Rethinking social mobility for the levelling up era

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About the Author

Alun Francis is Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College and has just been appointed deputy chair of the Social Mobility Commission. He began his career teaching in higher education before entering local government, where he worked on a series of urban regeneration programmes in Manchester and held senior positions in education in various boroughs. Since 2007 he has worked in Oldham, leading the Building Schools for the Future programme, before moving to the College in 2010. He led the merger of Waterhead Academy from 2010-16, and has overseen the redevelopment of Oldham College with over £50m invested in the campus since 2012. The College has a good Ofsted inspection, a silver TEF rating and has won a variety of awards for teaching and learning, the use of technology, and special needs provision. It is currently leading the independent Oldham Economic Review in partnership with the University of Manchester.

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Foreword

By Ben Houchen
Mayor of Tees Valley

In his new role in charge of delivering levelling up, Michael Gove has pointed to Teesside as the best place to start looking at what levelling up is about. Those who know the people and place I am proud to represent will be able to see why, both because of the work we are doing to deliver levelling up and because of the kind of challenges we still face. I am doing all I can to drive job creation and investment, fighting to ensure we make up for lost time and deliver broader opportunity. At the same time, fundamental changes need to be pushed forward by national government. People feel in their bones that, in all kinds of imperceptible but powerful ways, the dice are loaded against some people and places in our country. They are right. At both a local and national scale, today's pressing task is to deliver a much-needed rebalancing and correction.

Social mobility is an important part of this story but for too long the conversation has been framed too narrowly. The Social Mobility Commission itself has been focused mainly on entry into a narrow range of professional jobs through a few universities, and pushing employers to broaden their social intake. For places like Teesside, Darlington, and Hartlepool, that has felt like a patronising focus on delivering socially respectable tickets to escape out of the region for a small number of people who might be persuaded to move into professional jobs, artificially clustered in metropolitan centres. But what of people's actual aspirations and ambitions for fulfilling jobs, better lives, and healthier communities where they are? It is time we moved on from just talking about reshuffling the queue at the top of certain professions to creating a bigger supply of better job and life opportunities for the many.

And I am happy to say we are now doing so. I very much welcome the new leadership of the Social Mobility Commission and the new approach laid out in this report by deputy chair Alun Francis. It is a very practical report and it resonates with the real issues I discuss with local people in all kinds of jobs and from all kinds of backgrounds on a daily basis. We need to make sure we have the right foundations in place to enable a huge variety of new jobs to be created so that our economy grows to reward the whole diversity of people's talents and characters. We need equality of esteem between professional office jobs and the kind of engineering and scientific roles through which Teessiders (and, admittedly, a few others) have built much of today's world and are building tomorrow's. And we need skills training which enables people of all ages and backgrounds to participate fully in society and offer what they can to the world.

I am confident that this report will be widely read. I hope that it is taken to heart and triggers a step change in public policy thinking that helps me and others to deliver good quality jobs, wider opportunities for fulfilment, and a broader notion of social mobility, in a better, stronger, levelled up Britain.

Introduction

A few years ago, I read that a nearby college, which was primarily academic, somewhat selective, and focussed almost entirely on progression to university, had won a social mobility award. It seemed ironic. Important as their work is, I could not see how anyone knew whether any of the students who went there were actually socially mobile, in the proper meaning of the term[1], because none of us have the accurate origin-destination data needed to prove it. However, at the time, the prevailing assumption was that preparing people for university was the best way to improve their opportunities, and it was, by implication, the most reliable proxy for social mobility. If it included sending people from deprived areas away to study, this was just assumed to be a good thing. It was all the evidence that was needed to please social mobility champions.

It was always difficult to work out where we fitted into this narrative. I am the Principal of a general further education college. We have over 6000 predominantly local learners, studying a wide variety of programmes from "entry" (the level we use to describe those starting with no qualifications at all) through to degrees. We are absolutely not against higher education. We annually teach 600 higher education students ourselves at our own centre, and have multiple excellent partnerships with universities who validate our programmes. We send a further 400 young people a year to higher education. However, we are sceptical of the "one size fits all" university model – which is residential, mainly focussed at young people, and largely delivered through big organisations. We actively support non-degree routes to higher skills, particularly through apprenticeships as the vast majority of our learners are not going to follow the pathway conventionally associated with social mobility. Seventy per cent of them are from deprived wards, and most will stay in Oldham in the future. Sadly, when it came to giving prizes out, it appeared that social mobility champions would only be interested in our students if they wanted to "leave to achieve."

However, social mobility policy is changing. The "levelling up agenda" is presenting it, and many other areas of policy, with new challenges. It has refocussed public policy on the people and places often referred to as "left behind". This has triggered a response from organisations, such as the Social Mobility Commission (the Commission), which has produced a number of reports into areas of policy it has not looked at before: including adult skills, apprenticeships, downward mobility and place-based inequality [2]. In turn, the Government has signalled its intention to refocus the Commission in this direction. Previously located in the Department of Education, with a remit to focus on education and the labour market, it has been moved to the Cabinet Office, where it will form

1. There are different definitions of social mobility (which is part of the problem in policy terms, because they are used inconsistently). It usually means a change in socio-economic position compared to the previous generation in the same family.
2. See for example - "Adult Skills Gap" (SMC, January 2018); "Apprenticeships and Social Mobility: Fulfilling Potential" (SMC, June 2020); "The Long Shadow of Deprivation" (SMC, September 2020); "Understanding Downward Mobility" (SMC, November 2020).

part of a new approach to equalities, with a broader remit, now including employment and enterprise, and the power to shine a light on regional inequalities across Whitehall.

This is a welcome step. It creates the potential for a completely new dialogue about social mobility, showing how it can and does benefit everyone. It promises to shift debate away from a narrow focus on how to share around a limited supply of similar opportunities among a few people, to the more ambitious challenge of how to create a larger number and wider variety of opportunities recognising and rewarding a wider array of talent, benefitting a larger number of people and places. For the people and places who are left behind, this is going to be essential.

However, if social mobility policy, and the work of organisations like the Commission, is going to rise to the occasion, it needs more than a change in line management. It will need a very different approach to its work. Its current approach reflects many of the flaws of conventional social mobility policy thinking. It takes the largely pessimistic view of social mobility as a given. It commissions quantitative research which tends to confirm this gloomy view, but sheds little light on how mobility actually works, and is therefore weak in terms of providing workable policy solutions. If the Commission is going to play the part that Government wants from it, it will need to think and work very differently.

Social mobility policy in the UK

Social mobility has been a concern for policymakers and politicians, across all parties, for over twenty years[3]. It is a complex phenomenon. A very wide range of factors play their part in determining why someone achieves particular outcomes compared to others. Talent and ability are clearly part of the equation, but they have to be identified and cultivated – so families, parents, communities and educational institutions all have important parts to play. But so do the workings of the labour market and a whole range of wider factors such as inheritance, geography and place. Evaluating social mobility improvements is inherently more difficult than almost any other areas of policy, because of the number of factors involved and because results take a generation to show. To make matters worse, definitions are often inconsistent and data sets frequently incomplete. Many of the "measures" are actually abstract "proxies", sometimes with no clear line of sight to actual social mobility. There are at least seven problematic issues with the tenor of the debate as it stands.

Promiscuous

FIRST, this complexity is not always evident in the pressurised, practical world of policy, which needs clear analysis, concrete action and tangible outcomes. This is understandable. However, it is hard not to conclude that the whole area has become a bit messy. The term "social mobility" has come to be used so promiscuously as to be in danger of losing any meaning. It is casually applied to almost any initiative which can loosely claim to offer new opportunities. These may be good and worthwhile, and may even genuinely offer new opportunities (most of life does) but it does not mean that they promote social mobility. It is ironic that, while more and more people claim to be promoting it, some commentators are convinced that it is in crisis.

Pessimistic

SECOND, is the pessimism problem. The dominant narrative is that social mobility is in sharp decline. However, the consensus among academics is that the decline narrative is misleading[4]. Mobility rates are, by any standards, fairly high, with around 75% of adults belonging to a different social class to the one they grew up in (using the standard seven class occupational class model). The claim that it is decline is associated with one LSE study, published in 2006, which measured mobility in terms of income. This study has been challenged for a number of methodological shortcomings, and for drawing "unnecessarily pessimistic" conclusions from its own data which actually shows, according to one commentator, that mobility is "staggeringly high"[5]. Almost all other studies, using a

3. For a comprehensive account of the social mobility policy since the 1990s, see Payne, G The New Social Mobility (Policy Press, 2017)
4. See for example, Payne (2017), Chapter Seven; Goldthorpe, J "Understanding – and misunderstanding – Social Mobility In Britain", Barnet Papers (Oxford 2012); Budoki et al, "The Social Mobility problem in Britain", British Journal of Sociology (2015); and for a more popular summary, Bloodworth, J The Myth of Meritocracy (Biteback, 2016).
5. Gorard, S "A reconsideration of rates of social mobility", British Journal of the Sociology of Education (2008).

variety of measures, have concluded that there is no evidence that rates of mobility have fallen. Social mobility policy tends to take the pessimistic picture as its starting point, despite evidence that it should not.

Measures of success

THIRD problem is that there is no effort to define "good"[6]. Rejecting the decline argument does not mean that there is no social mobility problem, but it does mean that the debate needs to be more specific about what this problem is and what good mobility should look like. The advantage of the decline argument, is that the purpose of policy is to restore a lost age of better social mobility. If this lost age did not exist, then different criteria for assessing performance and measuring improvement needs to be in place. Otherwise we have no way of evaluating evidence or the effectiveness of interventions.

What is the measure of success? In terms of comparative studies, there are indices which consider the UK's performance against other countries (rather than comparing it with the past), such as the Global Social Mobility Index and work undertaken by the OECD[7]. The same problem recurs in terms of whether they measure actual mobility or a set of proxy indicators of opportunity (which is not the same thing). However, they do treat all countries the same, and based on their findings, the UK comes out with some room to improve. The UK came 21st out of 82 in the world in the 2020 measure, better than the USA, New Zealand and Spain but not as good as Germany or the Scandinavians. As this is a new index, there remains a problem in quantifying this over time, which is very important in terms of measuring progress and being clear about the impact of interventions. The policy literature tends to be quiet in this respect, often reciting the fact that there is a problem with social mobility, but being unclear about what measures make a difference.

Aspirations and ambitions

FOURTH problem is that little attention is given to the actual aspirations and ambitions of real people. The little evidence that there is, suggests that people may see social mobility in a different way to social mobility champions. They measure their progress, or that of their children, in terms of distance travelled compared to the people nearest to them[8]. Social mobility champions tend to measure it in terms of "odds ratios" or comparisons, between groups at different levels, usually the "bottom" and the "top". There may be issues of values to consider here[9] which opens complicated territory. Social mobility champions have definitely lost focus on the role that a socially mobile society should have in matching all members of society into occupations and roles which they are suited for and enjoy, and at which they excel. Whether or not this implies upward, downward or sideways mobility is not the only consideration, either for individuals, or for the wider social good. The lack of attention paid to this aspect of the problem is a glaring omission, especially so when inequality of esteem has become recognised as being as important as inequality of

6. See Payne, Chapter One.
7. See for example, https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality; and https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility_9789264301085-en#page1
8. See Lawler, S and Payne, G A Social Mobility for the 21st century (Routledge, 2019).
9. The obvious difference would be between the values of the two groups which David Goodhart describes using the metaphors of "somewheres" and "anywheres" – with the former attaching greater importance to the locality, extended family, community and place; and the latter favouring mobility, globalism, and personal progression. The two world views imply very different perspectives on what social mobility might mean for different people in different contexts. Arguably, mobility champions have tended to favour models which reflect the values of the latter over the former. See also, Mattinson, D Beyond the Red Wall (Biteback, 2020) which has some interesting insights on concepts of opportunity in so called "red wall" places.

income and wealth. Much that social mobility champions appear to regard as desirable may be considered condescending to those who choose a different route in life. Policy surely has to be sensitive to the way people view their own opportunities and the choices they may wish to make about their own futures[10]. And society needs people to want to be good at different things.

Extremes

FIFTH problem is that it has an over-heavy focus on the extremes at the "bottom" and "top". This is unhelpful for a number of reasons. First, it tends to create a binary view which divides everyone into two fixed groups usually described as the "disadvantaged" and "advantaged". This loses any sense of difference or nuance for those in the middle of the extremes (with very little said about their mobility, including shorter upward movements, sideways movement or downward mobility). It also obliterates any differences within these two categories, along with the nuance of understanding the fluid movement of many people in and out of them over time. Consideration of this greater level of detail would reveal a more accurate mobility picture, both good and bad, and a better understanding of the factors that enable some people (with apparently similar social and economic characteristics) to achieve different outcomes. Those who "buck trends" in this way should surely occupy a much greater part in the social mobility story. It would almost certainly be more helpful in building a real picture of actual social mobilities than reducing everyone to "blindly operating averages", which is what happens when the analysis focusses exclusively on extremities[11].

Demand

SIXTH problem is the tendency to look only at the demand side of social mobility (the competition between people for a fixed sum of opportunities) rather than the supply side (the factors which decide what the terms are which determine those opportunities and create and constrain their volume and range). This is why much social mobility policy focusses so heavily on access to (mainly academic) education and the labour market (mainly for professional roles), and whether or not different groups are fairly represented in terms of educational achievement and recruitment into (usually elite) occupations. This drives much of the practical work of social mobility champions, particularly in terms of interventions which seek to improve the proportions of "disadvantaged" students at (mainly elite) universities, and the recruitment practices of the major firms in finance, banking, accountancy and the civil service. It undoubtedly leads to some good and important work, particularly when the competitive position of someone can be improved over that of another person who is, ostensibly, less deserving. However, it is mainly a "zero sum game". Only very small numbers will benefit, and even then, the best that can be achieved is a reordering of who comes where in the queue for the best opportunities.

10. For a discussion of inequality of esteem, see Goodhart, D Head, Hand, Heart (Allen Lane, 2020).
11. The essays in Lawler and Payne touch on some of these themes, but it appears to be an under-researched area. It would be particularly interesting to understand the ambitions which parents have for their own children and then grandchildren (two generations) and different patterns in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and religious background.

Merit and equality

SEVENTH problem is that social mobility policy is muddled about fairness and merit. There are three main ways of allocating occupations and positions: inheritance, planning and competition. The first two were tried in Ancien Regime Europe and the Soviet Union, respectively, and found wanting[12]. This leaves competition, with educational achievements playing a key role as a proxy for identifying and demonstrating talent.

However, this has two main problems. The first, is fairness, because people grow up in different families, with different experiences, in different places, and attend different institutions so have different contexts for developing their abilities. Efforts to equalise this usually focus on identifying those who are comparatively disadvantaged with programmes or measures to compensate them in terms of improved opportunities. However, it is not easy to agree how to define or measure disadvantage[13] and who, within the disadvantaged is worthy or deserving of additional support. There is also a problem of assuming that all advantaged people are the same, and of ignoring any obstacles to opportunity which are not socio-economic.

Second, there is an enormous problem about what to do with those who, under whatever methods are deployed, do not appear to meet the standards required. Are they "meritless"? Or is the problem that merit is being defined with such strict and specific criteria, usually based around cognitive-analytical abilities as revealed by tests, that the "rules of the game" are less fair than they seem?[14] Social mobility champions have spent a lot of time arguing over the first of these problems (equality) but very little on the second (rules of the game). Yet the second is arguably more important.

12. For a discussion of these themes, see Wooldridge, A The Aristocracy of Talent (Allen Lane, 2021).

13. See the report of The Sutton Trust, "Measuring Disadvantage" (May 2021) - Measuring Disadvantage - Sutton Trust

14. There have been a number of recent contributions to the debate about how merit is currently being defined, with two notable ones being Goodhart, D Head, Hand and Heart (Allen Lane, 2020) and Sandel, M The Tyranny of Merit (Allen Lane, 2020).

A more ample and varied field of enterprise?

A new approach to social mobility is required, and it should start by acknowledging that a socially mobile society is meant to bring benefits to everyone, not just the small number who are upwardly mobile. It is intended to allocate human resources in ways which match people, as far as possible, with roles that suit their tastes, ambitions, acquired talents and abilities. This is good for the individual, but also the wider community, because it fosters competence and this brings wider social benefits, even if it also brings some measure of inequality.

A new social mobility approach should also acknowledge that our preferred method of managing social mobility, with competition to identify merit, is not perfect. It is based on the idea of equality of opportunity to identify and cultivate talent but must also embrace inequality of outcome to reward and incentivise excellence and high achievement. The credibility of this is stretched when the tension between these two aspects grows usually because inequalities of opportunity become too large and/or too readily passed down the generations, and the collective benefits of high individual achievement or reward are obscured or lost. And the upshot can be a situation where the talented become a self-perpetuating elite protecting their position and reproducing privileges for themselves and their families.

This is a real threat for meritocrats and how to prevent it has been a matter of debate across generations. Writing in the 1950s, Hannah Arendt described educational selection in England, as "clearly once more the establishment of an oligarchy, this time not of wealth or birth but of talent"[15]. A short while later, Michael Young coined the term "meritocracy" when he produced his dystopian and satirical critique of the elitest tendencies of a society dominated by the most talented[16]. Neither, however, was able to advance a convincing alternative. Nor did they recognise that, contradictory as it seems, meritocracy has some redeeming, abiding qualities and has proved very adaptable. As one commentator has recently described it, meritocracy is not a fixed thing, but a "protean idea" which is open for debate and development and is capable of "self-correction". It has survived, throughout the modern period, and continues to have appeal, precisely because of this quality[17].

A new social mobility has to be based on a new approach to meritocracy, which recognises its inherent tensions, but adapts it to our time and makes it live up to expectations. Despite the prevailing consensus that we are living in a period of unusual pessimism where social mobility is concerned, these are not new problems. The ideals of meritocracy have

15. Arendt, H "One Education" (1954).
16. Young, M "The Rise of the Meritocracy" (1958)
17. See Woolridge, Ibid

a long historical lineage which can be traced back to Ancient Greece, through Imperial China, and into modern society through challenges, in Europe and the USA, to the "artificial aristocracy" which bestowed social position on the basis of hereditary positions rather than ability [18].

The Founding Fathers confronted the same kind of challenge that we now have, albeit in a different context. John Adams, in debate with Thomas Jefferson, warned that the new American republic would need to find solutions to two big issues: first what talents were deserving of merit; and second how to restrain the successful (however talent was defined) from forming a new impermeable elite which would "destroy all equality and liberty"[19].

What is instructive, however, is not just the way they framed the problem but the debate about solutions. For Alexander Hamilton, perhaps the most interesting of all the participants, and one of history's greatest examples of upward mobility, the way out was not to narrow the focus on the competition for the best opportunities, but to broaden the range and number of ways to be successful. His solution was to promote "a more ample and various field of enterprise", by which he meant an economy which not only grew, but did so in a way that rewarded the "full diversity of talents and dispositions" [20].

Hamilton was challenging the Jeffersonian vision of opportunity, which drew its inspiration from a largely agrarian economy. Hamilton was an ardent supporter of industrialism, and it was this which he thought would bring the "more ample and various field of enterprise" which would extend the range and volume of opportunities. Although, like all of the Founding Fathers, his view was that government should remain small and enterprise should be free he was willing to compromise to support the growth of industry. He advocated a form of protectionism to foster the kind of environment which would deliver his vision.

Our current challenges are much more complex than Hamilton's, but in other ways, they are very similar. In terms of the role of government, many of the same themes remain central to policy. And the challenge of economic transition also remains, although it is no longer from agriculture to industry, but from an industrial to a post-industrial or service led economy. However, it is the spirit in which Alexander Hamilton approached these challenges which is central to our current dilemma. It is the same spirit that we should adopt in tackling our social mobility challenges. Instead of just asking how to share a limited supply of opportunities around in a "fair" way, our focus should be as much on how to create more opportunities and a wider variety of them. It means looking at our economy, the labour market and the education system in a different way and being clear about where "every individual [can] find [their] proper element".

18. Op cit
19. Ibid p 184
20. Cited in Woolridge p 187.

A more ample economy

Much of our current anxiety about social mobility arises from the way that opportunities are generated and distributed within the service economy. This sits at the centre of concerns about "levelling up". According to most commentators, it is the long run sectoral change in the occupational structure which has changed both the volume and nature of opportunities, and this has changed the rules of the game in terms of who wins the competition for the best positions. The pessimists are right, therefore, that something has changed – and things have become harder for some. They are wrong, however, to see it in terms of a "decline" and to present it as a crisis. Their approach leads them to keep describing the same problem over and over again, without ever arriving at clear remedies.

Occupational structure

The changing occupational structure presents complex challenges in terms of measuring social mobility, because the categories used to define origins and destinations are not consistent over time. However, this is not just a methodological problem it is an economic reality. There has been a structural change in the volume and composition of professional and managerial occupations, driven by the expansion of the service sector and the decline of industry[21]. In 1911, 40% of employment was "semi-skilled" manual work, falling to 22% a century later, while professional and managerial occupations had risen from less than 15% to over 43% in the same period[22]. This occupational transition has also changed the composition of the labour force, because it has included a significant change in the employment of women, along with changes in the nature of the skills needed to fulfil the new roles well (the growth of so-called "soft skills") and a significantly enhanced role for academic educational attainment as the passport into those roles.

This process, which gathered pace in the 1950s and 1970s, may have slowed toward the end of the century, and some suggest that this was the trigger for the pessimistic account of social mobility to take root. As the supply of new places in the top two professional and managerial classes slowed, and more people had already moved up over a generation (parents with white collar jobs had children who grew up to take white collar jobs, the former being upwardly mobile, the latter not necessarily), there has been overcrowding "at the top"[23]. The challenge is that the supply of opportunities may not have kept pace with demand, and the race for them has certainly become more competitive.

21. See Payne (2017), Budoki (2015), Bloodworth (2018) and Goldthorpe (2015) for some examples of this view.
22. See Payne, p 114
23. See Payne, p 120-21

Inequalities

Meanwhile the earnings gap between the better educated and the less well educated has grown [24]. In terms of wealth holding, inherited assets have added a whole new dimension to inequalities which go far beyond differences in income[25]. There is a distinct generational aspect as older people are both the wealthiest and least likely to be poor, and younger people, even when they have higher levels of education, enjoy fewer of the housing, pension and other advantages enjoyed by the "baby boomers"[26]. However, those families where both parents are working in professional and managerial occupations — increasingly frequent as a consequence of the greater competitiveness of women in this labour market and the increased number of double income families — clearly have considerable advantages over others. The worst off appear to be those families in low paid and low skilled work or, more specifically, the children growing up in those families. Their relative poverty has stagnated in contrast to the improvements for the older poor, and there is often a geographical aspect to this.

Geography

It is not hard to see where opportunity supply has become most arid. Geographical unevenness is a characteristic of the process of economic change, not only in the United Kingdom, but all over the world. It is, however, particularly marked in this country. While it is not strictly true that all of the "left behind" people and places are to be found in the former industrial towns and cities, such places form a considerable part of the cohort and they are mainly located in the Midlands, North of England, Scotland and Wales[27]. The problem for these places is that in this transition they have lost their economic purpose. The function of such places usually originated with some kind of geographical advantage. In Oldham, apart from being near to the market place in Manchester, it was because it was damp and rained a lot, which meant that cotton broke less on a spindle and productivity could be increased, spectacularly with increased mechanisation. But once the production of tangible goods such as coal, cotton, and steel was replaced with the "intangible" economy — of financial products, design, marketing and consultancy — the damp and rain were all that was left. And they no longer confer any economic advantages[28].

Opportunity traps

There is no apriori reason why places should not be able to adapt to these kind of changes, either by finding a new purpose, or by managing a reduction in size, or a combination of both. For complicated reasons, however, this never happened. Former industrial towns have ended up in a kind of stasis, unclear about which direction to move in pursuit of a solution, while struggling to manage increasingly difficult problems. A system has evolved where large parts of the country are dependent on redistribution through the tax system to meet their economic needs. Tax

24. For a summary of these inequalities, see Haskel, J and Westlake, S "Capitalism without Capital (2017).
25. The classic account of this is Piketty, T Capital in the Twenty First Century (Harvard, 2020).
26. See Willets, D "The Pinch – How the Baby Boomers took their Children's Future" (Atlantic, 2019).
27. See Beatty, C and Fothergill, S, "The Long Shadow of Job Loss : Britain's Older Industrial Towns in the 21st Century" , Frontiers of Sociology (Sheffield Hallam University 2020) - The Long Shadow of Job Loss: Britain's Older Industrial Towns in the 21st Century (shu.ac.uk)
28. See Haskel and Westlake for an extended discussion of this theme.

income from London and the South East amounts to 36% of the national total, but only 27% of the population live in those areas[29]. And per head tax paid by Londoners is almost double that paid by people in the North of England. The net fiscal balance for significant parts of the country – including almost all of the former industrial areas (Midlands, North of England, Wales and Scotland) is negative. Only for the East of England, South East and London, is it positive[30].

Economists have thought long and hard about how opportunities and economic benefits are spread more evenly in a service led model. It is acknowledged that there are high income generating economic actors, and that this high value creation does not always produce significant volumes of directly employed people. The benefits are spread from the value creating, "frontier" tradeable goods sectors through to everyone else either by state led redistribution, or the exchange of services in the "foundational" economy – including public services, but also retail, hospitality, leisure and personal services[31]. According to one economist, there is a clear and measurable multiplier effect, such that "For each new software designer hired at Twitter in San Francisco, there are five new job openings for baristas, personal trainers, doctors and taxi drivers in the community"[32].

Some have been inspired by this kind of model to present it as a solution for post-industrial regeneration. The Manchester Independent Economic Review, which was published in 2009, set out a framework for the regeneration of the city-region, based on "agglomeration theory". It envisaged service sector growth clustered in Manchester, with the benefits gradually extending to surrounding areas through the "escalator" and "fountain" effects, providing high value earners with career progression and the prospect of moving out to surrounding neighbourhoods[33]. In adopting this approach, it followed an approach which has dominated both US and UK thinking about regional growth and regeneration in recent years. Has it delivered?

The evidence is that agglomeration has worked in London, but has been less successful elsewhere. While it is true that nearly 75% of the former industrial towns are located in the hinterland of bigger, more economically successful cities, it is not clear that this has provided the expanded range of opportunities which the towns need. The evidence is that job growth has been faster in those cities, possibly five times as much in the period since 2010[34]. And there is some evidence that the benefits of this are shared. Around 1m people commute from former industrial towns into cities for work (approximately 14% of all employed residents of former industrial towns commute to other places for work). In terms of pay, those who live in former industrial towns and work locally appear to earn marginally less than those who are able to secure better employment in neighbouring areas (by around 2.5%) [35].

The conclusion can only be, at best, that the model provides a partial answer to the problem[36]. We do not know enough about the kind of jobs they are securing, and they certainly do not seem to available in the quantities needed to make a substantial difference. There is some evidence

29. See "Blagden, J et al, "Levelling Up The Tax System" (Onward, 2019) cited here - Levelling-up-the-tax-system.pdf (ukonward.com).
30. The existence of regional inequalities is widely discussed in policy terms, for example – "UK 2070 Commission", chaired by Lord Kerslake which produced a series of reports in 2020. But these rarely get down to the level of understanding the impact of deindustrialisation on former manufacturing towns, nor do they ever make recommendations which address the future of such towns. This is almost always assumed to be a by-product of other interventions, which eventually may trickle down and have some effect. It should also be noted, however, that the former industrial towns are not good at telling their own story. The narrative of how they moved from their past to their current position, and what has triggered that, does need to be captured and understood. The upshot of all of this, is that we have had deindustrialisation for a generation, but no clear sense of purpose for those places most affected by it.
31. For an explanation of the distinction between the tradeable goods/frontier sectors, see the debate about industrial strategy. See "Industrial Strategy, the Grand Challenges" (UK Government, January 2017) Industrial Strategy: the Grand Challenges - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) and Bentham, et al Manifesto for the Foundational Economy (CRESC Working Paper 131, 2013) cited here Microsoft Word - Foundational Economy Manifesto SJ 11 nov 2013 (wordpress.com)
32. See Moretti, E The New Geography of Jobs (Mariner, 2013) p 13.
33. See Glaeser, E Triumph of the City (Pan, 2012).
34. See Beatty and Fothergill
35. Ibid
36. For an interesting analysis of the neighbourhood benefits of growth, see Hughes, C and Lupton, R "Understanding inclusive growth at local level", Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society (14) (2021)

that, far from expanding opportunities for their residents, some former industrial towns are simply overshadowed by the economic growth of neighbouring cities[37]. There is a case for demanding that a lot more work be done to understand and address this question, and for arguing that it should be stitched in to devolution arrangements and made a core responsibility for mayoral authorities. Unless further evidence can be found to suggest differently, the only conclusion currently possible, is that if agglomeration is expanding opportunities for "left behind" people and places, it is not doing it fast enough or on a big enough scale.

When those "frontier" tradeable goods parts of the economy are unable to carry the rest of the economy, the impact on opportunity supply can be dire. Moretti estimates that for every manufacturing job lost in deindustrialised towns and cities, another 1.6 employment opportunities disappeared with it[38]. Given that 9 million people were employed in manufacturing towns and cities in the 1970s, but now it is less than 3 million, this multiplies out into a rather distressing collapse of opportunities. And for those who do work, the opportunities are not extensive. Former industrial towns continue to have relatively high manufacturing employment (14.7% in 2019) but much opportunity is in the "foundational" economy – education, public sector, construction, retail and personal service – which every area has. They have significantly fewer opportunities in banking, finance, business services or new value creating "tradeable goods" sectors, such as digital. There does not appear to be any significant difference between such areas and elsewhere in terms of insecure, part time and "zero hours" contracts (although they are growing in the same way as in other places) although self employment does appear to be on the increase and these "are less likely to be a prosperous entrepreneur or freelance worker than a quasi-employee with diminished employment rights"[39].

Labour market obstacles

However, the problem does not stop there. First, because in the absence of other solutions, this leads to a huge level of dependence on state led redistribution in order to function. Second, because this has made the functioning of local labour markets even more complicated and difficult[40]. Unemployment has risen, but more importantly, there has been a long term shift from unemployment to "economic inactivity" initially among working age men, but increasingly across both genders with spiralling numbers withdrawing from the labour market onto incapacity benefits. Although they are home to only 25% of the country's population, the former industrial towns account for more than a third of incapacity benefit claimants[41]. And there is a significant and disproportionate dependence on in work and out of work benefits, with in work households in former industrial areas receiving an average of £6500 a year in tax credits (2015-16 figures) and Universal Credit[42].

There are a host of accompanying problems which affect communities and places which are in this economic position. The precise interconnection between these problems is complicated, and needs to be better understood,

37. Pike, A et al "Uneven Growth – Tackling City Decline" (Joseph Rowntree, 2016).
38. Moretti (2013) p 24.
39. Beatty and Fothergill, p 8.
40. For a detailed discussion of this, see Beatty, C and Fothergill, S "The Long Shadow of Job Loss : Britain's Older Industrial Towns in the 21st Century", (Frontiers in Sociology, August 2020) cited here Frontiers | The Long Shadow of Job Loss: Britain's Older Industrial Towns in the 21st Century | Sociology (frontiersin.org)
41. See Beatty and Fothergill
42. Ibid.

but includes persistent low (by comparison) performance in terms of educational attainment, health, crime, community cohesion and trust - to name a few[43]. All of these problems tend to get in the way of each other, because they are interconnected. And this is the main reason why lumping people into monolithic categories of disadvantaged and advantaged is not always helpful. It sheds more heat than light on problems which have to be overcome if the volume and variety of opportunities is going to expand. Unless this challenge is met, social mobility will continue to have limited meaning for left behind people and places.

Regeneration?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to recommend ways of expanding the opportunities in every "left behind" place. Over the past thirty years, there have been numerous initiatives to address the issues presented by uneven regional economic development, but the problems remain. Some have questioned the rationale for continuing intervention and investment when the outcomes appear to be so inadequate[44], but given the scale of the problem, managed decline is hard to take seriously as a solution. There is moreover, evidence of considerable new thinking, both in terms of understanding the causes of the problem, and in offering solutions. These include reversing inequalities of government funding across a range of areas, from transport and innovation through to housing and culture [45] when the "left behind" is compared to London and parts of the south. Other suggestions include tax adjustments, more freeports and their inland equivalents, new forms of financing to support enterprise and innovation, an overhaul of research and development priorities and more attention to the potential for reviving manufacturing.

It is highly unlikely that they can all experience a dramatic renaissance and ideally, some should contemplate the prospect of improving opportunities for those who live there, by accepting a different rationale, shrinking and focussing on giving the best deal possible to those who stay. Others may hope to revive their fortunes[46] by attracting relocated public services or obtaining infrastructure investment to improve transport, perhaps as part of a renewed "agglomeration" relationship with larger, more dynamic neighbours. All of these have potential for creating the kind of "more varied" economy that Alexander Hamilton referred to. However, it is clear that economic regeneration cannot solve problems on its own. Education and skills have a very important role to play in developing people to take the opportunities which might be created, although past efforts to do this have not always met with the success they claimed.

43. A good summary of some of the issues from a US perspective, was provided by Putnam, R Bowling Alone : the Collapse and Revival of American Community originally published in 2000, but recently republished (Simon and Schuster 2020); see also Goldstein, A Janesville – An American Story (Simon and Schuster, 2018). We do not have an equivalent UK version for Oldham or Preston or Hartlepool although the post-Referendum political literature has moved in that direction. See Goodhart (2017) and Goodwin (2018), and Mattinson, D "Beyond the Red Wall" (Bite back, 2020).
44. See Leunig, Tim "The Regeneration Game is Up", The Guardian August 2008, The regeneration game is up | Tim Leunig | The Guardian
45. See the comprehensive set of "levelling up" reports produced by the think tank Onward, all of which are published on their website - Levelling Up - ukonward.com
46. See "Making Places, How to rebuild the economy of Britain's industrial towns" (Industrial and Communities Alliance, 2020) https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bb773c49b7d1510743e696f/t/5e3c40b589f1dd0fb73a7fab/1581007047835/How+to+rebuild+the+economy+of+Britain%27s+older+industrial+towns.pdf

A more varied field of education

There is an assumption, popular with policymakers, that education, and investment in it, correlates directly with growing economic prosperity. This assumption is not new, but it has acquired a particular twist more recently, when education, and more specifically, educational qualifications have acquired unprecedented importance. For the century or so after the Education Act in 1870, they played little role in preparing the majority of people for careers – apart from by providing some with a reasonable standard of general learning. This was not to say that there was no demand for credentials and qualifications because there was an increasing array of adult classes and certificates from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards [47]. But there was no national system, it continued to be commonplace to finish general education before taking any examinations at all and without accumulating any certificates. In the mid-1970s almost as many left with no qualifications as achieved 5 good O level passes[48].

Things were different in relation to elite occupations which defined themselves in terms of high levels of cognitive ability as part of the job role. Elite academic education was originally disinterested in merit as such because its purpose was cultural. However, examinations came to play an increasing role in the selection of people for the Civil Service, the Armed Forces and the professions, and the school system was, in turn, reorganised to provide the stepping stones for such careers, with the introduction of School Certificates in 1918, and later "O" levels, CSEs and GCSEs. Higher education came to play an increasing role as gatekeeper to those careers, as the occupational structure changed. The rapid expansion of educational credentials as power in the labour market, shaping employment options, directly mirrored the emergence of the post-industrial service led economy since the 1980s. The high point of university expansion occurred in the 1990s, and by this time was rationalised in terms of the characteristics which the new economy appeared to demand. Skills were described as dependent on ideas, science and technology for innovation, economic growth and high skilled employment. This view reached its apex in the theory of the "knowledge economy" which was highly influential in the UK, Europe and the OECD during this period, in shaping economic and educational policies[49].

The impact of this mass expansion of higher education has been widely debated, particularly the dominant model in the UK (the residential, three-year degree). Critics point to problems with its costs, inconsistent rates of returns for different degree subjects and institutions, and the wider "mission drift" of universities more interested in generating income through student numbers than generating and applying knowledge to

47. Thanks to Lorna Unwin in helping to unpick this tricky issue. She points our that there was a demand for credentials from a wider spectrum of the population than is generally assumed – hence in the second half of the 19th century, many adults attended technical and evening institutes to study for certificates awarded by the government's Science and Art Department, the City and Guilds of London Institute, the RSA and other examining bodies.

48. See Education: Historical statistics (parliament.uk)

49. To explore this further consider higher education policy as set out in the Dearing Report in 1997 and then Labour's higher education policy in 2003.

real life problems. And as the system has gained momentum, the link to economic prosperity has remained cloudy. Mass higher education has been expanding most rapidly when western economies have been experiencing low growth and suffering a productivity slowdown. It cannot be held directly responsible for this but if the claims made for the beneficial economic consequences of a bigger graduate class were justified you would have expected the 16 per cent of undergraduate programmes in business to have made more impact.

Opening or closing opportunities?

Equally important have been a set of criticisms which question how far this process has really opened up opportunities as much as it seems. Five fairly weighty arguments suggest that the jury is out. First, it has tended to push everyone into a "one size fits all" system of selection, ostensibly based on academic merit. The benefits of this for the 50% of young people who now follow that route are not uniformly evident, while the impact on those who have not met the criteria, has been largely negative. Second, it has created a highly regulated education system which is driven more by targets around the production of credentials, rather than learning. Third, it has tended to reinforce rather than challenge what appears to be an unfair and inconsistent set of labour market regulations where educational qualifications combine with other barriers to entry, to keep professional occupations relatively well protected (and better paid) while non-graduate occupations enjoy less consistent (and often just less) protection, or no protection at all[50]. Fourth, it greatly advantages those who know their way through the credentialist system, particularly those with parents who have been through it, and especially those where both parents have the same experience. The advantages of being born into such a family are both financial and cultural. Fifth, it has done nothing to help, and may have exacerbated, regional differences by creating a skills system which is good at supporting the mobile, fluid, graduate "anywhere", but offers little to the "somewhere" people and places[51].

The problem of knowledge

However, it is not clear whether the knowledge economy argument was just completely wrong, or whether it failed because it confused knowledge with qualifications and misunderstood the role they respectively play in systems of skill formation. It is one of the ironies of our age that, at precisely the same moment economists were arguing for the enhanced role of education in the new economy, and advocating significant investments in schools and mass higher education to address the problem, educationalists were actively redesigning the qualifications system, in schools, college and universities, in ways which, by and large, played down the central role of knowledge in the curriculum[52].

Supporters of the "content-less" approach offer a number of defences arguing that the aim of the exercise is not to produce particular knowledge or specific abilities, but generic skills which, in a rapidly changing labour

50. See work on occupational licensing in the USA and in the UK – and the associated debates about decline of trade unions, which previously did the job of artificially protected jobs roles and occupations which now need the state to do this for them.
51. See Goodhart cited above – who also talks about the wider gaps in values and outlook between graduates and nongraduates.
52. For a discussion of this, see Simons,J and Porter, N (eds) Knowledge and the Curriculum (2015)

market, can be applied in different settings[53]. Some even consider that this approach fosters skills such as "creativity" and "problem solving". It is often argued, alongside all of this that in age of technology, google and the internet, people don't need to remember information and facts, because they can look them up. All they need are the generic thinking and interpersonal skills, so that they can find the information they need and apply it in the workplace.

There are obvious flaws in this notion. Such generic skills may be important, but they do not exist in isolation from real knowledge acquisition. Thinking, creativity, and problem solving are all aspects of applying knowledge to real world applications. Consider the prospect of a surgeon turning up to repair a prolapsed mitral valve, recalling nothing about the workings of the heart or the circulation of blood, and using a You Tube video to guide the process. They might, at a push, be able to understand where to make an incision, and possibly how to stem the bleeding. But how would they understand the intricacies of the inner working of the heart and the connection between this and all the other aspects of the way the body works. To do the operation successfully, the surgeon needs to have (at a very high level) the kind of understanding which Michael Young (the educationalist not the man who coined the term meritocracy) calls "powerful knowledge" an understanding not only "that" something works in a particular way but "why"[54].

The same holds for almost any setting in which "skills" are applied, including for example, how a joiner installs a kitchen in a house where the walls are not square, how an electrician solves a complex wiring problem, or how chefs master particular dishes and invent new ones. Generic skills are an abstraction which can only exist in a concrete context, drawing on knowledge of the field, systematically learned and retained. It is a mistake to separate knowledge "out" in any learning setting because knowledge acquisition and retention are key to the process of thinking, skill acquisition and their application[55].

General education

Critics of the contentless approach argue that, although it is often presented as "progressive", it has had a disastrous impact on learning and is especially damaging for the most disadvantaged. Their starting point is that the purpose of education, in the first instance, is not simply to train people for particular roles, but to socialise them. Hannah Arendt, an early critic of contentless learning, for example, described schools as "the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all"[56] Knowledge is key to the achievement of this role, for two key reasons : for cognitive development and for the transmission of the "best that has been thought and said" from one generation to another[57] If the education system fails to deliver a knowledge informed curriculum, all learners will be affected, but those who have access to it from home and other settings will be less badly affected than others. Those who have no

53. The best early example of this was Leadbetter, C Living on Thin Air (Penguin, 2000), but similar arguments are echoed in the works of people such as Ken Robinson and Guy Claxton among others.
54. See Young, M, Bringing Knowledge Back in (Perlego, 2007); and for debates about his view, see Canning, R "Liberal, Academic and Vocational Knowledge Education" in Pilz, M (ed) The Future of Vocational Education and Training in a Changing World (Blackwell, 2012); and Guile, D and Unwin, L "Expertise as a 'capacity for action': reframing vocational knowledge from the perspective of work", Journal of Vocational Education & Training,(-December 2020)
55. For an excellent introduction to the role of knowledge in workplace settings, see Crawford, M Shop Class as Soulcraft – An Inquiry into the Value of Work (Penguin, 2009) . Anyone who doubts the value and complexity of knowledge and intellectual endeavour in jobs which involve working with hands, should read this book.
56. Arendt, H "On Education"
57. See the works cited by Young (2007) and Simons and Porter (eds) (2015) and the work of ED Hirsch.

access to it will, by contrast, start out in life without the intellectual and cultural equipment needed to participate in society on level terms with everyone else.

This critique has had a considerable impact on education policy and practice over the past decade. It has influenced curriculum reform in primary and secondary schools, significant developments in pedagogy and teaching practice[58], and knowledge based learning (or variants of it) has become the hallmark of educational innovation, for organisations seeking to transform outcomes in disadvantaged communities[59]. It is important that this work continues, but also to be clear about what else needs to be done. Educational transformation is uneven. To some degree it mirrors the unevenness of the economy, with London schools doing considerably better than those in "left behind" areas. According to one think tank, a child attending primary school in Yorkshire, East Midlands or the South West is 12 times more likely to live in an area with a higher proportion of underperforming schools than if they lived in London. And secondary pupils in the north are five times more likely to grow up in a place with above average levels of underperforming schools. Some local authority areas have been firmly rooted at the bottom end of performance tables for twenty years[60].

There is also a serious problem of "missed" general education for adults. This is a nationwide problem, but almost certainly more marked in areas of low economic opportunity, and it is a major obstacle for "levelling up". According to one recent report 16 million British people struggle with basic numeracy [61], while 16-18 year olds have lower numeracy skills than over-55s according to the International Survey of Adult Skills. There has been a persistent "long tail" of 16 year olds leaving school with achievement much below their peers—around 35% do not get adequate passes at English and Maths GCSE—and a significant proportion of adults continue to be educated below the level of 5 GCSE pass grades. While these problems are widely discussed, particularly in terms of their links to other areas of social and economic concern, and the potential transmission of underachievement across generations they are not well understood and policy interventions have not been effective. Moreover, the link between poverty and low achievement is not a simple one. According to the book *The Tail* on educational failure, at age 16 around 75% of low achieving children are not poor (meaning on free school meals in year 11) and 66% of poor children are not low achieving (meaning in the bottom 20% by GCSE point score). A surprising fact probably in part driven by the educational aspirations of relatively poor ethnic minority groups.

Education and work

Even more complicated is what happens when general education finishes, and qualifications become part of the process of obtaining employment. In the educational theory of the knowledge economy, there is a simple correlation between studying to degree level and acquiring high skilled work in the new economy. There are jobs where it does seem as simple

58. See the essays in Simons and Porter (eds) (2015)
59. There are numerous examples, but the most well known appear to be Mossbourne Academy, Michaela Free School, and the Inspiration Trust.
60. See Onward – Levelling Up – Lost Learning Lost-Learning-Onward.NSN_.pdf (ukonward.com)
61. See the report by Kerr, M, "Paying the Price – The Cost of Very Poor Adult Literacy" ([ro Bono Economics, 2021) and – and Haldane, A "Its not joke – the problem with numeracy sums up our skills crisis", The Times, 14 May 2021

as this. There are very high rates of return for degrees in subjects such as medicine and medical science, mathematics, and economics, among others. The high rates of return for these subjects undoubtedly reflects the levels of intellectual and knowledge-based excellence which these fields require[62]. And there are sectors, including science and technology research and development, artificial intelligence, and financial services where real knowledge does directly drive invention, innovation and economic development.

There is also much to be said for the general intellectual skills which can be acquired from academic study, and for the usefulness of much general knowledge. This is why, for some professional and managerial occupations, degrees in specific subjects (especially from specific institutions) are required to "gatekeep" entry because they are seen as a proxy for high levels of ability or the capacities and qualities required to practice the profession. However, such occupations nearly all follow up high levels of general education with specific technical, vocational or professional training (such as in accountancy, banking, law, human resources, teaching, management or consultancy). And in such settings, it not always clear that the degree is required because it implies that the holder has any specific, relevant subject knowledge, as opposed to "signalling" that they have the qualities required to begin specialist training.

Protected professionals?

When the volume of professional and managerial occupations in the economy was relatively small, the "signalling" function of degrees arguably worked well, as degrees were held by small numbers of people and offered a short hand for employers to identify the candidates they considered most suitable[63]. However, the system works less well if many people have degrees. Then it becomes more important to distinguish them by subject, the status of the place awarding the degree, or by postgraduate qualifications. And this process continues until people start to lose confidence in the "race for credentials" for the kind of reasons critics have begun to question the mass expansion of higher education[64]. If the qualification is not strictly necessary to do the job, why does it play the role it does in the labour market? Because it may well be that it is part of a process of controlling, rather than expanding, opportunity.

This last point is very important, because it points to the role of skill formation in shaping the volume and variety of opportunities. These are not just given by the economic structure but are the outcome of a whole set of battles over the "rules of the game" within the labour market and it may well be that, professional and managerial occupations have acquired some advantages and protections not enjoyed by others. And they have kept these as the occupational structure has changed.

In such professions, the real job of developing the knowledge required to practice takes place within the workplace. Some occupations (law, teaching and accountancy are good examples) have well established "signature pedagogies", through which the knowledge, applied skills and

62. They are also occupations which are disproportionately "advantaged" – possibly because preparation for those professions is from schools and families which know what is required in terms of knowledge based learning – so have significant advantages over others.
63. See Wolf, A "Does Education Matter?" (Penguin, 2002)
64. See works cited above by Goodhart., aswell as a wider academic literature, including Lauder, H et al (ed) "The Global Auction – The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes" (OUP 2012).

behaviours required to practice, are cultivated and developed[65]. And very often these are tied up with regulations and licenses to practice which, along with degrees, create barriers to entry which control the numbers of new entrants and confer significant advantage in the market.

Other occupations

It may well be that much of the pedagogical and regulatory processes surrounding professional occupations are required and needed to enforce standards or public safety. However, it is not always the case. Furthermore, it contrasts sharply with other occupations, which have considerably less regulatory protection, and where the knowledge, skills and behaviour required to practice are taken less seriously and afforded lower status. Some critics have gone further than this, and argued that the "problem of knowledge" in technical and vocational learning has been just as acute and just as damaging as in academic settings[66]. There has been a consistent downgrading of the cognitive and knowledge based aspects of such technical occupations, with the skills required to do them being reduced to "competencies". Echoing the supporters of E.D. Hirsch, who have argued for the importance of knowledge in primary and secondary settings, one expert has observed that competency based education in vocational learning "acts to reproduce social inequality by denying disadvantaged students access to the theoretical knowledge they need to participate in debates and controversies in society and in their occupational field of practice"[67]. Knowledge, organised in disciplinary ways, appears to be essential in both academic and technical fields.

In technical and vocational settings, the way knowledge is developed and passed on is both similar and different. Furthermore, what makes something a skill and what gives some qualifications the power that they have in the labour market is not straightforward[68]. The much admired German system provides a very formal way of doing this, with a system of skills design and management established by employers, trade unions and the training system established from the 1890s. This is a protectionist system, which has the advantage of increasing the status of the vocational areas covered by the system but may be less effective in responding quickly to rapidly changing labour market conditions. The British system never developed the same formal skills formation process with the trade unions traditionally playing a key role, through bargaining with employers, over the definitions of "skilled" work[69]. The decline of trade unions has been part of the creation of a labour market less regulated than the German model, but not completely unregulated.

The evidence is that regulation (and with it the status of the training programme) favours some more than others with 76% of professional occupations subject to some form of regulation, compared to about 58% of jobs in total, and just 10% for retail workers and those working in care[70]. It is often the regulation which gives the training system its labour market value, so the least regulated have the least training and the lowest pay.

65. For a discussion of signature pedagogies in professional settings, see Shulman, L "Signature Pedagogies in the professions" (2005) - Book Summer 2005 composite.qxd (eventact.com)
66. This is a much under-discussed area of vocational learning, but is discussed by a number of specialist researchers, including Winch, C "Skill – A Concept Manufactured in England?" in Brockmann, M (et al) (eds) Knowledge Skiills and Competence in the European Labour Market (Routledge, 2011); and Wheelahan, L "Knowledge, Competence and Vocational Education", in Guile, D and Unwin, L (eds) The Wiley Handbook of Vocational Education and Training (Blackwell 2019). A very good collection of essays is contained in Warhurst, C (et al) (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Skills and Training (OUP 2017).
67. Wheelan, L "Knowledge, Competence and Vocational Education", in Guile, D and Unwin, L (eds) The Wiley Handbook of Vocational Education and Training (Blackwell 2019) p 97.
68. A good introduction to some of the issues is Crouch, C (et al) Are Skills the Answer (Oxford 2001).
69. This approach was riddled with vagaries, such that 19th Century male cotton spinners who minded mules were defined as "skilled" as were tailors. But seamstresses who put collars and cuffs onto shirts were regarded as "unskilled".
70. See the UKCES report, "A Review of Occupational Regulation" (2011) p 10 -Occupational regulation: a review - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

This is not to say that all occupations and jobs should be treated as if they have the same complexity, and it is important not to over regulate when it is not necessary. However there may be a question of consistency and fairness and a close examination of the equity (and necessity) of regulations, the kind of regulations, and their impact in terms of labour market privilege, would appear to be central to the creation of a "more ample economy" and a "more varied field of education". Alexander Hamilton did not have to think about such complexities, but we do. If general education with a strong commitment to knowledge is they key to extending opportunity to all children and young people, it is also important that they then have choice in terms of the ongoing development of their talents in ways which are relevant to the labour market and the world of work, and that each individual finds the routes and pathways which give them real opportunities. This is why the reform of the technical education, including alternatives to the three year residential degree, is rightly a priority. Changes to the apprenticeship system, including the stronger emphasis on knowledge and end point assessment are a key part of this. When done well, this provides the "Rolls-Royce" pedagogical experience, combining practical and theoretical knowledge in unique ways. So is the broader improvement of technical education, with a very strong commitment to knowledge and work experience in T levels, and the extension of flexibility and choice through the development of new routes to higher skills by reintroducing Level 4 and 5 qualifications and more flexible funding entitlements. These are all essential steps in creating "a more ample and various field of enterprise" which reflects and rewards the "full diversity of talents and dispositions"[71]. And the extension of these opportunities to adults, who have not had the opportunity to find what they are really good at, must also play a central role.

71. Cited in Woolridge, The Aristocracy of Talent, p 187.

Social Mobility Commission discovers the "left behind"

There is, therefore, the basis for a much clearer vision for social mobility in the era of "levelling up". Delivering on this vision is, of course, not simple. Although there are outliers in primary and secondary education which demonstrate what can be achieved in terms of knowledge-based learning and the behaviours required to achieve success, there is more to be done in understanding why this works and how it can be translated to a wider variety of settings. And in terms of the reform of post-16 education and training, there is a long list of implementation challenges which will need to be met over time, if the strategy is going to work. These are especially complex in left behind areas, where the economic opportunities are needed to support a robust supply of apprenticeships and the high quality work placements required to deliver new technical qualifications. In such places, educational changes will only work if they run hand in glove with changes to the economy.

The Commission focus

However, it is not clear that the Social Mobility commission, operating as it has hitherto, can contribute much to meeting this challenge. From its inception, the Commission has mainly focussed on demand. It has defined its remit as "promoting social mobility in England ….. by challenging employers, the professions, universities and schools to play their part in promoting social mobility". It has been preoccupied with access to elite occupations, for which the preparatory route is high academic achievement. For most of its history, its reports have looked at the extreme top and bottom. In terms of the top, at least a dozen publications have concentrated on exposing barriers to entry into the Civil Service, finance and the professions, pay gaps within them based on social background, the "non-educational" barriers which make entry more difficult for those without the right family connections or cultural dispositions[72], and the development of toolkits or schemes to encourage employers to recruit differently. In terms of the bottom, a similar number of publications have been devoted to highlighting the obstacles for those at the bottom, including the broad impact of socio-economic factors on child outcomes, through to social and emotional issues, parenting, school performance and the production of indices of social mobility which seek to measure those obstacles.

These reports are both voluminous and often eye-catching for the media, but appear to be a source of much frustration for the Commissioners and their critics both of whom claim they have limited impact. The

72. A full list of reports can be obtained from the Social Mobility Commission website.

Education Committee concluded in 2019, that (among other things) the Commission focussed too much on research and not enough on action[73]. The ineffectiveness of interventions has been echoed by other critics and the Commission has itself produced two reports which argue that there has been little improvement in social mobility during its lifetime [74]. The Commission has tended to conclude that the source of this problem (in the main) is a lack of effective cross government support for its proposals. There may be something to be said for this. But there are more fundamental problems.

Disparity analysis

The main problem with the Commission's approach is that it uses quantitative statistical analysis to deliver "disparity analyses" which show differences between groups in terms of access to services. These are very effective in terms of confirming its view that there is systematic inequality for some groups. On closer examination, however, it does not tell us a great deal about actual social mobility. What it does is build models which offer the prospect of a comprehensive and systematic measurement of the problem. However, as with all models, these are highly abstract and riddled with assumptions. Their strength comes from seeking correlations between variables but it is not always clear that those variables are as fixed as they might seem, and that apples and pears are not being mixed up. And even when correlations are established, it is not clear that the models provide much in the way of analysis or explanation. In the end, they find what they are looking for (disparities) but do very little to understand what sits behind the data.

The Left Behind

Some of the limitations of these models can be illustrated by a brief summary of the work presented by the Commission on regional inequalities, apprenticeships and adult learning. These reports all have their strengths, but none tell us anything much about real social mobility and all shed more heat than light on the problems of the left behind. The report on geographical inequalities, for example, sets out to show that there are differences in opportunities across generations, for people living in different areas, independent of their levels of education. It then produces a complicated index, based on a fairly abstract model using quantitative statistics, to try and provide a measure of the different opportunities in different local authorities.

Quite how reliable or useful this index is, however, is very much open to question. It makes a number of assumptions about where people live, learn and work (it is assumed to be in the same local authority area) and takes no account of the many variable factors, from economic structure, housing tenure, adjacencies to bigger towns or cities, and patterns of migration in and out (including student populations), which affect this. And it takes no account of the role of inheritance or property prices in shaping opportunities in different areas, positively and negatively. In the

73. See George, M "Social Mobility Commission admits making little impact", TES, 18 June 2019 - Social Mobility Commission admits making little impact | Tes
74. See for example, "Time for Change – and assessment of government policies on social mobility 1997 to 2017" (June 2017) Social mobility policies between 1997 and 2017: time for change - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

end, it is just not very clear what the social mobility index is actually saying. It is not surprising, therefore, when it comes to policy solutions, it has very little to offer apart from referencing initiatives such as the Towns Fund and "more devolution" as potential solutions. These are purely speculative, untested and without evidence, because they do not arise from the analysis. It is like trying to understand a complex moving picture from a set of still photographs and guessing at potential solutions because you cannot really see what is going on.

Apprenticeships and Adult Skills

Similar shortcomings are evident in the reports on Apprenticeships and Adult skills respectively. The Apprenticeship Report of June 2020 seeks to measure access to apprenticeships by different socio-economic groups since the introduction of the Levy system in 2015. The Levy was part of a package of reforms designed to increase employer investment in skills and improve the quality of provision. Having examined the performance of the apprenticeship system from recruitment through to completions, the Report concludes that there are systematic discrepancies between "advantaged" and "disadvantaged" learners to such an extent that the system is "broken". There do appear to be many grounds for criticising the apprenticeship system and the Levy, but it is not clear whether the discrepancy identified in the Report is an inequality as such. It may be, but the Report does not demonstrate that it is. The new system has a number of novel characteristics, including new entrants into the provider market (universities being the most significant), and new qualifications, as well as the new payment system itself. There are also geographical dimensions to the delivery of the apprenticeship system because employers are not evenly spread across the country, either by sector or size.

However, there is also another factor to consider. The Report defines "disadvantage" in terms of the area that a learner lives when they start their apprenticeship. It does not distinguish between young people and adults, which adds considerable confusion from a social mobility perspective[75]. Nevertheless, we know that the most disadvantaged postcodes have a disproportionately large share of the population with the very lowest levels of prior educational achievement. Could this be the reason for the discrepancy? Because if it is, the source of the problem does not lie so much in the apprenticeship system itself, but the system for improving basic skills, including English and maths, so that those the Report is rightly concerned about, can compete for apprenticeships on a stronger footing.

Similar confusion emerges when the analysis of adult skills is subject to more detailed scrutiny. Again, the methodology is to build a model which finds and presents a disparity, between one group and another, and then to make recommendations to close the gap. The connection with social mobility has now become extremely tenuous (we do not know if low skilled adults were "advantaged" in their childhood, but have moved down, or have been disadvantaged all their life). However, it concludes that there is a discrepancy in terms of training investment in the workplace,

75. You cannot tell which direction they are moving in!

between adults who have different levels of existing skill and previous training. It concludes that the Government and employers should consider how to close this gap. It oversimplifies the problem because it does not relate any of this to actual job roles (a nurse will do repeated updates on training, but a car park attendant may not need to do as much). And it oversimplifies the solution, because it assumes the obstacles are just "systemic". It does not mention that many adults are reluctant to engage in training, not least because much previous adult work place training has been tokenistic and ineffective[76]. It also confuses qualifications with the process of skills formation which give some of them (but not all) labour market value. And it ignores altogether the most obvious obstacle to adult learning which is the persistent problem of low numeracy and literacy. This is not a challenge which can be met simply by delivering "more training" without considerable further thought.

These are not meant to be exhaustive critiques of the reports in question which would, in any case, require someone with much more technical expertise to unravel the finer details of social mobility analysis. However, it is important that, if bodies funded by public money are going to make a solid contribution to policy, that they try to get underneath the problems they want to draw attention to, and propose real solutions. Disparity analysis can be a useful tool, but it is also extremely limited. It can only point to differences between groups. It has to be very careful how it defines those groups (and in the case of these reports, the disadvantaged are all defined in different ways) or it creates a misleading picture. And once the disparities are identified, it must go beyond them to provide explanations and analysis as this is the only way that policy and interventions can improve. Otherwise, all that is achieved is a generalised sense of unfairness, appearing to be well evidenced but actually lacking real rigour. This kind of narrative is not constructive and may even be counterproductive. It can only serve to create a sense of pointlessness for the very people whose lives policy is meant to change.

76. The obvious example is Train to Gain.

Conclusion

Making social mobility relevant to everyone must, henceforth, be the pressing priority for social mobility champions. To deliver an Alexander Hamilton style vision of opportunity, the upward relative mobility of the few must be matched by the upward absolute mobility of the many. This will involve a shift in thinking and in methodology, if the real challenges of the current period are going to be met. There are evidently many examples of unfairness and inequality, but if social mobility is going to improve, policymakers are going to achieve little if they remain locked into a discussion about elites, and policy focusses only on who becomes part of it. They have to ask harder questions about the supply of opportunities and how they can be extended to a wider variety of people. And this involves understanding how the education system and the economy currently constrain opportunity, but can be made to work together more productively, to identify, cultivate and reward a wider array of talents. The focus henceforth, should be on finding and supporting initiatives which help to make this happen. And it means abandoning the current approach, where statistical analyses are used to confirm the gloomy position which was assumed at the beginning but produce little in terms of solutions. This does not really help anyone. The challenge of policy is not to interpret the world, but to change it and if social mobility policy is going to be more effective, it needs to embrace the spirit of Alexander Hamilton. Otherwise, social mobility will be irrelevant to the vast majority of the people.

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