

Dorling, D. (2011) A-levels 2011: Students' futures have been stolen from them, The Guardian, 16<sup>th</sup> August, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/aug/15/a-level-students-face-debt>

## A-levels 2011: Students' futures have been stolen from them

Most A-level students face a life of debt if they go to university, says Danny Dorling, to the benefit of the rich

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A hopeful A-level student opens her results. Photograph: Gabriel Szabo/Guzelian

Twenty-five years ago I collected my A-level results. In 1986, only a handful of us traipsed into school to get them. Most children had left by the age of 16. Of those staying on, even of those taking [A-levels](#), only a tiny number would go on to university; a majority of those would be boys. Today, half of all girls now gain a place at university [1].

When I went to university, there were no fees. This was because people had fought for decades to open up the universities, not because there were so few of us coming from ordinary schools. Angry reports were written in the 1930s on how unfair university access was then [2]. Fifty years later, we had never been as equal, but the tide was turning again.

In 1986, the richest 1% of the population held 18% of all marketable wealth (the kind you can lend). For the rich, it was a low point. In that same year, the poorest half of all Britons held 10% of marketable wealth between them, an all-time high. The latest figures reveal that the richest 1% of Britons now hold 53% of all marketable wealth and the poorest half hold just 6% [3].

Most successful A-level [students](#) today face a life of debt if they choose to attend university. Student loans will ultimately be underwritten by the richest 1% as they

hold the majority of what money can be lent, that 53% of marketable wealth. For decades to come, the debt interest that students will have to pay will mostly find its way into the bank balances of this richest 1%. This is not in the interest of 99% of the population.

It gets worse. The same irrational logic that has been employed to privatise universities could be extended to secondary education. Why, politicians may ask, should adults who choose not to have children be taxed to subsidise schooling? Why not instead give all children a loan and, while we're at it, surely not all children are up to learning after age 16? Do all children need to stay on until 17? After all, many new jobs in future will involve working in service for the super-rich. Do you need a GCSE to be a butler, maid, nanny or cleaner?

There is another way. In fact, there are so many alternatives to the stupid night-watchman state we are heading towards that a good A-level student, if set an exam essay on it, would not know where to begin. They would have so much to say and so little time to say it.

Between the years 2000 and 2008, the position of the UK in the OECD ranking fell from third to 15th when measuring the proportion of its young people going to university. At the top of the ranking is Finland, where 80% of girls now attend university. How much must the Finns charge their young people to afford this? Home fees in Finland are non-existent, and 94% of all Finnish [higher education](#) funding is from their public sector [4].

It's not just A-level students who are to be robbed to keep the rich so very rich, but their parents, who will help them if they can, and grandparents, who will worry about them now even if they have "done well". In fact, everyone gets hurt when we tell a generation that we are not willing to allow them what we had. Why shouldn't they grow selfish and resentful? And if they do, who will care for the elderly in 25 years' time?

At some point soon, the 99% of us will, probably in a very quiet British way (public disapproval and private ostracising), seek reparation from the rich for the 25 years of theft that has occurred and which is ongoing through student loan financing and government borrowing in general. After all, it is not as if the "wealth creators" have succeeded in creating a bright new dawn. They had their 25-year shot and they failed [5].

If you are picking up results this week, good luck with your future. Whatever you are awarded, please remember that it's more important to be about something good and useful than just to try to get rich, or just to survive [6]. Your parents forgot that. They let this happen and now they are worried about your future as well as their own.

• Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at the University of Sheffield. His latest book is *Bankrupt Britain: An Atlas of Social Change*, written with Bethan Thomas and published by Policy Press

*These are the notes to the article which, of course, Newspapers never print.*

[1] Clark, L. (2010) A university first ... more than half of girls now study at one, Daily Mail, April 1<sup>st</sup>, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1262686/A-university---half-girls-study-one.html> It wasn't a joke. It is hard to verify the story as, Orwellian style, Department of Education press release prior to the May 13<sup>th</sup> announcement of Michael Gove's appointment as Education Secretary have been wiped from the web. History begins with Michael. DEF (2010) "Michael Gove has been confirmed as the new Secretary of State for Education. The full ministerial team will be announced in due course." 13<sup>th</sup> May <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0061080/michael-gove-confirmed-as-education-secretary>

[2] In particular see Chapter 10 by David V Glass and J. L. Gray entitled "Opportunity and the older universities: A study of the Oxford and Cambridge scholarship system" within Hogben, J. (1938) "Political Arithmetic: A Symposium of Population Studies", London: George Allen and Unwin. Reprinted by Routledge in 2010. On page 439 of that volume details are given concerning how the majority (52.7%) of 'scholarships' and 'exhibitions', designed supposedly to widen participation slightly – even in those times – were being awarded to pupils from "Public and Private Schools" (note also that the word 'Public' here is the bizarre title given to the most private of private schools, those whose head is invited to a particular annual conference): "The conclusion to be drawn from this last table is that the bulk of State scholarships, in relation to school populations, is going to boys from wealthier families or from families of higher social status than was intended by the authors of the scheme" (page 442).]

[3] Dorling, D. (2011) Underclass, overclass, ruling class, supernova class, Chapter eight of A. Walker, A. Sinfield and C. Walker, (Eds.) Fighting Poverty, Inequality and Injustice, Bristol: Poverty Press. Table is:

**Table 1: Inequalities in Wealth in the UK 1976-2008: Shares of Wealth**

%	1976	1981	1986	1988	2006-8	
					(a)	(b)
Top 1% of the population	21	18	18	17	28	53
Next 4% (top 5% less top 1%)	17	18	18	21	13	10
Top half excluding top 5%	54	56	54	56	51	31
Bottom half of all people	8	8	10	6	8	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Source: Townsend 1991, page 33, marketable wealth at death from probate; and final columns calculated by author, a) excluding pension rights and, b) also excluding main residence housing equity from the wealth calculations. Source of 2006-2008 data – National Equality Panel DataSheet 2.17\_2.18\_2.19b (key calculation is £7,424,366/£14,101,780)*

[4] Coughlan, D. (2010) How about 80% going to university?, BBC News Education and Family, 3 November, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11438140>  
 See also: Young, M. (1958, 1961). The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An essay on education and equality. London, Thames and Hudson. (p.13 of 1961 edition).  
 Writing in 1958 about a possible future economic shock in 2134, Michael Young write:

“The danger that has settled in upon us since the shock administered by the events of the last year is that the clamouring throng who find the gates of higher education barred against them may turn against the social order by which they feel themselves condemned”

[5] The London Big Bang took place on 27 October 1986.

[6] And, in a tragic attempt to remember what life was like 25 years ago, in the immortal words of N.A.S.A.'s (from the tract money), what ever you get, just “be about something”, see:

[http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/presentations/video\\_offtheshelf.htm](http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/presentations/video_offtheshelf.htm)

If not enough people are about something enough this example below shows what a minority can get away with. Its just from the start of Don's article:

*“IN OCTOBER 2005, three Citigroup analysts released a report describing the pattern of growth in the U.S. economy. To really understand the future of the economy and the stock market, they wrote, you first needed to recognize that there was “no such animal as the U.S. consumer,” and that concepts such as “average” consumer debt and “average” consumer spending were highly misleading.*

*In fact, they said, America was composed of two distinct groups: the rich and the rest. And for the purposes of investment decisions, the second group didn't matter; tracking its spending habits or worrying over its savings rate was a waste of time. All the action in the American economy was at the top: the richest 1 percent of households earned as much each year as the bottom 60 percent put together; they possessed as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent; and with each passing year, a greater share of the nation's treasure was flowing through their hands and into their pockets. It was this segment of the population, almost exclusively, that held the key to future growth and future returns.”*

Source: Don Peck (2011) Can the Middle Class Be Saved?

(The Great Recession has accelerated the hollowing-out of the American middle class. And it has illuminated the widening divide between most of America and the super-rich. Both developments herald grave consequences. Here is how we can bridge the gap between us.) The Atlantic, September 2011 edition – on the web by August 10<sup>th</sup>:<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/can-the-middle-class-be-saved/8600/>