

‘You Sound Funny’: Northern Discrimination and Inequality in England

Perhaps the one piece of context needed for this article - I am a Northerner who has experienced the impact of the North/South divide. Our own university lacks Northern representation, and I hope to be able to bring attention to a societal issue that has perhaps not been fully considered by many in our own university, as well as our society. The fact is that the North has been left behind, which I believe is a result of both the historical and current political (and, as an extension, economic) context of England. This article will explain some of the reasons why and how this has come to be.

Historically, the North was for a while considered to be violent, whereas Vikings had settled largely in the Northern part of England. This region was known as the Danelaw, which was largely initially undisrupted by the ‘traditionally’ English people. Attempts to ‘settle’ this region had not turned out well. Indeed, the North/South divide under William I after Normans had settled within England had grown to an extent that campaigns in 1069-70 to bring Northern England under Norman rule, known as the Harrying of the North, had resulted in the Northern regions’ agricultural land made infertile. This campaign resulted in 75% of the Northern population either dying or fleeing and not returning to these regions. These historical facts show a dark history of prejudice (to the extent of genocide being committed against an entire region) within the English borders. The politics of England has traditionally been and indeed continues to be today, elitist against those deemed to not be within a particular section of society: in this case, because of regional background. Social and economic injustice against the North continues even to the modern-day.

Today, there are clear differences in opportunities and local council funding in different regions of the country. Studies from the Centre for Cities think tank in 2019 indicated that austerity cuts affected Northern cities the most, with Liverpool’s cuts representing £816 per person, and Barnsley being the hardest hit in percentage terms with 40% of their local authority funding being cut. These local authority cuts have coincided with already existing inequality to cripple many areas in the North. In my own home city of Durham, for example, I have seen many businesses forced to close during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of funding.

In terms of education, the North East has the lowest number of young people who attend university - in our UCAS application process, only around 34% of 18-year-olds in the North East (the lowest in the country) had applied to university, compared to nearly 53% of 18-year-olds in London (the highest in the country). We can probably expect to see in the upcoming years a continued lack of North Eastern young people in universities, as many young people in my area are simply not encouraged enough by universities to attend, and are continued to not be attracted by the idea of attending university. For even younger people in education, the percentage of children aged 0-5 in the North with a good level of development was in 2017 (according to DfE research) around 68% compared to around 72% for the rest of the country. Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that in education, even in the early years, inequality of opportunity due to regional background very much exists.

Something I have noticed is that a Northern accent in institutions such as our own tends to get recognised quickly. This can be both positive and negative; while I have been

complimented, I have also had my accent and culture mocked. This is unsurprising given a general lack of awareness and sense of a cultural divide that has been created, translating from society into our educational institutions. It is particularly difficult for society and education to be considered meritocratic when, in educational settings in England, Northern students are told (for example as in Durham University earlier this term) that they are 'tokens' and a waste of a worthy student's place. Northern young people are victims of the classism and economic inequality within our society, being ridiculed for their accents and heritage. Articles such as [this one](#) from The Guardian demonstrate the impact that these behaviors have on these students. If a university is intended to be a smaller representation of society, then our society, and universities, have much to do to tackle these issues.

In our own university, more needs to be done to ensure that the relatively few Northern students are better represented, and more absolutely needs to be done to incentivise more bright Northern young people to attend here. In the higher education system in general, these young people are often made to feel as though they do not belong. This issue needs to be brought to our attention so that our society can do better and be better. The North/South divide is not as harmless as it seems, and this needs to be addressed. I hope that this article can, at least, inform people about this issue and raise some conversations in the future.

Kieran Barry, 20th December 2020