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**Abstract**

This study examines the proposition that mass higher education is, in practice, less a network of more or less homogeneous activities than a series of concentric circles in which elite institutions remain at the centre, but are surrounded by increasingly wide bands of universities and colleges, that are less and less likely to set graduates on the road to elite status the further they are from the centre. After a brief review of the classical and subsequent literature on elites and elite formation, the empirical study uses data from the very long established annual publication Who's Who to make a quantitative analysis of the higher education background of all 120,000 Who's Who entries born in the twentieth century. It finds that Oxford and Cambridge remained the dominant route to elite status throughout the century, though their share fell from about a third to about a quarter of the total. There were big rises in the contribution of other leading universities that have come to be known as the 'Russell Group'. An analysis by main occupational categories shows that the political elite broadened its

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educational catchment area more than other groups. The so-called 'public' (i.e. independent) secondary schools also continued to make contributions much larger than their numbers warrant. The main conclusions are that Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital' offers a useful contribution to the interpretation of the continued dominance of well-known high status universities, and that while there was considerable change throughout the century, in general it followed the British tradition of being evolutionary and slow. In policy terms it concluded that the present government is justified in seeking both to widen participation generally and simultaneously to increase the number of people from modest economic and social backgrounds who attend the high prestige universities. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Williams, Gareth, E-Mail: g.williams@ioe.ac.uk