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Insight

IMPROVING ACCESS TO UNIVERSITIES: A CONVERSATION WITH DR TONY SEWELL CBE

We believe that responsible and sustainable investing for the long term must go along with a concern for society as a whole. Growth, prosperity, creativity and opportunity can only come from reinvestment in our greatest resource, people. Education is a critical factor, which is why it is one of the areas we have decided to support as a business and as individuals alongside our support for the arts and other causes.

It carries on a long-held tradition of the Stern family of establishing and supporting educational institutions like the University of Frankfurt in Germany or Lord Wandsworth College here in the United Kingdom, many of which continue to this day.

As part of our social commitment to education, we have held a number of discussion events looking at important aspects of higher education and universities. Established to help foster a deeper understanding and to bring together thought leaders within education, politics, business and other areas, these events have sought to contribute to the public discourse about universities and higher education.

In 2016, we hosted a seminar at New College, Oxford University, on the role of private finance in higher education with former Minister of State for Universities and Science, Lord David Willetts. This was followed in 2018 by a panel debate at the Oxford & Cambridge Club where a panel of distinguished Vice Chancellors, academics, educators, advocates and activists discussed issues around tuition fees and their purpose, impact and potential adaption in a challenging environment for universities and higher education.

We are excited to look towards our next event in the series. On Wednesday 8th May we will be hosting a panel debate on issues at King's College, Cambridge University, about access to higher education and different models that could be successful in boosting diversity in universities.

Universities have been at the forefront of change over the centuries, both for individuals and society. The brightest students from all social backgrounds should have an opportunity to gain access in terms of admission, cost of tuition and cost of living, to benefit from the opportunity to study and learn at the highest levels and to contribute in turn to political, social and economic progress. How this has been done over the years, however, is a critical challenge that is often contentious and has led to public criticism of some of the leading institutions in the UK.



In collaboration with King's College we are bringing together a panel that includes Professor Michael Proctor, Provost of King's College, Dr Tony Sewell CBE, CEO of education charity

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Generating Genius, Lee Elliot Major of the Sutton Trust, and other leading figures within higher education. The discussion will be followed by a reception we are hosting at King's. We would welcome your participation and if you are interested in attending the event please contact Abbey Allen on +44 20 3478 1800 or at aallen@jsternco.com.

Ahead of the discussion, we sat down with panellist Tony Sewell, who is one of the UK's leading educationalists and founded Generating Genius in 2005, to discuss some of the issues around access to universities and the improvements that could be made to help those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

What are the issues preventing wider access to universities in the 21st century?

There are two primary issues. The first is that there are many factors leading to low aspirations and achievement for girls and boys. It is not only race or faith but also culture and class. The second is that educational decline needs to be halted during early secondary school, before girls and boys have reached their teenage years, otherwise it is too late to tackle low aspirations. We must make a place at an elite university like Cambridge or Oxford seem like a reality, not a distant dream.

The truth is that this affects many groups. One of the issues is that many of those who are disadvantaged – for historical, geographic, social or other reasons – have, to a certain extent, coalesced into what has been called a new anti-school subculture. For instance, some immigrant communities have integrated into local disadvantaged communities and, accordingly, fallen victim to the same problems.

What do you think is preventing the elite universities from taking people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Universities are not, in my view, fundamentally biased. The reason there are so few disadvantaged students at our elite institutions is that they often come from environments that lead them to have low expectations and aspirations. Many talented students attend state schools that have no tradition of sending their pupils to top universities: teachers and careers advisers will often deter students from applying because they do not want them to be 'disappointed' or feel 'out of place'.

Of course students have to get the grades to be considered by the likes of Oxford and Cambridge but there is evidence that schools frequently do not stretch or challenge pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and, as a result, they have little chance of realising their potential.

What models do you think could help improve the diversity of universities?

Early engagement with children from disadvantaged backgrounds is important so that going to university is a realisable aspiration and not a distant dream. Academies successfully producing sports stars nurture talent by giving young people the framework and mindset to succeed from an early age. A similar model can be applied to the academic realm, inspiring, motivating and supporting students to ensure they receive the recognition they deserve and allowing them to take pride in what they achieve.

We have to recognise that disadvantaged students can be trapped in a vicious cycle where inadequate discipline, a lack of encouragement from parents who often themselves have failed within the education system. This vicious cycle can go hand-in-hand with a mindset that is trapped within a small comfort zone, not wanting to push themselves for a fear of failure.

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That is why building confidence, skills and aspiration is critical in getting more disadvantaged students into our universities.

Are there particular subject areas that are suffering from an underrepresentation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

There are several, but the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) have a strikingly low proportion of disadvantaged students. Partly, this is because recruitment into STEM has historically derived from too small a pool. Access to the top jobs often comes through narrow networks which often do not include low-income, black or female talent.

There is a need to search wider and encourage talent from disadvantaged background. The STEM worker shortfall is estimated to be about 69,000 per year, so taking steps to address this and to encourage more young people to see the value of these skills is not just important for their prospects but a great opportunity and vital to ensuring a thriving UK economy.

What role can businesses play in helping to improve access?

Businesses that provide young people with hands-on workshops, work experience placements, trips to universities and career advice all help to build confidence, skills and aspiration in students. From a wider corporate perspective, whether it is a partnership or financial donation to charity like ours that works with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing equipment for sessions for students, hosting workshops and work experience placements or just simply letting schools or charities use a meeting room space, there are many ways businesses can get involved with helping to improve access, as well as provide real benefits to themselves.

Businesses can benefit from connecting with motivated students who they might not ordinarily meet, allowing students to receive opportunities that they never thought would be possible for them. This helps companies diversify their talent pool and inspire young people to reach their full potential. Studies have proven over recent years that businesses with a diverse and multi-cultural workforce will outperform as each member of staff brings a fresh perspective, regardless of experience.

You founded Generating Genius in 2005, how does it try to address some of the issues you have raised?

We aim to inspire, motivate and support 14-18-year-olds to pursue STEM subjects at school and to ultimately consider careers in these fields. Our alumni, now undergraduates, become mentors to school participants, feeding their experience back into the programmes.

We work with young people who are underrepresented in higher education and particularly in STEM, most of whom are from low-income households and are often the first in their immediate family to go to university.

We partner with London state schools that have a high percentage of pupils in these categories who show academic potential and an interest in these subjects. We also work closely with universities and businesses to help deliver our objectives.

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