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**The Crisis of the Meritocracy:
How Popular Demand (not Politicians) Made
Britain into a Mass Education Society**

By

Peter Mandler

Peter Mandler is Professor of Modern Cultural History at the University of Cambridge and Bailey Lecturer in History at Gonville and Caius College. He writes on the social, cultural, and intellectual history of Britain since c.1780 and on the history of the humanities and social sciences in the anglophone world more broadly. In 2012–16 he served as President of the Royal Historical Society and is currently President of the Historical Association. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His current work with Laura Carter, Chris Jeppesen, and Annie Thwaite on the experience of universal secondary education in the UK since 1945 is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and can be followed at [sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk].

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Tel: 020 7309 2050
email: ghil@ghil.ac.uk
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The history of education, despite not being a very sexy subject, generates an awful lot of myths. Like the myth that grammar schools drive social mobility, or the myth that comprehensive schools do the same (actually, neither is very important to most people's social mobility). Or the myth that Britain has a terrible technical education system and ought to imitate Germany. I could go on. Why does the history of education generate so many myths? In part, because we all play a role in that history; we all have our own story, and in a familiar psychological frailty, we tend to project our own story onto others, making ourselves more representative (or more exceptional) than we really are. But also in part because education *matters* so much – uniquely so in the past few generations, when for the first time in history everyone has been guaranteed a secondary-school education.

Before the war, only about 20 per cent of teenagers had any exposure to secondary schooling and only about 2 per cent any exposure to higher education; today, the former is universal and the latter is now experienced by half of all young people. So only in the last few generations since the war – our grandparents and parents – has everyone been exposed to more than a minimal training in the three Rs. And that matters. Educational institutions have taken on many of the functions formerly carried out in the workplace and in churches: of taking children and making them into adults, of helping young people make the transition from family to society. In asking them to perform these socialization functions, we put a lot of pressure on educational institutions. We put them on the frontline of social change, asking them to deal with all the social problems that habitually infest the teenage years, to grapple with issues of which older people are unaware, and to prepare young people for futures we can hardly predict. So our hopes are heavily invested in them, as they are in our

This is a lightly revised text of the lecture I delivered as the Annual Lecture of the German Historical Institute London in November 2020. I am very grateful to Christina von Hodenberg for the invitation to give this lecture, to the audience for many stimulating questions, to Anita Bellamy for logistics, and to Jozef van der Voort for ushering it online. Many of the arguments in this lecture are expanded on in *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford, 2020), where further references to a rich primary and secondary literature can be found; here, I confine notes principally to sources directly quoted or cited.

young people, and we need stories about them to tell us how they have done and how they might do better – thus the myth-making.

Today, I am going to address another myth that I haven't yet mentioned – one that will allow me to say more about how much people have come to care about and invest in education over the past seventy years. This myth revolves around the politicians who are held to be responsible for getting us the mass education society we now live in – familiar figures such as 'Rab' Butler, the architect of the Butler Act which made secondary education free and compulsory for all after 1944; Tony Crosland, who (allegedly) abolished the grammar schools (or at least most of them) in 1965, thereby creating the possibility at least of wider progression to O-levels, A-levels, and higher education; Margaret Thatcher, who apart from snatching the milk in the early 1970s is supposed to have made that progression possible through her reforms in the 1980s raising standards in state schools; and Tony Blair, who set the 50 per cent target for higher education that we reached this year. They are all formidable figures in British political history, of course, and undoubtedly all took a close interest in educational provision – but the myth that I want to attack is that they were *responsible* for the extension of education to more and more people. I want to suggest instead that they could only *respond to* popular demand for more and more education. In other words, the motive forces were not the heroic initiatives of educational reformers, but the incessant and growing expectation from the electorate that the state would provide more education over time. Even when they thought they were leading or shaping this demand, in most cases, I will argue, the politicians were trailing sadly behind it. So you cannot blame (or credit) Tony Crosland for abolishing the grammar schools – which he didn't do – or Tony Blair for making half of all young people go to university, because you have only yourself to blame (or credit). That is the case I want to make.

Let me first sketch out some reasons why I think popular demand has counted for so much in determining the amount and shape of education on offer, and why this was especially the case in post-war Britain. In some respects, Britain was like most European countries in the middle of the twentieth century. It was only newly democratic – that is, adult men did not all have the right to vote until 1918; adult

women not until 1928; and one person, one vote not until 1948. Its state education system was almost entirely limited to primary education (as I have said, only 20 per cent of the population had any experience of secondary education before the war), and therefore primary and secondary education were essentially two separate systems, with state primary education for the masses and secondary education – much of it fee-paying – for a small minority. There was no ‘ladder of opportunity’ or even much thought of one. Higher education was available only to a tiny handful and not even universally used by the social elite; only one inter-war prime minister went to university, for example. On the other hand, Britain was not, as is sometimes said, backward in these respects. It actually offered more years of compulsory state education before the Second World War (nine) than any other European country – although, as I have said, for most people all of those years were undertaken in primary schools and were not intended to lead to further education.¹

After the war, all developed countries expanded educational opportunity greatly and there was a degree of convergence, so that other countries caught up to some extent (although Britain is still ahead, now requiring thirteen years of education or training to age 18). All countries eventually provided universal secondary education and all countries expanded their higher education provision too, especially in the 1960s. It was clear across the developed world that a modern nation needed an educated population to ensure equal citizenship (in countries that all now had universal suffrage), to provide the skills for an increasingly post-industrial economy (a ‘knowledge economy’, as it became known in the 1960s), and simply to equip people to live in a modern society that increasingly required formal knowledge and abstract thought. All governments across the developed world – right and left, authoritarian and libertarian, on both sides of the Cold War – provided mass education, though they gave highly varied reasons for doing so.

Some special circumstances peculiar to Britain after the Second World War, however, gave popular demand more weight and

¹ Fabrice Murtin and Martina Viarengo, ‘The Expansion and Convergence of Compulsory Schooling in Western Europe, 1950–2000’, *Economica*, 78/311 (2011), 501–22, at 507–8.

visibility in this drive to mass education. First of all, state education in Britain had been provided since the early nineteenth century with a tender concern for local, especially religious sensibilities. A liberal state like Britain was more cautious about imposing on people's freedoms of religion and expression than bolder, more centralized states like Prussia or France; it was probably also more successful in imposing itself when it tried. So state education was firmly assigned to local authorities rather than central government, there was no national curriculum until the 1980s, and local authorities and even individual schools had considerable freedom to determine what was taught when and to whom.

Then there were the special circumstances of the mid twentieth century; of the war and its aftermath. The Second World War built up considerable popular expectations of a new deal in terms of state provision of social security: guaranteed minimum living standards, universal benefits, the package that we call the welfare state. Popular support for the welfare state was uneven. Trade unions were suspicious of income controls and other wage-related benefits, preferring free collective bargaining, and there was no minimum wage until the 1990s. The most overwhelming support was for a universal entitlement to health and education. These services, uniquely, were seen not only as important to ensure fairness and greater equality in society, but virtually as a right of citizenship. Therefore, provision in health and education had to be universal and increasingly had to be as equal as possible, while still being delivered through local authorities in the case of education.

It took time after the war for these expectations of health and education to build up. We are so accustomed now to treating the National Health Service as a national treasure that we forget how it took time to root itself in the affections of the people.² The same applied even more so to education. Primary education had become well accepted,³ but changing schools at 11 and continuing to 15 or even 16 took time to

² Important new work is now being done on this acculturation to the NHS by Sian Pooley, Andrew Seaton, and others.

³ Hester Barron, 'Parents, Teachers and Children's Well-Being in London, 1918-1939', in ead. and Claudia Siebrecht (eds.), *Parenting and the State in Britain and Europe, c.1870-1950: Raising the Nation* (Cham, 2017)

catch on. The connection between secondary education and citizenship only gradually became clear. Secondary education was where you learned to be an adult, a functioning member of society, an *equal* citizen in a world where civil equality now mattered a lot. You can see this growing awareness of the centrality of education in the way it rose up the political agenda, especially at the local level, in the 1950s and 1960s. At the beginning of the 1950s, education was mentioned in fewer than half of Parliamentary candidates' election addresses (which were then more important than national manifestoes). By the end of the decade, it was mentioned in almost all of them. Ever since, health and education have remained uniquely twinned at the top as the most important political issues in most electoral surveys.⁴

Then there were reasons why most people's expectations of education also grew by leaps and bounds in the immediate post-war decades. The importance of secondary education was that up until this point it had basically been the 'posh people's' kind of education—the kind that led to 'clean' jobs in shops and offices for the lower middle class, and to managerial and professional jobs for the really posh. For the two-thirds to three-quarters of the population in manual occupations who expected their children to continue in those occupations, secondary education was not seen as necessary or even possible. These expectations had begun to shift before the war as more people—especially mothers—aspired to 'clean' jobs for their children and thus to secondary education, though few as yet achieved it. After the war, when secondary education for all became a civil right of the welfare state, new expectations—not only of more equal education but of more equal life chances, or more social mobility as we would now say—began to form. And in fact after the war, many more people *were* socially mobile into the intermediate social classes—an awful lot more people. Right after the war, over half the adult male population was employed in manual working-class occupations. More importantly perhaps, they had grown up assuming they would be employed in such occupations and that their sons would too. But after the war, that pattern began to shift. The manual working class began to shrink and the professional and managerial classes in particular began to grow.

⁴ Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, 47–8.

A similar though less pronounced shift was experienced by employed women. More than half of all people born just after the war experienced upward social mobility in their working lives.⁵ Other forms of mobility were also common. Even those who remained in working-class jobs were physically mobile—mostly to the suburbs. Our image of post-war tower blocks in urban situations is misleading, as over half of all council estates were in suburban locations. And parents were now much more likely to expect and to want their children to lead lives different from their own. This has been called ‘psychic mobility’—a movement away from a belief in a static towards a more dynamic vision of society.⁶

This optimism about the possibility of progress—both personal and social progress—was closely tied to expectations of education. People associated the promises of security and equality offered by the welfare state and the provision of an increasingly equal education by the state with their chances of improving their own and their children’s lives, socially and economically. This despite the fact that for most people, social mobility probably had little to do with educational opportunity; rather, it had to do with the shift in the labour market in Britain—as in many other countries—away from manual labour and towards service-sector occupations. In fact, people with every level of education were almost equally likely to be socially mobile, especially among the generations born in the 1940s and 1950s.⁷

I have always thought this was one of the most revealing and yet misunderstood features of modern British society—that social mobility as experienced by most people doesn’t have much to do with education (though it may become more important at the top end and more recently). In other words, neither grammar schools nor comprehensives have been really crucial to most people’s upward mobility. But these post-war generations wanted more education regardless of

⁵ Lindsay Paterson and Cristina Iannelli, ‘Patterns of Absolute and Relative Social Mobility: A Comparative Study of England, Wales and Scotland’, *Sociological Research Online*, 12/6 (2007), 58–78, at [<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/6/15.html>], accessed 24 Feb. 2021.

⁶ Diego Gambetta, *Were They Pushed Or Did They Jump? Individual Decision Mechanisms in Education* (Cambridge, 1987), 98–9.

⁷ Paterson and Iannelli, ‘Patterns’, esp. Table 8.

what direct contribution it made to their occupational outcomes – they wanted it because it was a civil right, like a free and universal health service, and because it seemed basic to a welfare state that promised security and prosperity for all after decades of growing inequality, the Great Depression, and the sacrifices of war. These popular demands never meant that education was purely a force for equality, but they did help to counteract the effects of a more stratified educational system in exacerbating *inequality*. This is why I have titled my lecture (and my book) ‘The Crisis of the Meritocracy’: because I want to argue that popular demand for more equal educational provision has for the last half century or more put a check on the unequal effects on education of ‘meritocracy’, based on differential educational achievement, which might otherwise have been the dominant effect of education on the social order.

Let me now turn to my main argument, which is that these new expectations of a universal education service were actually more responsible for determining what the state provided than any initiatives of politicians. Politicians were on the whole responding to demand pressure, not stimulating or creating it. I will offer three examples of the power of demand: first, in determining the transition to comprehensive education (a process well under way before Tony Crosland put his name to it in 1965); second, in determining the transition to mass higher education since the late 1980s; and third, in determining not how many people studied, but what they studied – the balance between arts and sciences in schools and universities over the whole of the post-war period.

So first to comprehensive education. Here we can see in the two decades after the Second World War a loose framework set up by politicians – starting with the famous Butler Act of 1944 – that was gradually transformed to suit the needs and wishes of parents. The Butler Act itself did very little apart from require local authorities to transfer all children to secondary schools at age 11 and then to provide free and compulsory secondary education for all to 15. Butler said very little about what kind of education children should get and in what kind of schools, so long as they were free. Unlike other features of the welfare state introduced by the post-war Labour government, like the NHS, the Butler Act was a product of the wartime coalition

and represented a bare-minimum consensus, leaving possibly more controversial details to be determined by local authorities. But as I have said, it was also part of a long-standing policy that in a free society, central government should not dictate the terms of education to parents. On the other hand, local authorities were not necessarily more responsive to parents. They were run by educational administrators who had their own views as to what kind of education was appropriate and by penny-pinching local politicians who needed to keep the rates low.

It therefore took quite a long time for local authorities to do anything beyond the bare minimum, which was to ensure that all children transferred to a secondary school at 11. For many, that transfer was merely a fiction, as 'all-age' schools survived into the 1960s in many places and children simply moved from one part of the school to another at 11. For most, the easiest and cheapest solution seemed to be that favoured by central government, which was the so-called 'tripartite' system of three kinds of schools for three kinds of children: grammar schools for the academic (most local authorities already provided grammar schools for the top 10 per cent of 11-year-olds), technical schools mostly for boys aiming at skilled trades, and 'secondary modern' schools for the rest. Tests at age 10 or 11 – the so-called eleven-plus – selected out the academic and the technical children, which left about three-quarters of the population to be educated at the new secondary modern schools. The secondary moderns were either repurposed primary schools or cheap new schools that used temporary accommodation to house separately the children formerly kept in primary school to 14. They had little obvious function, little obvious 'secondary' character, offered few exams or qualifications, and remained institutions in search of a mission for their entire lifespan. But it quickly became clear that they did not meet parents' expectations, and so their lifespan was short.

For one thing, it was already apparent in the early 1950s that the eleven-plus was desperately unpopular among both middle-class and working-class parents, but especially among the latter because their children were much less likely to pass the test and gain a grammar school place. Before the war, most parents had little experience or expectation of secondary school for their children, and so were

relatively unaffected by grammar school selection. After the war, it became nearly universal; it affected everyone. With every passing year, dissatisfaction grew as the state measured up its nation's 11-year-olds and found 75 per cent of them wanting, consigning them to what were widely viewed as low-grade schools. As early as 1954, when mothers of 8-year-olds born right after the war were asked what kind of secondary school they wanted for their children, two-thirds said grammar school. And yet only about 25 per cent of those mothers would get what they wanted—most of them middle-class mothers. As the Chief Inspector of Schools said at the time, this was not a tenable situation if parents' wishes were to be regarded, rather than educationalists' or politicians' views of what was good for them.⁸

Local authorities paid little attention to this swelling demand at first. They were scrambling to provide any kind of schooling for all 11-year-olds and were neither able nor willing to contemplate providing the most expensive kind of school—the grammar school—for everyone. Nor did expert opinion think that parents' wishes should be regarded. The widespread expert view was that only a minority of children would ever be capable of benefiting from an academic education, and after all, as even the left-wing Labour Minister of Education, Ellen Wilkinson, put it, 'coal has to be mined and fields ploughed'.⁹ There was a static vision based on an eternal manual working class and a minority educated middle class.

Two manifestations of popular demand that mounted during the 1950s made it impossible for local authorities (or experts) to ignore the problem by the end of the decade.¹⁰ These were known to contemporaries as 'the bulge' and 'the trend'. 'The bulge' was what is now more often known as the 'baby boom'. Family size had shrunk earlier in the twentieth century as the slump and war caused people to aim for fewer children to support. But the birth rate suddenly leaped ahead at the end of the war and continued to surge through the early 1960s. 'The bulge' was itself evidence of the new optimism

⁸ Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, 43–5, 54.

⁹ Quoted by David Rubinstein, 'Ellen Wilkinson Re-Considered', *History Workshop*, 7/1 (1979), 161–9, at 167.

¹⁰ What follows summarizes the argument of Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, chs. 3–4.

that most people felt about their future prospects—partly thanks to economic growth, but also to the security provided by the welfare state. And although of course it did not have immediate effects on demand for education—it takes babies at least five years to grow up into primary-school children—at the same time, educational planners knew immediately that the absolute number of secondary school places would have to start growing in exactly 1956 (eleven years after the bulge began). That meant new schools would have to be built.

Would these schools be tripartite or comprehensive? It was very hard for local authorities of any political complexion to contemplate new tripartite schools. The children of the bulge were children of the welfare state; their parents were having more children because they had high expectations of social security and social progress. Would three-quarters of them be happy to be relegated to second-class schools that offered no exams and few other qualifications, and no chance of progression to O-levels, A-levels, or even possibly higher education? They would not. As even the Conservative education minister of the early 1960s, Edward Boyle, said later, 'I cannot from memory recall a single Conservative, with any interest in the subject, who really favoured building new grammar schools and secondary modern schools, side by side, in an expanding housing estate'.¹¹

This demand pressure for new schools on an unsegregated basis was exacerbated by a second source of demand increasingly manifest by the late 1950s: what was called 'the trend'. This was the growing demand by parents and students, among the majority educated in secondary modern schools, to stay on in school after age 15 and to sit exams—O-levels at 16 in the first instance. The grammar schools only provided places for at most a quarter of all 16-year-olds, but many more than that were showing themselves able and willing to stay on and sit exams. Demand for O-levels was growing at 10 per cent a year in the late 1950s and 15 per cent a year in the early 1960s. A similar trend was evident in Scotland, where by the late 1950s 35 per cent of 16-year-olds were already sitting the equivalent qualification. Not only were the assumptions of the tripartite system challenged by

¹¹ Edward Boyle, 'The Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation: Some Reflections', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 4/2 (1972), 28–38, at 31.

‘the trend’ – it was obvious that the eleven-plus was only selecting a portion, and a shrinking portion, of the cohort evidently able to take and pass academic exams – but also popular pressure for exams was overflowing the banks of the grammar schools and manifesting itself in secondary modern schools too, where they weren’t supposed to be provided.

Local authorities responded to the bulge and the trend in various different ways depending on their local politics and also on how much leeway the Ministry of Education would allow them. But nearly all Welsh and Scottish authorities and three-quarters of English authorities were already determined to abandon the eleven-plus by 1963. Most kept their existing tripartite schools, but began to open new schools on a comprehensive basis. Others – for example, Swansea, Wiltshire, or Middlesex – simply decided to start offering O-levels at their secondary modern schools, so that the difference between them and grammar schools began to dissipate. The most popular response in Tory authorities was to move to a two-tier system, which allowed them to keep existing secondary modern and grammar schools. The two-tier system – sometimes called the Leicestershire plan after the Conservative-controlled authority that pioneered it in the late 1950s – abolished the eleven-plus and kept all pupils together in the same schools until 15. These junior secondaries, based on the old secondary moderns, were effectively comprehensives. Anyone who wished to stay on after 15 could then transfer at this later stage to a senior secondary school where they could sit O-levels and A-levels. These senior secondaries, based on the old grammar schools, were more selective, but they were able to expand to meet the demand for O-levels however much it grew. You will recognize this two-tier system as persisting today in many parts of England, where students stay in comprehensives to 16 and then proceed to a sixth-form or an FE college.

The point here is that although the 1964 general election brought in a government ideologically disposed to comprehensives, and although in 1965 an even more ideologically disposed Education Secretary, Tony Crosland, issued a circular to all local authorities asking them to draw up plans to abolish the eleven-plus, by that date nearly all of them had already done so. And Crosland knew it.

The circular in fact spelled out the various routes local authorities could take to comprehensive education based on the plans already in train. Thus the Leicestershire plan was approved, and so were 11–18 comprehensives as already planned in every Scottish authority. Of course, famously, a small number of Conservative authorities resisted this circular and some of them continued to hold out until Margaret Thatcher rescued them in the 1980s. And much as in other countries (Sweden, for example, moved to comprehensive schools over the same period, though not until later to 11–18 comprehensives), it took a while for those local authorities that did reorganize to do so. New schools had to be built and often old schools had to be closed. As we know, over 90 per cent of state-educated students across Britain are today enrolled in comprehensive schools, and that figure hasn't changed much in the past forty years. This transformation of the school system came about not because of Tony Crosland and his circular, but because after the war, parents had higher expectations for their children and higher expectations of the welfare state, and because between them, the bulge, the trend, and the welfare state caused the great majority of local authorities to begin the transformation long before 1965.

Let me move now to my second illustration of the power of popular demand, which takes us forward in two senses: forward to higher education and forward to the 1980s.¹² To bridge the gap, I should say that of course the bulge, the trend, and the welfare state – which helped to bring about comprehensive education from the late 1950s – almost immediately thereafter put immense pressure on higher education as well. The planners who knew how many more 11-year-olds they would have to accommodate after 1956 knew just as well how many more 18-year-olds they would have to accommodate after 1963. And by then they also knew that the trend towards more O-levels was leading irresistibly to more A-levels and to more candidates for university. Thus more universities were already being planned well before the Robbins Report of 1963 reported to government on the future of higher education. The famous 'plate-glass universities' of the 1960s are sometimes erroneously called Robbins universities, although they were already half-built or – like

¹² Higher education is covered in Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, chs. 5–7.

the University of East Anglia – already open at the time of the Robbins Report. From the point of view of popular demand, though, the Robbins Report was important because it defined the so-called Robbins Principle, which was that everyone who was qualified for higher education (by passing two A-levels or, in Scotland, three Highers) and wanted a place should be guaranteed a place. This embedded in policy – more or less right up to the present day – the idea that politicians should not seek to engineer the provision of higher education, but should merely respond to demand for it. Robbins made a series of projections based on the bulge and the trend about how many places would be needed for the foreseeable future, and we are only now reaching the outer limits of his longer-term projections, which went up to 2020.

Robbins’s projections were more or less accurate for the rest of the 1960s, and the bulge, the trend, and the welfare state, as well as the provision of more places in universities and polytechnics, ensured that the proportion of 18 and 19-year-olds who progressed to higher education grew from under 5 per cent at the beginning of the 1950s to almost 15 per cent at the end of the 1960s. Then something very interesting happened.

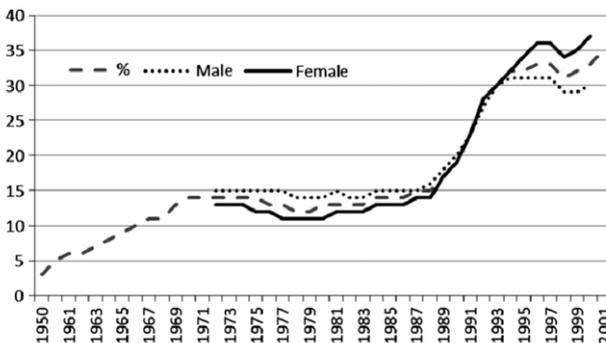


Fig. 1. Age participation rate for all higher education, 1950–2001. Geoff Whitty, Annette Hayton, and Sarah Tang, 'Who You Know, What You Know, and Knowing the Ropes: A Review of Evidence about Access to Higher Education Institutions in England', *Review of Education*, 3/1 (2015), 29. Unmodified from source and licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0 [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>].

Robbins's optimistic projections started to go wrong around 1969. Instead of continuing to rise, the proportion of young people going to higher education levelled off – not just temporarily, but for fifteen or twenty years. Why that happened is a subject to which I could devote a whole lecture on its own,¹³ but here I will just say that this levelling off in the growth of higher education was also as much due to popular demand (or lack of it) as to political initiative – if not more so. Some policy decisions in the 1970s did inhibit the supply of places. Many teacher training colleges were closed, for example, anticipating the end of the bulge and a declining demand for new teachers. But on the whole, what caused higher education to level out in the 1970s and 1980s is that 18 and 19-year-olds stopped wanting it – for a wide variety of reasons that had to do mostly with the very uncertain social, cultural, and economic prospects of the period, very much unlike the 1950s and 1960s.

But here I want to focus on the return to growth in the later 1980s to show again how popular demand flexed its muscles, whatever politicians wanted or said they wanted. During a period of financial stringency in the 1970s, politicians were reasonably happy to go along with diminished demand, which meant having to pay for fewer places at a time when it cost government a lot of money not just to provide the places, but to pay the fees and grants for the people who filled them. But when Margaret Thatcher came to power, her governments showed a more ideological disposition to limit participation in higher education as a matter of policy rather than simply as a response to demand. Or rather, it was not so much Thatcher and her governments as her Education Secretary and ideological mentor, Keith Joseph, to whom she delegated education policy. Joseph was on record as regretting the Robbins-era expansion of higher education, echoing Kingsley Amis's famous diagnosis that 'more is worse'. Part of his recipe for economic recovery was to ensure that only educational investment that contributed to economic growth should be permitted. Thus he was determined not just to prevent further growth in participation, but actually to drive it down from

¹³ I offer slightly different analyses of this crux in 'Educating the Nation: II. Universities', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 25 (2015), 1-26, at 10-17, and in *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, ch. 6.

its current levels, setting a target of 12 per cent – lower than the existing rate that had crept back up to 15 per cent by 1984. As we will see, he also tried – equally unsuccessfully – to determine not only who studied, but what they studied.

Unfortunately for Joseph, his term in office coincided with the end of the long period of suppressed demand for higher education. By the mid 1980s, more 18-year-olds were seeking to progress from A-levels to university, and perhaps even more significantly, many older women who had forgone higher education in the 1960s and 1970s had been returning to it earlier still. Again, I don't want to spend too much time here explaining why growth resumed in the 1980s – a question almost as mysterious as why it slackened in the 1970s. Changing attitudes to women's roles played a big part; even among young people, women's participation started to grow from around 1980, and by around 1990 their participation rates would match men's. But other factors involving renewed faith in education more generally must also have contributed. Joseph was very cross about this resurgence of demand, especially as it manifested itself mainly in places that he thought did not give value for money: in polytechnics, which he tended to view as second-rate universities, and in social studies subjects, which he viewed as tantamount to socialist studies. But as soon as improved demand did begin to register – and especially as middle-class students who wanted places in universities found they could only get them in polytechnics – then Joseph's colleagues in government began to feel uneasy. Civil servants were warning them that there were insufficient places for those eligible and wanting them, and that therefore the Robbins Principle was being violated. More significantly, the parents of those middle-class students who were being turned away from universities began to protest, and their MPs – backbench Tories, many of them – began to feel the heat. There were open revolts in 1985 when Joseph sought not only to deprive their constituents of places, but to charge for them by introducing tuition fees.

Eventually, Thatcher replaced him with Kenneth Baker. Baker had his own proclivities – not 'more is worse', but definitely technocratic, as he wanted to invest in science and technology. Even so, he knew what his political responsibilities were, and he duly turned on the supply tap. Participation rates soared, especially among women, at

a pace even more rapid than in the 1960s. In fact, the upsurge made up for the stagnation of the 1970s and early 1980s, so that you can draw almost a straight upwards line from 1960 to 2000—the slow-down being precisely compensated by the acceleration. When the Treasury cried out for some restraint on student numbers in the mid 1990s, the political retribution was almost immediate. The Tories' polling on education slumped, Tony Blair skilfully took up the cry of 'education, education, education', and after his landslide election in 1997 he set the 50 per cent target which we have now reached. Of course, different governments found different ways to pay for this expansion. Thatcher preferred cutting costs, Blair devised tuition fees, and Cameron went for the high-fee regime. But it is striking that none of these policies—even though they had a direct impact on students' experiences and debt levels—made much difference to the ever-growing participation rate. And politicians have sought to ensure that that was so, as they have learned since the 1950s how quickly and brutally they get punished if they seek to halt the trend.

I will end with my third illustration of the power of popular demand—in this case, not in determining how many people study, but rather in determining what they study. I think this works particularly well as a case where the actual trends are nearly the opposite of what most people think they have been. That is because most people think the trends have followed politicians' near-universal desires, embedded in many, many reports and acts of Parliament, whereas popular demand has consistently foiled those politicians' desires for over half a century.

We have to go back to the 1950s and ask: what did the minority who took academic examinations (and the even smaller minority who went on to university) actually study? Most people have a picture of 1950s grammar schools and universities as chock-a-block with young people studying classics, English, and history—unfortunately rather backward subjects in a post-war world that desperately needed the white heat of the technological revolution to fuel its economic growth. This picture owes a lot to C. P. Snow's polemic on 'The Two Cultures', which complained at the end of the 1950s about the dominance of the arts in British culture and education and championed a push for more science and technology education. It also

owes something to the general prevalence of a so-called ‘declinist’ understanding of the British economy in the post-war years, which portrayed it as backward relative to – well, mostly to Germany. In fact, so far as education goes, the reverse was the truth. The proportion of students doing science subjects at A-level and at university was at its high point around 1960. That proportion had been growing since the war, and by the 1960s Britain had, in the words of an OECD report, ‘the greatest concentration on science and technology in higher education and the biggest proportion of qualified scientists and technologists (graduates, diplomates and certificate holders) in relation to population and labour force’ in Europe.¹⁴

By the end of the 1960s, that large share won by science had begun to shrink. In fact, it shrank almost continuously from a high point of about 57 per cent of all degrees awarded in the early 1960s to a low point of 38 per cent in 2012. Something similar happened in schools. For example, there were more A-levels awarded in physics in *absolute* terms in the late 1970s than there were thirty years later, despite a huge increase in the total numbers taking A-levels. Why did this happen? The main drivers were the same forces that drove the trend towards widening participation in exams and education in general. As these numbers expanded, the new entrants inevitably tended to be those from backgrounds with less prior education and educational experience. Science (and, incidentally, modern languages) tends to favour those who have been engaged in continuous study for longer; for those on an upward trajectory, it was easier to pick up arts subjects and easier still to pick up the new subjects known as ‘social studies’, which were taught less in school and could be taken from scratch at university. The decline in science’s share thus followed more or less the rise in numbers; it slackened off when growth slackened off in the 1970s and it accelerated when growth accelerated in the 1990s.

There are other factors as well, of course. Women’s growing participation hit the hard sciences, though not biology. And both the general culture and the labour market – not only in Britain but across

¹⁴ Quoted in University Grants Committee, *University Development 1967–1972*, Cmnd. 5728 (London, 1974), 25.

the developed world – were less favourable to science from the 1960s onwards and more favourable to self-expression and understandings of self and society. While in fact the number of jobs specifically requiring science and technology skills was not growing, the number of jobs for which arts and social studies degrees were acceptable – especially in the public sector – was growing very rapidly. There does not appear to have been a ‘STEM skills shortage’, to use the current jargon, at any time since the 1960s. Only about a quarter of science and technology graduates end up in science and technology jobs, and many of the rest go into management, where they are in the same posts as arts and social studies graduates – though they tend to be better paid at first. In short, there were no external incentives for new entrants to higher education to choose science and technology degrees, and many reasons why they would choose arts subjects or, increasingly, the new social studies subjects. As shown in Fig. 2 (p. 19), arts subjects have retained a level share while science subjects have declined, and the margin is taken up with the growth of the social sciences, business, law, and communications.¹⁵

So we have a continuous fifty-year decline in the share of the sciences, and yet over the same fifty years, politicians of all parties have been almost unanimous in their calls for more science students. When the so-called ‘swing away from science’ began in the 1960s, there was almost a panic in the Labour government of the day. A national commission was set up to halt it, and yet the growth in higher education meant that the swing could not be halted. After a period of stagnation, as we have seen, Keith Joseph also tried to reverse the swing, arguing not only that there were too many students, but that there were far too many students studying arts and social studies. He was particularly exercised by the social sciences, like sociology, though you would have thought he would have approved of economics, business, and law. But he inaugurated a new policy of government seeking to steer young people into their favoured subject choices which has really never let up since.

¹⁵ See further Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, ch. 8.

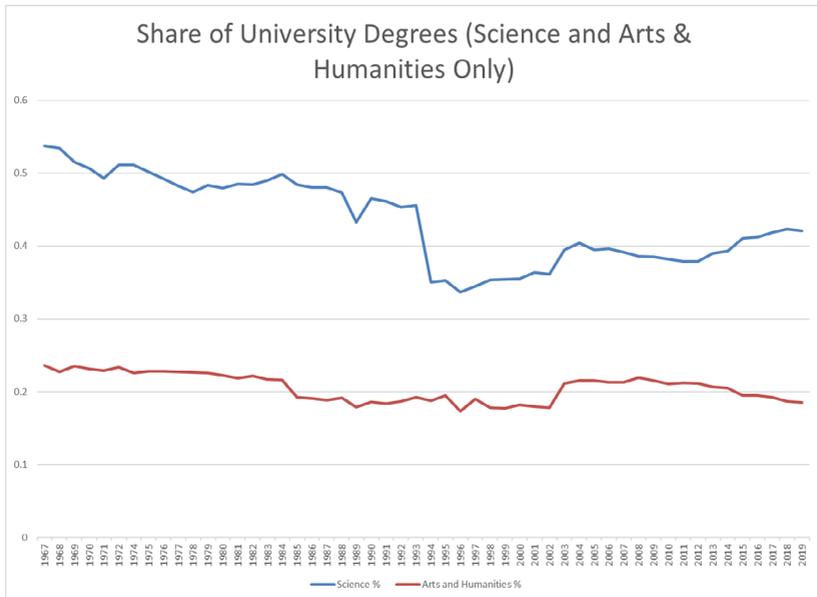


Fig. 2. Shares of science and arts and humanities degrees in universities, 1967–2019. Data from DES, Education Statistics (1967–79), University Statistics (1980–82), HESA, Higher Education Statistics (1993–97), HESA Online (1997–2019). GB only 1980–92. Data for 1993–2003 not strictly comparable.

I have lost count of the number of reports and speeches in which government ministers try to steer more students to take science and technology courses, of which the latest—the Augar Report—came in May 2019. As you will see, however, they appear not to have had any effect until 2012. At that point, the swing finally did go into reverse. Science degrees’ share of the total has increased almost every year since. Of course, two major disruptions occurred around then which must have something to do with the reversal: the economic crisis of 2008, with a sustained depression of the labour market ever since, and the high-fee regime of 2010, which may be changing students’ attitudes to subject choice. Government propaganda has also continued to pound away. The Augar Report has again told us that there is a STEM skills shortage and it has threatened students with fewer places or higher fees for courses of which government disapproves. So far, politicians have not been emboldened to actually deliver on these threats; there

is still some vestige of a liberal inhibition against so directly dictating student choice. But they won't need to if student choices continue to go in their favoured direction.

As the swing back to science suggests, sometimes what politicians say and do does matter—I would not want you to think I am arguing otherwise. But I do want to argue that in the sphere of education in particular, there are also powerful social, democratic, and demographic trends that tend to carry politicians along in their wake, despite the rhetoric they use to obscure their powerlessness. These trends are less palpable than Acts of Parliament and politicians' speeches, but that is why we need historians to make visible and palpable longer-term trends that politicians and journalists self-interestedly skip over. All too often, very short-term political moves are credited with much more force than they deserve. If politics A-level numbers are rising, we say, it's all due to Brexit. But choices of subject at A-level are nearly always rooted in much longer-term processes and decisions that even the teenagers themselves are barely aware of, and it is hard to attribute these to anything that just happens to be in the newspapers or on social media at the present moment. The same applies even more to decisions about whether to stay on in education and for how long. The demand for more and more education has been a fundamental feature of our (and others') democracy for several generations now, and I don't really see it yet directly challenged by anxieties about cost either to students or taxpayers. But that is the point, I'm afraid, where the historian's task ends. We are not that much better at predicting the future than any other informed citizens—and to the future, the past is, alas, only an uneven and unreliable guide.

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