for many the beliefs that should underpin a university such as reason, knowledge, progress and enlightenment for the public good and for improved outcomes for the marginalised and disadvantaged. This book suggests that these are the core elements which might underpin a universal curriculum that the Access movement in microcosm tried to emulate in its attempt to provide an alternative for the educationally dispossessed. Access was a human project therefore and not a social policy or economic intervention in the labour market. Market forces and the needs of the labour market hardly explained the critical and potentially oppositional quality of the curriculum content of Access courses or the characteristics of the students themselves which were very different from classical school leavers about to become undergraduates.

Robbins had stated that all applicants with appropriate qualifications should have places (Robbins 1963: 265) and this statement illuminated what was common knowledge: university education had been and remained restricted to the economically and social advantaged classes in Britain. In 1963 only some 3 per cent of the children of manual, semi-skilled and skilled workers went on to any form of full-time higher and further education and only one girl in a hundred would go to university. The fifty-odd years since Robbins saw a complete transformation in the size and shape and meaning of higher education; a movement that went far beyond the boundaries of Britain (Cantwell et al 2018). The model for the development of a mass higher education system in the United Kingdom was, however, far from that envisaged by Robbins. The university model as it had developed up to the 1960s did indeed expand with new universities constructed on green field sites and the creation of universities from existing advanced technology colleges. But the growth of the public sector polytechnics by the 1980s saw the majority of higher education students located in the new sector (Fowler and Wyke 1993). The creation of the polytechnics was a vital stage in the creation of a mass higher education system in Britain. This was the wider context in which Access developed its distinctive contribution to the struggle for educational equity and opportunity.

Mass higher education becomes 'universal' according to David Watson (2014: 34) when participation rates rise above 50 per cent and as he noted, there was a strong sense of civilisation being abandoned when that occurred. In 2013 the UK rate was stuck at 49 per cent but Scotland had reached 55 per cent and across the UK female participation was ten points higher than for males. After 1995 and up to 2013 a majority of students had not been on full-time first degrees and the UK had become for a time a …'lifelong learning friendly system' with more than half of the then current registrations on other modes and levels of study than the full-time undergraduate degree (Watson ibid: 37). However, as the decade progressed the numbers of part-time students who were mature, that is over 20 years old on entry, fell and part-time undergraduates fell by 40 per cent (Watson ibid: 47).

Robbins had argued for expansion from the principle of equality of opportunity – not on the basis of equality of outcomes. This was the view that persisted throughout the expansion period and was compatible with the ideology of meritocracy which itself favoured the elites of British society. It is clear that the middle classes benefitted most from the Robbins era growth and that a more egalitarian society did not result. As inequality of income increased inequality in higher education tracked it (Barr ibid: 72). Robbins certainly initiated growth and change in higher education itself and may have encouraged the school system to respond to what was perceived to be an opening up of opportunities for university study. What was not conceived nor intended by Robbins and the academy in general was the possibility of transformations in social justice and equality through the widening of access to

universities. The purposes of higher education itself were not being considered for fundamental revision.

Throughout the period following Robbins there was no single 'big system' of higher education in Great Britain and Northern Ireland and no consistent policy or principles were laid out for its development. Wild lurches between expansion and contraction took place; radical changes of mind about the institutional status of universities occurred; debate took place on what a university is; and moral panics over dumbing down were aired in the public media. No single direction could be detected where ideas of 'excellence' and being 'world class' contradicted the social purposes and even the economic goals being set by national and regional strategies for education. By the time of the new century it was clear that the differences of mission between vastly different types of institutions had been reduced as each one conformed to the government's requirement of competitive and supposedly free-market driven funding. No such free market in university places emerged and central government control over funding and maximum fee levels remained. A managed market and a partially privatised student loans scheme was invented to ensure universities received student tuition fees. A majority of undergraduates went into serious levels of debt for their tuition, repaid through tax deductions once they had started work. Hierarchies of selectivity, research production and funding emerged as diversity diminished. Almost all universities adopted the highest levels of fees they could charge, whilst offering discounts to the different categories of students they wanted to attract. There was now less clarity or agreement on what an authentic university education was across such a large number of higher education providers. There was epistemological uncertainty as Barnett (1997 ibid) put it about the forms and types of knowledge needed in such changing and uncertain times. As inequalities in the wider society were increasing they were mirrored by those between universities in an unjustifiable hierarchy of elite institutions. The hierarchies were demonstrated by performance in league tables which, not surprisingly, reflected existing and historical differences and inequalities in wealth and cultural capital accumulated by the so-called elite institutions who came out on top in the competition.

Unequal discourses

The hierarchy was unjustifiable because new forms of inequality and unfairness were constructed with overt collusion by the very institutions which were supposedly dedicated to providing opportunities and wider participation to those previously excluded. Widening participation certainly was happening on a massive scale over the period under review but it was simultaneously creating opportunities to be unequal. Widening participation became part of the dominant discourse along with 'equal opportunities' and the merits of meritocratic achievement within markets for education. Some discourses are, however, saturated with power, as Barnett reminds us (Barnett ibid: 169) and come loaded, as it were, with intentions and material and ideological interests that are not always clear and transparent. The education consumer had in fact little power in the market and state funding of further and higher education always comes with a political agenda. For the political interests governing Britain, that agenda did not include a significant challenge to the fundamentally unequal state of British economy, society and culture. The dominant discourse was that reforms and modifications might be achieved through the creation of more consumer choice and by climbing the meritocratic ladder of opportunity through education, which was also to be thought of as a market where one might purchase or invest in one's future.

Markets were also sites of power where existing wealth and inequalities could be reproduced and legitimated. Political discourse became saturated with metaphors designed to re-assure those who might doubt the direction of market-led opportunity and change. A rising tide floats all boats and the trickle down of wealth from the very rich to the poor and less wealthy that arguably benefits everybody were amongst arguments used to justify the reality of rising inequality. The un-achieving and poorer sections of the working class were encouraged to raise their aspirations as the way to fully participate in the modern consumer society. Through education their children might aspire to the glittering prizes by climbing the ladder of opportunity. Social mobility was in fact in decline and inequality was growing between the 1990s and the 2010s, whilst the richest 5 per cent of people in Britain grew richer (Todd 2021: 300). The rhetoric of social mobility and equal opportunity, including that of widening participation, was used to justify the unequal state of the nation and its unequal wealth and access to opportunities. The prevailing political sentiment from conservative policies and strategies was 'excellence', which was the result of merit and would be rewarded. The social mobility industry was created whose job was to sell the idea that upward mobility was available to everyone. The newly emerging hierarchies of universities and schools within the marketised yet managed system of education adopted much of the same rhetoric of equal opportunities and the discourse of excellence and social mobility. The reality was, however, opportunities to be *more unequal* became embedded in the widened and extended higher education system.

From 'second chance' to mass participation in the knowledge economy

Following Robbins, the growth and impact of mass higher education in British society (and on a global scale) cannot be denied. The education boom of the 1960s was geared to a low literacy population and led to the growth of second chance education along with an expansion of secondary schooling and universities. By the 1970s there was talk of 'education permanente' (Faure 1972), and this became in English terms 'lifelong learning' viewed as an affirmative stage of development which encouraged the emergence of Access courses and programmes. By the end of the century a mass higher education system had evolved along with an expanded further education sector. There was a coming together of the enrolment of an increasingly diverse cohort of students in universities and colleges with efforts by government to diminish public funding for public higher education. All of this was accompanied by an ideological assumption: that Britain's educational system was capable of delivering democratic goals including that of equality of access, and greater educational opportunity. Equal opportunities were taken as proxy for actual achievements and substantive and structural inequalities remained and took new forms as new generations emerged. The need for equity and access was often affirmed but it came in the guise of individual self-development and advancement through meritocracy. The narrow focus of a curriculum in support of free market capitalism and neoliberal conservative goals and values was predominant in the governance of further and higher education. However, many teachers and learners thought differently and at the chalk face in many schools and adult centres, in the burgeoning information technology centres, in many community centres where learning was encouraged and in further education colleges and some universities, potential alternatives and challenges were available (Ball 2015; Davies 2021). This was the seed bed for the growth of the Access movement in Britain.

The dominant thinking of policy developers emphasised the importance of education for the economy of the country and human capital theory was widely used to explain the need for investment in people and work. The primary qualifications such as the undergraduate degree became 'commodities' for which it was thought an appropriate market could be organised based on consumer choice and capacity to pay (if necessary for the majority by a government-backed loan). This was not just a world built for young people.

There were over 1.5 million undergraduates in the English universities and colleges in 2019 and over 30 per cent of them were mature students. Almost all postgraduate students were mature, some 480,000 or 99.2 per cent of the total. In 2021 mature applicants from the UK to universities had risen by 34 per cent to 93,390. Online teaching and learning had been catalysed by the Covid 19 pandemic (Nyland and Davies 2022) and part-time entrant numbers to the Open University had stopped falling (OfS 2021). Mass higher education and the knowledge economy was the reality and destiny for many, as an evolving labour market adapted to a changing economy where low-skilled teenage labour was no longer allowed or required. Following the decade-long increase in the proportion of school leavers opting for higher education in Britain, some 320,000 sixth formers applied for university places in 2022, more than 50,000 more than at the same stage in 2019 (Guardian (b) 2022). This was the learning society in terms of its volume numbers – a burgeoning sector of the labour market where over 50 per cent of each school leaving cohort intended to go to university. Fewer resources were devoted to the other 50 per cent of the school population, some of whom went on to do apprenticeships or into the labour market which was low paid and becoming ever more precarious for unqualified people.

This picture confirms an optimistic view that British universities offer a promise of higher education to a mass population. Furthermore, individuals at any age have a chance to learn and to open up new opportunities for themselves. For mature students, over the age of 21, university or college can be a genuine second chance to learn. Higher education is now a major industry driving the knowledge economy forward and contributes immensely to national wealth and well-being. Research and development in almost every major field of enterprise is powered by universities. The universities pension scheme is amongst the largest in the UK. For many people higher education represents the most tangible and viable route for social mobility and self-improvement.

There is a mindset that suggests the sheer extent of higher education and especially its centrality to the futures of a majority of young people in society, means we have reached a point of sufficiency. There is a university place for each person who wants one if s/he is suitably qualified and if they are sufficiently motivated and work hard. Even those who have failed or been failed by the conventional schooling system can find Access courses and Foundation courses at local universities which offer a second chance to succeed. The ladders of opportunity and mobility are there to be climbed and it could be argued the promise of Robbins has been delivered. Governments now subscribe to the idea that they have a responsibility to improve opportunity and choice for students of all ages and that there is a particular remit… 'to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students' (OfS ibid). The pioneers of Access and adult learning would surely have celebrated such evidence of progress towards a better social result through learning. Has the Access agenda then been successfully delivered now that study opportunities exist for the many? Were prospects and lives transformed by the events and processes described in this book? Can we see the lineaments of a transformation in educational and life opportunities? Has the existence of a university education for masses of people helped produce both a theory of change and the actual changes needed to bring about a fairer and more socially just and equitable society? These are the questions that still underpin why we debate and argue about the purposes and meanings of university education. These are some of the questions that have for generations informed the search for knowledge of how education and learning can both conserve and transform our culture, apparently at the same time (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Barnett 2017) and how educational and social capital are key to understanding how social reproduction and transition occurs (Bourdieu 1993).

Access and widening participation as social transformation?

The answer to the question of whether the growth of access and widening participation education was transformational must be equivocal since a contradiction sits at the heart of the British education system, and though it has specific resonance for England it is relevant to other advanced democratic capitalist societies such as Australia (Marginson 2016; Wesley 2023: 22-23). And it is this: mass higher education like mass schooling has produced a stratified and highly unequal system. Whereas by the 1970s most secondary schools had switched from a selective system to a comprehensive one, no such attempt was made with universities. The mixed-ability principle was never adopted by higher education and what was an elitist system evolved into a mass system, but one that is highly stratified. The glittering prize is a place in a handful of elite universities but is only available for a selected minority. The majority are asked to be satisfied with second or third place in the hierarchy of institutions. Though schools policy claimed to seek a less divided and fairer society in which people from different class and ethnic backgrounds were expected to mix, as the higher education sector expanded the elite universities clung to their hierarchies and unjust selection methods. These methods were effectively a form of social exclusion and social division, often in the guise of academic selection, in which the more affluent populations took up a disproportionate share of places. Universities, especially elite ones were in the business of 'sorting them out' – that is to say, choosing those who would be admitted and those who would be rejected. Those who were successful had social class origins and backgrounds which correlated highly with the possession of family wealth and higher incomes. Private schools and selective state-supported grammar schools in Britain had a disproportionately large share of the places at elite universities. This is hardly surprising since the misnamed 'public schools' and private schools spend far in excess per pupil than state schools and some have links with Oxbridge going back centuries. In almost every way imaginable these schools have resources and forms of social, cultural and professional capital to out-compete comparatively poorly funded state schools. In 2022 the British Chancellor of the Exchequer and later Prime Minister Rishi Sunak donated £100,000 himself to his old public school, Winchester College. Even though some state sixth form providers have had striking successes, there is no level playing field in this game and this has hardly changed in the last century. Notwithstanding the growth of state school pupils entering the elite universities there is only a handful of underprivileged teenagers getting their hands on one of these golden tickets (Guardian (c) 2022).

The fact that comprehensive schooling had been established across the United Kingdom by the 1970s should not lead us to believe that this was an egalitarian system. Leaving aside that most of the children of the rich and powerful do not attend state schools, the state education system maintained a formal system of selective secondary schooling that had negative effects that reached further than the number of such schools might have suggested. They were in a minority but the doctrine of 'parental choice' ensured that all schools existed in a market – driven hierarchy in which the least desirable children from the least desirable backgrounds and communities were concentrated in the least desirable schools. Children from low income neighbourhoods tended to go to those local schools located in the low income estates and suburbs. The reverse was true for the middle classes and the affluent populations who managed to get their children into the higher status schools with better academic outcomes. The English national obsession with status and wealth hierarchies shaped and structured an hierarchical education system from top to bottom (Todd 2021). The prosperous elites were allowed to use schooling and higher education to promote inequality by effectively monopolising the selective routes to learning and

higher education which were themselves part of the divisive class and elite-based social system. A nominally democratic system, subjected to market conditions and the illusory ideologies of *freedom of choice*, undermined the sense of national cohesion that an authentic, universal schooling and higher education might have brought about. The evidence seems to suggest that the elite system of hierarchies of schools and universities subverts the goals of critical thinking and progressive social action which we need to sustain a pluralistic and participatory democracy. Success for some, the relatively few, means lack of success for the many where membership of the elite is by definition always limited. However, the real freedoms which education confers allow us to think differently and to ask for success for the many by asking different questions whose answers can equip us with comprehensive literacy and the critical thinking skills needed for the challenge of change facing us (Davies, 2022; Nyland and Davies 2022).

University expansion and widening participation – who benefited?

In the early years of the 21st century there was a consensus that university expansion was unquestionably a benefit for individuals and for the wider civic society. Governments of all persuasions sought to remove caps on higher education enrolments. There were specific and targeted interventions to increase participation in which it was assumed that these would capture other aspects of deprivation and exclusion. There was, however, no generic assumption that higher education was the solution to all social ills. By the third decade some of the assumptions of consensus were being questioned by conservative politicians in particular and a growing feeling could be discerned that some students should not be at university at all. A growing uncertainty was brought to bear against the belief that widening participation taps a resource of talent and ability and allows those who would not have otherwise have considered university as a route out of deprivation. Much of the argument revolved around who 'benefits' when some graduates in relatively low status subjects from low ranking universities entered the labour market and were unable to secure well paid jobs. Some of the debate centred on the idea of a 'good university' and education as a scarce commodity. The approach of the third decade of the century saw debate emerge yet again about the need to limit and cap university courses and to drive demand towards vocational training as an alternative (Augur 2019). There was debate and concern about the measurement of educational quality and elitist conservative policy makers focussed on the unproven assertion that 'more means worse' and pointed to the creation of new types of degrees and new subjects, most famously media studies in the newer universities, which received great disparagement. That the quality of degree programmes varies within a single institution was ignored (Ashwin 2020). The opponents of elitism argued the case that 'more means different' and some acknowledgement of Access courses was conceded but what was less enthusiastically endorsed was the reality that the mass system had evolved into a highly differentiated and stratified set of hierarchies which embodied wholesale inequalities. A degree from the higher elite universities had in general terms far greater value and currency than one from a much lower ranked institution. All degrees, though notionally subject to the same quality control and procedures, were not the same. The place from which you received your degree mattered more than the objective content or quality of the qualification. The middle sector of higher education institutions presents itself today as both traditional and modern, selective and open, for the masses and for the elite – all at the same time. Although mass teaching and learning and specific high quality research programmes are in reality two opposing missions, they are claimed by many HEIs as being entirely consistent with each other. In Australia following the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s the universities adopted research as the common and definitive mission. In Britain very many of the mass, post-1992 universities claim to be both serving the needs of local communities and people and to be carrying out internationally significant and leading research. They perceive no contradiction in their claims but in reality they are not in the same league, literally, as the world-leaders in research. Research became the critically visible means of stratifying the HE systems and seemed to be confirmed as the index of higher education value.

Markets and the elite system

In Britain and Australia there was an attempt to create a market environment for higher education which was in reality a quasi-market in which the price of tuition was not in fact determined by supply and demand, as required in a purely market-driven system. In practice the price to the student was fixed by government decree through the government-backed student loan systems and competition was managed through manipulating entrance scores for a pre-given hierarchy of HEIs. In Australia the price was fixed but the volume was not (Marginson 2016: 162). High prestige institutions thus do not need to grow to remain successful and for some there were no economic gains or prestige enhancements through admitting Access students. In Australia, this resulted in a bifurcation between institutions who select their student intake on various grounds and those universities that are 'selected' to compete and are chosen by intending students and their families. Some members of the elite are still supply-driven in general but cannot rely exclusively on their relative high status and prestige to recruit the best students. In the mass or more demand-led 'selected' sector, there is an absence of a clear cut hierarchy of value. The means of defining social value in this part of higher education is through labour market outcomes and possession of a degree – any degree – is an increasingly significant factor in securing jobs (Marginson ibid: 220-221). In Britain and Australia we also find a parallel system of exclusive, high fee private schools which feed into and take up a disproportionate percentage of high value places in the super-elite universities (Marginson ibid: 227).

The elite system is a social formation in its own right and provides sites (literally) where an intensive 'tribal' formation can take place. (Cohen 2009; Mason 2014; Green et al 2017; Verkaik 2018 ; Green and Kynaston 2019). Young people in each generation meet together, live together and socialise together and share their culturally homogenous lives in schools and colleges. The formation of 'self' takes place and is powerfully shaped by adolescent experiences and the internalisation of values and beliefs which assert their superiority over others. This connectivity is often maintained throughout later life with the school and university/college as its social focus. The fondness of the super-elite for institutions such as Harvard and Oxbridge has a strategically significant benefit for those who are included and this goes without saying is an exclusive club membership whose members have often shared an education and social/cultural background. In Britain in particular the combination of shared backgrounds, values, beliefs and entry to monied and powerful professional roles means such elites leverage influence and power across economic, social and political and sometimes religious life in highly undemocratic yet perfectly legal ways (Graystone 2024).

The claims of Access run counter to both the quasi-market-led system and the social snobbery and elitism of exclusive social and cultural groups. A different value set is proposed. The reality behind these distinctions of status and difference is that working class children and teenagers have been offered second-best routes to education and training for over a century. And who then wants to be second best in life? In the era of mass higher education the routes to university and professional qualifications have been skewed to privilege those with private education and/or access to highly selective state schools. It is true that working class pupils have been increasing in numbers at university and indeed in Britain some middle class pupils undertake apprenticeships.

However, in the real world the division between the academic and the practical falls between the different social classes where background and wealth shape experience and outcomes. An apprenticeship is unfortunately the second class prize in the lottery of life and opportunity (Hutton 2022). The quality and standards of what is offered rarely matches that of an academic education. In Britain vocational education spending was significantly reduced in real terms in the ten years up to 2022, thereby limiting choice for working class young people. Despite the introduction of a levy on employers, apprenticeships for those under 25 years of age fell steadily. The demand-led nature of university admissions was retained but with government determined to ensure graduates pay more of the debt they incur through higher taxation. The effects of this seem to have been designed to discourage students with lower qualifications from applying to university. This takes place in the light of what we know is the case –that secondary level attainment, student outcomes and choice all interact with social disadvantage and can further limit the opportunities in higher education for the socially deprived groups in our society.

The relation between the academic university system and the vocational further education system is highly unequal in terms both of finance and status and continues to underscore the need for fair access and participation in learning. Underpinning this concern lies a long history of debate and scholarship on the need for lifelong learning which takes us far beyond the single-minded concern with training for vocations or skill, important though these are. This focus on the need for learning throughout life, and as a basis for a good life and a life well-lived, can be said to be one of the foundation stones of the Access movement and is an important part of the subject matter of this book (Smith 1996, 2001; Davies 2021). The progressive version of lifelong learning was an underpinning of Access but was not universally shared across the general scope and reach of widening participation policy and practice, much of which was concerned with the vocational outcomes of higher and further education within a highly selective, differentiated and unequal mass system. What had emerged by the start of the third decade of the 21st century was a highly stratified population of higher education students matched to a socially stratified HE system of institutions. In England especially, the social significance of the ancient and 'best' universities co-exists with their pre-eminence in research, science and knowledge production, which do in fact yield social and common goods which benefit everyone. Nevertheless, outside of the meritocratic science and research community, a distinctively super-elite continues to occupy the very top spots and in England the graded snobberies of the so-called public schools persists in their ludicrous claims to be 'charities' whose aims are in the realm of the public good. The reality is of course that the social and economic elites reproduced through private schooling have their education and social prospects enhanced by wealth and bought-and-paid-for privilege – plain and simple, but mediated in the public sphere as a demonstration of meritocratic achievement. In the wider scheme of things this demonstrates the power and depth of ideologies and taken-for-granted thinking which infuses public life and discourse. Likewise it demonstrates the necessity of engaging with and contesting such sentiments with evidence and values rooted in social thinking and analysis which is capable of challenging and changing the unequal, unfair and socially unjust outcomes of privilege.

Mature students as a proxy for Access

If the promise made to younger people of success through higher education for all has proved to be a mixed blessing, if not a false prospectus, do the achievements of the Access movement enable **mature** people to acquire new skills and open up new opportunities? The decision to go into higher education is often a more challenging one for them to make, and the consequences of it can be greater than those for young students. Mature students, defined as those who enter HE at the age of 21 or over, are still often overlooked. In 2018-19 there were 478,000 mature students studying at undergraduate level at English higher education providers (30.2 per cent of the total number of undergraduates) but after 2010-11 the number of UK domiciled undergraduate mature students up to 2021 declined by nearly 20 per cent, a reduction of some 47,000 students (OfS ibid: 2).

Many of the same social and economic issues that bedevilled earlier Access students still remain and they still have different motivations and needs from young students. They are less likely to live on campus, more likely to own their own home and more likely to commute. More than twice as many mature students (26.6 per cent) live in the most deprived areas of the country as in the least deprived 13.1 per cent (OfS ibid). Overcoming deprivation is still a vital element for the learning of many adults. Over the first two decades of the 21st century the number of mature students entering higher education dropped significantly. Around a fifth of the adult population in Britain does not have upper secondary education and less than half have university level education. The high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy that persist in British society testify to the continuing failure of education to meet the needs of large numbers of people.

Just what kind of education is thought to be appropriate to this situation where large numbers of mature students are in the conventional higher education system but where part-time opportunities and community-based provision has dramatically declined? The official and policy focus is on utilitarian and work-related skills, including new skills that can be useful to the national economy, filling gaps in sectors such as those for information and digital technology and in the National Health Service. Among those in prison, entering higher education can reduce re-offending and for some disadvantaged groups such as care-experienced students and adult refugees, higher education can be transformational. Marketing and management and top – up degrees for further education students can all help match employment and skills needs in specific areas (OfS ibid: 3). However, the decline in part-time degree students reflected the reduction of government loans for living costs for students studying for a qualification equivalent to or lower than the one they held. The increase in undergraduate student fees to £9,000 in 2012 had a negative impact on opportunities in universities for those taking care of children and families. Neither can the impact of a decade of 'austerity' after 2010, pay freezes and the growth of job precariousness and insecurity be under-estimated as disincentives for studying in higher education. For many, the reduction of part-time study options meant the loss of their chance to enter higher education at all. In the third decade of the 21st century for many who might have wanted or continue to seek part-time education, the Access agenda has stalled.

Regional inequalities can also disadvantage mature students who cannot afford to travel for higher education. Rural and coastal areas in the UK suffer in this regard. What is remarkable, though well known, is the fact that mature students are more likely to attend specialist providers and less selective universities than younger students. In 2020 more than a third of mature students went to universities with low average tariff scores (which often reflect lower entry requirements) whilst for younger students only 21.9 per cent did so. The elite institutions with higher tariff scores took a declining number of mature students in the period 2010-2020 whilst FE colleges nearly doubled their intake of such students (OfS ibid: 5). The now historic working relationships between FE and HE forged in the Access growth years had laid the basis for this style of educational partnership (Farmer 2017), though the more radical and community-based versions had lost their funding and in many cases their reason to exist as community-based education diminished in the face of austerity budgets manufactured by political interests opposed to their educational and social vision (Davies 2023).

There can be no doubt that mass higher education has brought with it a vast expansion of student places and courses, the sheer existence of which offer expanded study opportunities. This must lead to an improvement in life chances for many who otherwise would have been left behind. The knowledge economy and the learning society would be impossible without such developments and life in modernity incorporates the need for learning throughout life, even though this benefit is unevenly distributed. But this reality is tempered by the fact that inequality and unfairness are built in to the system. In their access and wider participation plans submitted to the Office for Students in 2020 only 40 out of 230 providers of higher education included targets related to mature students. The choices open to such students have been narrowing and they have not been prioritised by government and universities outside of certain vocational subjects (OfS ibid: 8). Part-time study has been hollowed out and so for many higher education is still not a viable option.

Across the scope of Britain's version of mass higher education we can observe that the Access agenda has not been fully met. Its purposes were much broader and deeper than that of augmenting or modifying an elite selection process. Access had the capacity and potential to benefit society as a whole by providing a model and alternative to the social engineering of the British governing elites and the self-serving supporters of meritocratic ideology. This is still needed because while 85 per cent of 17 year olds in England are in full-time education less than half of 16-18 year olds study for A–levels, the route to higher education for most. The majority of any age cohort will not attend university, at least during their late adolescent phase. Any attempts to reduce inequality must surely provide routes to further study for the future so that skills and further training can be part of an opportunity culture. However, the British Government's proposals for addressing the startling inequalities in British life in 2020s included boosting the chances of underprivileged children by creating more elite and super-selective state sixth forms (Guardian (b) ibid). Once again increased selection was viewed as a solution to lack of opportunity and who would deny bright sixth formers in in poor areas their right to aim high? However, the selection of an elite implies failure for some, and most probably for the majority. Selective sixth forms may in fact show that far from diminishing inequality overall, the result may be to cream off the most capable and best supported members of a cohort, leaving things for the remainder much the same. It is as if the answer to the problems of elitism and selectivity in education can be solved by creating slightly more access to that elite for a select few from disadvantaged groups. This approach leaves the majority where they were, which for elitists is preferable to removing elitism as the cause of the problem. Such an argument can be boosted by a belief in meritocracy which assures those who succeed that they have done so on merit and worth and disavows any suggestion this might be unjust or unfair.

Instead of investing in local institutions and in work-related and community-related education and in a properly funded and supported lifelong learning culture, a promise is made for a few more ladders to top universities. The wicked and genuine social issues such as social injustice, inequality and poverty, racism and unjustified discrimination against minorities are by-passed. The institutions and organisations, the curriculums, the pedagogies and the cultures of disavowel (Mercer 2017; Hall 2017: 73) within educational discourse fail too often to address such matters. The need for an Access agenda persists and the promise it offered has not been fulfilled.

The crisis of elitism, knowledge and public goods

This book is about the Access to HE, widening participation and the 'proper' functions of universities and university engagement. However, there is an important sub-text here focusing on Access as a form of progressive **curriculum** which at least pointed the way towards a challenge to university orthodoxies and hierarchies. Between the 1960s and 1980s new approaches to the curriculum were possible and some took root, long before the new digital technologies became widely available. Inter-disciplinary studies and degrees were on offer, modular learning created new routes to degrees, student-centred and independent learning became available and in some places the authority of traditional disciplines could be challenged and new ones brought into being. This was a time when discourse on the need for the emancipation of education itself was widely shared and the need for humanistic and democratic learning throughout life, rather than as an instrument for a particular agenda or as a duty to safeguard the economy or society was debated (Faure 1972; Biesta 2021). Knowledge became more publicly contested as did social theory which in some respects became more closely connected to public intellectual life through studies and social analysis of race, ethnicity, identity and feminism (Seidman 1998). In the later 'neoliberal' 1980s and 1990s, as the new managerialism and 'performativity' took over leadership thinking in universities, much of this progressivism was to be dismantled (Holmwood 2011; Scott 2021: 16) and the development of human capital and support for economic growth became the dominant functions for universities. By the late 1990s some academics were predicting the end of knowledge as we had known it in higher education (Barnett and Griffin 1997). Scholarship and research became increasingly industrialised and neither the high elitism of Oxbridge and the Ivy League tradition nor the mass growth of universities both in the number of institutions and their size could provide a viable alternative. Many of those who led and managed these institutions had no interest in such alternatives and indeed they were amongst its most rewarded beneficiaries as they became 'chief executives' and 'presidents' of their management and governing boards and were able to ensure salaries and rewards for themselves as if they were 'captains of industry', developing and creating in their own minds the wealth of the nation and society. In reality it was of course public funding and civic society which sustained almost all university expansion and not the privatised, so-called 'free market' in education as a private consumer good. The myth was, however, pervasive and perniciously influential as the neoliberal globalised economy powered ahead in the 21st century.

Marginson as a leading analyst of the role of universities in public life, sees no necessary contradiction between the existence of elites and the generation of public goods … 'the education of students in elite HEIs can advance not only private positional benefits but also relational citizenship, internationalization or other public goods benefits.' (Marginson 2016: 111). He views basic research carried out by leading international universities as important for the generation of future industries and for general prosperity and the large research-based multi-universities are concentrations of social, economic, intellectual and communicative resources. All of this is no doubt true, but they are not the autonomous and self-defining corporate firms they are represented to be in the discourse of English speaking countries (Marginson ibid: 112). They are not entrepreneurial corporates managing knowledge resources in a globalised and privatised market for education and research. They are in fact essentially publicly-funded resources and their social purposes and meanings are part of the public sphere – and as such they should be democratically accountable to the public. Marginson (ibid: 117) considers that equity in education is normative and although it signals justice, it does not indicate a fixed quantity of something such as equality. Equity is about the existence of dominant narratives and is expressed through the themes of equality of opportunity, the right of access to higher education and access to the economic benefits of HE. Unfortunately, such themes have been deeply problematical and severely contested as we hope to have demonstrated with the examination of Access as a movement. The language and rhetoric of mass higher education may indeed be 'normative' with

equity somehow nested within it, however the challenging realities are of developing inequalities and the increasing dominance of notions of profitability and returns on investment which characterise higher education and threaten the achievements of a generation of Access successes.

Perhaps the most disturbing example of this tendency to follow income generation and the profit-making ethos in universities, and which is held in common in the United States, the UK and Australia, is the recruitment of overseas or international students as a profit generating core activity. This is true of not only the poorer and financially less well-endowed universities but also of highly selective and elite institutions. By 2024 a third of all UK university places were filled by overseas students (Insight 2024) whilst in Australia the international recruitment of students ensured that by the early 2020s the HE sector was the fourth largest generator of domestic product. It is notable that in the UK this trend ensured that in 2022 four out of ten candidates for British high status universities were turned away. Competition for the pool of wealthy overseas students grew as so-called 'pathway' courses were invented by the universities for foreign students to enter the first of what were in reality four year degree courses with relatively modest entry grades to the first pathway year. Insight reported in 2024 that at one highly ranked elite university in England there were 40,000 applicants for some 6,000 undergraduate places. One version of the special pathway route enabled students to enrol outside of the normal application process and to pass into the second year of the economics degree. More than 40 UK universities accepted students from these 'pathway access' programmes into the second year of degree courses. Whereas entry for the normal, home-based students was only available to those achieving the highest grades, this pathway concept was in effect an inversion of the idea of special Access courses whose intended outcomes were to secure highly regarded places in elite universities for the children of the wealthy. The fees paid by the overseas students are far in excess of home-based student fees. Competition for the pool of wealthy students is fierce and recruitment agencies are commonly employed in this new form of access into elite universities. For these universities this is a lucrative business and these practices belie the claim that all the elite universities make – namely that all applicants are considered equally on merit.

The reality is that pathway courses are a bizarre parody of Access courses and are a cynical denial of both the claim to fair selection based on academic merit and access to equal opportunities for all regardless of background and family wealth. Many modern universities undertake the recruitment of foreign or international students and there is a sense in which universities must participate in the creation and distribution of knowledge and research beyond national borders. This activity can fairly be claimed to be contributing to the creation of public goods and its benefits can be substantial and even of vital importance to a global society, especially in health and environmental sustainability and protection, and perhaps it may be argued, in geo-political matters which threaten world peace and security or serve to protect international human rights. However, where elite universities are concerned, the existence of a profit-making ethos which drives the selection of students cannot be justified on the grounds of academic merit. It is clear that in some significant cases academic selection gets translated into social and economic differentiation and placement in later life in the job market. For some wealthy people access to the competitive social and economic opportunities is effectively bought in the marketplace created with the willing collusion of higher education institutions.

The concept of special pathways, in reality a backdoor route, available to only the wealthy is in contradiction to some of the most deeply embedded values held by academic institutions. Acquiring an education at one of the elite universities has never been formally viewed as a transactional matter where choosing an education is like choosing a lifestyle. There have always been reasons given for selecting the members of the elite which appealed to higher order values such as academic excellence, the need to preserve culture, the moral uplifting of a generation or even the need to defend civilised life. The fact that the realities of selective entry to elite universities have also historically in Britain and the USA contributed to social class differentiation and to class formation has not gone unremarked; selection is simply social elitism (Todd 2021: 356). Social equality through education, which is a vital collective social good, is in conflict with a free market heresy which asserts that education is a freedom of choice matter which can be bought in the market. Access as a movement was, and remains we hope, a challenge to the libertarian fundamentalism which demands the free play of wealth and privilege. The actions of elite universities which receive state funding and support cannot claim to be fair and just whilst they perpetuate selection rooted in social class differences of wealth and income and cultural segregation. The pursuit of profits in a market for wealthy international students cannot be commensurate with an education that needs to be free, universal and democratic which is the core mission of Access.

In the third decade of the 21st century it appears that the world-wide economic trends for growth and expansion have stalled and the issues of mass poverty, climate crisis, ecological destruction and the threats of pandemics and war have produced widespread disenchantment and even disillusion with democracy itself and in the capacity of capitalism to generate benefits and prosperity for the wider populations (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Wolf 2023). There is in this perspective a severe crisis of democratic capitalism. The threats deriving from populist politics and anti-democratic tendencies have brought into question many of the taken-for-granted assumptions we make about the stability and 'normality' of our societies. This is part of the crisis of our times and it presents educationalists with their own existential version of this crisis which revolves around the need for education throughout life as part of a humanistic and democratic existence and not as an instrument for a particular agenda. How has the expanded mass system of higher education responded and has critical and transformative thinking occurred which might hold out hope for solutions to the crises of our times? It seems clear that universities, which were themselves a significant part of economic growth in many countries, hold few if any potential solutions if we are to judge them from their own strategic purposes which focus on maintaining or improving their positions in the hierarchy of performances and league tables which generate their student-led cash income and research funding.

Solutions to the crisis of higher education?

If solutions exist they are dependent on which questions and agendas are taken to be of central importance. There can be no single solution to the complex questions which have been outlined here but perhaps there can be what have been called points of departure for future and current debate so that our focus and concerns more properly reflect the great issues of the day and the challenges which face each one of us.

We need a universal higher education system where the old divisions and hierarchies which discriminate against so many people are abolished. Such a system would require a critical and open curriculum which focusses knowledge and scholarship and research on the existential issues facing all of us. A participation rate of around 80 per cent for a universal system would be advisable and necessary, even if our ambitions for future generations were only to match those of nations such as South Korea. The historic divisions between vocational and academic knowledge must be rescinded and arbitrary distinctions between graduate and non-graduate jobs must disappear as we respond to changing labour markets and social needs.

As a greatly expanded HE system develops,

the issue of fair access and greater equality of outcomes will come to the fore yet again. The mass access system produced in the UK, Australia and elsewhere between 1960 and 2020 was highly divisive and unfair. An elite of universities was consolidated whilst the mass of 'convenience' or service universities strove to differentiate themselves and gain market share of students and resources. The Access movement had shown what might be possible with different approaches and concerns but this was eventually restricted to the margins of the university system in spite of widening participation having been the declared goal of substantial parts of the same system. Diversity was said to be one of the aims and characteristics of the mass system, but there was no consensus on what diversity should mean or how it might be achieved. The elite universities failed to challenge those inequalities which inhibited diversity and encouraged competitive individualism whilst restricting social equity and inclusiveness (Dorling 2018). In Britain in particular, the core mission of elites was to preserve the elite system and its buttressing ideologies and the tension between excellence and equality was not resolved in spite of brave attempts to encourage change (Kettley and Murphy 2021). The knowledge claims of universities remained rooted in traditional and conservative disciplines, with notable exceptions (Barnett 2017) and the opportunity to build on the Access tradition was refused. Only limited initiatives took place across the HE sector to develop a curricular space for reflexively engaged learning and teaching with world issues which were existentially vital to all our futures.

In the UK the question of who should pay tuition fees remains to be resolved. If higher education is a public and social good, why is it not free and funded from general taxation? Most Access students did not personally pay tuition fees and there is widespread belief in the idea that ability to pay fees should play no part in determining who has access to higher education. Fees in a neoliberal system become part of the 'market' mechanism but are still hugely contentious and unpopular, especially in their impact on socially disadvantaged groups where the notion of fairness has great importance. Undoubtedly we have a widened system but is it fairer? In the elite universities everywhere a disproportionately large number of students continue to be recruited from the most socially advantaged groups.

Fair and equitable access requires a thorough revision of the ways in which academic and quality standards are shaped and manipulated. If not, an unfair and disproportionate number of students from affluent backgrounds will continue to get access to the elite universities and consequently to the most desired and often most economically rewarding graduate job markets. The argument here is not just about these manifestly unfair selection processes which do discriminate against socially disadvantaged groups, serious and debilitating though this problem is for the wider society. Rather, the argument should be that the educational role of the university needs re-thinking. Such a point of departure takes us beyond the idea that we should modify a widening participation approach which re-shapes the deficient student so s/he better fits the institution and can be shaped to conform to existing conceptions of success. This is essentially the deficit model of access and widening participation and, as this book has argued, it has been found wanting in that the transformations expected of higher education could not materialise. What was missing was the required emphasis on the educational role of university learning and in particular the need for critical curriculum change and reform. The purpose of a university has to contain an educational function which goes beyond measurements of quality and performance so there is an engagement with intent and concern to change life for the better (Wesley 2023). Paul Ashwin expressed this in the following way... 'the educational purpose of a university education is not to prepare someone for their role in the future workforce. Rather ... (it) is to bring students into a transformational relationship to knowledge that changes their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world ' (Ashwin 2020: 3). This is also the authentic meaning of Access and widening participation as argued in this book. The Access movement gave space for the claims of popular and useful knowledge to be part of the university curriculum with intent to change it. It challenged elitism by virtue of its very existence but this challenge was to be mediated by powerful material and ideological forces which gave expression to some of the defining cultural beliefs and political engagements of the current era – the belief in meritocracy and the power of so-called free markets to create and shape opportunities and consumption, including that of education itself.

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Chapter 8

Meritocracy and the free market in education

From the perspective of the current era with its expectations of ecological catastrophe, the continuing existence of mass world-wide poverty, its international conflicts, and brutal wars of aggression and growing authoritarianism, we might look kindly on the time of relative social stability and increasingly high living standards which emerged with the growth of mass participation in education towards the end of the 20th century. At least in the western capitalist nations which subscribed to social democratic norms this appeared to be the case. There was no apparent alternative to globalised capitalism and neoliberalism as an economic and social philosophy appeared to be triumphant, in that no realistic alternative could be imagined by most people. One commentator remarked that it was easier for some people to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism (Fisher 2009).

However, beneath this surface appearance of a golden age of globalisation and economic growth with its fetishisation of the market and subjection of citizens as consumers of the goods within that market, was a reality of social control and manipulation. This was where meritocracy found its new voice and meaning. If mass education could embody the aspirations of the many, it could also sponsor the selection of elites and be the means of legitimising inequality. Selective education and schooling was nothing new and Britain, the USA and Australia had developed their own distinctive elite schooling systems. The 21st century and modernity, it might be imagined, were more democratic times and demanded a different approach. Education would need both to justify and help counter the social inequalities that came with formal access to equal opportunities. This proved not to be the case, however, and the tension between education as emancipation and education as a form of control and social engineering was not overcome; inequalities continued to bedevil many advanced western societies. The possibilities of large scale reform receded in the new century in the face of the successful marketing of meritocracy. In the USA, the leading western economy and international political force, ideas and beliefs in the existence and practicality of the 'common good' retreated in the face of the belief that each person could succeed as the foundation of the American nation's understanding of itself (Sandel 2021). This was in essence a belief which asserted that personal and individual talent and ability could and should be recognised and that this would drive people to succeed. It was as if the only thing stopping people from being the authors of their own success were their own inhibitions. This foundational sentiment of neoliberalism was to be found throughout the modern western capitalist world.

Meritocracy became one of society's most powerful myths and many people wish to live in a world that appears to be fair and where rewards go to those who deserve them through talent and hard work. Unfortunately this ideal did not and does not correspond to the reality in which we continue to live and struggle to improve. The university system, as we have seen, is stratified and hierarchised so that the educational role of university education is in serious question and its purposes subject to critical scrutiny (Ashwin 2020; Brink 2018; Sandel ibid). Many universities claim to be 'world class' but this cannot be the case in general without devaluing the notion an elite institution itself. The university a person attends is now a proxy for her/his employment potential. In Britain, for example, educational stratification is in reality a social stratification for life. British pupils from the poorest backgrounds, receiving the pupil premium, make up just 2 % of admissions to the most selective universities, in spite of the fact they are 13 % of all young people. The claim that universities can deliver the common good of our modern societies is in serious question and under scrutiny.

This is now the context in which we must try to understand the meanings of mass higher education and the growth and persistence of Access as a narrative which is vital to today's education system and its need to open up opportunities regardless of class or ethnic or family origin. In this chapter a key reference point is the British conception of competing values which have swirled around debate and contestation over inequalities for generations. Some of these find a resonance in Australia for what may be obvious historical reasons whilst the USA's manifestations of meritocracy and inequality are powerful representations of dominant ideologies of the world's leading economy. Access in its original form raised questions about how education and learning outside and at the margins of the mainstream could advance social mobility, opportunity and equality for the previously excluded. This chapter explores some of the conundrums of meritocracy which make it relevant to today's system of higher education and to the future shape of learning, nomatter whether this takes place in Britain, the United States of America or in Australia. Inevitably, given the background and traditions of its authors, the perspective followed here asserts the relevance of the British tradition of meritocracy and its own peculiar brand of exceptionalism. The existence of different interpretations of meritocratic ideologies and practices cannot be denied, however, and Australia's own version of this is notably different from others. We believe though that there is a commonality which is relevant to discourse on meritocracy nomatter where it is situated and we hope to have drawn on a perspective which is commensurate with different but contingent national and cultural experience.

Meritocracy was once the cry of the dispossessed. Only let us compete on the basis of our naturally or God-given talents and abilities and we can remove the evils and barriers of inherited privilege and distinction based on birth or inheritance. Once we are allowed to compete fairly then merit not birth will determine outcomes so that power, wealth and authority can be justly distributed. The same thinking informed feminists who argued that girls and boys should learn the same things so that women could free themselves from the constraints imposed by the patriarchy. In the working class it was the meritocratic principle that drove people to prove they were as able as their social superiors. Working class intellectuals, many self-taught, emerged in the 19th century and the early 20th century to show that it was immoral to deny opportunity to the lower classes (Rose 2021; Wooldridge 2021: 14-15).

At its most simple, merit and meritocracy mean that those with talent and ability should get to succeed. Unfortunately the corollary of this is that those with less talent unfortunately get to fail. Those that fail to rise are left at the bottom of the social hierarchy and what is worse, they are seen to be there because that is where they belong; they deserve their fate due to their lack of aptitude or talent or intelligence or whatever measure is used to decide on the selection and fate of elites. In the first two decades of the 21st century, however, a whole set of social and economic developments occurred which undermined the idea that western economic systems and societies had a system of meritocracy which rewarded the deserving. In the last two decades of the 20th century this became clear as a series of social developments showed how globalisation and technical change had killed off many manual jobs, destroyed wholesale domestic industries and thrust the planet into a crisis of climate and ecological instability which threatened everyone's future. The rise of a technocratic elite and new forms of digitised capitalism seemed to ensure the capacity of existing elites to pass on their advantages and wealth to their children rather than to ensure competitive fairness and access to the elite positions in economy and society. Meritocracy ensured the continuation of elites and privilege, though its rhetoric always told a different story. At its best meritocracy became a disguise for a sophisticated form of class privilege; at its worst it helped enforce class privilege and social division where universal rights and justice had been promised. What could justify such glaring inequality?

Success in a meritocratic system does not come easily. Huge amounts of money and effort are

spent on children by parents eager to ensure their offspring get into the right schools, the right elite universities and onto the right career paths. Meritocratic selection is never left to itself. It has to be organised and often it is 'colonised' on behalf of those with existing resources. There is not very much room at the top and occupying it takes struggle and effort both to get and stay there. It goes almost without saying that competition to enter the elite schools and universities is fierce, though for the wealthy and well-placed, money and connections smooth the well-trodden pathway to inherited and paid-for privilege.

Merit is everywhere – rewards are not: equal opportunities to become unequal

The fact is there are many different types of meritocracy (Wooldridge 2021). It can claim a presence in political life where suspicion of democratic and collective involvement means that representative democracy is absent or is rejected by electorates in favour of populist revolts against elites (Goodwin 2023). It is compatible with the election or nomination of elites so that democratic pressures are less likely to be used directly to influence government. We can identify technocratic, business and academic meritocracies where certain qualities are used to select people for merit and others are excluded. In producing business or academic meritocratic elites there may be little need to recognise the positive value of 'character' or that of virtue. Success is deemed to be more important than the value of a person's work or contribution to the greater good, things which are difficult to value in monetary terms. Underpinning the growth of modernity there are widely held beliefs and assumptions that a progressive society allows a meritocracy to exist and thrive. Societies based on hereditary principles or selection based on personal preference and selection by favouritism are widely held to be incompatible with the requirements of a modern, industrialised and sophisticated economy and society.

The problem with meritocracy is that it requires *selection* and this can and does lead to the entrenchment of elites, not least where elites with money and access to power can see that such purchasing power can buy access to the supposedly meritocratic elites – mainly in the present generation through education. This encounters criticism from the left on the grounds that such elite formation in a vast variety of forms, not just in school selection, is unfair and denies the need for social justice and a level playing field. Marginalised groups are thus able to point to the way in which elite institutions simply fail to live up to meritocratic principles (Wooldridge ibid: 17).

As levels of social mobility in recent decades have declined in many western societies educational meritocracy can be seen to have transmorphed into its opposite. 'Educational institutions, including the most self-consciously progressive universities, are vectors of race-based inequality.' (Wooldridge ibid: 6; Bhopal and Myers 2023). Instead of promoting social mobility and opportunity amongst the excluded and marginalised in society, significant parts of the elite system have promoted elite-continuity and social closure rather than an opening of class, gender, race, and ethnicity borders. The moneyed elite, including significant elements of ethnic and racial groups, have worked to provide a form of caste closure which sponsors certain groups but excludes others. Meritocracy does not produce social justice either. As Selena Todd suggests in a ground-breaking study of social mobility in the UK, despite a majority of every generation since the end of the 19th century moving up or down the ladder of mobility…'over the past 140 years, birth and wealth have exercised a far greater influence on a person's social position than talent, effort or ambition' (Todd 2021: 1).

John Rawls, the influential Harvard philosopher, argued that even a system of fair equality of opportunity could not produce an adequate system of distributive justice (Rawls 1971). High intelligence could not be used to justify differences in social or economic outcomes since differences in talent are morally arbitrary and not a reward for merit. Talent distribution was as arbitrary as social class – both of which were essentially inherited. Rawls' solutions to the inevitable inequalities of natural and social endowments was 'compensatory'. The winners had to share their benefits through progressive taxation if there was to be justice. Neither did hard work entitle an individual to higher rewards since this capacity was, like intelligence, inherited and therefore arbitrary and unjustifiably unequal. The emphasis here could be said to be on limiting inequalities rather than on opening up opportunities (Wooldridge ibid: 292). Rawls called this the 'difference principle' in which natural talents are viewed as a common asset and therefore should be enjoyed by those fortunate enough to be endowed only in so far as those who were not so blessed are also rewarded. In other words, the social rewards of talent and effort should be fairly shared, collectively and communally. No such situation actually exists in reality at a societal level, which forces our attention onto the question of the equality dilemma in which it is argued there will always be significant inequalities between people in terms of wealth, status and power. There will always be winners and losers, people who succeed and people who do badly in the competitive struggle for advantage in this view, which is widely held in liberal and conservative circles. The question then is…is this a 'freedom' in which we have a right to be unequal and therefore justifies unequal and unfair outcomes?

Rawls' solution to this dilemma was the promotion of equality of opportunity, through what he called the principle of 'fair equal opportunity' in which those with similar skills and abilities should have similar life chances (Rawls ibid: 72-73). This was to be achieved within the efficiencies of the so-called free-market economy which itself contained systems of institutionalised inequality. For Rawls the system could be managed so that the 'difference principle' permitted social and economic inequalities only where they work to the advantage of the most disadvantaged. This gave the right to compete within a system of institutionalised inequality but not the right to choose amongst alternatives of equal value. The problem here is that formal equal opportunities between competing groups or individuals do not deliver what Lynch called a 'real prospect of achieving something valuable relative to others' (Lynch 2022: 108). There is always a pre-existing set of structural and cultural conditions in any society which shape choices and limit alternatives. We may get to choose some options but this is never a wholly 'free' choice; it is a conditioned choice in which power and wealth and access to influence play a significant part. These conditions are often structured in inequity!

This line of argument is taken up in an influential analysis of women's roles and the undervalued nature of care contingent on gender and class inequalities within the capitalist world (Lynch 2022). In Lynch's view a concern with prioritising notions of 'freedom' over equality mean that…'even the most left-leaning liberal equal opportunities policies cannot deliver social justice in any substantive form in an economically and politically unequal society, as those groups that are privileged will use their own institutionalised power and influence to defend their own interests… The inherent classed logic of social hierarchy under capitalism does not permit the election of the few to become the pattern for the many. The very constitution of a hierarchical society precludes the development of a meritocracy as privileged groups use their excess income, wealth, power and other forms of social and cultural capital to undermine meritocratic practices' (Lynch ibid:108). When we consider the cumulative, compounded and overlapping social, economic, political and affective dimensions of inequalities, as Lynch does in her ground-breaking work, we are forced to engage with the intersectionality of inequalities and with the question of what kind of meritocracy has become accepted in modern times where there is pervasive and extensive inequality?

Business capitalism as a leading ideology of meritocracy

There was once in the minds of many a belief that the post-war period was one of meritocratic revolution. In America, perhaps most spectacularly, the research scholar became the meritocrat-in-chief who might be thought of as not just understanding the world but changing it for the common good (Wooldridge ibid: 250). Across the Atlantic universities became 'engaged' in the wider social agendas of the day including professional and business life. Business schools became the hand-maidens of corporate industry and developed business models using 'knowhow' and management financial expertise to drive profitability and shareholder value. The new meritocrats did not inherit their wealth; they generated it through their knowledge of business practice and the application of expertise and trained intelligence. Schools became routes for mobility, universities became research-based training schools and businesses became obsessed with selecting the 'brightest and the best' who had the brainpower to drive towards greater profitability for corporate America. Intellect and mind and intelligence were co-opted through education to produce a version of meritocracy which offered access to opportunities. The downside was that it would lead to highly unequal outcomes.

In the era of neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s, which itself sponsored the emergence of the technocratic revolution of the digital age, the globalising business ethic became a persuasive and dominant ideology in which individuals looked to themselves, their families and their elite membership of social and educational groups to safeguard their interests and identities. The state and big government were anathema; only the privatised market had the power and capacity to solve problems according to this creed. Neoliberalism became a dominant discourse in public life and policy, and was particularly noteworthy in America and Britain but was also true of Australia which developed a competitively driven 'knowledge economy' (Wesley 2023). The connections this 'philosophy' had to ultra-conservative political movements in Britain at least was clear (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Brown 2019) and it marked a reaction against a rising tide of demands for social equality, and in America for desegregated public higher education (Chun and Feagin 2022). The neoliberal view advocated so-called free markets but in reality they extended the power of large commercial corporations over government and public life. Social welfare expansions, taxes on businesses and the regulation of corporate activities for the public good or protection were viewed as government interference in private profit making. Formally, governments at this time pressed for 'austerity' and the reduction of government expenditure as well as the privatisation of public assets including education. The realities of government interventions were paradoxically very different and in this period state expenditure and debt grew exponentially in Britain, in America and elsewhere. It seems clear that this aggressive version of neoliberalism had destructive effects on both American and British economies and the lives of their citizens (Chun and Feagin ibid: 64; Toynbee and Walker 2020).

Moral managerialism

In a society supposedly driven by the fundamental belief that individuals count more than collectivities, it is something of a paradox to encounter the collective activities of capitalist firms and corporations as being virtuous. Some of them claim to be solving some of the world's biggest and most problematical issues including climate change, poverty, racial inequality and of course economic development (Dunn 2021: 26). Many of them insist that their firms exist for a higher purpose than simply making a profit. This is not just a 21st century event; by the mid – 20th century the idea of corporate responsibility was widespread as companies realised their corporate balance sheets could be enhanced by treating their employees better and understanding how they felt. Workers of all kinds could be seen to share popular values such as patriotism and be seen to contribute to a growing and progressive affluence. A growing class of professional managers spread these ideas and by 2008 more than 100,000 MBA graduates were being employed each year across the globe (Wooldridge ibid).

In the same period we can also observe the breaking up of traditional social and economic ties and communities and perhaps their moral force being weakened as individualism and consumerism displaced older and more collective ways of life. We can also note the loss or diminution of mass movements for social change such as trades unionism and citizen's movements for peace, disarmament and social reform in which the struggle for education was a part.

How does this allow us to better understand the meritocracy issue? The modern digital IT companies, clustered often in America, see major world social and economic problems as issues to be solved and understood by the genius of a few gifted individuals who happen of course to work for their companies. Climate change, ecological degradation, racial inequality, the future of research into medicine and artificial intelligence can all be 'solved' by the application of technologies and digital communications which they own and control. This is part of the new meritocracy where the billionaire owners of the companies are presented as saviours of humankind. The reality is that the businesses that underpin these ludicrous claims are not about science and knowledge; they are about highly qualified and skilled professionals selling targeted advertising, web-hosting and communication as entertainment. They have persuaded the world that unlimited consumerism, pervasive mass surveillance and the monetisation of what was once private space are progressive and desirable innovations (Crawford 2015; Zuboff 2019; Habermas 2023). In reality they are in the business of profit creation not of changing the world.

The case against meritocracy

The meritocratic idea though shot through with inconsistency and ambivalence, was however a key aspect of progressive education which set out to right historic social injustices. The meritocratic 'ideology' accepted that individuals differed in their innate abilities and the role of the wider society or the state in particular was to discover ability and allow it to flourish through educational opportunities. This position argued for a humane and efficient form of meritocracy. There was widespread belief in the idea itself which was understood as being good and progressive, not just amongst academics and educators. Jean Floud (1961: 93) summed up an apparent consensus amongst social scientists… 'Some pupils will always do better than others, but it is desirable that the order of inequality should be, as it were, a natural one unmarred by fictitious and irrelevant social differences'.

The attack on meritocracy itself came from Michael Young whose work was often paradoxically thought to be a celebration of it (Young 1958). The key issue raised in the book is the notion that the meritocratic idea is in fact the opposite of the egalitarian idea of equality. Meritocracy supports competition and inequality and in so doing smuggles in equality of opportunity in the place of actual equality of outcomes. The argument runs that if meritocratic competition is allowed to flourish then economic efficiency will hold sway and social compassion will be held in check. The social and psychological conditions which ensure people protect their own kind will, under meritocracy, ensure prevailing unfairness and eventual rule by 'meritocratic elites'. Meritocracy offers upward social mobility for the few at the expense of the majority who are kept in subordinate positions. Worse perhaps was the fact that the winners were persuaded that their own talent was responsible for their successes, whilst the losers had nobody to blame but themselves for their failures.

The critique of meritocracy centred on the questions of what were the relevant social

and cultural differences which helped explain inequalities if natural endowments and talents, including the propensity or desire to work hard, themselves were to be set aside as reasons or legitimations for unequal social and economic outcomes. For Pierre Bourdieu (1990), an influential theorist of culture, educational differences were due to the way in which 'cultural capital' was produced and circulated. It was cultural capital which allowed the privileged to control access to the professions and prestigious positions in social life and then to reinforce this by persuading the poor that they actually only deserved to be at the bottom of the social pyramid. There had in addition always been a conservative critique of meritocracy where idealised versions of the past were sought where 'communities' contained only people who knew their place and were bound to each other by unbreakable reciprocal and mutual obligations. This was essentially a religious version of society whose fundamental order and highly unequal structure was ordained by a superior entity such as God or a supreme being. The communitarian ideal of a society was, however, also shared by non-religious critics of modernity who rejected its specifically capitalistic forms. This version wanted a vision of a future society which rested on oppressed groups and classes freeing themselves from the inherited inequalities which bedevilled their lives and communities. The loss of community became a key theme in social studies and educational discourse (Bauman 2001).

No room at the top for group rights, gender and identity

The critique of meritocracy based on ideas and beliefs about the need for greater social justice found its expression in a growing concern for group rights. These were the social groups that seemed immune to individual upward social mobility and whose position vis-à-vis other more advantaged social groups did not change. Race, ethnic belonging, faith commitments and sexual orientation were at the root of such group identities and were the basis and source of much political and social unrest. The scepticism about meritocracy was underpinned in the real world by the persistent realities of race and gender inequalities and the consequentially perceived lack of social justice around them. Increasingly, the wrongs suffered historically by black and ethnic peoples and by women were collectively felt yet were intensely and personally experienced and articulated (Hirsch 2018; Rankine 2020). The solutions to racism and sexism increasingly were called on to be collectively driven, since this was how they were articulated as conscious experience. They were sites of injustice (Lynch ibid) as group identity became a crucial key to understanding social development. Radical approaches to the long term effects of slavery and patriarchy argued that these wrongs had been imposed collectively on people because of their 'race' or their sex or sexual orientation (Olusoga 2016; Bhopal 2018; Thornton 2013; Lynch 2022). In such cases there could be no solutions based on individualistic ideologies embodied in meritocracy. Solutions had therefore to be collectively inspired and collectively determined (Wooldridge ibid: 298).

With regard to the role of women in society, the impact of meritocracy as an ideology, as a way of thinking and believing that certain ideas are true and essentially right, came to dominate male thinking. It shaped sensibilities and legitimated the assertion that male expertise was more valuable than that of middle-class educated women and was far above that of working-class women who had been denied any chance of getting on the ladder of mobility. 'They (men) stressed the importance of establishing a meritocracy, and of measuring its success by gauging how far men like themselves could succeed. By the 1960s they had succeeded in persuading senior politicians that male upward social mobility was the best means to measure Britain's social and economic progress. The great inequality that neither the welfare state nor economic growth resolved – women's limited political power and economic opportunities – was ignored' (Todd ibid: 155).

Individual and group identity

What was better understood was the idea that meritocracy was really about selection and selective education rooted in individualistic ideologies that separated out elites from the rest of society. The elites tended to come from the existing elites who had found ways of preserving their positions and wealth and indeed their cultural capital from one generation to the next. Equality of opportunity was being viewed within the critical or radical perspective as being in opposition to equality of outcomes, since the former allowed the emergence of managerial elites who governed and ruled on behalf of and in place of people who might have been selected from the broader masses but who in fact were recruited primarily from existing elites. The so-called meritocratic elites were rewarded with the glittering prizes in life – better jobs, more money, improved lifestyles, higher social status and greater access to power and resources. There was little or no equality of outcomes for the masses and in fact in the 21st century there may have been an increase in inequality on a global scale as well as within single states (Dorling 2018; Toynbee and Walker 2020; Picketty 2020: 534-536).

The masses themselves were of course always something other than just an undifferentiated mass. The masses existed as social groups with specific identities constructed around many different cultural and material factors such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, geography, occupation, work, community, sport and myriad interests and identities, some of which inevitably overlapped and intersected. The rhetoric of meritocracy was often about the recognition of individual qualities and talent but the reality was always about the social groups into which individuals were socialised and whose characteristics they shared. It was the structure of society and the way groups related to each other and to the institutional make-up of communities and society in general that determined the unjust social outcomes. It is difficult to have meritocracy, where people think they have achieved or acquired what they deserve through their own merits and talents, and at the same time raise the outcomes and achievements of whole classes and groups, many of whom may not possess outstanding talents. For meritocracy to be inclusive and dynamic there are major contradictions to be overcome.

The practical means of securing elite status across the generations involved education. For the UK elite circles, academic, selective schools continued to provide routes to selective elite universities for the children of the ruling elites and groups. These groups were of course distinguished by the fact that they were already in possession of wealth, capital and social and cultural power. They were in a position to buy access to private schools, to the most successful state schools, and to universities which in turn could confer privileged access to jobs, many of the professions and entry to political power and influence. The abolition of grammar schools nearly everywhere by the 1980s had abolished one set of elite schools which had provided a route to success and opportunity for the middle classes and to a lesser extent the working class. The even more elite and privileged private schools, which served the much richer families under the misnamed 'public schools' title, were not abolished. They were not even mildly reformed with their 'charitable' status left intact so they could avoid paying tax on the profits they made. They were in fact encouraged to cater for the approximately 7 per cent of the pupil population whose parents used these schools to buy-in to elite positions and wealth in British society (Cohen 2009; Green and Kynaston 2019). How was it possible that age-old institutions such as public schools and social class groupings that had exercised power and accumulated wealth over generations could continue to exercise control in modern meritocratic society?

The new meritocracy

The 1980s and 1990s saw a significant change

in the way capitalist economies worked. The pro-market and small state ideologies of the Thatcherite years came home to roost in many societies across the globe. The information technology and digital industries took off world-wide and the networked society and knowledge economy boomed. The promises and limitations of the social-democratic societies that arose after World War Two became apparent as neoliberalism and the ideologies of free market capitalism took hold in many advanced economies. At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the 21-first centuries the rise of hypercapitalist societies seemed assured (Picketty ibid: 415; Fisher 2009). As the new 21st century dawned a new 'occupational elite' came into being to service this rapidly expanding sector and a large number of high-IQ (intelligence quotient) jobs, many involving computing skills, were created in both the public and private sectors. This was a global phenomenon but could be best observed in the financial centres of global capitalism such as London, New York and Sydney. Universities expanded to meet the new requirements of the market for academic talent. Money was the touchstone of the new elite's success and the measure of all things of value.

The new elites bought into the old elite schooling systems as a way of acquiring privileges for their children and the wealthy could always buy privileged access where native intelligence failed to secure places at the most desirable schools and universities. The marriage of money and elitism may have continued to produce more inequality so that, for example, in the UK in the early 21st century about half the places at Oxbridge went to pupils educated at private schools – comprising less than 7 per cent of the total school population.

Social mobility more generally may in fact have gone into reverse whilst operating under the false colours of 'meritocracy' and equal opportunities for all who can afford it! Those who possess significant wealth, the plutocrats, are now allied to those who realise they must succeed in the meritocratic struggle to get the best education at the best and most prestigious institutions. The elite universities and business schools, where aspiring meritocrats augment their qualifications for leadership are also a location where naturally the offspring of the wealthy encounter each other and create the social milieu and contacts which it can be said are needed for successful business enterprise. It may be that some eventually marry and reproduce since elite universities and business schools where the children of the wealthy meet each other are a key location for creating cultural and social capital.

The marriage of merit and money distorts all attempts at 'levelling up' the unjustified and damaging social inequalities that beset our society. The old elites were not closed to newcomers and, as we have suggested, a newer middle class professional elite emerged within the top echelons of the university hierarchies. However, this new elite did not replace the older 'power elites' and did not become somehow a new ruling class. Rather the old ruling elites adapted to the new conditions and, as from time immemorial, co-opted new entrants and adapted to change without changing their function as owners and beneficiaries of an unequal and unjust system.

The free market model of education

If the ideology of meritocracy was the story the fortunate told about themselves to justify their accomplishments, then 'the market' was the means by which this was achieved. In spite of governments wishing to create a market for higher education, universities do not just exist in a market for student choice. They live and die, as it were, in a reputational struggle for predominance where various indexes of performance are manipulated to best effect. This is not a free market but is a 'managed market', manipulated in favour of those already endowed with privilege. The net result are various performance league tables which are taken by the general public as indicators of value and quality. Schools, parents, careers advisors, employers and the general public accept these contrived judgements as to what is best without fully knowing or perhaps also without caring about the real factors which lie behind the league table numbers, which by quantifying objective judgements of value, actually serve to legitimise already existing and inevitable inequalities between institutions. In the league tables competition, providers of higher education do not, obviously, start on a level playing field either in terms of their financial viability or their reputational status.

Yet in many places the existence of mission diversity and difference was intended to be an authentic alternative to the historic and inequitable selectivity of the older universities. Mass higher education had a different mission and was part of what was supposed to be the authentic diversity of higher education. The market model of university education failed, however, in almost every aspect: it did not drive down costs for students and it did not increase opportunity outcomes. Out of diversity came conformity within a hierarchy of performances which could never be judged on an equal basis. It did nevertheless facilitate the expansion of student numbers and the growth of education as an industry. However, the market in learning was not primarily responsible for this – rather, the disappearance of a viable labour market for 16 to 18 year olds in this period was the primary cause alongside the world-wide growth of mass higher education as the global economy and its local versions rapidly changed.

The fact was that as participation in higher education rose, many of those who would not go to university were bound in the main for a low wage, low skill economy where the prospects for lifetime, well-paid and secure work were rapidly diminishing. Meanwhile the prospects of graduate *under-employment* were rising as graduate jobs with secure lifetime employment prospects were themselves becoming ever more scarce. A first degree was no longer a guarantee of a secure job and many new graduates found themselves in what were previously non-graduate jobs in the clerical and service industries, many of which involved short-term and part-time contracts and flexible hours. For many jobs the premium qualification became a second or masters degree and a required period of unpaid 'internship' work – an impossible demand on those without existing finance and wealth, often provided by affluent families to their graduate children.

If universities in general were subject to financial constraints it was also the case that considerable freedom was granted institutions to make their own way in the neoliberal market place for education. For those who developed Access and widening participation, learning was not a unit of financial resource (Davies 2023). Neither was it a commodity to be bought and sold as a marketable product; it was not 'provision' to be disposed of just as it was not available off the shelf as a consumer item or positional good. For the supporters of Access, learning in the newly expanded system was about engagement and renewal. It was about critical thinking applied to the issues and challenges of their students as they struggled to overcome barriers to learning and opportunity. The setting up of Access provision was a redeeming of pledges made to local communities – that they should also inherit what learning opportunities can yield: a better social product and a better chance at life for the people who were living in the here and now and future opportunities for their children.

Is the free market model now broken?

Universities in Australia and the UK expanded and developed in a period when a consumer-based ideology stressing the benefits of so-called free markets and individual choice was in the ascendancy. Tuition fees were increasing and the importance of revenue streams meant all universities were becoming big businesses. The economic power of education meant that universities were a key contributor to the prosperity and futures of their host cities and towns. This was the context in which students began to be treated like consumers who were

buying a product for sale by the university. Education could be viewed and marketed as a commodity. This had been happening during the previous two decades but accelerated after 2010 when student fees were ramped up.

This process was an actual example of what John Gray (2021) called ... 'the centrist ideology in which the principle function of government is to re-engineer society as an adjunct of the global market... (which) has become the orthodoxy of a vanished age'. The global free market was compatible with the ideology of meritocracy which asserted the fact that self-made men, it was almost always men, deserved to be in the leading positions of economy and society. If they did not merit it, how else had they arrived at their elevated status?

The new system, intended to fuel growth in student numbers, attached funding to students, and from 2015 in England limits on recruitment were removed with the exception of some specialist subjects such as medicine which required much more additional resources. The more students recruited the more income for the university was generated. One result of this was the development of what is known as market conforming behaviour. For universities this meant raising revenue streams, maintaining credit ratings and committing to a continuous flow of students who bring in fees. Maximising student intakes is a key to this process and its counterpoint is raising league table ratings. At the same time there is an imperative to lower costs which impacts on staffing expenditure and contracts which in turn has the effect of destabilising academic life. All academic life came to be measured and monitored in these managerialist terms. Risk taking and creativity was suppressed in such circumstances. Cost cutting measures and retrenchment may present the easiest immediate solution where market conformity holds sway.

The metrics do not of course capture the full reality of what was going on. Larger and richer institutions, for example, are able to game the system. There is only a very imperfect market in higher education anyway as cultural and historical factors shape who goes where regardless of the ability to pay fees. At the end of the day university leaders choose where to put resources and where the focus of development and effort shall be. The rules of this game favour conformity and conservativism and corporate uniformity. These rules clearly did not favour Access and widening participation as uniformity and standardisation of higher education proceeded up to the year 2020. The truth is that Access provision was never meant to be a standardised version of a university. It was meant to challenge that uniformity of expectations where all the players resemble each other. It was meant to equip us with a better prospect to truly reflect the diversity of our communities and the possibilities of a renewed and creatively enhanced curriculum.

Neoliberal meritocracy

Meritocracy as an 'ideology' extended the idea of competitive individualism into everyday life, supported by public mass media and entertainment businesses and business entrepreneurialism. There was a withdrawal from the values of the welfare state and erosion of the sovereignty of the national state in favour of the rapidly globalising world economy. The issues of downward social mobility and the social value of lower paid jobs became ever more invisible yet ever more disavowed by powerful ruling elites.

Meritocracy under neoliberalism had many different guises: it asserted that it was your own fault if you failed to achieve your dreams and aspirations since those with merit deserved to succeed. Inequality could not be seriously denied but the solutions were in the extension of capitalist, market principles and solutions. The net effect of this was, throughout this period, to increase inequality and social division. Meritocracy was a powerful idea because it appeared to react against inherited privilege and to assert the possibility of individual effort in overcoming barriers to opportunity and success. At the same time meritocracy was used to market and sell the idea of equality whilst extending the power of those with wealth and privilege. It confused the idea of democracy with the power of choice in the market where all things are for sale (Brown 2019). Yet the reality is that not everything can be bought and sold. Some parts of our collective and social life cannot and should not be monetised and working and living together rather than competing alone is the only viable and worthwhile future.

The growth of neoliberal belief systems and the acceptance of the free market state have undermined belief and trust in modern welfare states in many places across the globe. Local communities have been fragmented and destroyed as economic investment and employment have moved to more profitable places, resulting in the undermining of social and communal solidarity (Bauman ibid). In his book The Tyranny of Merit (2021) the philosopher Michael Sandel argues that the people who reach the top of the social and economic hierarchies tend to believe that their success is of their own doing; that they therefore deserve the full benefits and rewards that the market bestows on them. Likewise those who fail in the system are deemed to have failed due to their own inadequacies. Sandel's argument is that prevailing liberal conceptions of personal and social freedom tend to assume that ultimately we are all self-made and self-sufficient, whereas the reality is that we live social and communal lives in which we are dependent upon one-another. Markets alone cannot ensure we have a proper social fabric and effective social justice (Sandel 2012 and 2021; Lynch 2022).

Lessons learned

This chapter is part of a narrative about Access as an educational movement which came about at a point in history when change was desired by many but was frequently denied. Access came at a democratising moment in education when people were demanding more learning opportunities. It was also a time when fundamental social change was underway in the economy and culture. The social imperative was for mass further and higher education as economy and society adjusted to global change; the personal imperative was of a desire for a more fulfilled life and future for self and family. Much of the Access agenda was ultimately concerned with work and employment for its students and therefore with social mobility and moving up the ladder of opportunity which was thought to exist.

The fastest growing occupations between the 1990s and the 2010s were managerial, professional and technical jobs (Todd ibid: 321). However, these jobs though 'professional' and 'managerial' in many cases lacked the income and security previously associated with senior posts. There was job title inflation with little lifetime career path development available. Meanwhile heavy industry declined and skilled manual workers also experienced job insecurity. People entering the labour market in this era believed that only by being upwardly mobile could they succeed in life and politicians encouraged this. Older strategies for improving life were diminishing such as trade union power and collective bargaining, whilst social mobility through meritocratic effort was supported for the talented few. Individual drive and ambition was said to be the real solution to the need to equalise opportunities (Milburn 2009). Social mobility was the central social policy objective for governments of all stripes in this period (Mandler 2020), yet upward mobility was not achieved for many of those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies. The fact is the most desirable and best rewarded jobs and careers remained in the hands of the wealthy elites and ordinary people in trouble were told to save themselves by individually climbing the social mobility ladder. Secure manual and clerical jobs continued to be harder to find. Social class continued to matter even when working class students did manage to enter elite universities. Such students, said to be among the 'brightest and the best', were significantly less likely to enter the professions or management than graduates whose parents were themselves professionals. The

striving for upward mobility offered no challenge to the embedded inequalities of class, race and gender.

In general successive governments in this period encouraged free-market and neoliberal policies that benefitted the rich and which effectively closed off routes to ambitious young people from the lower social and income groups. The political spirit of the age seemed to be that talent would best be helped by competition rather than social welfare. The acquisition of wealth was the key signal for ambition and effort and the favoured route towards it and the justification of it was supposed to be upward social mobility. Those who contemplated climbing the slippery ladder of opportunity, however, were probably outnumbered by those who lived in fear of sliding down that same ladder.

Redefining inequality through education

Modernity and postmodernity refracted through the lens of meritocratic ideology offered both opportunities and threats. If new industries and networks of capital investment and communication were developed, there was co-terminously an undermining of traditional forms of community and solidarity, which were no longer capable of protecting people whose economic security was linked with skilled and unskilled labour in traditional industries and communities. These same communities were being dissolved by the same processes and forces of change. Education was called upon to respond as a key means of combatting these pervasive changes and this involved the expansion of higher education of which Access was an intrinsic part. The growth of Access to higher education in Britain was part of the adaptation and reconstruction of types of traditional adult education which had emerged from the long history of struggle for education and learning. Adult educators sometimes referred to this as 'the Great Tradition' (Wiltshire 1956; Chase 1995; Freeman 2020) through which 'liberal adult learning' contributed significantly to the efforts of working people in particular to improve their lives. Often such struggles were organised at a local level and had elements of democratic control built into their practices and procedures. Later developments in the 20th century favoured state-funded and state-controlled provision geared towards a vocational perspective and the needs of a 'knowledge economy' in which the UK might improve its performance and position. And yet Access provided from the late 1970s onwards unheard of opportunities for tens of thousands of people who had been denied admission and even consideration of access to higher education. What could be more progressive than that?

The transition to a mass higher education system brought with it massive investment and growth of institutionalised learning. The demise of the diverse voluntary and locally accountable and generally speaking 'adult' education tradition was accompanied by the explosion of university places and institutions, and by the consolidation of FE colleges into a central government controlled sector which was highly sensitive to market demands for vocational learning. The ideology behind this growth asserted students were the main beneficiaries of higher education and therefore they should pay for the investment in their own 'human capital'. This was the justification for the raising of university student fees and for the incorporation of much Access, pre-access and second-chance learning into the formal governmental funding system within the FE sector.

Educationalists and Access movement supporters faced a dilemma since they generally supported the expansion of higher education and their product, as it were, was in high demand from both intending students and the universities keen to grow their student numbers and enhance their funding. Furthermore it seemed abundantly clear that the more people were educated the better society would be and few denied that higher participation in higher education was one mark of a progressive and more liberated society.

Economic growth and development was also seen to be correlated to the growth of learning opportunities. For families without access to wealth or conventional cultural resources and cultural capital, education for their children was not just the obvious way forward it was probably the only one. It was difficult for anyone to argue that increasing investment in education was not desirable.

The problem was and remains – the growth of education in this era and beyond also saw the continuation and even acceleration of inequality and social injustice (Dorling 2018). What remained below the horizon was the possibility that education itself was itself generating this inequality alongside the economic and social conditions driving modernity. If we choose to view educational activity through the lens of individual experience and development then we are likely to see positive outcomes. This was the case as argued earlier when highly talented individuals from BAME groups were recruited to Oxbridge in an attempt to signal progress towards a more fair and just society (Topping 1993). However, if we see education as contributing to social differentiation and to an ideology of meritocratic justification of privilege, then we are forced to engage more critically with the core values of a democratic society. This can mean asking how education lives up to its claims to open up opportunity and advancement on the basis of merit and worth for more than the very talented individuals within a given social group?

Social inequality and class remain as the market develops

One of these key claims to democracy and its relation to education and learning concerns the salience of social class. Despite the rising of inequality over the last two decades there has been a tendency in the wider society and culture to deny the significance of class. Assumptions have been made that class is now consigned to a more divisive past (Savage 2015) and many people do indeed operate as if class bears no relevance to the practical and applied aspects of education. It seems as if it has been banned from the policy discourse around university entry and displaced by a more acceptable vocabulary of the 'disadvantaged'. This category can include the lower income or status groups, or under-represented groups of different types and often proxies are used such as postcodes, POLAR (participation of local areas) or free school meals data (Harrison 2018: 61). Definitions and the meanings of social class are notoriously difficult to assess and they change in significant ways over time (Savage 2015; Picketty 2020 ch 14), however, the relevance of class to understanding the unequal wealth and power relations of modern society continues to be demonstrated (Dorling ibid 2018: ch 2.4; Todd 2021). There is also misrecognition of the nature and extent of the social and educational 'advantage' and privilege. One of the most significant features of meritocracy is its capacity to legitimise and reward existing privilege under the guise of 'justified reward' to those who succeed in the competitive struggle for places in prestigious universities or have access to the best careers.

The significance of this for Access has been the marketisation of widening participation – a key theme in the original Access agenda. Since universities were able to define widening participation and engagement in different ways they were able to construct institutional agreements with partners and providers which reflected their own needs and privileged their own programmes. There was no national view or consensus on what the wider system objectives actually were. In Britain the net effect of this was to consolidate the distinctions between the high status and lower status universities after 1992. There was little commonality in the way elite universities sought to recruit a small group of high-ability, but socially disadvantaged members of ethnic groups and the mass recruitment amongst ethnic minority groups to the lower status 'convenience universities' in the urban centres. The relative superiority of elite universities,

measured in terms of performance league tables which themselves reflect and consolidate a range of pre-existing distinctions including endowment wealth, has arguably been increased in recent decades, even though some elite institutions have increased their intakes of students from working class backgrounds. The access agreements that universities had to make with the government agency in England, OFFA (Office for Fair Access) in order to charge higher fees had only weak sanctions for non – compliance, and furthermore … 'Higher education providers with the most unequal student bodies are the least likely to hit access and progression targets' (OFFA 2016).

The access and widening participation efforts of recent decades undoubtedly expanded provision and opportunities for literally millions of students who historically would have been excluded from higher education. But there is a cycle and structure of advantage which continues to hold sway in British and especially in English life. It is spectacularly unequal and unfair, though it may be meritocratic in some limited senses it is a rigged and managed system. It is not an aberration or malfunction in an otherwise rational and fair system. The inequalities are predictable and intended to privilege those who benefit from them. The accidents of birth and social placement associated with owning wealth and accessing power and influence determine social and educational outcomes far more than talent and natural ability which are randomly distributed across the social landscape. A small number of private schools dealing with about 7 per cent of the school population take a very high proportion of undergraduate places at the most prestigious universities. The economic power of the parents of these children is able to be converted into educational and cultural capital and so advantage can be purchased and transmitted to each succeeding generation (Green and Kynaston 2019). The power of such factors is shown in the way in which these HE institutional hierarchies are deeply embedded in wider social and economic structures – such as that of the graduate labour market and the professions (Savage ibid). The way in which different institutions are valued in the wider society has significant implications for careers and opportunities for graduates. The degree classification an individual achieves and its location can be crucial for opening opportunities in the workplace. Oxbridge in particular is renowned, or perhaps better described as notorious, for the social and cultural capital it manages to transmit to its graduates and which fosters their careers long after they have left university life. In terms of their on-going social networks many never leave these communities of interest; why would they when they continue to confer benefits down through the generations.

The market of course implies 'choice' is available which in turn connotes for many a sense of freedom to select for oneself the education fit for one's children or oneself which may in turn allow a sense of control over what the uncertain future may hold. The problem is that market forces in education do not operate in a free market for everyone. The market is managed in favour of certain social and economic interests whose privileges ensure unequal and unjust outcomes for the less well – off and the working classes. The ideology of choice along with that of meritocracy, often glibly conflated with ideas of 'freedom' and respect for the rights of individuals, has held sway in wider political debate and find expression in educational policy developed and imposed by conservative elitist interests.

A future postponed

There is an argument that globalisation and the marketisation of so much of our social life has somehow run its course. The Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in 2019 has often been cited as signalling the end of an era and the need for a 'new normal' (Nyland and Davies 2022 ch 11). This came at the end of a period in which austerity was the major public policy driving down expenditure and investment in public services of all kinds including net per capita expenditure on education and health, allied to an explosion of market-driven and debt-based consumption. The net effect was to create new forms of poverty and deprivation so that differences in life chances between the rich and poor are virtually as great as they were one hundred years ago. In Europe Britain appears to be uniquely tolerant of inequality. No other large European country according to Dorling (2017) taxes the rich so little and lets them take so much wealth and income at the expense of the poor. Britain spends less on health than other comparable countries and is alone in seeing the life expectancy of some of the poorest people begin to fall. No appeals to meritocracy have been able to rectify these levels of inequality in the British Isles. A sense of something needing to be done to atone for the failures of the last decade is palpable in the wider society as the 21st century enters its third decade.

That these issues involve education is hardly in doubt and the lessons of Access may yet speak to the promise of a better future and transcend the ideologies of a meritocracy and the free market in opportunities. They can be said to be ideologies because they are not realities, yet they are still powerful beliefs and practices which shape behaviour and thinking and have been widely celebrated over a long period. Our understanding of education in modern life requires us to grasp the historical development of ideas and ideologies as they impact on our lives and futures as material forces. It can be reasonably argued that the 1960s were the high point of liberal, democratic humanism with respect to education but were followed by a reaction as capitalist interests invested in and supported Thatcherism and Reaganism. Their neoliberalist economic strategies helped transform the remnants of the social democratic welfare state settlement into a more rapacious and global force (Brown 2019 ibid). This was part of the spread of economics into all walks of life associated with globalisation. Neoliberal economics had at its heart an assumption of the economic and moral rightness of individualism. It was a moral issue because it was said to be innate to human nature and life. Only free markets and states that allowed property, wealth and capital the freedom to prosper could guarantee a free society. There is a sub-text also here – that the right of the state to act on behalf of us all is in question if it contradicts the rights claimed by individuals. The collective and communal interests of a society can be undermined in this way by powerful economic and social interests (Zuboff 2019). Education itself cannot be immune from the debate as we have seen. A neoliberal form of meritocracy has become the basic commonsense of society which justifies hierarchies and vast inequalities and this has become embedded in our social spaces, our culture and in our educational institutions (Ball 2015). It is surely the task of critical thinkers and educators to challenge this and rejuvenate the Access agenda.

The original Access movement raised questions about knowledge and learning in the context of social mobility and equal opportunity which remain with us some forty years later. We continue to live, however, with these two 'ideological' myths – that of equality of opportunity and that of meritocratic selection – which have had a pervasive and sometimes pernicious effect on our social and intellectual life. Both have been used as ideological masks (Lynch ibid: 151) to conceal their own false promises and perpetuate a deception. The reality is that few people can achieve their full potential where social inequality and injustice are pervasive and unchallenged and it is surely the task of educationalists to bring this challenge into the central focus of our learning and teaching.

Part of the task of this book was to illustrate and explore the paradox and contradictions which accompanied the phenomenal growth and explosion of educational opportunities which we have argued characterised the growth of Access as a movement for change. The more diffuse emergence of widening participation at approximately the same time as Access was a wider, intrinsic, pervasive and developing context, where the contingencies of educational change, embodied in Access, we have suggested, met and

contested the structural inequalities of social and institutional life. The Access movement was embedded within the wider educational system and although it was oppositional in its approach it was part of that same system.

The wider context of educational change, those powerful economic and cultural forces which sanctioned the ruling economic and social order could not prevent the emergence of challenges in spheres of public life that attempted to speak for democracy and social improvement (Habermas 2023 ibid). The unfairness of the market under assumptions of 'liberal-globalisation', the normalcy of injustice and the sheer persistence of intersectional inequalities represent the material and ideological foundations for the more specific and contingent ***pathologies*** which we explore in the next chapter through the prism, as it were, of three key aspects of Access. These pathologies were in fact focal points of resistance and represent alternatives and the capacities we need to develop to think and act differently. This point of view mandates us to explore the significance of lifelong learning, the impact of women's struggles on education and the issue of understanding race and racism in the modern era. If we are to contemplate a radical alternative to the inequalities and injustices we have suggested characterise our present, we need a future orientation which grasps the full meaning of these challenges.

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Part 5

Aspects of Access

Chapter 9

Lifelong learning

We have argued in the previous chapter that right into the third decade of the 21st century privilege and inequality continue to shape and determine educational opportunities and outcomes. We have suggested that meritocracy is a false prospectus for the hopes and aspirations of ordinary people who wish to succeed in a world of self-perpetuating and self-privileging elites. Furthermore we have stated that Access brings into scrutiny the limits of the traditional curriculum and its providers, the universities, to engage the common people on any other terms than as consumers in a marketplace for learning. Higher education services the populace, turning the masses into students. It is also the case that the theme of access and widening participation to higher education and indeed to all forms of learning is a kaleidoscope. It extends far and wide into our social and economic lives and is deeply embedded in our cultures. It impacts on every community and place and it shapes our global development. The problems and challenges of our age are *educational* matters for all of us. The following three chapters examine three separate aspects of contemporary issues that challenge our current conceptions of learning and the purposes of learning and of higher education – **lifelong learning, women's education and the matter of race and racism** in our educational cultures. Each one of these aspects dealt with in this section of the book is intended only as an example; a brief snapshot for illustrating issues and concerns which have impacted on Access and educational opportunity, and we make no claims to new knowledge or a comprehensive account here. We do, however, believe that these themes illuminate and describe some key moments and understandings of why education is central to modern debate and discourse about access to higher education and the matter of university engagement with the wider society. Most importantly for the purposes of this book they illustrate, we hope, the distinction we have made between **access** in lower case, which refers to courses and schemes for disadvantaged learners such as equity groups and **Access**, higher case, which refers to the idea of a movement for critical educational thinking and for social change and improvement. The two terms are 'registers' or ways of seeing the question of widening access to educational opportunity. They were and are not entirely separable in real life and real times, though there are real distinctions to be made as we shall see when looking at how widening participation may be achieved without necessarily shifting the dial on inequalities and injustices. When we outlined the nature of meritocracy in chapter 8 for example, we examined some of the ways in which educational and schooling hierarchies can themselves be used to reproduce inequalities. Using three chosen themes our examples in this section focus mainly on Britain and Australia for the reason that this reflects our own lives and experience, though we believe the arguments made here have wider relevance for critical thinking and the changes we need for a viable and just educational future everywhere.

We cannot and do not claim to have researched in detail into the second and third of the three themes of this part of the book, either in Australia or in the United Kingdom. There is a vast and ever-expanding volume of important research and literature on women and feminist perspectives and on race and ethnic matters which we cannot hope to incorporate into our limited themes within Access. Women's education and race/ethnicity are subjects of immense scope and reach, both intellectually and for public policy discourse. Neither can we do full justice to the complexity and diversity of debate on modern social class and social differences and their behaviours and interests. However, we have argued that significant issues of social difference, including economic inequality, social injustice, cultural diversity, racial and ethnic difference and gender distinctions are wholly relevant to our theme of Access, widening participation and higher educational inequality. We have also noted the need to understand aspects of historical change and challenge so that comparisons of Australian and British experience in education can be meaningful whilst recognising differences that are entirely distinctive and derive from different cultures, traditions and conjunctures of structures and events. It is necessary to be even more aware than Norman MacKenzie in 1963 when he wrote that in the 1960s Australia had been… 'a notably derivative and dependent society in its culture and institutions' (p.xii) but was now a country free from the social inhibitions of the British colonial culture. Nevertheless, we subscribe to the view that the intelligibility of many social and cultural customs in Australia may often benefit from an understanding of their British and Irish origins and the complexities of a polyglot empire (Macintyre 2020).

Lifelong learning for a learning age

At the end of the twentieth century it was clear that western industrial nations faced the challenges of economic regeneration and of the need to re-construct social cohesion. The globalising economy was at the same time re-shaping international trade and manufacturing and many of its dependent features such as how labour markets and human resources were organised. These transformations were re-shaping modernity and the nature of advanced capitalism both in local communities everywhere and across the world at large. By the onset of the third decade of the new century these concerns had become so grave that the link between capitalism and democracy itself was subject to questioning, with the debate by no means concluded. (Lansley 2022; Wolf 2023; Goodwin 2023).

A generation earlier, however, saw 1996 declared European Year of Lifelong Learning and in Britain it became a central policy preoccupation which was used to justify any modest change to the status quo. Change was in the air as a long period of stagnant conservative government was about to end and education became a cynosure and focus for this sense of impending change impressed on the public by New Labour and its charismatic leader Tony Blair. Meanwhile, the values and philosophical bases of 'lifelong learning' continued to be contested and no long term consensus emerged as to exactly what it might mean for all of those who claimed its importance (Woodrow 1999; Duke and Tobias 2001).

In Britain in 1997 the newly elected Labour Government had declared that its priority vision for the future improvement of the nation was 'education, education, education'. The Dearing Review had pointed out earlier in the same year that there were very marked social divisions between those who participated in higher education. The working classes were suffering from inequalities and education was in the front line of attack, as it were. Learning was to be the foundation for an active citizenship and for greater well-being for both individuals whether at work or in their communities. *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998) was declared and reforms to the divisive curriculums which separated knowledge-based learning from competency-based vocational qualifications, as well as those that separated adolescent from adult learners, were proposed. Remedies were suggested for the high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy and for the low participation of young people from semi-skilled and unskilled family backgrounds. Some of the barriers to learning were at last formally recognised and the consequences acknowledged for social exclusion and cohesion. In 1999 the British government issued a framework for post-16 education, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999), in which the influence of the Access agenda could be detected. It stated…'too much learning provision is unsuited to the needs of learners. Many learners do not want to be tied to learning in a classroom. Many adults, in particular, are looking to learn in informal, self-directed and flexible ways – in the evenings, in their places of work, at week-ends and in their holidays. This flexibility will be essential if we are to attract into learning those for whom traditional learning methods have formed a barrier – including women returners and those turned off learning in a classroom by

poor experiences at school.' It was recognised that formal education had failed many in its first phases and had furthermore delivered experiences of learning that had been emotionally and educationally disabling (Ranson et al 2000).

If Access as a movement in Britain had an influence on these policy developments it was as a shadow passing in the penumbra, behind the full light of concern demonstrated by both Conservative and New Labour governments in this last decade of the 20th century – and beyond. This concern was for the development of lifelong learning to support a national policy for improved employability and competitiveness in a global economy. Conservatives stressed the need for individuals to take responsibility themselves for acquiring skills and knowledge and invest in themselves. Individuals had in this view to make themselves marketable in the competition for jobs. The UK Labour Government of the time did not fundamentally dissent from this viewpoint though it sponsored thinking and research around a more liberal and inclusive notion of lifelong learning.

The lifelong learning theme was taken up in the context of further education by the Kennedy Report, *Learning Works*, which appeared in 1997. It evaluated widening participation in terms of how a strategy might promote a self-perpetuating learning society and it was critical of aspects of the marketisation of further education (FE) following the incorporation of colleges in 1993 when they were 'privatised' and released from local authority control and ownership (Ransom ibid: 4). Learning for work and learning for broader life purposes were regarded as inseparable in the report but one can see the wider, historical influence of the adult education tradition coming through… 'Learning may also be undertaken for fun, for personal development or to achieve an appreciation of broader issues' (Kennedy 1997: 29). Kennedy's recommendations also supported the launch of a credit accumulation system and for new pathways of learning in further education, especially in relation to open college networks. These developments had been recognised by the Open University in the early 1990s but had stalled as diversity of mission and a common post-school funding strategy failed to achieve acceptance by government and the HE system (Daniels 1992). *The Fryer Report* of 1997, issued by the incoming Labour Government, went further and stressed the need to address social inequalities, highlighting the importance of involving local communities, and the need break down barriers to access in order to bring about cultural and social change through progressive education and learning. Tackling employability and social injustice called for support for learning cultures from a wide range of work, community and family contexts. A second Fryer Report was published in 1999 concerned with creating learning cultures for the much discussed 'learning age' that it was thought was about to be constructed.

The Kennedy and Fryer Reports had similar perspectives on credit frameworks and qualifications and were published within months of each other in 1997. However, they had significantly different emphases on the scope and meaning of education such that in Kennedy's view FE included *everything* outside schools and universities, whilst Fryer's report was perceived by government as a concept to replace the unfashionable idea of adult education (Wilson 2010: 100). *Lifelong Learning* was apparently a more acceptable concept and more in tune with the globalisation and human capital theories adopted by New Labour, which stressed the need for individuals to invest in their own skill development and employability in an ever more competitive global environment. It also marked the impending demotion of the voluntary partnerships between providers which had been characteristic of the widening participation and Access movement. From now on centralised and government-funded agencies which were bent on implementing centralised strategic government policies would occupy the driving seat (Wilson ibid).

Much of this thinking about lifelong learning and the debate surrounding it in Britain found a point of condensation in the Labour Government's Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998). The main thrust of this proposal was, however, to bring the focus back on to the question of improving 'human capital' in the context of globalisation and international competitiveness (Ranson ibid: 5). In the foreword of the Green Paper, David Blunkett the Minister for Education and Employment stated… 'Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century' (DfEE 1998 ibid: 7). Enhancing employability was clearly the main agenda for Blunkett and helped drive his policy agenda. Worthy though this undoubtedly was, it was a long way away from the ambitious project of creating a *learning society*, let alone from the transformational power and potential of a mass learning movement, which might conceivably challenge entrenched privilege and militate for a more socially just and equal society. Some universities, mainly the new ones and the former polytechnics saw themselves as a central element of the lifelong learning movement and allied themselves to the university extra-mural tradition whilst seeking to modernise their curricula (Watson and Taylor 1998). Though the Access movement may not have formulated such an aim for itself (it did not), it facilitated the critical thinking that allowed it to be considered and debated by the Access movement (Ransom ibid). Some proponents argued the case for supporting new sites of learning and pedagogies which embraced learning at work and in the wider community (Davies 1999; Teare 1998). There were also critical voices to be heard on the true or unrecognised meanings of lifelong learning. In the year 2000 a leading exponent of Access in Britain argued that… 'Lifelong learning then is all things to all people, a universal panacea. It is : the Holy Grail, winning the lottery, a double Scotch, Viagra, whatever turns you on' (Woodrow 1999). For all the valid claims made for lifelong learning and the opportunities it might give, it did not represent a new paradigm and it could not represent a common currency or a universal literacy that might transform educational opportunities for individuals into changed life chances for whole groups and classes of disadvantaged people. It did, however, suggest a shift in the existing paradigm by inferring that adult education was an effective means of compensating under-represented groups. To a certain degree it was, as we argued earlier an expression of the relevance of the 'great tradition' of liberal adult learning. However, as mass higher education grew and increasingly absorbed traditional adult education provision and institutions, lifelong learning became more useful for integrating into the system those who were most similar to traditional entrants, than for encouraging participation by new groups from different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. The use of lifelong learning as a concept to drive policy was more of an expression of *equity* as a bridge between justice and fairness, rather than as an entitlement to equality of outcomes. It sounded somewhat like equality and it hinted at a material benefit but it gave no such entitlement to learners.

Under New Labour the needs of lifelong learning were now to be focussed primarily on human capital and the skills required throughout working life. New funding principles were produced which gave preferential treatment to students from lower social-economic groups and employment related concerns such as re-skilling of workers, job insecurity and the significance of guidance and counselling for employment applications. High quality vocational education and the creation of new vocational opportunities for learners of all ages became available, at least in theory. However, this was no longer an agenda that governments thought could be safely left in the hands of voluntary partnerships spread out across the local authority regions of the country. Centralised control by government became the predominant thrust of educational policy and the outcomes of this would not become immediately clear. The diversity and variety of lifelong learning was about to become an issue in what universities

were actually in business for and what their true purposes might be in a changing and modernising society. The matter was seriously contested in the final decade of the old century and in the second decade of the new one (Duke 1992; Watson and Taylor 1998; Brink 2018; Ashwin 2020; Scott 2021).

Continuing growth of the learning society

As the 20th century ended and the new one evolved the growth in demand for relevant education quickly outstripped what was on offer in conventional further and higher education. Routine qualifications could not satisfy an awakening demand for more relevant and useful knowledge. Inclusion and widening participation became the touchstones for university engagement rather than selection and exclusion based on elites reproducing themselves. These developments did not meet with universal approval. Some authorities considered that standards were at risk if existing minimum entry requirements were lowered. A rising middle class and a growing proportion of working class school pupils were by now making their way to university through the expanding secondary school system. In the mean-time the elite, ancient universities continued to select the offspring of the wealthy elites through the well-trodden state and private school-university escalator with very little criticism of their academic standards and quality.

University courses continued to thrive as part of a movement towards greater equality whilst the wider society was moving into a new period with a surge in income and wealth inequality that defined it as one of market supremacy. This was the era of neoliberalism and globalisation which was to be most beneficial to people with the highest human capital and the highest financial capital and wealth (Picketty 2013). A struggle was about to develop between rival concerns and ideological shifts around the nature of a 'learning society' and the role of education within it.

New needs for education

Out of the long historical setting of education and the struggles for access to it, emerged the belief that education was crucial to modern state formation (Archer 2013) and was central to the post-Second World War social democratic settlement. Universal secondary education and an expanded further and higher education system evolved to be the expectation of the many and of the majority by the 21st century in all the westernised social democratic capitalist societies. The demand and desire for higher education, however, grew in the interstices of the educational and social welfare systems, identifying and meeting needs and desires for learning in a wide variety of informal and community-based contexts. There is an argument that student demand grew also in part due to the continuing failure of schools to meet the learning needs of many who left without qualifications and skills and faced an increasingly precarious future where unskilled labour was less valued and skills themselves could become quickly out of date. The fact is that there was a large pool of talent in the working classes which had remained educationally untapped. Education was a potent force for the liberation of people who had been denied their right to learning and opportunity and hence their social and economic liberties had been artificially restricted. For this to change, new learning and teaching methods were needed. Knowledge encoded in the traditional curriculums and 'valorised' by traditional gate-keeping educational institutions would therefore have to be challenged and changed. Traditional elite higher education institutions on the other hand had been engaged in selecting out and excluding people from higher learning and all the good things that flowed from it, such as access to the professions. The right to act as gatekeepers and the legitimacy of this process lay ultimately in the argument that only a limited number of people had the ability and capacity to benefit from higher education. The selection procedures came down ultimately to judgements about who had acquired the relevant knowledge and curriculum. In Britain the state schools and private grammar schools worked on behalf of the universities to preserve this symbiotic relationship which privileged the wealthy elites and the educationally aware middle classes, whilst simultaneously excluding the majority.

The rigid selection process and three year degree excluded the possibility of students learning at their own pace and of using their lived experience as part of their course. Academic performance was judged on the ability a student had to handle concepts without reference to immediate personal experience. The ability to use concepts learnt in action was tested, if at all, only in courses of professional training. Even where political radicalism could be detected in universities, courses with a heavier load of abstract theory tended to be far distant from knowledge relevant to the social needs of individuals and communities. There were of course exceptions to this as shown, for example, in the pioneering and inspirational work of Jerome Bruner (1966), Paulo Freire (1972), and Malcolm Knowles (1970 and 1981). Australian Michael Newman's innovatory adult education centre in London in the 1970s showed how adult learning could be transformational at the local community level (Newman 1979). There existed in this period, and long before, a cohort and community of critical educationalists whose work was matched by their different but complementary emphases on the necessary connections between theory and practice and the need to create new social knowledge. The full extent of this body of critical thinking is by no means exhausted by the above list (see Seidman 1998; Ashwin et al 2015). In general though, the dominant teaching and learning styles of schools and higher education were well adapted to helping 'normal' new under-graduates fresh from their final years at school through their degree courses. They played to their strengths in developing a limited facility in handling abstract concepts in the unreal context of the academic test essay without challenging their weaknesses in understanding and applying concepts and critical analysis to their own lives. Equally this approach disadvantaged non-traditional and mature students by providing little or no space for them to express the insights gained from experience or even to demonstrate how their education had helped them cope with their everyday lives. Where 'academic' learning and teaching detached the students' understanding of social reality from their existential dilemmas and challenges, some teachers and learners made social reality problematical and thus the object of critical understanding. The lives and experience of learners themselves began to come to the fore.

Lifelong learning and adult learning

There are students and teachers who view adult learning as a distinct category of learning which can be grouped under the rubric of 'andragogy' (Knowles 1983), which refers to the learning principles and practices relevant to adult education. In particular the focus is on the idea of stages and phases of personal development which are experienced and developed in relation to social change (NAG 1983).This idea was central to Malcolm Knowles' influential work in the 1970s and 1980s. Knowles identified four major assumptions. First, adults have strong needs to be self-directing and as we get older the self-concept moves from dependency on others to self-direction and personal autonomy. Second, maturity brings with it experience which is a resource for learning. Third, as life proceeds readiness to learn becomes associated with a person's social roles. Learning becomes relevant to the need to know – not because we are told to learn. Fourth, as a person grows older and matures, problem or project-centred learning takes over from subject-centred learning.

It can be argued there should be organising principles for how such adult learning should be included and embodied within the learning process wherever and whenever it takes place. These might then include the need for motivation

of individuals which must be maintained through the setting of learning objectives which are compatible with personal goals. This in itself requires the recognition of individual differences within any learning situation. Formal schooling and the formal higher education curriculum often does not take into account such differences. Neither do they therefore allow new learning to be assimilated and integrated within existing frameworks of knowledge and experience. Formal educational institutions find it difficult to acknowledge and give credit for experiences which fall outside their domain. Action learning and problem-centred learning may also struggle to find a place in conventional schools and colleges, especially where subject and academic discipline boundaries are rigidly upheld (Lovett 1983; Teare et al 1998; 2108). Traditional and conservative institutions tend to use academic disciplines as separate and discrete entities around which to construct learning, which has the effect of reinforcing traditional conceptions of knowledge and the hierarchies of status and prestige within the academy. The adult education tradition, on the other hand, tended to recognise the validity of a 'collection code' (Bernstein1974 and 1977) where different disciplines could be brought together in new combinations for a more radical and critical account of how knowledge could serve a social purpose. In societies characterised by massive structural inequalities, large scale unemployment, de-industrialisation, poverty, social inequality and exclusion, racism and crime there are certainly debates to be had about what might be the most fitting and best curriculum content and methods of learning and teaching. There are in fact very different and contested frameworks of understanding and knowledge in play here and the possible existence of forms of contested knowledge. Such a conception provides an embryonic alternative to the hegemonic university-dominated system at the apex of the educational ladder of achievement, one of whose major functions had been the legitimisation of selection and exclusion of the common people from higher education. What is clear, however, is the fact that many intending students in the era of widening participation do not come through a linear and sequential process comprising easily identifiable stages which corresponded to predictable behavioural or social experiences. Lifelong learning for such students is often disjointed and unpredictable where the posing of problems is as important as the search for answers. The learner's self-concept may become a determining factor in her/his progress rather than the instructions from the teacher within a pre-digested formal curriculum.

In Britain this approach to learning for life as lived by the ordinary and common people and the need for critical thinking and real and really useful knowledge (Johnson 1981 and 1988) underpinned much of the Access movement's understanding of itself in its early phases (Griffin 1983; Millins 1984; Davies 1987 and 2023) though the diversity and often experimental nature of Access itself precluded any attempt at a cohesive or uniform system of courses or curriculums. Access was a test-bed of innovative approaches to non-traditional learning and learners; a significant departure point for critical thinking and practice in the real worlds of lifelong learning which embraced many different sites of learning and many different communities. It was, we suggest, the emphasis on the Access agenda which posed new possibilities for lifelong learning in the relationship of further and higher education (Davies 1997). The importance of lifelong learning for this book lies in its contribution to critical thinking about equity, learning entitlements and the positive benefits of specifically adult learning for individuals and whole communities. It is part of the belief that a progressive learning and transformative framework of concepts and practices can be constructed.

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Women's education, knowledge, communication: the possibilities of doing things differently through dialogue.

Chapter 10

Women and education

'For education is the key to emancipation. Without education a people, a class or a sex which suffers discrimination lacks the capacity either to perceive its inferior situation clearly or to find the means of escape from it…the struggle to secure equality of educational opportunity for women took half a century to break down the barriers of custom which confined most women to the intellectual ghetto of feminine accomplishments. It was a struggle, moreover, which reveals much about the role in which women were cast in both Britain and Australia, and about the origins of women's dissatisfaction with that role'.

(Norman MacKenzie 1963:18-19)

A voice, a space and a subject

The story of the struggles for education and social progress is also the story of women as learners, teachers and organisers who had to combat patriarchy and sex discrimination in all its forms since time out of mind. The social and political history of Australia for example, just as that for Britain and Ireland is also that of the evolving position of women in education (MacKenzie 1963; Rowbotham 1973 and 1999; Open University 1982; Lake 2013; McMinn 2000; Ryan and Ward 2019; Lynch 2022). The unequal gender division of labour in both the workplace and in domestic life has historically impoverished women, especially working class women and enriched men of all classes so that men were able to take up public power in ways that exercised control over women and ensured their subordination and exclusion from civil society. The role of women, especially in their care and affective relations with others and in nurturing and socialising succeeding generations has been seen to be outside the mainstream and often ignored by male scholars (Lynch ibid: 59). Social class and gender constructs have in particular shaped women's experience of education as have issues of ethnic and national identity and this has varied over time and place (McClaughlin 1998). Class and social divisions as well as ethnicity and faith dimensions of life can continue to exercise decisive influence over women's education in multi-racial/ethnic/faith communities such as exist in Australia, Britain and Ireland. Women's position in a society always raises questions about the history and social structures of that society. The relations between the sexes, the nature and quality of family life, the place and meaning of education, employment and public policy are all fundamentally shaped by women's lives and expectations within the wider society.

In Australia in 1960 there were almost exactly 5 million women and girls. They formed part of an integrated group of people dominated by men in the public sphere and in which they had a subordinate place characterised by their domestic roles as wives, daughters and mothers. Women had made up a significant work-force in Australia's modern history at all periods of settlement notwithstanding the severe shortages of European female labour and marriage partners in the early period. In the 1960s four out of five married women in Australia lived in a detached single-story house, normally with a garden. Three out of five people lived in their own homes. 85 per cent of Australians were born in Australia and almost all its immigrants came from Europe, half of them from the United Kingdom. Until the end of the Victorian era some 60 years prior to this, higher education had no meaningful reality for women beyond a relatively small group of middle class, affluent wives, widows and daughters who did not do paid work and who had time and wealth to spend on education. The rest of womankind were condemned to work for wages in factories, sweat-shops, kitchens and shops. The rural population contained wives and daughters who worked in the early years of the country from dawn to dusk often at back-breaking labour on fields and farms. As the 20th century progressed some middle-class women were able to benefit from the proliferating white collar occupations before marriage took them out of the labour market in favour of domestic life and subordination. Australia's history is one of adaptation and adjustment to a harsh and changing environment over successive generations (Bolton 1996). The burden of this fell on women more heavily than men as Australia was considered by many until recently to be more 'a man's country' than other industrial democracies (Mackenzie ibid: xi).

Women's social and political emancipation was firstly for legal and political rights as full citizens. A second stage was for control of their own fertility, which declined dramatically as it did in most developed countries where women challenged patriarchal dominance and repression. A third stage involved access to better employment and an enhancement of professional opportunities. The onset of 'modernity' has involved arguably a more 'liberated' stage where contested views of social and sexual identity relate to conceptions of social justice in a 'postmodern' world and where ideological differences replace previously widely shared common frames of reference. Nomatter the shades of difference in approach, women's education and learning alongside feminism, we would argue, make up one of the most important social movements in human history (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020).

Modern Australia shows a very different picture. As opposed to 5 million women and girls in 1960 there were 12.96 million women and 12.73 men by 2021, a total of more than 25.5 million Australians. The United Nations estimated an Australian population for July 2024 at nearly 26.5 million. More than 86 percent of the people lived in urban settings (UN-2022/23) and life expectancy for both sexes had risen substantially. Women's economic security and legal standing was radically different from the settlement and Victorian periods but gender inequality persisted right into the third decade of the 21st century. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency Review Report of December 2021 (WGEA b) showed that : gender inequality persists across women's economic security (defined as participation in the paid workforce); the pay gap in favour of men, even in female-dominated industries; women are under-represented in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) industries and higher paid occupations; women experience more sexual harassment at work than men; on-line abuse disproportionately impacts women; and although progress has been made on women's leadership few women manage to lead the major companies. Many more women work part-time than men and it is women who bear the greatest burden of domestic work even when working. Women's employment situation overall means they inevitably are worse off than men when in receipt of superannuation balances. These types of inequalities are not limited to Australia and the ways in which women are hidden and excluded from the public sphere regardless of national boundaries continues to have profoundly negative impacts on women and the whole of society well beyond the world of education (Criado Perez 2019).

> *'Australian women are among the most highly educated in the world, yet their participation in paid work remains comparatively low.'*
>
> *Elizabeth Broderick, Sex Discrimination Commissioner (2007 – 2015)*

The education of Australian women has developed considerably since they were first able to get access to the country's higher education system in the late nineteenth century. Australian universities were among the first in the world to open their courses to women – even before established universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. This favourable international comparison for Australian women was not without its challenges and it was only by taking an activist approach through women's suffrage groups that had emerged in the 1880s that a legacy of access to universities for Australian women was forged. One hundred years later one in three students in Australian universities were female and at the beginning of this third decade of the twenty-first century they comprise nearly 60% of the total student body (WGEA 2021a).

The history of Australian higher education has always been as much about its regions as it has been about its metropolitan areas. In order to address the tyranny of distance, International Correspondence Schools (ICS) became one of the first colleges in Australia to offer courses to women to gain skills and to better their lives. They offered Australian women the opportunity to complete their programs by correspondence, that is, students would be sent their assignments and tasks by mail, which were posted back to them in order for them to gain their qualification. Today, a number of Australian universities based in the regions of Queensland and New South Wales (such as University of New England and University of Southern Queensland) have close to 25,000 students, with 80% of their student population studying off campus.

The two World Wars of the twentieth century saw the involvement of Australian women in traditional professions such as health, but also other jobs that had traditionally been the preserve of men such as shipyard roles. By the early 1970s, encouraged by the growing women's movement, women were present in much greater numbers in undergraduate STEM courses and they became eligible to enrol in technical college courses without charge, their fees being paid by the Commonwealth Government. A decade later (1983) saw the Introduction of Technical Occupations (INTO) – an industry-specific programme designed for women seeking employment or training in a non-traditional industries including engineering, electronics, building and construction, rural technology and business administration.

In 1990, the Hawke Government developed the policy "A fair chance for all: higher education that's within everyone's reach." The report recognised the major changes that had occurred in higher education participation for women in the previous decade, but was still concerned with their rights.

Australia has made great strides towards achieving equality between men and women. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency is an Australian Government statutory agency charged with promoting and improving gender equality in Australian workplaces in accordance with the Workplace Gender Equality Act of 2012. The Agency was set the task of working towards enabling access for women to all occupations and industries, including senior leadership roles. The official recognition in Australia of the need to devise and develop public policy on gender and sexual inequality reminds us that Australians have seen themselves as a people and nation committed to there being 'a fair go' available to each person willing to work and engage with the challenges of life in an emerging nation. They are proud to recall that Australian women led the world in bringing forward suffrage rights in the late 19th century. However, complacency in the current era would be inappropriate since according to official data, more than 4 in 5 Australian women over the age of 15 have been sexually harassed at some point in their lives, 1 in 4 women have experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 15, Indigenous females aged 15 and over are 34 times as likely to be hospitalised due to family violence as non-indigenous females, and 1 in 6 women will experience financial abuse from an intimate partner in their lifetime. This litany of unequal lives is in addition to the economic and work-related gender inequalities highlighted by the WGEA (2021a) and issued by the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

There can be no doubting the fundamental transformations in women's lives and education that have occurred in the last half century (Lake 2013). Australian women have shared and contributed greatly to this change and are responsible for the new prospects that are apparently and in theory available to almost all women. And yet there is a paradox, pointed out by the feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1953) that women belong at one and the same time to the male world and yet they are projected into a sphere where many feel compelled to challenge that world. There is a parallel here with the Access movement, as we have tried to define and explain it. Access programmes and pedagogies belonged to the world of official and established education, including that of universities whose doors and walls needed to be breached. Yet simultaneously they challenged that world without being able to de-construct and then re-construct it. This was a task well beyond the Access movement alone. For women, political freedom and social equality for some, meant the break-up of the conservative and patriarchal social order, a task only partially achieved at this current conjuncture in history. Many modern industrial economies and a plethora of feudalistic and theocratic states throughout the world remain as sites of oppression and repression of the full rights of women. Our argument in this chapter has been that the role of education and social science and critical thinking within the Access tradition, is foundationally connected to the fate of women. The origins in fact of both social science and the growth of women's education and freedoms, argued Viola Klein in an earlier generation, are in the break-up of established and reactionary social orders which called forth radical changes in the structure of society (Klein 1946).

If the formal emancipation of women has been largely achieved in Australia and Britain, the issues that lie behind discrimination and women's disadvantaged position in society have not been 'doomed to disappear', as MacKenzie put it in 1963. The revolution that formal emancipation made was an unfinished revolution. In spite of the masculinity of historical Australia and the pioneer conditions which re-enforced women's domestic roles, the essential equality of men and women was always true. This does not obviate the fact that it was women who had the 'dual role 'in life – as workers striving for equity and personal fulfilment and as wives and mothers whose domestic and caring demands did not fall equally on men (Lynch 2022). These issues are shared by all industrial democracies and solutions must involve a continuing effort to remove arbitrary and unfair discriminations on the grounds of sex/gender AND to recognise and reward the special needs and capacities of women that arise from distinctions of sex. Education as ever it was, is a key to this issue. In the late 1940s there were less than 200 female teachers in all of Australia's higher education sector (MacKenzie ibid: 151), yet 92 per cent of all nurses were women but only 8 per cent of doctors and 2 per cent of dentists. This situation was never a question of women's ability, or just crude discrimination and barriers against women and certain kinds of employment, but rather of profound cultural influences and conditions which shaped patterns of demand. Women's dual role, for example, where caring roles and concerns are negotiated and acquired, is a feminine character into which girls and women are socialised and influences where choices are made and shaped at an early age. Social inequality and the impact of class and culture is profound, as we have argued in earlier chapters of this book and sex/gender distinctions are inter-connected with social class and the conservation of elites. Ultimately however, it was the growth of mass higher education that re-shaped the occupational futures of women in Australia, as elsewhere in the developed world. Within this explosion of learning the Access movement and agenda discovered that it could not wish away the academic disciplines which are deeply embedded in university cultures (Davies 2022: 69) and the expansion of university education has not divested itself of differences in curriculum and opportunities which favour men as against women (Criado Perez 2019). Both the women's revolution and the Access movement are by their nature destined to be 'unfinished' as wholesale life patterns change and world economic conditions shift and appear to be more precarious. The implications of this go far beyond this book but education must surely still provide the basis for rational and free choices in democratic societies which have values and a range of opportunities which enhance personal freedom for women as well as men across all the social and economic divisions which inhabit our cultures. Access was a signal contributor to widening participation but it was also a movement with women at its heart. Education reform and change to improve women's lives was a matter for women themselves, though with the progress towards equality and roles outside the home and family that have been achieved, younger generations of women join groups which have a more definite purpose than the generalised interests of women.

In Britain patriarchal attitudes and structures in the 19th century ensured that women had to struggle to overcome barriers which limited them to the private sphere of the home and domestic subservience (Purvis 1980). The adult education curriculum for women in the 19th century, important though it was for different classes of women, was rooted in domestic ideology, in spite of the fact that large numbers of women were also wage earners. Voluntary organisations and schools stressed the need for female literacy and learning to be around the needs of children,

family and home. In the UK even by 1870 women were without voting rights, property rights or educational entitlement let alone the right to organise a trade union.

As social reform proceeded the women's movement(s) militated for greater freedom and opportunity alongside voluntary and religious organisations. For example, James Stuart at Cambridge University set up a lecture series which led to the foundation of the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women, which led to the birth of University Extension work in England (Benn 1996: 379). It was not, however, until 1948 that Cambridge allowed women to graduate with their degrees from the University even though women only colleges had been founded decades earlier.

At the start of the 20th century women's adult education was said to be 'invisible' and the social and economic needs of women within the world of education were often ignored (Benn ibid: 381). The first waves of women's liberation and fight for suffrage, two world wars and the massive social and economic disruptions accompanying them saw the role of women in public life decisively shift as they began to take their place in the public sphere. Full, formal equality was still more than a generation away though and in Britain had to await the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 in Britain. A similar delay can be said to characterise the introduction of an emancipatory form of adult education for women, as opposed to the 'domestic version' which had held sway for so long. Women remained in general within the domestic sphere and as far as adult education was concerned were often subsumed under the category of men. This is not to say that women's education in Britain did not exist: between the world wars the Adult School Movement, the WEA, the Women's Co-operative Guild, university extension, the Women's Labour League, the Townswomen's Guild, Women's Institutes and local education authority classes attracted women as a high proportion of students, teachers and organisers (Benn ibid 382). By 1936-37 one third of all LEA adult education enrolments were in women's subjects and recreational areas and 56 per cent of students were women.

The 1944 Education Act in Britain and Northern Ireland contained a rhetoric of equality of access but overall women's secondary status was of near invisibility. Girls could of course attend grammar schools and formally enter university but they were still largely excluded from higher education after the Second World War. The ideology of 'motherhood' was used as a powerful deterrent against further education and working class girls in particular were educated for domesticity (Deem 1981). Yet by 1950 women had risen to be a 60 per cent majority of all adult education students in evening institutes and major establishments (Benn ibid). The demand from women for education at all levels was insatiable and it could no longer be suppressed by patriarchal or deferential social attitudes and values.

The changing post-war world labour market, economic growth and the liberalisation of attitudes all changed women's position in the home and in public life as the second wave of women's liberation occurred. In the home domestic labour saving devices such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners, fridges, and cooking utensils made women's lives easier, though men still did not take up their fair share of housework and child care. Many women benefitted from the availability of the birth control pill from the 1960s because they could now control their own fertility. Social experimentation was everywhere in the sixties as traditions and cultures of the older generations were questioned and abandoned. Women demanded a more equal division of labour, a greater sharing of power and control over family and domestic life and recognition of how women constructed their own sense of really useful knowledge and learning. Women's educational studies evolved (Open University1982; Dixson 1984; Daniels 1989; Damousi 1994; McMinn 2000) and feminism became a major strand of academic and social life (Appelrouth and Edles 2007). These developments linked a feminist curriculum to other critical thinking and social liberation movements (Allen 1982; Arnot 1995) and these social knowledges began to contest the separation of knowledge, values and politics from women's lives. Sexuality, race, gender and identity were all re-examined to include the politics of self, culture and knowledge (Friedan 2013; De Beauvoir 1953; Greer 2012; Giddens 1991; Seidman 1998 ibid). The women's movements developed and explored the ideas of a more personal, experiential, 'dialogic' and person-centred curriculum and the need to create spaces where gender biased criteria for what counted as knowledge could be challenged (McMinn ibid; Lynch 2020).

Not all women were educated for domesticity (Kibworth Grammar School, Leicestershire 1935)

In the 1970s and 1980s the Women's Liberation Movement was a focus for adult learning in Britain and elsewhere (Thompson 1983; Hughes and Kennedy 1985). In Britain and Northern Ireland women continued to make up the majority of such students, as both staff and students. Women broke the traditional moulds and invented Second Chance and New Horizon courses for women nearly everywhere and many were linked-in to the emerging Access courses and Open Colleges (Wilson 2010). The Access Movement at this time included many women's initiatives focussed on learning that was appropriate to women returners and a curriculum that centred around confidence building, counselling, study skills and women's interests; many were purposively located in local communities where women lived out their lives rather than on educational campuses. The government's Manpower (sic) Services Commission and the local authorities offered wider opportunities for women in areas where women had been traditionally excluded such as electronics and computing. The Women's Technology Scheme set up in Liverpool in 1983

was one such course and there were many others (Hughes and Kennedy 1985: 92-95). Positive action courses such as 'women into management' and 'professional updating' for women returners to their careers proved popular. There were feminist women's studies programmes in universities and colleges which raised questions of what women's knowledge and a feminist curriculum might be. The Open University's course on 'The Changing Experience of Women' was a pathfinder in its use of multi-media, a critical multi-disciplinary pedagogy and its reach via distance learning, though its introduction in 1983 came some ten years after the first women's studies courses in Britain and more than a dozen years behind those in the USA (Leonard 1985). Feminism became a major strand of academic life and infused wider cultures in the workplace, the community and beyond. Some community-based courses emphasised student-centred participatory learning which was intended to be transformational in that it recognised women's own power to shape their experience and futures (McMinn ibid). By 1995 some two thirds of the over 30,000 students on over 1,000 Access courses in Britain were women (Benn ibid: 388).

One of the results of this upsurge of interest and support for women's education was the re-focussing of attention on the enormous but hidden variety of learning that took place in Britain and elsewhere. This movement questioned the assumptions made about women's needs and invented new kinds of educational processes (McMinn ibid). The scope and range of traditional women's subjects were expanded and the concept of 'Access' itself was extended to include the vital elements of literacy, language and basic educational skills. Perhaps as important was the belief that women's education needed to provide a 'voice, a space and a subject' (Hughes and Kennedy ibid: 145) for women so that a 'dialogical' method could be used to engage those who had been silenced by traditional education.

The predominance of women in the Access movement was also a signal that traditional assumptions of social, sexual, family and economic roles were capable of being transformed. This transformation was itself bringing into question the older 'schooling model' of learning in which knowledge is supposedly acquired in a continuous process of attendance between the ages of 5 and 18 years, and then in attendance for three more years at university for the fortunate and talented. This model did not chime with the realities of fragmented lives of many women where breaking down education into more manageable and flexible and open learning formats would bring benefits. The Access movement with women at its heart showed that alternative models of learning were viable and that assumptions about cultural and social patterns involving men and work, women and family, immigrant and indigenous communities and the need for universal literacy could be challenged and changed.

A continuing voice and space?

The growth and expansion of women's education took place at exactly the same time as that of mass higher education and though women's presence in the wider society including education would achieve formal equality and even a sense of 'equity', it would not produce sex and gender equality. The social forces, the economic discrepancies, the psychological barriers and the cultural formations of sex and gender distinctions would remain. Many traditional assumptions about male and female roles would be unquestioned across many different forms of patriarchal society. The social outlook, its philosophy, its morality and its social theory including its science would be reformed only in outline, not in substance. Opening up provision for more women at all levels of educational need is undoubtedly a progressive task but it may in fact obscure the true nature of inequality. If identification of the subject (the learner) is with the dominant groups and with their values then participation in that world may obscure the truth and create false explanations. Greater access to the dominant groups by the 'equity groups' does not of itself produce equality. For many women, greater access to education is a transformational benefit but it does not mean true equality is gained when what is needed is a changed structure in the wider society that redistributes wealth and power. Prejudiced attitudes and power which are used as means of social control over women are not separate from control over economic resources by men. As with the question of racial discrimination and exclusion, there is a need to be in the system by the excluded, but also a need to change the system to suit their needs. There are many women who are impelled to ask the question – access to what and for what social purpose?

The reality is that the growth and expansion of access education and widening participation in the 20th and 21st centuries is at one and the same time the story of women's education. The emphasis on women's learning in the 19th century had been on a curriculum focussed on the domestic division of labour – one that positioned most women as subordinate to men and beyond that fashioned them for cheap labour in agriculture, the service industries or factories. And this was in addition to women's dual role in the household as domestic labour and family carers. For some women of the middle classes there existed greater opportunities, if not in work and the professions, in world of literature. Women writers were able to create their own spaces and meanings and gain public access and recognition through their own work and increasingly through the 19th century writing became an accepted profession for women. Despite all the possibilities of discrimination, learning, reading and literature were paramount among the arts for women for the last 200 years. In the 20th century women were in the majority in much adult and further education and by the end of the century they had asserted their right to equality and fair treatment across all forms of education. This did not end the discrimination and prejudice women continued to experience in both public and private spheres, neither did it remove the patriarchal and oppressive ideologies and attitudes which continue to plague modern societies. There are alternatives even for those of us who may not be cut out for success in the arts and literature or in the sciences – and for which women have been in the forefront of change. There is, for example, what Lynch (2022) refers to as a parallel world to that of political-economic existence – an affective care-relational world – in which women have played and continue to play the vital part. This is the world whose contribution to social justice and learning cannot be over-estimated; this is a world Lynch states has been silenced in academic and other discourse.

Domination and subordination of women in man-made worlds did not unfortunately disappear as social life proceeded apace in the later 20th century. The rapid growth in women's education coincided with the desire of Conservative governments everywhere to cut education budgets in the 1980s and 1990s. Contraction and rationalisation became watchwords for the controlling parties in government who had committed themselves to neoliberalist economic policies and the ascendancy of market forces. In the wider political and cultural debate the ideologies of individualism and economic neoliberalism were combined with the belief in the sanctity of the family to limit access to women's education. Particularly in Britain this was part of a paradox where the needs of the labour market were evolving towards a more educated workforce and a massive increase in women's part-time work was taking place. Simultaneously welfare and childcare provision funded by the state and local government was decreasing, re-imposing domestic burdens on women.

If the changing prospects for women's education in adult and community education and in the Access movement were not highly visible in the wider society, the extension of mass secondary schooling impacted generally on girls everywhere. As social attitudes changed in the post 2nd World War period the use of a strictly gendered curriculum at whatever level of education could no longer be sustained. The more egregious ideas of what had been thought to be appropriate for

girls' education were abandoned. Girls could no longer be educated for domestic subjection or trained simply for secretarial or female work roles. Female students would come to be a majority in both Australia and Britain, though gendered subject choice remained as a feature of both boys and girls schooling and of higher education course selection. STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) were dominated by white male academics (Criado Perez 2019) and students, whilst traditional courses in the arts and humanities and in the vocational areas of nursing and care attracted large numbers of females. In time this form of student choice would come under criticism and be viewed as an expression of inequality and unfair discrimination against women. As access to conventional schooling became more democratised and extensive, attention shifted to selection and attainment rather than on whether girls could be educated in equal ways to boys. Girls were now to be fully part of the rollercoaster that was to be the myth of social mobility and meritocracy through education which we have outlined earlier. The supposedly meritocratic ladder of opportunity which became the myth in Britain, however, did not challenge the unequal hierarchies of society nor did it increase upward social mobility or even working class people's entry into higher education (Todd 2021; 340). Whilst equity-based female participation eventually allowed girls to predominate in the mass HE systems of Australia and the UK, it did not remove the biases against women, nor those gendered discriminations which were rooted in social class distinctions and ethnic communities (Tomlinson 2019; Beneba Clarke 2019; Tomaszewski et al; 2020).

There are norms, values and practices that suffuse and underpin modern society, especially in its neoliberal and marketised forms, which remain gendered and unequal. There remain social, political, medical and technological barriers to full participation in society by women so that the world is less hospitable and more dangerous for women than for men. Women's liberties and freedoms are often violated by men's attitudes and by their capacity for violence against women. Many societies continue to naturalise sex and gender discrimination (Criado Perez: 314) and education systems continue to legitimise and normalise the unequal position of women in their cultures, religions and public spheres. Yet women, and hopefully men also, everywhere, resist the definitions of themselves as objects or victims or merely as economic actors in somebody else's world and seek authentic learning for self-fulfilment and better social results. Women's voices within Access education were amongst the most significant aspect of resistance to historic oppression and exclusion from education. They were a means of demanding change and progress and they continue necessarily to be key agents of challenge and change.

Women in motorsport. Equal opportunities for Advanced Performance Engineering (courtesy University of Bolton)

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Chapter 11

Race and ethnicity matters

Australia and Britain are relatively successful multiracial and multicultural countries but there can be no doubt that in both countries the meaning of their own ethnically diverse past is problematic, and furthermore there is a frequent reluctance to engage with some current realities. Race, identity and culture, for good or ill, are themes that education at all levels often fails to prepare young people and mature adults for, in a world in which we all have to live together. Race and ethnicity can become central 'fault lines' for division and social conflict, especially if they are framed by aggravated inequalities in economic and community life. They may also give expression to the dynamics of the clash between progressivism and traditional identities where population demographics are constantly changing, as they do with diasporic migration (Collier 2013). Australia and Great Britain have both experienced such cultural and identity challenges of, for example, ethno-nationalism and the political and cultural issues around nativism versus internationalism or cosmopolitanism (Ignatieff 1994). Prejudice and intolerance cannot be part of a progressive educational system and combatting them has been part of the wider movement for educational reform for generations (Simon 1965 and 1985; Tomlinson 2019) and therefore directly relevant to our understanding of Access.

Universities themselves are a key part of a fragmented system which continues to ignore the need for a universal and critical knowledge of our social lives so that the past and present can help us understand our future needs. A progressive perspective on access to higher education, and especially one that incorporates the **Access Movement**, requires us to address the key challenges, including the widening inequalities and insecurities of a globalising world, not least in respect of the threats of climate change and ecological disaster. This section of the book has selected three aspects of change which throw light on widening participation and Access. All three can be viewed as selective prisms through which we can view something of our history; a history in which post-imperial Australia and Britain have a significant share (Bolton 1996; Bashford and Macintyre 2013a and 2013b). The differences are perhaps more notable than the similarities but nevertheless we have tried to learn the common lessons since the challenges to inequality and the role of higher education do share a perspective; we are united in wanting a better social result for access and widening participation in the era of mass higher education. As part of this prospect we are committed to an education that enables people of different racial designations, different ethnicities, different cultures and different faiths and none, to make advances into a plural existence in what is still a reluctant society. A socially just society will come to terms with and overcome racist and xenophobic ignorance in favour of a critical and open education. In this educators in Australia and Britain have a shared and common goal worthy of engagement and struggle and we hope the narrative told here is relevant and useful to both.

In modern times the sensitive and frequently troubling issues of race relations have been present in the historical struggles and disputation around education and they remain today (Bhopal and Myers 2023, Tomlinson ibid 2019; Bhopal 2018). In Britain's case, the material basis for these concerns often lay in the inner urban working-class districts of industrial cities which bore and continue to bear the brunt of material poverty, social disadvantage and social injustice. They were also often the settlement locations for unskilled immigrants of the 1950s up to the 1970s and beyond. This is the underpinning of the intensely debated and contested racism and discrimination in employment, housing and education that racial minorities and many black people experienced historically. The outcomes of this were ethnic disadvantage and major fragmentation of what was once called 'community relations' (Allen 1982). In Australia race and racism has had a different though connected trajectory, no less troubled with historical and contemporary controversy (Fay Gale and Brookman 1975; Yarwood and Knowling 1982; Gammage 2012; Goodall 2019; Davies 2022). The legacies of British colonial expansion in relation to the First Peoples of the continent and its islands as well as the commonwealth period of settlement and development have left many unresolved fissures and fractures in the Australian landscapes of society, economy and culture which are traceable to the matters of race, colour and racism imposed by white British/European settlement. This did not only yield catastrophic developments for the Indigenous people which redounded down through the generations. Writing almost 50 years ago the authors of an insightful and prescient study stated… 'The isolation of Aborigines has had its effect upon the European community, too. By keeping Aborigines isolated for so long from the European stream of Australian culture, it has given Australia the appearance of being a uniracial community. It has made many persons in the general community more ignorant of and antipathetic towards race relations than perhaps they need have been' (Gale and Brookman 1975). In the third decade of the 21st century race relations is still contested terrain with little consensus on how much a priority it might be at national policy level or within higher education practice and just what the exact nature of the issues that arise are. Our understandings of this matter are often adversarial and whilst some are yet to speak, questions of race, identity, belonging and the nation are unfolding and remain unresolved, though many people of good faith have worked for a resolution of this (Hall 2017; Arday and Mizra 2018).

Britain has an ethnic and faith complexity which makes it unrecognisable from 50 years ago (Malik 2023). It is a geographically small, highly diverse and well connected multi-nation state with a high density and relatively large and very diverse population. In addition there are cultural and political 'tribes' that intersect the changing social class and ethnic composition of the people. Over-riding all that is the historical reality of the fact that being British was the civic identity of a multi-national state for three centuries involving the Scots, the Welsh and the English. The Irish, north of the current border remain part of the unfinished and continuing business of the post-colonial settlement whilst Irish people from the Republic also constitute an ethnic group of immigrants within Britain and with their descendants number millions. Ethnic minorities from Commonwealth backgrounds have felt a strong stake in British identity though this has been challenged by people with a poor knowledge of their own country's history. Australia has quite different characteristics yet also shares some key cultural values and historical ties with Britain and Ireland. The racial and ethnic constituents of both nations are in some ways quite different, yet there are striking parallels between them. What are these and why are they important?

(from Fay Gale, G. and Brookman, A , Race Relations in Australia-The Aborigines, 1975)

Australia's continuing ethnic diversity may enable open elites to emerge who possess the educational and professional credentials of the existing establishment. It may be that an open and dynamic economy can create a large and growing middle class professional elite which is large enough to assimilate the aspirations of many as the population increases and diversifies. Something like this appears to have occurred in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s when professional occupations

expanded and whole rafts of new professions emerged requiring higher qualifications, whilst at the same time the attractions of unskilled jobs diminished to the point where many 'native Brits' simply refused to do them. Mass immigration from the Commonwealth and later the European Union further complicated the narrative as capital for industrial development was exported to countries with low wages and both skilled and unskilled labour migrated from poor nations to the wealthier ones (Collier ibid).

In the initial phases of these developments few would have predicted the emergence of members of ethnic minorities rising up the social class and status hierarchies to be national political and professional leaders. For a few such people this proved possible as the ladders of opportunity allowed selected recruitment of a small number of minority group members to succeed in accessing the elites, mainly through the old, elite universities. Some decades later there may be more diversity at the top of the elites than was traditionally the case, but this will not automatically achieve access and opportunities for the broader masses or groups. Britain has become, for example, a pace-setter for ethnic and faith diversity at the leadership level of national political parties. However, this does not reflect equality in who dominates the public voice and who has access to the high status jobs, professions and opportunities in the wider society. Neither does it guarantee which high status social groups and interests exercise economic and cultural power. The operation of social difference, including the impact of racial classifications and identities, especially those connected to elite formation and reproduction through elite universities, is therefore part of the social justice agenda and therefore also part of the Access agenda. Widening participation may in fact be the 'Trojan horse' in this narrative in so far as it seeks to challenge and remove the culture of exclusion, selection and privilege represented by elite universities, including many in the Anglosphere such as in Britain, the USA and Australia.

Race and class in elite universities

That racial and ethnic inequality exists in education and across the variety of sectors that make up public life cannot denied (Olusoga 2016; Tomlinson 2019; Finney 2023). The exact meaning of these inequalities and the meaning of inequity and injustice in relation to 'race' is, however, a majorly contested field. There are those who assert the declining significance of race and stress the impact of poverty and inequality within disadvantaged and racialised communities rather than the single characteristic of 'colour' or racial identity (Wilson 1978 and 2012). There are those who assert the significance of racial belonging and identity as the key to understanding racism and white privilege in social, economic and cultural life (Bhopal ibid 2018) and there are those who look to redressing the structural inequalities in educational institutions including racial and class prejudice and discrimination (Arday and Thomas 2021) . This contested terrain is true of both academic and political discourse right across the globe. How inequalities are generated and sustained via universities is a matter of general concern but for those engaged in Access and widening participation it carries special resonance.

Elite universities embody and give expression to inequalities; how else could an 'elite' be defined? The question is, however, what is the proper basis for selection and membership of an elite and how does that measure up to our notions of social justice which we believe characterise a democratic and fair society? The elite universities can be said to be founded on the same principles that are acknowledged in the wider society and these principles recognise the existence of many forms of inequalities. Race and class and gender are used to amass data on a regular basis which shows that elite universities fail to address these inequalities. The failures of the Oxbridge Colleges, for example, to admit black students has been well documented (Bhopal and Myers ibid: 129) and the reality is that this is normal rather than a new and problematic finding. Inequalities are

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the hallmark features of the elite university field. This is not to deny the good faith and engagements of countless teachers and students who have striven to expose and rectify unjust practices and to engage with populations of excluded and marginalised ethnic and gendered groups. The growth of Access itself as outlined in the opening chapters of this volume we hope is testimony to this. Access was and we hope remains as a challenge to the power of universities in general and elite universities in particular to establish which forms of knowledge are accepted and used to judge everyone's educational life and value. This matter is important in our attempts to outline via Access those themes that are the proper purposes of a university in an era of mass higher education.

There exists no single metric to measure the elite status of a university. Yet there is a widely perceived 'recognition' factor for measuring the institutional status of the 'top' universities within the competitive field of higher education. This field is now a global one and the super-elite or global super-league (Bhopal and Myers ibid:119), though they have local and place-based identities, have shared characteristics and functions on behalf of the wider society in which they operate. They are recognisable within named and defined groupings: in the USA the Ivy League and the 'Public Ivies' demarcate categories of inclusion whilst in Britain the Russel Group designates exclusive membership below the 'ancients' of Oxford and Cambridge. In Australia we see a demarcation between the G08 group of research intensive universities regarded as an elite and high status core of higher education attracting international recognition, and the remainder who compete on less favourable terms for students and funding. Research is claimed by almost all HE institutions as a vital part of their missions though competitive success is concentrated on the elite providers.

Universities operate in a competitive and

complex field, including their lecturers and managers as well as students. So much is clear, however, what is opaque are the patterns of inequality around race and class and how these are sustained and legitimated, if indeed they are in the universities. The question of whether race and racism are regulating mechanisms within the institutional structures and systems of elite universities has not been resolved.

Elite universities enable forms of privilege, it is alleged, by restricting access to the existing forms of dominant social, economic and political power. This is reproduced in succeeding generations through the processes of selection and socialisation which ensure the offspring of one affluent and powerful generation get to inherit the advantages and benefits of their family membership and attachment to exclusive social groups. The elite universities organise, manage and legitimate the selection process and ensure the smooth transition of the children of the wealthy into the higher echelons of learning. This is a long-term process requiring social and economic investment as well as considerable investment in the creation and transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2005). This is their reason for being, though it is often not their expressed intention. The search for excellence, quality and world class performance is more often cited as the reason universities strive to be elite in the first place. Elite universities foster upward mobilities whilst at the same time disguising their exclusive and restrictive institutional practice. They serve the interests of existing and perhaps emerging elites in societies where inequalities are viewed as positive features of social and economic life.

Oxford and Cambridge universities – the ancients – have a special place in the lifeworld of the Anglosphere as do Harvard and Yale in the USA. Nearness to power is a mark of their influence and status as is the enormous wealth accumulated by many of the elite universities. There are elites within the elites and competition exists between institutions to be identified as a better, more elite member within the hierarchies of the elites themselves. The elite universities in addition are assiduous in highlighting the distinctions between themselves and standings in the global rankings are obsessively sought after. The purpose of this striving is to reproduce noticeable inequalities firstly within the top ranks and then to distinguish the top rank from all the others. The elite hope to attract global audiences and resources as a result.

The social class elites that comprise the highest income groups and SES (social and economic status) groups are not limited to a national setting but are part of a global and transnational middle class which has access to greater educational choices based on wealth and mobility (Sklair 2000). The students at elite universities generally have access to pre-existing economic, social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1977; Zimdars 2010). Elite education is part of the global marketplace (Kenway and Koh 2013; Marginson 2016) and just as advanced capitalism dissolves borders and restrictions on its capacity to invest and extract profit almost anywhere across the planet, elite members seek transferability of educational accreditations and qualifications. There are so-called 'global super-league' universities (Bhopal and Myers 2023) defined by their exclusivity of their student selection methods, their domination of global university rankings measuring research excellence and teaching, their financial resources and income generation capacities and the dominating positions of their graduates across global social, economic and political spheres. The point here is that these forms of wealth and 'capital' can be transferred and exchanged for each other and they can be inherited through the purchase of an elite education for the child of an existing elite. For someone admitted due to their exceptional abilities or attainments exceptions are made, as they are when some parents possess exceptional wealth and can endow the university in return for placing a child, usually a son, in the desired institution. Elite formation and reproduction has a certain fluidity since elites and the 'fields' or places and spaces in which they exist compete fiercely for top positions. The competition may of course be far from fair though elite universities claim to recruit the brightest and the best and claim to use meritocratic selection methods, which as we have shown are often far from equitable and fair.

The elite universities cannot operate in an air-tight vacume and must relate to and compete within the wider system of internationally sought-after institutions if they are to maintain their differential advantages over less well-endowed ones. The elite occupy the top levels of what has become a highly stratified and differentiated hierarchy of HE institutions. It is a hierarchy which is immersed in and suffused through *the wider, pervasive social and cultural forms of modern society*. The main ones being social class, race and gender distinctions which either actually exist or are believed to exist in capitalist modernity. Where issues of race and racialisation are concerned, questions of how identities arise and are sustained bring us to face-to-face with how universities themselves are implicated in the production and reproduction of inequalities, including those that arise in respect of the racial divisions and tensions that bedevil modern societies.

Primarily these concern us through the designations of 'colour' with which populations and groups of people become identified. 'Blackness' and 'whiteness' are used to characterise and ascribe identities and qualities to people on the basis of being one or the other. These terms and nomenclatures have become central to the debate and discourse on race and class in university education – especially in respect of the reproduction of elite groups and the use of what is known as Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bhopal and Myers ibid 2023).

Critical Race Theory and 'Whiteness'

Critical race theorists assert that whiteness is a property or way of understanding the world which normalises white people's experience and perceptions whereby people of colour are excluded or marginalised. This feature of life is said to be so pervasive and taken-for-granted that the supremacy of whiteness over other racial groups is invisible and covert (Leonardo 2002; Bhopal ibid 2018). Frequently CRT scholars also assert the existence of 'insectionality' where race, gender and social class, age, disability and religion interact with social, political and economic factors to create and sustain oppressive conditions and ways of life (Bhopal and Myers ibid: 13; Arday 2018). A third approach is used which argues that even where progressive reforms to racism and other inequalities are achieved, this is only done for ulterior motives which allow benefits to be given to white people. The idea of 'interest convergence' is seen as a means of examining measures designed to address racial and other inequalities, which are in fact providing gains for white groups.

How and why does privilege work to protect elites in universities?

To ask the question of why does privilege exist is to also ask what is the meaning of inequality and how does it persist? We have argued the viewpoint that Access and widening participation has been and remains a lens through which struggles for a better education have illuminated some of the broader and deeper issues facing communities and societies and ultimately the whole of humanity when we consider the ecological crises and the mass extinction of species. If universities once shared the illusion that they were all fundamentally equal and shared a conspectus on producing knowledge, research and teaching, then the modern picture they present must severely disabuse them of their idealism.

On a global level universities are highly stratified and differentiated and the rankings are used as an effective selection proxy for elite wealthy groups who secure access to the most desired and prestigious institutions for their own members and children. Global elites use universities to protect and perpetuate their own privilege. Global markets in which the elite graduates often

work are extended beyond national boundaries (Bourdieu 2005) and market-driven practices are increasingly adopted within the state sector's delivery of education. The global brands that international 'leading' universities claim to possess, help nation states to legitimate political and cultural authority across global markets. There is therefore a global economy of eliteness which often possesses a local geography but which is also part of a form of dominant cultural capital at the global level. The elite universities have role to legitimate and validate the entire international field of higher education and this is achieved through differentiating that entire field on the basis of hierarchies of self-regulated performance in which they, themselves are best capable of performing. The elites have become cosmopolitan brands which produce knowledge through the cultural power and wealth they can deploy. The links between elite universities and other elite groups have been well documented (Zimdars ibid; Verkaik 2018; Kynaston and Green 2019) and these serve to illustrate how the transmission of inherent inequalities of race and social class are regulated and transmitted down through the generations. Elite universities operate with a status which appears to be unchallengeable – inequalities are the taken-for-granted and unchallenged price of self-regulated excellence.

The pathways to elite universities lies mainly through elite, fee-paying schools and are shaped by access to economic, social and cultural capital which is in turn influenced by race and ethnicity. Less privileged and marginalised groups in society face far greater challenges in reaching an elite university. Mobility and meritocracy have far less to do with this state of affairs than the hierarchies of privilege which give to students the 'capitals' needed to succeed in the unfair competitive environment. Academic ability on its own is far less likely to secure a student place in a globally elite university than a combination of inherited wealth, cultural capital and social practices geared towards advantaging cohorts of privileged families. This is not to say that less privileged students may not be successful in their careers but whilst they might benefit from their degrees it would be to a lesser extent (Bhopal and Myers ibid: 15).

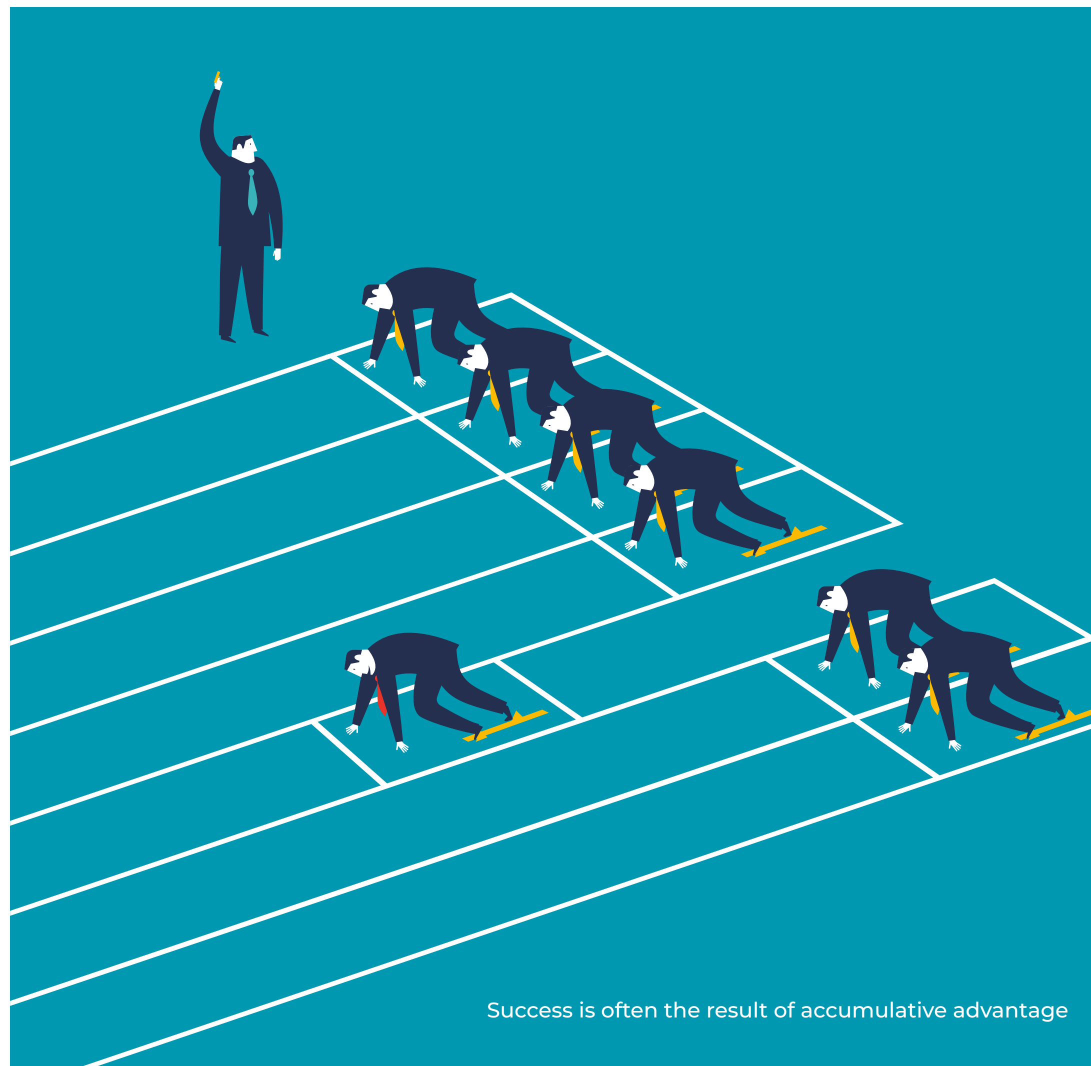
The extent to which race and racism contributes to the production and reproduction of elites is a highly charged and contested issue. There may be a variety of racisms shaped by contexts and contingencies of particular places and times. CRT believers argue that white elites are produced and reproduced by systemic and structural racism and the impact of class within elite universities. They assert that the centrality of racism as a normal and taken-for-granted ideology which is deeply embedded in the educational part of the public sphere. This approach assumes the existence of 'white capital' and that 'whiteness' as a form of power is entrenched in the shared characteristics of elite universities and ensures that outcomes for students of colour are worse than those for white people. Whiteness is said to be …'a naturally held property of already advantaged students… '(Bhopal and Myers ibid:16). In this viewpoint white institutions such as elite universities, whilst appearing to acknowledge racial injustice, recruit greater numbers of students of colour but in reality they maintain racial hierarchies and facilitate racist outcomes by reproducing their embedded cultural and racist assumptions. Lower levels of success for students of colour and differently disadvantaged students from black, working class backgrounds are the result.

The practical outcomes and results of institutional racism can be demonstrated (Finney 2023) and provide a material basis for CRT, but there is also an investment by CRT scholars in identity politics and the belief that one's identity and position in society shapes and determines how one comes to understand that society and the forms of knowledge it uses to legitimate the inequities it fosters such as racism and patriarchy. In this perspective which we can call a form of 'postmodern' thinking the boundaries between meanings becomes blurred and objectivity becomes problematic. Understanding becomes dependent on 'positionality' – where a person's personal and lived experience and their identity becomes central to their argument. Nevertheless the question of identity underpins much thinking about race and racism and the core beliefs of CRT are that racism is the everyday experience of people (in the USA), white supremacy is systemic, colour blind policies cannot address the embedded and structural character of white racism, and people of colour have a unique and distinctive voice (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020: 119-120).

The allocation of people to categories such as 'white' and whiteness as a property or quality of existence is deeply problematic and impacts upon many aspects of social thought and the social categories of identity. A similar yet different social construction of 'blackness' has also been the subject of contested discourses (Hall 2017; Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). The empirical and objective, social scientific bases for such categories are not immutable and there are epistemological problems with notions of race and race-thinking (Taylor 2022) which we cannot deal with in this volume. Nevertheless, the salience of race theory and concepts of race and racialisation have rarely been more relevant to the study of education and the theme of disadvantage and social justice (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). The long-standing narratives of race lasting over centuries did not come to an end even after the victories of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. However, the experience of American racism is not simply repeated in other parts of the western capitalist lifeworld and CRT, it has been suggested, is fundamentally an American phenomenon (Pluckrose and Lindsay ibid 2020; Wells Brown in Adi 2022). Nevertheless, the continuing existence of racism within institutional life in our own societies which are not American, cannot be denied (Owolade 2023) and universities have particular responsibilities to recognise and address this. This is especially the case where the denial of race and ethnic questions may be used to legitimate narratives of elite university meritocracy which we have argued earlier. Solving racial inequality has been the concern of social democratic policy and thinking for generations and the Access movement we have suggested was deeply concerned with this challenge at its outset. Racial and ethnic identity was deeply significant for the pioneers of special Access courses for black and minority ethnic communities. However, following a half century of educational progress and development we are still forced to confront the facts that education has brought about much change but it has not changed the fundamental inequalities we find associated with racial and ethnic differences. Black, working class Americans are still the most unequal racial or ethnic group in that nation. Black young people in Britain in the third decade of the century are the most deprived and educationally disadvantaged minority. Poverty has been said to be the key defining characteristic of the black experience (Boayke 2019). All of this, despite the results of affirmative action, points to the fact that social class and poverty define life's experience for black people and not just their racial identity. In 2020 the percentage of African Americans admitted to Harvard was almost 16 per cent – higher than the proportion of black people within the US population, but black students at Harvard were not representative of the black population in America. More than 70 per cent of Harvard students come from the wealthiest families with just 3 per cent from the poorest 20 per cent. Kenan Malik has asserted that the greatest lack of diversity in American elite universities is not racial but class based (Malik 2023 b). Affirmative action, he argues, has benefitted the black elite, not the majority of the black working class people who are falling further behind higher income blacks.

Yet there is an increasing fixation with racial identities rather than the economic deprivation within African American communities which is reflected in other multiracial and ethnically diverse societies. The debate as to whether public policy should either be 'race conscious' or 'colour blind' becomes relevant to our discourse on educational equity. Should access and widening participation target the specific inequalities

faced by minority and equity groups or should all citizens be treated equally regardless of an individual's racial and cultural backgrounds? These are significant and contentious issues which shape and condition our understanding of the role of education, and of universities in particular in the way we conceptualise and organise access and participation. Should this be based on individual rights rooted in liberal universalism which is colour blind and does not recognise racial distinctions in policymaking and takes no account of an individual's race or culture? At stake in this question is the valuable principle of treating everyone as equal citizens, rather than as bearers of ethnic, racial or cultural characteristics or histories. The alternative is to acknowledge and recognise the rights and qualities of racial and ethnic minorities as being distinctively different from majority populations. This dilemma is illustrated by the recent decision by the American Supreme Court to outlaw affirmative action on university admissions for racial groups and has



Success is often the result of accumulative advantage

led many to fear that progress of Black Americans in higher education may stall. On the other hand there is a counter view which sees the impact of race-based identities as confirming people in a singular identity of subordination and deprivation; 'another way of imprisoning people within ghettos' (Malik ibid). As we have suggested, affirmative action may have brought about improved prospects for some members of ethnic groups but it can leave untouched the lives of ordinary people. The recruitment of relatively small numbers of black elite students within elite universities, as in the case of the Oxbridge colleges, has not diminished racial inequality and disadvantage as a defining characteristic of the wider society (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

In practice the realities are that citizens in multiracial societies are treated as members of racial and ethnic communities and not just as individual citizens and the assertion of race-based and ethnic identities is ubiquitous. This can have both positive and negative effects. In France, for example, the collection of race-based statistics and data is banned in the name of 'universalism', which makes it far more difficult to assess racial discrimination and allows credibility to the argument that such discrimination does not exist. In reality though, and as recent widespread social unrest and violence between minority communities and the police has shown, racism is perceived and experienced by many as deeply embedded in social and economic life. In America race and racism plays an immense role in the lives of black people and though its conditions and culture cannot be seen as a model for other nations, the lessons it provides are salutary. One of these lessons is surely that equal treatment based on universalist principles of equal rights and responsibilities must be matched by the recognition of racial inequality and the power of collective experience and identity.

The importance of these matters for Access and widening participation lies in the way we understand social justice scholarship. The acceptance of critical race thinking and perhaps of allied notions of intersectionality has implications for how we view the paradigm of liberal universalism which stresses the common and shared rights and characteristics of all individuals. CRT stresses the social significance of identity categories such as 'black' or 'white' and those related to gender and marginalised groups whilst liberal universalism sought to remove the social significance of identity categories and treat people equally regardless of identity. Mainstream liberal discourse has been stated to be inadequate to understand how structures of power discriminate against people who inhabit more than one category of marginalised identity (Crenshaw 1991). Knowledge and understanding in this perspective derives from *positionality* – that is to say, from group identity and from the experience of those marginalised people who are subject to the power of other, dominant and oppressive groups who are able to legitimise their exercise of power and wealth through the institutional and cultural spheres which they control. This points to the significance of the impact of elite selection and education and the role of meritocracy which we have raised in earlier chapters of this book and to the importance of Access and critical thinking which we hope will guide us to an improved understanding. It also points to the problem of using one single aspect or variable of explanation – identity and oppression – to understand prejudice and power imbalances as a single topic rather than as a complex of structural and contingent factors. In our attempts to grasp this complexity we need to understand the different trajectories of class, race, gender and all the myriad distinctions which impact on our topic – that of Access to higher education in societies such as Australia and the United Kingdom which both share common heritages and yet which are categorically different in so many ways.

One matter seems clear – the construction of categories of people who are thought worthy of intervention through, for example, Access and widening participation are not eternally fixed and uncontested. Furthermore the categories

we choose need to be those capable of arming and supporting the struggle for social justice and change. This means, we believe, that we cannot assume, as does CRT, that racism is everywhere and is normal and permanent – the problem being that white people fail to see this. It means we require a better theory of how our knowledge systems and curriculums are constructed so we can understand and combat prejudice AND be aware of our own standpoint and positionality. We need to understand what 'whiteness' means as much as the meaning of 'blackness'. We need to understand the role and functions of race and racism and other potentially divisive concepts and categories and to be able to find the means to test and falsify the dangerous and damaging ones. Critical thinking and new frameworks for intellectual and social engagement were never more needed, both to critique contemporary society and to hold it together.

There are serious questions as to whether ethnic minorities have bridged the lines of mutual mistrust and social division which are part of Britain's heritage (Phillips 2005). In the USA the racialised political battle lines are notoriously difficult to overcome and are constantly being redrawn and redefined in many aspects of the social, economic and cultural struggles which beset that society. In some societies such as Britain and Australia it may be that large sections of a society can live separate lives in a divided society even whilst small numbers may be visibly successful in business and national political life. Increasing diversity may not lead to fairness and equity simply because the race to the top has had a small number of winners from one or more ethnic groups. Research has shown, for example, that the number of Black people in some British cities in the most powerful and influential positions in politics, sport, education, arts, business and health is significantly unrepresentative of the Black population as a whole (Finney 2023; Guardian Research 2023).

Australia and the idea of a post-racial society

When we consider the categories used for educational attainment in Australia and if we assume they are a proxy for 'access' to higher education purposes, we find a focus on the relationship of widening participation rates (for year 12 student applicants) in relation to their socio-economic status (high and low), and in relation to their location in major cities and regional factors (Tomaszewski et al 2020). Indigenous people of whom significant numbers live in remote and regional areas are another generic category in relation to the Australian states and territories and make up just over 3 per cent of the population. These categories are at a high level of abstraction and aggregation and are valuable in comparing how the different Australian States and territories perform in terms of participation of specific age groups and equity groups in higher education. Researchers and policy makers are aware of the compounding factors of disadvantage and of the considerable intersectionality between equity groups. However, there are issues to be raised concerning the utility and the validity of these categories if we want to consider the wider issues of access, race and ethnicity in relation to issues of social justice and equity. Tomlinson's work (2019) has noted and commented on the use of the language of 'disadvantage' to aggregate different types of people with different needs and characteristics so that issues of race and ethnicity can be disavowed, even when this is not intentional.

The categories and contexts of access need to be scrutinised, analysed and renewed as part of the wider use of engagement themes in the education arena. They refer to more-or-less generic qualities and characteristics concerned with 'disadvantage' – so under-represented groups are identified and described – such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, residents of regional and remote locations, and people from low SES backgrounds. These are aggregations and lack the specificity and 'granular' characteristics of populations that tend to need access (in the original form of special provision for designated groups). Whether for good or ill, this means that access has to discuss the self-designated **and** the objective characteristics of identity which mark out the potential access populations or groups. An encounter (conceptually at least) with matters of race, racialisation, ethnicity, colour, prejudice and racism is needed in order to engage with the issues that arise. This is surely a lesson from our own (British and Australian) history and one which suggests that we can only deal with the great and contentious issues by debating them. Being silent or repeating what Stuart hall (2017) referred to as the historic disavowel of race and ethnicity is hardly an option.

We need to explore the fact that widening participation and access to education goes much further than year 12 entry to universities or the generic issues of, for example, 'intersectionality' where multiple indicators of disadvantage can be identified (Tomaszewski et al, ibid). The Australian equity groups (referred to for example, in the Engagement Australia Accord response (2023/24) are defined in terms of social and economic status and according to the kind of regional or city/urban location they are in. This is an insightful starting point and points us in the direction of travel which needs further explication. There is a parallel with how in Britain the various ethnic and black groups were once compared generally with the 'disadvantaged' (ie the poor) as if this was sufficient to understand what was happening with regard to low attainment by members of ethnic groups. This led at the time to a type of 'colour blindness' where people of goodwill sought to counter racial prejudice without really examining it and certainly without scrutinising it from the perspective of those who suffered from racism (John 2006). There was once a widespread belief that by counting the number and types of ethnic and racial categories/identities we were actually re-enforcing colour or race distinctions that were thought to be unhelpful and damaging. This is no longer held to be a valid point of view, and in fact it harbours a perhaps questionable assumption that assimilation is needed or desired and that the real question is not about difference and diversity but rather about poverty or low aspiration or cultural deficits or other general conditions shared by excluded populations. From such a perspective it can be contended that the victims of exclusion or their culture, values and practices can appear to be the cause of their own disadvantage and suffering.

There appears to be significant intersection of race and class in modern society and there can be little doubt that race impacts on wider issues of inequality and difference. Nevertheless, the belief or myth that we live in a post-racial society or even a post-nationalist society has had currency as multiracial and multicultural societies have emerged in an era of mass migration and open labour markets (Taylor 2022). One consequence for Britain has been the state and society have found themselves incapable of defining clear national interests in relation to international mass migration as have other European nations such as Germany (Ignatieff ibid: 75). The realities are, however, that racial identities have not disappeared. Rather they have been transformed and re-shaped by the events and consciousness of new times and in a world of perplexing insecurity, of de-stabilising economic and social change and of the persistent demands of modernity where change is the only constant feature of life and by the unfortunate persistence of racism across and within wide arenas of our social life. The reality is that some identities are far more privileged than others and that race and colour, especially in relation to what is generically called 'white privilege' persists. In a world where it is often asserted that we live in globalised times where race has been proven to be scientifically untenable, white people are still perpetually more advantaged than men, women and children of colour (Hall 2017; Bhopal 2018 ibid). Whilst access and participation is frequently about poverty, deprivation and exclusion, and these are generic issues, for universities in particular it is about

conceptualising issues and themes and challenges around race, ethnicity, inclusion, equity, social justice and asking whose knowledge and whose curriculum will predominate? The role of place and community, universal literacy and critical thinking are all aspects of engagement with learning which complicate the challenges of access and participation.

An Australian view on belonging and cohesion

A key question within the Australian debate on these matters is …we are where we are; a good start on generic issues has been made and much good work has been achieved thus far by engaged parties. Nevertheless, we must surely ask the questions – have we done enough on identifying the Access issues, especially from the perspectives of the **objects** of our policy frameworks and proposals. The object(s) of our analysis and exploration are in reality **subjects**, that is to say, real people who need to be engaged in dialogue and development. This is the content and subject matter of a critical curriculum, of debates, about contested knowledge and authentic open learning. Where are the proposals for an Access Agenda which develop these ideas in particular?

The creation of an Indigenous First Nation category, for example, clearly rests on the distinctiveness of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Their distinctiveness is a matter of their own right to define their identity and as First People they clearly are in a unique historical and contemporary position in the social topography and cultural consciousness of Australia. However, there is the possibility that international migration leading to the modern world-wide diaspora of ethnic peoples and groups changes the social character and make-up of populations in Australia, as elsewhere in the world. There is a transnational geography in the 21st century which did not exist in earlier generations, as the Black Lives Matter protests which took place all over the world illustrated in 2023. This has implications for how 'equity groups' see themselves and identify as distinctive ethnic or cultural or racial groupings. That this process itself is conflictual and painful can hardly be denied as it was in previous eras of Australian history (Macintyre 2008; Bashford and Macintyre 2013a and 2013b). The 'integration' or absorption into mainstream Australian life of different racial and ethnic groups contains both a socially contested history and deeply felt and excoriating narratives at the level of personal experience (Beneba Clarke 2018 and 2019). Multiracial and multi-ethnic societies do not necessarily cohere, rather they can be sources of deep division and fragmentation and they require our attention.

There is arguably a set of unresolved questions and issues around the question of the ethnic composition and identity of modern Australia and its role in the generation and continuity of social cohesion. This is a matter that emerged historically as the two main ethnic protagonists the English and the Irish conveyed their own specific cultures and characteristics in the colonisation and settlement of Australia. That they were often bitterly antagonistic to each other cannot be denied but that a common core of Australian identity emerged is also conceded by most commentators (Dixson 1999). The later 20th century immigrants brought entirely new forms of ethnicity as did those of the 21st century, bringing also questions of how a new, modern social cohesion is to be constructed and social dissolution and fragmentation avoided. Miriam Dixson enjoins us to consider the past and writes… 'As a formative theme, in Australia ethnicity is potent in effect but muted in expression…It is scarcely possible to underrate the Irish influence in shaping Australian identity. As a 'founding people' possessing a strength of numbers, influence and confidence beyond their fellow Irish in North America and elsewhere', the Irish in Australia for the most part rejected segregation and diffused themselves across country and city alike…the Irish exerted a 'galvanic' influence on Australian identity' (1999: 93-94). The fact that we are now in culturally formative times once again means that the ethnic composition of the nation is a vital element in the construction of education and the notion of belonging. The new identity of a very diverse multicultural, multiracial Australia needs to be built on the conscious recognition of the successful and unique and formative core culture. This was a culture that was divided from the start, born of colonialism traceable to the twelfth century and the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. For Europeans this was a world far from home and seen as alien and oppressive and involved the brutal suppression and extended displacement of the indigenous people and a stigmatised convict beginning to a new society. However, a new beginning and community was established and a nation emerged with an identity intact, though contested and debated right up to the present day (Horne 1964; Meaney 2013). Contested it might be, but Dixson asserts Australia's foundation culture and community ''held' us (Australia) with surprising firmness until the 1970s' (Dixson ibid: 96).

The persistent presence of the international migration of labour, of poorer people seeking work and security, coupled with the asylum crisis has forced countries such as Australia and Great Britain to engage with some nationalist discourse in the modern and ever-changing era. Even for liberals who believe in open borders some nationalist discourse is unavoidable and the difficult questions of national borders and belonging and discussions of quotas, limitations, deportations and repatriations are raised. As Michael Ignatieff (1994 ibid: 75) has asserted … 'All of this would be natural enough, were such a language not disgraced by its associations with the Right'. Coupled with the expanding themes of university engagement concerned with equity and social justice and the pressing importance of what we have referred to as the 'wicked issues' of impending ecological disaster and climate change (Nyland and Davies 2022), there are implications for the categories of access provision we need to recognise and develop as the objective of Access study and knowledge.

Participation and attainment as categories and metrics may not adequately capture the full importance and scope of what we have recognised as access matters and struggles for educational opportunity. The objects of these measures (people and groups) are themselves described within a series of categories limited to **Indigenous, regional, remote and low SES cohorts**. Yet the realities of human classifications and identities are more complex and challenging. The world-wide, transnational and diasporic migrations of the 20th and 21st centuries, for example, have created and heightened the impact of members of under-represented groups everywhere. Such groups as they transition to a new normality are at risk of social exclusion and many will experience the compounding factors of disadvantage. The relationship between such groups and the benefits and obligations of higher education have been the subject matter of access and struggles for education for generations. Recognition of this in its modern context and localities is needed. We do not wish indiscriminately to turn access matters into matters about race and people of colour. Colour blindness, however, which can assume or assert that since racialisation in the form of illegal discrimination is not allowed, therefore racialisation itself cannot exist, is clearly not a viable and appropriate stance. The fact is that we cannot understand modern racism if we do not understand racial experience and the language in which it is experienced and where appropriate resisted, and for which we have a social and humane duty to support. The differentiation of Black populations and of Indigenous peoples and the possibilities of multiple and even shifting identities needs to be recognised by all of those involved in Access education. A critical curriculum is needed to engage all of those involved in and for the social purposes of education and this is one aspect of this book.

From disavowel to recognition: a snapshot from the British experience

The official origins of Access courses in Britain were in the government letter of 1978 which encouraged the setting up of 'special Access courses' and in effect invited local authorities and by extension their educational institutions to extend opportunities and access to higher education and the professions to black and other ethnic groupings and communities (John 1993: 10). Was the recognition of black and ethnic groups' needs for 'special Access courses' a recognition of the position and experience of these communities in British life and society? The answer must be … only to a limited degree since the whole question of institutionalised racism and the embedded and long-term cultural and social exclusion and marginalisation of black and ethnic groups from 'mainstream' life could not be addressed by a small number of worthy courses staffed by relatively junior teachers and volunteers working in low status institutions. Nevertheless, it signalled a change which eventually would shift perceptions and possibilities in the mainstream.

Access as a ***movement*** arose in a milieu in the 1970s and 1980s, at the point when working people were seeking a better life and a more secure future; a point at which the reforms in schooling and higher education which the post-war settlement had delivered were being experienced by many people as failure. Comprehensive schooling and the expansion of universities in Britain had stalled by the 1980s and social inequality was on the rise. At the same time black and other ethnic groupings were increasingly marginalised in the inner urban areas of United Kingdom cities. Black youth were alienated in particular as cultural integration was seen to fail and as racial discrimination was perceived as institutionally embedded in parts of British society. Black students often came from the battle-grounds of the inner cities (Humphrey and John 1971). This had a profound impact on what was acceptable as educational knowledge to black people themselves. The emergence of Access courses served to assert the presence of black people and members of ethnic communities in further and higher education and signalled the need for changed priorities. A clear signal had been given for the need for a commitment to alternative means of entry to further and higher education. What remained unanswered were the difficult questions of …access to what and for which purposes and whose curriculum would be used?

From the start there were those who insisted on the need to locate Access in the wider debate about who has access to power, to resources and to the professions via the education system (Tomlinson 2019 ibid). If Access in general was about contesting some of the wider and historical inequalities of British society then, as Gus John suggested…

'We need to talk not about black Access Courses, but about a black access movement that takes on the educational rights of all people, whatever their background…Although Access Courses may address the issues of black people, and to a lesser extent women seeking to enter HE, they don't address the issues of what happens to these people, what these institutions are about, and what their responsibilities are as institutions of higher learning in meeting these students' needs… Governments and the universities themselves are very reluctant to raise questions about the so-called mainstream…They are reluctant to discuss who should validate knowledge and who decided that we should screen certain things out and study other things. Why should there be such a major divergence between the pedagogy and curriculum of Access Courses and those of the HE institutions to which these students progress?' (John ibid: 10-11). That there was discrimination against black people and some ethnic groupings in the wider society and in employment was clear; the evidence within education broadly was less clear but there was a widely perceived sense of alienation by black people and participation in higher education was lower than their white and Asian counterparts (Taylor 1993; Harrison 2018). Participation of black people and people of colour in the elite universities was minimal and was not to improve significantly until well into the 21st century (Bhopal and Myers 2023).

If the historical aspects of race and racism were often hidden from view (Hiro 1973; Fryer 1985; Walvin 1973; Olusoga 2016 and 2023; Scanlan 2020), the contemporary ones have seldom been far from the headlines. A deep seated and complex racial problem exists in many nations which now have multi-ethnic and multi-racial populations. In the United Kingdom this matter exploded into public consciousness in the last quarter of the 20th century (Foot 1969; Rex 1973; Moore 1975; John 2006; Tomlinson 2019) yet public policy often remained 'colour blind' to the issues and concerns. More than four decades ago Stuart Hall (1978) argued that race, racism and its disavowel – its lack of recognition amongst the dominant classes and in their discourse – was a key theme and signifier for a society that was careering into a series of crises that was accompanying the decline of British economic and social life. Unemployment, violent crime, urban decay, the breakdown of public order, street violence and demonstrations were all laid at the door of ethnic and racial minorities. Black youth in particular were perceived to be a threat to the tolerance, order and stability of British society (Dhondy 1974,1979; Davies 1981; John 1981) The language and perceptions used to describe, for example, black youth in 2011 in London boroughs and other cities (Tomlinson ibid 2019:183) was remarkably similar to that used 40 years previously.

There are no easy lessons in the struggles for racial and ethnic equality and yet we know this is a world-wide issue which continues to resonate across borders and down the generations. We do not live in a post-racial world, though there are debates which assert the desire to be beyond racial thinking (Taylor ibid 2022). In our understanding of access and the role of participation in education we must note the formal repudiation of racism and racial explanations is not the eradication of race as an obsolete or unhelpful notion. Paul Taylor argues that there exists the danger of … "subordinating racial differences to ostensibly unifying categories like citizenship, class, or humanity; or submerging particularly important differences into the vast sea of possible variations in human condition, turning even the asymmetries that result from racist exclusions into just one more kind of difference among many." (Taylor ibid: 49-50).

Neither can we overlook the undeniable fact that race and ethnicity is complex and that people have diverse experiences and lives. It might be thought that racism is fundamentally experienced by black people and people of colour and that white people cannot themselves be the object of racism; that racism is a black and white matter. Such a view is challenged by the testimony of history in the case of the European Jewish Holocaust and by recent evidence in Britain that racism is multi-dimensional. For example, some 40 per cent of white Irish people reported experiencing some form of racist assault in their lives. This is more than black African and all Asian ethnic groups: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and other Asian groups. (Finney 2023). We cannot assume that racism is just about black people being at the bottom and white people being at the top of society.

Race and ethnicity, just as with notions of nationalism and national identity, have not disappeared as the 21st century has evolved. One of the continuing threads of this book is that Access education should help turn the tide not just against educational disadvantage but also against a curriculum and forms of thinking which disavow and avoid the crucial issues, one of which is the correct understanding of race, language and identities and the different meanings which lie within them.

Race and education: possibilities for resistance through education

"There are no guarantees against the growth of a popular racism, but there is always, in the factual everyday struggles of those who resist racism, the possibility of anti-racist politics and pedagogy" (Hall 1980: 69). Educators committed to Access

were faced with the realities of racism and of how race actually worked in British society. Race and the issues associated with it were the flash points for historical and continuing crises and conflicts in the last decades of the 20th century and educators could not ignore these (Tomlinson 2018). The lived realities which confronted the black population – their 'lived experience' of racism and their resistance to being treated as subordinate and inferior – were of the utmost importance to educators regardless of their own ethnic or racial identity. Teachers and learners learned that race and ethnicity were familiar features of everyday lives and if a more equitable education and life were to be won through learning then life in a racialized world would have to be recognised and sometimes resisted.

Cultures of resistance took many different forms; some were forced to the margins such as Rastafarianism which challenged the role of the state and its institutions and culture. In some cases opposition was expressed through 'style' where dress codes and music sought to disrupt the dominant and commercially viable (profitable) cultures (Campbell 1980; Hebdige 1981). Education played its part in explaining and combatting racialism where it referred to inappropriate and false notions of the distinctness of human peoples and societies (John 2006 ibid; Taylor 2022 ibid).

Race and racism was a daunting challenge to education beyond school where attitudes in the wider society were shaped by the inadequacies of previous schooling and the damaging continuities of empire and British attitudes to foreign nations and peoples (McIlroy 1981; Tomlinson 2019 ibid; Elias 2020; Olusoga 2023 ibid). Forms of resistance to damaging racism and exclusion included Access courses involving black people and ethnic minorities. These were part of a broad set of contemporary and controversial issues of the most potentially explosive kind and were to play a role in moving forward to a more critical and reflective conception of race and how it works in human societies (Jeffcoat 1979; Rex and Tomlinson 1979; ILEA 1984).

Lessons learned and knowledge gained?

Access education and the possibilities of learning outside the conventional systems seem to offer, at the very least, an encounter with the social order and its educational institutions. We have noted in earlier chapters and commented on the way historically mass movements for social change, social justice and improvement had an educational component. The struggle for really useful knowledge amongst the organised working classes and the reform of elitist and selective higher education were the signal of the need for change. The changes and the changed, when they came, were part of a wider transformation of modern capitalism which took place on a global scale. New, middle class and professional elites emerged at the top of the education hierarchies. Mass higher education came about, but within a system of its own hierarchies which ensured the elite universities remained at the top. What C. Wright Mills (1956) called the old 'power elites' were not simply replaced in this development but they were modified and at least in Britain the ruling class remained with its wealth and privileges largely intact and still in place. This is perhaps the most significant context of mass higher education and the real meaning of Access as more than a set of special courses for disadvantaged groups. Those involved in the wider sense of Access as a ***movement*** attempted to re-draw the educational map, often admittedly on a very local and limited scale, and to pose new questions for new audiences and learners. This movement continues right into the present (McMinn 2000; Teare 2018; Ashwin 2020; Nyland and Davies 2022). If we can accept that new forms of education can tell us a great deal about wider social developments, then Access as a movement for educational thinking and change opens up questions about what counts as knowledge and how it is articulated and experienced by people whose existence and culture are often seen as challenges to existing education. These challenges are of course often rooted in the lived experience of discrimination and racism in employment, housing and education itself by members of the ethnic minority and black communities. Such experiences can be expected to generate the will to resist and to find knowledge and learning that will equip a successful struggle for improved outcomes. As such they may provide lessons for all of those involved in the possibilities of an anti-racist education which makes things visible which were once hidden and disavowed.

From invisibility to disadvantage to social justice

Racism is often disavowed and invisible to white people precisely because it is routine and unconscious (Hirsch 2018). That Britain or Australia could be a racist society was not thought possible by many white people in particular, especially when acts of Parliament had ruled racial discrimination in employment, in housing and education illegal. However, the non-legality of racism did not and does not prevent its occurrence. Education has a role both at school and in adult, further and higher education to assert the principles of social equality and social justice which hidden and institutionalised racism denies.

Higher education institutions at the point of expansion to being a mass participation system did not feel compelled to re-assess the failures of previous reforms and innovations. At the time the very invisibility and assumed integration and assimilation of black and ethnic minorities was seen as an indicator of progressivism and liberalism by teachers and leaders in higher education. This was hardly surprising since the educational needs of a multi-racial society in schooling had been widely associated with a general category of 'disadvantaged'. In Britain all minority children, children of immigrants and those from racial minorities had been lumped together as part of the disadvantaged population. This was a euphemism for 'poor' argues Tomlinson (2019 ibid: 105) that endured for years. The government Department for Education at the time asserted that minority children shared with the indigenous children in urban areas 'the educational disadvantages associated with an impoverished environment' (DES 1974: 2). Members of black and minority communities were being exhorted to accept their poor housing and neglected urban environment and the failure of their children in schools because they shared these conditions with poor whites. The language of disadvantage and deprivation was used to disavow and deny the racial and ethnic issues which were there for all to see, if they had eyes to do so. For black people and many members of ethnic communities it was confirmation that both overt and covert forces were at work to exclude them from participation in education and the rewards available for those who could succeed. The principles of national policy were increasingly to view black people as bearers of educationally disadvantageous behaviour and as the inheritors of a deficient culture. There was no automatic connection linking expansion to equality and ethnic minorities benefitted less than their white counterparts from the growth in provision. Compensatory intervention programmes failed likewise to break the cycles of advantage and disadvantage conferred by the proxies for class and race such as 'father's occupation'. By the 1970s it was plain that the problems of education and equality needed to be posed in new terms (Halsey 1972: 7). It was also clear that by the 1970s race and ethnicity were intersecting with social class to make the connections between educational reform and social and community experience that much more problematical (CCCS 1975 and 1981).

It is hardly surprising then that the demands for Access came from outside the conventional educational institutions and called for a radical approach to learning which could embrace community experience and learning which in turn needed to express the black and minority ethnic experience itself (John 2006 ibid). Community cohesion was supposed to be possible within, for example, an ethnically diverse British society but the realities were far from the ideal. Trevor

Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, claimed in 2005 that multiculturalism suggested separateness and that the country was sleepwalking into segregation (Tomlinson 2019: 164).

The language of 'diversity' and the understandable desire for an inclusive and coherent social contract used by politicians masked the realities of an unequal and divided multiethnic and multicultural society. The traditional subject-centred curriculum remained entrenched in schools and universities with minimal progress towards a universal literacy which might have enabled learners to better understand the society they inhabited. Universal literacy would be a claim on critical understanding aimed at all learners at all levels in the system which would put the pressing concerns of understanding and tolerating difference where they belong – in the forefront of our learning and teaching. One of these issues is how we understand the question of race and racism in a democratic society, which should be part of the shared learning experience of all.

The realities of shared recent history were different from this prospect. The privileging of the offspring of the wealthy continued into the 21st century and the elite universities consistently recruited fewer black and minority students than could be justified on the grounds of equity and fairness. Division and inequality on the bases of race and class and area of domicile continued to characterise both the wider society and the educational institutions within it. Selective education and social mobility for a few working class and black/ethnic minority students continued to be the basis for official policy and educational institutions came into line with this. It was not a tension that could be resolved by the Access movement alone which tried to 'buy-in' to the meritocratic ideal by sponsoring individual achievements whilst simultaneously acknowledging collective and community aspirations.

There remains also the particularly pertinent question of what it was that black and excluded minority groups of students were getting access to? The wider society with its cultural discriminations, its sense of embedded racism in parts of its institutional life, in employment, in policing, in aspects of sporting life and still in wide swathes of education had not removed the stains of supremacist associations. No nation could claim exemption from its history though the denials of Black experience in history were notorious (Fryer 1985; Olusoga ibid 2016). The educational rights of all people were still to be fairly and equitably shared but Access opened up possibilities and points of departure for black and minority groups in British society, and in Australia a recognisable though by no means identical trajectory has been followed (Dawkins 1990; Beneba Clarke 2019; Wesley 2023). The Australian tradition and emphasis on egalitarian social thinking did not engage formally and publically with the matter of race in the way the British had been forced to confront their own heritage of multiracial and multiethnic identities and their racialisation (Bhopal 2018; Tomlinson 2019). It did not need to, but it did need to engage with its own checkered history of race relations and the difficult questions of restitution of racial/ethnic equality (Gale and Brookman 1975; Tomaszewski et al 2018; Macintyre 2020). There are surely insights and lessons for all of us in this whilst we must acknowledge the fact that the racialisation of education is a theme that demands attention always within its specific and conjunctural context. Inequalities take their differing and contrasting forms according to the national and local circumstances, traditions and cultures in which they find themselves and engage with that evolving reality. It is our contention that access and widening participation must likewise engage in the immediate and 'conjunctural' struggles for educational equality but also in that deeper and wider sense of the 'Great Tradition' of struggles for long-term progressive social results through critical learning and teaching. The Australian and British experiences are salutary and teach us, we believe, that each new generation must meet the scale and scope of the challenge of which this book is a part.

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Part 6

Contested Knowledge and Future Options

Chapter 12

Access – a social theory approach

The need for a theory of society

Contemporary Access and widening participation and the burgeoning and complex reality of university engagement did not come out of the blue. It came hand-in-hand with high participation systems of tertiary or higher education and as a worldwide tendency not confined to the wealthy countries. Such systems are becoming ever more inclusive at a rapid rate everywhere. Access has a history, some aspects of which we hope to have shown contributed to current and future prospects for a more egalitarian and fairer education. In suggesting that Access and widening participation can best be understood as part of an Access social movement, we have at the same time raised the question of how to understand Access in relation to social analysis? This particular challenge remains with us even though we have adopted an eclectic approach to the social and educational theories that underpin the empirical facts, realities, processes and experiences which we call education. Access is about practical courses and programmes but it is also about ideas and what we understand as valid knowledge and how that knowledge is theorised. That is to say, our concern is with social theory that can illuminate our understanding and make the connections which are otherwise obscured. If no single, meta-theory or grand theory can be derived from the empirical realities we have referred to, a range of approaches using theoretical concepts can be identified to help shape an insightful analysis and interpretative purposes of Access to higher education and its wider context of mass participation.

We hope to have demonstrated that critical analysis can show us that higher education and its capacity to generate knowledge is best conceptualised as a public good. When it is conceived of as a private commodity, available on the market for consumers to buy, we have argued that this diminishes social equality and leads to severe social injustice, social divisiveness and to a zero-sum situation where one person's advantage is another's disadvantage. Higher education is more than the distribution of available resources for learning and universities have a huge public significance in sustaining democratic ways and values. They provide space for criticism and challenge and allow new public formations, ideas, movements and activities to emerge. They are absolutely vital for the generation of a highly literate and numerate population needed to sustain liberal-democratic values in an era where these are questioned and sometimes subverted (Scott 2021; Wolf 2023). The public value of HE within the public sphere, however, is difficult to measure, evaluate and sustain, especially in the face of attacks by neoliberal philosophies which assert the primacy of personal ownership of 'private goods' such as education, and private gain as foundational principles of modern society which are taken to be morally superior to ideas of the collective and common good.

Our theoretical approach is to suggest that Access widening participation and the critical thinking that accompanies their empirical and theoretical forms, are expressions of deep cultural and social values. They are not taken up everywhere to the same degree in higher education or even in the same way, but they are indicative of the wish and need to find universally valid solutions to human problems and aspirations including the desire for fairness and justice in education and for equality of opportunity. Our book is not primarily about philosophical or sociological controversies but there can be no doubt in our minds that theories of social action and human behaviour alongside conceptions of social justice and equal opportunities can help us understand the connections between things and the limitations imposed by our current knowledge. It is important to determine the limits as well as the value of our concepts and ideas.

We have drawn on a range of social and sociological and in some cases historical perspectives to bring together description and social analysis of the Access agenda. We have also tried to defend the notion of a scientific approach to social issues against the belief that all that is possible is an interpretive and selective approach to the nature of scientific explanation. Whilst the idea of contingent, contemporary and different realities are significant in Access as everywhere, we have resisted the notion that it is impossible to understand the whole 'bigger' picture. The idea that the plurality of discursively produced realities undermines the attempt to understand the whole picture is widespread in social and cultural studies (Reckwitz and Rosa 2023: 6).

It should be clear from what we have written that we think social and educational theory should be about the present and its immediacy for the future. The crises of the present gives theory/analysis its importance. But what do we mean by 'theory'? Reckwitz argues we should distinguish between social theory, which asks 'what is the social?' and from which perspectives can we analyse it?' – and the 'theory of society', which asks, 'what are the structural features of modern societies?' and 'what are the concepts we need to use to investigate it?'. Social theory uses concepts such as action, communication, norms and roles, discourse, power and institutions whilst 'theories of society' uses theories of structural life such as how capitalism as a system works or how individualisation or social differentiation actually works in history or in modernity (Reckwitz and Rosa ibid :12). We have in fact used *both* these approaches since the examination of education is an empirical field with actual, real, social events and phenomena and it is a social field and discourse within the theories of society framework. We have used thinkers such as Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas and Freire whom we see as social theorists and theorists of society such as Shor, Freire, Wolf, Piketty, Zuboff and Goodman who have examined actual examples of learning, education and social transformation.

The complicated reality is that there are various vocabularies for theorising the social. We live in a scientific and pluralistic culture in which interdisciplinary efforts to grasp the sociocultural world cannot be constrained by the boundaries of the disciplines, though we have also noted the difficulties in escaping the disciplines. In a secularised modernity we cannot accept theological or religious accounts of our existence and so we look for a theory or theories of society which can enable us to make some general statements about particular societies. In our case the focus is on the growth and meaning of mass higher education and Access in modernity, or what some term 'late modernity'. This refers to what has happened since the late 1970s including developments in globalisation, digitalisation, post-industrialisation and liberalisation (Reckwitz and Rosa ibid: 17). At the more prosaic level we hope the theory of society approach we have used has been able to identify some of the causes and explanations for the reproduction of inequalities in higher education and to explain how Access might be seen as part of the potential transformation of those structures and practices. In crossing the invisible boundaries between theories of society and that of empirical studies of Access and widening participation we hope to have made contexts and connections more visible.

A summary of themes within our 'theories of society' referred to in this volume includes:

- social development, social action and the common good
- social justice and redistribution
- human capital theory
- education as the reproduction of labour
- cultural reproduction and resistance
- a general theory of social formation
- the crisis of the public sphere and the public good
- mass media, communication and global attention economy

Social development, social action and the common good

If the history and current reality of social development were less complex and 'braided'

than it is, it would be a more simple matter to explain the impact and importance of Access education. We have maintained that Access grew out of a strong tradition of social purpose and beliefs that a critical education could and should contribute to social and political action for change. In Britain this tradition had roots in a wonderfully diverse and conflicted history of adult and continuing education (Fieldhouse 1996). The role of universities, especially the extra-mural 'great tradition' (Freeman 2023), was significant as were the independent organisations of the working class who struggled for access to learning and knowledge for change and improvement in the common good. These were the origins of the adult education *movement* which later evolved into a *service* on behalf of the state and provided for learners as consumers. The incorporation of vast areas of previously voluntary education into state provision was one of the themes of modern state formation which undermined radical and responsible social action through and within education itself. This was a theme that emerged within the Access movement itself in Britain in the later 20th century. We have already alluded to the immense range of education initiatives which can claim some parentage rights in generating learning opportunities for working people. These included the independent working class education sector, the trades union movement, the National Council of Labour Colleges, the Workers' Educational Association, the adult residential colleges and the Plebs League and Labour Colleges. The role of local education authorities and numerous voluntary associations also helped to sustain what was in comparison to the 21st century, a rich and diverse variety of adult education. Within that variety was what the encylopaedic volume on modern British adult education called ...'the very successful Access movement in further education and the Open Colleges' (Fieldhouse 1996: 396).

Whilst the variety of institutions in the adult education world provided a structure and systems for organising courses and learning opportunities, albeit one that was marginal and precarious where funding was concerned, questions of what knowledge was for and how it might or might not transform prospects for the learners were answered by teachers and learners themselves. The impulse here was the acquisition of people's knowledge and 'really useful knowledge' within collective and collaborative learning environments. The intention was to generate learning that was embedded in communities that engaged with social movements which were committed to a democratic social purpose involving greater social justice and social equality.*

A social justice and redistribution

This book has argued that the significance of Access and widening participation goes far beyond the courses and programmes which facilitate entry to universities. It is also at the same time a movement involving post-school education and points the way to a more radical and deeper sense of engagement for higher education. Historically, Access implicitly questioned the traditional forms of teaching and learning and of how we think about academic and public knowledge. In some cases it was explicitly committed to a philosophy of change and transformation (Freire 1972 and 1973; Shor 1992; Newman 2006; Goodall 2019; Ashwin 2020). At the root of the distinction we have made between the concept of access as programmes of learning and Access as a movement there was and remains a concern for social justice and the role of education in bringing about change for the better. The concern is with 'equity' which can be seen as a strategy informed by a theory about why and how the social system is unjust. In Australia we have noted that the approach to access and widening participation had much in common with that of Britain although over time different policy directions have prevailed. Social justice theorists can be located in relation to the interventions and thinking inspired by Michael Sandel (2009) who used the concept of 'redistributive justice' to critique the unequal outcomes of meritocratic values and practices which historically drove educational thinking in the USA and elsewhere.

Access as a movement, however, is best understood as incorporating a wide body of work and action for better education and an improved social result. It is in contemporary life most relevant to the idea of the 'commons' which we understand as the social and common good. That is to say those people who need to benefit most from an expanded and socially just education system and it belongs to no exclusive nation or culture. This means that its nature and characteristics are varied and it has a rich and diverse history and many contemporary manifestations. Access in the more specific higher case sense was and is today a part of a critical dialogue and critical thinking about the nature and meaning of learning and knowledge. It was a competing claim for how knowledge is organised and transmitted and applied within and beyond our educational institutions. It contained epistemological value and this claim remains outstanding. Put simply, Access is a claim to an alternative to the previously dominant paradigm in which formally organised knowledge and academic learning in ways which exclude many if not most people from the full benefits of learning opportunities in higher education. As long as this issue has not been successfully resolved, Access remains a crucial focus and as contested terrain in the world of education. Historically and today this is not without its paradoxes as we have already noted, and whilst access courses and programmes were the means for some to move up the ladder of opportunity and become socially mobile, the education system in which they were embedded functioned to legitimate and confirm the economic and social inequalities of the wider society. By its very existence Access as a movement challenges a system habituated to the filtering and screening out of those who would are not allowed to enter the academy and the professions. Yet in its theory and actual practice it suggests a new paradigm might be possible and it signals the transformational possibilities of a paradigm that continues to motivate people in favour of change through learning and critical thinking.

The emergent question is how do we place Access as a social justice paradigm in its appropriate theory context so that Access practice and programmes can be related to the wider debates and themes of social thinking, social policy and social analysis. One possibility is to frame them within the theorised conceptions of the 'common good' (Marginson 2016; Goodall 2019) and the earlier explanations advanced by Jurgen Habermas on the transitions and crises of the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989, 2022).We believe that these approaches offer useful theoretical insights which underpin the applied concepts of equity and social justice which are inscribed in both access and the Access movement.

Human capital theory

Simon Marginson (2016) notes in his seminal account of higher education and the common good the surprising survival of human capital theory in the social policy narratives in most countries. Investment in higher education is thought to be the key driver for economic growth and underpins explanations of the benefits of equity concerns by policy makers and educationalists. Everywhere, though for a quarter of a century, higher education has been considered to be a positional good and its position is irreducible (Marginson 1997, 2016). Its important

** A single volume or chapter cannot hope to summarise the immense extent of educational interventions which were rooted in social action philosophies and ideas of the common good. Nevertheless, in referring to a short and perhaps unfairly selective list of major contributors to this tradition we can only alert the reader to the scope and reach of the theme and its impact on generations of educationalists. The work and writings of R.H. Tawney (1943), Henry Morris (1924), Paulo Freire (1972, 1973), Tom Lovett (1988), Ira Shor (1987,1992), Jane Thompson (1980, 1983), Sally Tomlinson (1990, 2019)... and from Australia – Michael Newman (1979, 2006), Noel Pearson (2001) Bruce Pascoe (2018), Jane Goodall (2019) and Simon Marginson (2016) – all of whom have been referenced in this book – can testify to the power of ideas and practices of education in the service of social action for the common good.*

social sorting role has been enhanced as mass systems of HE have come to dominate the labour markets in an unequal capitalist world. The only way out of the inequalities generated by this zero-sum position is through the mediating power of more egalitarian policies. However, though universal desires for betterment are articulated through higher education, the social opportunities available are not universally available. Inequality, difference and social exclusion mean that the number of absolute socially advantaged positions on offer is limited by their scarcity. In this case the scope for relative advantage is crucial and students from affluent families come to dominate the high value positions. They purchase privileged access within the mass system which then tells the tale of the search for social success of families in the hierarchies of prestige for their children under circumstances they do not control, but as active agents strive to gain advantage.

There are severe reservations about the explanation of higher education growth as part of the policy narrative of human capital theory. As higher education expands its capacity to deliver positional gains for the average graduate falls, especially when economic growth is slowing and job competitiveness is increasing. There are only so many good jobs at the top. Extending the boundaries of higher education is often held to be the key to creating social equity and inclusion. However, this notion has been modelled in the main without modifying the deeper and structural social relations that sustain inequality. Furthermore, the mainstream HE and FE institutions themselves have not generally developed alternative knowledge and qualifications which could critique these social relations. Transformations in learning are not possible without reframing to a significant degree the educational institutions and this is probably only likely to happen when social action and mobilisation occurs. Large scale social upheavals and disruptive change are of course often a catalyst for such mobilisations and the world as a whole faces such events on a recurrent and sporadic basis.

This volume explores university access and widening participation as part of the challenge to educational disadvantage. It suggests that decisions by individuals themselves to invest in higher education are not driven by a single factor such as the likelihood of a better paid job, important though that may be to any given individual. Neither can public and state investment in education on its own explain the drive for higher education across the broad masses of the population in so many different countries. Larger scale social and mass-psychological forces we suggest are at work and these forces are not limited to any single set of policy narratives within any given nation. As the author of a great narrative of change and conservatism about Inishkillane in the West of Ireland noted… ‘capitalism fuels the imagination’s flight’ (Brody 1973). The possibilities that modernist, globalised and technologised capitalism offers is an offer open mostly to the educated. A huge and often possibly silent revolution has occurred over some three decades in which the acquisition of university qualifications has become the mark of normality and success (Wesley 2023). Britain and Australia have been transformed into majority-educated societies, though this has not prevented polarisation, inequality and division in society from reappearing in new and old forms. It was not exclusively the operation of the market for labour and the demands for human capital that drove and shaped the functional requirements of higher education or the demand for greater access to learning opportunities, though the nature and availability of work, career possibilities and the returns a person might expect for gaining qualifications are important factors in motivating families and individuals to strive for educational success.

When we theorise the drive for participation in higher education we need to account for much more than economic and human capital investment. In addition to the contradictions and paradoxes thrown up by an expansive and inclusive HE system which was also simultaneously dedicated to elite selection, we are confronted by the massive complexity and ubiquity of a globalised higher education system which is multi-functional and even multi-directional in that it follows no single set of coherent let alone consistent values and practices. Modern science, research and knowledge distribution is now dependent on this phenomenon in its very diversity and concurrent uniformity. We have argued that within this burgeoning system, Access and its hinterland, its salience as a *movement*, was a challenge to the differentiation of value which the modern university systems have produced. The hierarchies of so-called *high quality* institutions often constructed on the basis of their previous advantages and accumulated reserves, have become self-privileging and self-serving elites. They contribute to the antithesis of what we understand to be the common purposes and common good which universities are supposed to embody. More significantly perhaps has been the emulation of the research-led approach to academic excellence by nearly all the mass participation universities themselves. That all should be excellent in an elite driven competitive race for funding is simply impossible, whilst subverting the desirable diversity of provision and curriculums that once existed to serve a population of diverse communities. Access was an attempt to devise, develop and deliver a curriculum in its broadest definition that was critically engaged with its students and the social milieu from which they came, and to which most expected to return. It created new social value based on notions of collective improvement, some of which were implicit and some of which, rooted in ethnic and gender concerns though not exclusively, were designed to transform potential into actual achievements for the students and facilitate better lives.

Education as the reproduction of labour

Education and schooling is both an intensely personal and individual experience, for good or ill, and simultaneously it is the link between the succeeding generations of any nation and the world of work and labour. Schools and universities of all types represent the instrumentalisation of the public sphere by private and state interests. We noted earlier the importance schools and universities for nation building and state formation of modern societies. We noted also in chapters 5 and 6 the significance of class polarisations and in chapters 10 and 11 gender and racial formations in the growth of mass education and in part 4 both the impact and limitations that ideologies such as meritocracy and equal opportunities can have within modern educational systems of higher education. Where such dominant ideologies persist over time and appear to win consent from the majority populations we can say that they are hegemonic.The evolution of Access education has been within a broader policy closely identified with Anglo-American-Australian approaches to a hegemonic conception of the public good. Higher education has been viewed as a private good and as a private entity the less it was seen as a public good.

There can be no doubt that education has evolved to meet the needs of economic development and sustainability. Whether this has been done successfully and coherently is a matter of empirical investigation, and the social systems of different countries and epochs have thrown up fascinating and sometimes shocking differences. These themes through time have often entered the popular mind through imaginative literature. The imaginative yet surely intensely truthful brutality of Dickens’ Dotheboys Hall in his novel Nickolas Nickleby can be contrasted with the callous snobbery and elitism recorded so brilliantly by George Orwell (1947/2023) from within the middle and upper classes in England. D.H. Lawrence’s descriptions in *The Rainbow* of Ursula Brangwen’s

classroom teaching are both deeply revealing of the oppression of the school and its authority and power (Williams and Williams 1973; Davies and Davies 2021: ch 6).

Shaping and determining almost every student's expectation and experience of schooling, including that of university life, is the impending neccessity of having to work for a living by selling skills and talent on the labour market. In 'Schooling in Capitalist America' (1976) Bowles and Gintis stated their view on correspondence theory which claimed to lay bare the relationship of educational selection and differentiation to the needs of the capitalist system. Those destined for higher education receive via the selective means of public education or through the purchase of private education, a grounding in the knowledge and culture commensurate with the management and control of productive life. Those destined for the factory floor, for agricultural hire, for clerical employment in offices and those headed for the service economy of the unskilled and semi-skilled labour market, receive a differentiated, less academic, more vocationally oriented curriculum. This perspective views educational systems as ultimately maintaining and reproducing the competitive inequalities which safeguard wealth and privilege in capitalist nations. Those who succeed in the selective system are educated and trained for 'conceptual' work required by and on behalf of the ultimate owners of capital and wealth. Academic selection serves to sponsor and accelerate up the system a minority who are deemed worthy of preferment and ultimately a better life. Those required to work in the practical aspects of productive life, that is literally to work and labour, are schooled for the execution of work, that is the carrying out of labouring tasks. This was the ultimate 'correspondence' between conception and execution in work and the kind of schooling one received depended upon being allocated to one rather than the other. Those that succeeded got to conceptualise, manage and organise work and the production of wealth and social value; those that failed to rise in the schooling system were ultimately relegated to the lower status jobs and positions and received less reward, naturally. The rewards for success naturally meant only an elite of selected and acculturated people could progress to the pinnacles of achievement and thereby gain the material rewards. This account stresses that the differentiated labour requirements of advanced capitalist production are reproduced in schooling and in the institutionalised hierarchies of higher education through ultimately a differentiated curriculum for those who work and labour and another for those who direct and manage the productive economy. This finds a resonance in Britain between the supposedly different vocational and academic education traditions which characterised secondary modern schools for the many and grammar schools for the selected few during much of the period covered by this book. It is a variant of human capital theory which has undoubtedly some validity in explaining how demand for various types of educated labour helps structure social and educational policy at a societal level. It does, however, severely under-estimate at a social and personal and perhaps cultural level the impact of human agency and aspirations for learning, some of which are articulated through what we have termed the Access movement and within the wider desire for accredited learning and access to the opportunities available in the labour market.

Cultural reproduction and resistance

Pierre Bourdieu outlined a set of general theoretical positions in his empirical studies of social stratification, schooling, universities and culture and indeed he set out some foundational concepts (Bourdieu 1984, 1990) in which he wanted to overcome the division among sociologists between those who viewed social structures as crucial to social scientific understanding and those who supported agent-centred and intersubjective meanings within social analysis (Seidman 1998: 152). Bourdieu was among those who stressed the importance of explaining the social context of individual actions. Yet individuals were capable of action that is intuitive, involves strategies and can be innovative.

A key concept Bourdieu used was that of *habitus*, by which he meant the ways in which social individuals are immersed in ideas, interpretive schemas, ways of behaving, acting, thinking and feeling which help them reproduce their objective conditions of existence. People who share structural or class positions have similar and repetitive experiences which produce a common habitus – a shared version of what the world means and of social practice (behaviour). Habitus always functions at both the individual and social levels and operates in relation to a given social 'field' or form of 'capital'. There are many different fields and many forms of capital but the relevance of habitus to many of the themes contained in this book is clear. We can understand the dynamics of social domination and inequality better if we can place the role of culture and habitus in the context of education and its role in social reproduction. Culture helps reproduce class domination through its influence in learning and education. 'Class domination is mystified or obscured by the ideology – promoted by the dominating classes – which sees the most desired and valued cultural forms and practices as the product of gifted, talented, even charismatic individuals' (Seidman 1998: 155).

Bourdieu's cultural analysis is relevant to the themes taken up by this volume in that the dynamics of class domination are concealed by the acceptance of the ideology of individual talent. Individual ability in Bourdieu's schema plays an important role in so far as it is seen to reflect superior cultural sensibility rather than class based impositions. Class inequality is made possible by transforming social class distinctions into educational ones. The use of meritocracy as an ideology for legitimating differences in performance which are essentially class and culturally driven and the formation of elites through selective schooling and higher education were the themes of earlier chapters and were informed by Bourdieu's approach to education and culture. This approach maintains that there are spheres of social conflict in which different social groups compete to establish cultural values, standards, choices and lifestyles. The inequalities sustained by the reproduction and multiplication of class inequalities and hierarchies through education provide both the historical and the on-going sites of struggle and contestation over access to higher education and over the content and reach of Access programmes and policies. Such educational matters are always part of wider social issues and contexts which shape and are shaped by specific events, places and contingencies but the theorisation of this relationship owes much to the broader conception of habitus which allows us to discuss both individual perceptions of value and performance *and the structural and cultural class dominance imposed by culture*. Bourdieu's habitus allows us to think about subjective dispositions which are embodied in individual persons or agents and to relate these to the objective world of other people and things (Jenkins 1992: 79).

Bourdieu's analysis of the struggle over cultural values suggests also that he was acutely aware of the contest over what constitutes valid and social scientific knowledge. If classes distinguish themselves through claiming the superiority of their class based values and tastes, then is not class based knowledge equally class structured and therefore biased? The claims to valid knowledge and explanations are one of the themes taken up in considering the possibilities of new frameworks for knowledge for Access and widening participation here and at chapter 13 below.

This particular theme finds a resonance also in the understanding of Access, in that culture is defined in this approach as something that infuses all social life. Culture, whether defined as high-brow literature and art or as popular entertainment, is viewed as an expression of lived experience and as something rooted in collective and shared lives and communities. Culture

in this sense is the basis of what we term the Access movement and involves conceptualising communities and social groups as creators of their own cultures and meanings. These are integral to social life, yet clearly all cultures (and sub-cultures) are not equal. Cultural meanings are not fixed and they are often in conflict with other varieties of culture and here we can see in this the emergence of mass higher education as a site in which competing definitions and conceptions of culture are played out. We have argued that this has particular potency in examining questions of gender and race in higher education, where access and the Access movement had specific meanings and challenged cultural codes and practices. We used the insights and research of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies and the work of Stuart Hall to show that cultural and social conditions were connected and that some meanings legitimate social privilege (Hall 1980; Seidman 1998: 200-01).

A general theory of social formation

There is a wide agreement we believe that no single and general theory of higher education has been set out which can do justice to the diversity and complexity of higher learning and its institutional forms and types as they have emerged in our globalised world of the 21st century. However, Simon Marginson has attempted to describe the *social formation* of higher education in general theoretical terms. This asserts that it is possible to view the functions of higher education operating globally, nationally, regionally and in civic society generally. They operate to reproduce and regulate the professions and higher level occupations; they shape the discursive practices of the disciplines and they socialise individuals within collective values and beliefs. Individuals gain a sense of their identity and self-worth from the social life and interaction they share at university. Important though these functions are however, they do not explain the growth of mass HE as we have pointed out earlier but they help explain the character and functions of HE systems.

The growth of higher education is more effectively explained by the interaction between families that are active and invest in every stage of development of their children in the contest for educational success. This is a cumulative and generational tendency and accompanies the wider struggles and movements for social justice and equality which we have outlined in earlier chapters and which contributed to the Access movement. The system itself is not neutral in what we conceive of as a clash of values, interests and perspectives. The agents in this social/story/narrative are differentiated by social class and wealth and family capacities and 'ownership' of cultural and other forms of capital. The educational institutions are differentiated by value, with the high value places monopolised by the wealthy and elite groups. The actual interaction between subjectivities (individuals) and families and objective structural forms such as the actual universities or the actual state and government, takes place within specific national boundaries and at specific sites which themselves have their own characteristics. Oxford is not Harvard which is not Melbourne! Neither are these elite places the same as the mass participation institutions which account for much of the mass participation we have been describing. Widening participation is an adjunct function for sifting and sorting the majority within the nation state and goes far beyond the selection of those destined for the comparatively few elite places and positions available in society's top echelons.

It is important that we do not forget that even though learning is almost always organised and controlled within institutionalised settings it has to pass across the subjectivity of the individual. It has to be somehow 'experienced' by persons who are subjects and it takes place in historical contingencies which are always changing and evolving. Anthony Giddens famously referred to how in modernity the 'self' has become a lifelong project for individuals (Giddens 1991). In a sense some people curate themselves as developmental projects in a process of self-formation (Marginson 2014) in which individual aspirations and desires interact and engage with social structures. We have suggested in this book that this engagement of individual motivations and aspirations within the wider social formations involving class, race, ethnicity, gender, generation and geography are what has animated and supported the emergence of Access within the widening participation movement as a whole over a considerable period of time. This movement was also both a physical and intellectual location for the clash of ideas and contests between fields of knowledge and ideas which are part of the transformative power of learning (Bourdieu 1990; Jenkins 1992; Seidman 1998). This is why Access was a focus for the development of critical thinking and an expression of critical realism in which knowledge was an objective force for change and social improvement for the working masses and for the public good (Rose 2021).

Higher education is a complex selective and stratified mass experience in modern societies, which claims to be the provider of universal benefits on behalf of itself and the wider society. This can be said to be a knowledge claim that is at the same moment an 'ideological' claim, in that all higher education institutions claim to be for the common good and all claim to be active for inclusion. These claims are of course not universal claims for truth, but rather are policy narratives which serve to mask the claims of social groups who have wealth, power and influence and who are responsible for the highly unequal and unjust social outcomes in our societies. As we hope to have shown in chapter 5 above, there may well be meritocratic systems in play in higher education but they are by no means neutral and egalitarian systems. Marginson asserts that as participation rises and approaches universality… 'equity as social inclusion meets equity as social group equality' (2016 ibid:118) which implies that when all social groups are fully included, then under-representation vanishes. This does not happen however, since inclusion is not spread fairly across the whole of higher education and value in HE is not shared equally. Far from it, since the HE providers compete fiercely to show they have greater value than their competitors and there is a steep gradient of elite universities. What characterises the HE system in the UK, Australia and the United States is great inequality both in terms of individual access to HE opportunity and for the equity groups including some racial and ethnic communities. As competition for high value places in HE increases due to the perceived openness of access, the reality may be that marginalised and disadvantaged groups are in fact less able to compete for the 'private goods'(ie, the degrees and qualifications) that elite universities manage and control.

The higher education system that has evolved over the last 50 years is diverse and global and it has accelerated within the 21st century to unanticipated and almost universal significance. It is also a site of struggle and is contested terrain! It can be viewed legitimately as a site of struggle for alternatives which it is thought should lead to a fairer and more socially just public sphere. The relations of education to the common good are complex and always subject to change and they are now increasingly part of the multiple global economic flows of people, goods, services and wealth, in addition to being the source of the science and research which are central to the determination of social value in higher education (Marginson ibid 2016:160). However, these factors do not explain the workings of social value in public higher education systems nor the social divisions that are built on the fact that knowledge produced in public institutions is used to confer private benefits and to sustain inequalities. A major paradox and theoretical quandary exists: an elite sector which generates social goods based on autonomous cultural and scientific standards and research AND a mass system of HE driven by the need to have quantity delivered to the masses within quasi-markets as if students were only consumers of private goods.

The crisis of the public sphere and the public good

The notion of the public good and of collective interests of society have an important place in the long history of ideas and these have a special resonance for working people (Rose ibid). The wider social significance of the public sphere goes beyond what Habermas referred to as the 'democratic will formation' which includes the democratic voting franchise and legal rights which characterise most 'western democracies' (Seeliger and Sevignani 2022).The wider civic society is included within the concept of the public sphere and, it is argued, has boundaries established by history, culture and modern political struggle over time. The argument suggests that these boundaries are now dissolving and fragmenting under the pressures of modern capitalism. Zygmunt Baumen (2000) famously referred to what he called 'liquid modernity' to analyse this trend and we noted earlier the impact of 'accelerating' capitalism and its relentless capacity to change social and economic life (Fisher 2009; Noys 2014). The impact of such change is transforming the public sphere into something less free and consequently we must understand this to sustain the democratic community.

Habermas (1989 and 2022) suggests that the Enlightenment instituted a sense of basic and human rights within democratic institutional life and that there was 'a normative gradient' in the consciousness of legally free and equal citizens. This was a conception derived from the work of Kant and asserted that each individual ought to be accorded equal respect and receive equal treatment within the general, moral and foundational social norms that apply equally to everyone – regardless of the distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, identity or any other defining characteristic within the single human race. Of course these distinctions and categories are socially constructed and often contested and are by no means simply neutral in their effects. In a world where knowledge itself is contested,

The public good and collective interests of society have an important place in the long history of ideas and have a special resonance for working people

the point is that higher learning should be used to shape society so as to increase our capacity to enlighten and educate for a better social result. This was, we believe, the foundational aspect of Access, whose conception of knowledge was part of a moral vision and a publicly educational voice for reason and for change.

Habermas refers to the dynamics of a transformation of social conditions accelerated by technological progress (Seeliger and Sevignani ibid: 4) and these dynamics are generally also those inscribed within learning and education, hence their importance for Access and the engagement of the university sector. The prevailing ideologies and discourses of educational change, cultural transmission and reproduction find an expression in educational structures, consciousness and practices. The dynamics of inequality are built into our educational lives, paradoxically co-existing with both acceptance and resistance to ideologies of equality of opportunity, meritocracy, possessive individualism and notions of the common good. These concepts have been incorporated into the analysis we have made of what we term the Access movement, which we characterised as a loose and somewhat eclectic collection of approaches to curriculum planning, teaching and learning and knowledge formation in post-school education. The institutional forms that Access courses took were highly varied, from adult education and community learning to university extra-mural and foundation courses, but its paradigm had coherence around notions of education for social outcomes and social justice. Central to these concerns was an understanding that the public sphere of social and civic life and the role of higher education within that were crucial to social progress. However, we need to be aware of assuming that a single public sphere exists which is structured and coherent and represents a single set of interests or identities. It is better perhaps to think of the public sphere as a complex set of structures, ideologies and discourses which are in motion and subject to contingency as well as forces beyond the control of limited interests. The public sphere is not a single, unified entity but its importance for the understanding of higher education is undeniable.

Habermas shows us how the instrumentalisation of the public sphere by private and state interests works to polarise public life essentially along class lines. The modern state, he argues, attempts to address its citizens as private citizens rather than members of a collective. The electronic mass media have become ever more important in this process as they have infiltrated not just public and cultural life but the lived experience of schools and higher education. Collective publics are transformed into manufactured publics and the state tries to direct public dialogue amongst which the discourse on education and opportunity can play a major role which can be highly politicised. Debates and dialogue about the nature and meaning of equality of opportunity, meritocracy and the need for social justice have never disappeared from the contested agendas of educational opportunity. This has significance for how we understand and theorise Access and widening participation within a public sphere which is fragmented and often acutely distressed.

We have argued that mass higher education involves the creation of audiences and 'publics' whose limits cannot be simply determined by those in authority. Access as a movement came from below as much as it was provided by enlightened authorities from above. Access providers and developers believed they had some relative autonomy and some sense of agency in their development work. This position raised a vital question which is yet to be fully resolved: was Access part of the transformative potential of working people or publics in motion (Seeliger and Sevignani ibid: 9) or was it part of a collective identity that failed to develop a fundamental challenge to social inequalities ? We have also argued that public authorities have tried to control the growth of mass higher education, at times limiting its reach and at other times encouraging expansion, sometimes on a planned basis and sometimes as an extension of market economics. Whichever variant was adopted the desired transformations always required attention be given to learning processes and institutions. Public authorities tried to control growth but only with limited success. We have argued that rising demand for higher education was located in popular consciousness but that this was manifested through unmet demand from below which itself was rooted in a desire for a better quality of life. We suggested the existence of connections historically and in contemporary society between ideas of the public good, the struggles for literacy and learning that working people had undergone throughout modern history and we argued that Access was part of the continuing thread through time that is about critical learning.

We did not resolve the matter of whether Access penetrated deeply enough into the public sphere of education to trigger a genuinely transformative learning process. There are difficult questions anyway of just how we might judge and evaluate such a matter – what would be the scope, the reach and the depth of such a question and what data would be appropriate to evaluate the answers ? One putative answer might be that changes in public discourse about learning and education and the public purposes of higher education might be seen as deeply problematical. Instead of flowing from top to bottom as a result of policy from controlling elites should we take a democratic and non-elitist approach which comes from multiple directions and sources? This has certainly occurred as we have pointed out above and in the work of notable educationalist and/or social theorists who have commented on these issues (Fieldhouse 1996, Marginson 2016, Scott 2021, Ashwin 2020). We have indicated the value of alternative frameworks and paradigms where education publics overlap with other discourses and suggested in chapter 6 some empirical points of departure involving lifelong learning, the role of women in education and the salience of race and ethnicity in higher education in particular. We have also suggested that our basic validity claim lies in a democratic and liberal approach to theory and to questions of knowledge. Knowledge should be tried and tested in the public realm, against the canons of scientific methods and challenge, not ascribed to 'post-truth' or 'post-factual' knowledge derived from the identities or experiential status of the knower.

In this volume, Access and widening participation are positioned within the persisting social movements in western society that continue to raise awareness and consciousness of the incomplete inclusion of people who are oppressed, marginalised, afflicted and disadvantaged. These categories mean we must give attention to the classes, sub-groups, sub-cultures, genders, races, ethnic groups and even nations which make up our increasingly diverse societies. The public sphere according to Habermas shows us a steep gradient between the positive validity and the unfulfilled content of human rights as they are experienced by members of these groups. The public sphere is the arena of dialogue and dispute where what he calls deliberative politics takes place and this is an essential component of a democratic society. Dialogue and dispute are of course liable to give voice or lead to dissent as citizens search for rationally acceptable solutions and decisions based on what they perceive to be the truth and on what they think is just. Educational access, we have suggested, is a part of the condensation of public and private spheres of life: a point where the lifeworld of civic/civil society becomes active and conscious and articulates with the individual, private and familial world, often within communities. Access written large as it were is a focus point or prism for active citizenship within a liberal culture which itself encourages learning both for its own sake as a marker of a civilised society and as a means for addressing socially and economically disconnected populations. We must also consider whether the great growth of mass participation on HE, often driven by policies stressing the need for competition for university places has significant limits. Markets and neoliberal policies were present and active in the period of greatest growth but they had significant limits in the transformation of higher education as we hope to have shown in our understanding of, for example, the role of women, the extent and scope of lifelong learning and the impact of race within Access in part 5 of this book. Without public education, modern capitalist/welfare state economies which seek to build high degrees of trust, solidarity and reciprocity among diverse populations, cannot secure the legal and material conditions needed for the private and public autonomy of each citizen. Where once nation building and state formation were the crucibles for forging educational policy and provision, it is now different knowledge that is needed for deliberative and active citizenship. Without this we appear helpless before the intensifying crisis that is evolving in the third decade of the 21st century. This is the bedrock of our concern in this book with the need for a universal literacy and a critical curriculum.

The critical analysis of the public sphere and its putative fragmentation does not necessarily mean we are convinced that we are at 'disaster capitalism' but we are certain that there is both a crisis of ecology and environmental survival and a social crisis which has global significance. The social crisis involves the emergence of a vastly rich kleptocracy which has styled itself as a self-justifying 'nobility' due to the almost unimaginable wealth they have accumulated and the justifying of this as something they have deserved through their own talent, superior intelligence and smartness. They are the new 'feudal elite'; an aristocracy of wealth and hence power who can avoid the everyday concerns of the majority. On the other side of this chasm of wealth is a largely propertyless, plebeian mass population who have only their labour and skills to sell. And as dystopian versions of the future appear on the horizon of possibilities, there may be very few markets available in which to sell labour power as automation and artificial intelligence begin to transform productive processes and the very nature of work itself. As the double crisis of social and ecological conditions evolves our lifeworld is increasingly impacted by technological change. The public sphere is continuously transformed both economically and socially by the communicative media. The globalised private companies that control and own such capacities are subject to few democratic controls; transparency and accountability are fundamentally available to share owners rather than to democratic publics. This technologically driven change has far reaching impacts on social and community life – right across the planet. We believe that educationalists must address this problem as a central and determining feature of our learning and lives or be marginal to all our futures.

Mass media and the global attention economy

The transformation (and destruction) of what Habermas called 'collective publics' into 'manufactured publics' is made possible by the mass media and its use within state-directed discourses. The products of this global media empire are made for us, not by us. We consume these products and the practices and meanings that are created within them, we do not in general help create or manufacture them. Problematically, they can be addictive and they monopolise attentionality and we end up outsourcing our imaginations and diminishing our own personal and social capacities (Crawford 2015). We lose autonomy, the capacity for agency and activism in our own local cultures in favour of a globalised, uniformity of 'edutainment', produced and distributed for profit and gain. To create and maintain an appeal to a mass market means that the common denominators are likely to be of low resolution designed to appeal to the greatest number of users or consumers. This is not a recipe for quality and a differentiated cultural offer designed around creative and diverse social and collective communities who have their own cultures and sub-cultures. The Hollywoodisation and Disneyfication of our global culture has proceeded apace as the commercialised global world has outrun the under-funded local one in many of our public spheres.

A screen and a powerful computer are in one form or another available to practically every living human on the planet. The attention of billions of people is co-opted every hour of every day and all of this is provided for us at the click of a button and the switch of a screen. Every school child will demand a personal hand-held device capable of communicating with every living being on the globe. A destitute refugee from the horrors of warfare, persecution, poverty or oppression scrambles ashore or across a barbed-wire border fence clutching a mobile phone. The emergence of vast, global

communication and commercial empires based on the control of the new information and computing technologies (Microsoft, Alphabet/Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon), many based in Silicon Valley, California or in China subject to state control by the Communist Party, has seen the instrumentalisation of the public sphere by private and state interests. This has been under conditions of class polarisation where the vast majorities of populations are disbarred from meaningful participation other than as consumers. Collective publics become dysfunctional in such a system and can become marginalised and subject to inequalities and increasing social exclusion. How could what Habermas refers to as a propertyless, plebeian mass population, possibly compete to produce a competitive culture against the power of modern corporate mass media?

The new media are radical and disruptive and each consumer is potentially a producer of their own media, yet this potential is unrealised. The unregulated, egalitarian, de-centralised and potentially spontaneous promise of the new technology is drowned out by the self-referenced and self-affirming echo chambers of the commercialised media interests and systems. Much of the value this technology is used to generate profits for the corporate media mega-giants rather than to create any emancipatory potential. The consequences are a fragmentation of the political sphere and of political opinion in an unregulated and boundless public sphere where those who metaphorically shout loudest because they have the most resources and capital to create content, are the most powerful. The creation and distribution of knowledge and cultural content is effectively closed off and sealed so as to sustain wealth controlling elites. The computational media determine the meaning of organisations and the way in which they are allowed to work and it does this in great secrecy. Content, including educational and cultural content is allowed to vary only within acceptable boundaries which do not challenge dominant thinking and attititudes. The lifeworld becomes, according to Habermas, commodified and politics becomes 'platformed' and divorced from the lives and experiences of the common people.

At the everyday level, entertainment, advertising and consumption of private goods are elided together and addressed to citizens who are depoliticised, seeing themselves as passive consumers of goods, services and messages produced somewhere else. Incentives are offered to those who are narcissistic and devoted to self-presentation and performativity whilst decorum, civil behaviour and good manners are relegated to history. Thousands of commercial television channels, millions of U-Tube and Tik-Tok uploads and the plethora of advertised products available to each and every cell phone owner, speak to the debasement and trivialisation of our communicative culture (Monbiot 2023). There is almost everywhere outside of the repressive state-controlled societies such as China and Russia an attempt to privatise the entire communications infrastructure and to capture the media environment within private ownership. Secrecy and privacy for those who own and control the media empires is the desired norm and is an organisational principle whilst public, democratic and transparent public media are in retreat or under threat nearly everywhere.

This is not to deny the fact that modern, computer-based communicative technologies have transformed our lives and futures and that this is to be welcomed as a signal of our collective intelligence and capacity to continue to transform our world for the better. However, the benefits and positive aspects of this fourth industrial revolution are extremely poorly and unfairly distributed. The public capitalistic organisations, though generally privately owned, which control and develop world resources do not have to be committed to egalitarian outcomes which could benefit the whole of humankind, though controversially some claim precisely to be doing that. The 21st century is undoubtedly chaotic and fragmented and the outcomes of this chaos are by no means clear. Where we are heading remains obscure; destinations are opaque and the direction of travel is uncertain. There exists no cogent plan or conception and we live in a public sphere which is characterised by conflicting publics. Education cannot be exempt from this, neither can it disavow in our view its responsibilities for thinking through these existential issues. If not educationalists, then who?

There are implications for how we view knowledge production in all of this. The new communicative technologies have compressed geography and one effect of this has been the creation of a global platform for knowledge as well as a platform for performative politics by populist politicians. The creation of 'deepfake' truths and 'knowledge' which cannot be challenged because someone who exercises power has stated it is a fact, has serious implications for democratic societies if social media platforms and biased media companies abrogate their responsibilities for the content of the media platforms they own and control. A web of deceit and obfuscations can be built by constant repetition of conspiracy theory memes which assert that their opponents are peddling fakenews and thus conspiring against them. These arguments accept no objective notions of truth: their truth is the truth – full stop.

Because of the many manifestations of modern computational communications the pace and intensity of social and political events has accelerated – almost beyond imagination (Noyes 2014). General social development and the pace of change, however, impact differently in different societies and cultures and their effects are uneven. War, for example, is often not a continuous battle – it may be fragmented over a long period. It can start and stop, and then start again (Kaplan 2024). The implications for knowledge producers in the field of education, science and culture are significant. In the face of the epistemic uncertainties which expanding knowledge and its colonisation by vast technocratic companies brings, we must surely capture the potential for the common good which these developments can also yield. The boundaries of social and scientific literacy need to be extended in response to these challenges. The common and collective capacity for communication should not simply be a vehicle for an ever-expanding commercial network of companies whose interest is overwhelmingly in profits and return on investment. The social goals and importance of these means of communication need to be re-assessed and revised so their great benefits can be managed within the value frameworks of rationality, accountability, science, tolerance and democratic politics.

We can only say perhaps with some certainty that the period we are now in is transitional. The multi-dimensional change we can chart now means that life cannot be as it once was. Change of the scale we have outlined is irreversible and we cannot simply look to the past for guidance. Neither should we be naïve about the need to safeguard our public life from the capacity of the mass media to distort truth and validity in public discourse and the potentially catastrophic consequences this can have for democratic values and politics. Communicative rationality demands we defend our 'western' notions of free speech and freedom of opinion. The force of reason and science must be mobilised to defend the continuing validity and belief in the possibility of scientific methods and understanding. The world and 'publics' of higher education can be said to have a special mission in this respect. We have argued that Access was both actually and potentially a counter-public space, in that it was an example of how conflicting publics involving race, ethnicity and gender as well as working peoples' identities can generate educational challenge and change. In this sense it was a critical part of the modern public sphere.

The engagement with what we have termed social theory and theories of society should have helped explain and explore the complex relations of higher education and its social meaning. No single theoretical approach or set of concepts can explain such a complex set of circumstances and practices which characterise modernity's relationship with higher education, so no such claim is made here. However, we do believe that a claim can be made

for a shift of emphasis and focus which flows from the application of critical social theory to higher education issues. We believe that a paradigm shift is possible so as to produce deeper insights and to make more visible and transparent the vital connections that are necessary for an improved social result from critical engagement with Access and higher education.

A paradigm shift for Access?

We have suggested that in order to fully grasp access and widening participation as both a historical project of growth, challenge and change and as part of the history of ideas, we need to engage and apply critical concepts and approaches to our subject. We have drawn from selected social theorists whose intellectual traditions can be traced back to the European Enlightenment which instituted a sense of basic human rights within democratic institutional life, though we are aware of the fact that even basic propositions such as this are contested by some postmodernist and 'positionalist' social theorists (Seidman 1998: 161; Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020: 118). The social theory we have chosen to use within our interpretive scheme of Access and the associated threads through time, comes from within a tradition of social theory as critical, reflexive and publicly engaged (Gouldner 1970; Marginson 2016; Reckwitz and Rosa 2023).We have included appropriate elements and concepts in a way that suggests a coherent perspective, not one that suggests the existence of a social theory canon. The debate over what is or might be a social theory canon is on-going and social theory is a contested field (Seidman ibid 160-1). Nevertheless, we assert the right and the need to identify and use the best conceptual scheme we can assemble and we hope that it supports the continuing assertion of the centrality of a moral vision for progress and social justice in the study and practice of education in general and of Access in particular.

If Access was about the assertion and renewal of rights to education as part of the public good then its theorisation had to be necessarily about the need for knowledge and pedagogy which could address this dual perspective: access to what and for what social purpose, and just what kind of knowledge was needed to bring about transformations towards a more socially just outcome? These questions brought the focus onto both the epistemology of Access (just what kind of knowledge did Access require or imply?) and into public policy on access and widening participation in the era of mass education. In trying to answer we propose the consideration of new frameworks or paradigms.

The concept of paradigm used here derives from the work of Thomas Kuhn (1970) and refers to the way we understand and apply knowledge to particular practical situations. Kuhn's main concern was with the analysis of types of scientific explanation which led him to explore the conceptual basis and organisation of science as ways of looking at the 'natural' world. He argued that a field of scientific enquiry rests on a set of assumptions and taken for granted axioms which set out the conceptual boundaries within which the enquiry takes place. These scientific parameters included the models of analysis in use, the problems for which solutions were necessary, the validating standards used to assess results and the normal modes of thinking applied to a particular scientific enterprise. All of these constitute a paradigm within which a scientist carries out 'normal' science. Kuhn suggests it is not normal practice for a scientist to examine the assumptions upon which her/his work rests. The significance of Kuhn's work for other fields of enquiry in the social sciences or education lies in its ability to help us explain our understanding of the ways in which knowledge is organised, transmitted and recognised.

Access as a movement questions implicitly and explicitly some of the conventional axioms and assumptions of conventional educational practice. Access programmes of study have often been overtly related to collective experience and forms of knowing which are rooted in the perceived needs and experience of disadvantaged groups and communities. It is not the numbers of access students and courses that are most significant but rather the fact that this movement appears as a practical realisation and expression of a possible alternative educational paradigm. The knowledge paradigm in which Access courses, for example, operated took as its central concern the idea that the mind and intellect is capable of infinite development. An individual has an unlimited capacity for educational development and as such has an entitlement to learning at each and every stage of a life. In the Access movement this perspective was passed on to students through a curriculum which stresses the need for useful knowledge which can be acquired by any person who is sufficiently motivated and dedicated to learning. The Open University in the UK demonstrated more than a generation ago that thousands of students could complete their degrees without having had entry qualifications. Access became part of self-understanding; it became knowledge which could be acted on; learning was externalised in students' social actions and practice (Freire 1972; Lovett 1983; Shor 1987, 1992) and possibilities were opened that had once been closed. The possibility of a paradigm shift became possible and remains an option open to present and future educators.

Access as critical thinking: knowledge and human interests

Access courses showed a wide public that knowledge could potentially be emancipatory (Freire 1973; Habermas 1972) and could lead to what Mezirow (1983) called 'perspective transformation' by which he meant a critical theory of adult learning that could transform our understanding of why we are the way we are and enable us therefore to be different. Knowledge was not just enshrined in existing syllabuses and institutions of higher education. Access was always a movement of learners and teachers who looked for change in the way institutions managed and selected their students and the knowledge they were deemed to require to get ahead in further learning – and all that might follow from that. If perspectives were to be transformed as part of this then Access was also a process of *critical* learning. But what exactly was critical learning and could it lead to a paradigm shift in learning? These were the sorts of questions that were being asked by proponents of critical thinking and adult learning in the 1980s (Mezirow ibid; Griffin 1983; Gibson 1986) – the initial point at which the Access movement was asking questions about the dominant paradigm for entry to higher education.

There are many claimants as authentic antecedents of Access and its history and the openness of the 'great tradition' of liberal adult education was set against the elitism and exclusions of working class people, ethnic groups and black populations which elite universities had operated down through the generations. The marginal freedoms, for example, of some university adult education institutions meant that university extensions could often create their own syllabuses, set up and deploy their own teaching and learning methods and adopt knowledges that moved well beyond single subject disciplines (Fieldhouse et al 1996; McCulloch 2011; Freeman 2020). They did not, however, move to the creation of what Stuart Hall (1983) notably called a 'universal literacy' and critical curriculum which might have equipped the common people entering mass higher education with a knowledge base with which to challenge the marginality of access provision even when its status was protected by university extra-mural education. The challenge came through a more diffused but real sense that a range of initiatives from below and from the margins of institutional education could sustain and develop a sense of the social purpose of a more open type of university and a more democratic form of lifelong learning (Davies 1996, 1997). We have already noted in chapter 10 above the immense role played by women in the history of adult learning and its contribution to social justice issues. A good deal of debate took place in

Transformations through critical learning; Knowledge and learning

the 1970s and 1980s on the best way forward to produce higher education for all. The social policy aspects of increasing provision and the economic implications of increasing state intervention in higher education were widely discussed (Roderick and Stephens 1979) and a change of emphasis in academic and public concern could be detected. A wave of interest occurred in what was called lifelong education and which later was transposed into the idea of lifelong learning. The famous Faure Report in 1972 stimulated policy developments in a number of countries in Europe, Australasia, Canada and Japan (Richmond 1974; Field 2004a, 2013; Elfert 2016). A key aspect of the new approach was that there should be a focus on the promotion of learning rather than on teaching and training. There was a second wave of interest in the notion of lifelong learning in the 1990s when globalisation and the pace of technological, economic and cultural change pushed competitive economies to greater rivalry in the fields of financial investment and economic growth (Field 2001). Education and hence lifelong learning became part of the burgeoning knowledge economy which focussed primarily on the individualistic benefits that could accrue from an instrumentalist and individualistic approach to learning (Field 2004b). It has been suggested in this book that this trend is at odds with ideas of a broad learning 'Access' culture which favoured wider participation and social transformations through critical learning. As a trend, it was to grow in influence as the century reached its end and the fruits of neoliberal policies began to shape learning and especially continuing education for economic purposes.

Knowledge and learning specifically in Access, however, were problematised – that is to say, the processes of knowing, and hence learning itself were thought to be properly located at least in part in the student's experience and consciousness. Knowledge was not simply incorporated within objective syllabuses and curriculums, as in the traditional and conventional paradigm. Knowledge had to be interpreted and re-experienced in the mental structures of the mature student where the student had greater responsibility for her/his own learning. This 'phenomenological' approach put the student's subjectivity and understanding of self at a more central locus than the older, more 'objective' view of what knowledge actually was. Access courses had in general a commitment to process rather than to curriculum content. This was the basis for critical learning and social development and was rooted in collective, communal experience and social practice rather than individualistic concerns for self – advancement. At least this was in theory a rationale for the distinctiveness of access approaches to learning and teaching which focussed on the methods appropriate to the (adult) learners who were the students. It involved what we can call a pedagogy of 'dialogue' and questioning in which learners were seen as creators of knowledge rather than as consumers of knowledge produced somewhere else by others who were considered to be experts. How the more subjective and phenomenological approaches to learning experience could challenge the embedded, unequal and socially unjust material and cultural factors which constituted huge barriers to learning, however, was unclear. That the Access curriculum or approach to learning had significance for how knowledge, culture and power were conceptualised and distributed could not be denied. New forms of knowledge and experience were emerging which would eventually be admitted to a more problematical and contested curriculum, more in tune with the needs of those 'below' and outside the mainstream of university life at that time (Seidman 1998: ch 7).

However, contradictory forces were in play and impacting on the likely future direction of higher education everywhere. In Australia the notion of the 'knowledge economy' took hold of public and political imaginations and from the late 1980s, after a decade of recession and stagflation, an era of technological change and innovation appeared to beckon as national economic competitiveness replaced a focus on security. This was a focus designed to buttress innovation and university research rather than extend and re-invigorate access to a revised and more radical curriculum in the interests of the masses desiring access to higher education (Wesley ibid: 139-146).

By the end of the last decade of the 20th century, higher education in the United Kingdom was said to be in crisis, though different voices identified different crises (Griffin 1997). Significantly, academics identified a crisis of knowledge with implications for the values of a liberal democratic society as mass participation along with its Access variant took hold of the modern world of higher education (Scott 1997). Lest we assume that the discourse of crisis has somehow disappeared we must note that the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century saw a notable educator state in the opening sentence of his book that... 'Talk of crisis is everywhere in higher education. There are so many different crises: crises of funding, crises of leadership, mission and governance, crises of access and inclusion, the student debt and graduate employment crisis, crises of the humanities and social sciences, and even crises of morality' (Ashwin 2020). Our concern is with Access and mass participation and is not about the arguably continuing crises of higher education (Featherstone 2023). Our focus is on the educational purposes of a university education and the need for critical thinking about the issues that have come to dominate debates about the

meaning and quality of higher education. Our contention is that the Access movement made and continues to make a contribution to this debate, and in particular to the issue of what constitutes knowledge in a university education. As to whether there is a continuing crisis in higher education, there can be no doubt that the world's universities are becoming a key battleground in the on-going struggle for equity, racial justice and access to opportunity. Our approach is to argue that the Access movement was an attempt to confront and engage with pedagogies and the unequal access to knowledge which underpins the structural inequality we find in universities. This was and remains itself a fundamental cultural and political matter, deeply embedded in our educational institutions and in our thinking.

New knowledge: contested knowledge

Access as defined in this book arose as part of the transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education in a period when the social and class structure of Britain and Australia was in flux and when the historic achievements of western advanced industrial societies – their solidity, their pragmatism, their sheer massive traditional industrial power, the apparent immovability and persistence of their class structures – were being undermined and replaced by very different conceptions. By the 1980s *progress* was being identified with change and modernity and postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard (1984) thought it denoted a condition of perpetual motion in which new desires would come and go along with new technologies which would replace the old ones. The neoliberalism of the 1970s had produced a new capitalism which gave birth to a culture of the flexible and provisional. Little was fixed and everything was changeable and for the short term. Individuals were faced with endless consumption and new satisfactions, including the possibilities of shifting and multiple identities. Bauman (2000 ibid) suggested that this liquid modernity was capable of dissolving traditional values and behaviours. By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century there was debate and concern that contemporary life, that is to say the advanced capitalist forces of production, were 'accelerating' and dissolving our social life beyond the limits of control. Such trends were by no means neutral but in their damaging effects they were in fact 'malign velocities' (Noys 2014 ibid). The economic force driving the changes was neoliberal capitalism which was busy deconstructing the old economic order in favour of 'open markets', global free trade and unhindered global expansion of productive capacity in search of profit. Being postmodern by the end of the 20th century meant joining a global order which was inevitably far greater than the single nation state and which would inevitably dominate world development.

The new modern and growth of techno-capitalism

The general mood of postmodernism was optimistic with a sense that old boundaries and constraints could be removed, new identities formed and old elites moved aside in favour of the new. The rise of new inequalities brought about by neoliberalism could be masked by the growth of credit-led consumerism and where necessary for the poor and dispossessed, the interventions of the welfare state. These changes indicated a shift in the way knowledge and learning was used in postmodern society. Driven by science and technology the logic of capitalism was merging knowledge and science into capitalism itself so the two were becoming indistinguishable. Science was no longer a scholarly endeavour and pursuit of knowledge for its own sake but was now itself a force of production and a part of the circulation of capital. This idea is in effect an anticipation of the notion of the 'knowledge economy' which was to be taken up in the 1980s by universities which were encouraged to exploit their knowledge resources and be more entrepreneurial. Capitalism itself was on the cusp of using the digital revolution to connect international business and trade with financial markets whose authority depended on owning the capacity to process vast amounts of digitised information and data. The dawn of Silicon Valley was about to occur where big finance and advanced technology could create 'platform capitalism' where the acquisition of data and information of consumer preferences could simply outperform traditional capitalism in favour of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019). Science and knowledge could be privatised and turned into assets in ways simply not conceived in earlier times as capitalism restructured itself in the 21st century (Picketty 2019; Halden 2024).

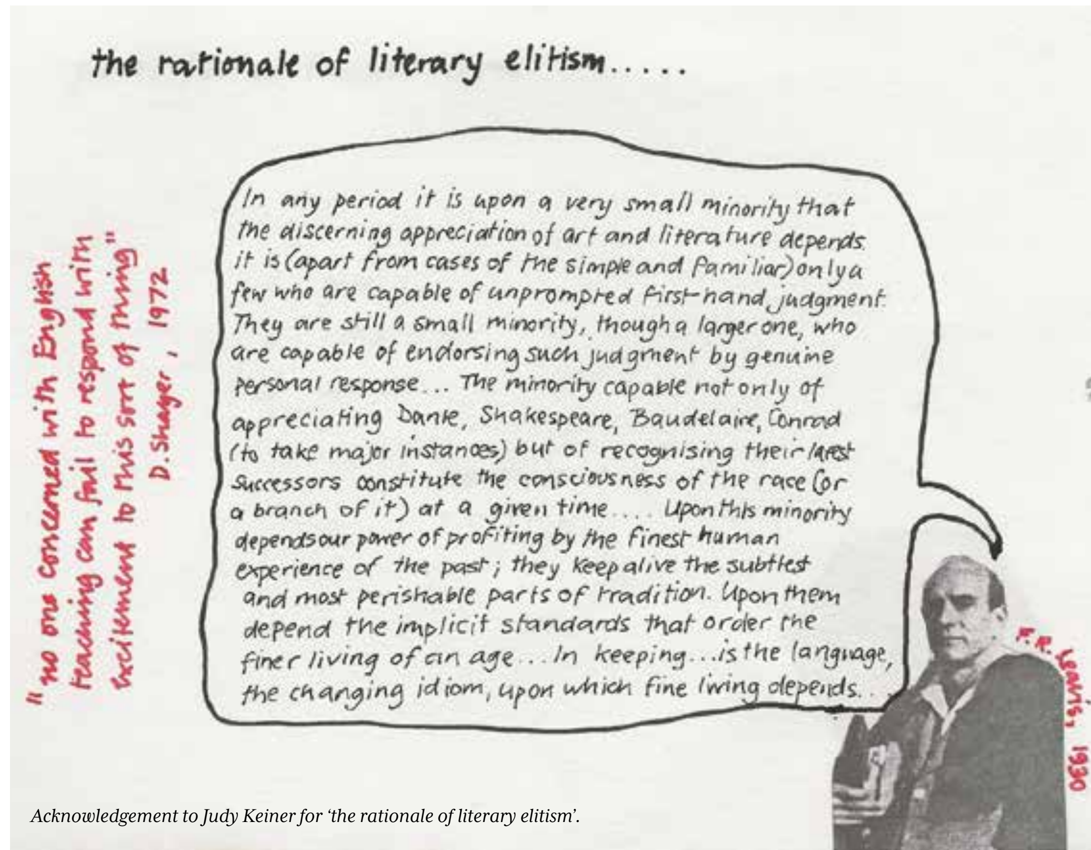
There is in addition the difficult problem of how and why people appear to willingly accept the domination of technology, media and communication systems which position them as consumers of a world made somewhere else and which generates vast profits from doing so whilst so many of the consumers are in fact poor and disadvantaged? It raises also the question of why people are willing to insert themselves into grids of surveillance and control and their willingness to pay for this as part of the market economy in which we exist?

A critical curriculum and pedagogy

One of the striking features of Access education was that learners and teachers did not only have in mind access to a particular kind of institution or system but rather to a particular kind of knowledge itself. The theoretical potential of the idea of Access was, and is, in the area of the curriculum content of education. In fact Access was significant for a range of providers including those involving further and higher educational institutions and for government policy. But perhaps its most significant feature involved the knowledge content of higher learning and the learning and teaching methods best suited to critical thinking. However, it was clear from early on that achieving a greater degree of openness and rationalising access to classes of students and using distance learning methods could all be achieved **without** radically affecting the curriculum content of the traditional education system, including that of the universities. The Open University in Britain showed how previously excluded students could be recruited and engaged in successful degree level study, using radically different tuition methods without abandoning a very traditional knowledge structure of subjects and academic faculties.

Access historically and traditionally, including that provided by the Open University, was in many if not most cases, conditioned and shaped by the curricular considerations of traditional and conservative institutions. The barriers maintained by these institutions which people faced when trying to gain entry to universities were not merely physical, technical and economic. There were also additional barriers… 'constituted by the "social construction of knowledge" …(and) cultural restrictions upon access to high-status knowledge' (Griffin 1983: 82-83). In other words, universal and democratic access to knowledge is restricted where knowledge itself is stratified. Access provision in the form of courses and classes was allowed to challenge institutional resistance to the entry of, for example, working class students or members of ethnic and racial groups to further and higher education, but was forbidden to challenge the curriculum content and meaning of education and learning. This would have been a step too far for the guardians of traditional knowledge in the elite and traditional universities as the short extract that follows exemplifies:

The purposes and meanings of a university education are questions which inform the search for knowledge and underpinned the desire for greater access to higher education. The consciousness of the 'race' or a branch of it as F.R. Leavis put it, is no longer focussed on fine living and on the finest human experience of the past expressed in art and literature taught in the ancient universities. The most egregious and offensive elitist and exclusionary conceptions of culture have been largely displaced by the sheer force of mass and ubiquitous presence of



Acknowledgement to Judy Keiner for 'the rationale of literary elitism'.

higher education and the democratisation of our public culture. However, the social and cultural barriers erected around high status knowledge and the still essentially restricted closed access to the elitist institutions which control it, remain in place for many people. We have outlined some of the consequences of this for the common good of populations in general and for higher resolution categories of the people including its impact on racial/ethnic groups and on women. Historically the barriers to be overcome were many and varied but included elitist and exclusionist views of what and who could access valid knowledge. We have charted some of the changes for which Access represented a serious challenge to this perspective.

The Access movement came to fruition in a time of growth for mass higher education, but it was a mass system of education *without* a common culture of knowledge – what we have identified as form of universal literacy. Where the emphasis was on gaining entry to a socially conservative and culturally elitist system, the structures of knowledge were left unchallenged and unchanged. The realities of a mass education system, where knowledge and qualifications were highly unequal and stratified, could be by-passed and these realities exposed a major paradox for the Access movement. Access opportunities were developed under conditions of social conservatism where there was little or no re-construction of social knowledge. A mass system of education was encouraged in the absence of a common culture of knowledge and an absence of what a 'university education' might be if it focussed on what knowledge might best contribute to a fairer world (Ashwin 2020). The strategies associated with Access included removing financial barriers, making positive interventions and developing counselling and guidance services and the introduction of well-designed individual study and intensive group-work, along with the use of innovative technology exemplified and pioneered by the Open University. All these improved educational methods were to the good and to the benefit of students and teachers. What they were not, however, was the kind of radical change that mass higher education might have implied – that is to say, a correspondingly radical change in how society is understood, how knowledge is defined and how it is translated into qualifications and opportunities which transform people's lives. In order to achieve this, a critical curriculum is required. The Access movement did not achieve this breakthrough in any conscious or coherent way; no single unifying narrative emerged to spell out the key principles for all who were part of the movement. But the movement was a beacon and guiding light for those who thought and worked towards such principles. We might term them for convenience 'points of departure' for the future of engaged and committed knowledge and for which Access as a movement and in relation to its specific learning programmes, however incomplete, were an early and notable example.

Towards a manifesto: points of departure for a critical curriculum

Access was about more than gaining places in educational provision, on courses and into previously elite-recruiting institutions. It was concerned with all of that of course, but it engaged with the problematical knowledge-content of learning (who learns what and for what purposes?). This was a deeply cultural issue and raised problems about identity, belonging, social justice and the sources of social division and solidarity which would continue to bedevil British society in particular for generations to come. It also raised questions about the interplay of material and cultural factors which constitute the barriers to learning and alert us to the ways in which Access could be conceptualised in terms of knowledge, culture and power (Griffin ibid: 87).

Over and above the fact that Access was about gaining entry to provision, it was primarily important in engaging and challenging the *content* of that provision. It did not do this as a principled and coherent theoretical proposition but rather it achieved this by calling into question the previously unchallenged, unproblematic categories which defined educational achievement. It could not overthrow these categories (the disciplines are hard to dislodge) but it could bring to light, directly through personal and collective experience the fact that the content of education is socially defined, distributed and evaluated. The content of education had historically failed to deliver its promises to broad masses of people and yet Access, through its students, demanded an alternative. The students wanted learning which resonated with their lives and aspirations, including their identities. This potential alternative did not ignore such matters and focussed on the curriculum problems of the wicked issues of the moment, of poverty and injustice, of racial and ethnic experience, of women's issues and perspectives and on themes of inclusion and the need for social change and better outcomes.

It would be unjustifiable to claim that all Access provision fulfilled the claims made for it here! Clearly there was significantly diverse provision, and courses were spread across differing geographies and amongst very diverse and different communities. There was historically no single point of condensation which could have captured the learning and work of many thousands of people in many different locations and who thought of themselves as delivering Access as a movement. There was therefore no single 'conjuncture' and no unified or universal

model for Access. There was, however, a sense of there being a movement for change and growth underway which could shift the dial on how learning and education might open up opportunities previously denied. Access was about the widening of purposes and the generation of knowledge for social progress. A number of key themes for an Access curriculum can be identified within this generic approach and for the type of pedagogy (learning and teaching) adopted by Access programmes. These themes were by no means imperatives but they served as guidance to practice and are, we believe, critically relevant to contemporary concerns.

Themes for a critical curriculum within Access:

- learning should contribute to the combatting of ignorance which a segregated and divisive selective system had bequeathed to both Britain and Australia
- an Access curriculum would address the (historical) demotion of 80 per cent of the population in Britain that historically had failed the selection exam at age 11 so that education for ignorance would be abolished forever for the future
- the values of competitive individualism, separatism and exclusion would be replaced by more democratic and inclusive values which themselves would encourage a transformative education
- the character of communities, including their demographics and cultures should be expressed in the curriculum at every level so that lived experience and critical self-reflection becomes crucial to learning
- cultural diversity and tolerance should contribute to healthy social integration and social justice; this is above all an educational challenge to be met and overcome
- education should be a democratising process which can challenge damaging and persistent inequalities, including those of class, race and gender
- engagement with the new technologies and digital communications so that they contribute to socially progressive outcomes is needed
- that the self-elected group of mega businesses that exercise monopoly functions over our digital lives should be made to accountable to democratic procedures
- the mass-psychology of passivity and consumption of goods and services as the 'highest' form of value must be questioned by critical learning
- the social purposes of learning and knowledge need to be re-instated in public and communal life
- educational institutions in receipt of public funds, including universities, should be brought within democratic control and the role of business, faith and religious vested interests be made accountable and transparent
- learning should be for democratic citizenship not just widening participation; the role of local authorities, parents' groups and teachers should be recognised and valued
- an extended and common/universal curriculum for all young people is a key building block for dispelling ignorance and can lead to a fair and more socially secure and just society
- the existential challenges of climate change and ecological disaster facing the planet must be central to our learning.

Themes for a critical pedagogy

No single university academic discipline or subject can yield up a handy set of concepts to be applied to the issues of Access and diversity of learning outlined in this book. There is, however, reason to believe that the process of critical thinking and research and progressive learning might offer a way forward. Some of the steps in this process of reform involve reformulating the role of learning and teaching for critical social and political engagement and in the re-conceptualisation of public education in the lives of thinking citizens. Some of the steps in curriculum planning for engagement in this process can be identified as follows and may serve as guidance for practitioners:

- identifying real world problems which can be expected to be complex and involve contested knowledge
- establishing learning sets, groups and teams which can draw on the different 'discipline' approaches and knowledges and use knowledge for action and transformation
- starting inquiry using curiosity, problem solving, reflection and openness to critique as a basic and democratic form of learning and knowing
- an insistence that learning and action for change and transformation go hand-in-hand and should be geared towards the solution of problems
- generating and testing knowledge solutions with those whom it affects so that knowledge becomes really useful
- personal commitment to learning and critical reflection on the status of knowledge about what is to be studied
- a realisation that the monopolies held on knowledge creation and its distribution can no longer be maintained by conventional universities but must be re-thought in the new contexts
- the unlocking of human potential through critical thinking and learning, especially for those who have not had learning opportunities or cannot afford them
- a challenge to the conservative and traditional notions of the neutral and objective observer who is capable of exercising judgement from the 'outside'
- adopting a learning methodology which supports mutuality and reciprocity and encourages and facilitates participants' visions for the future and views learners as active agents for positive change
- recognising that the educational purpose of a higher education degree is to help students/learners develop a transformational relationship to knowledge. By doing so they can critically understand themselves and their environments and be better prepared for changing both themselves and the society in which they live
- if artificial intelligence is to deliver a fundamental transformation of economies, social living, politics and cultural life (proposed by some commentators) then its implications must be made clear: our key senses of what we are as human beings and communities cannot be left to a small number of businesses focussed on profits to be made. This is a key social issue for the future of all and engages us with questions raised earlier – who posseses and controls knowledge and access to it?

All of these processes and activities involve what was once called pedagogy and we would argue represent part of the viable basis for critical thinking and learning which needs to underpin learning and teaching (Davies and Nyland 2022). Using some of these approaches, the Access movement showed us an example of how learning could be re-thought and re-conceptualised and can still serve as a model for the future.

'Openness' as part of the critical curriculum

The growth of the Access movement in the United Kingdom took place co-incidentally with the emergence of what were known as 'Open Colleges' (Davies and Robertson 1986). These colleges were in fact networked collaborations between education providers who were interested in discovering and using new forms of open learning

so that more people could be brought into mainly adult learning. New organisations were needed that could operate outside the conventions of formal state schooling and the divisions between vocational training and academic scholarship which bedevilled British society and hindered equal opportunities through learning.

Yet the new growth point was different. Its objective was that of designing courses specifically for adults who had little experience of study and who lacked confidence but who had hopes of succeeding in new ways. Ethnic and black communities, women in particular whose employment prospects had been limited by social expectations and patriarchal attitudes, those who had been made redundant by the closure of old industries and technological change and millions of people whose literacy and numeracy skills were under-developed, all constituted the new learners. They gave expression to the important principle that an inclusive system should be capable of recognising all learner achievement.

It was thought important at the time that Access could not, nor should be limited to one level of provision but ought to encompass the whole range of adult educational provision – from basic education up to university entrance. It was envisaged that a complete range of courses at all levels could be incorporated in Access education.

The argument for such new open college institutions, networks and federations was as follows: traditional forms of schooling, further education and higher education were continuing to fail the majority of the population who were excluded from the benefits of further learning and the opportunities in life and work which resulted from education. A new system, capable of recognising and validating different forms of experience and of meeting new and emerging learning needs was required.

'Open College' would potentially do for the sub-degree student – the ordinary person in the street and in the community and in the workplace – what the Open University had tried to do for undergraduate education and what the National Extension College had done for distance and correspondence tuition across the various levels of achievement– make available and possible for ALL to achieve a better life through education. Open colleges would do this, it was anticipated, at the local level and in local communities wherever they might be. No community need be excluded because it was part of a low socio-economic area or because it suffered from geographical or social isolation. There was also a wider set of interests which favoured the development of a broader and critical curriculum (Hall ibid). This involved the idea of an open and critical curriculum which in the minds of its supporters could help bring about change and awareness and a new kind of learning and education. When they looked around at the issues confronting the changing world this transformational learning was direly needed.

Openness as an encounter with the educational order

History tells us that the practices and procedures of the universities and higher education institutions themselves became the object of scrutiny and it was becoming clear by the end of the 20th century that they were in the business of sorting out applicants and were not simply 'gate keeping' but 'gate closing' institutions (McPherson 1972; Davies and Davies 2021: 8). Demand for and knowledge of open learning emerged at a time of significant social change and disruption, including within and across the educational landscape. Much of this demand was locally based and organically linked to the hinterlands of the urban metropolitan areas. Some of it was facilitated by the burgeoning communication systems including the ever expanding internet. Many providers were voluntary and autonomous and democratically accountable to their local owners who were mostly accountable themselves to elected local authorities.

The new needs of adult learners whether younger or older, was precisely that they were both *continuing* and *comprehensive*. That is to say, the new learning offer needed to bring together many of the post-school learning opportunities including re-training and skill updating for working people and the learning needs of the whole community going way beyond existing award bearing courses. This was why the open college schemes referred to their claim to both provide access to provision which was *continuing and comprehensive* and to develop it where it was needed (Black 1982; Wilson 2010).

Priorities for this agenda were identified in a report by the Advisory Council on Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE 1982a: 190) and included:

- development of more part-time provision
- expansion of short full-time course provision
- help with practical difficulties facing adult students, particularly those wanting part-time study
- positive support for educational release from work, particularly for those working unconventional hours
- development of modular courses
- the provision of a national information service on credit transfer and development of operational arrangements for transferability of credit.

The origin and development of open higher education

The term open college evokes immediately consideration of the Open University which demonstrated its presence through a variety of communication and pedagogic methods including television, radio, video, correspondence tuition, computer-aided learning and face-to-face situations (Venables 1976). The OU provided open access and routes to formal higher education qualifications and learning to those who had been denied them for whatever reason. The need, the motivation and the ability to learn were the entrance qualifications for OU study.

The open colleges shared a certain basic rationale for their development and committed to acknowledging a range of unmet learning needs within their spheres of influence and localities. All of them were committed to the principle that a system was needed that recognised *all* learner achievement. The main means of doing this was to be via credit-based courses and the recognition of different kinds and levels of learning (Black ibid; Wilson ibid). The claims made at the time and the evidence of progression into university life for working-class and disadvantaged people suggest it had significant impact (Millins 1984; MOCF 1985). Open colleges showed the world of universities that the life-worlds and interests of working class and ordinary people were really quite extra-ordinary and deserved their place in the systems and cultures of learning.

The open colleges made a significant contribution to the growth and consolidation of Access as a movement which supported multi-level access to learning and its accreditation. They allowed learners to progress from basic skills and literacy classes to university level study and qualifications whilst remaining in their home communities and institutions and within their cultural 'habitus' or everyday world. This was an important feature for many adult learners who still had many barriers to overcome if they wished to succeed in higher education. The open college federations sponsored collaboration across all 'binary divisions' and linked adult and further education with universities in new and innovative ways (Sanders and Whalley 2007).

In Britain the year 2000 there were 31 open college networks which worked in collaboration with the NOCN (National Open College Network) that had been set up in 1991 (Opencoll 2020). At that point in time there were some 40,000 Access course students nationally and it was clear that the alternative to the conventional school-based qualifications for entry to higher education had stood one test of time, and that open colleges had made their own vital contribution to widening participation. In a period of around

twenty years the open colleges with their Access movement allies had made significant inroads and contributions to widening participation practices and policies. Though the work of the open colleges themselves was later to be incorporated within government funded associations and institutions (Wilson ibid 2010), by the third decade of the 21st century the colleges themselves had effectively ceased to exist. The Access provision ethos and Access courses lived on within the further education sector and to a degree within the lower tariff universities which continued to support the idea of an Access movement.

New knowledge is contested knowledge

Whatever the future holds, the present demands that we as educators look at our real experience in the real world and this can only be done by knowing others in some direct and meaningful way and by sharing the thoughts and insights we gain as a result. Is this not the great challenge of change to all of those involved in public education in this as in every generation? The Access movement provides us with a lived example of educational change whose historical meanings still resonate strongly as a social movement (Field 2013).

To meet the challenge we need to acknowledge that social practice in modern life is modified in the light of new information and knowledge which comes from an increasingly diverse range of sources. These include the social spheres as well as the academic and employment fields. The old monopolies on access to knowledge and learning can no longer suffice. Family, community, education, government, internet, social media and 'infotainment' all help comprise the social and cultural processes which are institutionalised as part of social life and practice and therefore impact on education. They throw up both some of the great benefits of modernity but also the great threats it poses. This means learning must be shaped and organised for an improved and democratic social result if we are to engage and overcome the daunting challenges facing an increasingly precarious ecology and a fragile world. The continuous production and incorporation of new and contested knowledge through critical learning into institutional practice is the driving force of modernity and the basis of our social theory of society (Giddens 1991; Reckwitz and Rosa 2023). It is one of the essential social practices which sustain our lives and should serve the interests of the many and exist for the benefit of society.

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Chapter 13

Frameworks for university engagement

The Access movement may have been part of a relatively brief period of growth and optimism, particularly in modern British education though its roots can traced to the onset of modern society itself. This book has argued that its significance went beyond the relatively small numbers of adults involved in learning and teaching in the 1970s and 1980s as widening participation and mass higher education took off in in many countries. It showed an alternative way of developing education, firstly for those who had been excluded from higher learning and then more widely for those who struggled for an improved curriculum. Access put the social issues that matter in the forefront of learning and in doing so raised a series of questions that continue to resonate into the third decade of the 21st century. Access was an attempt to engage educational institutions and their stakeholders in a different type of learning. As a movement it had an impact right across the various levels and types of educational institutions in Britain and it fed into and contributed to the growth of mass higher education. Since Access for students was primarily concerned with accessing higher level study it had particular meaning for universities. Access raised for universities the possibilities of a different kind of engagement with students themselves, with communities and ultimately for the wider society. It raised the question of what university engagement itself is and might yet be. It is in the light of this perspective that we hope the empirical cases and evidence dealt with in the book are relevant to a wider audience and go beyond the boundary of a single nation state.

There are few who would disagree with the assertion that we need to invest in the public realm and services in order to build a more resilient economy and society, and education must be right at the heart of this. Can the promises made in the past about the need for a more equal and socially just society through educational mobility and meritocracy be redeemed in the future? This is the question that persists across the generations and across the boundaries of nations. There is an argument that a new engagement agenda for universities and indeed for all post-school education is required which puts critical thinking and learning and research at the leading edge of change. A new 'ecology of learning' is needed which puts the social purposes and the meaning of community back into the strategic objectives of university development (Barnett 2017; Brink 2018; Davies 2021; Davies and Nyland 2022 a; Grant 2021).

As educators these issues test our humanity and our democratic engagement in both education and civic society. Education is a vital part of the social capital of a community; it cannot be commensurate to equate it with making education yield profits from learning. Although the growth of a marketised education system appeared to insulate universities from the disastrous effects of the longest, deepest and most sustained period of cuts to public services in modern British history, in reality this period became what Toynbee and Walker (2020) call 'The Lost Decade'. Between 2010 and 2020, for example, the British National Health Service funding per head fell as never before, public health expenditure was decimated, social care was stripped of funding, school spending per pupil cut by 8 per cent and local councils weakened by cuts of up to 40 per cent. A million public sector jobs in Britain were lost. In the context of the re-emergence of dire and distressing levels of poverty and deprivation and the entrenchment of highly unequal wealth and income inequality, and in learning the lessons of the failure of a market model, a society should surely find the ethical way of doing things. This will surely involve investing in and with communities as well as for financial stability and income generation for the capital and financial markets. It will necessarily involve building social and community capital as well as the professional capital of degrees as key objectives for all higher education. This is an important part of the context in which we argue a new view of Access is needed; one which has the capacity and potential to transform the way we think about education and the way we use it to transform our lives for the better. This is an agenda for change which we believe has no national boundaries.

An alternative is needed

There is an alternative model to the neoliberal model outlined previously in this book. The shareholders or stakeholders of a university are not simply the university governors or the university managers. The nation itself and the state have an interest since they provide most of the finance, through one means or another and through student loans for fees. The rhetoric of delivering a diverse and regional system with real choice needs to be made a reality so that universities are seen as the custodians of that wealth. A university represents a type of social capital and communitarian wealth, paid for ultimately by the tax payers and the common people, something not widely understood. It is not a business with commercial shareholders taking risks in a market. The purpose of a university is not to generate shareholder value and profits. The other stakeholders are the staff, the students (past, present and future) and the communities that surround and sustain the institution. These are varied and include industry and commerce in all its guises as well as local authorities which unfortunately in Britain have been enfeebled and marginalised by the national governments of the last twenty years. The alternative model must be rooted in a financial plan that protects the public realm and what are essentially public services.

Higher education was not and is not a private commodity but is a social and public investment. A healthy economy and society depends on having a plurality of social forms and activities. If education is just one element or competitor in a free-for-all global market and if our social purposes are wholly driven by financial interests, then the basis for a just and fair society ceases to exist. On the other hand, if the basis of society is shared values and ethics, then market exchange and cost benefit analysis can never become the chief driver in the organisation of social and communal services, including higher education. A better framework and a re-imagined idea of engagement for education is needed. Such a framework would need to incorporate what Marginson (2016: ch 9) referred to as difference and diversity within higher education so that other fields are included, such as the relations of work to incomes and to wealth as well as how power works within labour markets and the multiple global economic and financial flows which shape production and consumption of social and individual wealth. It is these factors which fashion and shape our understanding of the relations of education to the common good. We need to go beyond viewing higher education as a market or as a locus for degrees as private goods bought as part of a lifestyle choice. We have argued that we need a framework and ideas which allow us to question the ideologies which legitimise inequalities in education as being normative or inevitable. This entails more than adopting a different 'imaginary' or a set of beliefs or descriptions of what equity in education might mean. We suggest a re-thinking of a more radical and extensive kind is needed.

Rethinking university engagement in the light of Access and open learning

The reality of university life is complex and diverse. Universities are often huge civic and commercial institutions which impact massively on social and economic life. They are far beyond being places where scholars simply search for truth and knowledge and they are ubiquitous. Almost everywhere on the planet young people view university education as the passport to a better life. Universities are foundational to modern economy and culture. Everywhere they claim to be good at research, teaching, learning, knowledge transference and income generation. As Chris Brink (ibid 2018) has argued, they are often very 'good at' something: it is less certain that they are in general 'good for' something. Excellence, for example in research, is not enough if we are to have education which is good for the people.

This argument foregrounds the 'educational

function' of universities. This can be contentious because it suggests that if every university wishes to be a 'world-class research centre' then this is a serious distraction from the educational function in which universities can be good for communities, for social solidarity and for social and ecological justice and fairness.

Finding solutions to an appropriate balance in nations which have a 'mixed economy' where market-led solutions enable choice for those with money, and welfare-led provision such as education and health for those without, is difficult. The poor never achieve the best outcomes. In these circumstances university engagement practitioners are searching for the fair and just balance between competing priorities. Individuals, employers and the society and communities in which we all live are all stake holders here but present arrangements do not provide a fair and just balance between the three parties. Players in national governments, managers of universities and the dominant culture of universities are not pre-disposed to simply shifting the balance away from financially advantageous and prestige-based rankings towards a needs-based university whose core educational functions may not yield the most prestigious or financially rewarding activities.

Universities may once have been ivory towers, their cloisters and libraries seen as bastions of knowledge and scholarship safeguarding a culture and values which, though separate from the wider society, were essential to its sense of being 'civilised'. This is no longer the case. In an accelerating capitalistic world (Noys 2014) universities have long ago joined the competition which characterises the digital era. It is now clear, for example, following the 2019-2022 global Corona Virus pandemic that computer and web-based distance learning is here to stay for everyone. This case was already proven following the success of the Open University in the UK which showed that the teaching function of a university can be achieved to a large extent through distance learning. Similarly the social function of higher education can be partly replicated online. There can be no refusal of the digital realities as we move onwards and these will likewise impact on all the forms of university engagement currently used. However, if by simple definition and logic every university cannot be a world-beating leader, yet aspires to be unique and distinctive in some way, there can be no doubt that all higher education is being shaped by common forces which demand conformism. Resisting these demands for conformity, many of which have at their root the workings of the global obsession with neoliberal market solutions to the world's problems, may be the best way to a richly diverse university sector – one which can respond to an authentically diverse student population rather than one selected, sorted out and differentiated via wealth and social privilege.

Furthermore and hearkening back to the Robbins Report of 1963, if the objective is to help create a society in which all those who can benefit from higher education and who wish it could participate and study the discipline of their choice, then we will need to look beyond top-down actions by universities. More attention is needed on the question of how knowledge and learning is organized and for which purposes a curriculum is devised. Whose curriculum is it and how is it taught? These questions were of course at the heart of some of the issues that the Access movement attended to, many of which had an intensely local and place-based focus in actual existing communities.

No simple and easy answers are available and never have been. However, if we assume that one of the keys to unlocking the power of universities is through the application of critical thinking perhaps we can shift the paradigm towards the educational function in a decisive and progressive way? Frameworks of thinking are just ways of ordering our experiences and our knowledge but good ideas can help change the world. For example, it has become ever more clear that knowledge which is classified as universally valid and true, whether emanating from a theology or from a particular conception of science, must also be subject to the claims of criticality. It must seek to explain its own origins within rational, critical analysis and subject itself to the burdens of proof and scientific skepticism. We can no longer assume that western rationalism and science confers a superior understanding of our environments and lives, simply because its origins were in the European Enlightenment, powerful though such origins were for the development of democratic norms and values. There are, for example, different 'frameworks' of knowledge and understanding such as the notion of 'indigenous knowledge' to which we must give proper attention (Pearson 2009; Davies 2022). These matters are under active consideration and are 'contested', as when Seidman (1998) argued that modern social theory must be connected to public intellectual life and its moral and social concerns concerns, as did one of the founders of sociological analysis Max Weber, almost a century earlier. However, such attempts to re-formulate our ideas about what constitutes knowledge and a knowledgeable person are not new and certainly need revisiting in every generation (Polanyi 1974). Beyond this we need to renew and reconstruct our public institutions in each generation as the commercial and technical imperatives of modernity are forced upon us. There is always a need to ask if our frameworks and paradigms are still fit for purpose and to test them against reality. The Access movement of the 1970s and 1980s, it has been suggested, was a fulcrum and testbed for new ways of thinking and organising educational opportunity and hence social change from the bottom up – from where learning actually was done and experienced. Communities of practice were made real in many different types of institutions and places across the United Kingdom. The constituent elements of Access practice were always present in the courses themselves, but they were generally untheorised and the use of frameworks may enable us to bring some theoretical understanding to Access itself.

We have seen that Access was a form of education that frequently involved learning and teaching for adult learners within an awareness of the 'wicked issues' that framed people's experience and aspirations, including the lack of opportunities for progression in higher education. Many key social issues such as poverty, deprivation, women's social role and oppressions, unemployment, social displacement, environmental degradation and social justice matters found a place in Access courses of one kind or another. In practice these issues helped shape the curriculum alongside an emphasis on literacy and numeracy needed for higher levels of study. Unfortunately this did not usually persist once students were entered into their higher learning phases where the pervasive growth of neoliberalism served to consolidate an individualistic and competitive ideology at the centre of university policy (Brown 2019; Chun and Feagin 2022).

The Access movement was effectively incorporated and co-apted by the established educational institutions for an agenda of growth and development. The existing institutional HE structure adapted itself to Access and in so doing it ensured that Access was adapted in turn to its requirements. The radical and transformative potential of Access was diminished as mass higher education evolved into a marketised and differentiated hierarchy of universities and colleges. The elite institutions wanted little of Access as a radical approach to learning and the 'mass institutions', that is to say the newer 'municipal' universities and former polytechnics in Britain, focused on the need to apply the market disciplines in order to compete on costs and fees. This approach did not allow for the diversity and difference fostered in the Access movement itself. Uniformity and conformism became the norm as institutions competed in the performance league tables which were deemed necessary to protect 'quality' and 'excellence' in the delivery of higher education. The growth of student numbers overall continued as the system expanded and this allowed greater numbers of poorer students and ethnic minorities to attend university. However, participation in higher education continued to

be distorted by the impact of previous wealth and privilege. Racial and ethnic minorities succeeded in getting a few of their brightest and most able students selected into elite universities but the overall disparities and inequalities remained in place. The capacity of the elite universities to deliver a socially just outcome was severely limited by their own ideologies justifying their unfair selections of students.

Neoliberalism in an elitist system

The Access agenda though successful beyond the wildest dreams of its Victorian forebears had not broken through the carapace of discrimination and injustice that elite university education continues to support into the third decade of the 21st century. The mixed ability principle which, for example, had driven the British Labour governments of the twentieth century and especially in the 1970s to militate for comprehensive schools (Ball 2002; Benn 2011) had not infiltrated the universities. In spite of the diversity and sheer size of the knowledge economy and the significance of learning and education in modern society, by the 3rd decade of the 21st century there had been no great meritocratic breakthrough to a more equal society and to a greater system of social justice. In Australia, despite decades of government effort and over 50 years of expansion of the number of Australians attending university, perversely, stratification and inequalities within higher education were increasing rather than decreasing (Wesley 2023).

This book has suggested that the fundamental impulse driving Access was one of striving for equity and opportunity by those who had been refused education and the benefits derived from it. This was a long historical struggle with many different facets – but it was not a singular or linear narrative even though common 'threads through time' would appear in the story. There can be little doubt that the development of 'human capital' theories help explain the extent and penetration of skilled labour and expertise required in modern capitalism, just as theories of neoliberalism offer us an understanding of how universities have been thought about and managed in the modern era. Neoliberalism usefully highlights how market mechanisms have contributed to the solutions that universities sought when faced with precarious balance sheets. The vocabularies of managerialism and enterprise, narrowly defined, were used uncritically to keep institutions up with the competition in relation to student recruitment and consumer satisfaction. This was the neoliberalisation of higher education where in theory individuals had choices of where they might study and what they might elect to pay for it. The realities were quite different, however, and students were not independent customers paying for their own education. The state was the controlling interest and for most students it controlled the system through a combination of interest and salary repayment. It was no free market. An inefficient capital market always required government intervention to finance the country's student debt and huge subsidies were needed to sustain the production of socially necessary 'vocational' subjects such as medicine, dentistry and engineering. It has been argued that only a minority of neoliberal arguments were ever appropriated by politicians in the United Kingdom anyway and that British governments always viewed universities' primary functions as engines of growth (Freeman 2018). In this scenario government existed to intervene to produce top-down modernisation and to subsidise big business and technology projects.

These were a part of the generic economic and political contexts in which Access programmes and courses were developed, mediated by the particular circumstances of the time. These in turn included the specific cultural and social concerns of the day such as racial and ethnic perceptions of peoples' lives and experiences. The wicked issues of the day ensured that struggles for social justice were often high on the political agenda and education was crucial to many of these. The old frameworks and ways of thinking about education proved inadequate by the 1970s and the dash for growth and the globalisation of economic and social life with all of its disruptions, fostered a new phase which incorporated Access within an expanded institutional hierarchy that itself was profoundly unequal. The 21st century has generated a need for new and radical re-thinking of the frameworks within which to conceptualise and practice learning and teaching. This book has suggested that the theme of critical engagement might be fruitful in exploring new frameworks for learning and for re-mapping the future trajectory of universities and their social purposes.

Frameworks for engaged learning and teaching

Three potential frameworks are suggested initially here as a basis for reflection and exploration. Within these frameworks we can identify points of departure which can direct our thinking to the crucial issues and themes. Frameworks can help us understand and conceptualise our taken-for-granted assumptions. Frameworks are themselves metaphors for the different paradigms that inform knowledge acquisition. The first framework focusses on the dominant capacity of industrial and scientific growth to sustain our social and communal lives. It is often assumed that our western scientific knowledge corresponds to the world out there and to the superiority of western knowledge and in particular to applied science and technology. How else could our western values have been implemented and our standards of life and needs for security be guaranteed? To state that this may be the dominant way of thinking is not to dismiss the fact that it may be contested in all sorts of ways. Nevertheless, western rationalism can surely be said to be exercise a certain hegemony within the advanced industrial nations as globalisation and industrialisation proceeds and places its demands on local and more people-centred communities which may have alternative knowledge systems. This particular framework has dominated the development and expansion of universities world-wide in the last 50 years.

The second framework employs what has been called by a notable indigenous Australian educationalist Noel Pearson, a 'peoplehood' concept (Pearson 2009). It focusses on people, communities and society. We can contrast close-knit units such as family or kinship groups such as tribe or 'mob' with the wider groups which form people's identity such as ethnic or religious affiliation or the universalism of global communities or cosmopolitans (Skrbis and Woodward 2013). These frameworks of understanding can shape our understanding of ourselves and our own history. The importance of personal learning and personal growth and the existence of a 'biographical epistemology' where a lived and personal life can be recognized should not be underestimated. It was the sociologist Anthony Giddens who suggested that the 'self' had become for many people a reflexive and personal project in which individuals 'invested', including through education (Giddens 1991, 2010).

Frameworks

Industrial/scientific growth	People-centred/indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)
Knowledge is formal and recorded with limited access to it	The earth's resources are finite and there are limits to how people can enhance them
Knowledge belongs to those with qualifications	Those who control resources also control power
Almost all products can be bought and sold in the market	The needs of the poor and communities are recognised
Sustainability is about ever-increasing growth of economic capacities	Inclusive and socially just communities are essential to an inclusive global system
Economic and social interests drive progress and development	Security and identity are vital for families and communities
The earth's physical resources are inexhaustible	Culture is performed and is vital to communities
Western science and industry will provide ever new possibilities for growth	Oral traditions are valued
Waste and destruction can be absorbed indefinitely	Knowledge of the environment is key to producing a livelihood
Consumerist norms rule our desires – poverty is only inadequate growth	Control over resources is done locally
The liberal market economy can drive growth and living standards	Economic interests and identities are reconciled

The third framework (below) represents an attempt to specify the '**foundational**' educational function of the university (Williams 2021). This focusses upon the question of what the university is 'good for' and attempts to scale up the focus from individual and group experience at the 'people-centred' level to how education could contribute to social and economic welfare. Foundational education could address such services as health care, carbon clearance, food production and distribution, urban farming and social housing projects and places where there is a mosaic of incomes which vary according to location, housing type and community orientation. This approach assumes that a university and its communities could support projects at volume which could benefit the engaged stakeholders.

These frameworks are of course not a concrete 'reality' and do not exist in a specific place or time. They are a device to help us select those features of educational provision we wish to identify as relevant and which we may wish to explore further. Real historical and contemporary universities and colleges will almost certainly have taken elements from more than one framework to construct the lived reality of learning and teaching and all of the associated functions needed to offer an education. In our attempt to understand and explain the Access movement they can help us analyse the meaning and significance of the societies in which we live and how transformative learning and teaching seeks to shape a different future. The argument here is that Access, both past and present, can be better understood therefore through the prisms of these three frameworks. They can offer us in turn points of departure to grasp some of the meaning if not definitive accounts of historical and social movements.

A framework for being good for something

Knowledge must have a social purpose. It must also focus on critical social teaching and those who are yet to speak.
The community of learners and the places they inhabit are major strengths for the curriculum. Universities are foundational to local and regional economies; they can invest and directly support a zone of the economy focussed on productive enterprises and social capital.
A critical literacy is needed for those facing a precarious economic future. A truly democratic participation would be 95%; the 50% rate currently is pathetic.
There is no dispensing with the disciplines but creativity is a key to progressive education. Where is the critical curriculum which investigates our social lives? When does creative art, music and literature interact with science to define and expand our future possibilities?
The borders we have erected around faith, ethnicity, race, social class and culture must be recognised and crossed. How can we be vigilant for tolerance whilst expressing a distinctive vision through education?
The ecological precariousness of our planet must now be the object of our critical awareness. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could/should be central to all HE curriculum planning.
The ecological crisis is accompanied by a crisis of digital life which is accelerating at exponential speeds. Our lives in the public spaces of the internet are commodities. Information explodes into availability and all emotional and social life can be commercially exploited through an addictive technology.
A curriculum has always to be chosen, it cannot evolve spontaneously: whose curriculum is chosen and in whose interests is it selected?

Points of departure – the lessons of Access for a new approach:

Learning should change futures

Progressive learning which incorporates critical thinking has always been about the social purposes of knowledge. The roots of social justice lie in the belief in rational and objective knowledge developed firstly in the European Enlightenment and then within the western scientific tradition. This tradition informs the social and political progress we have made and which benefits those

who live in advanced industrial and democratic societies. Whatever the oppressive and alienating conditions in which people have lived, they have been compelled to struggle for a better life and to control their own existence (Davies and Nyland 2022b). We shall always need history to reveal the actual lived experience of social change and mobility and to reveal the forces of oppression as they have impacted on our lives. The importance of education for both personal and community well-being is demonstrated in the work of thinkers and reformers who have assessed the value of the university as a public educator and the idea of freedom being gained through higher education (Nyland, Davies and Davies 2022; Davies and Davies 2021). The idea of freedom through education has been tarnished but not defeated and there are those still to speak who will shape the eventual outcome of the struggle for a better life and improved social outcomes through critical and transformative learning.

Places and communities are vital to learning

In seeking our points of departure in order to better understand Access as a social movement, we need to affirm the part played by *places* in the cultures of learners and, to do this we need to re-imagine the community of learners and recognise its significance within a renewed curriculum. There is always a question of pedagogy where learning is concerned and yet we continue to ignore the positive impact of diverse cultures, students' own concerns with language and identity and the power of affective learning. The role of places and spaces is of great emotional significance and shows the potential that a treasured environment may have on personal and social understanding. This suggests a rich but often ignored resource for a more critical understanding and a new approach to the curriculum. We need to extract the experience of people in specific communities at certain times in the history of their communities, and through social interaction in the classroom and beyond it, create new learning involving objective knowledge and thought and feeling (Shor 1992). What these geographical locations tell us is that passion for the place is a marvelous resource and that we need to harness this so it becomes in turn a passion for learning. The brief example taken earlier in this chapter was that of indigenous knowledge (Davies ibid 2022) but it represents only a single instance of a more general phenomenon. The implication is clear – we need to re-define the subject matter of what we learn and teach and the ways in which people in communities can become central to learning. The critical appreciation of the layers of reality and feeling, seen for example in many rural communities, yet so often ignored, can be viewed as an example of an alternative resource to the long encounter with conventional, organised and structured knowledge which is on offer in conventional learning (Pearson ibid 2009). The social authority and constraints which accompany conventional knowledge systems have often been experienced as oppressive and alienating and change in this is on the wider agenda for change in education.

Really useful knowledge of the wicked issues

The really useful knowledge of one generation can serve as a guide to later generations but it must be re-constructed always in the light of current challenges. The knowledge a society possesses is encoded in its culture and when it is used to select a minority for preference and privilege in life and work it becomes a negative and conservative force, not for good but for ill. Knowledge in a culture should be a process of inquiry not an affirmation of unequal and exploitative oppression, even if legitimated by false notions of meritocracy and the myths of social mobility (Wooldridge 2021; Todd 2021). This is why each generation finds itself in struggle to question the received wisdom of its elders and to find the 'really useful knowledge' its own generation needs. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, many young people, including the campus activists, assumed they were part of an upward trajectory towards greater freedom, liberty and opportunity but experience showed that the boundaries of possibility could be re-drawn and diminished. The current generation of graduates faces a future of precarious work, low public investment in social services, a devalued and privatised degree factory system which forces huge debts on many, a housing market out of the reach of many ordinary people and the persistence of poverty and social exclusion on a truly disturbing scale. If the earlier knowledges thought to be part of a continuing liberation were partly an illusion, they at least ensured a rising participation rate and a general raising of the educational level of the people. This was secured at least partially through education. The struggles of young people and students also prepared the way for a greater consciousness of the pressing issues of 21st century whose destructive potential threatens everything.

The failure to recognise and address the wicked issues of the day is more serious than just the sin of omission. Climate change, world poverty and degradation, war and social dislocation on an unimaginable scale and environmental destruction are the great evils of the time. They are the existential issues which will make or break our way of life and they impact the whole globe and all who live on it. Our handling of these things will determine the future of our planet and species. Every individual has a stake in this matter and it transcends the burning issues of the day such as inequality, race, ethnicity, faith and injustice. Whilst we cannot and should not invite people to consider deep suffering and deprivation as a learning opportunity, these serious issues should be at the very heart of our learning and be the basis of a critical literacy relevant to all learners. These matters are surely relevant to the question of – what are universities good for? (Brink 2018; Ashwin 2020).

What dominates our conventional learning and schooling, however, is the deficit model of education. Children and students are to be filled with facts and 'knowledge' which is encoded in the official textbooks. Knowledge is bestowed from above rather than being created in interaction and dialogue; we inherit and continue to reproduce therefore a divisive culture which abandons critical literacy in favour of subject specialisms and a pre-formed and often constricted curriculum. Although we cannot abolish the academic disciplines which retain their power we have discovered that a critical and universal literacy is required to empower those whose access to knowledge has been restricted and who have been denied as a result historical and social justice (Hall 1983).

What is needed is something that resembles a critical community-based learning culture which investigates and supports the communities in which educators actually live and work. What is implied here is in fact learning beyond the classroom where the problems and challenges facing communities become the source and inspiration for learning. Instead what we have seen grow and expand in recent decades in the United Kingdom is a political climate which has seen regressive budget cuts for education and social welfare and more bureaucratic, less egalitarian and less experimental educational policy. The progressive type of participatory research and development done with community participation shows what community action could achieve with long term commitment and engagement with a progressive educational vision (Teare 2018). Financial austerity and authoritarian control from the centralised top – down managerial models of university life can only signal the demise of open education and mass participation designed for widening participation and achievement.

Combatting ignorance

There is a further aspect of what we understand as really useful knowledge and this is the long historical, yet ultimately very modern struggle to combat ignorance. Ignorance was one of the five 'giant' impediments to social progress identified by the Beveridge Report in Britain during the Second World War. The others were want, disease, squalor and idleness (unemployment) and combatting these led to the creation of Britain's welfare state

(Gillard 2023). Ignorance in some senses has clearly been reduced in successive generations and mass access and participation in education is the mark of that. However, new kinds of ignorance have taken their place with widespread beliefs in conspiracy theories and 'fake news'. Misinformation and the deliberate production of ignorance, including doubt in the validity of science and technology have been perpetrated, mainly through social media and internet sources in the most recent times. The media and internet campaigns against vaccination during the Covid 19 pandemic are a prime example. Historically there are many examples, however, of deeply conservative interests spreading ignorance and misinformation about, for example the role and effectiveness of comprehensive schooling, so-called failing schools in poor areas in the UK and notably the racism associated with the over-representation of Black Caribbean children in 'special educational needs' schools in the 1970s. The supposed failure of comprehensive schools continued under the Blair Labour governments and schools were removed from democratic control and accountability to control by business and other vested interests when in fact there was no such failure. Sally Tomlinson has written... 'It had taken 200 years to develop a national system of state schooling with some democratic input from local authorities, teachers and even parents; it took just 20 years for it to disappear into private hands and undemocratic control' (Tomlinson 2022: 129).

Much has changed in the world of education as this volume has hopefully demonstrated in dealing with the pivot of change in access and widening participation between the latter part of the 20th century and the third decade of the 21st century. Societies that only tolerated limited elementary schooling and denied tertiary education to the many, regarded girls as less worthy of education than boys and men, undervalued vocational education and encouraged deference to elites have changed in myriad ways. However, as we have pointed out the privately educated children of the wealthy still dominate the elite universities and positions in the economy and society. There is still a belief within government circles in the rightness and benefits of meritocracy, though the realities even there are that merit on its own rarely succeeds in the competition for elite statuses and rewards. There is a continuing denial of the impact of socioeconomic factors, namely social class, responsible for educational outcomes which disadvantage working class people. Ignorance is deeply embedded in some powerfully held political attitudes to education and learning by vested interests which uphold the elites. And these are often broadcast and 'sold' through the privately controlled mass media. This form of ignorance will not be demolished until equal, fair, comprehensive schooling alongside an extended and universal/common curriculum for all young people becomes the accepted form of schooling.

Creativity as a source of knowledge

Our sources of knowledge are limited by the academic and school-based disciplines which dominate our learning. Creativity is needed which breaks out of the artificial constraints of the past. Language and literature, for example, are key sources of social knowledge which offer us an alternative way of seeing. Literature, for example, is a way of understanding reality which is distinctive; it liberates the imagination and can give us insights and pleasures available nowhere else. Literature is not to be seen as a justification of the contemporary world, though some of it may do precisely that. Through its emotional and affective impact literature along with the arts and humanities can change the way we think and act. When it does this it is part of the critical paradigm of social thinking because it reflects the real world of history, of how humans have created their own societies and their own nature. Imaginative literature allows us to ask whether the story or text has *moved* the reader to think and act beyond what is already given and experienced. Literature and art appeal to feelings and this is also a matter of social thinking which could enhance both more individualized and collective creative approaches to education. Creative thinking and creative education can teach us fresh ways of asking perhaps the most fundamental question, *what is education for?* (Robinson 2016).

Access and creativity: the arts can change the way we think, learn and act.

The value of crossing borders

Our points of departure for rethinking our approach to education should consider the borders we erect around racial, ethnic, faith and cultural matters. These must surely be recognized and crossed so that a more tolerant and genuinely multicultural life becomes possible for all. Oppressive and intolerant laws must be contested and reversed. We must be militant for freedoms and democracy because these values are key to our way of life which must continue to encourage critical thinking, reflection and its expression in a free press and media. The significance of language and culture, often hidden beneath a horizon of indifference or ignorance can never be over-estimated. Where ethnic, linguistic and national identities are played out in the inheritance of the imperialistic and nationalistic states and ideologies there must be challenges and alternatives proposed. Where we are not vigilant for tolerance we are exposed to regressive values such as religious fundamentalism and nativist nationalisms and populisms which can easily become oppressive (Malik 2023).

Learning and the ecological crises

The discovery and recognition in practice of the laws of nature and of the ecological precariousness of our planet must be the object of our critical awareness and thus of our education. This awareness of the ecology of learning is not restricted to the geographical and physical environment, though it is connected to it (Barnett 2017; Davies and Nyland ibid 2022 a). Ecological life includes also the ways in which we live our lives in a mass culture of consumption and the acceleration of everything including our 'attentionality' (Crawford 2015). Life is lived at speed – fast cars, fast food, fast music and instant gratification and delivery of what we want if we can pay for it now. Everything is speeded up and our perception of the environment is changed as we are bombarded with advertisements in every possible shape and form and size and every public and private space becomes a venue for the sale of something. The mass data harvested in its millions and trillions of clicks per minute across the whole world harvested by the monopoly digital conglomerates multiplies exponentially. Information explodes into availability across the internet. High levels of stimulation are of course intrinsic to high levels of consumption in our mass culture. The lessons to be learned, often in settings that are beyond the classroom, are that it is possible to decelerate so that complex social and emotional processes can be identified in the places we live and work.

More participation and a negotiated curriculum

which focusses on the key issues of the time plus a decelerated learning and teaching (a pedagogy for dialogue) would provide us with better tools to fashion our future. It would perhaps help learners to develop a critical commentary on public life and reality, because the systems of mass communication we have currently leave many of them immobilised, unable to understand the causes of their confusion and alienation and unable to act on them. For young people in particular this is important since they are the future and they have the most to gain or lose.

The importance of sustainable development

Climate change, a loss of trust in institutions, the growth of public and private anxiety and the failure of economies devoted to a narrow focus on growth, regardless of its true cost, are the challenges facing us in the third decade of the 21st century. What cannot be easily denied is the fact that a great transformation is needed if we are to avoid climate change and ecological catastrophe on a truly global scale. The United Nations sustainable development goals shown here were adopted by world leaders in 2015. They are surely key parts of what we must all learn to value and to protect for a secure and just and viable future for all.

The points of departure outlined above address some of the themes and concerns developed by the Access movement and critical thinkers and teachers of earlier generations who sought to expand the horizons of their students whilst literally opening the doors of their institutions to people who had been unjustly excluded. Without necessarily knowing it, they were developing frameworks within which a more critical and transformative education could be conceived.

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Chapter 14

Access and the social purposes of higher education

The positive lesson of Access

The Access agenda in the final quarter of the 20th century had no clear, unilinear and concise conception of how the structures of an unequal society interacted with the contingencies of life lived in difficult circumstances for many learners. In this sense there was no single or coherent agenda for Access. In Britain and Australia, for example, as demand for further and higher education grew there was a multiplicity of courses and an explosion of diverse provision for learning across multiple communities and places as the new century began. In England in 2003, for example, there were some three million learners in the Further Education Sector of whom adult students made up four fifths of enrolments and three quarters of such learners were women. This diversity had elements of democratic involvement and control as local communities articulated their own demands and needs for education. Access courses tended to be local in character reflecting local communities and interests, including ethnic and gender dimensions. Students and teachers generally gave actual and symbolic recognition to the places and communities from which they came and to which they would return to use the learning they had acquired. The life course of students became a part of the curriculum for many and Access recognised their lives and personal identities (Huttunen 2007). The rights and achievements of a mature person could be recognised through credit accumulation and the accreditation of prior learning and experience in ways and volumes simply beyond the capacity of conventional school-leaving qualifications or undergraduate study (Lillis and Stott 2005; Wilson 2005 and 2010). The growth of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem accompanied the acquisition of critical literacy and the study skills needed for advanced study. The building blocks for social capital were constructed from the functional resources of family, community and the workplace as individuals demonstrated their learning achievements and entered universities in their thousands using the new Access courses and open access colleges and federations (Black 1982; University of Derby 1993; Freestone 1996; Fryer 1997).

In Australia education had always been a key social resource for the development of the nation and for nation building, underpinned by conceptions of 'fairness' and concerns for social justice and equity. That the Indigenous peoples did not share equally in this has been widely recognised and remains a key social and policy objective yet to be fully met. It is arguable, however, that access in Australia was more keenly felt to be about shaping and full-filling aspirations and achievements rather than addressing issues of social equity and cultural inequalities (Croucher and Waghorne 2020: 144-145).This tendency has, arguably, intensified in the 21st century, especially in higher education as the era of global neoliberal competitiveness and technology-driven disruption injected what Wesley (2023) refers to as 'ambition' and 'anxiety' into the national conversation about Australia's future. Australia's universities saw themselves as key elements in the drive to be publicly useful and simultaneously be at the centre of the new knowledge economy. This developing awareness and search to improve their competitive position plus the need to search for resources did nothing to resolve the tension or contradiction over whether universities should be committed to social justice and the pursuit of higher forms of knowledge or to utilitarian outcomes and its supposed economic benefits. The development of challenge and the desire for alternative viewpoints, nevertheless could be seen in the rise of critical forums for debate such as that of Engagement Australia and the persistence of voices committed to access and social justice such as that of the journal *Transform*.

The Australian higher education system has been one of the great social and economic success stories of modern times and its contributions to social engagement and progressive thinking have been acknowledged (Forsyth 2014; MacIntyre, Brett and Croucher 2017; Croucher and Waghorne ibid). The purpose of this book, however, was to tell the story of what might be called a 'hidden curriculum' which refers to attempts to assert a different way of thinking about learning for those people and communities that needed what Habermas called transformational knowledge. We referenced earlier the need for 'really useful knowledge' among working class communities in Britain reaching back into the 19th century and what Goodall has called the need for education within the politics of the common good in Australia. The Access agenda we have asserted was always ultimately about the social purposes of education, though it takes many diverse forms across the time frames we have used and the socio- geopolitical and geographical diversity of Britain and Australia in particular. Nevertheless we have argued the existence of a commonality of interest and shared values across these divides so that Access is viewed as part of a deliberative and democratic culture. This has peculiar and specific resonance for socially and disconnected populations and for how we understand public life and the role of learning within it.

Wherever Access students and teachers emerged in universities the meaning of higher education was expanded because universities were forced to deal with something other than their instrumental purposes. They were confronted with demands to advance common purposes, to consider the nature of a common culture of learning and to debate what might be common capacities for citizenship. All of this required an engagement with open enquiry, scientific enterprise for public-welfare outcomes and engaged learning and teaching. In Britain this no doubt derived in part from the socially just and liberating messages of the authors of the Robbins Report itself in 1963 (Barr 2014) and the inheritors who 50 years later and then beyond that, asserted that universities have to be active in making sure that our collective life is democratic and socially just (Todd 2021; Scott 2021; Davies and Nyland 2022).

Prospects opened: transformations delayed

When people begin to grasp the idea that there is a deep psychological need for belonging and recognition across communities, and that culture and education are deeply embedded in this, we may get progress towards the society we desire. In this perspective, learning and especially lifelong learning opportunities are as vital as economic investment. In many ways they are coterminous and one is only possible when the other exists alongside. Education and employment together are essential for a thriving community; they are essential to the creation of a shared public understanding of what reality is and can be. A narrow and vocationalist skills-led approach to learning, for example, which became a dominant theme in educational thinking in the last decades of the 20th century cannot address the challenges of the 2020s and beyond. Neither can future education prospects be forever rooted in elite university systems which consolidate existing class divisions and exclude the wider public from debate, participation and stakeholder ownership.

There are doubts about the significance and meaning of mass higher education, however, and many are not convinced that mass higher education can promote democratic access that can challenge and overcome the hierarchies of inequality and unfairness which persist across the globe. Some argue that mass expansion of HE has actually served to consolidate rather than erode social differences (Scott ibid: 12) or at the very least reconstructed them in different and less obvious but no less divisive ways. Danny Dorling of Oxford University has argued that ...'We have an educational system that is designed to polarise people – one that creates an elite who can easily come to have little respect for the majority of the population; who think that they should earn extraordinarily more than everyone else; and defines the jobs of others as so low skilled that it apparently justifies many living in relative poverty' (Dorling 2018: 228).

Yet mass access has increased participation and the acquisition of knowledge and skills must lead to better outcomes than those which rest on exclusion and ignorance. The general level of education has been raised enormously through mass access and perhaps a claim can be made for a commensurate increase in civilised behaviour and progressive values, though such a claim is no doubt contestable. In Britain educational achievement is still correlated highly with social class (Savage 2015; Todd ibid), which though true, does not deny the significance of shifting social class indicators and of other demarcations such as gender, race and ethnicity. Nor does it counter the importance of intersectional factors when we state that the graduate class of people is still very much a middle class, even though its constituent parts are now composed of a greater variety of ethnic and social groups.

There is an argument that the highly stratified and variable graduate population which has emerged from the hierarchical higher education system has benefitted from the legitimating ideology of meritocracy. Many believe they have succeeded because they deserved to do so without ever examining the manner in which our social elites are formed and reproduced and the way in which inequalities are embedded in economic, social and cultural life. There is much to do in devising a universal literacy and a critically informed graduate class who should be aware of such social forces and ideologies. Widening participation enabled millions more people to study and acquire degree qualifications though it became clear that the graded snobberies of the elite institutions would also be refashioned for new generations to impose inequalities and to continue to privilege the wealthy. The realities are that mass participation may also have helped restrict access to the more highly stratified labour market by limiting job opportunities to only those possessing a degree. Older, apprentice-based routes to occupational progression have diminished and opportunities for non-graduates have been restricted.

Culturally it may be the case that burgeoning metropolitan universities have created new urbanised communities centred on regional and urban hubs. Wholesale districts and 'quarters' have been built in cities around student and graduate life, stressing the 'cosmopolitan' lifestyle on offer and the advanced and technologically based employment and entrepreneurial opportunities available. To a degree this type of development may have highlighted the diminishing attractions of the older, industrially-based communities and impoverished rural communities which have been starved of investment and 'left behind' as the digitally-based revolution in employment and consumption has proceeded. The corporate university has emerged as the dominant form of university at the 'hub' of regional educational activity but at the other end of the spoke, at the edge of the wheel, there may be disenfranchised communities whose colleges and campuses have been shut down in the interests of managerial efficiency (Davies 2021 and 2023). The persistent and egregious problems of poverty and inequality have not disappeared from advanced capitalist societies and they continue to disfigure the lives of many for whom the promise of educational opportunity remains just that – but a promise unfulfilled (Toynbee and Walker (2020).

The promise of educational achievement has been delayed, if not denied in many societies but there exists a possible future where education, including higher education, will depend on there being a plurality of stakeholder types, instead of a single type of HE institution which monopolises everything within a managerial and controlling culture. New types of social enterprise are emerging, building on a tradition of social action and co-operativism which at its core creates social capital through creating access to people and education (Teare 2018). Innovative businesses, mutual trusts, co-operatives, public benefit companies, not-for-profit businesses are all different forms of social enterprise which support social and community relationships. They can intentionally foster and support re-enfranchising a group or place so that the well-being of a community is the measure of success instead of perhaps the financial balance sheet of an institution. Barnett (2017) has called for an 'ecological philosophy' where universities can be involved in a range of ecologies – social, cultural, political and environmental – and where intentions and values can infuse and interpenetrate learning and teaching about the world issues which face us. The thread or Leitmotif running through a critical account of university learning is therefore that real understanding comes when we grasp the relation of one thing with another: when there is a connection, understanding grows. We need to better understand the relation of university education, engagement and learning to our communities and we need to be clear about the social purposes of higher education.

Is there transformational learning?

Many of those who commit to a working life in education argue that that we need practical and transformative learning and a positive prospect or manifesto to bring about desired change (Teare ibid; Ashwin 2020; Habermas 2022). However, when we reflect, as we must, we need theory to make the connections clear and to test ideas against experience. We may in fact need to theorise a type of universal literacy which equips learners with the critical thinking skills and tools as advocated by notable critical thinkers and theorists who adopt a sociological approach to these issues (Habermas 1972 and 1989; Hall 1983 and 1990; Shor 1992 and 1996). It should be clear that we have used a 'theory of society' approach which asks what are the concepts and structural features of modern society we need to understand and apply if we are to fully grasp what is happening to higher education (Reckwitz and Rosa 2023). Yet there is no single theory of education nor is there a single 'framework' to explain the meaning of the different themes, issues and problematics of our times which impact on learning and community engagement in and for universities. A single and unifying narrative can surely never be the intention yet we clearly need the insights that a developed and argued conscience for higher education might deliver, if it were rooted in critical and transformative thinking. An openness to experience and critical reflection on the many different and contrasting sources of knowledge can be recognized (Smith 1996 and 2001; Seidman 1998; Davies 2022). We need at least to continue to argue for a 'values-based capitalism', as we hope to have done in this book, which suggests reform and reconstruction of economic and social institutions in the interests of the common good (Foley and Manwaring 2023; Wolf 2023). If we are to have a vital framework for access and engagement the evidence suggests there must be a diversity of topics and themes and approaches, which reflects the fact that we do not live a linear life and we can never live alone. As one of the greatest English language poets said… 'No man is an island, entire of itself.' (Donne /Stubbs 2006). We share common origins and our destiny is likely to be shared by all as the existential issues impact on everyone. Nomatter how any individual meets their own moment of extinction there is one absolute that everyone has in common. How we deal with the knowledge that we are now capable of destroying life as we know it on the planet has to be at the forefront of our minds. This is an educational agenda which points to structural reform rather than rehearsing the politics of well-being through equality of opportunity schemes which ameliorate problems without solving them whist allowing inequalities to persist over the generations.

In the search for a transformative education we must surely acknowledge the contradiction we have already encountered in this narrative of Access. Educational systems such the mass participation version we have in Australia and Britain can be both transformative *and* conservative (Desjardins 2015; Wesley 2023 ibid). The great story of our time which involves the mass access to education is undoubtedly a transformative one and the debate about its meaning is a continuous one. The positive perspective is that technological and social/ educational solutions can combat the misleading 'overdramatic' worldview that holds that

corruption, war, violence, natural disasters, human made disasters and the existential threats of climate change constitute our future (Rosling 2019; Bregman 2018). Our perspective has been to show that critical thinking in the progressive contexts of Access and widening participation can change our realities and prospects. We need new knowledge and knowledge frameworks; a new normal (Nyland and Davies 2022) which can engage with the old paradigms which themselves have prevented new prospects from ever emerging into the light of day. It is not just education itself but the social, cultural and political contexts in which learning takes place that matter for transformations of society. This book has argued that it is through 'really useful' knowledge', a thread through time, that change can be brought about. Using critical thinking we can find ways of learning and teaching that are commensurate with social justice. How this happens is not a straightforward process as social science has consistently demonstrated over successive generations (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The different kinds of capital that exist in the world (Bourdieu 1986; Picketty 2014), the continuing force of ideologies which sustain inequality (Picketty 2020) and the acceleration of capitalist production as a destructive force as well as for wealth creation, should alert us to the real contexts in which our education systems exist. These are the accelerating and negative forces which threaten us with destabilisation and precarity (Noys 2014).We must understand these and grasp the alternatives through critical thinking and analysis as elements of social action.

The great global inequalities which are shaping our lives and futures are experienced and refracted through the lived experiences of people at the local level – where people actually live out their lives in communities and neighbourhoods, and where they work and learn. Yet the focus cannot simply be on the local which is necessarily narrow. Education must account for the wider public policy frameworks and the institutional frameworks in which learning is embedded (Kerslake 2019). Access was an innovation which promised some of the elements for a transformation in educational opportunity. Its limitations were demonstrated by its restricted capacity to address some deep and extensive social, cultural and economic realities which lay far beyond its reach. Its success was to shine a light on what could be achieved and to open up prospects in spite of and in recognition of the limitations. Access created new meanings and identified possibilities for those it served. Those possibilities may yet serve as a promise delayed, but not yet denied.

Goodbye Mr Chips – the unloved mass university

Peter Scott, in his influential analysis of the crisis of mass higher education (Scott ibid 2021: 14) refers to the 'normative coherence possessed by earlier, and smaller universities'. The Oxbridge colleges have historically provided an idealised model of the collegial university in which academics shared the democratic governance of their institutions and where endowments provided economic security over generations and students had often a familial connection with the college, again sometimes over generations. Such 'ideal types' could never probably have existed in reality but they represented an imagined and desired community of learning which could exercise a hold over its graduates throughout their lives. They provided havens for some of the great minds to develop and for scholars to educate and socialise the coming generations who would populate the elite positions in British society and its empire. They were not and did not claim to be institutions for the creation of equity and fairness, yet they did in some cases uphold values of freedom of speech and enlightened thought. They did become key centres of science and rational debate. They inculcated a deep sentimental attachment in their students who, with exceptions obviously, felt known, recognized and valued.

In the 1936 film version of Goodbye Mr Chips we see an English 'collegial' school in its conservative setting where Mr Chips, teacher of Latin, knows each student personally and probably their fathers and even grandfathers. It is an all male school (naturally) where women, when not invisible, are positioned as the carers and ultimately servants of men and where each individual is known and is humanely valued; even a German teacher who is killed in the central social/political event of the film, the First World War. Not even the unprecedented catastrophe of World War with its awful and needless deaths and industrial-scale carnage can shake the foundations of the institution and the comradeship and belonging the students feel for their alma mater. Indeed it is the school which transmits the sentiment that it is a glorious thing to serve the nation in its hour of need and if necessary to die for it. The sheer bloodiness and human butchery and its scale is obscured by the Hollywood production values used by the film, but this cannot obviate the impact that this conflict still had less than a decade after it ceased. There is little or no social 'critique' in this film but there is a statement about the importance of the values of tolerance, decency, commitment, constancy and the love of learning and teaching which few popular films have ever been able to capture. This collegial spirit has lived on in the popular imagination of what an educational institution might be, though realities often proved to be different and the graduates of this imagined education have been less than beneficial as they have governed an increasingly divided and unequal society characterised by crises and wicked issues discussed in this volume (Dorling ibid; Verkaik 2019). Robert Donat, the star actor who played Mr Chips, was a Manchester boy at Ducie High School, a local selective school located at the fringes of notorious inner-city areas Moss Side and Hulme, both later demolished twice as slum housing areas.

If the Oxbridge College was revered and possessed a normative coherence, the modern corporate university, Scott suggests, is unloved. It has emerged in the era of mass expansion of higher education and it can be argued has failed to challenge the social inequalities and hierarchies as something like near-universal participation has evolved. Elites and hierarchies dominate the higher education scene with new and old divisions and status distinctions ensuring that the middle and upper classes have benefitted most. Meritocracy is the distorting ideology of choice and the old elites still dominate the entry to the 'best' universities. The graduate job market is highly stratified, favouring the older, higher elite institutions and privileging their graduates over all others. The universities in the UK, Australia and elsewhere are increasingly corporate, financially complex and driven by national government policy rather than academic communities and values. The question of what universities are actually for has been raised again (Brink 2018; Ashwin ibid; Scott ibid; Wesley 2023) and who they serve so that there is a gathering crisis of higher education in the third decade of the 21st century which replicates in part and extends the crisis of learning and knowledge experienced at the start of the new millennium by those who thought modernity, vocational utilitarianism and postmodernism might threaten the basis of university thinking itself (Barnett and Griffin 1997).

What do we need next for Access?

There is no blueprint of solutions for all of the issues facing higher education in Australia and Britain or elsewhere in the world. This book has not attempted such a task but it has tried to indicate the problems, challenges and successes, both conceptual and empirical, of Access and widening participation in a world of mass higher education. The paradoxes and contradictions we have encountered do not allow easy generalisations to be made about what is needed next, nevertheless an indicative list of propositions can help focus attention on what might be achieved:

- re-classify the institutionalised vertical hierarchies of universities into *research universities* with international reach and status, *regional universities* which serve research and teaching for national and local populations and *teaching universities* which use scholarship and pedagogy as central concerns – all on an

equal status and funding basis

- recognise that the many facets of public and common good which attach to the modern university need support and funding and that this is essential to democratic engagement
- establish that the core mission of widening participation should include the service and engagement with local communities and the sustaining of employment opportunities
- overcome the positional war in higher education between higher education which values elite performance as a different scale and value from that of Access and widening participation
- employ Access courses and philosophies in all types of higher education to achieve a primary fair and equal access for all
- democratise all entrance requirements to higher education providers which use public funds and make them subject to public accountability
- extend the horizontal diversity of HE institutions so that different missions, sizes and organisations can develop higher learning opportunities
- introduce measures that minimize inequalities in work-based income, property and wealth including more egalitarian tax obligations and measures to prevent tax avoidance/evasion
- consider the introduction of a social wage as part of the collective gods provided by the public sphere
- put an end to privilege through education by reforming the high cost, elite-driven private schools and universities
- maximise social benefits through higher education as a means of creating social capital and wealth
- end supply-driven HE development which allows for selection by elite HEIs and ensure that the majority of demand-driven/selected universities operate fair access policies
- ensure that Access addresses the matter of low social inclusion of some community groups by building trust, solidarity and equity into educational programmes and initiatives
- allocate by democratic and random ballot the limited number of elite places to those suitably qualified by academic merit
- build in demand-driven growth and access to HE through the use of fair and equity-driven reputation; abolish historic and embedded institutional advantage and undeserved status
- sponsor creativity and difference in HE organizational structures and systems so that no institution can gain status advantage at the expense of another
- discourage the tendency of all universities to claim they are carrying out world-renowned research
- re-instate the value of teaching and learning as core university activities with students at the core of concern
- establish evaluation methods and schemes which recognize merit and talent and the role of universities in adding value to further studies
- counter-balance the influence of inherited wealth and privilege on entrance and attainment in the HE institutions by incentivizing Access schemes and widening participation across the socially excluded populations
- engage with the social and ethnic groups that constitute modern populations around their educational needs and perspectives so that more public goods are created
- create a universal literacy movement which has a democratic momentum around a new Access curriculum whose content engages with the great social and cultural themes of the time
- ensure that the ‘wicked issues’ which bedevil the international community are addressed within the notion of a critical curriculum.

Extending the boundaries of engagement

Everybody who lives in the present must engage with modernity: there is no escape entirely. It is modernity itself and its forms of experience that confer a common identity on most of us and it is modern life which is the primary focus for the challenge to traditional truths and values. Such a view might assert the challenge to ‘natural’ and essential meanings in our everyday life. Our social and community life and our history, in this perspective, is to be actively re-made as part of the collective struggle for a better life. Ways of seeing (to evoke a resonance from a John Berger title (2008) have to become ways of learning and acting. This is now taking place in a new context. The boundaries of learning, which previously had been geographical and cultural, have been expanded by the globalising forces of economy and an explosion into availability of information through the internet and modern communications technology has occurred. This has been accompanied by the power of acquisition – the capacity to consume more-or-less immediately, what is available. There are surely implications for universities in this perspective and for all educators? The implications for what is learned and taught are profound.

However we ‘see’ current or historical events, there can surely be no doubt that modern times present new problems which require new solutions. The past, present and future of communities, conceived in positive terms as the product of imagination and critique, implies the adoption and extension of ways of learning that are compatible with the evolving community of experience as outlined above. This is a significant issue, given the corrosive power of modernism to undermine stability and continuity and the threats to the planet’s very existence as a home for the human race. Geographical and identity-based community is then still a powerful organising and framing concept. It retains resonance and the power to mobilise our sentiments and imaginations. We appear to want to retain it as a locus for our longings and imagined pasts and futures. And if this is truly the case then we need to re-think and re-shape our attitudes and understandings of what learning is and does for us, specifically in relation to our understanding of ‘community’ and the significance of our ecology over time and through space. We have suggested that a new ecological education is being signalled. It suggests that we need to re-assess our identities and belongings in the light of the new world that is emerging with great rapidity. The challenge is to understand and transform our communities and our learning as part of the solution to our problems. The new and imagined future will need new ways of knowing and being and a reformed universal and critical curriculum to match it. The educational future was once a promise of liberation and greater freedom: it is now a question of survival.

Concurrently amidst the carnage that is foreshadowed by the idea of ecological disaster (Vince 2014 and 2023; Kaplan 2024) is the paradox that we have vastly more education and learning than our forebears could ever have possibly imagined. Modernity – meaning advanced industrial societies with large-scale and urban populations – is full with schools, colleges and universities. Formal and informal learning opportunities have exploded into realities via the digital revolution. It is theoretically and almost practically possible for educators to communicate with every living human being on the planet. Education including research represents the greatest potential for economic growth and underpins a large part of global prosperity. And yet … although education as a social, economic, political and cultural reality is massively significant, it is literally astonishing that that the matter of curriculum is in general of minimal concern. Although there are notable exceptions, we have a university academic structure inherited from the 19th century and hierarchies of subject disciplines and departments conceived and organised literally for a different century and for different purposes than those facing us now. The stringent need is to reorganise and re-shape the curriculum and structures of higher education so that it addresses the paradox.

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Part 7

The Australian Universities Accord

Leading The Engagement Agenda

Engagement Australia champions the unique role universities have with society to address contemporary global challenges and trends through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.

We do this by:

- Providing and inspiring leadership;
- Developing capacity and future leaders;
- Enabling peer-learning;
- Providing practical tools and tips; and
- Providing a platform for collaboration and knowledge creation.

Engagement Australia supports the wider contextual standard definition of community engagement, previously developed by the US-based Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which has succeeded in codifying the core characteristics and principles of community engagement. It defines Community engagement as a method of teaching, learning and research that describes interactions between universities and their communities (business, industry, government, NGOs, and other groups) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

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Chapter 15

An Access perspective

The Accord is an Australian government intervention designed to address future higher education issues for the nation at large. Following extensive consultations it reported in 2024 with an extensive description and analysis of themes and challenges for the tertiary education sector. A substantial list of recommendations covered many aspects of higher education including research, university governance, university engagement and the needs-driven position of equity groups and the disadvantaged in accessing higher learning and qualifications. Australia is viewed as a growing and developing society whose presence on the world stage is increasingly seen as key to economic and geopolitical security and the maintenance of democratic values and practices in its region and across the world. Social change and diversity has been embraced.

We can note that labour market and economic concerns underpin the Accord's viewpoint on educational needs and the requirement for skills development is stressed. It is the case that industrial and economic productivity growth was strong in Australia – particularly through the 1990s – however, the growth of the world's economy in the third decade of the 21st century slowed and geopolitical uncertainty became more marked as the USA retrenched its economic reach and China extended its own. A changing population in Australia with countervailing trends of an ageing settled demographic and a younger migratory one with multiracial/multicultural origins now suggest challenges for the labour market and the social structure. The aspirations for ever-rising living standards are not commensurate with low productivity and depressed educational achievements. A healthy education higher sector is crucial for both economic growth and social and community wellbeing, twin objectives which drove concern for renewal in Australia in the third decade of the 21st century.

The Accord was an ambitious and far-reaching review of the state and future potential of Australia's higher education system. Its fundamental concerns were for the future skills needs of the nation, the need to grow the numbers of students to meet rising social and economic demands and the desire to assert equity and fairness within practical policies supporting disadvantaged people with special recognition of the position of the Aboriginal peoples. A renewed system was envisaged as an evolving mission for Australian higher education with equity concerns and an expanded conception of community engagement given prominence. The overall concept of the Accord was immensely wide-ranging and included analysis and recommendations covering the need for excellence in teaching and learning, international engagement, research and innovation, sustainable funding requirements for stability and growth, updating of governance and regulation of HE, regional challenges for HE providers and students, and consideration of a universal learning entitlement to make lifelong learning a reality. The consultation was quite categoric, that too few Australians are going to university and asserted that the goal must be growth for skills through greater equity. Crucial to this vision and analysis was the claim and belief that First Nations students were at its heart.

The thrust of the Accord is quite clearly 'progressive' and aimed at reform in that real and concrete steps are contemplated to improve access and participation in higher education for designated social and equity groups. There is a recognition of historic inequalities and inequities and of the need to bring Australian thinking in line with modern/current events and movements on access and opportunity. These are also the themes of this book, though we have moved out to range more widely than the Accord to problematise and explore Access issues in the context of new dedications: ecology, women, ethnicity/race and nativism. We do not face away from the historic issues of nation, identity and racism in higher education and we outline critical approaches to the social purposes of universities, not least in the light of ecological threats to humanity and our way of life. There can be little doubt, however, that the Accord hit important targets in the attempt to produce an enriched and diverse consolidation of higher education in Australia.

The Accord identifies National Tertiary Objectives which it states must underpin a strong and resilient democracy and this is to be done via drive for national economic and social development and environmental stability. New knowledge must be created to sustain the social transformation which will lead to the betterment of society. These are worthy objectives by any standards and accompany the commitment to a vision of democratic cohesion and environmental sustainability and environmental wellbeing. The potential threats to social cohesion are mentioned on the first page of the Accord and must be addressed by the education system. The system must grow on a 'needs driven' basis which puts the student at the centre of concern and puts 'equity students', that is those who are educationally disadvantaged by background or capacity, in the forefront of support whether that is financial, familial, institutional or pedagogic. Both logic and rational morality support the case for all of this intended change and a whole raft of potential 'shifts' in the system delivery mechanisms are made in the Accord. From the Access perspective the most significant include:

- the VET and HE parts of the system are to be seen as belonging to the same system and no longer binary which is divisive and counter-productive
- growth as an imperative, with equity groups prioritised, must be built into provision
- current tertiary level III provision should be raised to 80% participation by 2050
- increases in adult (25-34 years) participation in HE should rise to 55% by 2050
- participation in VET/TAFE should rise to 40% by 2050
- equity is a key concept and should sponsor increases in undergraduate participation from all under-represented groups
- flexible, modular and stackable courses with credit transfers and a study passport are needed to promote attendance and attainment
- student finance should be reformed to encourage participation
- expansion of preparatory courses should be undertaken and fees-free courses for disadvantaged students made more widely available
- a new fund for solving Australia's 'big national challenges' should be introduced
- research should be re-prioritised
- regional developments and initiatives are needed to counter historic and geographical disadvantages
- first Nation peoples are to be given priority to shift the dial on participation; a First Nations Council is to be established
- community engagement is to be better recognised
- diversity of missions in HE is to be supported.

The Accord itself states quite boldly that 'Big changes are needed' (p.7) and the tenor and vocabulary of the document is one of challenge and change and even of urgency. However, from an Access perspective in particular, and perhaps more generally, it seems clear that the Accord has at its heart a concern with skills development and is rooted in a 'human capital theory' framework of thinking. The upskilling and training of new generations of people in the labour market is naturally a vital concern but the assumption that this is at the heart of the problems of participation and access is misplaced. We would argue that the labour market is not an autonomous factor and that the striking growth and emergence of mass higher education from the 1980s up to the second decade of the 21st century is not crucially explained by the demands of the labour market nor by the changes in labour supply dependent on skills acquisition (Marginson 1997, 2016). The

academic record we believe has demonstrated that other powerful forces were at work in shifting perceptions of what higher education meant and how it might be accessed, both by the broader masses through schooling and via the opportunities made available through the Access movement. We have argued in chapter 12 of this book that although cognitive development and skills for the economy are vitally important and in predicting individual economic success, education and schooling is only part of the process. Socialisation, culture, social differentiation, and the impact of social structures such as class, gender, identity, race/ethnicity and the question of how wealth and inequality are distributed make the difference in how higher education contributes to a viable sharing of the benefits and burdens in which we are all free to pursue our own ends unimpeded by prejudice, lack of opportunity or material deprivation. We believe this approach can take us beyond the equity framework to a deeper and potentially transformative higher education.

The growth of the HE system as an 'equity guarantor' focussed on human capital conceptions of skills and motivations is also problematical as long as the basis for growth and expansion is rooted in and based on a race for growth and competition between universities and institutions. Such a marketised system is an outgrowth of previous differences and inequalities which are now embedded in our social and economic structures and are expressed through the class, gender and often ethnic identities and communities of the population. This book has sought to demonstrate that alongside and embedded within the university system is a fairly newly emergent and highly differentiated and unequal set of hierarchies which perpetuate inequalities. We have an elite-driven HE system which continues to generate and distribute inequality, a position that is not seriously contested by the universities themselves and is seen as inevitable and immovable.

We believe that the Accord is a step forward in engaging higher education in a discourse of change and renewal. We would argue also that its power to shape the future would be enhanced if it were to extend its analysis to embrace a critically informed analysis of how the poly-ethnic nation displaces the ethnic nation and of how critical thinking and a universal literacy can be applied in what Miriam Dixson (1999) called 'a new dispensation' which can address the social fragmentation and sense of alienation from national concerns of identity and belonging which many of the educationally disadvantaged experience. These are issues which impact on the sought after social cohesion which many societies seek in times of change and social fragmentation. What we have termed an 'Access movement', as a wide ranging set of ideas, principles and practices, can contribute to the ability of marginalised and excluded people to take charge of their own lives, to gain social and political agency and to participate in a renewed civil society and civic identity. In response to the Accord, we believe that from an Access perspective our contribution to public debate can help raise an insistent awareness of the need for new frameworks to analyse and understand access and equality in higher education.

A view and commentary from an Access perspective

The Accord itself identified what it called 'big issues' facing Australian higher education. The question of the 'Big questions' is the key issue facing Australia's high education in the future. What is needed we suggest is a focus on the major changes underway in society, economy and the environment and how all Australians can have the opportunity to participate in HE now that more than 80% of the cohort are likely to enter the tertiary sector.

It is encouraging to note the Accord acknowledges that along with awareness of rapid technological change and the mixed impact of globalisation on local and regional economies, there needs to be a balance within and across education so as to regain a sense of purpose in civic and social progress. This emphasis contextualises what is often now taken for granted; higher education institutions are expected to respond to diverse client choice from a student perspective and perhaps increasingly from that of employers in a fast changing and uncertain world, yet are expected to deliver social benefits for the common good on behalf of all in an unequal society. The nature and extent of such inequality is a subject on which the educationalists themselves have spoken and have differed and the Access perspective has contributed to the debate in this book.

We believe that six of the main themes raised in the Accord are of special relevance to our themes of Access, opportunity and widening participation. Within these themes there are specific concerns which this book has commented on and which are relevant to our understanding of the Accord and its likely effects on Australian higher education :

1 – Access and widening participation and equality for all

2 – University engagement for the social purposes of HE

3 – Critical thinking and capabilities for free and democratic citizenship

4 – A curriculum for sustainability

5 – Student engagement and success

6 – The Wicked Issues facing Australia and the Accord.

1. Access and widening participation and equality for all

The Accord illustrates very well the deepening of change impacting on Australian society and communities. This is an economic, a social and a deeply cultural transition which is underway now and whose fruits will be harvested for certain in the period 2030-2040.

The current system produces chronic inequality of opportunity which is a continuing predicament for public policy. However, social inequality is unlikely to be seriously challenged by focussing on the skills needs of the economy as if that were an independent fact and feature of life. Social inequality is encountered in the workplace but it is not caused by the nature of skills nor the access to those skills. Neither is a university education exclusively about acquiring skills and competencies nor access to them; it is about much more than that including the idea of having a place in the scheme of things and the deeper sense of belonging within a culture that values diverse people and talents.

2. University engagement for the social purposes of HE

If it is generally true that the mass expansion of higher education has re-shaped and re-ordered the expectations of many people in modernity so that going to university is now normative, it is nevertheless still true that it has failed to challenge many of the social inequalities and hierarchies that reproduce inequalities. Universities are increasingly 'corporate' businesses with the graduate job market highly stratified with developments driven by financial objectives and/or government policy directives. However, the social purposes of higher education will need to be substantially re-imagined for the challenges of the 21st century. There will be a need to create high quality general learning capabilities through **lifelong learning** and via a 'universal literacy' so that each individual can function effectively in modern society. Ever accelerating technological change requires a continuous process of learning and adaptation so that people acquire the necessary skills, knowledge and adaptability to thrive in a knowledge-based society; this means accepting the lifelong and society-wide nature of the university student base. The primary responsibility for learning cannot rest with the individual alone; it should be thought of as a social responsibility.

Social capital must be created and rewarded so that communities and individuals are not excluded from national and mainstream

economies and higher education's role in this requires scrutiny, analysis and appropriate change and reform. Community engagement must be renewed in the light of Australia's evolving reality of being a multicultural and multiracial society with its own distinctive national identity which is truly inclusive. The social purposes of higher education have been the unifying subject of this book although the object of scrutiny is admittedly hugely diverse and complicated. The Accord has the great virtue of bringing light to bear on the wide range of policy initiatives needed to address these issues of the social purposes of higher education in the context of this century's issues, its uncertain future and its huge potential for the public good.

3. Critical thinking and capabilities for free and democratic citizenship

The Accord identifies an aspect of the role of higher education in terms of its support for critical thinking and capabilities for independent thought and judgement in its students and staff. Neville Meaney argued that even if core values for what it meant to be Australian were disputed, there were some that were not contested. 'The commitment to Western liberal values is fundamental. So also are ideas about equality, about the individual in relation to society and about the right to challenge authority' (Meaney 1996 and 2013).

This book has argued that universal and democratic access to knowledge is restricted where knowledge itself is stratified (Griffin 1983: 82-83). We have argued this case through reviewing some of the work and ideas of notable educationalists over a period of over 50 years – the period when mass higher education and access became a radical story of change and opportunity whilst at the same time morphing into a stratified and unequal system for distributing educational 'goods' in an unequal world (Freire 1970; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Fieldhouse 1996; Davies 1999; Marginson 2016; Featherstone 2023). This arguably mandates us to renew and reform how we understand and transmit knowledge to our students. We now have, arguably, produced a mass system of education without a common culture of knowledge – what Stuart Hall referred to as a universal literacy (Hall 1983). A number of key themes for an expanded curriculum can be identified within this generic approach and for the type of pedagogy (learning and teaching) adopted by learning programmes targeted at groups that have been marginalised by their socio-economic status, their culture or their lack of previous education and qualifications (Shor 1980, 1987; Nyland and Davies 2022).This is part of the emerging and continuing Access agenda with which the Australian Universities Accord is engaged.

The Australian Accord is an opportunity also to re-engage with the debate about the 'Anglo-Celtic core' (Dixson 1999) as an expression of Australia's national identity, not least in the light of the plurality of more recently arrived ethnicities and the question of what holds together the diversity of diasporic communities from being a disintegrating force. Civic identity must be rooted in the core culture. This is the real meaning of social cohesion and the importance of developing a sense of belonging which can combat the disintegrating elements of modernity. Without a cohesive force, multiple identities and communities are at risk of what Miriam Dixson referred to as … 'exploding into psychosis' (1999: 11) whereas what is needed is unity and a common vision for a better future.

The Accord notes the need for reform and vigilance in how higher education is governed and that a wider range of stakeholders can be recognized, 'Place-making', for example, which involves recognising the significance of landscape and place, is vital for many communities and often ranges across state, city and local boundaries (Pearson 2009). Questions of personal and social identity can become the foremost concerns for individuals and groups, not least when faced with uncertainty and the possibility of marginalisation within the wider culture.

The dimensions of student diversity and identity (Thomas and May 2010: 5) are actually and potentially huge and are an unrecognised resource in much of higher education. Whatever we do we must find and re-invent where necessary the capacity, motivation and will to learn from our students (Shor 1980,1987; Barnett 2017).

Learning is always a contemporary project: the planet's ecology is our key future project

4. A curriculum for sustainability

Learning is always a contemporary 'project' because it takes place in the here and now, in the active present; it takes place in particular places and geographies and it is done in particular languages and with and through cultural practices by individuals who are members of groups and communities. The term community has generated a great deal of argument over decades (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Bauman 2001) and its meaning is often both ambiguous and confusing; it also has strong resonances in Australia (Ward 1958, 1978; Dixson ibid1999; Meaney 2013: ch 3). Community narratives explore in detail what it is to live in communities defined by the nature and availability of work, by the social and economic state of the residents and of their cultural pursuits and social organisation (Bauman 2001; Edensor 2002).

An ecological approach to community would argue that there is a continuing geographical basis to most people's lives (Urry 2002, 2005; Barnett ibid) and therefore learning and education should reflect this fact and be based upon it. Geographical communities and identities generate natural learning groups through which learning takes place. Relations between people and groups of persons are seen as potent sources of learning and meaning. Our imaginations are important elements in defining ideas, concepts and even academic disciplines within the social sciences. This means that individuals and groups within a bounded geographical community can develop that community's awareness of itself 'ecologically'.

5. Student engagement and success

The Universities Accord identifies student success as a prime focus for the renewed Australian HE system. We have argued in this book that student success for those who need it most depends upon many things but prime amongst them is the successful application of the principles of critical learning and teaching. The underlying principles of most concern are: support for diversity of experience in the student journey through higher education; engagement with appropriate knowledge disciplines and situated and 'local knowledge'; critical literacy and learning for life, not just for accreditation; active and reflexive learning and teaching; recognition of the social importance of education beyond skills acquisition and human capital; acknowledgement within learning frameworks of the importance of cultural and ethnic difference within a common core of cultural identity; and a shift in the grounds of those who claim power and privilege on the basis of their knowledge monopoly (Dixson ibid: 31).

We believe that the Accord offers the chance to renew our concepts of what counts as the student experience and can help empower people to claim a say over their futures in uncertain times. However, the reality is that digital technologies have transformed the world economy and peoples' lives but they have also amplified unprecedented inequalities of wealth which have harmed many (Picketty 2020; Zuboff 2019).The digital technologies are now firmly embedded in the student experience and this presents both opportunities and severe challenges, not least as Artificial Intelligence (AI) extends its reach deep into student learning and assessments. The dangers of intellectual and emotional dependency, loss of personal autonomy and of the sheer addiction to computational technologies are severe (Crawford 2015; Zuboff ibid). These are some of the concerns which we believe underpin the need for an extended and deeper Access approach and sensibility to higher education renewal, specifically in respect of student engagement.

6. The wicked issues facing Australia and the Accord

A hierarchy of concern can never satisfy all the available priorities but there may be in fact some over-arching issues which threaten to overdetermine all others if they are left unattended. There are 'wicked issues' which in fact threaten the continued existence of our planetary way of life as we know it. In response to the Accord, which rightfully claimed to consider the 'Big Issues' facing Australia, we believe there is value in considering some of these issues which we are certain will help shape the future of higher education. This should include our understanding of class, race, ethnicity and belonging in relation to the role of higher education in a changing and uncertain world.

If we were not to recognise and address the most compelling of the crucial issues of the day, we would be committing more than just the error of omission. We made the claim earlier that mass higher education is one of the great stories of our time but climate change, world poverty and ecological degradation, war and social dislocation on an unimaginable scale and environmental precariousness are the great evils of the time. They are the existential issues which will make or break our way of life and they impact the whole globe and all who live on it. Our handling of these great challenges will determine the future of our planet and species. Whilst we cannot and should not invite people to consider deep suffering and deprivation as a learning opportunity, we believe these serious issues should be at the very heart of our learning and be the basis of a critical literacy relevant to all learners.

Towards an ecology of learning

There can be no easy technological 'fix' to the pervasive and extensive issues that arise but educators perhaps above all professions have a duty to respond. Barnett (2017) has suggested we need an 'ecological philosophy' where universities can be involved in a range of ecologies – social, cultural, philosophical, political and environmental – and where intentions and values can infuse and interpenetrate learning and teaching about the world's great threats and issues which face us. This is an agenda for all not just the elites in the commanding heights of the economy and culture. This is an agenda for 'Access as a Movement' which is needed to mobilise and energise the broader population and to ensure the inclusion of the marginalised. They are not a burden but a resource which government has yet to effectively mobilise for the benefit of all.

The primacy of one of these crises is clear, however, and it is by no means a new phenomenon. What Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1976) called the 'central ecological hypothesis' refers to the role of production in generating social wealth and the crisis of existence which accompanies it because that wealth is not shared on any equitable basis. This is an issue on a mass scale and it is global in extent. It impacts on all who now live on the Earth. The destruction of mankind can now be contemplated not as a result of a nuclear holocaust but as the normalised out-working of the productive forces as, driven mainly by the search for profits, they supercharge the exploitation of the Earth's natural resources. The unity and reconciliation of human beings with nature is a social question and the question of survival and restoration of the ecological balance is one of learning and education. Gaie Vince has shown us that we are making a very different world through our generation of and responses to extreme climate change and that we face an alarming and urgent emergency... 'Over the next fifty years... large swathes of the globe (will be) lethal for 3.5 billion of us (2023: xiii). As Vince points out, you and we will be among them or you will be receiving them as they are forced to migrate.

The approach to critical thinking and learning in this book has outlined some of the increasingly urgent concerns of teachers and scholars but in reality the wicked issues are existential matters of life and death for everyone; they are existential. The fact that we are constantly forced to address them across all boundaries of social difference, age, nation and culture suggests that we are experiencing a collective failure of learning. The issue here is the making in part at least of a new curriculum which puts at the heart of learning the actual problems and challenges of the living world. We need a basis for a better education – one in which both the content and form of learning is re-shaped to fit a world which knows it must change in order to survive.

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Conclusion

Where are we now?

Because the higher education system is so large and diverse and because many of its institutions have been transformed into a 'multiversities' with myriad functions and vast and complex operations, some of which involve extensive corporate property empires and global digital presences across continents, its core purposes are hard to identify. This 'system' is now an infinitely complex network and web of human activity and endeavor, and is part of the global knowledge economy as well as being a cultural phenomenon which impacts on every technologically advanced economic community. There is no single purpose that binds different universities to a commonly shared vision and thus there can be no single solution to the problems encountered even in a single nation state, which may have populations which claim different and yet over-lapping national and cultural identities such as Britain or Australia. In spite of this, many if not all universities view themselves as having civic responsibilities and many suggest they are committed to serving their local and regional communities. In general the notion of 'engagement' has been predominant and university engagement, both with civic concerns and the welfare and progress of students, has become a significant and diverse enterprise in its own right in many different cultures and societies.

There is, however, another dimension we should consider; that universities are a part of what we know and understand as a 'free society'. A democratic and open society enables freedom of thought and its expression to flourish. Dissent and differences of view and the clash of values are part of the expected discourse and dialogue of a free society. The freedom to teach and publish controversial opinions and scholarship carries a high value for a civilised society. These values and the practices that sustain them are not 'private goods' to be bought and sold in a market place; they are not part of a corporate learning experience designed to enhance profitability and enterprise. A university education should allow people to change themselves if they so wish and to change the world around themselves and in doing so facilitate the possibility of authentic transformations. It is the acquisition of knowledge, really useful knowledge, which makes this possible. Universities remain as keystones within the free and democratic societies and must recreate and renew this in each generation of students so that a university education is an education for democratic life and engagement. Yet we live in a world where realities often speak another language. The scale of contemporary crises is intimidating and these myriad problems are interrelated, ranging from the economic to the geopolitical and environmental. There appears to be no consensus on a solution and the prevailing orthodoxies, including much that passes for educational convention, are inadequate to the task.

We live in a world where...

It is instructive if we sometimes ask ourselves the questions that cannot be answered, though an opinion might be proposed. One such question is...just what kind of a world do we actually live in? There can be no definitive answer of course and there is an infinite quality about what we can know of the world in which we live. Any response which relies on a single discipline response risks making a 'classification error' unless its philosophical, sociological, epistemological and ontological status is clarified. This enterprise is beyond the scope and intention of this book but there appears to be nevertheless a certain value in the possibility of two antithetical responses to the unanswerable question.

First, there is an answer that relies on a 'panglossian', best of all possible worlds, primarily because the world is what it is and it is what we have made of it. It is a world where human beings have fulfilled their potential destiny as a species by occupying nearly all habitable spaces on the planet. The global population will reach beyond 8 billion and the possibilities of a decent standard of life for all can be realised, if we can organise ourselves for that outcome. The technological and innovative power of science can conjure the knowledge economy into global transformations for a fourth industrial revolution which will bring benefits to everyone. Within this frame modern universities are a force for global technical innovation and research and are central to meeting the global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics and the threat of social dislocation and even species extinction. This is techno-optimism of a high order and at least fulfils the function of meeting our wish and desires for solutions. There are those on the other hand who might suggest that the art of advanced consumer capitalism is to produce solutions, often based on technological advances and devices, to previously non-existent needs or the desire to find escapes from an unstable and uncertain present or a much worse apocalyptic future. The emphasis on technological solutions to our existential problems is sometimes augmented by a perspective stressing the progress humankind has made, demonstrated by its ever-increasing human welfare and prosperity. There is an argument that, for example, in the past everything was worse and that the philosopher Thomas Hobbes' view that life was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' is now redundant. In the last 200 years, in what is only a fraction of the time our species has been on this planet, billions of us are suddenly rich, well fed, healthy, educated, clean, well housed, safe, and able to display and develop our cultures, pastimes and talents so that we have fulfilled lives. Whereas the vast majority of the world's population still lived in extreme poverty in 1820, by 1981 that percentage had dropped dramatically by the late 20th century and now, just a few decades later, it is probably under 10 per cent. Something of the same can be said of improvements across the world in life expectancies, in combatting malnutrition, improving health outcomes, raising average incomes and in access to vacines. The use of modern communication technology and its devices has potentially transformed the economic and social futures of almost all peoples.

The argument runs... that these profound and far-reaching economic, social and technological changes have taken us so far towards a world of actual and potential plenty, that almost everyone is rich, safe and healthy. Capitalist systems are said to be malleable and respond to pressures, but the crises keep on recurring. Green and renewable energy systems have been massively rolled out in recent times but some of the rich and powerful still view the planet's ecological crisis as collateral damage in their battle to increase their bank balances. The world's greatest energy companies are set on expanding fossil fuel extraction notwithstanding all the scientific evidence that shows the existential dangers to everyone on the planet. Where poverty, deprivation and disadvantage continue to exist the solutions are often thought to be available through a combination of self-improvement allied to the perceived 'magical' solution of more and better schooling and a higher education degree for all who can be said to benefit. Simply more 'Education, Education, Education', however, proved not to be the silver bullet for Britain's or Australia's problems at the beginning of the present century. That Access and widening participation found such a resonance in this period of change and foment was no accident. In spite of the macro economic and social changes at a global level which were real enough, inequalities and injustices continued, took on new forms and became ever more intricately linked with other factors in a dysfunctional form of advanced capitalism which sustains deprivation and exclusion for some, uncertainty and anxiety for many and untold riches for the few.

The second and alternative viewpoint which is in dynamic and dialectical tension with the first one as to what kind of a world we live in, might be... we live in a world dangerously divided along racial, ethnic, class, religious and generational lines. We live in an increasingly divisive society

where communities live separate and distinctive lives. We live in a world where democracy is failing its greatest tests; where liberal democratic values are assaulted by racism and intolerance and where authoritarian regimes suppress dissent and persecute their opponents. We live in a world where war is used to annihilate innocent people and drive them from their homes. We live in a world where we cannot ignore the growing gaps in wealth and the regional disparities which impoverish so many. We live in a world in which change is perhaps the only constant and where modern capitalism injects accelerating insecurity and uncertainty into many lives. We live also in a world where traditionally liberal democracies placed value on individual freedom and choice and there was a widespread belief that education was the engine of change and of social mobility and progress. Yet we live in a world where neoliberalism has posed great threats to our democratic values and way of life and where social conflict and division is endemic. We live in a world where climate emergencies, fundamentalist ideologies, population mobility and the technological revolution are quite indifferent to national borders. We have been taken to the brink of ecological disaster by the desire for wealth and growth at all costs. The economic dislocations of the free market economy have destabilised societies around the globe and challenged our belief in the power of democratic capitalism to deliver benefits and opportunities to all. We live in a world where market forces have shaped how we have come to understand and value learning and education.

These issues and the seminal challenges they present are the actual real-life contexts in which the demand for mass higher education has evolved just as they have been the foreground of technological change and progress. There is a complex and complicated story in all of this and no simple formula exists by which we can unravel the braided threads through time (and the spaces and places involved) which we have drawn on to explain and understand Access, widening participation and the long struggles for educational equality which preceded it. We have attempted to provide some insights as a key to unlocking the myriad meanings of learning and the struggles for knowledge that had to be won rather than being handed down by the state or the Church or even by families who valued learning for the right reasons. We have tried to steer a course through the rocky passage where on the one side 'catastrophism' and the wicked issues threaten us all and on the other side where an uncritical optimism places hopes in technological solutions to human-made problems. If there is to be a safe passage then it does not lie somewhere external and beyond us. We have stated a case, we hope, for understanding Access and its appropriation of really useful knowledge as a valuable part of the social capital of our modern societies and as part of the solutions to the great societal challenges. We consider Access to be part of the public wealth and to be worthy of sustained public funding; an index of social value which will shape improved outcomes which go far beyond private enrichment.

The Access movement was a functioning and marginal part of the growth of mass participation in further and higher education, though offering an internal critique of it. It was part of a process which, it has been argued, paradoxically held out the hope for social change through individual and collective struggle for knowledge and learning, yet which also re-asserted the unequal and divisive links between social and economic capital, educational connection and social class. These links in the past had suppressed the legitimate social democratic demands of working people for generations and continued to support the distinctions between university educated elites and everyone else in modern times. Mass higher education changed the game but new conventions and rules were invented to exclude those who had a deficit of wealth and 'culture'. A hierarchy of elites and elite institutions emerged to monopolise the opportunities and places on the ladder of opportunity.

A university education was and is still a powerful cultural symbol of aspiration and opportunity. Access opened up the possibility of change and a better life for the excluded and it offered us a view of a more healthy democratic future which is inseparable from an open and democratic education system. This was a promise which must work for everyone and belongs to all. The primary purpose of a university education is educative. Beyond the provision of access to the labour market and the satisfying of the need for a certain type and volume of graduate skills, all of which have an importance, and beyond the need to simply raise the education levels of populations who have been denied access to learning, there exist economic, social and psychological forces which shape our lives and futures. These forces are now existential in that our planetary future can only be assured if we adapt and change our behaviour to combat world-wide social inequity, poverty, climate change, ecological destruction and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Making the connections and explaining the relations between these forces and facts is surely the truly educative role of universities. New university curriculum models and new ways of university engagement are needed to bring about the changes in thinking which this demands of us. Perhaps the Access movement and the waves of widening participation of which it was a part can be an indicator of the kinds of new learning that will be needed.

Lessons learned for a future postponed – not denied

There is an argument that globalisation and the marketisation of so much of our social life has somehow run its course. The Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in 2019 has often been cited as signalling the end of an era and the need for a 'new normal'. This came at the end of a period in which austerity was the major public policy driving down expenditure and investment in public services of all kinds including net per capita expenditure on education and health, allied to an explosion of market-driven and debt-based consumption. The net effect was to create new forms of poverty and deprivation so that differences in life chances between the rich and poor are virtually as great as they were one hundred years ago. This disfigures, for example, British society and makes inequality an abiding and familiar feature of our lives. It is to be hoped that Australia can chart a different path drawing on its distinctive cultures and its adaptation of our common values and struggles for greater equality and fairness. What is to come next, it is said, must be better and fairer than what went before. A new sense of common purpose can perhaps be generated beyond and across national boundaries which can re-instate a more socially just society in which poverty, deprivation and social exclusion can be challenged and overcome. In any case, the inequalities are unsustainable for the future. A sense of something needing to be done to atone for the failures of the last decade is palpable in the wider society. The lessons learned from the first decades of the 21st century and the last decade of the 20th century must surely equip us with a greater understanding of how education is both the solution to our problems yet co-existentially part of the problem as long as massive and persistent inequalities exist. The radical relevance of Access remains on the agenda since it points the way to potential solutions.

These could include recognition of the need for a universal higher education system where old and new divisions and hierarchies which discriminate against so many people are abolished. We need a critical curriculum which focusses knowledge on the key existential issues; a curriculum which is based on forms of academic knowledge which allow true access to opportunity for all, not only the privileged elites. Really useful knowledge for the majority is required. It is clear that, for example, 80 per cent plus participation is advisable and necessary, if only to catch up with the leading nations in post-school education. We need a curriculum which does not discriminate between vocational and academic knowledge because these divisions are

disappearing as the nature of work and labour markets themselves change. We need a curriculum which acknowledges and recognises the need for dialogue and discovery wherever it is found – in schools and universities, and in communities and workplaces where education can help transform lives and futures and where even the poorest can have inclusive access for structured, recognised lifelong learning. The 'great tradition' of adult learning which we outlined earlier always argued that education was a social product and was for a social result. In the age of mass participation and of mass communications and social media this need has not diminished, though some established access routes have been displaced by the new technologies and on-line possibilities which have accompanied the growth of market forces.

Radical change to overcome elitism

The story of Access, this book has suggested, is the story of a struggle for educational opportunity and against disadvantage whilst simultaneously charting the growth of a socially stratified education system. This system ensures that those born to privilege and wealth are educated into the highest earning and status jobs whilst at the same time holding back those born to parents who had no such opportunities. The British example is salutary but is not without relevance to other societies. In the third decade of the 21st century just some 7 per cent of children attend private schools in Britain but make up almost one in three undergraduates at the country's most prestigious universities. The ranks of the higher civil service, the judiciary, diplomats and the senior editors in the media as well as those in cabinet levels of government are dominated by this privately educated elite. This result is not a product of their ability but of the vast resources that are invested in their education and the social and cultural capital created and used to secure their futures. The promise of privilege handed down from one generation to another has distorted British social life for generations and elements of this system were transposed to Australia in the colonial era. Whether in Britain or Australia, and in spite of the differences between the two societies, the implicit promise of private schooling is that wealth will buy your children advantage. As well as this they will be elevated away from the wrong sort of children who are disruptive, unambitious, poor and unworthy. Questions of intergenerational justice remain to be resolved and matters of Access remain on this agenda.

There are social harms and dysfunctions as a result, which shut out other, more able young people who do not possess these advantages of wealth and social/cultural capital. The legitimacy of this system is upheld by a widespread belief that we inhabit a meritocratic society where on the whole people are fairly rewarded for their talent and efforts. This is plainly not the case. Even where meritocracy can be shown to be working, it does not produce equality and fairness. What characterises the education system is tangible inequality. It seems clear that wherever it takes place, selective schooling privileges children from more advantaged backgrounds. At the university level, it is clear that a highly stratified and unequal system has emerged and this is replicated across continents and different cultures. The institution a young person attends often stands proxy for their employment potential and prospects, rather than the quality of degree they have earned or the education they have gained. In the UK Oxford and Cambridge represent the pinnacle of this self-serving and unaccountable system within the anglo-centric universe. Only a radical change to overcome this elitism is likely to produce benefits for everyone. The Access agenda represents one possible point of departure for this change and in the face of a conservative culture retains its radical charge and potential for the future.

Finding meanings: an emancipatory promise?

There is something vital in looking beyond appearances so we can get to understand the real and *essential meanings* of things. Things are not always what they seem at first sight and the connections and the *relation of things* is crucial. The best of teachers always make these connections clearer and show us a way beyond our taken-for-granted knowledge and sometimes our illusions. If our thinking is clear and reflexively critical, our values and commitments can be true and authentic and then education can deliver its promise of transformational thinking and social progress. Authentic education builds a bond of reciprocal obligations and benefits and these can be built from new if we build universities and colleges committed to a better social result and a fairer society.

The Access movement gave us insight into some of these vital issues by constructing courses and learning experiences which addressed them. In doing so the teachers and the learners themselves showed us how the future of learning might be different. This possibility remains as a legacy to be used for future progress in which social justice is more central to our concerns. The Access movement sponsored a curriculum approach based in reason which was seeking spaces to refocus the way universities saw their students and might see their future students, who would be different because life was generationally different. In the period dealt with in this book the possibilities for the new generations exploded into reality and yet the chains of convention and conservativism could continue to impose barriers and selective exclusions for the socially and economically disconnected populations. Reflexively engaged, we have no viable alternative but to learn from our past and to try to make sense of knowledge which challenges exclusion and intolerance and which celebrates community and democracy. Access showed us that we should favour changing the world around us, rather than adapting to it. Perhaps this is the essential and true meaning of Access?

In reflecting on the meaning of Access and widening participation and on the importance of learning for the mass of people who need access to it, we cannot ignore the **macro level facts and issues** facing humankind. The demands of human beings in the third decade of the 21st century are driving towards an irrecoverable crisis. High levels of population help cause chain reactions because they require the use of more fossil fuels which are necessary to sustain in turn more and more people. Earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts and floods are more terrifying than at any time in our history because more and more people are living in inappropriate places. These are often densely populated zones which are climatically and seismically fragile and where people were never meant to live in the first place. Rising world temperatures, groundwater shortages, forest fires, desertification and air pollution contribute greatly to human migration across borders and continents. Species extinction for plant and animal life and even of ourselves on the planet is now contemplated, not just as a result of a possible nuclear conflagration but as the outcome of unchecked industrial growth which depends on fossil fuels. The biosphere is unable to absorb greenhouse gasses, there is an ecological disaster threatening much of the world's population as the planet becomes less inhabitable and climate change destroys our capacity to exist. We are on the brink of passing disastrous climate tipping points. We are experiencing climate disasters with economic losses in the billions of dollars and millions of people are regularly displaced by agricultural losses and environmental degradation. There are limits to growth and technological invention may not save us from ecological collapse and the resource wars and conflicts that will inevitably result, if change does not come. We threaten each other with nuclear weapons when we know where it can lead. Genocide, torture domestic violence, child abuse enslavement, school shootings and the mass extinction of species provide those affected with torment. These are wicked issues that dwarf all previous social problems in their scale, their reach and severity. Human communities must now change themselves and adopt environmental and social stability as the key priority for human survival. This is the

primary learning agenda for ALL.

At the **micro and interpersonal level** of understanding, many people are facing a loss of the future. The belief that progress is unstoppable and inevitable is hard to sustain in the face of continuing and deepening crises, some of which we have alluded to in this volume. We have argued that we need a modern understanding of what 'really useful knowledge' might be so that educational disadvantage can truly be relegated to history. Access to knowledge which enables people to truly understand their lives and prospects and their interests and identities was never more important. What brings together the macro and micro levels of understanding is of course that the one absolute that everyone possibly has in common is the possible death of the planet. We need, however, to avoid being disarmed by doubt and uncertainty over this existential issue. A reframed higher education system and a critical application of knowledge allied with social action and mobilisation to bring about social change could make a world of difference. Individual lives, sensibilities and enterprise can be combined with collective, social democratic engagement so that change is possible. We have recorded on the pages of this book our proposed wish list of educational solutions to the myriad problems and issues we have raised in its various chapters and we do not assume that a single coherent political manifesto can be conjured up to solve these matters.

However, the matter of how the natural world acts as a trigger for the geopolitical one and the facts of the planetary ecological crisis now constitutes the centre of history and literally demands our attention and must change our perceptions.

It is in and through education, we suggest, that we can challenge the uncertainty of the future, though challenge and critique cannot be limited to our educational institutions. Co-ordination and co-operation of human energy and resources, which is ***educational and social in its deepest meaning***, is surely the reason why we must learn and continue to learn. If education cannot emancipate us alone and lead us out of the many crises and disasters we face, it can surely at least illuminate the ways forward. None of the experiences and problems we have raised represent 'a sentence of eternity' and none lie beyond our human capacity to solve these problems. We have argued that Access was an expression of agency from below which gave us alternative perspectives on what higher education could achieve. It was both an explicit challenge to power based on wealth and elitism and a claim for collective improvement and a social result. Access must continue to play a part in this emancipatory promise and help us to achieve a more radical reimagining of what education should be in a world where everyone's fate is linked.

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THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE:
ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY IN MASS HIGHER EDUCATION

David Davies, James Nyland and Verity Firth

Access once referred to special courses for adults designed to secure access to universities for people who had been denied chances to study earlier in life. Its ethos was egalitarian and offered routes to learning and opportunities often denied. The 1970s saw the growth of mass higher education and Access across many parts of the world was part of that upsurge of opportunity. The book pivots between this foundation period and urgent contemporary issues facing higher education in the 2020s and a connection is made through the idea of 'threads through time' between then and now and between Great Britain and Australia which had both similar and shared yet different concerns as democratic societies facing challenges.

Key themes include the problematical nature of human capital theory in explaining HE growth and change, the changing character of the public sphere, persisting inequality, meritocracy and elite formation and the public good. The book deals with how knowledge is both a catalyst for change and is deeply problematical for marginal groups in society and forces us to engage with issues, including race, racism and ethnicity alongside the impact of climate change. Access exists both within and beyond formal sites of learning and still gives us possibilities.

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