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Elitism and meritocracy in UK universities : the UK needs investment in its labour force

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**Abstract**

This article summarises previous academic research into university education, distinguishing between arguments for and against improving access. Several views are summarised, including structural-functionalism, which claims that powerful social groups maintain their status and income, and human capital theory, which focuses on employee productivity. Almost all viewpoints discussed in this article support meritocracy. UK universities differ in their openness to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many universities, referred to here as 'inclusive?', deserve credit for encouraging disadvantaged people to become students; in contrast, 'exclusive?' universities tend to have fewer disadvantaged students than expected. There are barriers facing disadvantaged students, including unequal access to universities, which can at least partly be explained by private schools for rich pupils and financial burdens at university causing some students to take paid work (reducing time available for study). The UK spends less per student on universities than the world average and less than half as much as some European countries. The UK Government could increase university funding, concentrating on universities that are most inclusive and that tend to have the largest

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problems in affording sufficient staff and teaching facilities. This investment would give long-term benefits to the UK economy. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)