

Make merit contestable

Evaluate the book's claim that apparent failures of meritocracy often reflect closed access rather than excessive attention to competence. Audit credentials, networks, regulation, market power, and housing while preserving dignity and testing alternative explanations.

2 lessons · approximately 5 hours, plus multi-day practice

How to use this workbook

Read the assigned manuscript first. This workbook contains accompanying teaching and invented cases, not a revision of the source. Attempt exercises before consulting the rubrics and explanations. Written work is self-assessed or discussed with a tutor; no secure examination, academic credit or certificate is implied. Use a clearly labelled fictional case when live practice or personal disclosure would be unsuitable. Links use the course's intended publication address; for offline review, open the supplied source PDF at the full-book page numbers shown.

- Define contestability and distinguish it from equal outcomes.
- Validate competence signals and identify unrelated gates.
- Analyze linked institutional barriers.
- Design open learning and selection pathways.
- Interpret mobility evidence without overclaiming causation.

[Open the module and source reading links](#)

Lesson sequence

1. Audit whether a contest is genuinely open
2. Restore standards and access together

Audit whether a contest is genuinely open

Allow approximately 100 minutes, plus any continuing activity.

Learning objectives

- Define meritocracy as the source's contestable allocation mechanism.
- Distinguish valid competence signals from unnecessary eligibility gates.
- Analyze closed networks, capture, monopoly privilege, and housing access.

Assigned source readings

Complete consecutive source range, including its arguments and examples

Full-book PDF pages 147–151. Section links open the chapter at the relevant page.

Develop the argument

The book's definition and psychological bargain

The chapter defines meritocracy as an imperfect allocation mechanism aligning rewards with contribution rather than birth or favor. Its central term is contestability: positions should remain open to challenge through relevant ability, judgment, and responsibility. Treat this as the author's normative reconstruction, not a verified historical account of what the word originally meant. The psychological-bargain section argues that people accept unequal results more readily when effort can improve their prospects and rules seem credible. That is a testable social claim, not a guarantee of universal acceptance. Some people may reasonably question how contribution is measured or how much inequality is acceptable even under fair competition. The chapter's main diagnostic remains useful: an institution should not describe a closed selection process as open merit. First compare its stated standards with the actual route into consideration.

Credentials: useful evidence or costly permission

The credential-inflation section distinguishes a signal that aids judgment from a certificate that replaces judgment. A degree can provide relevant evidence for some tasks, while an unrelated requirement can exclude capable candidates who lack money, time, or access. Test predictive validity, task relevance, alternative learning routes, and total applicant burden. The source's stronger claim that educational institutions generally dilute standards and sell prestige is not established by the existence of a degree gap. A difference between current workers' qualifications and new job postings could reflect a rising gate, changing tasks, different cohorts, or other factors. Investigate job content before choosing among explanations. A better system may combine structured work samples, recognized prior learning, transparent criteria, and necessary credentials where safety or technical requirements justify them. Removing a degree filter without replacing it can simply increase reliance on personal connections.

Networks, capture, and monopoly privilege

Closed networks can circulate internships and vacancies among insiders while evaluating accent, hobbies, or familiarity instead of relevant capability. Distinguish useful references from cultural similarity masquerading as competence. The regulatory-capture section extends this logic to enterprise: fixed compliance costs, selective rules, or incumbent privileges can protect established firms. The monopoly section argues that rewards can then reflect extraction rather than service. However, concentration alone does not prove monopoly privilege or low contribution; scale economies, innovation, geography, and demand may also matter. Examine barriers to entry, conduct, pricing, alternatives, and rule-making records. The source acknowledges real safety concerns but also makes a broad assertion about asymmetric enforcement. Treat the latter as a claim needing evidence in a specific setting. An access audit must test both unnecessary restrictions and the risks that justified protections address.

The geography of opportunity

Housing connects enterprise-level contestability with a person's practical ability to participate. Even a transparent vacancy is inaccessible if the applicant cannot afford to live nearby or reliably commute. The source emphasizes zoning, permitting delays, and incumbent vetoes as mechanisms of scarcity. Evaluate those alongside land, infrastructure, construction costs, environmental constraints, finance, and demand. Supply reform may help but takes time, so consider transitional access and displacement as well. The core method is to map linked gates: learning, credentials, applications, housing, transport, and selection. A formally equal rule can have unequal access costs without every unequal outcome being proof of corruption. Source notes on mobility, hiring, and capture provide research leads rather than complete causal identification. A strong audit states what the evidence demonstrates, what remains uncertain, and which change would make the contest more genuinely open.

The technician contest that starts too late

Invented for this course.

An invented employer advertises a technician role publicly but requires an unrelated degree, holds an unpaid two-day assessment, and fills most places through managers' relatives. Its site is far from affordable transport.

1. Separate the stated standard of technical competence from degree, time, referral, and location gates.
2. Ask whether the degree and assessment predict actual task performance. A public advertisement alone does not establish an open process.
3. Compare a paid accessible work sample, structured scoring, public scheduling, and equivalent prior-learning routes.
4. Test selection and job outcomes while protecting applicant privacy and avoiding judgments based on family background or cultural similarity.

The process can be made more contestable without abandoning standards. The remedy must validate competence and reduce irrelevant barriers together.

Practice and evidence

1. Draw the access funnel

Map the technician route from learning about the role to successful performance six months later.

Deliverable: A seven-stage funnel with dropout causes and data requests.

1. Identify formal and practical barriers.
2. Separate inability to participate from inability to perform.
3. Propose one evidence-based improvement at each major gate.

Diagnosis · 3 points

Distinguishes access, selection, training, and performance.

Evidence · 3 points

Requests relevant task and outcome data rather than assuming gatekeeping.

Safeguards · 3 points

Uses fair criteria and protects personal information.

2. Validate a competence signal

Compare an unrelated degree, a relevant certificate, a reference, and a structured work sample for a fictional technical role.

Deliverable: Four signal assessments and a recommended combined process.

1. Define job tasks and risks.
2. Assess predictive value, cost, accessibility, and manipulability.
3. Plan validation and appeal.

Relevance · 3 points

Connects evidence to actual work.

Fairness · 3 points

Avoids cultural-fit proxies and unjustified barriers.

Balance · 3 points

Recognizes useful credentials and limitations of work samples.

Reflection

At what stage does an apparently fair contest exclude people before their relevant ability is ever assessed?

Formative self-check

Choose an answer before looking at the answer key. These questions are open practice, not a secure assessment.

1. A vacancy is public, but applicants need two unpaid days and expensive travel. What remains uncertain?

- A. Whether the posting exists
- B. Whether the role has a name
- C. Whether entry is practically accessible
- D. Whether any candidate has skills

2. Current workers lack degrees now required in new postings. What is the best next step?

- A. Declare that job tasks cannot have changed
- B. Investigate task changes, performance, cohorts, and the requirement's validity
- C. Assume every degree is useless
- D. Infer all employers are corrupt

3. A market becomes concentrated. What would strengthen a capture explanation?

- A. Concentration alone
- B. High profits alone
- C. A successful new product alone
- D. Evidence that incumbent-designed rules exclude rivals without proportionate public benefits

Answer explanations

1. C — Whether entry is practically accessible

Formal openness is only one stage. Time and travel costs can prevent otherwise capable people from entering the contest.

2. B — Investigate task changes, performance, cohorts, and the requirement's validity

The gap is relevant evidence of possible inflation, but does not alone prove unchanged tasks or motives.

3. D — Evidence that incumbent-designed rules exclude rivals without proportionate public benefits

Capture requires an institutional mechanism. Concentration can arise through several channels, so rule-making and benefit evidence are important.

Restore standards and access together

Allow approximately 100 minutes, plus any continuing activity.

Learning objectives

- Evaluate the chapter's dignity and legitimacy claims without equating rank with worth.
- Design open-merit reforms across training, selection, enterprise, and housing.
- Distinguish mobility evidence from a complete causal account of access.

Assigned source readings

Complete consecutive source range, including its arguments and examples

Full-book PDF pages 151–157. Section links open the chapter at the relevant page.

Develop the argument

Dignity is not a prize for winning

The dignity section argues that a rigged contest humiliates people by presenting exclusion as personal inadequacy. Preserve that insight while questioning the stronger claim that meritocracy humiliates only when it lies. Even a fair contest can be experienced painfully, and a system can overvalue a narrow skill while neglecting care, solidarity, or unmeasured contributions. Human dignity does not depend on rank, income, employment, or success. A sound institution can use relevant standards while offering respectful feedback, adequate support, opportunities to improve, and recognition that luck and circumstances affect results. The chapter's claims about resentment, disengagement, and radicalization describe possible responses, not psychological diagnoses of unsuccessful applicants. Assess the fairness of processes and the availability of alternatives without assuming that everyone reacts the same way or that criticism of merit must be hostility to excellence.

Small institutions as places to learn

Burke's little-platoons section emphasizes families, workshops, associations, congregations, and neighborhoods as settings where abilities and habits develop through repeated practice. The useful distinction is between cultivating competence and merely filtering for people who already possess it. A workplace can create a paid training route rather than requiring a costly signal acquired elsewhere. A community group can offer mentorship and feedback, while a formal institution can provide accessible instruction and recognized assessment. Neither local reputation nor distant measurement is automatically fairer. Small groups can observe real performance and can also preserve favoritism; standardized processes can improve access and can also miss important context. Design complementary forms of evidence, with transparent criteria and appeal. The chapter's statement that merit is grown in practice should guide investment in learning opportunities rather than become a reason to reject all quantitative evaluation.

Scapegoating and the open-merit package

The scapegoat section argues that institutions launder capture, scarcity, and inheritance through meritocratic language, prompting people to attack standards rather than the mechanisms of closure. This is the author's interpretation, not the only possible critique of meritocracy.

Reconstruct competing arguments fairly, including concerns about luck, measurement, unequal preparation, and the distribution of rewards. The proposed open-merit package includes lower artificial barriers, less credential inflation, restored competition, simpler legal entry, more housing near opportunity, demonstrated competence, and protected voluntary institutions. These are linked proposals requiring sequencing and evidence. A better selection test cannot compensate fully for inaccessible training; training cannot guarantee mobility if jobs or housing remain unavailable. Preserve necessary safety and anti-discrimination protections while lowering unrelated gates. Judge whether standards become more relevant and participation more feasible, rather than assuming access and rigor must be traded against each other.

Read mobility evidence at the right level

The notes cite declining absolute income mobility, degree requirements, elite hiring practices, and captured regulation. Absolute mobility compares a child's income with parents' income at a specified age; it is not the same as moving up the relative rank distribution. Its decline can reflect growth and distributional changes as well as access barriers, so it does not alone prove the chapter's full causal account. The degree report is dated differently elsewhere in the book; this bibliographic inconsistency needs verification rather than silent correction. The final Hazlitt summaries revisit credentials, capture, and housing, and the extracted group includes a Part IV transition and a Mises-attributed quotation about taxation and creation. Preserve that material as source rhetoric, not independent proof. A strong final assessment states the author's diagnosis, identifies what its evidence supports, engages a substantive alternative, and proposes a falsifiable reform. Neither agreement that merit legitimizes inequality nor rejection of redistribution is required for full credit.

An open route into project coordination

Invented for this course.

An invented nonprofit wants project coordinators who can schedule work, manage a budget, and handle conflict. It currently requires a prestigious degree and unpaid experience. It considers a paid training route with a structured task and mentored trial period.

1. Define relevant performance before selecting signals: scheduling accuracy, budget reasoning, communication, and fair conflict handling.
2. Offer equivalent entry routes and accessible assessment, while preserving minimum competence and safeguarding participants during trial work.
3. Compare completion and performance across routes using consistent scoring, feedback, and appeal; do not treat background as a proxy for ability.
4. Track whether housing, transport, or care constraints still prevent participation and whether training leads to real opportunities.

Open merit means making relevant excellence attainable and assessable. It does not mean removing standards or treating unsuccessful applicants as less worthy.

Practice and evidence

1. Design an open-merit reform

Create a six-month redesign of the nonprofit's recruitment and learning process.

Deliverable: A process specification with standards, access supports, and review criteria.

1. Define tasks and fair scoring.
2. Provide paid learning and alternative evidence routes.
3. Monitor hidden barriers and offer feedback or re-entry.

Standards · 3 points

Retains relevant, validated competence requirements.

Access · 3 points

Reduces unrelated costs and closed-network dependence.

Dignity · 3 points

Separates performance decisions from personal worth and provides fair remedies.

2. Audit a mobility claim

Analyze the claim that a fall in children out-earning parents proves all institutions are captured. Use the source's mobility note without claiming external verification.

Deliverable: A 300-word evidence audit and a proposed research design.

1. Define absolute and relative mobility.
2. Identify alternative causes and missing comparisons.
3. Specify evidence connecting particular gates to outcomes.

Concepts · 3 points

Distinguishes levels, ranks, cohorts, and comparison ages.

Inference · 3 points

Does not infer a complete causal story from one trend.

Research · 3 points

Links proposed data to specific mechanisms and counterarguments.

Reflection

What would make a standard both more demanding about relevant skill and less dependent on inherited access?

Formative self-check

Choose an answer before looking at the answer key. These questions are open practice, not a secure assessment.

1. A fair skills test rejects an applicant. What follows about the applicant's dignity?

- A. It is reduced
- B. It is unchanged; the decision concerns a specific role and evidence
- C. The test must be invalid
- D. The applicant has no other contributions

2. Absolute income mobility falls. Which conclusion is justified from that fact alone?

- A. All relative ranks became fixed
- B. Every employer is captured
- C. Fewer people exceeded parents' income under the study's definition; causes require further analysis
- D. Training is useless

3. Which redesign best captures open merit?

- A. Remove every standard
- B. Keep prestigious credentials regardless of task relevance
- C. Hire only people already known to managers
- D. Validate relevant standards, provide accessible learning routes, and test hidden gates

Answer explanations

1. B — It is unchanged; the decision concerns a specific role and evidence

Role-specific assessment does not determine human worth. Respect, feedback, and alternatives remain important even in a fair process.

2. C — Fewer people exceeded parents' income under the study's definition; causes require further analysis

Absolute mobility is a defined outcome measure. Growth, distribution, measurement, and access mechanisms need separate investigation.

3. D — Validate relevant standards, provide accessible learning routes, and test hidden gates

The chapter's strongest proposal joins competence with contestable entry. Neither automatic exclusion nor absence of standards accomplishes both.

Module assessment

An institute that promises merit

A fictional institute selects trainees through prestige degrees, unpaid trials, insider references, and housing near an expensive campus. Its leaders cite successful alumni as proof that the system is fair.

Required evidence

- An access and evidence audit from application through later opportunity.
- A redesigned selection-and-training pathway with validated standards.
- A response to both the source's argument and one substantive critique of meritocracy.

Assessment criteria

Diagnosis · 5 points

Distinguishes selection effects, acquired skill, inherited access, and actual performance.

Design · 5 points

Combines rigor, paid or accessible participation, alternative routes, and safeguards.

Dignity · 5 points

Does not equate rank or productivity with human worth.

Evidence · 5 points

Uses credible comparison and avoids treating alumni success or mobility trends as complete proof.

Model response: consult after your attempt

A strong response recognizes that successful alumni may reflect selection rather than the institute's value added or open access. It examines who never applies, who drops out before assessment, what credentials predict, and which supports make learning possible. It proposes structured relevant assessment and accessible development routes while preserving safety and fair standards. It can question the author's claim that open merit fully legitimizes unequal rewards, provided it represents the argument accurately and supports its alternative.

Source cautions and interpretation

- Footnotes 41–44, all twelve numbered sections, chapter notes, three final Hazlitt examples, and the Part IV transition were read.
- The source's absolute-mobility evidence does not alone identify capture or relative mobility; psychological responses and legitimacy claims are contestable.
- Dismissed by Degrees is dated 2017 here and 2014 in earlier chapters; bibliography and empirical summaries require verification against original sources.

- No figure blocks occur. The source remains unchanged, and assessments grade reasoning rather than ideological agreement.

Source coverage

Chapter 10: The Meritocracy Problem That Isn't Meritocracy

The complete opening quotation and chapter introduction establish the problem and author's governing position; the first teaching section reconstructs the argument and separates its assumptions from evidence.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 147](#)

I. What meritocracy was meant to do

Presents contestability as the author's normative definition and distinguishes it from a verified word history.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 148](#)

II. The psychological bargain of merit

Tests perceived fairness and opportunity without assuming universal acceptance or psychological responses.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 148](#)

III. Credential inflation: when signals replace substance

Validates task relevance and alternative signals before labeling a degree gap as proof of gatekeeping.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 148](#)

IV. Closed networks and inherited advantage

Distinguishes relevant references from insider referrals and cultural-similarity proxies.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 149](#)

V. Regulatory capture and protected scarcity

Requires evidence of incumbent influence and disproportionate barriers while preserving legitimate safeguards.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 150](#)

VI. Monopoly privilege and the illusion of competition

Distinguishes monopoly privilege from concentration caused by scale, innovation, or demand.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 150](#)

VII. Zoning, housing, and the geography of exclusion

Maps practical housing and transport access with zoning, infrastructure, finance, and transition constraints.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 150](#)

VIII. Meritocracy and dignity

Separates role-specific performance judgments from inherent dignity and acknowledges substantive critiques of merit.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 151](#)

IX. Burke's "little platoons" and real merit

Combines local practice, paid training, and formal assessment with transparency and appeal.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 151](#)

X. Why meritocracy becomes the scapegoat

Reconstructs the author's scapegoat argument while engaging luck, measurement, preparation, and reward-distribution critiques.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 152](#)

XI. The real alternative: widening entry

Designs the seven-part open-merit package with sequencing, relevant standards, and accessible routes.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 152](#)

XII. The lesson

Evaluates the claim that open merit legitimizes inequality as a normative conclusion rather than a required belief.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 153](#)

The Lesson Line

Uses the access-versus-mask formulation to test actual entry and selection processes.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 153](#)

Chapter 10 Notes:

Distinguishes absolute from relative mobility and flags the inconsistent degree-report date and unverified empirical summaries.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 154](#)

The "Hazlitt" Examples (Primary)

Revisits credential, capture, and housing mechanisms in the institute access assessment.

[Read source section: full-book PDF page 155](#)

Part IV — Taxation, Capital, and the Wealth-Tax Illusion

Reads the Part IV title and Mises-attributed quotation as a transition to taxation, not independent empirical proof.

Read source section: [full-book PDF page 157](#)