Problematizing social mobility in relation to higher education policy

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Abstract
This paper problematizes the concept of social mobility through an exploration of it in relation to higher education policy in England. Based upon a content analysis of a number of key policy documents from distinct eras, it identifies definitions and understandings of social mobility within them; exploring how such references have changed over time; and critiquing the differences between the imagined 'ideals' of what policy rhetoric seeks to do and the reality of policy implementation. In particular it considers the characterisation of social mobility as an individualised concern; it positions aspirations of improving social mobility within the market of higher education; and it ultimately asks whether higher education can solve the government's 'social mobility problem'.

Resumo
Este trabalho problematiza o conceito de mobilidade social através de uma exploração do mesmo em relação à política de ensino superior na Inglaterra. Com base em uma análise de conteúdo de vários documentos-chave de políticas de diferentes épocas, identifica definições e entendimentos de mobilidade social dentro deles; explorar como essas referências mudaram ao longo do tempo; e criticar as diferenças entre os "ideais" imaginados do que a retórica política procura fazer e a realidade da implementação de políticas. Em particular, considera a caracterização da mobilidade social como uma preocupação individualizada; posiciona as aspirações de melhorar a mobilidade social no mercado de ensino superior; e, finalmente, pergunta se o ensino superior pode resolver o "problema de mobilidade social" do governo.

Introduction

The Office for Students (OfS), the new regulatory body for the English higher education (HE) sector, advocates that higher education 'can compound the social mobility problem or contribute to its solution' (2018a) – adding to a long-running policy discourse around widening access and participation and improving social mobility through tertiary education.

This paper will address the political conceptualisation of the role of higher education towards improved social mobility; based upon a documentary analysis of a series of key policy papers it will seek to show the transformation that has taken place between the influential Robbins Report of 1963 and the creation of the OfS in 2017.

There is an established history in English policy of widening access to higher education and universities – going back at least to the Robbins Report – which centred on the principle that courses 'should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (Committee on Higher Education 1963). The report is largely credited with the move towards the massification of HE, being published at a time when only around six per cent of young people entered the sector (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997, 20). In 1997 the Dearing Report launched the modern widening participation agenda, stating that 'increasing participation in higher education is a necessary and desirable objective of national policy over the next 20 years' and arguing that disparities in participation should be reduced (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997). In 2003 a white paper, 'The Future of Higher Education', was published (DfES 2003) which asserted that the 'social class gap in entry to higher education remains unacceptably wide' and which paved the way for legislation to create the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Taking over many of the roles of OFFA, creation of the OfS was central to the 2016 white paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' (DBIS 2016) which later led to the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). This legislation strengthened the policy levers which incentivise the widening of access and participation in universities (e.g. the access agreements formally presided over by OFFA, supplanted by the access and participation statements that are regulated by the OfS).

This paper will focus on higher education in England, an area of devolved policy across the UK since 1998 – but will inevitably include some references to the UK, particularly as policy prior to this date largely applied across the constituent nations. Its conclusions relate to the conceptualisation of higher education towards social mobility aims more broadly – having relevance to all those systems which have engaged in similar policy discourses (e.g. Haveman & Smeeding 2006 – writing on the US system).

The language of social mobility in education includes a variety of terms which have come into and out of fashion across policy discourse: providing an equality of opportunity for people to access higher education was the hallmark of Robbins, while Dearing concentrated more keenly on widening participation. More recent documents highlight 'social mobility' itself as the ultimate goal of education policy (e.g. DfE 2017). As Harrison and Waller point out, the terminology is not necessarily interchangeable – in their usage 'participation' denotes admission and entry into HE, whereas 'access' generally refers to 'the ability to participate within a fair and open admissions system' (2017, 141). The use of the term 'widening' is particularly relevant according to Burke – 'the emphasis on widening, rather than simply increasing, access to, and participation in, higher education places focus on those groups who

have been traditionally excluded or under-(mis)represented in higher education' (2012, 35). Social mobility is often described as the product of widening access and participation (e.g. Russell Group 2018) and is defined by the Social Mobility Commission (an independent statutory commission) as 'the link between a person's occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents' (2019a).

Recent government policy developments, and their associated discourses of social mobility and widening access and participation, are catalogued by Harrison (2018, 59) which (inevitably) provide something of a frame through which we view historical policy documents. Layer noted that there was 'an overt policy commitment to widening participation' in 2005 (particularly prevalent since the Labour government took office in 1997), although also noted that there was considerable debate over what the term meant (2); while Burke asserted that 'widening access to and participation in higher education has become a central policy theme nationally and globally…although with a particular focus on certain social groups at different times and in different places' (2012, 1-31). According to Harrison and Waller, later governments continued to adopt such an approach:

> The Coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative (2015 to present) governments have maintained the earlier policy commitment to WP [widening participation], albeit with a shift in tenor from social justice to social mobility – i.e. from a broad brief to tackle the origins and effects of structural inequalities within the education system to a narrower focus encouraging disadvantaged young people to access (especially elite) higher education as a route into professional careers (Harrison & Waller 2017, 142).

Nonetheless, the same authors go on to argue that broader social justice issues have taken on less priority, with 'a strong emphasis on raising aspirations rather than addressing inequalities in attainment directly' (Harrison & Waller 2017, 157).

Internationally, the pursuit of social mobility, and in particular education's ability to strengthen or improve social mobility, continues to be regarded as important (e.g. OECD 2018), which Archer et al. describe as 'motivated by a number of factors, including economic, institutional and social justice concerns, which are framed within the globalization of the knowledge economy/knowledge society' (2003, 1). In England we have moved to a mass higher education system – almost 50 percent of young people now attend according to the government's measure (DfE 2018) compared to just 5 percent in 1961 (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997): which reflects the broader trend globally (Marginson 2018). However, as Burke notes, 'those benefitting the most from policies to expand HE are those with relative social, economic and cultural advantages' (2012, 11).

One of the key divisions (regarding social mobility) in the English system sees older and newer universities in this country enrol markedly different intakes of students: 'research-intensive, elite institutions continue to recruit students largely from affluent socio-economic backgrounds, whilst newer post-1992 institutions are associated most strongly with recruiting students from traditionally under-represented and 'diverse' backgrounds' (Burke 2012, 31). Boliver's research has shown that admission is not meritocratic at these so-called elite institutions as 'applicants from more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds are more

likely to be offered places than applicants from less advantaged backgrounds with the same grades and facilitating subjects at A-level' (2018, 45-6). This is clearly problematic in terms of the government's stated aspiration for universities to improve social mobility (OfS 2018a), as although massification has widened participation more broadly, it has not enabled all students to evenly access all institutions: elite universities have largely maintained their social mix of students (Harrison 2018) and there has been a polarisation between types of university (Reay 2018). Crucially, this disparity may have contributed to the wider problems (from a social mobility perspective) that remain within the English HE system:

> While many more young people from low-income homes are finding their way into higher education, the 'social class gap' has not closed significantly and the change in participation rates shows a strong correlation with improved school qualification pass rates (Harrison & Waller 2017, 143)

Until the creation of the OfS, different universities were given significant levels of freedom to essentially define their own conception of 'widening participation' (James 2018, 234) through their access agreements with OFFA. This has led, among many of the elite universities in the country, to competition to recruit from a small group of disadvantaged applicants, rather than necessarily increasing the overall number of disadvantaged applicants obtaining places holistically (Harrison & Waller 2017, 157).

While there are institutional divisions around wider participation and access, Archer also highlights inherent divisions within the (potential) student population – noting that 'working-class students face greater risks of failure and more uncertain rewards' from entering HE (2003, 119) – which might lead some to question whether their participation is worthy of such risks. As such, many of the governmental moves towards improved social mobility often don't consider some of the more fundamental, or structural issues at work. When the choice of HE is riskier for some groups, the choice is unequal (Archer 2003, 136), especially in the marketised system which operates in England:

> The illusion of the market is that it offers a kind of natural mechanism for justice, though it is fairly clear that those best resourced will benefit the most. Consumers will make what Bourdieu terms 'the choice of the necessary', which is to say that their positon in the field structures their habitus and therefore shapes their horizons for action (James 2018, 241).

There are at least two issues of relevance here – firstly whether it matters what university you attend in terms of the quality of the teaching and learning experience you encounter; and secondly whether it matters what university you attend in terms of your graduate prospects. In terms of the first, Boliver et al. have shown that your chance of obtaining a 2:1 or first class degree is largely unaffected by institution type once entry requirements are accounted for (2018a, 4) and outside of Oxbridge there is little evidence from the initial rounds of the Teaching and Student Outcomes Excellence Framework (TEF) that traditionally 'elite' institutions (e.g. the Russell Group) do better than other institutions (e.g. Pells 2017). Resultantly, if we consider the intrinsic benefits of attending university, it could be argued that the disparity between attending different types of institutions should not greatly matter.

However, in terms of the second point, we do know that even accounting for differences in prior attainment and in courses studied, attending a Russell Group university (the self-styled elite universities in the UK) leads to the highest graduate salaries (Belfield 2018, 49). The reputation of a university does appear to have an impact in terms of acting as a gateway to better jobs and a higher earning power – which makes the disparity between access at different institutions problematic, and places the lack of progress elite universities are making in this area (Heselwood 2018) into sharp relief. Archer et al. argue that institutional cultures need to be challenged more broadly:

> Even within institutions with high proportions of 'non-traditional' students, the culture of the academy predominantly reflects a discourse of the student as young, white, male and middle class. Students should be able to feel that they can 'belong' in any institution, but this will not happen until the elite universities are no longer the preserve of 'traditional' students (Archer et al. 2003, 197).

However the same authors note that this is unlikely to happen until the government more strongly incentivises such moves.

While such issues are undoubtedly important to consider, one of the fundamental concerns within the academic discourse around social mobility is the treatment of HE as incontrovertibly the 'best' form of learning (Burke 2012, 32) and the assumption that all young people *should* aspire to go on into tertiary education. Similarly, as Hayton and Stevenson point out, the broad support for widening participation is often built on the assumption that 'the opportunity to participate and benefit from HE should be open to all' (2018, 2) without questioning whether this might be problematic or counter-productive. Indeed, the whole social mobility agenda seems to rest on a deficit model of working-class people (Gewirtz 2001) which 'normalizes particular middle-class values and practices' (Archer et al. 2003) and only contributes 'to the re-privileging of certain institutions, courses, academics and students (Burke 2012, 32). This problem is compounded by an individualised vision of the benefits of HE (associated with the argument that because 'students themselves are the main beneficiaries of higher education [they] should therefore pay for the investment being made in their own 'human capital' (James 2018, 232)) – this argument will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

In keeping with such a critique of higher education as the social mobility 'solution' (the characterisation at least proposed by the OfS (2018a)) Archer et al. have claimed that the pursuit of 'equality' of access for all may not even be possible: 'it is a system with an in-built necessity for failure because, were everyone to participate, then it would no longer be 'higher' education in the same sense' (2003, 200). Ultimately, as Reay summarises, discourses of social mobility (defined, above, as a product of widening participation and access) only serve to reinforce inequality:

> The promise of mobility allows capitalist societies like the United Kingdom to maintain a system of firmly entrenched inequalities. In direct contradiction to Gordon Brown's assertion that social mobility is equivalent

to social justice, it is a key justification for social inequalities, a crucial lynchpin in neoliberal ideology (Reay 2013).

Reay's argument follows Tawney (below) in asserting that in reality the focus on social mobility is something of a sleight of hand by government which allows them to individualise the notion of success or failure (i.e. improving your own position in relation to your parents) and which frames the concept of earning more, of moving 'upwards' through social classes, as the most desirable outcome. The Social Mobility Commission's characterisation of what social mobility is directly ties the concept to employment, which means that the divide within the university sector fundamentally undermines this drive towards improved social mobility. This allows the government to place the blame on universities themselves, without acknowledging the role that the quasi-market that has been created within English HE does not incentivise (elite) institutions to adopt widescale changes to their recruitment approach.

> It is possible that tadpoles reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly onto dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs (Tawney 1964, 105).

As Tawney noted in 1964, and Reay has since described more recently, a focus on concepts such as social mobility might enable a handful of individuals to transcend their upbringing, but this generally reinforces inequality and disempowers the wider majority of those from 'lower' class social backgrounds. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore the route English HE policy has taken to reach such a position and to question the extent to which a series of governments, ministers and education departments have (mis)led the discourse around the equality and widening of opportunity, access, participation and, ultimately, the pursuit of social mobility.

Methodology
This paper addresses understandings of social mobility across a number of key policy documents – to conceptualise how the discourse around social mobility, and related concepts including widening participation and access, has changed over time. Focusing on four key policy documents, from distinctly different political periods, it charts such changes from 1963 until 2016. The documents analysed are:
- 'Higher Education' (1963, widely known as 'The Robbins Report')
- 'Higher Education in the learning society' (1997, widely known as 'The Dearing Report')
- 'The Future of Higher Education' (2003)
- 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' (2016)

The four policy documents have been selected in order to reflect important shifts within the HE sector over this half-century period. They were selected as examples of either government-commissioned or government-written policy documents in order to capture the way that policymakers framed the debate around access and participation to universities; they are explicitly not pieces of primary legislation. Inevitably a much wider pool of documentation might have been chosen, and what is assessed here are snapshots rather than a continuous analysis – however this paper aims to identify broad changes (and similarities) over time rather than present a chronological history.

Analysis of these documents followed an iterative process, combining elements of both content and thematic analysis, as per Bowen – identifying key parts of the texts and undertaking a form of 'pattern recognition' to capture the phenomena of widening access, participation, and social mobility (2009, 32). Each of the documents is briefly discussed below – with a focus on their content – and then the paper addresses some of the key themes which were identified across the corpus of documents.

Policy documents

This section of the paper introduces the four policy documents, provides a brief summary of the ways in which each discusses issues of access, participation and social mobility and locates each temporally. The documents are addressed in chronological order.

'Higher Education' (The Robbins Report)

Published in 1963, at a time when participation in higher education in England was of a very different nature to today, the Robbins Report predicted and proceeded widespread changes in the sector, largely related to the expansion of full-time undergraduate provision. The report took a distinctive approach to participation (for the time) and was based upon a principle that ultimately higher education should be available 'for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (Committee on Higher Education 1963).

The report drew attention specifically to Oxford and Cambridge, warning against the danger of 'too high a proportion of the country's best brains' going to England's ancient universities, resulting in them being composed exclusively of a 'certain kind of intellectual elite' – a prescient warning given some of the very recent criticism levelled at Oxbridge (e.g. David Lammy MP et al.'s scathing criticism of the universities' lack of diversity in 2017).

In particular, the report's predictions around expansion were based not on economic forecasts for future jobs, but on the likely demand from suitably qualified entrants (Willetts 2013). This approach brought some criticism, with views around 'more means worse' (written by Kingsley Amis in 1960 (Black & Sykes 1971)) held widely and some believing that there was a 'limited pool of talent' able to take advantage of opportunities (Willetts 2013, 25). Nonetheless, in an article a year after the publication of Robbins, Morris said that it was 'established and accepted that there will have to be much more "institutional" education for a much wider proportion of young people in the post-school years' (1964) – suggesting that, in some quarters at least, public opinion quickly coalesced around the report's recommendations.

In terms of language and terminology, social mobility is not mentioned at all in the report and the term 'social justice' only appears once: the overarching discourse is primarily

around equality of opportunity. Although the report documented the inequalities that existed within HE, it made few references to 'the kind of student that might be attracted' (Ross 2003, 37).

'Higher Education in the learning society' (The Dearing Report)
By 1997, and the publication of the Dearing Report, university education in the UK had changed dramatically and the expansion partly predicted by Robbins had come to pass: moving towards the so-called massification of higher education, with 33 per cent of young people attending by the time of the report. Dearing advocated pursuing even greater levels of participation:

> There should be maximum participation in initial higher education by
> young and mature students and in lifetime learning by adults, having regard
> to the needs of individuals, the nation and the future labour market
> (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997).

Faced with addressing the requirement to provide mass-higher education (Birch 2017) the report suggests that the expansion of the sector would be driven by 'increasing demand for higher education for its own sake by individuals seeking personal development, intellectual challenge, preparation for career change, or refreshment in later life' (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997).

Perhaps owing to the recommendations within the report that some of the financial burden of higher education be transferred to students themselves (those seen as reaping the direct benefits), approaches towards widening participation were similarly positioned as economically driven. Scott argued that Dearing's emphasis on wider participation was in direct response to a need to 'compete successfully in the economic race of the twenty-first century' (1998, 4).

As with the Robbins Report, there was no mention of 'social mobility' specifically in the Dearing Report, although some similar concepts were evoked. The general approach of the report emphasised the role of the market and economic measures – both as means to widen participation, and for its explanatory power in terms of the increase in demand for higher education and the benefits that higher education can provide individuals. The role of the state, while not marginalised, is nonetheless limited to ensuring fair and equal representation as opposed to any more idealistic or radical notions of mobility. Such an approach should be seen within the wider moves towards the marketization of the sector that can trace their roots back to the 1985 Jarratt report (McCaig 2018).

'The Future of Higher Education'
The 2003 white paper 'The Future of Higher Education' was published by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and featured the concept of 'social justice' prominently, which echoed a wider programme, aimed at tackling social exclusion and disadvantage, of the New Labour Government in the late nineties and early 2000s (McNeil 2013).

The paper has lengthy sections on 'fair access' and is uncompromising in its analysis of the gap between different social classes of the students entering HE: 'this state of affairs cannot be tolerated in a civilised society…it wastes our national talent; and it is inherently

socially unjust' (DfES 2003, 18) – proposing a package of reforms to address the aspirations of students (known as Aimhigher); to give grants to students from lower income families; and to mandate institutions to draw up access agreements which would be overseen by a regulator. While blame is not solely placed on HE institutions (there is open acknowledgement that the problem has roots much earlier in formal education), there is nonetheless a call-to-arms for universities and colleges to 'do more…in promoting opportunity' (2003, 8). In a departure from the Robbins report, the DfES state that their aim is that the sector 'offers the opportunity of higher education to all those who have the potential to benefit' (2003, 22) rather than more narrowly those that are qualified to participate.

The white paper, however, focuses centrally on economic concerns and positions 'the benefits of higher education for individuals' (2003, 4) ahead of those for society more generally (in keeping with the Dearing report and the ongoing tuition fees). As Jones and Thomas noted in their comprehensive analysis of the paper, it 'invites the conclusion that higher education in the future will create a class of new graduates who will be prepared, almost exclusively, to compete against each other in the job market' (2006, 622)

'Success as a Knowledge Economy'
Published in 2016 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), the white paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' featured the subtitle 'Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' – immediately signalling a shift in focus from the paper, above, published 13 years previously. The white paper would go on to structure the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, passed the following year.

At its time of publication, tuition fees had risen significantly to cover the majority of university funding. By 2016 participation rates across the sector had increased and the participation gap between non-disadvantaged and disadvantaged pupils had narrowed (Harrison & Waller 2017):

> We have gone from a higher education system that serves only a narrow band of people, to a broader, more diverse and more open system that is closer than ever before to fulfilling Lord Robbins' guiding principle that higher education 'should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue it' (DBIS 2016, 7).

Nonetheless, as above, 'increased participation from disadvantaged young people has been focused almost exclusively in lower status institutions' (Harrison & Waller 2017, 30) and whatever measure of disadvantage is used (e.g. based upon local area (Boliver et al. 2018a) or eligibility for free school meals (Harrison & Waller 2017)) the more advantaged you are the more likely you are to attend a HE institution.

The 2016 white paper sets out specific goals for widening participation – including doubling the proportion of students from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' and increasing the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students by 20 percent – as well as more general areas to focus on, such as supporting participation by students with disabilities.

Terminology in the paper moves away from issues of social justice more broadly to focus on social mobility, widening access and participation – taking the later to include the

'whole lifecycle' of university education. Although the targets set are specific, the more general approach is less concrete –focusing on enhancing transparency and increasing choice by opening up the sector to new providers.

Discussion

The following sub-sections identify some of the significant themes relating to widening participation, access and social mobility that cut across the policy documentation reviewed here. These are not intended to capture, holistically, the effect of such policies; but rather are used to highlight some of the key ways in which the current HE sector in England has been shaped by what has gone before.

The individual versus the collective

The policy documents analysed in this paper suggest a tension between the individual and the collective (e.g. Parkin 1972) – partly a by-product of the inherent distinctions between relative and absolute social mobility. Absolute social mobility refers to widespread and holistic improvements in standards/living conditions, whereas relative social mobility refers to the movement of individuals between social classes in comparison to their peers (see Brown 2012). The rhetoric of, arguably, all the policy documents analysed in this paper prioritises the role of the individual – benefits of higher education are described in individual terms, even Robbins' focus on 'those qualified' takes the individual as the starting point. While it would clearly be uncomfortable for a policymaker to countenance downward social mobility, the possibility has effectively been expunged:

> In addition to the conventional academic meanings that have been written out of the official documents, there is no room in this bright new policy-oriented mobility future for the embarrassing existence of downward mobility or any need to weaken the entrenched positions of the most advantaged classes (Payne 2012).

Robbins set out from the position of equality of opportunity to attend university, but the report still placed emphasis on those with the 'ability' to do so; Dearing described demand for higher education as driven by individuals; both papers published in the 2000s frame the benefits of HE in relation to individual success in the labour market.

This focus on the individual is problematic, not least because there was no real acknowledgement in the Robbins Report that economic disadvantage does not just make young people less likely to attend university; it also critically affects their ability to do well at school and to compete with their peers in national examinations (see Thiele et al. 2016). While Robbins recognised the potential benefits of university-designed entrance tests, the report failed to predict the inevitable middle-class gaming of such tests (e.g. see Kirby 2016).

The Dearing Report goes further than Robbins, in its overarching focus on the individual and the individual benefits that accrue from higher education. The report must be seen against the background of disquiet in higher education funding (see Crace & Shepherd 2007) and in making the case for some of the burden of debt to be shifted onto students, Dearing predictably had to make an economic case which revolved around the 'graduate premium' to be gained by studying a higher degree. However, by focusing so keenly on individual benefits it could be argued that the report neglects wider societal benefits from

higher education and, inevitably, social mobility (while not named) becomes about the relative possibility of individuals to move upwards through social classes. As Ball noted, the whole approach was symptomatic of New Labour's outlook at the time:

> Children and their performances are essentialised rather than seen as socially, culturally and economically 'made up'. This essentialism…is in part a reflection of New Labour's commitment to the idea of meritocracy…but is at odds with the commitment to raise achievements and close achievement gaps (Ball 2010).

Nonetheless, while the focus on individuals develops strongly through the Dearing Report, Willett has argued that the Robbins Report's decision to base expansion predictions on demand 'puts the individual centre stage' (2013, 23) – suggesting that the role of individuals has long featured in higher education policy discourse. Each of the more recent white papers continues this theme: the 2003 report notes in its very first paragraph that 'the benefits of higher education for individuals are far-reaching' and that 'on average, graduates get better jobs and earn more than those without higher education' (DfES 2003, 4); while the 2016 paper states that university funding now derives 'from those who benefit the most from it' (DBIS, 2016, 7), i.e. the students themselves. It is important to note that, especially in these recent documents, individual benefits are not discussed to the exclusion of those for society (or 'the nation') more generally; however by characterising individuals as those who benefit most, moves to widen access and participation are justified on the grounds that they enable these individuals to improve their own life chances: 'all those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so' (DfES 2003, 68).

The market and the regulator

The 2016 white paper (and to a lesser extent the 1997 and 2003 documents reviewed here) demonstrates a clear focus on the market of higher education – painting the governmental role as one of regulator, while nonetheless emphasising (directly) the social mobility goals of current policy. But this leads one to question, to what extent is discourse around 'social mobility' simply a means for the middle classes to maximise their own opportunities to thrive and succeed? Higher education massification, far from its equitable aims to increase participation (in relative terms) for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, actually appears to reinforce the benefits of the middle classes (e.g. Marginson 2016).

While there is strong evidence that those attending university earn more (on average) than their counterparts (although the variation here is extreme – see Bellfield et al. 2018) many studies show that there is no link between amount earnt and happiness beyond a threshold (e.g. Easterlin et al. 2010; Jebb et al. 2018). That is not to say, clearly, that poverty is a good or desirable thing – but there is a distinct need to differentiate here between poverty and the working class, and while many of the latter also fall into the former, we nonetheless should not conflate the two. As Reay argues, the social mobility discourse allows policymakers to highlight routes towards improvement of circumstances, without addressing more widespread societal disadvantage:

> Social mobility appears to be a mirage, a source of immense collective hopes and desires for those in the bottom two-thirds of society but in reality

it is largely a figment of imagination brought to life in policy and political
rhetoric (Reay 2013).

In the Robbins Report there was an emphasis on the positivity of equality of opportunity and, at least in part, an acknowledgement that education has value in and of itself. However, by 1997 and Dearing, the focus is undoubtedly on the economic benefits of higher education – essentially instrumentalising the experience as a means to promote individual (and therefore relative) social mobility. The shift to a Labour government partly explains the language of social justice in the 2003 white paper, however economic concerns remain paramount – expansion is predicated on the basis that the 'courses and patterns of study on offer really match the needs of our economy' (DfES 2003, 57). Similarly further shifts in government (to a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 and then to the Conservatives in 2015) preceded an overarching emphasis on social mobility in the 2016 white paper. While absolute social mobility is the outward, explicit, aim – the actual rhetoric and focus within the documentation leaves little scope for widespread collective improvement for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and instead prioritises the individual who is able to transcend their background (implicitly indicated through the grouping of 'social mobility' and 'choice' – the latter of which is seen as an enabling mechanism within the framework of the market). Despite a longstanding focus on social mobility, the OECD regularly finds that the UK performs poorly on measures of intergenerational mobility when compared with other countries (2015). The Dearing Report was published over 20 years ago and since then expansion of higher education has been rapid, which leads on to the question: why is improvement on such measures yet to be seen?

Perhaps one of the limiting factors in the pursuit of absolute social mobility is the passivity that is so apparent, particularly in recent government documents. Reay suggests that 'social mobility requires political not individual solutions' (2013), and yet according to Shukla this is exactly the approach of central government:

Funding is currently channelled to the widening participation departments
of individual universities, which means over 100 ill-co-ordinated funding
streams across the country and the inevitable patchwork of resulting
provision (Shukla 2018).

Both the 2003 and 2016 documents analysed here place considerable emphasis on the powers that are devolved to independent regulatory bodies (OFFA in the former, and OfS in the latter).

The widening participation and social mobility agenda is plagued by a (wilful?) lack of understanding of the difference between absolute and relative social mobility and a lack of appetite for the government to address the roots of the problems – preferring instead to pass the buck to individuals and to individual institutions while they act primarily as a market regulator.

Pursuing the unachievable?

Kelley suggests that universities 'will never be engines of social transformation. Such a task is ultimately the work of political education and activism..by definition it takes place outside the university' (2016). Meanwhile, Goldthorpe's work has suggested that in absolute (societal) terms education actually has little role to play in social mobility:

> Education is, without doubt, a major factor in determining who is mobile or
> immobile—which individuals. But it in no way follows automatically from
> this that education will be of similar importance in determining the total
> amount of mobility at the societal level (Goldthorpe 2016, 100-1).

The research of Goldthorpe and colleagues demonstrates that over recent years mobility has not declined but that there is also no 'evidence of any increase, at least of a general and significant kind' (Goldthorpe 2016, 100). While there has been a powerful discourse that social mobility has stalled in this country (e.g. Social Mobility Commission 2019b; see Goldthorpe 2012 for overview) and that undertaking (higher) education can be a key driver to improve mobility (OfS 2018b), there is little evidence that an individualised approach to the pursuit of education is sufficient (e.g. Major & Machin 2018).

During periods of wider economic expansion, absolute social mobility is often a societal by-product (Goldthorpe 2012) and so Robbins' predictions around the massification of higher education (and indeed wider, and earlier moves to expand access to HE (Willetts 2013)) and all that this entailed were enabled through the relatively prosperous period in the UK during the 1950s and 1960s. However, by the publication of the Dearing report, the outlook had changed significantly and as a result (along with the huge numbers then attending university) the government no longer felt it viable to offer free tertiary education. This coincided with a clear discourse in policy documents which prioritised the benefits to the individual, as well as focusing on the economic role of HE and the development of a market within the sector in England.

Inherent in any moves to address social mobility are the competing forces of upwards and downwards mobility:

> If relative mobility rates are to become more equal … downward mobility
> has to increase just as much as upward mobility. But, as against this
> mathematical symmetry, there is a psychological asymmetry (Goldthorpe
> 2016, 105-6).

However, there is no discernible acknowledgement in the latter documents (either 2003 or 2016) that any moves to improve access or to promote social mobility might entail a challenge to status of those currently privileged: e.g. although the 2003 paper promoted 'fair access' as one of its key pillars, it was proposed that this would be achieved via continued expansion – 'it is not the case that "more means worse"' (DfES, 12).

Conclusions

While aspirations of improved access to higher education have been part of the policy discourse within the sector in England since at least 1963, social mobility as a concept is a rather more modern addition to the policy lexicon and within the analysis of documentation in this paper, only emerges relatively recently. Nonetheless, the importance of social mobility in defining and shaping policy should not be underestimated – especially given its centrality to the new sectoral regulator, the OfS (2018a).

While rhetoric might prioritise the pursuit of absolute improvements in terms of social mobility, the individualised discourse that is a particular feature of recent policy, but which has its roots in the 1960s, allows the problems caused by wider inequalities to be marginalised. This discourse allows 'elite institutions' to recruit the 'heroic disadvantaged'

(Boliver at al. 2018b) without dramatically altering their enrolment strategies or challenging the positions of the already privileged.

Higher education's role as the 'solution' to the problem of social mobility (OfS 2018a) is controversial in and of itself (e.g. Goldthorpe 2016), but is not advanced by a continuing policy discourse which positions those that do not attend as being in deficit; which concentrates only on the individual (economic) benefits of attending; and which frames this problem as one that can be solved by increased choice within the market.

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