

## **Class at the friction point – emergent inequalities in higher education**

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This paper explores how class is formed through higher education and how inequality continues to be produced and reproduced within formal and informal trajectories and strategies generated within it. It contends that the signs, measures and markers of class have become harder to track, but its effects remain stubbornly entrenched, if not growing in their impact. It is harder and harder to neatly draw a circle around a particular group of people, particular homologies, whether around occupation, consumption or material wealth. Yet, there is also the largest division between rich and poor the world has ever seen. Theories of social class thus need to be adapted to the turbulent conditions that continually reshape its boundaries.

Class boundaries are theorised in this paper as *friction points*. Friction points function as phenomenologically experienced but structurally significant limits that deflect social mobility as a dispositional threshold. It aims to avoid a static preconstruction of class and replace this with a conception of class as an emergent property, in which certain forms of being reach a threshold. In this threshold, it is not possible to carry over certain forms and conditions of being. These must instead be revised, mutated and adapted to suit the conditions being entered into. Class is not so heavily prescribed as to produce a strong barrier but rather one that emerges from improvisational strategies that reinscribe or shed class position.

This paper builds a theory of class in higher education at a time of its disappearance in policy discourses that favour ‘socio-economic status’ ‘underrepresentation’ and ‘non-traditional’. Within these discourses, higher education is heralded as offering a key opportunity for a more fulfilling job, better pay and security that are accessible on a meritocratic basis. However, these discourses hide the durability of social-structural effects in maintaining patterns in the distribution of higher educational benefits and privileges.