

GMT interview

Social mobility in higher education

with Alan Milburn

In an interview with GMT, Alan Milburn¹ offers insights into his thoughts about social mobility in higher education. From raising aspirations of young people, to the need for contextual data in the admissions process to university, Alan talks about how universities can contribute to social mobility, not just through widening participation activities, but beyond to collaboration with businesses and access to post-graduate education.

In your report 'Fair Access to the Professions', you make the case for the provision of sound information, advice and guidance when making decisions to progress to higher education, so let's begin with you, what information, advice and guidance was available to you as you applied to university?

I can barely remember. It's such a long-time ago. But I think the answer is none. That might have sufficed in the era when a university education was for a few hundred thousand people but not when it's for 2.5 million who are competing in an increasingly complex labour market.

What impact do you think the Key Information Sets will have on the decision-making of students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

I really welcome the introduction of Key Information Sets. The principle in the Government White Paper of empowering students through better and clearer information is a step in the right direction. In particular, it's great to see more information on outcomes for students being integrated in an easy to access format. In general, when we're looking at social mobility, it's important that we can see the actual progression people make from one stage of life to the next, so I'm quite excited about this shift in focus. Hopefully the information will help people make a decision on what and where to study that best suits

their long term ambitions. Having said that, while information is one crucial piece of the puzzle, it is not enough on its own. The Key Information Sets will require plenty of context and explanation in order to help individuals make decisions that best suit their interests and aspirations. So it needs to be coupled with good advice and guidance. Also, it's likely that for many courses, the numbers will be so small that the data might not be published, or won't be particularly clear.

In light of the proposed arrangements for the new Careers Service, how will schools and colleges support the raising of pupils' aspirations to enter the professions?

The short answer is I don't know and I'm not convinced anybody else does either! You've got two things going on here at the same time. On the one hand, you've got the emergence of the National Careers Service which is mainly directed at adults, but which may also lead to provision in schools. In an ideal world this would create a thriving market place of providers, which would lead to a clear evidence base on what works and a cost effective service that really delivers. It's too early to say if this is what will actually happen, and it's something we're going to need to monitor.

On the other hand, as we recommended in the Fair Access report, the Government is devolving the duty to schools to provide careers advice, so that they can make a decision on what best suits their pupils' interests. Whilst I am pleased to see this happen, the problem is many schools are feeling a financial squeeze at the moment, and there's a risk that some will decide that careers advice is something they simply can't afford to do in detail. I think that's absolutely the wrong approach, as there's plenty of research that shows you need good careers advice to

¹ Alan Milburn was appointed by the Government as Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, and will shortly be taking over as interim chair of the Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty. His report on the role of universities in furthering social mobility is due out later in the spring.

improve social mobility. So the worst case scenario would be some schools fulfilling their duty to provide independent advice by referring students to a website and phone line, and then thinking that they've done all they need to. I think the statutory guidance will need to make clear that this isn't enough.

As you can see, I think there are a lot of question marks and potential pitfalls in what is happening in the area of careers advice, and it's an area I'm going to be keeping a very close eye on!

Enhancing social mobility via widening participation in HE is now well-established but what do you think is the right balance between the provision of fee waivers or cash bursaries to support first generation students?

There has been some great research on the impact of bursaries which found that they have minimal, if any, impact on widening participation. They should be seen as tools to aid retention, not to broaden access. At the same time, the evidence from Simon Hughes and others suggests that fee waivers are even worse! The fact is, you don't need to pay back fees until you earn, and so I think fee waivers should only be used in very rare circumstances.

Overall, I think far too much of university expenditure is going on bursaries and fee waivers, and I absolutely agree with the OFFA direction that more of the money should go on outreach activity instead. This requires a huge effort by the sector to work together, to build collaborative infrastructure, to understand what really works, and then to put their resources behind these proven approaches.

Do you feel the financial arrangements for post-graduate education received enough attention in the recent white paper? (If not, what would you have liked to see?)

No I don't. I think post-graduate education is a real time-bomb in terms of social mobility. Everyone agrees that nobody should be barred from undergraduate education because they can't afford fees, and yet we completely accept this barrier when it comes to post-graduate education. The fact is, post-graduate education is not a luxury for the individual, it is a necessity for our economy and wider society. More and more professional jobs require masters' level education at entry level, and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are clearly facing huge obstacles to get these qualifications. With the increase

in fees, and what we know about the relative debt-aversion of people from poorer backgrounds, this problem could go from bad to worse. Unfortunately, the solution to the problem requires money, and there isn't much about at the moment. So I think this is an area that requires urgent consideration to develop a serious long term strategy for funding post-graduate study.

What is your view on the recent debate on the use of 'contextual data' as part of university admissions processes?

This is one of the most contentious, and important, debates. I would like to see universities as a whole grasp the nettle of contextual data. It is time in my view that the use of data that takes account of the educational and social context of pupils' achievement becomes the norm not the exception across university admission processes. This, I know, is controversial terrain. But without concerted action here I simply do not believe we will make progress in ensuring access to university is genuinely open to the widest possible range of students.

In an ideal world, of course, all schools would be of a uniformly high standard and universities could simply select students on the basis of actual academic achievement. Sadly, for all the progress since the late 1990s, that is not the case. When some pupils attend consistently high achieving schools but others low achieving ones the issue becomes how best to judge what each pupil has achieved. Clearly academic attainment should remain key to a university place. No other single indicator provides better evidence of how a young person will get on at university than their A-level results. But they are not fool-proof in predicting future performance. Hard evidence suggests that a typical state school pupil – once they get in to university – performs at the same or at a higher level than privately educated pupils who have better A-level grades. Studies at Bristol University and at Oxford University have bolstered that evidence base. They suggest that a pupil getting good but lower A-level grades from a poorly performing school may do better at university than somebody with better A-levels from a high performing school.

The data goes with the grain of common sense. I think most people would accept that a youngster with no family history of going to university from a disadvantaged area attending a low achieving school, has had to work harder to get decent A-levels than a similar youngster who has attended a top school,

having been brought up by well-off parents, who know the university system like the back of their hands. That is why universities like Bristol, Durham and Exeter have been taking wider social and educational factors into account in assessing applicants' academic achievements. Many other universities do the same. Their experience is that using contextual data improves rather than lowers standards.

From the conversations I have had with vice-chancellors and others I suspect that many universities would like to do more of this sort of thing but are fearful of the consequences. They recall with horror the Laura Spence affair and the media hostility to Bristol University's positive efforts to broaden its social intake. Some of the top universities worry about their standing in international league tables if they are seen to soften entry requirements. Many others are simply afraid of being charged with social engineering or positive discrimination. Most believe the politicians will run a mile if the universities face a media onslaught on those grounds. I understand those concerns. But there is only one answer to them. Universities have to summon up the courage to get out and make a positive argument for change. This means confronting the argument that greater fairness means lower quality. The evidence suggests it does not.

If evidence from the UK is not enough to convince you, look at the experience of the US. There diversity is not regarded as an obstacle to academic excellence; it is a prerequisite for it. Indeed that principle has been affirmed by the Supreme Court and is reflected in how the top Ivy Leagues universities approach admissions. At Harvard, Princeton, and others they carefully craft their intake each year to ensure it has a diverse mix of students from different backgrounds with different talents. Prior attainment has a central place in determining who gets in but so too does the potential to make distinctive contributions to the welfare of society and the quality of campus diversity. The top US universities do this because they have accumulated evidence to show that diversity adds dynamism to the learning environment. They see no tension between excellence and widening participation. They are not enemies. They are friends.

Do you think it's time we ended unpaid internships?

I'm concerned at the number of unpaid internships and informal 'friends and family schemes' that are still common in some sectors. Unpaid internships can disadvantage those from less affluent backgrounds who cannot afford to work for free for any length of time. Informal work experience opportunities are difficult, if not impossible, to access unless young people have family contacts.

The evidence that I have seen shows that, despite some examples to the contrary, connection rather than ability continues to be the key to getting an internship. This is both unfair and bad for business. So I think there are three key principles for effective internship programmes. First, providing individuals with meaningful work experience opportunities, rather than be used as a source of free or cheap administrative support. Second, ensuring opportunities are accessible to all and based on 'what you know', rather than 'who you know', through open and transparent recruitment. And third, offering paid internships, so that they are accessible to those without private means of support.

This is an area where universities can show leadership. I agree with Tim Wilson's recommendation in his recent report that there should be a sector wide agreement that no university careers service will offer unpaid internships. In general, this will mean that the employer should pay. In a small number of cases, where there are outstanding internship opportunities but the employer is simply unable to provide funding, then universities should use their Offa funds to support eligible students. Employers need graduates, and so the sector could send a powerful message that would help move this forward.

Finally, what do you think universities can do to improve social mobility?

The first thing to say is that I think universities have a critical role to play in improving social mobility, and there's a whole range of things which they can do. Of course, they can't solve the problems alone, and many other players, like schools, have much to contribute, but we'll only make progress if everyone pitches in. I break down the social mobility work of universities with students into four categories – getting ready, getting in, staying in, and getting on.

So under getting ready there is the work they can do in raising attainment and aspiration. One of the biggest issues here is the need for better evaluation of what works in terms of outreach activity. Given the resources that have been spent, I think it's quite shocking how far there is still to go on this. Our universities have some of the best researchers in the world, so they should use their own resources to drive forward this evidence base.

Getting in refers to the admissions process itself. Contextual data is a key issue here. More universities should use it, better data should be made available to admissions teams to help them use it, and common approaches should be developed. I think the work of SPA, UUK and UCAS is a great start in providing the right basket of data for universities to use. There's a long way to go, but the more universities get behind this initiative, the quicker it can move forward.

Retention, or staying in, is an area where I think there's a lot of good work going on, for example in developing student charters in collaboration with student unions.

Finally, there's the issue of outcomes, or getting on. This is an area which often gets neglected when we talk about social mobility in universities. The fact is, if universities aren't equipping students to get on in life once they leave university, then all the work on access won't improve social mobility. Universities need to be forming partnerships with businesses, understanding the needs of their students, and helping them to make the most of the experiences on offer at university. There's a shift in focus beginning to happen, where universities are paying careful attention to the skills and capabilities which students develop through both the formal and informal learning at university – for example, the ability to work in groups, developing tolerance for different points of view, critical thinking, and so on. At Durham University, they've developed a skills audit which helps students understand where they need to develop, and then enables them to make the most of the experiences on offer to improve their capabilities. This type of initiative has the potential to maximise the impact universities have in transforming people's lives.

Alan Milburn's report on the role of universities in furthering social mobility will be published later in the spring.