

## **S7.1** Chepstow Friday 9 December 9.45- 10.15

### ***Higher education policy: Compounding the problem of social mobility or contributing to its solution? (0146)***

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#### **Part 1 Abstract**

This paper will problematize the concept of social mobility through an exploration of its temporality in relation to higher education policy in England. Based upon a content analysis of a number of key policy documents from distinct eras, it will identify definitions and speculate on understandings of social mobility within them; explore how such references have changed over time; and critique the differences between the imagined 'ideals' of what policy rhetoric seeks to do and the reality of policy implementation. In particular it will consider the extent to which a focus on social mobility in higher education policy masks underlying issues of inequality.

#### **Part 2 Paper**

The Office for Students (OfS), the new regulatory body for the English higher education sector, advocates that higher education 'can compound the social mobility problem or contribute to its solution' (2018) – adding to a long-running policy discourse around widening access and participation and improving social mobility through tertiary education. This paper problematizes the concept of social mobility through an exploration of its temporality in relation to higher education policy in England.

There is an established history in UK/English policy of widening access to higher education and universities, going back at least to the Robbins Report of 1963, which centred on the principle that courses 'should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.' The report is largely credited with the move towards the massification of higher education, being published at a time when only 6 per cent of young people entered the sector. While there can be little doubt that the report encouraged greater participation (and achieved this end) its language would likely not be regarded as sufficient in today's climate. In 1997 the Dearing Report launched the modern widening participation agenda, stating that 'increasing participation in higher education is a necessary and desirable objective of national policy over the next 20 years' and arguing that disparities in participation should be reduced. In advance of the formation of the OfS, the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) strengthened the policy levers which incentivise the widening of access and participation in universities (e.g. the access agreements formally presided over by the Office for Fair Access, and now the access and participation statements that will be regulated by the OfS).

This paper will address conceptions of social mobility across a number of key policy documents – to identify definitions and speculate on understandings of social mobility within them; to explore how such references have changed over time; and to critique the differences between the imagined 'ideals' of what policy rhetoric seeks to do and the reality of policy implementation (as borne out by what data is available on higher education participation and access and recognising the inherent limitations of such data). Given that Reay has described social mobility as 'largely a figment of imagination brought to life in policy and political rhetoric' (2013), the paper will consider how and why the concept is used – explicitly in relation to policies as products of their time and context. Based upon a content analysis after Payne (2012), the paper will explore published policy

documentation that addresses both social mobility (or related concepts such as widening participation) and higher education. In keeping with the focus on temporality this will include reports and papers from distinct eras: the Robbins Report from 1963, the Dearing Report from 1997, and the DfE's 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential' report from 2017, amongst others.

As part of the problematization of social mobility, the paper will consider to what extent it is a middle class concept which detracts from underlying issues of inequality that education policy should seek to address (see Ball 2010); it will explore whether conceptions of the term focus on or recognise only perceived deficits in working class members of society rather than the inherent advantages available to the upper/middle classes; and it will question the nature of social mobility policies and strategies which inevitably encourage the promotion of individuals away from their wider group (see Tawney's tadpole analogy, 1964) masking the more significant structural differences between groups.

### References

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