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*what does
social mobility
have to do with*
CAREERS WORK?



Social mobility – such a politically charged, contemporary preoccupation. Before this issue launches into consideration of the what and how of addressing social mobility through career development practice, **Fiona Christie**, Careers Consultant at Salford University, and **Gill Frigerio** Principal Teaching Fellow at The University of Warwick's Centre for Lifelong Learning, consider the arguments about its relationship to the work of higher education (HE) careers services.



What is social mobility anyway? The concept assumes that there are strata in society and that individuals can move within these, up as well as down. Relating this to employability, the term then suggests that being socially mobile might allow movement into another stratum in order to find more fulfilling and/or well-paid work. It is worth asking then whether, and how, social mobility might contribute to social justice and the opportunity for 'decent work' for all, not just the lucky few, e.g. those who manage to break into elite universities/professions. Social justice has become a popular concept in careers literature and the International Labour Organization (ILO) identified 'decent work' as critical to worldwide economic growth. However, back in the UK and higher education (HE) policy context, 'social mobility' regularly hits the headlines. It has its own Commission, which has given it traction, so let's stay with this as a term.

“ WE CAN REMIND UNIVERSITY MANAGERS THAT CAREER DESTINATIONS ARE INFLUENCED BY SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND GEOGRAPHIC DOMICILE ”

ACCESS TO WHAT?

It has been a received wisdom that educational participation leads to social mobility, hence drives since the 1960s to increase participation in HE. By the nineties, it became clear that increasing access was not the same as widening it, and energy went into admissions work to stimulate aspirations and attainment. A few voices then began to ask about the effects of this widening, posing the question “access to what?”.

Fast forward to 2018. Marketisation has led to a focus on both widening access to university and the employment outcomes of those who leave as indicators for the sector. This has shone a light on the disparity of employment outcomes based on social class, alongside investigations showing the challenges of access to elite professions, with the role of unpaid work experience as one of a range of barriers. It has also been argued that getting a degree has become more about an insurance against downward mobility.

CLAIMING OUR SPACE

This puts us firmly in the spotlight. Some of us have been claiming our space here for years, but the publication of The Bridge Group report in 2017, *Social Mobility and University Career Services*, shows that we have been noticed. We are being used as an entry point to examine this issue. This idea of being an 'entry point' chimes with what we know: that we work at the boundary. We know our work is political, because it operates “*at the interface between individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism*” (to quote Tony Watts). It is also at the boundary of our institutions, facing in to students/colleagues but also out to employers/labour markets. From here, we can speak prophetically in both directions. But how?



Back to an international perspective, in 2004 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identified ten activities of guidance:

- ✓ Informing
- ✓ Counselling
- ✓ Enabling
- ✓ Feeding back
- ✓ Networking
- ✓ Advising
- ✓ Assessing
- ✓ Advocating
- ✓ Teaching
- ✓ Systems change

Social mobility is relevant to all of these. Guidance practice requires us to be sensitive to how social background contributes to individual confidence in applying for jobs, or in believing that a certain career might be possible, or having access to social capital which can help in knowing how to play the careers 'game'.

WIDER CANVAS

Whilst any of our services need to be considered from the perspective of how the individual learns from them and takes action, we also operate on a wider canvas, not least because our clients are deeply connected to their social context. Our knowledge base gives us insights about the space between the individual and society. We are advocating every time we engage with an employer, thinking about systems change as we read this edition of Phoenix.

There are challenges, of course. Our environment is politically charged and forces our attention on immediate policy demands. The criticality that we need to develop in ourselves and in our students is not easy in a marketised context. Our institutions compete with each other, yet we are operating as a profession. AGCAS as a cross-sector body is in a unique place to position ourselves collectively to support social mobility: we can have an impact that goes above and beyond individual universities.

Our understanding of students allows us to see beyond the rhetoric of positive outcomes as we know that transition is more nuanced than just being in a graduate-level job at the time of DLHE. We can

remind university managers that career destinations are influenced by social background and geographic domicile. Place is important: we know that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to stay local or to return home after study, and this affects their employment prospects. Do we tackle this and, if so, how will their home communities thrive if the educated flee?

“OUR UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENTS ALLOWS US TO SEE BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF POSITIVE OUTCOMES”

Finally, how can we avoid over-simplifying our view of students in relation to socio-economic background, e.g. it's important to consider how class intersects with gender, ethnicity, etc. No one wants to hear that the odds are stacked against them and that their individual perspective counts for nothing. The scope to develop individual agency is at the heart of our work. It is often the small interactions that we offer that contribute to individuals being able to have career mobility; it is important that these are accessible to all, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have most to benefit from them. Each small encounter has the potential for big impact on someone's life, and through this, we effect social change.








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