

Review: unequal graduate lives

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***The Degree Generation: The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives.* Nicola Ingram, Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Jessie Abrahams, Laura Bentley, Harriet Bradley, Tony Hoare, Vanda Papafilippou and Richard Waller (2023) Bristol University Press**

This book is the second to emerge from a long-running project. Over twelve years, the 'Paired Peers' study has followed the journeys of young people from different social backgrounds who studied at Bristol universities. The first instalment covered students' journeys into and out of university; this book uncovers the class- and gender-based inequalities of their experiences moving into employment. The book follows graduates from the 'post-92' University of the West of England (UWE) and its more prestigious neighbour, the 'Russell Group' University of Bristol, explaining different outcomes and experiences, not as the cashing-in of these universities' different credential values, but as inequalities of social class and gender re-emerging in the struggle for 'graduate jobs'.

Why should this matter to those *PSE* readers whose lives and work revolve round young people who don't go to university? Aren't millions marginalised by talk of a 'degree generation', as though graduate status is normal and lacking it a sign of deficiency? One reason is that a university degree has become a necessary condition even to apply for a growing number of jobs. Consequently, young people excluded from this 'generation' are also excluded from the meaningful work and relatively secure lifestyles to which degrees - if sometimes deceptively - offer access. More importantly still, whilst the methods by which the

disadvantaged are excluded are different for those who enter university from those who don't, both contribute to the same rising curve of inequality.

The book's chief merit lies in its contrast with earlier studies that explained how working-class applicants' habitus inclined them to choose universities that provided less advantageous opportunities. As the authors argue, some accounts have used participation at post-92 and Russell Group universities as simple equivalents to membership of the working class and middle class respectively. These earlier studies provided important explanations but have proved liable to capture by policy narratives that blame working-class youth for a 'lack of aspiration' and blame 'inferior' universities for the lack of 'graduate jobs' available to their graduates.

The Degree Generation shows that inequalities do not simply emerge from these choices of institution but in the different ways that the cultural and social capital that applicants have accumulated are converted into a symbolic form recognisable to employers but never acknowledged. This enables those who can demonstrate the 'right' attitudes to reap the rewards of their social origins whilst presenting these as individual merits. Individual accounts of working-class graduates whose expectations prove 'cruel optimism', their aspirations crushed into humiliating routine occupations, for example in care, are contrasted with peers who complacently wait for a career 'to pick them'.

These considerations are especially important for young people on technical and vocational routes into higher education, whose experiences are

increasingly organised around learning at work. In the negotiation of student placements and apprenticeship opportunities, no less than in contests for graduate jobs, social differences are signalled to employers as they decide who will 'fit in'. The greater role these work experiences play in reinforcing social inequalities was at the heart of my recent account with Liz Atkins of the emerging 'technical elites' in *Education, Skills and Social Justice in a Polarising World* (2022, Routledge). Whilst these routes do not feature strongly in this study, its explanations of symbolic capital provide important explanations for the inequalities magnified through the turn to work in both further and higher education.

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The Degree Generation's authors present their sample, who graduated from university in 2013, as examples of a largely full-time 'millennium cohort' and a 'massified' higher education that educates far more students than universities recruited until the late 1980s. In later years, degrees have undoubtedly become necessary for more jobs, whilst fewer graduate vacancies are available. In the last ten years, higher education has continued to expand, despite becoming more expensive and consumerised in the process. Yet the lifetime of this study has also seen a dramatic reversal of government policy in relation to university expansion and alternative routes into post-school education. Whether this policy shift succeeds in reversing the tide of higher education expansion is another question: degrees remain well-known credentials, even if they no longer guarantee middle-class security, and full-time study remains the 'normal' route into higher education; but alternatives for adult, part-time students, once frowned upon by governments, are now much in favour and growing in important areas such as nursing.

What can be taken for granted is that in an unequal society, both education and the contest for jobs will preserve and strengthen the advantages of those who are already privileged. Reversing that process requires a thoroughgoing transformation of both education and work.

PSE: where we stand

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in all sectors of post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.