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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/mortarboard/2010/jan/28/labours-great-successes-university-access-danny-dorling>

The Single Unprecedented Success New Labour Could Shout About.

By Danny Dorling, University of Sheffield

Today's Higher Education Funding Council report on who is getting into universities shows that after years of effort children from poorer areas are going in growing numbers to university. Many more university places have been provided in the last few years. For the first time ever recorded, the majority of those additional places have been taken up by children living in the poorer half of British neighbourhoods. This will probably be seen in future years as the greatest positive social achievement of the 1997-2010 governments. This was achieved not at the expense of upper- and middle-class children, who have also seen their chances improve. It occurred because of the way the education system as a whole has expanded and, most importantly, as a result of massive increases in funding per child in state secondary schools in recent years. Save the Children this week report that more children are living in the worst of poverty in Britain today as compared to 2005. The life expectancy gap between areas continues to widen alarmingly, faster in recent years than before. The wealth gap is growing despite the crash. But here is one unprecedented success. Participation at universities has been widened in such a way that no

one lost out and those who had been most badly served in the past saw their chances improved the most. Education turns out to have been a priority as evidenced by the increased equality of outcomes now being reported. The funding council's report is one of the most accurate pieces of work that has ever been undertaken in the monitoring of social policy across the United Kingdom. The fortunes of every child in Britain are now carefully tracked over time and between institutions so that the trends can be plotted with uncanny accuracy. By the end of 2009 some 36% of people in Britain were studying at a university by the age of 20. The increase almost perfectly matches the earlier improvements there have been in GCSE results which in turn almost perfectly match the earlier increases in spending per child in state schools. All this was made much more affordable by the decline in size of the birth cohorts involved. Spending and places have been increased as the numbers of young people coming through have been decreasing. The introduction of education maintenance allowances provided a huge boost to school staying on rates in the poorest areas. Government did help and can take a lot of the credit, but it also helps that so many more affluent children were already going to university that they were not crowding out the rest. In contrast the 1960s expansion was an almost exclusively middle class expansion in university places. Britain still allows fewer of its adults to go to university than the majority of people in other affluent nations are able to. Given this, few will credibly argue that 36% entering by age 20 is too many. The target was 50% by age 30 by 2010. That will still be missed. However, given the gains in GCSEs still coming through, barring draconian restrictions on entry to university in the future, we should expect the participation rate to continue rising for many years to come. Britain remains a hugely divided country; the prospects for the 20% of young people who do not even think of going to university are bleak. The current prospects for all school and university leavers are bleak, and going to university is not the be all and end all. But something has changed. Probably forever. Universities are no longer just for the likes of them.