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# UNIVERSITIES DRIVING SOCIAL MOBILITY BEYOND THE OXBRIDGE OBSESSION



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## So, the Government wants universities to make social mobility their top priority?

Social mobility is high on the political agenda. The Government has made clear that it wants to promote a society in which people can improve their lot in life, including by studying at university.

In spite of this aspiration, the Government's approach to the role it wants universities to play in driving social mobility is very narrow. Ministers have focused on the progression of relatively small numbers of younger students from free school meal backgrounds and state schools to a relatively small number of universities. At the same time, not enough university places were funded in England to keep pace with the demand from qualified students in 2010 and 2011 and universities have been fined for exceeding their student numbers allocation, notwithstanding rising levels of unemployment.

The Government is right to challenge elitism but this limited view of how universities can drive social mobility is unlikely to disturb the practices of some key employers who continue to recruit graduates based on university and school attended rather than graduate achievement. There is also a real risk that this emphasis on ‘fair access’ to a few universities will reinforce old hierarchies rather than promote the Government’s wider objectives of ensuring that talent and achievement are recognised and rewarded, whatever a person’s family background.

A limited vision of social mobility will yield only limited results. We explain why it is now time for the Government to move ‘beyond the Oxbridge obsession’.

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Office (April 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to Higher Education has previously been measured by socio-economic class. The ‘FYPSEC’ measure looks as ‘the gap’ between the initial participation in full-time higher education rates for young people aged 18,19 and 20 from the top three and bottom four socio-economic classes.

## How is the Government planning to assess social mobility and progression to university?

The Government’s social mobility strategy *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility*<sup>1</sup> applies two indicators of social mobility to assess progression to university:

- > the gap between those pupils eligible for free school meals and those not (aged 15) progressing to higher education at age 19;
- > the gap between students educated at state school and those educated at independent schools going onto the most selective higher education institutions.

These are very limited aspirations, almost wholly concentrated on younger students. The use of ‘free school meals’ is a highly imperfect proxy for socio-economic disadvantage compared with those used by previous governments<sup>2</sup>. These measures will do little to either assess or ensure the progress of people from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education – those from poorer backgrounds and low participation neighbourhoods, first-in-family, BAME students, mature students, part-time and those with work, caring and/or family responsibilities.

## **Why should social mobility be more than 'fair access' for free school meal students?**

For society to flourish it is essential that individuals are able to realise their full potential, irrespective of their individual backgrounds and circumstances. The term 'social mobility' refers to the changes in a person's social status over time and the extent to which opportunities, successes and rewards in life are conditioned by family background or driven by personal talent and motivation. A society with high levels of social mobility is one where individual success is driven not by the income of your parents, the school you attended or your personal contacts but by your talent, ability, drive and application.

Social mobility, then, is both desirable and essential. Yet the UK has one of the lowest levels of social mobility in the developed world<sup>3</sup>. This is bad for individuals and bad for society: for individuals it means that potential goes unfulfilled whilst for society it stymies innovation, progress and economic growth.

Social mobility is about much more than simply encouraging the progression of free school meal pupils to a small number of universities. Life-changing opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds exist at every university.

## **Is the Government right to link education and social mobility?**

By ensuring that everyone has access to a high quality education the Government can help to overcome the disadvantage of income inequality. Equalising educational opportunities needs good investment across all education but it also requires targeted initiatives such as improving early years education, investing in schools in poorer communities and steps to promote participation in post-compulsory and higher education to help people get the qualifications they need to succeed.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2010) Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth 2010.

## **But should we concentrate on intervention in early years?**

Inequalities in educational outcomes become apparent from the early years and it is widely accepted that intervention can help to address this. Children living in poverty arrive at school with significant disadvantages. By the age of six, initially low achieving children from more advantaged homes will tend to outperform initially high achieving children from less advantaged homes. By the time children leave school the attainment gap is even bigger<sup>4</sup>.

High quality and free early years services can reduce educational inequalities. These services not only help families to engage in their children's learning but also allow them to balance work and caring responsibilities and in doing so help increase employment rates and family income.

## **So how does getting a degree help with social mobility?**

Early intervention can reduce the attainment gaps between children from different backgrounds but it is only part of the solution. Among people who have gained a degree, parental social class is less of a factor in determining access to better jobs, better salaries and progression to higher socio-economic groups. In fact, the achievement of a first degree is the most significant factor in terms of impact upon life-time earnings. This is particularly the case for students from non-traditional backgrounds and more generally for women who earn much less than men if they enter employment with the equivalent of A-Levels / Level 3 qualifications or less.

Whatever a person's age or background a university degree will improve earnings potential and allow access to better career opportunities and more professions. Studying for a degree is an important 'second chance' for those who missed out when they were younger and universities that offer opportunities to older students make a vital contribution to social mobility. This is likely to go unrecognised under the Government's social mobility 'indicators'.

<sup>4</sup> Feinstein L (2003): Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort.

## **Is social mobility all about getting pupils on free school meals to Oxford and Cambridge?**

An 18 year old from a disadvantaged background who studies at Oxford or Cambridge University will have opportunities far in excess of their parents. However, this is only a very partial understanding of how universities can contribute to social mobility.

The Government's focus on fair access to a limited number of universities should not be the whole or even the main story. Ensuring that a few more students from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to attend particular universities will not lead to a step change in levels of social mobility. A much bigger difference could be made by recognising and incentivising the contribution which modern universities make to social mobility by offering life-changing opportunities to students from a diverse range of backgrounds and at different ages.

## **What's the difference between 'fair access' and 'widening participation'?**

Widening participation recognises that social mobility can be enhanced by ensuring that students, who would not otherwise have gone to university at all, have the opportunity to do so. This means not just increasing the numbers of school leavers going to university but involves thinking about older, part-time and work-based students.

Modern universities make an outstanding contribution to widening participation and transforming lives on a scale that should be both valued and promoted by the Government.

## **So university is not just about young people?**

Correct. Many people do go to university straight from school but 48% of all applicants have already studied in FE Colleges and many of these will be older students. Over 40% of all higher education students study part-time and modern universities have been particularly good at offering flexible provision and opportunities for students who missed out or did not have the opportunity or qualifications to go to university when they were 18. The average age of graduates from universities which have more socially inclusive student profiles is 26 – and many of their graduates are much older. Some modern universities have more students studying part-time than the Open University and Birkbeck combined.

## **But don't we have too many graduates already?**

Those who criticise the number of graduates are short-sighted. Evidence from the OECD<sup>5</sup> and others confirms that in spite of the increase in the supply of graduates they continue to earn more than those with lower qualifications. Graduates also have the high-level skills required to adapt to changes in the labour market, re-enter the labour market more quickly if they become unemployed, higher overall levels of prosperity and better prospects of social advancement.

Participation in higher education and the acquisition of higher skills is beneficial to individuals but also to the Treasury in terms of higher tax returns and the non-monetised benefits of a university education are well recorded. OECD<sup>6</sup> and other studies confirm that these benefits include better health and greater engagement in society, even after differences in gender, age and income are taken into account.

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2011): 'Education at a Glance 2011'.

<sup>6</sup> ibid.

## **But has this expansion made any difference to social mobility?**

By tracking employment destinations three and a half years after full-time students had graduated and comparing these with their family backgrounds when they entered university, research has confirmed that universities with the most inclusive student profiles make a positive contribution to social mobility with graduates moving into higher socio-occupational groups compared to their family backgrounds<sup>7</sup>. Moreover the earnings of graduates from these universities were likely to be nearly 15% higher than the earnings of people who have lower qualifications – many of whom could have progressed to university but did not do so.

## **OK but will higher university fees impact on social mobility?**

Surveys suggest that higher tuition fees can deter participation by young people<sup>8</sup>, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>9</sup>. Older prospective mature students have also been shown to be highly price sensitive<sup>10</sup> and more debt adverse than young students<sup>11</sup>.

Any reduction in demand for university places from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education will undoubtedly have long-term consequences for individuals and levels of social mobility in society as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> million+ (2009) Social Mobility: Universities Changing Lives.

<sup>8</sup> Ipsos MORI Young People's Omnibus 2010: A research study among 11-16 year olds on behalf of the Sutton Trust.

<sup>9</sup> High Fliers Research (2011) University Tuition Fees and the Graduates of 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Foskett, N, Roberts, D and Maringe, F (2006) Changing Fee Regimes and their Impact on Student Attitudes to Higher Education. Report of a Higher Education Academy Funded Research Project 2005-2006.

<sup>11</sup> Connor, H, Burton, R, Pearson, R, Pollard, E, and Regan, J (1999) Making the Right Choice: How students choose Universities and Colleges.

However, the new student finance arrangements do have some positive elements. There are no upfront fees; students only pay for their degrees once they have graduated and pay back according to what they earn rather than what they owe. Repayments only start once a graduate is earning £21,000 a year and any money owing after 30 years will be written off. Part-time students will also be able to access fee loans for the first time.

### **Surely fee waivers and the new National Scholarship Programme help social mobility?**

Universities which teach the majority of students from lower income backgrounds have sought to ensure that their students are supported with bursaries rather than offering fee waivers. These universities understand that support for students while they are studying is often more important than a fee waiver because graduate repayments will be calculated according to what they earn rather than what they owe.

Under the Government's new National Scholarship Programme each university has been required to set its own eligibility criteria for students from lower income backgrounds. This means that there will be a variety of offers because some universities recruit many more students from disadvantaged backgrounds than others and also receive less in endowment income. The NSP is a postcode lottery rather than a national scheme, nationally administered with clear individual benefits identified for eligible students. In the interests of both fairness and social mobility it should be rethought.

## What about the Government's other Higher Education reforms?

The Government's proposals – as set out in the Higher Education White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*<sup>12</sup> – to allow the unrestricted recruitment of students who achieve AAB or above at A-Level or equivalent qualifications, are likely to undermine rather than enhance social mobility.

A wealth of research has shown that students from more prosperous backgrounds and at private schools tend to perform better in standard examinations. Out of the 54,600 students in England aged 16-18 who achieved AAB or better in A-Levels and AVCEs in 2010, 16,100 (29%) were at private schools even though only around 6% of all pupils are at private schools. A further 5,420 (10%) of those achieving AAB were at selective state schools<sup>13</sup>.

Whilst privately educated pupils tend to outperform their state educated counterparts at school this situation is reversed at university. Students with lower A-Level grades from state schools are likely to equal or out-perform students from private schools with high A-Level grades once they are at university: a five-year study co-funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Sutton Trust, the National Foundation for Educational Research and the College Board that tracked 8,000 A-Level candidates found that a comprehensive pupil with the grades BBB is likely to perform as well in at university as an independent or grammar school pupil with grades ABB or AAB<sup>14</sup>. High achievement in school exams is not necessarily a good predictor of achievement at university.

<sup>12</sup> BIS (28 June 2011).

<sup>13</sup> House of Common Library (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Kirkup et al (2010) Use of an aptitude test in university entrance: a validity study. Final Report. National Foundation for Educational Research.

The Government's proposals privilege choice and investment for just a handful of students. In contrast, 20,000 student places will be transferred away from universities with more socially-inclusive student profiles unless their average fees are no more than £7,500. By 2014-15, 60,000 places will be transferred to lower-cost providers. This policy has the potential to limit student choice and to transfer taxpayer investment in higher education away from universities which make the most significant contribution to social mobility.

### **So modern universities change lives and create opportunities?**

Modern universities have played an outstanding role in creating opportunities for students with no previous family experience of higher education. These universities also recruit many more black, Asian, ethnic minority, female and older students. As institutions, they have positive strategies to support people from non-traditional backgrounds, a history of recruiting students from low participation neighbourhoods, state schools, FE colleges and those with vocational qualifications. They also offer flexible and part-time as well as full-time provision.

## **So what should the Government do next?**

If the Government wants to deliver its social mobility agenda it must recognise and promote the opportunities to benefit from teaching, scholarship, innovative research and knowledge exchange that are offered to students from a wide range of backgrounds by modern universities. The activities of these universities contribute directly to individual opportunity but they also stimulate the entrepreneurship and the growth in new and emerging markets vital to the future of the economy – and crucially, these universities contribute to both social enhancement and social cohesion.

The Government has an opportunity to deliver a much more comprehensive and potentially more valuable agenda of social mobility than that currently being set out. There has never been a better moment to move beyond the Oxbridge obsession.

## **Any more questions?**

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