Higher education and social mobility

Professor Tim Blackman

Education is often said to drive social mobility but it isn't what matters most: what matters most is how equal a society is.

More equal societies have greater social mobility. Education still plays an important part because educational attainment on average is lower in more unequal societies: since education improves incomes more for those at the bottom of the income distribution, social mobility is reduced if educational attainment is lower.

This is particularly true of school education but we also see this in higher education. In England, compared to their peers who do not go into higher education, the earnings premium for a student from a low income family is relatively more than for a student from a higher income family. About double in fact.

It's also thought there's an aspiration element to this. If the gap you have to jump from a working class family to a middle class career seems impossibly large, you may be less motivated to work hard and progress to higher education.

Thanks to the work of Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett and others on social inequality and Claire Crawford and others specifically on higher education, we have plenty of empirical evidence about this.

The greater the material differences between people, and the lower average education attainment, the more we see various types of social breakdown, from low levels of trust in society to higher levels of crime and violence.

This also drives people to separate themselves from people who aren't like them, in where they choose to live, and where they choose to study.

University league tables are no guide to how good an education you'll get at a university, but are a good guide to status and how to separate yourself from others less like you, less smart than you, or more smart than you, who come from different family backgrounds or have different identities.

Few aspiring university students think where can I study where I'll mix with people different to me? Even fewer think let's find a university that's diverse because I'll learn more there, even though the evidence suggests that will indeed be the case. Diversity is good for learning.

In education, we don't use selection to create diversity but to create sameness.

It's often said that the UK has a diverse higher education sector but we don't really: what we have are differences between institutions that enable students to be grouped into homogenous communities by prior attainment and hence by social class.

The process is driven by the most selective institutions because their practices create a different kind of sameness in the institutions left with the students they exclude.

These very selective institutions cream off the highest academic achievers with the likely effect, if we extrapolate from schools research, of depressing average academic attainment across the sector because diverse learning communities have more educational potential than homogenous ones.

There are many reasons for this, but they relate to the fact that learning is social. We see this reflected, for example, in how identity diverse teams bring a mix of experiences to solving complex problems that increase their likelihood of solving those problems, or in how mixed ability classes create the potential for one of the most powerful ways to learn, and that's to learn from peers.

A co-curricular example of this at Middlesex is how we've leveraged the potential of our multilingual student community by engaging students in volunteering to pair up and teach each other their different native languages. We've further to go in the classroom however.

While peer-to-peer learning has been shown to be very effective, I think few university teachers are skilled in how to do it well.

None of this is likely to work just in and of itself. It needs teaching expertise.

These factors are why schools research has clearly established that the most effective school systems in the world are comprehensive mixed ability systems with expert teachers.

This research has also established that the effectiveness of comprehensive education is undermined if it co-exists with selection. This can take the form of residential selection, that undermines the mix of a school's catchment area, or selective schools, that have a similar more direct effect.

In higher education we have a gradation of selectivity by institution and subject that creates a status hierarchy in which the most selective institutions are commonly described as 'top', 'leading' or 'elite', casting the shadow of selection over even comprehensive schools and colleges – because these often measure their own success by how many of their students get into these top institutions.

In many people's minds, elite universities are at the pinnacle of a meritocratic society. But Michael Young wrote of meritocracy not as social mobility but as a dystopia in which a well-educated elite disempowered everyone else, which of course has to some extent happened and contributed to the Trump and Brexit votes.

And just as David Goodhart has written of Trump and Brexit voters as society's 'somewhere' people, people who stay attached to locale and family, the educated elite are 'anywhere' people, geographically mobile in their search for career progression.

A classic trait of the anywheres is for their children to go away to residential universities, seen as a good thing that builds independence and cosmopolitan attitudes, but actually sorting them into universities where their peers will be other young anywheres much like them.

And many proponents of widening access in HE see their mission as to rescue the somewheres from going to their local somewhere university, an ex-polytechnic.

Access policy and practice is dominated by measures to get 'smart' somewheres into anywhere universities.

At scale, this has virtually no impact on social inequality. It costs hundreds of millions of pounds a year when by lowering tariffs a much bigger effect could be achieved for nothing.

In fact, universities charging over the £6k basic fee would be able to reduce their fees if they reduced their tariffs, because currently they are required to spend some of the additional fee on access measures.

My argument is that all universities should operate the same basic matriculation entry requirement, probably around three Cs in A level terms, or successfully passing a foundation programme, because below that there is a significantly higher risk of a student failing. I would bring back student number controls so that universities can't simply use their prestige to cream off students from other institutions.

I would build in an element of aspiration by replacing access agreements with diversity agreements, based on universities having agreed fixed quotas of intakes in different tariff bands deliberately designed to create mixed abilities and backgrounds among their students.

Ideally, each programme would have entry quotas at different tariff points at and above the basic matriculation requirement. If there are more applicants than places at each tariff band, admission would be based on a lottery.

This would spread higher achieving students across the sector rather than concentrate them in a few institutions, and create opportunity for lower achieving students in universities that they currently can only dream of getting into to.

This would also have another big effect, and that would be to force universities to raise their game when it comes to teaching expertise, and much more effectively than the huge bureaucracy of the TEF.

The main reason for this would be the transition to mixed abilities in all universities, which as John Hattie shows creates a resource for good teachers, who can put this resource to work with peer-to-peer learning techniques.

Some people have suggested this approach will dampen aspiration, the criticism often made of unconditional offers.

I don't think school students would need to be incentivised to do their best at level 3 but if there was evidence that this approach lowered their aspiration I'd introduce a financial incentive to achieve higher level 3 grades.

Scholarships for high level 3 attainment would be regressive and I think those universities that have used them have not found them to be very effective.

What I'd do is build on something we already have at Middlesex, and that's to offer our higher achieving third years part-time work as Student Learning Assistants to help first years that need some extra support.

What could be offered to applicants coming with the highest level 3 grades is guaranteed part-time employment as Student Learning Assistants, rewarding them for their achievement and providing other students with extra peer support.

This could be paid for by scrapping the access spending requirement and using it to pay for the SLAs, an effective and evidence-based way to support retention and achievement.

So, there's much to be debated and much to be done. I very much welcome today's initiative and see great potential for it to evolve into a network at a time when I think we've really been on the wrong track with the drive to marketise higher education.

Marketization is proving to be expensive, bureaucratic and inequitable. On a wider front, I think as a country we've lost our confidence in the ability of human design to make organisations and places that work, and we've lost our confidence in teaching as a skill that grows abilities.