The education divide is about disrespect: why it matters and what graduates should do about it

ESSAY

September 2021

SMF Social Market Foundation

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KEY POINTS

1. **Disrespect causes disruption** – Decision-makers and people with influence urgently need to address the deficit in respect between graduates and those without a degree, recognising that the emphasis on high-level qualifications has been at the expense of other credentials necessary for any definition of success to be worthy of respect.
2. **Character builds bridges** – Character is the equaliser which extends across all ranks. It encourages common and simple standards of behaviour in the way that we apply our respective knowledge. In a complex world we look for something familiar to help us judge who and what to trust. Common standards allow us to hold each other to account, and the authority for doing so needs to be far more widespread.
3. **Intelligence achieves results** – If we are to gain the full advantage of a truly diverse workforce, we need more work settings where graduates and non-graduates are working closely together, treated as equals and – because of the way that they apply their respective knowledge and the character they show in the job – enjoy equal opportunity to progress. That means today's bosses (who are predominantly graduates) need to recognise and respect different forms of knowledge and intelligence.
4. **Mutual respect is how to achieve more** – The education divide is a proxy for respect. It's a mutual respect gap. Not directly for each of us as individuals, but for the common standards necessary for us each to fulfil our potential, and to live and work together successfully to achieve more.
    - ***Purpose* is the goal which unites us:** we all deserve to live a purposeful life and know that what we do contributes to something bigger than ourselves. Purpose motivates, generates self-pride, gives us a stake and a right to be heard and taken seriously.
    - ***Standards* are shared credentials:** we all have our own ambitions which require us to have different skills and qualifications, but the *way* that we seek to achieve them should look familiar – reflecting and respecting that we rely on each other to succeed.
    - ***Intelligence* comes in different forms:** knowledge is gained in various ways; intelligence is how we apply it and helps to shows that we understand. Gaining intelligence requires us to engage other people whose knowledge, perspective and insight might be different to our own.

DISRESPECT CAUSES DISRUPTION

A lot of academic research shows how education, not class, has become a central dividing line in politics across the western world.[2] Here in the UK, the division between those with and without a degree was demonstrated vividly in all the major electoral and democratic events of the past five years. In the EU referendum, only a quarter of people with a postgraduate degree voted to leave, whereas over two-thirds of those with no qualifications did so.[3] Education remained an important dividing line in the 2019 General Election, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats doing much better amongst those with a degree, and the Conservatives outperforming Labour by more than two to one amongst those whose highest qualifications do not exceed GSCE.[4] Although this divide is a proxy in some respects – and I'll come back to how and why – it is not (as some like to argue) simply a generational divide by another name; it has been demonstrated that even among people of the same age, education divides.[5]

Whichever way we look at it, the education divide is big. It is vital for a healthy, happy society and our shared prosperity that we address the causes of this divide. But we won't succeed if we believe the problem is that half the population is insufficiently educated. This is not to say that we shouldn't work harder to provide a high-quality education for all children, or that we don't need better technical education, alongside ensuring that university is accessible to all who will benefit from it, regardless of where they come from. All of that is important and addressing inequality and inconsistency in standards of provision across the UK should be a priority. It's just that we are not seeing the bigger picture if we believe the answer to the education divide lies only in better training and more social mobility. In fact, from the perspective of people without degrees, the educational divide that they sit on one side of isn't about their qualifications at all. It's about a lack of respect for them by the people who want, need and sometimes arrogantly expect their support.

People in positions of power or influence across all sectors, and those who aspire to join them, believe they are doing or want what's best for our country and the people who live here. Yet many, including journalists and commentators, are struggling to understand why the gap between themselves and everyone else is growing. Many try to make sense of this distance by believing that the majority want simple solutions to complex problems they are not educated enough to understand. When faced with criticism or opposition, many in the political-media class never imagine it is they who haven't understood the problem. Instead, they persist in finding new ways to explain why what they want to do is right in the hope that eventually the 'less well-educated' will either accept their way of doing things – or just stop resisting and let them get on with it.

It always strikes me as odd that, even though it's the highly educated who are struggling to understand what's going on in politics and society, they want the 'less well-educated' to do all the heavy lifting. Why should non-graduates listen harder to people who claim to have all the answers but have yet to show they've understood the problem properly, and disrespect them when they try to help by explaining why?

Although Brexit is the most important and dramatic *symptom* of this breakdown in relations between the two groups, the infamous encounter between Gillian Duffy, the

Labour Party supporter, and the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in Rochdale during the 2010 General Election campaign remains the most powerful illustration of the *causes* of the rift.

There was a massive uproar when Mr Brown was caught calling Mrs Duffy a "bigoted woman" by a TV crew's lapel-microphone that he forgot to remove before driving away when they'd finished their conversation. But the most fascinating part of that event wasn't what Gordon Brown said behind her back, but what the shocked Mrs Duffy said when his comments were first relayed to her by journalists:

> *"I'm very upset. He is an educated person. Why has he come out with words like that?"*

When you watch the video again, Mrs Duffy is clearly shaken and baffled. She had taken the time and trouble to speak to the most powerful person in the country – whom she might also assume to be clever enough to understand her. But the Prime Minister did not understand. And in return for trying to help him understand a problem better so he was better equipped to fix it, he disrespected her.

The education divide is a proxy for disrespect

The stark education divide which we now see in all our democratic events is both a proxy for that disrespect, and a cause of it. Let me try and explain what I mean.

People who didn't attend university do not describe themselves as 'non-graduates' and are unlikely to see graduates as adversaries. Their level of education is *not* what defines them at all. They are quiet, decent people who get on with their lives and live all around us. They're certainly not mascots to be patronised nor are they victims to be pitied. Whilst they might not possess higher-level academic qualifications, they use their knowledge and experience wisely and their achievements and successes – however modest – are in large part because of their attitude and adherence to basic principles that we associate with character and being a good citizen. Amongst them, these principles, social norms or standards of behaviour are widely respected and evidence of them informs how people judge each other including when and whom to trust.

However, the same shared standards are either less visible when they examine the behaviour and activity of decision-makers and influencers or seem to have become less important to people who hold those positions. This causes scepticism amongst those from whom the decision-makers seek support and compliance. This scepticism is compounded when the decisions by people in powerful positions have led to failures affecting other people's lives and for which they are not held accountable. It gets worse still when we remain resistant to being held accountable to prevent the same happening again.

Inevitably, the more evidence of this, the more distrustful people have become. That's why the education divide is a proxy. I'll come back to this in more detail because it's not just important to understand, it's also how we can build bridges, and where we need to focus our energy if we are to address inequalities and remain forward-thinking. In this increasingly complex world, it's critical that people's motives – especially those

of decision-makers – are simple and clear. We judge motive through actions we recognise and share.

Educational attainment is also a contributing *cause* of this divide though, because those same influencers and decision-makers are now almost exclusively graduates. As we have increased accessibility to higher education, obtaining a degree, more than anything else, determines whether people are able to get on, to enter the better-paid, higher-status professions. It determines whether their views are taken seriously. This emphasis on *what* people know, not *how* they apply what knowledge they have – is coupled with a tendency among graduates not to appreciate knowledge which non-graduates gain through experience instead of books.

This is combined with a disregard among too many graduates for the common standards and social norms which people with fewer academic credentials especially depend on and which should bind all of us together. The result is that, whether intentionally or not, leaders and decision-makers are repelling the people we rely on and whose contribution is vital to our collective success. In leaders' lack of respect for people without degrees, we're not just shooting at them, we're shooting ourselves in the foot.

Before going any further, it's worth being clear the extent to which graduates now dominate positions of power and how that has changed.

Elitism and the expansion of higher education

According to the Social Mobility Commission's report, *Elitist Britain 2019,*[6] in 2017 the Cabinet was 100% university educated, as were all Whitehall Permanent Secretaries, and 88% of all MPs had degrees. The same report shows that 84% of all those defined as holding elite roles in the UK are educated to the level of bachelor's degree or above – amongst the news media that rises to 92%, and for leaders of the FTSE 350 it stands at 95%. Even 83% of police chiefs were university-educated, up 21 percentage points over the preceding 5 years.

The same report showed that amongst only the working-age group of the population who MPs represent, businesses employ, journalists seek to inform, and the police exist to protect, just 19% hold an undergraduate degree.

Of course, we want the people in positions of serious responsibility to be educated properly and to be well-informed. But there was a time when that didn't mean that they all obtained degrees. As recently as 2005, over a quarter of MPs were not graduates.[7] Back in 1979, only 59% of Labour MPs had degrees, compared to 68% of Conservatives. When Tony Blair became Prime Minster in 1997 still a third of Labour MPs were not university-educated. When Clement Attlee formed his Government in 1945, seven of his ministers had worked as miners.[8] These days there is no difference between the two main parties in this regard. Indeed in 2017 Labour pipped the Tories at 84% vs 83% for graduate MPs.[9]

There are many benefits to an expansion of higher education. But that growth has coincided – and perhaps helped to cause – a loosening of the mutual understanding that binds us together: the social glue has weakened. With more people from a wider range of schools and different social backgrounds going to university and rising to

positions of national responsibility, mutual incomprehension and disrespect between the two educational groups has grown.

We can fix this, but the solutions are less about education and more about attitude. Because the answer is not some kind of monoculture where we are all educated to think and *be* the same. That's not possible and nor is it desirable.

The way forward requires graduates and people in positions of authority to recognise that we have a blind spot. I say "we" because though I might not have a degree, I've certainly got more than just a foot in this camp. Our blind spot has caused and is perpetuating our biggest social divide. It gives me no pleasure to say this, but for as long as we fail to see and understand that the problem sits on our side of the educational divide, the situation is only going to get worse. This unwillingness to be accountable and take seriously people's expectations of us means we fail to maintain their confidence in our leadership and the decisions we make which affect their lives. Without people's trust, we can't rely on their essential contribution and support which is necessary for democracy, capitalism, and our important institutions to survive.

Recent surveys[10] illustrate the seriousness of this by showing the widening gap between graduates and non-graduates in their trust of government, institutions, business leaders and other professionals. Some pollsters argue that people's trust in government and politicians is a perennial issue and we shouldn't worry too much about it – but that seems unwisely complacent to me. If we've learned anything over the last five years it ought to be that when people feel disrespected, they are more than capable as voters of forcing change which powerful people don't like. And they are not going to stop finding ways to disrupt the status quo unless their important demands for us to change are heard and taken seriously.

Thankfully, recent democratic events are forcing politicians of all stripes to think again. Whilst it is Boris Johnson who coined the phrase "levelling up", no-one in Westminster could seriously disagree that we need to address economic and social inequalities within the UK. Turning around left-behind towns and equalising opportunity so people can fulfil their potential is promised by all sides. Post-pandemic, the pressure is on for tradesmen, people in low-skilled jobs and anyone doing essential work to be paid more and given more security. Recent labour shortages in key areas such as HGV drivers only demonstrate the cost of policymakers' prolonged neglect for such workers.

All of this is important and will make a difference. But massive infrastructure projects, the creation of new industries, and a redesign of economics so we pay people better are not easy solutions nor possible to deliver overnight. That's not an excuse – this kind of change is right, and we must accelerate the pace in getting on with it. But the division in our society is so big and serious we can't wait for important structural change to get underway. And on its own it is not enough anyway.

Decision-makers and people with influence also need urgently to address the deficit in respect which is felt by everyone else. Bridging this respect gap is vital if we are to keep embracing new technology, promoting equality and tackling climate change without fuelling a nasty culture war. The good news is that most of what we must and can do immediately costs nothing or very little. But it does mean that we – graduates and those of us in decision-making roles – must change how we go about our work.

In my professional career so far, the biggest thing I've been involved in which has given me most satisfaction is the way that we passed equal marriage legislation in the House of Lords. Our success was no accident – and we purposely took a different approach than in the Commons. We removed the politics, showed respect for people who were unsure about such a significant change, and emphasised the positive benefit to everyone of future-proofing the institution of marriage by making it accessible to all couples. We took seriously everyone who had a view and had a vote – because we were trying to strengthen and improve something which belonged to all of us. Not only did we enjoy larger majorities than expected and greater than those in the Commons – a majority of Conservative peers voted in favour on every division, and we even managed to convert some objectors and abstainers by the time of the final vote.

Economically, politically and socially, Britain is still trying to find its way outside the EU and after the pandemic. Can we learn from that approach of understanding different sensibilities to build mutual respect, so we can progress without engaging in a culture war?

This short pamphlet seeks to demonstrate that we can, and to explain why it's essential that we do so.

CHARACTER BUILDS BRIDGES

Corporate and political leaders talk a lot about *values*, but I'm not sure your average person could define their own values on cue. It's safe to say nonetheless that most people believe *rules* matter and should be applied equally to everyone. People in positions of power (especially if they are the rule-makers) have a particular responsibility to lead by example.

By way of illustration, consider the court martial earlier this year of Major General Nick Walsh who was jailed for 21 months after being found guilty of defrauding the Army out of nearly £50,000 in private school fees.[11] This is what people expect to see happen when someone in authority abuses the system and lets everyone down. As the judge, Judge Advocate Gen Alan Large, said: "*The higher you rank, the more important it is that you uphold the values and standards of the army*". The judge not only took the appropriate action in the face of the rules being broken by the general, on our behalf he made it clear that the general had failed to be the example people had a right to expect from someone of his seniority. The judge met our expectations and made sure that the rules remained intact.

When it comes to wrongdoing and serious errors of judgement by those who should know better, people's general perception is that real sanctions are all too rare. But their frustration and lack of trust is driven not just by the inadequate accountability for serious failings such as the financial crash of 2008, or even the unequal treatment when rule-breaking is dismissed as a minor breach for a boss yet qualifies as a matter for dismissal for anyone else. It's also the way that many of our unwritten 'rules', social norms or common standards of behaviour which equalise and eliminate difference have become less important to highly educated people in positions of responsibility.

The greater emphasis now on educational attainment as the main route to success means that those with degrees don't need to rely on the same tried and tested

standards of behaviour as everyone else to get on, and they show less appreciation for those who do. This has two serious consequences. It makes it harder for people to succeed on their own terms if they don't have a degree. And it makes it difficult for them to judge whether to trust the people who are decision-makers and influencers setting the rules for everyone else.

It's important for us to understand what's happening here and take steps to correct where we (the decision-makers and influencers) are going wrong. Because I'd highlight one more risk if we don't. As we become increasingly saturated with graduates – and the supply is greater than the prestigious careers they understandably pursue – they compete with non-graduates for routine jobs. So the question is: do we want a world where leaders and employers rely on 'values' and the opinions everyone else holds to decide who to employ and promote?

As concerning as the current situation is and the prospect of it getting worse is real, there is nonetheless plenty of scope to turn things around – but only if we are willing to change.

Character – not academic success – should define social value

When a young person does well at school, goes to university and graduates with a degree, their qualification signals effort, commitment, and dedication. Their achievement is recognised formally and generates pride amongst family and friends. Respect can vary according to which institution a graduate attended or the course they studied, but ultimately all degrees carry status. The effort, attitude and behaviour involved is what creates common ground and *should* generate respect.

We have always recognised higher academic qualifications as the most prestigious definition of formal knowledge, and rightly so. In the same way, we celebrate Olympic gold athletes more than a park-runner. At the same time however, we can also admire and respect someone whose success is a different order when we know just how much effort they're making to fulfil their potential and achieve their own goals.

Yet as more of us have attended university, a degree has become the main measure of a person's value and seemingly the only kind of knowledge or definition of achievement we recognise as important. The inevitable excess of bachelor's degrees and the need to differentiate means more people studying for master's degrees to establish additional credentials to improve their chances of greater success. And we also see graduates competing with non-graduates for employment.

But most importantly, the intensity of value on formalised learning and higher qualifications, has devalued everything else which also contributes to what we can achieve individually and collectively: knowledge gained through experience which cultivates wisdom, assists our perspective and broader understanding; and *how* we apply our knowledge and show intelligence. In other words, our character.

Most of us still judge someone's suitability for and success in a role (whatever the seniority or status) not just by *what* they know (whether gained by books or experience), but by *how* they apply it and the way that they behave in the job. It's behaviour, not qualifications, that gives us a true sense of someone's character.

Character is the equaliser which extends across all ranks. Character is beyond no-one, nor beneath anyone. It relies on the kind of conduct that any of us are capable of, even if some of us have a special talent, are highly skilled or more academically qualified. Character doesn't mean we never make mistakes; to err is human. But it helps put our weaknesses and occasional errors in perspective and – if we have enough evidence to judge someone's character – it means we're less likely to blow out of proportion an honourable mistake.

Behaviour which we associate with good character is particularly important for us to see amongst those who obtain or are given the power to lead or make decisions which affect everyone else. It helps stimulate the confidence necessary for us to comply with and follow what is being asked or requested. Whilst some might argue that character is an old-fashioned concept, I would argue that character is even more important in a complex world.

When we are being asked to take on trust complex solutions we can't possibly understand, we look for simple motives and we can only judge these through the actions which decision-makers display.

This ability for us to communicate and work together – taking advantage of our respective and individual strengths for our collective advantage – is collapsing because we are no longer judging each other's value on a set of common standards. This has become more acute in recent years because those in leadership positions have replaced 'character' with 'virtuousness' to judge themselves and others. So instead of assessing people's behaviour, we use 'opinions' as the key criteria when it comes to whom we listen, trust, follow – and want to spend time with online or in real life.

Progressing up a career ladder as a non-graduate is near-on impossible. Being taken seriously for what you achieve even though you've gone about it the right way doesn't seem to count. And if you have an opinion that is 'out of step' and express it in a way that betrays the fact that you don't have a degree – well, you might as well keep your thoughts to yourself.

Because we've devalued the importance of the behaviours and standards which apply to everyone, and which allow us to judge both effectiveness *and* character, we've built barriers and destroyed bridges. That's causing mutual disrespect, making it much harder for graduates and non-graduates to work together and live alongside each other. And that in turn is causing people to distrust those in positions in power. We can't judge whether we can or should be able to rely on someone as a boss, politician, expert, neighbour or colleague with whom we have very little in common if there's nothing to signal what it is that we share as good citizens – despite our differences.

This matters when – as a leader – you are seeking to address problems that affect us all and require us to change how we behave. Whether that's on a global scale, like the pandemic, climate change or mass immigration. Nationally, when it comes to something like levelling up; or at a regional or community level which might involve new planning regimes.

What do we need to do?

First, this is not a clarion call for a return to a bygone era. Some common courtesies were of their time and there is no point trying to resurrect them, however much some of us might mourn their demise. What I'm arguing is that, without leaders promoting the importance of common standards of behaviour and social norms, we can't move forward. We can't 'level up' and tackle any other forms of social or economic inequality unless everyone is bought in. But our collective success starts with the behaviour of those at the top.

What common standards do is require each of us to exercise the self-discipline necessary to achieve our own goals and – at the same time – demonstrate respect and consideration for everyone else, which helps us to recognise we are all relying on each other to succeed. These are standards and social norms that are timeless and are essential to a cohesive society because they are how we build bonds of trust.

There's no 'top ten' or exhaustive list of common standards, but to illustrate what I mean, shared standards and social norms are principles which force us to behave in a way that shows other people respect. For example, punctuality or timeliness, because it can involve an element of self-sacrifice, and is a demonstration of respect for other people's time; reliability when it comes to honouring a commitment made to someone else. Responsiveness to someone who is a customer, taxpayer, or supporter when they make contact to hold us to account, and whose support or custom is needed for us or our organisation to succeed. Maintaining the appearance of the place where we live and/or work by not dropping litter, and challenging people who do. (I'll come back to this again in a moment, because challenging poor behaviour also requires us to re-establish the authority of some roles in the community which we've allowed to be diminished.)

These might seem like small things, but small and simple things matter – especially when everything else is more complicated – and because these acts involve human contact or behaviour which allows us to form a view about each other. They are the opposite of a barrier to progress. And even though they may incur costs for business, expenditure on these functions is money well-spent.

The power of the people we serve

For example, functions that support or strengthen standards in customer service, should be prioritised for investment, not be first in line when cost-cutting is on the agenda. This might slow down a company's ambitions to expand and force public services to make tough choices. But meeting the public's expectations *should* influence decisions. If we don't show respect for our customers and supporters by meeting their expectations in how we serve them, what message does that send them, and to our employees whose job it is to engage with them? It is vital for organisations to be accessible (through direct phone numbers, email addresses etc) and be willing to listen and held to account even in the smallest most simple way.

Every time we dispense with or dismiss a common standard, we create a wedge. It becomes harder to succeed for people doing the jobs which require fewer academic

credentials. And it makes it harder for them to trust the people who claim to have the answers to the challenges they face.

Of course, no-one likes being held to account. But even the briefest of transactions which involve some human interaction require common expectations or mutual understanding between the parties involved.

In our high-tech and digital world, we need to be especially careful not to allow the purpose of any human involved in systems and processes to be at the mercy of the machine. This seems to be where the graduates who design new highly productive systems and create new 'non-graduate jobs' to operate them are failing to understand what they're dismantling. Think of call-centre workers who must stick to a script written by others, or retail workers who must stick rigidly to policies dictated from above. The facility for human beings to be flexible and use discretion when dealing with each other is important. The people who do customer-facing jobs are not robots and need to be given the necessary authority and responsibility to do them well, especially when they involve interacting with other human beings. All of us need a purpose at work, no matter how junior our role is. Purpose gives us a stake and means we need to be taken seriously.

We must keep developing technology, advancing, and making life easier for ourselves by using it. But none of this amounts to progress if it discourages the behaviour which binds us together and denies us any visibility which allows us to judge whether to trust and respect each other when we transact and interact.

The horrific "Horizon" miscarriage of justice experienced by the sub-postmasters at the hands of the Post Office is an extreme example of what happens when common standards no longer have the currency they deserve.[12] One thing is clear when listening to the testimonies of the innocent people involved, is the shocking arrogance of those in positions of responsibility. Senior Post Office managers put their faith in and relied on technology and their own intellectual superiority instead of all the evidence which showed they should have had far more faith in what the well-respected sub-postmasters were saying about what had gone wrong.

Leadership is meeting expectations and sharing authority

Those of us in positions of responsibility must show by the *way* that we operate and reach decisions that affect other people's lives and the services they pay for and/or rely on, that we care about meeting the standards they expect of us and make it possible for them to judge and feel confident in the decisions that we make.

Claiming that their expectations are invalid because they lack education to a certain standard is not only wrong – it's self-defeating.

No-one can enjoy absolute power as an individual. If we are to maintain the constructs which create wealth, but which rely on hierarchies for us to operate them, we need to behave in a way that people can trust. Common standards don't support any ideology or religion. But they are the essential equalisers which make the imperfect acceptable.

Some might argue that because we have more important things to worry about, like climate change or indeed the pandemic, we don't have time for this kind of 'trivia'. But

the opposite is true. You won't persuade people to take, say, climate change more seriously by obstructing their way. In the same way that 'chuggers' can undermine the reputation of charity by irritating passers-by in the street, political persuasion must start by treating people with respect.

It's true that discourtesy and inconsiderate behaviour in public spaces seem to be tolerated more now than they might have been in the past. But that's in part because no-one dare say anything, as we're no longer sure we'll be backed up by others if we do: ask yourself if you'd be the first to speak out on a busy train or bus if a fellow passenger was swearing loudly. We shouldn't have to resort to the police to deal with every social infringement, but neither should we ignore behaviour that weakens social cohesion. Small things matter, and when not tackled they lead to bigger problems.

Another consequence of making university degrees our main value-measure and an entry requirement for most jobs has been to diminish the authority and status of roles which don't need a degree, but are nonetheless important for upholding standards of behaviour in public places. Bus and train drivers; managers of shops, restaurants, cinemas and any public place; and those who provide a service to us in our communities - postmen, refuse-collectors, delivery-drivers. Most people doing these jobs are unlikely to believe they have the personal authority to take charge because they are actively discouraged or instructed by their bosses or unions not to. Even if they do have the personal confidence to do what's right when faced with others doing wrong, they can't be sure they'll be supported by the rest of the public in the moment, or later by their employer if there's some criticism for having done so.

We've removed the incentive for anyone whose job might involve helping to uphold standards and social norms. As well as paying them better, we ought to be re-establishing their status and authority. It wouldn't be enough for the corporate and political leaders to just assert this and offer some kind of patronising statement about people's importance. That would be meaningless and potentially make things worse. The change I'm talking about requires bosses and leaders to actively back those to whom they give authority. And at the same time, those same bosses and leaders should embrace and demonstrate the importance of upholding common standards and social norms themselves – by allowing others to hold them to account. That would include showing deference when someone else is in charge of a situation, even if they hold a 'junior' position in other contexts.

This is not a PR exercise. It's about bosses and leaders changing behaviours to put right where we're going wrong.

The challenges and pressures we face require this of us. In a world where people are on the move – especially across continents – and local communities are becoming more diverse, decision-makers will feel the impact of their neglect in upholding that which binds us together – if we don't stop wrongly casting blame elsewhere.

For example, queuing and taking our proper turn is important. It recognises everyone's time is precious and that if something is in short supply those most in need will be served first. It was notable that the Duke of Cambridge, second-in-line to the throne, wasn't amongst the first to be vaccinated but wisely received his jab at the same time as all other under 40s.

Queue-jumping can present problems not only when powerful people try it for themselves, but also when the perception grows that others who have not stood in line are getting priority over those who have. If decision-makers take the view that, for example, new immigrants have needs which are greater or more urgent and should be met ahead of those of their other constituents – they are taking a risk with public opinion. The arrival in the UK of new immigrants from Afghanistan could provide such a test.

Local people who become distressed by a change in priorities or increased pressure on their local services are not, by instinct, unkind or uncharitable. When new arrivals in urgent or greater need are exceptions rather than the norm, most people will willingly step aside. But if the situation isn't temporary and the only thing they hear from politicians, charities or local officials is criticism of their concerns, this can inflame tensions.

You can't write new rules and expect people to follow them if you've not earned their respect by following the old rules. And if new social issues force a change to a rule or the way that it's applied, the authority making that decision has a duty to ensure that all the other social norms and standards are promoted and upheld to protect that community. That's when a politician or local authority must show leadership. That includes helping any newcomers to adapt and adopt the local customs which will help them assimilate.

In a world as divided as ours, we urgently need our political, business, religious and all other leaders to promote and live by standards and help uphold social norms which demand self-discipline and show respect for everyone else.

We can't educate everyone to the point where everyone knows the same things and thinks in the same way. Nor should we try. But too often our graduate-led political conversation decides whether a person is deserving of respect on the basis of their educational attainment. Those who don't meet the grade find that they and their – legitimate and reasonable – opinions are dismissed. We're in for a lot more disruption via the ballot box if we don't stop and reverse this trend.

The only way we can live and work together and enjoy the full benefit of our varied skills, strengths and perspectives is if we share common standards and respect social norms that allow us to judge whether to trust each other to play our part.

INTELLIGENCE ACHIEVES RESULTS

I once told a room full of grandees in the House of Lords that one of the cleverest people I know is my mother – a factory worker without any qualifications. Naively, I assumed they would understand the point I was making, that theirs is not the only form of intelligence worthy of respect. Yet the shocked faces I saw reinforced to me just how little people of great status understand when knowledge and qualifications are their only measure of intelligence.

This isn't about comparing qualifications – which are important certificates and tests of what we know. Indeed, examinations are important equalisers for establishing someone's potential regardless of their social or economic background. It's about

recognising that our formal qualifications are not always what matter most, and that alone might not be enough.

People whose knowledge comes from practical experience are often shrewd and can see things clearly when there's a problem or things aren't working as they should. The night before starting my first Saturday job working in a cake shop a few feet from the bus station in Nottingham, my Mum advised that I'd need to learn how to serve people quickly, as the customers' main concern would be not missing their bus.

The level or extent of our educational qualifications is not what should determine whether we're taken seriously when we've got something relevant to say. But as Michael Sandel argues in *The Tyranny of Merit*, not only is credentialism a form of prejudice, it's one that's deemed acceptable. The accusation of 'stupidity' is now commonly used by supposedly sophisticated people to denigrate anyone with whom they disagree. It's not a metaphor or a (deliberate) euphemism – it is used quite literally and with serious force when the aggressor assumes they are more superior because they are more highly educated than their challenger. Think back to the grim public debates that followed the Brexit referendum to countless examples of those who regretted that decision questioning the intelligence of those who supported it.

Against those trying to make an argument or fit in amongst people for whom academic qualifications are the criteria to entry, the fear of being labelled "stupid" is an effective deterrent. It taps into a weakness – not of intelligence, but of self-confidence and self-belief. And even if someone less-well qualified has a different view that they are willing to defend, a well-trained graduate can often cut brutally, even if elegantly, the pretender down to size.

To be fair, having taught people to believe that academic achievements are what brings status and entitlement, it's not that surprising when graduates in powerful positions, who want to protect their status, feel threatened when someone not similarly qualified raises a question or spots a flaw not previously exposed. But that kind of stance is self-defeating and not in their interest, never mind that of anyone else.

Educational attainment is a forgotten aspect of diversity

We talk a lot about diversity in the workplace and the importance of it accelerating at senior levels in respect of sex, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, and recently we've started talking about it in the context of social class too. All of that is important. But there is one type of diversity amongst positions of responsibility and leadership we are ignoring. It cuts across and encompasses all those characteristics, and it is an area where we have *regressed* in recent decades: educational attainment. There are good reasons to reverse this trend: there is some positive difference between graduates and non-graduates which we are not benefiting from; and if we use character as well as knowledge to judge someone's suitability for promotion to leadership roles that will assist us in bridging the educational divide.

As I've already said, the educational divide is not really about qualifications, and we would be missing the bigger point if we assumed the answer lies solely in more or better technical training. But that's not to dismiss as unimportant the priority being

given by the Government to improving technical education and skills training as part of its levelling-up agenda. Indeed, this is good news. As is the recent research published by the SMF showing that most parents now see vocational education as the best option for school leavers.[13] We need more people to be equipped with the relevant skills for themselves and our economy to prosper. However, as we ramp up technical and vocational education, it will only assist in bridging the educational attainment divide if it is not seen as a consolation prize for those who do not go to university. It also has to be a route to 'the top' – but without those designing these courses making everyone think the same way.

Some people are best suited to the non-academic route because they are at their best learning 'to do' rather than 'to know' and will develop better when they can 'observe and absorb' on-the-job.

It is *because* they have not studied theories or trained to be 'rational-thinkers' to the exclusion of all else that they are more confident relying on what their instincts tell them about what they can *see* in front of them. They don't need time to identify the theory which justifies their thoughts, they 'read' a situation and the people involved. They zoom out to understand simply why things are as they are, and see the bigger picture often before anyone else. This means they can see beyond the symptom and can often spot more quickly the cause of the problem that needs fixing or identify the real need to be addressed. In short, they have an instinctive tendency to be more strategic in the way that they think. In any organisational setting, that makes them incredibly valuable – if they are taken seriously and given the chance to contribute.

If we are to gain the full advantage of a truly diverse workforce, we need more work settings where graduates and non-graduates are working closely together, treated as equals and – because of the way that they apply their respective knowledge and the character they show in the job – enjoy equal opportunity to progress.

That means today's bosses (who are predominantly graduates) need to recognise and respect different forms of knowledge and intelligence and make sure that the less polished speakers know they will be listened to when, in their opinion, something is being missed, plain wrong, or 'the obvious' is being ignored by everyone else. There are short-term and long-term gains to be had in doing this, so the effort is worth it.

Leaders must recognise it takes courage and is especially difficult for someone, who may feel inferior because they haven't got the academic credentials others in the room possess, to interject and say they disagree. And if that's not enough, then to find the words to explain why briskly, if they are to be taken seriously by everyone else.

Of course, to state the obvious in this context – this means giving someone the power to say what it is that others might not want to hear. And this gets to the heart of the conflict between those who know more and believe they know best, and others who understand without having to know everything.

How often is complexity deliberately used to create exclusivity and shroud something simple which anyone can work out – with or without a degree? When I worked at the BBC, the Corporation was under huge pressure in 2003 not to run a documentary programme about Al Jazeera, which at the time was new on the scene and held very different editorial principles to Western news outlets. One of those differences was Al

Jazeera's inclusion in their news bulletins of video images of dead British soldiers killed in Iraq. To illustrate the different editorial approach in the documentary, the BBC had decided to show the actual Al Jazeera footage as broadcast of the dead British soldiers. Understandably, the soldiers' families didn't want this to happen on British television and they were supported by politicians and national newspapers in a high-profile campaign prior to the documentary's broadcast. But the BBC dug in. For the news editors and BBC bosses in charge, this was a matter of principle and editorial independence about footage which in their view was in the public interest to show. Their solution was to pixelate the images as much as possible – literally to make the images fuzzy so people couldn't see them – instead of the solution which was being called for by everyone else: not show them at all. Any attempt to engage in a discussion was met by high-minded constitutional justifications which emphasised dangerous ramifications which would follow from failure to show the footage. The clear implication was that the rest of us could not possibly understand why their complex solution was right and our simple solution was wrong. A complaint to the Board of Governors after the documentary was broadcast was upheld.

We know that many problems are complex and the solutions not always easy to identify – but great brains come in all shapes and sizes. And having the confidence to strip complex issues back to their simple core to work out what it is that matters, why it isn't working, and what needs to be achieved, requires a different set of skills to grappling with the science or the details of how to do it. As much as it might not be what highly-qualified people want to hear, simplifying the complex can be done by someone who doesn't have a degree. And sometimes they are the best person for the job – because instinctively they simplify to understand.

As to diversifying the leadership ranks, not everyone wants to get to the top, but not everyone who has the potential to reach it starts out with high ambitions. Some people begin work and adulthood with modest aspirations, but as they start to succeed and gain confidence decide they want the chance and deserve the opportunity to progress to positions of real power and authority. We need to make the chance of getting from the shop floor to the top more commonplace. It's almost unheard of now in the commercial world, though there are small signs of things changing in the political arena.

The best leaders – in any sector – see the bigger picture and will define the purpose of the task clearly and simply so everyone else knows why they are needed and what it is that needs to be achieved. That skill has nothing to do with academic achievements. It comes from experience and having the intelligence to understand beyond the limits of our own knowledge. That doesn't require a degree, but a genuine interest and respect for the expectations of all the people whose support and inputs are needed to achieve great success.

The distance between leaders and the people they lead – whether of business or as politicians – is something which must be taken seriously. Those worried about the dangers to the future of capitalism must recognise that mitigation lies in understanding and meeting the expectations of workers, consumers and taxpayers. That's why we need far more diversity in leadership. And that means we need more people who experience and see the world differently because of their different paths to progress

and because of the way that they learn – not just because of where they started in life or the demographic groups they might also represent.

MUTUAL RESPECT IS HOW TO ACHIEVE MORE

The surprising results and disruption we've seen via the ballot box in recent years – welcome or otherwise – have been in large part delivered by people with fewer academic credentials. But they are not the people who don't understand or who need to change.

The results of those democratic events are symptoms, not the cause of our divisions. If we want to avoid that kind of unexpected and sudden disruption happening again, it's the graduates and decision-makers who need to act.

New economic investment, structural changes, improving infrastructure, creating skilled jobs and training people properly for them are all good and important responses. But they alone are not enough, because the problem is more urgent, goes deeper and is about how we relate to each other as human beings.

The education divide is a proxy for respect. It's a mutual respect gap. Not directly for each of us as individuals, but for the common standards necessary for us each to fulfil our potential, and to live and work together successfully to achieve more.

Non-graduates want the graduate classes to change the way that we behave. To respect and promote the same common standards of behaviour and social norms in the way we go about our work. To recognise that there's more than one form of intelligence, and that we need to deploy all forms of it – if we are to achieve more and make it possible for more people to prosper from our collective success.

These expectations are basic and apply at every level and at all scales. It shouldn't be difficult for anyone and everyone to meet them – they are beyond no one, nor beneath any of us. They require some element of self-discipline and force behaviour which demonstrates respect for other people we are relying on to achieve our respective goals.

Critically – and this comes back to our blind spot – respecting and meeting these expectations is in our interests, because they are part of the answer to any problem. They are not *the* answer - but they force us to act in a way which helps our understanding of complicated problems and define them more simply. And when these shared standards are maintained and used in how we work and apply our knowledge we are showing mutual respect for important methods which everyone else relies on to achieve their goals – however modest or grand. That therefore creates a common bond, and gives people confidence in the decision-makers grappling with big complex problems and responsibilities much greater than theirs.

We need to understand the lack of respect that people feel from those of us who hold powerful or influential positions comes because we've diminished or rejected much of what we should all share and stand for regardless of our differences – academic or otherwise. The answer is not to diminish academic qualifications – they remain important. But nor is the answer to educate more people so that we all think the same. We need different kinds of brains and perspectives. We just need to elevate the other

aspects of what makes each of us successful and provides us the opportunity for dignity and pride. And the great thing is, we create the conditions for us all to achieve so much more.

At the moment, many of the majority of people in the UK who did not go to university are quietly and modestly achieving on their own terms but feel they are not taken seriously, or that they are taken for granted. Their efforts and contributions are not fully recognised in their country's politics or its economy. This cannot go on. The people who lead our country on politics and economics, who almost all did go to university, must do more to respect and understand those who did not.

If we ignore where we're going wrong, don't change how we behave, and limit ourselves to economic solutions, we won't succeed in bridging this divide. And if we fail, we risk becoming more divided, and political disruption continuing – and possibly worsening.

But this is not an exercise in damage limitation. It's a chance to do better, for politics and business alike, by offering more respect and greater opportunities to people who didn't happen to go to university.

You don't need a degree to know the world keeps changing and we need to keep developing, adapting, and successfully taking advantage of technology to shape our modern world. People want to be involved. All of us need to live a purposeful life and want to be respected for the way that we play a meaningful part – however small – in something bigger than ourselves. British society used to be such a shared project, but today too many people feel excluded from that project, by reason of their education. A country in which graduates dominate national conversation and culture, to the exclusion of those without degrees, cannot be a united, happy or successful one.

Three principles for closing the education divide

This paper deliberately does not offer a set of policy recommendations, but instead highlights three principles which the graduates and decision-makers amongst us should keep in mind as we go about our work. If we can change the way that we behave, not only do we have the potential to achieve so much more – we have the opportunity to enjoy ourselves better along the way.

***Purpose* is the goal which unites us:** we all deserve to live a purposeful life and know that what we do contributes to something bigger than ourselves. Purpose motivates, generates self-pride, gives us a stake and a right to be heard and taken seriously. If we place too much weight on higher academic qualifications as a condition of entry to a definition of success which is too narrow, we cut people out who we rely on, and diminish the contribution that they make.

***Standards* are shared credentials:** we all have our own ambitions which require us to have different skills and qualifications, but the *way* that we seek to achieve them should look familiar – reflecting and respecting that we rely on each other to succeed. This allows us to judge each other on the basis of behaviour not opinion, overcome our differences, and form bonds of trust.

***Intelligence* comes in different forms:** knowledge is gained in various ways; intelligence is how we apply it and helps to shows that we understand. Gaining intelligence requires us to engage other people whose knowledge, perspective and insight might be different to our own. When we respect what each of us brings and can work together, we achieve more and are better equipped to tackle the complex challenges we face.

ENDNOTES

[1] Tina Stowell is a Conservative peer. She is a former Cabinet Minister and was Leader of the House of Lords and Lord Privy Seal until July 2016. Before joining the House of Lords in January 2011, she spent nine years at the BBC where she was latterly Head of Corporate Affairs. Before that she ran William Hague's office when he was Leader of the Conservative Party. As a civil servant she worked at the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall, the British Embassy in Washington, and in the Downing Street Press Office when John Major was Prime Minister. She was Chair of the Charity Commission from March 2018 until February 2021. Tina was born and brought up in Beeston, just outside of Nottingham. After leaving school at 16 she attended the local FE college and then moved to London aged 18 to join the civil service as a secretary.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Social Market Foundation.

[2] *Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies* by Amory Gethin, Clara Martinez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty shows how political parties are no longer associated with social-class in terms of their supporters, but education and wealth. https://wid.world/news-article/changing-political-cleavages-in-21-western-democracies/

[3] Sara Holbolt's analysis of British Election Study data. Figure 2. The education gap. Source: BES Online Panel Wave 7. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2016.1225785

[4] https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election

[5] *Brexitland* by Robert Ford and Maria Sobolewska demonstrates that even among people of the same age, education is a dividing line, with people under 30 without a degree much more likely to vote Leave than graduates of the same age. https://www.amazon.co.uk/Brexitland-Identity-Diversity-Reshaping-Politics/dp/1108473571.

[6]Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Foundation Report on Elite Britain 2019 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Elitist-Britain-2019.pdf. Separate reports by the Sutton Trust show that the percentage of MPs with degrees is unchanged after the 2019 General Election and the 2020 Cabinet slightly more diverse. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Parliamentary-Privilege-2019-1.pdf https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Cabinet2020.pdf

[7]Sutton Trust Report on Politician's Backgrounds 2005 https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/30377/1/PoliticiansBackgrounds_09-Dec-05-1.pdf

[8] Adam Gopnik, The New Yorker January 2018 www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/never-mind-churchill-clement-attlee-is-a-model-for-these-times

[9] House of Commons Briefing Paper on Election Statistics 1918-2019 CBP-7529.pdf

[10] Endelman Trust Barometer UK Edition Spring 2021 Update - https://www.edelman.co.uk/sites/g/files/aatuss301/files/2021-06/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Spring%20Update_UK%20Edition.pdf

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[13] https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Public-attitudes-to-vocational-education-April-2021.pdf