

The Failures of Capitalism in Promoting Equitable Access to Higher Education

An Analysis for Oxford University's World Access to Higher
Education Network (WAHEN)

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**Access & Geopolitics: Next Steps in
Tackling the Equity Crisis in Global
Higher Education**

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Introduction

The Promise vs. Reality

- Higher education is viewed as essential for social mobility and knowledge, playing a vital role in economic and cultural life.
- Certification is crucial for the career aspirations of many young people in the U.S., UK and Worldwide
- Ideally, higher education should be accessible to all, regardless of background.
- This presentation argues that contemporary capitalism and political trends create barriers that hinder equitable access to higher education worldwide.



The Financial Squeeze

Support it with a brief explanation.

The Financial Squeeze

The US Context



- Numerous universities in the United States are grappling with significant financial challenges, with only a handful of well-endowed institutions remaining unaffected.
- A major factor contributing to this situation is the reduction in public funding for higher education since the 1980s. This decrease can be linked to a crisis in federal and state finances, as well as the rise of right-wing politics advocating austerity measures for public institutions.
- During his presidency, Reagan waged a "crusade against publicly funded education," successfully reducing college funding and student aid.
- Even as California's governor, Reagan slashed millions from the University of California's operating budget and explicitly encouraged universities to impose tuition fees or require loans for those who could not afford to pay.

The Financial Squeeze

The US Context



- In response, most colleges and universities have dramatically increased tuition fees, forcing students to take on heavy debt.
- This situation puts into question access for young people from low - and middle-income families.
- Even families earning between \$100,000 and \$300,000 annually are squeezed by the soaring cost of attending elite US colleges.... Many earn too much to qualify for meaningful aid but too little to cover tuition out of pocket.
- At approximately \$150,000 of pre -tax household income, families are expected to pay around 20% (\$30,000) annually for tuition, rising to \$61,000 at \$270,000 income.

The Financial Squeeze

The UK Context



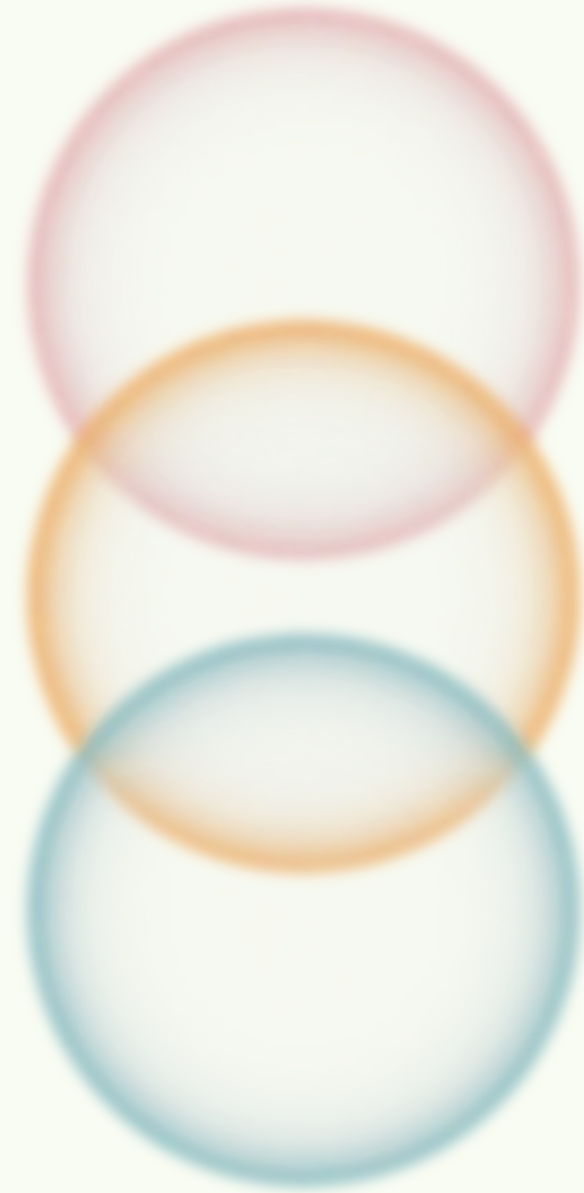
- Before the 1990s, universities were seen as a universal good, with low fees comparable to that of mainland Europe
- However, English universities have faced a financial crisis since the 1980s.
- In 1998, Tony Blair's Labour government introduced tuition fees of £1,000 per year.
- The introduction of these fees was politically sensitive, passed with a narrow majority.
- This policy shifted a significant portion of university education costs to students.
- Analysis indicates tuition fees would need to rise to £12,500 annually for universities to break even, yet the fee has been frozen at £9,250 since 2017 despite rising costs.

The Financial Squeeze

The UK Context



- If investment in teaching had kept up with inflation, funding per student would be in the region of £12,000 -£13,000.
- The current system heavily burdens graduates, who pay 84% of the cost of a university degree, while the government pays only 16%. The UK is increasingly an outlier within the OECD on this issue.
- This financial strain is eroding the quality of the student experience, leading to crowded lectures and less well-equipped labs.



The University as a Business?

The Rise of the Neoliberal Model

The Rise of the Neoliberal Model



- US & UK universities are shifting from public service to resemble private enterprises due to declining funding and neoliberal ideology.
- University managers aim to make institutions more like profit-driven corporations, emphasizing market discipline.
- This transformation leads to precarious job conditions for most teachers, including low pay and reduced job security, affecting even tenured faculty.
- Power has increasingly shifted to university managers, whose numbers and salaries have significantly increased.
- Universities are now part of global ranking systems, where prestige impacts funding.
- This trend reflects the growing influence of private business within academia, paralleling the state's involvement with private enterprise.

The Privatization of Knowledge



- Within the neoliberal university framework, academic work is increasingly viewed as directly productive labor that generates profit.
- Knowledge produced through academic efforts is progressively being commodified through mechanisms such as patenting, licensing, and copyrighting, benefiting both universities and associated private enterprises.
- Faculty members face heightened scrutiny and quantifiable evaluations, where their ability to secure external funding has become the primary measure of their academic value.
- This stands in stark contrast to the vision of a democratic university, which aims to create knowledge as a use value that serves the common good.

Political Interference & Ideological Control

Support it with a brief explanation.

Political Interference & Ideological Control The US Context



- The Trump administration has launched a campaign targeting US universities
- While claiming to punish institutions for alleged support for "antisemitism" and "anti-white racism" (such as DEI initiatives), the real targets are academic freedom and freedom of speech.
- The attack is primarily financial, with political motivations. Universities supporting research or speech against the administration's preferences face investigations and frozen or cut federal funding.

Political Interference & Ideological Control The US Context



- Researchers receiving US funding have been sent surveys asking about their involvement in projects related to climate action, "environmental justice", diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and defending against "gender ideology"....
- The administration also seeks disclosure of ties to entities associated with communist, socialist, or totalitarian parties and funding from countries like China, Russia, Cuba, or Iran. This ideological context is described as unprecedented.
- The Trump Administration is in complete violation of The 1st Amendment in regards to his crackdown on Higher Education

Political Interference & Ideological Control The US Context



- The Trump administration revoked Harvard University's ability to enroll international students, stating that thousands of current students must transfer or leave the country.
- This action was presented by the Department of Homeland Security as holding Harvard accountable for fostering violence, antisemitism, and coordinating with the Chinese Communist Party.
- The threat stems from demands for information about foreign students who might be implicated in violence or protests. Harvard's certification in the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, which allows it to sponsor international students, was revoked.

Political Interference & Ideological Control The US Context



- Students involved in pro-Palestinian activism have faced detention by US immigration authorities. Mahmoud Khalil, a graduate of Columbia, and Rümeysa Öztürk, a Tufts University PhD student, were detained for over a month without being accused of criminal conduct.
- They were arrested for speaking out against American corporate & federal complicity in the ongoing Genocide of Gaza (as defined by the Lemkin Institute of Genocide Prevention)
- Lawmakers described these detentions as a "national disgrace" and part of a crackdown on immigrants and constitutionally protected free speech under the Trump administration, moving towards an "authoritarian state".

Political Interference & Ideological Control The Global Context

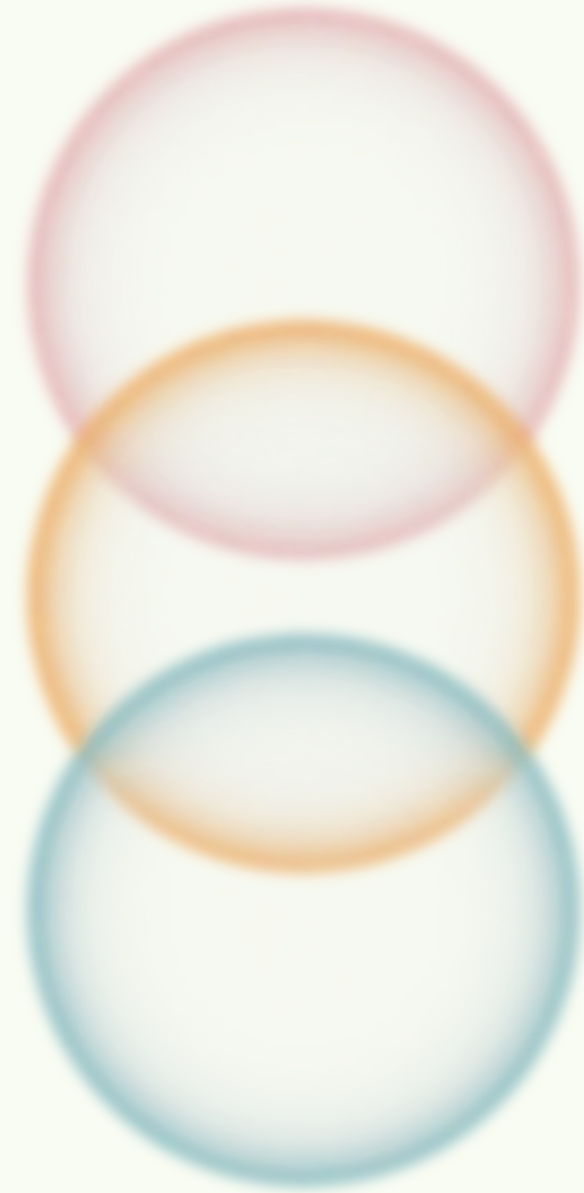


- The Trump administration's anti-DEI agenda and funding cuts impact research collaborations across the Pacific.
- Australia's leading universities and the Australian Academy of Science are alarmed by these developments and are seeking greater collaboration with Europe (e.g., Horizon Europe) and deeper ties in Asia (Singapore, Japan).

Political Interference & Ideological Control The Global Context



- The US is Australia's largest research partner. Policy changes introduced by the Trump administration have led the US to suspend or terminate research grants with six of the eight members of Australia's leading Group of Eight (Go8) universities.
- European universities, such as Ghent University in Belgium, are concerned about developments in American higher education under the Trump administration.
- Ghent University also warned staff of potential risks associated with collaborating with US colleges, particularly on sensitive topics, and advised storing data on internal servers to prevent deletion if it were hosted on a US server.



Classism and Inequality within Higher Institutions

The Rise of the Neoliberal Model

Classism and Inequality within Higher Institutions

India Case Study

**While my Oxford peers go skiing, I
am behind to clean their rooms**

wealth divide means that while some students attend May balls and dining societies, poorer undergraduates are having to work to pay for food and rent



Pomfret was thrilled to win a place at Oxford but says poorer students can find life hard

- Class-related issues are frequently sidestepped at Oxford, despite assertions of enhancing accessibility.
- Students from working -class backgrounds often hesitate to apply due to the perception of the institution as elitist.
- Some working -class students, like Chloe Pomfret, must work during holidays, cleaning rooms, to cover rent, highlighting the acute wealth divide.
- Misconceptions about working -class individuals can arise from limited interactions among privately educated students. Even tutors may lack awareness of the diverse starting points from which students originate.

Classism and Inequality within Higher Institutions Oxford Case Study



- Working -class students face financial struggles, often needing to work during term time or holidays, unlike wealthier peers.
- Lack of class diversity in fields like economics can lead to disconnection from real-world issues affecting ordinary people.
- The academic system may prioritize connections over merit, hindering less privileged individuals.

Classism and Inequality within Higher Institutions India Case Study



- In India, Muslims are the largest religious minority and face educational disparities.
- Despite a tradition of institutions like madrasas, barriers to quality higher education persist.
- The Sachar Committee noted lower literacy rates among Muslims compared to the national average, with fewer attending primary school and higher dropout rates.
- Only 4.9% of university students are Muslims, likely due to access issues, financial constraints, and better higher educational opportunities abroad, such as in UK, Malaysia and Bangladesh.

Classism and Inequality within Higher Institutions India Case Study



- Muslim girls encounter additional obstacles such as poverty, cultural norms, and limited access to educational institutions.
- Despite various government initiatives and efforts from NGOs, significant challenges persist, and the aspiration to provide all Muslim children with equal access to quality education remains elusive.
- The caste system in India hinders the economic integration of Indian Muslims into higher education, mirroring the caste-related issues faced by Indian Hindus.

Classism and Inequality within Higher Institutions India Case Study



- Under the leadership of Narendra Modi and the BJP Party, the policies have intensified feelings of discrimination among Indian Muslims, particularly within higher education settings.
- The 2019 protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act underscore the growing rift between the Indian government and students in higher education across the country.

What I Wish I Could've Covered (But Couldn't Due To Runtime)



- The destruction of every higher education institution in Gaza
- Social Hierarchy in American fraternities and sororities as barriers to racial and gender equity in America
- The attempts at “illiberalization” of Higher Education in Hungary and Florida
- Failure of Equity in Higher Education of Post-Apartheid South Africa
- The Effects of Taliban’s Governance on Women in High -Education Post-2021

Analysis and Conclusion

- The intersection of capitalism and higher education creates challenges for equitable access, especially for low- and middle-income students, due to declining public funding and rising tuition fees, a global issue.
- The shift to a neoliberal education model prioritises profitability and global rankings over public good, leading to precarious faculty conditions and the commodification of knowledge.
- Political interference threatens academic freedom, with policies undermining educational integrity and exacerbating classism and inequality in higher education.
- Case studies from Oxford University and India reveal significant barriers for working -class and minority students, highlighting cultural, social, and economic factors that perpetuate inequality.
- Addressing capitalism's failures in higher education requires multifaceted reform, including financial support and fostering inclusive environments to dismantle systemic barriers.
- As fellow speakers of The World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN), we should be dedicated to promoting equitable changes in the education system.

Thank you for your attention



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