

# Queering the Binary: The Politics of the Pre/Post-1992 Division in UK Higher Education

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## Abstract

The separation of old (pre-1992) or research-intensive, and new (post-1992) or teaching-led universities remains a salient and significant division within the landscape of Higher Education (HE) in the UK. In this chapter I examine the division's continued naturalisation, by exploring and complicating the discourses of 'quality', 'diversity', and 'employability' that commonly attach to it. The division is sustained by a number of widespread assumptions not just about the intellectual labour that takes place at different types of HE institutions, but also about the students who study at them, and it therefore has significant discursive and political implications that serve to reinforce educational and other inequalities. I argue that challenging these institutional divisions should be at the forefront of any critical approaches to UK HE, and further that queer approaches are particularly well placed to offer such a challenge, in the spirit of queer sharing across the division.

## Introduction

The separation of old (pre-1992) or research-intensive and new (post-1992) or teaching-led universities remains a salient and significant division within the landscape of Higher Education (HE) in the UK. This division is meaningful not just within academia itself, but also across broader public, political and media imaginaries. Within academia, it carries meaning both for HE workers (academics and others) and for students accessing HE. The division of UK universities into distinct tiers is commonly understood in relation to research intensiveness, funding, or quality; economic resources; students' entry qualifications and notions of selectiveness; the diversity of the student body, particularly the proportion of students from so-called non-traditional backgrounds; and graduate outcomes; as well as sometimes teaching or pedagogical quality (see e.g. Boliver, 2015). The distinction between old and new universities is not neutral, but rather strongly value-laden and hierarchical, with the former tending to be associated with higher quality, status and prestige, and the latter with lower quality, status and prestige.

In this chapter I examine the continued salience and naturalisation of the pre/post-1992 or old/new division, and argue that it both sustains and is sustained by a number of widespread assumptions. Importantly, these assumptions pertain not only to the nature and quality of the intellectual (and other) labour that takes place at these institutions, but also – perhaps more problematically – to the presumed circumstances, interests and abilities of students at them. In this way, the division has a number of significant discursive and political implications that function to reinforce educational and other inequalities, and I argue therefore that

denaturalising and challenging this division should be at the forefront of any critical, for instance queer, approaches to UK Higher Education, whether institutional or pedagogical. This is particularly important in the increasingly neoliberalised and managerial UK HE context, as the recent impacts of both the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit have only served to further intensify the stratification of the sector. In this chapter I deploy some of the key insights from queer approaches to consider how we might challenge this division. Queer approaches to higher education are well established particularly in relation to critical pedagogies, but here I aim to add to scholarship exploring how a queer approach might help us tackle *institutional* inequalities in HE, by denaturalising and challenging the binary concepts that structure the UK higher education field.

While the pre/post-1992 divide is unique to the UK, it certainly echoes similar distinctions between different types of HE institutions in many other national contexts (as well as internationally), such as those between selective and non-selective, public and private, or vocational and academic institutions. Thus, although in this chapter my focus is specifically on the UK, my conclusions have theoretical and political resonance for many other HE contexts. The first section introduces the pre/post-1992 division in more detail, and examines how we might question or denaturalise the notions of quality that tend to attach to it. In the second section, I suggest further that the pre/post-1992 division both maintains and is maintained by certain assumptions about the ideal subject(s) of HE, and offer a queer reading of the discourses of ‘diversity’ that have tended to paradoxically reinforce the division. Third, I explore the discourses of employability that have tended to map onto the institutional binary, indicating a kind of unequal *division of labour* between different types of HE institutions – which I argue a queer approach can help challenge. The brief concluding section then explores more generally how this entrenched binary division might be challenged, and argues that *queer sharing* across the institutional divisions should be at the forefront of any critical approaches to UK HE.

### **Denaturalising the division**

The pre/post-1992 division of UK universities originates in the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* that turned former polytechnics in England and Wales and central institutions in Scotland, which used to offer technological or vocational education only, into universities. The first ever UK university rankings were published a year later, perhaps precisely in an attempt to create easy-to-understand status distinctions within an increasingly crowded higher education field. Not that surprisingly then, rankings have tended to confirm rather than challenge the ascription of quality to older universities, and conversely a lack of it to newer ones – of course with some notable exceptions. Such categorisations of universities are, thus, reproduced through institutional mechanisms such as university league tables, as well as commonly reflected in politicians’ announcements about ‘failing courses’ – or in Amanda French’s words, ‘moral panics’ about ‘falling standards’ in HE (2013, p.239) – as I detail further below.

University rankings themselves have of course been critiqued by many: Jelena Brankovic for instance notes that rankings overall reinforce the idea of HE as a ‘zero-sum stratified order’ (2021, p.12), with the expectation that individual institutions continuously strive to compete and overtake others. The annual releases of the various national and international league tables are invariably followed by celebratory *external* announcements by the institutions that have maintained or improved their positions, and by *internal* proposals of restructurings and demands on staff to produce improvement plans within the institutions that have fallen or not improved their positions. As the categorisation of UK universities into old and new takes place in the context of growing marketisation and managerialisation of the sector, UK universities are expected to compete for customers (i.e. students) in an increasingly competitive market particularly since the trebling of tuition fees in 2010. What systems like league tables offer to (potential) students and the wider public in this context is a kind of shorthand, an easy way of making distinctions between different institutions that otherwise all seem to offer the same state-of-the-art facilities; cutting-edge teaching and research; and a diverse selection of students smiling in the brochure. This shorthand suggests that choosing an older university higher up in the rankings should lead to a higher quality education, as well as a more certain path towards high-paying graduate employment.

But notwithstanding ‘zero-sum’ rankings, to what extent is the broader association between old universities and *quality* borne out? Vikki Boliver (2015) investigates whether clear tiers of high and low status universities still exist in the UK, and finds four distinct clusters. Oxford and Cambridge stand out as a separate ‘elite’ tier, with the second tier comprising the ‘Russell Group’ universities (a self-proclaimed group of ‘leading’ universities founded in 1994) and most of the other old universities. A majority of the new universities, together with the rest of the old ones make up tier 3, and one fourth of all new universities make up a distinctive fourth tier. She concludes that old universities are characterised by ‘higher levels of research activity, greater wealth, more academically successful and socioeconomically advantaged student intakes, but similar levels of teaching quality, compared to New (post-1992) institutions’ (2015, p.608). The next two sections of the chapter focus in more detail on differences in graduate employability and diversity of the student body, while here I want to briefly consider the other indicators of status associated with old universities.

Perhaps the primary separating factor between old and new universities (apart from age) is research activity. Universities differ considerably in both the amount and quality of the research they do (based on the governmental assessments of research quality, the REF and previously the RAE). Of course this does not mean that research is not done at new universities, and indeed some post-1992 institutions have invested heavily in research in recent years. Nonetheless the divide in this respect is still stark – but whether a larger amount of (higher quality) research translates to either a better education, or a better institution more broadly, is another question entirely. In terms of teaching quality, the differences are much more minor (based on the governmental assessment of teaching quality, the TEF, and the National Student Survey, NSS). Boliver (2015) points out that it is perhaps surprising that bigger differences in this regard do *not* exist, given how much more limited the resources of

new institutions are. Indeed, if HE staff are rewarded (monetarily, as well as in status and prestige) for research, and not teaching, might that in fact *reduce* teaching quality? Boliver (2015) also finds a notable difference in the economic resources of different institutions, correlating positively with age. These economic differences might also play a role in the research differences, as limited resources at new universities tend to mean that staff have higher teaching loads and less time for research.

Overall then, it seems that the status differentials between institutions tell us mostly about age and financial resources, rather than any sort of straightforward measure of quality. Despite the rather weak basis for such differentials, the winners of this divided system are strongly incentivised to sustain it, however, as it benefits them in the form of continued selectiveness and high numbers of applications particularly from lucrative international students. In other words, the high-status institutions *need* the low-status institutions in order to continue having something to differentiate *from* – as is common with binary concepts whose meaning is *relational* (see e.g. Luhmann, 1998; Sullivan, 2003). One of the key insights of queer approaches has been to deconstruct and challenge such binaries, particularly those related and fundamental to gender and sexuality. For instance Susanne Luhmann highlights in her discussion of queer pedagogies that ‘the process of making (sense) of selves relies on binaries such as homo-hetero, ignorance-knowledge, learner-teacher, reader-writer, and so on’ (1998). We might add here that making sense of pedagogical *institutions* can similarly depend on binary concepts, which structure and therefore help make sense of a crowded HE field.

Although the line between pre and post-1992 institutions is perhaps more stable than many other categorisations of HE institutions because it is based on the date of establishment, these categorisations nonetheless belie the true diversity that exists within both groups. Indeed, the designation of pre-1992 institutions as old and post-1992 institutions as new conceals the many previous waves of *new* universities that preceded that of 1992. As Boliver (2015) details, the universities created in the 1960s and 1970s were at the time considered new and concomitantly less prestigious than pre-existing institutions. Similarly, prior to that the ‘civic’ universities formed in the mid-1900s, the ‘red brick’ universities founded at the turn of the 20th century, and the universities created in the 1800s, were all also seen as less prestigious than what were considered old universities at the time – ultimately juxtaposed with just the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Somewhat predictably, some now further separate the post-1992 universities into the initial wave of conversions and the even newer universities created since 2004. This constant readjusting of the line between old and new, higher and lower status, demonstrates well the inherent *instability* of binary concepts. As Nikki Sullivan (2003) details, the more valued side of the binary is continuously *haunted* by the less valued side, necessitating that the hierarchical line is constantly and deliberately reinforced. A key task for critical pedagogical scholars is, thus, to reveal the instability of the binary, in order to denaturalise and challenge its dominance in imaginaries of UK HE.

### Complicating diversity

As we have seen, the widespread assumption that higher status translates to higher quality in HE is not borne out by a closer analysis. Historically another commonly used indicator of a quality education or institution has been *selectiveness* and the socioeconomic mix of students. Boliver (2015) for instance includes the latter in her analysis despite the fact that it is not commonly used in rankings because it ‘undoubtedly contributes to different estimations of university prestige’, stating that it is ‘well known that students from more advantaged social class backgrounds and private schools are especially over-represented at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and the Russell Group, whereas students from “non-traditional backgrounds” are concentrated in New, post-1992 universities with widening access remits’ (2015, p.614). Indeed, post-1992 institutions attract a considerably more diverse range of students, particularly in terms of class background and race/ethnicity, but also for instance more mature students (see e.g. Boliver, 2015; Colosi, 2014; French, 2013; Read et al., 2003; Scott, 2012; Taylor, 2013a). Further, selectiveness is directly linked to socioeconomic status: because there is a clear link between socioeconomic background and achievement at secondary level already, when a university gets enough applications to be ‘selective’, they will invariably select more students from privileged backgrounds.

As above, the differentiation of students according to socioeconomic status is not value-neutral, but rather often assumed to carry meaning far beyond financial resources, for instance in relation to students’ intellectual or academic abilities. Indeed, Morley (2001) questions whether the proliferation of the employability agendas discussed in the next section precisely at the time of the ‘massification’ of UK HE can be interpreted as a demand for institutions to compensate for the perceived deficits in the cultural and social capital of the post-1992 student body. Sarah S. Amsler and Chris Bolsmann argue similarly in relation to rankings that:

there is little doubt that most ranking schemes indicate precisely what they claim to: where elite people are funded by elite people to teach elite people knowledge for elites. What university rankings do not indicate, however, is where and how education functions as a practice of freedom for the excluded majority. (2011, p.294)

In the UK that ‘excluded majority’ is overwhelmingly educated at post-1992 institutions, and at least partially as a consequence, those institutions are seen as less prestigious (French, 2013; Read et al., 2003). In other words, the hierarchical division between old and new universities both draws on and reproduces an elitist class and racial hierarchy that is further based on assumptions about the abilities of different groups of students, or as Rachela Colosi argues, ‘different institutions manufacture “divisions of intellect” [--] suggested in and perpetuated by the institutional choices prospective university students are encouraged to make’ (2014, p.29).

Such judgements of students’ abilities can be seen operating in some of the recent calls towards further differentiation between UK HE institutions. For example Dennis A. Ahlburg recently applauded universities ‘moving towards serving regional markets and providing

applied courses’, arguing that although such propositions might be seen as ‘elitist’, they ‘may be in the best interest of students’ (2020, p.4). Yvette Taylor (2008) notes that in Widening Participation (WP) initiatives targeting local pupils, ‘local’ is commonly used euphemistically to refer to disadvantaged or non-traditional groups. Similarly here, ‘regional markets’ seems to indicate that ‘applied courses’ and ‘further education instead of university’ (Ahlburg, 2020, p.4) are in the best interests of *some*, not all, students. Although the students who make up the regional markets might not themselves agree, it would be in *their best interests* (or perhaps, best suited to *their abilities*) to seek a vocational, rather than an academic, education, Ahlburg seems to suggest. Given the socioeconomic makeup of different HE institutions in the UK, such initiatives would invariably mostly restrict the access of working-class and racial minority students to non-vocational higher education, as well as perpetuating negative assumptions about their intellectual abilities.

It is clear that post-1992 universities tend to attract a considerably more diverse student body, particularly in terms of socioeconomic background, race or ethnicity, and age. But ‘diversity’ has also more generally in recent years become a buzzword in UK HE, as it has been increasingly incorporated into institutional agendas. Universities across the division now tend to make promises about how diverse, inclusive, and welcoming they are to a range of non-traditional students, with their marketing materials constructed to visually reflect such diversities. However, as Sara Ahmed (2012) for instance notes, the institutionalisation of diversity can also strip the concept of its radical potential, becoming a tick box exercise that paradoxically stands *in place of* – or even *in the way of* – transformative approaches to education. In other words, such approaches can take a simplistic view of diversity as mere minority *presence* that does not consider the structural inequalities and power hierarchies that constitute the everyday experience of higher education, in the UK and elsewhere.

We can observe such neoliberalised ‘diversity management’ (Smele et al., 2017) operating within the structural inequalities of the UK HE sector, such that an overwhelmingly white or middle-class student body is rarely seen as a problem in itself, as long as an adequate number of non-traditional students is admitted for the claim of diversity to be made. In this way, ‘diversity management both neutralises and seeks to profit from what are portrayed as harmless “differences” between groups of people’ (Smele et al., 2017. p.690). Taylor argues similarly that when institutional ‘diversity stories’ are told within the context of unequal opportunities, this can actually function ‘to re-embed, rather than challenge, certain institutionalised normativities (such as “whiteness” and “middle-class” which are rarely named as the concern of “diversity” programmes)’ (2013a, pp.244-5). In other words, diversity is desirable as long as it does not challenge the power hierarchies that sustain the high status of old universities: *too much* class or racial diversity for instance would disrupt the selectiveness that the whole system of status differentiation is built on. Overall then, diversity discourses tend to function so as to distinguish between *good* diversity (that does not challenge the selectiveness of universities, or the normativities that the selectiveness sustains), and bad diversity (that prohibits or challenges selectiveness, and is therefore perceived to lower educational standards).



Taylor (2013b) argues that elite universities may be able to offer limited diversity without changing their overall (white and middle-class) composition, thereby marketing themselves as both *selective* and *diverse*. Such ‘diverse elitisms’ position individual students (and staff) in various ways: non-traditional students in high-status institutions can be both charged with embodying diversity in the service of institutional initiatives, and positioned as lacking the cultural and social capital needed to navigate narrow institutional expectations, structured by classed and racialised normativities (see e.g. Burke, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2021; Gibbs and Lehtonen, 2020). Conversely, the universities that educate the vast majority of the UK’s non-traditional students ‘are positioned as “failing” to deliver on what is now a strange brand of “diverse” elitism’ (Taylor, 2013b, p.52). Indeed, the type of tokenistic diversity promoted by ‘diversity management’ may well be incoherent in the context of post-1992 institutions, where diversity is ‘a lived-in reality, a sound and sense in and around campus rather than something which can be captured and displayed for use’ (Taylor, 2013a, p.246). In other words, when there is no single measure of visible diversity that can be captured in a brochure, or indeed when there is no normative student to measure diversity *against*, such diversities may be rendered altogether invisible.

Students accessing Higher Education make their choices about which universities to apply to in this broader context, and given the highly stratified HE system that often further disadvantages already disadvantaged groups, some students may well choose to not engage in HE at all (Taylor, 2008). Further though, in the context of these competing diversities, individual students from non-traditional backgrounds might not feel like they *belong* in high-status institutions that they perceive as elitist. As Penny Jane Burke (2017) argues, students often feel shame about not fitting in with institutional expectations, and this is commonly interpreted as individual lack of confidence or capability. However, Barbara Read et al. show that some non-traditional students actively choose to apply to post-1992 institutions with significant proportions of students ‘like them’ in order to “mitigate” their position as “other” (2003, p.265). In their analysis, such diversities allow ‘the other’ to move from periphery to centre stage, enabling students from a range of backgrounds to feel at least some sense of belonging in HE. Given the alienation that many non-traditional students (and staff) report experiencing particularly at elite institutions (see e.g. Bhopal, 2017; Binns, 2019; Read et al., 2003), it is perhaps not that surprising for individual students might *choose* to attend a post-1992 institution (rather than attending one out of necessity), although it still certainly registers as quite a radical proposition.

Sexual diversity features less prominently in such ‘diversity’ discourses, although when it does, arguably it tends to attach to good or *marketable* diversities. Taylor discusses the university rankings previously published by *Stonewall* (the UK’s largest LGBTQ+ charity), and argues that they put forward ‘a rather consumerist measure of diversity as done-by and produced-for the white-middle-class student, and residing in elite universities’ (2013a, pp.247-8). There is at least some evidence that prospective students’ views align with such measures: for instance Richard Taulke-Johnson (2010) finds that the gay male students he

interviewed had actively sought to migrate to high-ranking universities in environments they perceived as liberal and open-minded, particularly in cities. Further though, they also explicitly contrasted such open-mindedness with their ‘heterosexist and homophobic home communities’ (2010, p.255), ‘pervaded by working-class conceptualisations of (non)acceptable gender roles and norms of masculine behaviour’ (2010, p.254). In other words, Taulke-Johnson’s interviewees frame working-class status and LGBTQ+ sexuality as *oppositional* identities or subject positions, suggesting even that they belong to different institutional environments.

This reflects a common political separation between (material) class politics and (cultural) identity politics, whereby the two are imagined to be not just fundamentally different kinds of political claims, but also in conflict with each other, whether over resources or political airtime (see e.g. Brim, 2020; Hemmings, 2011; Lehtonen, forthcoming). Further, LGBTQ+ sexualities tend to be firmly positioned as belonging purely to the cultural realm, or as Clare Hemmings argues, ‘culture sticks to sexuality’ (2011: 117). The positioning of class and sexuality as oppositional, or even conflictual, identities, subject positions and political claims has a number of important effects in the HE context. First, it means that working-class LGBTQ+ students are entirely excluded from consideration, as Matt Brim (2020) similarly argues in the US context. When the separation between class and sexuality is further mapped onto the institutional division between old and new universities, the implication is that class inequalities only matter in the context of new universities, such that both the lived realities of working-class students and classed knowledges are easily excluded from old universities. Similarly, queer concerns and critical theoretical approaches can easily come to be associated with old universities, and viewed as unrelated to the material realities of class.

Of course the everyday realities of institutions at both ends of the spectrum are more complex than what my discussion here suggests – plenty of LGBTQ+ students and staff work and study at new institutions, and similarly working-class students and staff exist at old institutions (although perhaps not in very large numbers). But we also know from the insights of queer approaches that exceptions to the norm rarely challenge the norm, and may in fact strengthen it. In the HE context, the positioning of the white middle-class student as normative cannot be meaningfully called into question by the presence of small numbers of non-traditional students in higher status institutions. As above, and as Sullivan (2003) and Luhmann (1998) also both suggest, we might instead focus on highlighting the *inherent instability* of such binary divisions. For instance Davey Shlasko’s queer pedagogy urges ‘us to do identity excessively, to make visible in the classroom multiple, fluid identities’, striving ‘to confuse, rather than define identity’ (2005, p.131). Although Shlasko’s focus is on challenging binary understandings of identity in the *classroom*, perhaps the binary divisions that structure *institutional* hierarchies in HE could be similarly queerly confused. This might involve, for instance, making more visible the multiple, fluid identities of staff and students at institutions on both sides of the binary – but perhaps particularly at older institutions where the norm of the ideal student remains strong.



## Queering employability

Historically another commonly used indicator of a quality education or institution has been graduate employability outcomes. Graduates from old universities, indeed, do better in the labour market than those from new universities (see e.g. Morley, 2001; Wilton, 2011), but is that because they have received a higher quality education, and are therefore favoured by employers? Perhaps not: for instance Louise Morley suggests that ‘it is not the title or content of the degree or the skills training programme but the institution in which it was obtained that carries cachet’ (2001, p.136). In other words, graduates from old institutions tend to achieve better labour market outcomes regardless of many other factors, suggesting that the association of old universities with quality is also reflected in the views of employers. The higher status of old universities also means that there has been very little need for them to focus on developing their students’ employability skills, despite governmental imperatives to do so – or in David Stoten’s words, for pre-1992 institutions, ‘employability is largely implied through attendance at a prestigious university’ (2018, p.15). Conversely, for post-1992 institutions the employability agenda is not just commonly part of their history, but also something many of them have deliberately chosen to focus on in an effort to mitigate for these differences in status and prestige, aiming explicitly to prepare students for the labour market (Stoten, 2018).

Thus, the historical origin of many of the post-1992 institutions as institutions of vocational learning lives on in their reputation as more vocational and ‘less academic’ today, despite a stated aim of the 1992 Act being to end the two-tier HE system. Similarly, politicians have continued to refer to such distinctions: in a speech delivered in February 2021 former UK Education Secretary Gavin Williamson stated that he wanted ‘to end the dominance of the three-year bachelor’s degree in higher education’, suggesting that instead of ‘dead-end courses that give [students] nothing but a mountain of debt’, ‘better ways of studying’ might be found in apprenticeships, diplomas and other more practically oriented and technical courses that ‘our society needs’ (2021). But given that prestige alone is a key factor behind graduates from certain institutions struggling in the labour market, are the courses themselves to blame? Indeed, as many others have done, we might take a step back and also consider issues of *demand*, rather than just *supply*, in the labour market: for instance Stoten points out that employability discourse ‘represents a subtle form of recognition by the State that full employment is no longer attainable in the post-industrial age’ (2018, p.15). In this way, employability discourses individualise the causes of (and potential remedies to) structural disadvantages not just in the labour market, but also in the HE system itself. Individual graduates are blamed for not embodying the correct employability skills and values, and individual institutions for not adequately preparing their students for the labour market – while the labour market itself, as well as employers within it, remains static and unchangeable.

To approach the issue from a slightly different angle, given the significant inequalities that exist in the labour market more broadly, for instance in the form of gender and racial pay

gaps, is it that surprising that students who are from more disadvantaged backgrounds to start with are less successful (in monetary terms) in their later careers as well? Morley for instance argues that elite universities ‘are already selecting the most “employable” sections of the community and so employability indicators, in the form of graduate employment figures, are misleading’ (2001, p.133). For example Nick Wilton’s (2011) study of business and management graduates found that minority ethnic graduates had worse employment outcomes even though they were more likely to otherwise have the characteristics associated with better outcomes, such as having attended an old university and being male. We might also note that given the higher likelihood of both mature students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students at post-1992 institutions, such students are also more likely to have at times considerable workplace experience both prior to and during their university studies (Morley, 2001). This further underlines the paradoxical (as well as somewhat patronising) nature of the proposition that it is *these* students who are *more* in need to employability training and initiatives than the relatively advantaged students at older institutions.

Further though, the pre/post-1992 separation can also be understood to reflect different understandings of the broader societal purpose of HE – as well as tensions between these understandings. Old research-intensive universities tend to be associated with more traditional aims of HE, such as the advancement of knowledge and the development of self and society, and new teaching-led universities with more vocational training or applied education. In other words, we might think about the pre/post-1992 binary in terms of (highly unequal) *divisions of labour* between students and staff in different types of HE institutions. In this way, the division also carries resonances of the separation Meg Wesling (2011) makes (via Marx and Arendt) between alienating labour and self-actualising work. *Labour* is compulsory, repetitive and alienating for the labourer, whereas *work* ‘produces something that carries within it the mark of its relation to the worker’ (Wesling, 2011, p.110). Although the everyday realities of both old and new HE institutions are of course more complex, the *division of labour* between different types of institutions at least somewhat aligns with Westing’s discussion. The labour that takes place at older, higher status institutions might in its idealised form be seen to resemble self-actualising work, as students (and staff) in them are encouraged to engage in intellectual pursuits largely unencumbered by material constraints, as well as develop careers that give them a sense of purpose. At the same time there is at least growing pressure for newer, lower status institutions to prepare students for a future of alienating labour, or in other words to *produce* workers – thus aligning with a marketised view of HE.

The brunt of recent cuts in the UK HE sector has been borne by lower status institutions, and particularly arts and humanities departments, courses and staff in them – with more drastic cuts expected in the future (Staton, 2021). If anything then, there seems to be movement towards *further* differentiation in UK HE, with older universities continuing with broad-based course offerings that include arts and humanities, while many newer universities refocus only or primarily on vocational education. This may have the effect of moving queer and other critical theoretical knowledges out of new universities, since as Brim (2020) and

many others have pointed out, queer knowledges tend to sit firmly on the side of ‘self-actualising’ or materially unencumbered intellectual pursuits. Indeed, queer preoccupations are frequently associated with ‘play, masquerade, [and] carnival’ (Hemmings, 2011, p.91), and therefore ‘framed as frivolous’ (p.119). Brim goes on to challenge this association of queer knowledges with the intellectual labour of high-status institutions by proposing a kind of queer approach to employability. He insists that HE teachers acknowledge the realities of students’ working lives, urging us to consider that students ‘seek employment, that they feel called to queer intellectual labor, that they are paid and unpaid workers already, that a life of the mind and queer work lives are only artificially separated’ (2020, p.105). By connecting queer theoretical ideas to histories of labour, exploring worker rights and discrimination laws, and so on, a queer approach to employability might, then, offer ways to challenge the demand that students at new universities are trained as compliant workers first and foremost – or as Brim asks, ‘can the work of Queer Studies be, in part, to prepare students to cause queer trouble at work?’ (2020, p.109).

However, we also know from the insights of queer and feminist research that unequal divisions of labour cannot be challenged just by providing *some* access to more valued forms of labour to limited numbers of those currently charged with undertaking less valued forms of labour. For instance women’s increasing entry to paid labour markets has not significantly challenged the overall gendered division of labour, and perhaps more importantly, unpaid caring and household labour has persistently remained of lower value. Similarly here, the division of labour between high and low status institutions cannot be tackled just by providing limited access to high-status institutions for so-called non-traditional students, for instance through widening participation or access schemes, as the previous section also argued. Rather, it is the overall division of labour, and in particular the persistent devaluing of the labour undertaken by students at newer institutions (both now as students and in the future as workers), that needs to be challenged by critical pedagogical scholars. This is a task that HE workers at higher status institutions are particularly well positioned to take on, and indeed, I wonder whether Brim’s queer employability training might also be beneficial here. Stoten (2018) and Morley (2001) suggest that in considering student employability we also direct our attention to the demand side, at the employers who should also be educated on structural inequalities (and their responsibilities in mitigating them). Similarly, given that older institutions educate disproportionate numbers of the managers and business owners of the future, I suggest that these institutions would also benefit from the kind of queer employability training proposed by Brim that takes seriously both the critical, queer ways in which we can approach labour outside the university, and the material conditions of our (queer and other) intellectual labour.

### **Conclusion: refusing the binary?**

The binary division between old and new, prestigious and non-prestigious, universities in the UK is certainly not on the wane, and if anything the current trend seems to be (back) towards further differentiation – with Peter Scott even noting that ‘there appears to be widespread,

and growing, regret in political and academic establishments that the divisive binary system was ever abolished' (2012) in the 1992 Act. In this chapter I have examined this division by exploring the various indicators commonly used to determine the status of an HE institution, and argued that most of them boil down simply to age and status, despite how strongly the pre/post-1992 dividing line continues to be associated with *quality* in both public and academic imaginaries. I have also discussed a few key ways in which we might use the insights of queer approaches to challenge this division. First, I highlighted the importance of acknowledging the inherent instability of line between different institutional categories, and the constant effort required to maintain it. Second, I suggested that the institutional diversity discourses that currently tend to mostly work in the service of entrenching pre-existing normativities and hierarchies could be disrupted by making more visible multiple staff and student identities across institutional divisions, and by complicating our understanding of the ideal subject of HE. Finally, I argued that the divisions of labour between old and new institutions could be challenged by approaching employability training queerly at both kinds of institutions.

The complexities of challenging such entrenched binary concepts have hopefully also come across in the chapter's discussion. Often the remedies that are proposed to challenge the stratified HE system in the UK (and elsewhere), even by many critics of that system, only serve ultimately to bolster its hierarchical and elitist nature. Initiatives such as Widening Participation or scholarship programmes that enable a few more marginalised or non-traditional students to attend old universities, nonetheless leave untouched (or may even strengthen) the overall system of selectiveness, which I have argued above is embedded in elitist, particularly class and racial, hierarchies. Similarly, while many individual students from non-traditional backgrounds choose new universities deliberately to increase their sense of belonging in HE, structurally this might also serve to entrench the system's stratification. While both approaches offer valuable avenues to success, belonging and well-being for individual students, the resulting broader, systemic issues are well-rehearsed in queer approaches aiming to disrupt binary categories (see e.g. Luhmann, 1998; Sullivan, 2003).

Brim asks pointedly in the US context, 'why isn't the call among progressives, including queer progressive intellectuals, for equal public education for all?' (2020, p.197). Similarly in the UK context, I would suggest that an insistence on challenging the status and value differentials between institutions should be at the forefront of any critical approaches to HE, whether institutional or pedagogical. Without such an insistence, we accept a Higher Education system that perpetuates hierarchies and inequalities, with far-reaching consequences for not just students' future working lives, but also their sense of belonging and self worth. Academics' investments in critical, inclusive or liberatory pedagogies do not sit so comfortably with a tacit acceptance of a system that only allows students from privileged backgrounds to access such pedagogies – or even worse, implicitly assumes it is only the privileged students who have the intellectual ability to take advantage of such pedagogies. Indeed, I argue further that such an insistence should be led by critical (queer studies and other) colleagues from prestigious universities, who are particularly well placed to challenge

these institutional hierarchies by engaging in a practice of queer sharing across the pre/post-1992 division. For example for Luhmann (1998), queer refuses stable identities and produces new identifications beyond binary understandings, and queer studies scholars would do well to extend this same refusal to *institutional* divisions, and seek to produce new identifications beyond them.

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