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SCHOOL OF
SOCIAL POLICY

‘Invisible Rules: Social Mobility, Low-income & the Role of Further and Higher Education’

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Background: Policy & Research Context

- Successive UK governments since the late 1990s have sought to expand the numbers of young adults in continuing education. Viewed as a means to build human (skills/qualifications), social (networks) and cultural (cultural knowledge) capital that serve to promote social mobility.
- Literature to date focuses on the ways that capital (e.g. skills, qualifications, networks) is accumulated through specific social fields. Existing research does not tend to trace the cumulative impact of ‘capital deficiency’.
- We sought to understand the interplay between poverty and capital formation, and how capital deficits interrupt social mobility:
 1. To what extent does the experience of FE/HE contribute to social mobility for those from low income backgrounds ?
 2. In what ways does low income interrupt the accumulation of capitals, namely human, cultural and social, that contribute to social mobility?
 3. What lessons might be drawn from those who experience social mobility, in terms of the journey from low income via FE/HE into higher paid sections of the labour market?

Background: Study Design

- **Research Design:** Based on literature review of 71 studies (Pemberton & Humphris, 2017). Designed to capture lived experience of (im)mobility and to reflect on individuals journeys.
- **Sample:** Purposive heterogeneous sampling frame. Recruitment conducted through the Walcot Foundation. Participants had: i) lived in poverty during childhood/young adulthood; ii) attended FE/HE (not necessarily completed); iii) 24 months labour market experience post education
- **Data collection:** 40 semi structured interviews (January-April 2017) and 3 focus groups (May 2017)
- **Data Analysis:** Used Atlas Ti CADAQS (i) Biographies (ii) Thematic Analysis

Navigating Further and Higher Education: Aspirations and Choice

- Our findings begin with an examination of the aspirations and hopes that many of our participants invested in social mobility
- Participants expressed a desire to **'better themselves'**, identifying a university education or a career in the professions as key to their future mobility:

'I was hoping I would get a good grade and then work for one of the big companies, at somewhere like Canary Wharf.' (Kayla)

- Participants who were parents framed their aspirations around **improving their circumstances** so that their children would experience a better standard of living than they had.

'It was a practical degree that led into a defined industry...My son! The fact that I had to provide a better life for him....' (Natalie)

Navigating Further and Higher Education: Aspirations and Choice

- Many participants referred to the role that their families played in forming their aspirations. Most commonly, participants highlighted the necessity to participate in Higher Education.
‘My mom always emphasised university, but no-one knew the details of how to get there...’ (Omar)
- Our participants suggest **they did not lack aspiration, but they did lack the ‘road map’**
- No shortage of ‘aspirational capital’ (Bagguley and Hussain, 2016), with evidence of parents sacrificing time and material resources, but often without the necessary forms of social or cultural capital to be effective.
- ‘Contingent Choosers’ (Ball et al, 2002) weakly ‘imagined futures’

Navigating Further and Higher Education: Aspirations and Choice

- ‘Choice’ is not experienced uniformly. It is clear from our participants that the decision making process is often reduced to guesswork
- Participants lacked **social capital**: key actors that might provide informed advice/emotional support, or information channels through which informed choices may be made.
- Participants also lacked **cultural capital** necessary to interpret the varying sources of information that our participants received; as Kevin put it, *‘I wasn’t equipped to choose at that time’*
- A number of participants also referred to the negative impact that school careers advisors and teachers had on decision making.

Navigating Further and Higher Education: Aspirations and Choice

- Participants were forced to navigate educational choices alone and to piece together forms of advice and support, filling the gaps for themselves:
'I was a bit confused from leaving school, because my parents hadn't gone to university and not really done Higher Education, all they knew, 'is you have to go to university', they didn't really understand whether that was essential to getting a job or whether it is something you can miss out.... I didn't really know, I didn't really have many choices and I didn't speak to many people about it...It wasn't very thought out and it was a lack of direction from the beginning.' (Fatima)
- Consequences of poor 'choices': selecting the wrong course for your career or academic interest/ability:
'If I had have known there was biochemistry for three years I would have run from it. Biochemistry was one of my weakest subjects even at college. I did ok, I didn't fail, but I would have expected higher grades.' (Sarah)

The Experience of Further and Higher Education: Accumulating Capital?

- Many participants remarked about the ways in which they were 'unprepared' for university. The effort that is focussed on the transition to less structured forms of learning comes at the expense of accruing 'soft credentials'

'The course was the immediate goal...everything else was extras...I was just looking at what was in front of me...' (Norah)

- Coping with the transition to university study dominated a number of participants' time and emotional energy; longer term career goals rarely featured.
- Therefore, using university to build 'soft credentials' through various forms of extra-curricular activity was not an option for many participants. Focussed on the 'old rules' of the game (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

The Experience of Further and Higher Education: Accumulating Capital?

- Working combined with full time courses resulted in participants engaging in a complex balancing act, with many regularly completing 12 hour days of combined study and work:

‘I worked in Dorothy Perkins. I was doing the early morning shift...I was doing from 6am to 8am. From there I would go straight to Uni, as I was starting at 10... then I would go home at 5 in the evening. I was doing Monday to Friday...I was leaving the house at 5 in the morning... it was hard.’ (Saadiya)
- It is unsurprising that participants viewed having to engage in paid work negatively:

‘You want to come back from university and think about what you have learnt and I didn’t have that. I was very close to getting a first and I didn’t get one...There was a certain time I had to leave and I had to start work at 6pm, so I would leave at 4.30pm...I would have to say to my friend “just take some notes” and we will talk about it after.’ (Mesi)

The Experience of Further and Higher Education: Accumulating Capital?

- For many participants, internship opportunities had eluded them. They perceived that these opportunities were reliant on an individual's connections and networks .

'I have a lot of work experience, but I have a lot of paid work experience. I don't have the privilege to be able to work for free, I have bills to pay and even at that young age I couldn't take a vacation scheme...If I did come from the background where my parents could fund my life and I could have gained free work experience, I would have stood a way better chance.' (Ethan)

- Many participants did not build networks or relationships, often because paid work got in the way or they did not understand their value. Paolo remarked of his peers at University, *'perhaps I did have them, but did not think of them as networks'*.
- Participants noted that they were unable to form such relationships through joining societies and having a university social life, because they went to university for lectures and then went home.

Table 1: Typology of Participant Mobility

Mobility	Qualifications	Information Channels	Work Experience	Networks	Institutional Knowledge	Imagined Future	Labour Market Position and Trajectory
Static (n= 17)	Predominantly level 3 – BTEC, GNVQ Degree Post 92	Little or no advice with educational / career choices	Little or no career relevant experience	Networks are weak/fragile do not extend beyond immediate family/ neighbourhood. Little opportunities for information transfer	Little understanding of University. Focus on course rather than 'soft credentials'	Contingent chooser. Weakly imagined future connection between education career	Low waged work with few prospects for development. Often forced to move regularly from short term contract. Plans to return to education to exit cycle
Adapting (n= 10)	Predominantly Degree Post 92. Some higher postgrad qualifications	Some positive experiences of advice at school/college. Still navigate career choices individually – stitching together advice	Little or no career relevant experience	Networks developing beyond immediate family/ neighbourhood. Some notable opportunities for information transfer	Little understanding of university. Focus tends to be on course rather than 'soft credentials'. Some examples of engagement with extracurricular activities	Contingent to embedded chooser. Plans evolve during and post FE/HE, gaining greater clarity	Working in low waged work or self employed as a means to gain relevant experience for desired career. Often trying to gain entry into industries that are network based (media etc.)
Rising (n= 13)	Mix of Degree Post 92, Russell Group and higher postgrad qualifications	Some positive experiences of advice at school/college, as well as family/friends. Still navigate career choices individually – stitching together advice	Notable instances of work experience	Networks developing beyond immediate family/ neighbourhood. Some notable opportunities for information transfer	Understanding of university develops and evolves. Awareness and confidence to engage in extra-curricular activities and to mix socially	Embedded chooser. Has a clear sense of career before beginning the degree, although may not be sure of the definitive steps towards it	Trajectories into professional/managerial roles. Well remunerated and rewarding work. Structured path into chosen career via a degree that is tied to a profession, e.g. Medicine. No need for work experience. Those with internships with direct entry into graduate schemes. Some adaptors who reach chosen profession

Conclusions: The causes and lived experience of social (im)mobility

- 1. Micro Deficits:** Low income frustrates the accumulation and development of critical forms of capital in a number of ways. Micro deficits of capital accumulate across people's lives and are critical to the story of immobility
- 2. The Importance of Structure:** The notions of human, social and cultural capital often produce agent-centred accounts; however, our findings suggest that capital deficits are the products of the structural constraints and restrictions that low income places on individual flourishing.
- 3. Complex Journeys:** Many of our participants' journeys do not represent 'linear' forms of mobility. Journeys are more complex and fraught than those of their wealthier peers. The issue is that when someone with little capital(s) to draw on falls off the 'conveyor belt', the odds are then significantly stacked against mobility.

Conclusions: The causes and lived experience of social (im)mobility

4. **‘Serendipity’**: A striking feature of our analysis is that even for those in the ‘rising’ category, a number of participants look back on their position as being due to ‘chance’ or a moment of ‘serendipity’, not necessarily because they had developed an informed and coherent ‘life plan’.
5. **‘The Myth of University’**: For relatively fewer participants (notably from the ‘adapting’ and ‘rising’ categories), debt is viewed as an investment. For many who saw the ‘debt as an investment’, this directly linked to the career they had secured. Conversely, and unsurprisingly, many who found themselves with static mobility (as well as a number in the ‘adapting’ category) viewed the debt as a burden. Many participants likened this to the ‘myth of university’.

Policy implications and recommendations

- **Advice and networks:** A state funded advice service providing young adults with careers advice *continuously* through education and into the labour market. Alumni mentoring schemes that provide an overview of the journey into and through university, and then into specific careers.
- **Financing Education:** The 16-19 bursary scheme should be extended to provide compulsory support to those who qualify for free school meals. Reinstatement of means tested tuition fees and the maintenance grant for low income students would reduce the current burden of debt. Long term consideration of tuition fees.
- **Internships:** Internships that exceed four week placements should fall within the scope of formal employment law and regulatory structures.
- **Labour Market Reform:** A 'mobility' levy should be introduced, which requires dedicated employer expenditure on 'development' and 'upskilling' for low paid workers. The current Work & Health programme should shift emphasis from 'moving people off benefits' to a well-funded programme that meaningfully invests in personalised forms of training and skills acquisition.