

Conferment of Honorary Doctorate – Acceptance Speech by NESLYN WATSON-DRUÉE, MBE, FRCN, DUniv, FCGI

"Chancellor, Lord Mayor, Vice-Chancellor, Fellow Graduates Ladies and Gentlemen

I join you in the celebration of Achievement by extending my congratulations to the achievements of all Graduates here to day.

I feel the depth of honour to be conferred an Honorary Doctor of the University, Bradford University.

My Honorary Doctorate is conferred in recognition for eminence in leadership development, providing development which promotes equality of opportunity.

My mission is to widen the pool of high-quality people from minority ethnic communities in the public, commercial and voluntary sectors. To this endeavour, my mission is in alignment with Bradford University's commitment to 'Confronting inequality, celebrating diversity.'

In our "credential society," as Randall Collins¹ famously described it (1979), education ranks first among the prerequisites for meaningful self-actualization in society.

To quote Horace Mann, 1849² "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men-- the balance-wheel of the social machinery".

Gregory J. Fritzberg³ argues, given the historic correlation between educational attainment and occupational opportunities, equal educational opportunity is the logical and operational proxy for the more general ideal of equal occupational opportunity.

The first mention of 'equal opportunity' in an international treaty dealing with education was in the Preamble of UNESCO's Constitution ('the States Parties to this Constitution, believing in full and equal opportunities for education for all ...')⁴.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵ proclaims something analogous (but with slightly different meaning), namely that 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit'.

The Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen⁶ purports the general concept of equal opportunity. "Every individual of a society should have an equal opportunity to do things, and lead the life, he or she has reason to value."

Both the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960)⁷ and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)⁸ refer to the general principle of 'equal opportunity'. In fact, the Convention of 1960 was designed in part to promote this principle of 'equality of opportunity and treatment in the matter of education' and specifically included article 4 to that effect.

The Convention on Technical and Vocational Education (1989)⁹ also recognizes the "right of equal access to technical and vocational education".

In an attempt to find equality of opportunity in a diverse society we have to think of both the process of opportunity as well as the capability aspect of opportunities.

The process of opportunity encompasses freedom from barriers to taking socio-political actions. It focuses on the ability of the individual to become involved in decision-making and removal of constraints on individual choice for example on speech, association or religion.¹⁰

The capability aspect of opportunities takes cognisance of the context and capacity. Freedom to take action is meaningless for people who, given their talents, backgrounds or disadvantages, are unable to take the action¹¹. To that end, education is central to providing equality of opportunity and one in which Bradford University excels as one of the top 10 Universities in the Country, in the 2005 Times University Guide. Among Bradford's Core Values are:

- ? Raising aspirations through activities with schools and colleges.
- ? Widening participation, achievement and social inclusion.
- ? Working with diverse communities.

Education in communities, inclusive of: schools, colleges and at universities play an essential role in expanding opportunities for individuals by enhancing capabilities.

This leads me to the "why" question. Why should we care about authenticating our society's claim to equality of educational opportunity?

Creating substantively equal life chances for all citizens is in alignment with UK's liberal values.

Obviously, the life chances of any particular person cannot be predicted with certainty, but we can attend to the current success rates of those who share similar social background characteristics-- attributes such as racial identity, socioeconomic status, or family composition-- and from these aggregate figures draw inferences as to whether individuals, groups and communities merit special attention¹².

I do not propose an obsession with "comparisons between social groups defined by the racial characteristics and socio-economic status. Attention to such data is simply a measure of our progress toward what is a worthy goal: an authentically equitable educational experience for all persons born into our society from varying stations.

If some are to outperform others, it should be due to superior talent and effort, rather than cumulative social and cultural advantages¹³.

When we approach equal educational opportunity in this way, it is clear that Universities have a place in providing promoting equality of opportunity through education.

Chancellor, Pro-Chancellors, Vice-Chancellor, Graduands and Guests, I accept this Honorary Doctorate with humility, appreciation and pride.

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