

Chapter 93

Social Mobility in the UK's Higher Education Sector: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

Social mobility is at the forefront of the British Government's plans to improve the lives of the most deprived groups in society. Since the election of the New Labour government in May 1997, consecutive governments have championed the concept of social mobility. The fundamental aim of social mobility is to tackle social barriers for disadvantaged groups in education and employment. However, within the social sciences there has been a lack of critical discussion regarding the theorisation of social mobility within the context of higher education (HE). In recent times higher education research has instead had a greater focus on pedagogy. The aim of this review is to critically explore past and current debates on social mobility, and the importance the concept has in the higher education sector. In this paper special reference will be made to the new UK government higher education policy on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

INTRODUCTION

Social mobility is about breaking the transmission of disadvantage from one generation to the next. When a society is mobile it gives each individual, regardless of background, an equal chance of progressing in terms of income or occupation. The upsurge in professional employment in the middle of the last century created an unparalleled wave of social mobility in Britain. It created unprecedented opportunities for millions of women and men. In the decades since then social mobility has largely stagnated (Milburn, 2012, p. 1).

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The above quote is taken from an independent review report written by a former New Labour Cabinet Minister, the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn, on behalf of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010 to 2015). The report examined the progress of social mobility and child poverty with reference to fair access to professional careers in the UK. Alan Milburn is seen as a respected social mobility 'guru' and has long argued that consecutive governments have been timid about driving social mobility as social policy. Social mobility is a buzzword in UK society and, as Williams notes the concept 'has tended to centre on the role of educational achievement and parental influence among high income groups in preventing social mobility in lower income groups' (2009, p. 669). For a long period of time successive governments have championed the concept of social mobility (Yaojun, 2016; Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Savage, 1988). In many ways social mobility is seen as a contributing factor in reducing unemployment.

In July 2016, the newly appointed UK Prime Minister, Theresa May commented that she was placing social mobility at the heart of her government priorities (Rayner, 2016). As it was noted in *The Guardian* on 19th July 2016, the Prime Minister was quoted as saying, 'build the education, skills and social mobility to allow everyone to prosper from the opportunities of leaving the EU' (Mason, 2016). It is well documented that for social mobility to work for the most deprived groups in society, social mobility must be driven within the framework of education. One aspect of social mobility to work in education is within the context of higher education. Murphy (2015, pp. 2-3) has noted that:

The idea of social and geographical mobility driven by education, and culminating in 'going to university', proved to be one of the most powerful post-second world war ideologies. Across the OECD, 30 percent or more of 19-year olds now attend tertiary institutions. Ready access to higher education prevails. The underlying assumption is that education-fuelled social and geographical mobility is ennobling. It emancipates human beings from a life of labour and enriches the mind.

An article by Leventoglu in 2005 stated that the concept of social mobility has been ignored by the social scientist. This is somewhat surprising as Leventoglu (2005, p. 465) goes on to state that 'social mobility [is] being raised as a central issue in public debates in many countries.' However, if we move on a decade, Milnik, Cumberworth and Grunsky (2016, p. 142) have argued that the concept of social mobility has 'fallen out of fashion' with U.S. sociologists.

Hence, it is this premise that sets out our underlying argument for this review. In this paper we argue that for too long there has been a lack of theoretical and political discourse on social mobility within the context of the social sciences discipline in higher education. The current article is divided into two sections. The first section will present a critical, theoretical discussion on social mobility. In this part of the paper we will examine the origins and political motivations of social mobility. The second section will provide a social policy review on social mobility within a higher education context. In particular, we will examine the attitudes towards social mobility of UK governments and higher education institutions.

THEORISING SOCIAL MOBILITY

Social mobility as a concept has fascinated political leaders, as many in social policy quarters perceive social mobility to be the problem solver in breaking down divided groups in society (Christie, 2016; Andrews and O'Mahony, 2013; Marr, 2012). Political leaders past and present, such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and David Cameron, have championed the ethos of social mobility. It could be argued that

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