On our SELECTION

Simon Marginson responds that while the old ‘progressive’ orthodoxies in education may be threadbare, the Left’s opposition to selection is still a valid one.

Ian Hunter’s work is always valuable because it is novel, it is carefully thought through and it is generative. It makes us think. We do not have to agree with his political assumptions or conclusions in order to draw value from what he has written.

However, I disagree with his article above. I don’t think that Ian has succeeded in laying to rest the education politics of equality of the 1970s and 1980s, although he has uncovered some limitations and weaknesses. Nor has he succeeded in justifying what he sees as the alternative: the meritocratic practices of grading, sorting and selecting in education, which were the unquestioned orthodoxy of the 1950s and most of the 1960s, and still dominate the education system.

Hunter sees the demand for equality in education in narrow terms, as the demand for “equality of qualification”, a refusal by teachers to engage in these practices of grading and selecting to the extent that limits are placed on what students can do after they leave education. This has been an important form of educational equality, but it is not the only form.

Equality in education can also be understood in terms of equality of respect; the refusal to work within the framework of hierarchies and domination/subordination (or in its softer version, the modification of traditional educational authority). It can also be understood in more conventional political terms as equal rights of citizenship. Hunter’s article largely neglects these aspects of equality.

Hunter discerns a “structural ambivalence” in progressivist education policy. He says that there has been a vacillation between two contradictory goals: the complete
development of each student, and the improvement of the techniques of educational selection to make selection more fair and accurate.

Some reformers have wanted to get rid of the selective functions of education altogether, because selection prevents at least some students—and arguably, all students—from achieving “complete development”. Hunter mentions the claim that educational selection is implicated in the creation of social privileges. Another and related claim is that it always tends to discriminate against the socially ‘disadvantaged’.

In the politics of upper secondary education those voices demanding abolition of selection have been joined to a larger group who share Hunter’s own goal (as expressed here by T H Marshall) of wanting to “purge” educational selection of all “inexplicit social residues” in order to “free the distribution of social rights from earlier systems based on the transmission of inherited cultural and economic wealth”—in other words, to refine educational selection so as to establish a ‘fair’ system.

I think he is right about the existence of this ambivalence between abolition of selection and reform of selection, although, as I shall argue, he has defined the case for abolition too narrowly. The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) embodies this ambivalence. It wants to treat every student in much the same way and on equal terms, and it would like students from all social groups to succeed equally well, but it also provides a raft of detailed information about each student, enabling employers and universities to differentiate and discriminate more precisely than under the old HSC.

I would argue that, while the ambiguity of the radical position helped to provide a wide political base for the egalitarians, it was to catch them out in the end. It robbed the pressure for the abolition of selection of any coherence and consistency, and it also confused the moderates. There was never an agreed benchmark or measure with which to demonstrate with precision the distance between the status quo, and a ‘fair and neutral’ system, that remained to be travelled. And the ‘fair and neutral’ system was never clearly defined.

Hunter associates the demand for the abolition of selection with a rhetoric of “the cultural development of humanity” in which the role of education is to release the true nature of the individual (in Hannan’s words, “to preserve the extraordinary gifts they are born with”) in a process of total and integrated development. In relation to this idea, any selection, by definition, can only be stultifying.

Hunter is right to link this vision to the ideal of universal humanity, to the desire of humanist intellectuals to project their “caste practice” as the essence of education. Where I think that Hunter is seriously wrong is in his belief that this argument in itself constitutes a sufficient dismissal of the opposition to educational selection.

This point is vital. Hunter’s renunciation of reform, his slide back to the status quo (“the right of students to enter unequal social and occupational statuses on the basis of demonstrated differences in their scholastic abilities”) depends on the assumption that there are only two possible positions: an opposition to educational selection that derives from ideas about human essences and total development, or the willing acceptance of selection modified only by some fine-tuning of the techniques.

Hunter strengthens the case in favour of selection by drawing the opposition to selection in narrow terms. This is a ‘straw man’ argument. He implies that all of the criticisms of educational selection are contained within the humanist rhetoric about total development. But I don’t think that rhetoric is sufficient to contain all even of Hannan’s argument, let alone all possible arguments.

There are also positions in this debate other than the ones cited in Hunter’s quotes from Hannan. The opposition to educational selection of the terminating kind—in other words, selection that cuts off the future options of some students—has often sprung from ideas about universal participation in education, and empowerment through education. For example, at least three further reasons to oppose this form of educational selection can be advanced.
First, it can be argued that the social and cultural biases in the techniques of educational selection are not technical blips capable of being removed by a more ‘scientific’, vigilant or honest approach. Rather, these biases are fundamental to any processes of this type and, as such, cannot be eradicated.

Second, it can be argued that power exercised by educators—the power to terminate a student’s progress towards a wide range of occupations, and the income and status benefits that follow—is an illegitimate one.

Third, managed competition in education draws much of its rationale and its form from nineteenth century social Darwinism which was influential at the time that the universal systems of elementary public education were being established. This educational competition specifically links educational performance to high levels of individual student anxiety. This is barbaric, and it has not been satisfactorily demonstrated that it improves performance, scholastic or otherwise.

Now some brief comments on the first two of these points. Hunter talks about the concern that “the procedures of assessment and selection are not fulfilling their technical ends; for example because they are assessing students on the basis of inherited cultural style rather than trained scholastic abilities”. He says that the unequal outcomes of education should be based on “unequal scholastic performance”—“purged” of those measures of ability “not explicitly transmitted by the school system”. Once this process of “purging” is complete we will then have genuine equality of opportunity, the career open to the (trained) talents.

If only it were so easy. Hunter has skipped over the sorry history of all of the efforts to construct such a fair educational competition. It has proved not only difficult, but impossible.

Despite successive waves of education reform in the 1950s and 1960s, the Whitlam tertiary education reforms in the 1970s, and the increase in tertiary education participation in the 1980s and 1990s, obvious inequalities of outcome by social group remain. Students from more affluent homes continue to display the most “ability”. In national-cultural terms, anglo-celtic students continue to perform best in school subjects heavily reliant on the use of language. Of course, inequalities have not stayed the same. For example, to the extent that they were influenced by socio-economic factors, the social group inequalities in education were reduced by the abolition of fees and the introduction of student allowances. But the problem of unfair selection remained.

The clear conclusion from this experience is that social biases in academic achievement can be modified, but they cannot be eradicated. Even the abolition of the schools set up to concentrate educational privileges—the elite private schools—could not do that (although it would help). Bias in selection would remain because the educational competition is conducted in terms of a “common culture” which is native to some social groups but not others. Students learn and are examined with differing criteria. Hunter’s article does not examine with differing criteria. Hunter’s article does not have a sense of these problems.

Thus, while educational success itself comes normally to the anglo-celtic child from the affluent private school, for others even success may be bought at a high price. Because they set out to create standards, schools can fragment identities and marginalise whole cultures. In the form of multiple curricula, multiculturalism is one way through, but it makes ‘objective’ educational selection more difficult because the different groups of students are being examined with differing criteria. Hunter’s article does not have a sense of these problems.

The strength of Hunter’s portrait of the education profession is that he emphasises that its role cannot be reduced to ‘broader forces’, whether economic or cultural. Education is one of the institutions that makes culture and society. What is surprising is his complacency about the exercise of this power.
Hunter describes the history and development of the educational professions in terms of "the technical character of educational thinking and organisation". The role of teachers has been to manage the population and to allocate it to the different social destinations. The implication is that it is 'unrealistic' to consider removing the function of selection.

I have little quarrel with the history as Hunter has outlined it. But it is possible to ask whether the fates of the population should be assigned in this way. Is it enough simply to say 'that is the way things are' as Hunter seems to do? This method of argument is, to say the least, politically disabling. It does not at all follow that because particular forms of educational selection have been used in the past that they will continue to be used in the future.

Further, it can be argued that, ethically, the power of educational professionals over the social futures of 'their' students is repugnant. Like some other powers which have now passed away, it would be better if it was not exercised, and education was organised in a different way, with objectives other than selection made more prominent in its business.

For example, selection into work could be carried out by employers and perhaps also at the point of entry into postgraduate vocational training. The functions of social selection would no longer be masked by liberal educational discourse. Their specific mechanics would be more clearly revealed. Employers would be forced to take responsibility for selection decisions.

As Hunter notes, egalitarian reformers have sought to modify the professional power of educators by the democratisation of schooling, the introduction of mechanisms of decision-making "to bring the formative structure and logic of schooling within the sphere of popular control". He does not encourage such efforts. His argument is that the "specific set of political and intellectual technologies" in education, and the "technical organisation of the school system", may not be compatible with democratic procedures or democratic assumptions about equal rights. Differentiation between people is compatible with inequality, but not with equality.

Of course, an education system dominated by administrative techniques is not conducive to democratic procedures. The point of democratisation is to modify substantially the role of the traditional school and system administration, and classroom management. Hunter's description of the profession shows why it is difficult to bring about democratic reforms in education. He does not show that they are impossible.

As Hunter's account shows, the limited outlook of the egalitarian reformers may be one of the obstacles. He cites Hannan's statement that egalitarian reforms "cannot be left to the decision of school communities". As Hunter says, this is scarcely compatible with an argument for democratisation. In that respect, the old progressivism (like leninism) has been contradictory, forced to rely on the insupportable claim that it knows the 'real' popular interests better than the people in whose name it acts. This may help to explain the political isolation in which the VCE-driving Victorian government now finds itself.

However, there is no necessary contradiction between educational egalitarianism and democracy. The recent history of school reform illustrates that parents who become closely involved in the running of local schools are often inclined to support egalitarian changes to grading and selection.

The role of the educational profession as outlined by Hunter is now being modified by two radically different and often opposing forms of 'user' or 'consumer' power. There is the politics of local involvement in decision-making (especially in Victoria, SA and the ACT). There is also the market economics of Friedman and Hewson. Payment of fees would enable the would-be university student to circumvent the rigours of academic selection. In their different ways both the market and democratic politics are implicated in the question of equality, even though they tend to produce very different notions of 'fairness' and 'equal chances' from those produced by the techniques of educational selection.

Hunter's article is characteristically incisive. It is unfortunate that he has been so selective. He has concentrated on taking apart the radical egalitarian position. Rather than developing another left position, one more suited to the times perhaps, he has given us the old 1950s goals of equality of opportunity and a fair selection system. Yet I believe that the idea of an objective or neutral educational selection is no longer convincing. It is now widely understood that, with the best will in the world, educational ability and educational selection are subjective, arbitrary and even corruptible.

The selection of students for occupational and social destinations is neither inevitable in its present form, nor is it, as he implies, something that is relatively unproblematic. It contains political and ethical problems that need to be faced. There is never any shortage of reasons for turning away from egalitarian goals and winding back to the status quo. But a return to the status quo solves nothing except, sometimes, our own personal and individual dilemmas about survival.

This does not mean that we must implement our own individual 'liberated zones' in education, free of the baleful influence of selection and competition, etc. Another lesson of the 1970s is that this approach is not effective. The problems raised by the question of educational selection cannot be dealt with through the decisions of single individuals working in the professional sphere, and need once again to be made the object of a collective and political practice. There is little to be gained from individual bad conscience, except therapy.

SIMON MARGINSON works at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at Melbourne University.