SRHE panel discussion abstract

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**The prestige claims of UK universities: rhetoric and reality**

Against a backdrop of mass participation in higher education, the prestige claims of UK universities have never been more overt, or more consequential. The Russell Group claims that its member institutions are the ‘jewels in the crown’ of the UK university system, and the badge of ‘world-class university’ is valorized as though it were the highest possible honour. In this panel discussion I argue that most Russell Group universities are really no different to most other ‘Old’ (pre-1992) universities; they simply benefit from the reflected glory of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge whose prestige, in turn, stems ultimately from being old, rich, and a long-standing haunt of the elite. I also argue that the ‘world-class university’ as currently conceived is antithetical to widening participation; an overriding concern to select only the ‘brightest and best’ students as measured by prior academic achievement, and the substitution of excellence in research for excellence in teaching and learning, serves to exclude the vast majority of prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Key sources:

Boliver, V., Powell, M. & Moreira, T. (2018). [Organisational Identity as a Barrier to Widening Access in Scottish Universities](https://www.dur.ac.uk/sociology/staff/profile/?mode=pdetail&id=9700&sid=9700&pdetail=117791). *Social Sciences* 7(9): 151.

Boliver, V. (2015). [Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK?](https://www.dur.ac.uk/sociology/staff/profile/?mode=pdetail&id=9700&sid=9700&pdetail=95910). *Oxford Review of Education* 41(5): 608-627.