Britain: Private college accelerates drive to make education a preserve of the rich

Paul Bond
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The establishment of the private New College of the Humanities (NCH) in London marks a qualitative shift in making higher education available only on the basis of wealth.

NCH, which will open in October 2012, has set annual tuition fees of £18,000, double even the maximum allowed at public universities after they were allowed to treble by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government.

The college is the creation of A.C. Grayling, a Supernumerary Fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford who was formerly Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London. He has said that his concern was a lack of sufficient "elite university provision", with the result that many students are unable to get into Oxford or Cambridge. (Such is the significance of these institutions for the British ruling class that they are known by the conflated term "Oxbridge"). These students often go to American private institutions, on which Grayling has modelled NCH.

NCH was set up ostensibly to offer a second chance of a prestigious education for those who failed to obtain an Oxbridge place. It promises one to one supervision along Oxbridge lines, and a student-teacher ratio of 10:1. It has been welcomed as the realisation of a "Rejects College, Oxbridge" by the Oxford-educated Tory Mayor of London Boris Johnson, who described it as potentially "socially responsible and immensely financially lucrative".

For all his claims about educational standards, the "elite" education to which Grayling is referring has nothing to do with ability and opportunity. He is addressing a social elite, able to finance their education.

NCH has claimed it will offer scholarships and other grants to one in five of the first intake of 200 students. Grayling has said he wants to see 30 percent of undergraduates receive "some help" with fees. He has also mentioned "full scholarships", to be financed by charities or from other students' fees.

Even as an attempted sop, this is both perfunctory and cynical. Question 11 of the application form asks, "How will you pay your tuition fees? If somebody else will pay them, please say who".

Scholarships and bursaries, including at Oxbridge, are used only to soften the blow of rising fees and to impart a flimsy pretence that these are anything other than institutions for the richest 7 percent of the population, whose high-standard private education up to the age of 18 guarantees they fill most places.

Grayling merely applies the same window-dressing to even more transparent effect. He has also told the press that it was too expensive to set NCH up as a charity, while still insisting that there is "a philanthropic edge" to the project.

Grayling claims to oppose education cuts and privatised education. A regular columnist for the *Guardian*, he moans that his critics have turned "everything I have written … on its head. Now I am a bastard capitalist. It is really upsetting".

Epithets aside, Grayling's wounded pose has no substance.

New College of the Humanities Limited (formerly Grayling Hall Limited) expects to break even in its third year of trading, having already raised £10 million in private equity funding to cover the first two years. Its CEO is Jeremy Gibbs, director of Cambridge Venture Management (2000), while its non-executive chairman is Charles Watson of the PR firm Financial Dynamics.

There are two other executives. Matthew Batstone has held "senior positions in blue chip companies," according to the college's web site, and is a governor at an independent school. Roy Brown has "followed a successful career as a venture capitalist" and has served on several global charitable trusts. This is a body fully committed to private education and profit.

Grayling has assembled a 14-strong "professoriate" of high media profile dons, in order to sell both the "elite" tag and provide a fig leaf of liberalism.

The married historians Linda Colley and David Cannadine have taken equity stakes in NCH. They have each been contracted to give just one lecture a year, as any more than that might cause problems with their existing employment at

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Princeton. Other members of the professoriate include right-wing historian of imperialism Niall Ferguson, literary critic Christopher Ricks, evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, philosopher Simon Blackburn and legal scholar Adrian Zuckerman.

Richard Dawkins, Lawrence M. Krauss, and geneticist Steve Jones will give two lectures a week between them on scientific literacy for two terms. Johnson described Colley and Cannadine as "famous lefties", though their only political association appears to be with New Labour under Tony Blair. Jones has several times written enthusiastically of Marx. In a 2009 radio interview he described private schools as a "cancer on the education system"—complaining of the advantages it bestows compared to state schools.

As with Grayling, their claims to social concern have proved to be decidedly thin when compared with a desire for personal remuneration. Dawkins has written that "the financial inducement was attractive".

The limited teaching schedule of these luminaries shows that they are merely lucrative bait for prospective students. Even as NCH began recruitment for 2012, some of its claims were already unravelling. NCH claims it was founded by "14 of the world's top academics". Confronting anger at the project (which has seen a flare thrown during a bookshop event with Grayling), Dawkins has backtracked. He has insisted NCH was Grayling's idea, and he had only been "invited" to join the professoriate.

More embarrassing still, academics at the University of London are complaining that their module titles and syllabuses have been reproduced wholesale on the NCH web site. Justin Champion, a historian at Royal Holloway, has pointed to "a whole degree programme being plagiarised". His colleague Amanda Vickery made similar accusations, writing that NCH "seems to have ripped off London Univ's international programme in history" and that she was "perplexed" to see one of her own courses listed. Colin Jones, president of the Royal Historical Society, described it as a "somewhat cynical repackaging operation".

Grayling defended NCH, saying it offered "University of London international programme degrees."

The University of London has stated that NCH "is not and will not become part of" the university, but providing tuition for an International Programme (ULIP) degree does not require the university's approval. ULIP's Dean, Jonathan Kydd, notes that ULIP "provides flexible access to awards of the university worldwide."

Kydd notes that most such undergraduate awards cost less than £1,500 annually. At present no arrangement has been made for NCH students to use University of London libraries.

Grayling has block-booked accommodation rooms, and it is proposed to rent University of London lecture theatres in central London. Announcing that Grayling had resigned from its teaching staff, Birkbeck advised staff that it had no links with NCH and no agreement to provide access to its facilities.

The Warden of New College, Oxford, had written to Grayling about the name of the new institution and possible confusion with older bodies. David Palfreyman, bursar of the Oxford college, said he regarded Grayling's venture as "a clever wheeze", as it uses "the University of London brand … their premises and fancy office space".

The government has also pointed out that NCH cannot yet legally describe itself as a "university college". NCH has said that it is looking to comply with the guidelines on status laid down by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills before its first term.

The launch of NCH nevertheless marks the latest escalation of the wholesale privatisation of British education.

The most bullish defence yet of Grayling has come from Toby Young, the right-wing journalist championing the Conservatives "Free School" project. Boris Johnson saw NCH in the same light as the establishment of the University of Buckingham, Britain's first private university. Set up in the late 1970s and granted full status in 1983, it was inspired by the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs and its foundation stone was laid by Margaret Thatcher. Leading personnel include such high-profile Tories as Roger Scruton, Anthony O'Hear and Chris Woodhead.

There is no difference in principle between the University of Buckingham and the NCH, other than Buckingham's fees are lower and this time the liberal and Labourite academics have gotten in on the act. Following last year's announcement of the granting of "university college" status to the private BPP Business School, there is no reason to expect hostility to granting NCH the same status.

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