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**Abstract**

The article examines the theoretical and empirical literature on higher education's role in relation to social equity and related notions of citizenship, social justice, social cohesion and meritocracy. It considers both the education and the research functions of higher education and how these impact upon different sections of society, on who benefits and who loses from them. Questions for future research on the wider impact of higher education are posed as well as some research questions on the narrower issue of widening participation. 8HRK / Abstract übernommen) Brennan, John, E-Mail: j.l.brennan@open.ac.uk