

MAKING EQUAL

Levelling Up is widely recognized failed as policy in the UK. ‘Making Equal: New Visions for Opportunity and Growth’ considers what lessons can be learnt and what might be done differently with cogent views from across the political spectrum. A century ago something similar happening in the UK, the 1920s were a time of failure, but by the 1930s the idea that Special Areas needed an Act of Parliament to help them was accepted. In these pages, we may be seeing history and consensus repeat.

—*Danny Dorling, University of Oxford*

This is a hugely impressive book – hooked onto the 125th anniversary of Ruskin College but whose writ encompasses Dickens’ ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* – past, present, and future. Its editors, Graeme Atherton and Peter John, have attracted a galaxy of impressive contributors – academics, politicians, social scientists, journalists, researchers – and let them fly.

The mounds of statistics are the backdrop to an urgency to that – and Graeme Atherton’s introduction has all the figures you might want, but along rising with eloquent anger – real people, real places, real heartbreaks, but also the determination to put things right.

As I am a historian, a tutor for The Open University for 20 years, and a further 22 years as a Blackpool MP (where Graeme grew up) I assure you this book is the genuine article. The five sections – Creating Opportunity from Birth, Higher Education – The Driver of Growth and Opportunity, Making Places Matter, Growth, the Economy and the Role of Business, Labour and Inequality – Past, Present, and Future – bring out in David Blunkett, Hilary Armstrong, John Bird and Rupa Huq some very personal narratives when the stats hit home.

What happened then matters now – echoes of Victorian philanthropists (Titus Salt and Robert Owen ...) rub shoulders with Place matters – the epiphanies of Sure Start but also 12 years’ gaps of life expectancy within (let alone) cities and towns.

This could not be more timely – as a Labour government grapples with devolution, hard choices, and the growing divide between public and private, in the post-Covid world in education. This book

should be on the virtual shelves of those who have the power to get some of this right.

—*Gordon Marsden*, Honorary Doctor of The Open University,
former Shadow Minister for Higher and Further Education
and Skills, Co-Founder of Right to Learn

As the government's honeymoon has soured into widespread voter disillusion, it has offered us new 'missions', 'targets' and 'milestones'. What remains missing is a clear moral anchor, rooted in the Labour Party's history. This book, by contributors with deep practical experience of struggles against social injustice, helps to fill that lamentable void. It needs to be read by those with the power to reset public policy.

—*Paul Collier*, The Blavatnik School of Government,
Oxford University

Ruskin College with its history of opening its doors to those who have been historically marginalised and offering them socially just pathways to empowerment and consciousness raising is reflected in this outstanding, timely, visionary and politically engaged collection.

The contributors bring a dynamic, multifaceted, radical and engaging lens for exploring, challenging and repositioning what it means to resist and remove the tough and often deep layers of inequality in society and education.

They offer critical in and out roads for humane and sustainable action and change, where people and their community are at the heart of levelling up; no matter what the circumstances of birth, dignity, hope and fairness are offered a space to flourish.

I will be dipping into this robust collection again and again. I highly recommend it for academics, educationalists, policymakers, students and anyone who cares about, challenging inequality and exploring real solutions for a shift towards a more just and joyous society.

—*Vicky Duckworth*, Professor of Further Education,
Edge Hill University

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New Visions for
Opportunity and Growth

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

Peter John

Professor Peter John CBE, Vice-chancellor of the University of West London and Principal of Ruskin College Oxford

The chapters in this book are part of a series of colloquiums held at Ruskin College during the past year to celebrate its 125th anniversary. Established in 1899, the College's roots were firmly embedded in the workers' education movement; one that would be of use and benefit to those who had been cut off from the standard educational routes. As an opportunity and access institution (to use the modern parlance), it catered for those with an intellectual thirst and a desirous aspiration. It was also a lever for those who wished to gain entry to higher education for personal, social, and economic reasons. In addition, from its inception it had, and continues to have, close ties with the Trade Union movement. And as I am apt to say, it is the institution that Jude Fawley (he of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*) would have studied at.

Throughout the decades Ruskin kept a strong focus on challenging inequality in all its forms; a concept that varies according to time and place as well as structure and magnitude. But as Thomas Piketty reminds us, at its core it is always 'ideological and political'. At Ruskin, this took centre stage as it challenged orthodoxies and came up with new and alternative solutions to this common problem; one that enabled its students and others to imagine new worlds and different types of society. As the book title indicates, many paths are possible when you are exploring new 'visions for opportunity and growth'.

Despite contending groups, political positions, and competing discourses, Ruskin College kept its principles unclouded and was always concerned to limit the deracination of its students. From the setting up of the Plebs League in 1908 to the present day, its staff and learners continue to stick to its values which remain driven by

critique, possibility, and alternative progressive ideas which shape conceptions of social justice. And readers of this excellent volume will find these thoughts somewhere on every page. So, I will leave the last word to a legendary Ruskin tutor, Raphael Samuel, when writing about the death of Raymond Williams, the great cultural historian and critic, he said that we need a ‘recovery of a lost wholeness ... a matter of age-old solidarities reasserting themselves, in conditions of difficulty and complexity’.

INTRODUCTION: INEQUALITY AND BREAKING WITH THE NORM

Graeme Atherton

Ruskin College and Ruskin Institute for Social Equity, UK

Recent years, especially after Brexit, have seen a resurgence in the debate around what constitutes Britain and British identity as those on the right have sought to establish new dividing lines in order to justify what they do. Language, culture, and history are all seen as part of what makes Britain as a country different from others. However, there is something else: what was always a characteristic of Britain since the 19th century ([Szreter, 2021](#)) has now come to define the country again and that is inequality. The facts regarding inequality in the UK are depressingly familiar. In the UK, after 2021, the bottom 50% of the population owned less than 5% of wealth, the top 10% owned 57%, and the top 1% owned 23% ([Chancel et al., 2022](#)). Even under the last Labour government, income inequality did not decline. As a result, the UK is one of the most unequal countries in the OECD and Europe, and the second most unequal in the G7 ([Francis-Devine, 2024](#)). Inequality is costing the UK £106.2bn more a year compared with the average developed country in the OECD ([The Equality Trust, 2023](#)).

Inequality pervades everyday life in the UK. We are presented continually with images of relative affluence through

the overwhelming power of television and social media. Food, for example, has gone from a functionary part of British life in the 1980s to the epitome of your lifestyle choice. But while, on the one hand, we spend £100bn a year on eating out in the UK ([Restaurant, 2024](#)), 5.1 million low-income households are cutting down on the size of meals or skipping them and 4 million are going hungry. Food also provides the best example of the normalisation of poverty in 21st century Britain. The last 10 years have seen an exponential rise in food banks with the number of parcels distributed by food banks growing from 0 in 2006–2007 to over 3.1 million in 2023–2024 ([Trussell Trust, 2024](#)). In early 2025 the Labour Party government announced free breakfast clubs in all schools. A welcome policy but also a shocking admission that millions of parents can't afford to feed their children in the morning and schools now should do it for them.

Efforts to reduce inequality have at best plateaued in recent years, with much of what government has done only exacerbating it. Those out-of-work households receiving benefits have lost on average £2,200 a year since 2010 ([Sheffield, 2024](#)). Since 2011–2012, there has been little growth in incomes in the bottom half of the income distribution, particularly for those in the bottom 10% ([Francis-Devine, 2024](#)).

Through the 2010s child poverty targets and the Equality Act's socio-economic goals were also scrapped, and social mobility strategies were likewise shelved with the Social Mobility Commission politicised and marginalised. This gradual retreat since the late 2000s from explicit attempts to address inequality is what has laid the ground for the changes in the benefit system which have pushed more people into poverty.

This normalisation of inequality and poverty in the UK is not the consequence of the Conservative and Conservative-led governments from 2010 to 2024 alone. Inequality has a long history in the UK. In 1670, around 82.7% of wealth was in the hands of the top 10% ([Lindert, 1986](#)). Little over 100 years ago in the first decade of the 20th century, Thomas [Piketty \(2020\)](#) found that the wealth of the top 10% of property holders peaked at a high of 94% while the bottom 50% held less than 1%. Things did start to improve slowly although not in a meaningful sense until

after the Second World War. This is the period when so many of the ‘costume dramas’, which British people appear to be obsessed with, are set. *Downton Abbey*, for example, once watched by nearly 10 million people every week, was first launched in 2012. Our fascination with historical dramas, which show life from the perspective of the wealthy and portray inequality as the norm, reinforces the view that in Britain then and now, this is how life was and is.

However, it must be noted that inequality has undergone significant change since the actual days of *Downton Abbey*. For example, over 40% of people from the Bangladeshi ethnic group are now in the bottom fifth of the income distribution – more than double the percentage from white backgrounds ([Department for Work & Pensions, 2024](#)). The education system, the preserve of the elite in the early 20th century, still acts to maintain the status quo of inequality as much as it does to enable progress away from it. For example, the gap between those progressing to higher education who are in receipt of free school meals (FSM) and those who are not has got wider since 2014 ([Department for Education, 2023](#)). Geographical inequality, as prevalent as it was in the days of *Downton Abbey*, has also taken on new and more nuanced dimensions. Where higher education participation is concerned, for instance, in 2023 fewer than 15% of learners from FSM backgrounds progress to higher education in Swindon while nearly 70% do in Westminster. And as has been well documented, where you live dictates how long you live. From 2020 to 2022, male life expectancy was highest in Hart at 83.7 years and lowest in Blackpool at 73.4 years ([Office for National Statistics, 2024](#)).

That Blackpool offers the shortest expected life for men in the UK is not a surprise. It appears near the top of a raft of indicators of poverty. But how this place has come to be perceived encapsulates how we have come to accept inequality and poverty in new ways. A seaside town that once was the watchword for fun and entertainment, Blackpool is now more associated with deprivation and depression. Whenever the London-based media wished to cover anything associated with the Conservative government’s ‘leveling up’ and regional inequality agenda, they would send a reporter to Blackpool to stand in the wind in an empty shopping centre near

the seafront. The facts nor the reality of Blackpool do not lie. It bears the brunt of the post-industrial, socio-economic changes that have left working class communities so impoverished. Despite this being a 'poverty postcard' image of the town, there are also areas of Blackpool where good housing and parts of the population are in stable employment. Nevertheless, Blackpool, like many towns in the north, Wales, Scotland and elsewhere, accepts inequality as part of its way of life as we have come to accept the decline of places like Blackpool as all too typical.

WHY MAKING EQUAL?

The purpose of focussing above on the normalisation of inequality in the UK was to illustrate that inequality and the poverty that comes with it are deeply entrenched not just structurally but culturally in the UK. Reducing inequality will require more than a focus on policy frameworks, new regional initiatives, and quick fixes, and it will also take more time than one term of office of any government. There is some hope, however. Research by the [Fairness Foundation \(2024\)](#) suggested that 75% of people are worried about wealth and income inequalities. However, turning concern into action will be a huge task though especially when so many of the population have seen their relative living standards decline over the last decade. It is estimated by the Resolution Foundation that had wages continued to grow as they were before the financial crash of 2008, the average worker would be £11,000 more per year better off than they are now ([BBC Panorama, 2023](#)).

This book reflects the need for a multi-faceted, radical, long-term approach to reducing inequality. By bringing together a diverse range of voices from politics, academia, civil society, and the private sector, the aim is to contribute practical ideas that can confront the roots of inequality in the UK. Many of the aspects of inequality in the UK are addressed, and not surprisingly given Ruskin College's history, educational inequality is included. Place is also a major focus, reflecting in part the work of the Centre for

Inequality and Levelling Up based at the University of West London from 2021 to 2024 now superseded by the Ruskin Institute for Social Equity. Moreover, these chapters also capture the increasing connectivity of us all and how this can play a salient role in addressing the causes and consequences of inequality on a national and individual scale. And we must be mindful of the fact that this is a problem that goes beyond governments and the public sector. The role of business, the voluntary sector, various community groups, and others will be vital if the structural, cultural, ethnic, and regional dimensions of inequality are to be addressed.

The book is not exhaustive. It was not conceived as an attempt to map out a coherent agenda for reducing inequality. Health, for example, is not covered, and schools and the nations of the UK also have specific issues that other contributions to reducing inequality should address. Building such an agenda might suggest that we need a Mark 2 version of the UK government's levelling up policy. Levelling up was designed to be a focussed approach to reducing inequality via the pursuit of 12 missions related to education, health, crime, wellbeing, etc. It was imperilled by the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the inflation that followed but also by a lack of government commitment towards its fundamental aims. It also became a slogan, and it was never really created to address the systemic nature of inequality which is now so deeply engrained in the British economy and society. It will therefore take more than warm words and political catch phrases to overcome what Danny Dorling calls the 'Shattered Nation'.

The book is divided into five different sections. The rest of this chapter will outline the contributions in each section.

CREATING OPPORTUNITY FROM BIRTH

The book begins, naturally given Ruskin's history, with a section on education and where inequality begins. Philip Collins is an experienced journalist as well as an ex official in the Labour governments of the 1990s and 2000s. His chapter to open the book looks at the evidence regarding the importance of early years' education.

Reflecting on this evidence and the success of the Sure Start initiative delivered by the last Labour government, Collins argues that:

government that mixed a concern for justice with a respect for the evidence would, without question, begin the process of shifting its spending from remedial work in the teenage years to the early years of life, when it still has a chance of making a difference.

Lord David Blunkett was Secretary of State for Education for four years between 1997 and 2001 and was the Minister when the first Sure Start programmes were launched in 1999. Drawing on his years of experience in the politics of education, Lord Blunkett argues passionately for lifelong learning as well as a return for Sure Start, the introduction of Individual Learning Accounts, and citizenship education. He emphasises in his chapter, the pivotal role that education plays across all aspects of economy and society.

While education may play a pivotal role how it can best do this is tackled by following chapter from James Robson. He laments the instability in post-16 education policy in England over the last decade, the product of what he describes as a *carousel of Secretaries of State for Education and Junior Minister*. Robson outlines three foundational principles which need to be adhered to in order for post-16 education and training to work more effectively. These principles are: adopting a systems-based approach, embracing multiple purposes for education and training, and reconceptualising the role of employers. Robson argues that the policy changes in the direction of a smarter and more co-ordinated post-16 system in England depend on a change in political philosophy and points to how things are changing in Scotland and Wales as evidence of what is possible in this area.

This idea of a change in philosophy is picked up by Professor Jonathan Michie, President of Kellogg College, Oxford, in his chapter on lifelong learning. Michie points to the role that adult education and lifelong learning have and can play in enabling us to face major societal challenges. He describes how after the First World War, the Ministry of Reconstruction set up by Prime Minister Lloyd George 'created a Committee on Adult Education whose final report in 1919 argued that central to such reconstruction

would be adult education, provided to all citizens, as a “permanent national necessity”. Michie goes on to argue that adult learning is as crucial now as it was over 100 years ago but policymakers need to understand that its benefits extend beyond not just the economy but to the society as well.

The final contribution in this section comes from the next member of the House of Lords to contribute to the book. Lord John Bird was the founder of the *Big Issue* magazine. A serial social entrepreneur he has overseen the growth of the *Big Issue* into a leading social enterprise. Reflecting on his own experiences and those who the *Big Issue* serves, Lord Bird argues that creating opportunity for all can only be achieved if we focus specifically on preventing poverty rather than spending billions on managing its consequences. Such focus requires a new Ministry of Poverty Prevention.

HIGHER EDUCATION – THE DRIVER OF GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY

The last decade has seen a gradual ebbing away of support for the idea that higher education can drive opportunity from government. This ebbing away gathered pace from 2020 to 2024. In 2020, the then Minister for Higher Education stated that work to widen access to higher education being undertaken since the early 2000s was nothing more than an attempt to dupe working class young people. The early days of Labour government since their election in July 2024 have seen a different tone with the minister with responsibility for higher education stating that widening access will be her ‘number one priority’. However, higher education still faces major challenges in terms of re-establishing itself as one of the major routes for reducing inequality available.

Steve Coulter’s chapter meets this challenge head on arguing powerfully that the higher education expansion of recent decades has been a success and that we need to extend participation further over coming decades to enable higher economic growth. But in order to drive this expansion, Coulter argues that a more diverse, flexible system is required but also one that is more co-ordinated as James Robson also supports. For example, Coulter argues that

‘every town or city with a population over 80,000 people should have its own university’. Recognising the interaction between higher education, inequality, economy, and place this chapter connects both with that of Mitchell et al. to come and the following section of the book devoted to place.

Digging further into how higher education can be a key player in opportunity and growth, Hilary Leever’s chapter looks at the unintended consequences that can ensue from adhering to a purely demand-driven higher education system. Leever, the Chief Executive Officer of EngineeringUK, uses her chapter to describe how engineering stands as the test case of the problems where a demand-led system is failing to meet the needs of the economy. She describes a situation where only 6.1% of undergraduate entrants in the UK were studying engineering and technology in 2023 although engineering accounts for a quarter of job adverts in the UK, 40% of which ask for degrees.

Leever is pointing to the importance of the outcomes of the higher education system. Professor Peter John, Vice Chancellor of the University of West London and the Principal of Ruskin College, takes this idea of equality of outcome as the theme for his chapter. Utilising the concept of opportunity hoarding, he meticulously unpicks the arguments used to justify educational inequality in the UK today, and how those who can navigate the system relentlessly draw from this river of strength to maintain their power and pre-eminence. Again, the limitations of change in one part of society if inequality is to be truly tackled are exposed. Education can only go so far when the inequalities that engulf it remain unchanged.

The last chapter in this section acts as an important bridge from the previous one, and to the next section looking at place. This chapter by Professor Kathryn Mitchell, Vice Chancellor of the University of Derby and colleagues describes how a university can play an active role in addressing place-based inequality. Through a range of initiatives supporting skills development at pre-degree level, working with local businesses and leading on social mobility-related activities through the region, the chapter provides an insight into what can be done at local level by collaborative, cross-sector partnership working.