



**Higher Education in the UK and the USA since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan:
Converging Models?**

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**Higher Education in the UK and California:
Issues of access, equality and achievement in a time of Excellence**

Abstract:

Higher education in the US and the UK has gone through significant changes during the past three decades, notably the transition to a mass system. As higher education has expanded, its value as a public good has been increasingly associated with national competitiveness and individual upward mobility. Given its size and efficiency, California's system offers a particularly relevant comparative model for UK higher education. The paper will first look at both higher education systems and show that their distinctive histories and cultures have led to opposite policies and reform processes: on the one hand, the UK has tended to unify a highly decentralized and autonomous system, on the other hand, California has sought to maintain the diversity of its tripartite structure of public colleges and universities. Yet, one sees a pattern of convergence in the continuing effort to broaden access and opportunity while responding to government mandates and global economic forces: in both countries, recent reform movements have tended to solve the dilemma of achieving expansion and performance. The notions of academic excellence and equality of opportunity will provide a framework for highlighting common patterns of development of higher education and higher education policies in the 21st century. The paper will more particularly focus on the multiple routes to higher education in the UK and California to show that the democratization of academic access is relative and hides persisting inequalities. The analysis will emphasize the fact that through their responses to global changes translating into distinct, yet comparable, dynamics of expansion, both systems tend to reproduce and maintain existing social stratification and cultural differences. Finally, it will strive to find how to combine the goals of economic competitiveness with the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and gain insight into the future of higher education as related to academic excellence and equality of opportunity.