'PRESTIGE POLITICS' AND ELITISM: CONSEQUENCES OF THE 'MASSIFICATION' OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL NORTH, 1945 ONWARDS?

ROBERT J. LAKE

DOUGLAS COLLEGE, CANADA

BACKGROUND

- Research rationale: a new area
  - Trained as a sport historian/sociologist (20 years teaching/lecturing)
  - Worked at 7 different (and quite varied) institutions across 2 continents
  - Witnessed and experienced increasing pressures on staff/faculty due to institutional directives
    - Teaching, research, service, and administration
  - Witnessed, read about, and experienced increasing incidents of mental health problems among staff/faculty – borne out by some harrowing statistics
- Phenomenon: staff/faculty willingly submit – they 'buy in' to this system (institutionalized set of practices) in their quest to 'get ahead' in academia – but why???

BACKGROUND

- Argument: Institutional prestige is built on a set of assumptions underpinned by (1) false logic, and (2) elitist (discriminatory) practices that also intersect with racism and sexism:

- Assumptions:
  1. Elite universities contain staff/faculty that are higher quality and therefore more deserving of attention/opportunities; quality of outputs is necessarily related to institutional rank/prestige
     - Because someone works at that institution, they share that prestige, and their 'quality' is assumed
  2. Barriers to entry for women/non-binary/POC/WC (or otherwise impoverished)
     - Privilege = better opportunities to work/run/attend elite universities; so, cyclical and self-fulfilling

BACKGROUND

- The captivation of <u>institutional prestige</u> (a personal fascination):
  - Staff/faculty are captivated by the prestige of working (or hoping to work) at an 'elite' university
  - Administrators are captivated by the prestige of running an 'elite' university
  - Students (and their parents) are captivated by the prestige of attending an 'elite' university
- University prestige is multifactorial, with some important considerations being:

Notable alumni

Age/lineage

Research profile (funding, doctoral awards)

QS world university ranking

Budget/income

Size (students/staff)

Student-staff ratio

KEY QUESTION

You have to know the past to understand the present.

-Carl Sagan

- Government policies enacted from the 1960s onwards in line with the 'massification of higher education' attempted to 'level the playing field' for students, staff/faculty and universities, but how successful have these been at dismantling elitism?

- Early post-war higher educational reform was not limited to the UK:
  - United States: National Defence Education Act (1958); California Master Plan (1960); Higher Education Act (1965)
  - France: reform of the French universities by Faure, the Minister of Education (from 1968)
  - Australia: Report of the Committee on Australian Universities (1957)

- Of note, in the UK: Robbins Report (1963); Further & Higher Education Act (1992)

AIMS

- Acknowledging this might not be a question that social historians can answer
  - How to effectively or accurately assess 'elitism'? Sources?
  - A useful discussion/debate if nothing else
- Consider elitism as a concept that underpins the 'academic experience'
  - Its ubiquity and persistence as a phenomenon, tied to 'prestige politics'
  - Where can public policy help to ~~eradicate~~ moderate it?

WHAT IS ELITISM?

- *'the belief or notion that individuals who form an elite – a select group of people perceived as having an intrinsic quality, high intellect, wealth, power, notability, special skills, or experience – are more likely to be constructive to society as a whole, and therefore deserve influence or authority greater than that of others'* (Wikipedia)

- In academia, in essence...

  - The notion that some people's voices deserve to be heard over others because of the institution where they work and their institutions' associated prestige and therefore *assumed* higher standards

  - Often leading to... the sense of entitlement based on assumptions of success, esteem or merit – and subsequent discrimination based on elitist prejudicial thinking (benefits/opportunities)

ROBBINS REPORT (1963)

- Philosophy/rationale:
  - Axiom: '*that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so*' (p. 8) (in effect, sufficient O-levels and at least 2 A-levels; plus, the availability of grants)

- Proposals:
  - To expand full-time student numbers in HE from 216k to 560k, from 1963-81
  - HE was to be coordinated into an organised system, dominated by the universities
    - Expanded university sector and autonomous of government control
  - Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) should become technological universities
    - Tasked with educating students in response to industry needs
  - Teacher training colleges should be financed within the university sector, and essentially upgraded

Lionel Robbins

Report

ELITISM

ROBBINS REPORT (1963) – OUTCOMES

INITIAL RESPONSE

- Tory government accepted the report
  - Did not want to appear elitist with a general election looming (Annan, 1982: 3)
- University Grants Committee
  - Sought to ensure equality across universities: no tiers, no first/second status; equal pay/resources/facilities

CHALLENGES

- Lord Annan (1982: 8-9): '*British higher education, then [in the early 60s], was a luxurious system in which few students lived at home, in which student unions were as splendidly financed as the subsistence grants for the students themselves, in which the staff-student ratios were far more favourable than those in any other country including the United States, and in which facilities for research were superior to any in Europe. Now it was proposed to expand this system on the same terms and to build beneath it another system of public institutions which were encouraged to demand parity not just of esteem, but of financial provision! No state could implement such a policy.*'

ROBBINS REPORT (1963) – OUTCOMES

- A host of factors impacted the subsequent actions (or inactions) based on Robbins' recommendations:
    - Devalued pound in 1967 and slow decline of British industry – not helped by the universities, which were a group of disorganised institutions without a remit to provide training in response to industry needs (Moser, 1988: 8)
    - Weak government, ineffective at impacting the (self-governing) university sector: *'there was no way of getting independent bodies to agree to the policy of central government except by the imposition of financial sanctions.'* (Annan, 1982: 14).

- Due to costing issues (a sustained political sticking point), the 'binary system' was implemented instead
    1. Higher Education:
        - Universities (privately controlled) and 32 polytechnics (local authority controlled)
    2. Further Education:
        - Teacher training colleges (local authority controlled)

ROBBINS REPORT (1963) – OUTCOMES

- *'The intention to create parallel but equal rivals produced several innovative institutions … yet by placing the polytechnics under local authority control on the "public" side of a "binary line" that was to divide them from the "autonomous" universities until 1992, Crosland [Anthony, Secretary of State for Education and Science in the incoming Labour government] contributed to a "balkanization" of higher education that was criticized from the start (not least by some of his own Cabinet colleagues) and inadvertently fostered the very elitism that he affected to despise'* (Dixon, 2006: 305).

- A '*contradiction*', argued Scott (2014: 147)

- Elite universities, in many cases, benefitted from the outpouring of government funding (Annan, 1982: 8):
  - Increased spending on facilities/buildings
  - Left task of admitting extra students to other institutions
  - Reduced student/staff ratios still further (<10:1)

IMPACT ON STAFF/FACULTY

- Despite student protests in the late-60s and waning public support for universities, the post-war period represented the 'golden years' for academic staff, argued Annan (1982: 22)
  - *'There were vast opportunities for promotion and security of tenure was easily obtained. Money and facilities for research multiplied. Research councils financed not only productive teams in university departments but dozens of independent research institutes. Teacher-student ratios remained low.'*

- And for Moser (1988: 8):
  - *'University teachers … were caricatured—as often indolent, leading comfortable and over-relaxed lives, work confined to a small part of the year, port circulating freely.'*

FURTHER & HIGHER EDUCATION ACT (1992)

- The UK did not acquire a truly mass system of higher education before the early 1990s

- The 1992 Act effectively ended the binary divide by putting the former polytechnics under the same funding arrangements as the universities

- But research by Blanden & Machin (2013: 578) found that '*HE expansion has not been equally distributed across people from richer and poorer backgrounds. Rather, it has disproportionately benefited children from relatively rich families … [widening] participation gaps between rich and poor children*'.

  - Compounded by the results of the Dearing Report (1997) that recommended the abolition of educational grants for students and the creation of tuition fees

- New hierarchies replaced old ones, in part due to '*nervous attempts made by the traditional universities to maintain a clearer distinction from these potential rivals*' (Scott 2014: 154).

ENTER…

THE RUSSELL GROUP, CREATED IN 1994
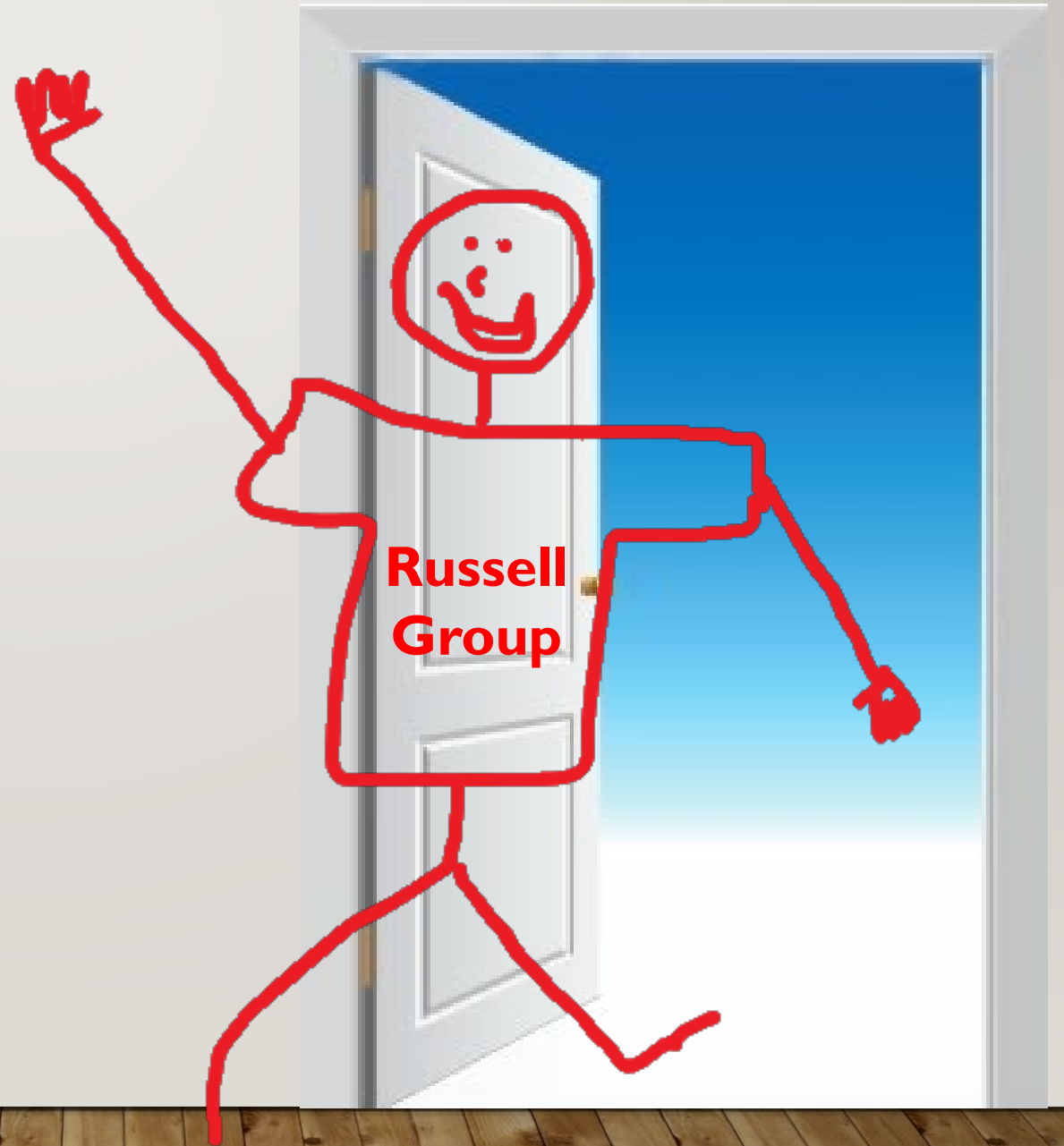
PRESENT CONCEPTIONS OF PRESTIGE…

- As in wider society, elitism can be moderated by creating opportunities for upward social (institutional) mobility

- Categories of prestige: Russell Group; Research Excellence; Institution Age

  - Research excellence (measured by research funding allocation, numbers of doctoral awards, etc.) is often dominated by the Russell Group universities, of which all but one were founded pre- WWII

  - Rep. just 15% of British institutions, they accrued 76% of all research funding and 60% of all doctoral awards (2021).

Teaching Excellence Framework: Analysis of Highly Skilled Employment Outcomes (Dept. of Education, 2016)

Variable	Description	Variable type	Rationale
Russell Group [iii]	A flag that indicates whether the HEI is part of the Russell Group	Binary: True, False	Employers may be more likely to make skilled jobs available to graduates of Russell Group universities which may act as a signal of quality
Research Excellence [iv]	A numeric score that summarizes an institution's research excellence	Continuous: range: 1.29-3.49	Employers are more likely to make skilled jobs available to graduates of prestigious HEIs and prestige may be correlated with research excellence
Institution Age [v]	A marker that splits HEIs into four categories representing differing lengths of establishment	Categorical: Ancient (established pre 1800), Red Brick (1800-1960), Plate Glass (1960-1992), or post-92 (established post 1992) Baseline: Ancient University	Employers are more likely to make skilled jobs available to graduates of HEIs with an extensive historical reputation which may act as a signal of quality

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- How successful have these policies/acts been at eradicating elitism in HE?

  - It is apparent that elitism is not just personal or social but also institutional, tied closely to historical and contemporary 'prestige politics' – the enduring captivation of prestige

- Pushing back against a key element of institutional prestige: While research excellence is attainable, in theory, by any university, there is quite obviously a strong connection here with lineage and RG status, making upward mobility for universities very challenging

  - Which begs the question… 'So why bother to try?'

  - … especially when we can see/feel a consequence in the rapid escalation of mental health concerns among academic staff/faculty

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- What are the connections between institutional prestige and elitism, and why might the celebration of institutional prestige be a bad thing? Something to ponder…

  - If elitism is the belief that a person deserves certain opportunities due to their assumed quality, based on where they work and the prestige of that institution, then there will be those who are undeserving who receive these opportunities and those who are deserving who are overlooked. Therefore, an institution's prestige works to gate-keep as gaining access to an institution becomes the dominant factor in determining whether someone receives these opportunities or not. If we believe the research that points to discrimination on the basis of social class, gender and race in terms of institutional hiring practices (alone), then by definition institutional prestige – and the celebration of it – is also by extension a celebration of elitism, sexism and racism.

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THANK YOU

I look forward to some passionate discussions…!