Continuity and Change: Social and Educational Mechanisms for ‘Driving’ Social Mobility under the Coalition Government

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Background and introduction

This paper reports initial findings and reflections concerning national policies for increasing social mobility. Work for the paper developed from an examination of the response of the previous Government (BIS, 2010) to the Milburn Report (Milburn, 2009) on fair access to the professions. The election of the Coalition Government, with social mobility advertised as a key social policy in its new programme (Cabinet Office, 2010), made the work more complex as a complete new suite of policy documents were in the process of being developed. Not all of these have been published at the time of writing (eg the new Social Justice Strategy is due from the Department of Work and Pensions later this year). And requests for interviews with senior officials – a staple of previous research of this nature – were initially met with some understandable reluctance in the first few months of the new Government.

This paper’s working conclusions on policy models have been developed from a critical reading of important national documents, informed by interviews at major departments of state. For this paper, these have included officials at the Cabinet Office, Department of Work and Pensions and Department for Business Innovation and Skills. Further interviews have been agreed and are continuing. From previous experience, discussions with the authors of national documents enable the identification of key common narratives across departments and at the same time eliminate inferred connections and themes that were unintended and (probably) unwarranted.

The paper also examines some of the work of the Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum. This was set up under the last Government following the publication of the Langlands Report (Langlands, 2005) and became key to that Government’s response to Milburn (BIS, 2010). It was restructured by its Executive Group, chaired by David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science, in October, 2010 under the Coalition into a series of ‘task and finish’
groups (as opposed to previous standing sub groups reflecting Milburn themes). Data drawn on here includes the documentation involved – again - and interviews with both senior officials and representatives of major professional groups represented on the Forum. These groups include the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the British Medical Association, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers. There have been further contacts and interviews with the Medical Schools Council, medical schools considered to have had positive records in widening access to the profession, medical students themselves, and chartered engineers that have acquired the (masters’ level equivalent) qualification by non-university routes. This work continues.

This paper does not discuss the theoretical aspects of social mobility, including the contestedness of the term. And it will do no more than touch on some more controversial aspects of government documents, as the prime purpose of the paper is an initial look at policy models. So little space is given to speculation about the effects of the HE White Paper (BIS, 2011), for example. Finally, there is very limited consideration of the nature of professions and their role in social structure.

Continuity and change: social mobility policy and mechanisms under the Brown and Coalition Governments

There are a number of continuities between the policies and aspirations of the two governments, between some people, and between some of the implementation mechanisms. But quite radical discontinuities – beyond the obvious such as the effects of the deficit reduction – are beginning to emerge in terms of policy mechanisms and expectations across Government, and may do so in terms of interventions. These will be reflected on further in subsequent work.

Policy aspirations

This is the modern definition of social justice: not just social protection but real opportunity for everyone to make the most of their potential in a Britain where what counts is not where you come from but what you aspire to become, a Britain where everyone should be able to say that their destiny is not written for them, but written by them (Cabinet Office, 2009: 1).

...no one should be prevented from fulfilling their potential by the circumstances of their birth... (This is) a vision for a socially mobile country (Cabinet Office, 2011a: 5).

These statements were made by politicians in introductions respectively to the New Opportunities White Paper of the Brown Government, published in January 2009, and the Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers Social Mobility Strategy of the Coalition published in April of this year. Importantly, these are the aspirations expressed by politicians to their civil servants, sometimes via their special advisers, that they expect to see developed into policy and implemented.
The sentiments are similar in terms of social mobility, and senior officials made it clear that they think there is common ground between the two governments:

(There is) a real passion for the ends, which in lots of cases... haven’t changed (senior official).

**Policy Proposals: under Labour**

One of the differences signalled by the Brown Government from 2007 was that social mobility would become a key theme of their reform programmes. *Excellence and Fairness* (Cabinet Office, 2008), the key document for public service reform, was one of the first places where this was made clear. Subsequent revisions to departmental policies – for Education in the 2009 Schools White Paper (DCSF, 2009) – included this theme, but much detail was also included in the 2009 social mobility white paper itself, *New Opportunities*. For example, the gifted and talented scheme was to be revised to incorporate *City Gates*, it said. This was to bring about a greater emphasis in major conurbations on progression from more disadvantaged communities to ‘more selective’ universities, involving the provision of individual tutors for young people who showed potential and the (then intended) provision of a package of support for young people who might be able to progress to such. This was to be:

as comprehensive as that often received by young people attending the best schools and colleges with high rates of progression to higher education (and would include) support to attend the most selective institutions (Cabinet Office, 2009: 63).

Staying with school reform, a variety of other measures – for example, CPD for all schools serving disadvantaged communities, Family Intervention Projects, ‘Inspiring Communities’, reviewed elsewhere (Riddell, 2010) – were to be implemented, and *New Opportunities* made the obvious point about the contributions to social mobility that would be made by effective early years provision, ‘world class schools’, and the development of ‘pathways for all’ (to further and higher education) as part of the Labour Government’s continuing reforms.

It is not possible to talk much about the nature of the detailed implementation of such measures – whether earmarked funding would have been available for the medium term, for example – because of the change in government. But it must be born in mind that additional funding made available to schools either directly or indirectly via local authorities was in process in the late 2000s of being amalgamated into overall budgets to be delegated, without earmarking. There is more on this below, but it was often these budgets that took hits from the first round of local authority budget cuts mid-year under the Coalition.

**Policy proposals: the Coalition**

Some of these approaches are echoed in Coalition thinking. The *Opening Doors Strategy* (Cabinet Office, 2011a) was launched as a ‘life cycle’ approach – drawing on contributions in the
Foundation Years (a new term for 0–5 year olds following the Field Report – Field, 2010), the school years, transitions (i.e. to work or higher education) and adulthood. Like Labour’s white paper, Opening Doors asserts the importance and contributions of reforms elsewhere: for schools, raising standards, narrowing the gaps in attainment and raising aspirations, as it says, and for universities, ensuring the wider social access it claims will be possible through the higher education reforms set out in the HE White Paper published in June (BIS, 2011).

The development of the social mobility strategy had been overseen for the Coalition by a ministerial group chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. Like under Labour, there is a complex relationship between policy announcements in the social mobility strategy itself and in departmental white or green papers. A significant proposal included in the strategy, however, was for the ‘Fairness Premium’ (‘Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility’ was the strap line on the cover of the original Coalition Programme (Cabinet Office, 2010)). This premium includes three tranches of resources. First, the allocation of funding to cover the costs of fifteen hours of nursery provision for disadvantaged two year olds (matching that made for all three and four year olds made by the Labour Government and following the recommendation of the first Allen Report – Allen, 2001b - that the age of three was too late). Second, there is the much-publicised pupil premium, to be allocated to schools for 2011/2 at least on the basis of free school meals, and third, there is the National Scholarship Programme to support university attendance for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Officials were keen to convince me of the significance of these proposals and the money found for them against the background of the deficit reduction. At a time when it was not possible to find new resources for almost anything, the fact that this had been done was considered highly significant. The implementation of the pupil premium is considered further below, but at the time of writing, there is a further, possibly counter, proposal for the national scholarship programme scheme from 2013. HEFCE issued guidance to all HEIs (HEFCE, 2011) giving them their NSP allocations and explaining that the funds could be used to top up bursaries and other funds planned to be made available through their widening access policies and access agreements; no more than £1,000 cash could be made available to students in any one academic year (as opposed to fee waivers). Since then, Simon Hughes, appointed as the Government’s ‘Advocate for Access to Education’, published his own ‘Hughes Report’ (Hughes, 2001), proposing inter alia to use some of the funding to allocate three scholarships to every fee-paying school.

Other continuities

One of the other obvious continuities is people: not the officials necessarily; the routine churn (and, anecdotally, the effects of the early release scheme to help reduce civil service numbers begun under the last government) has meant that a different group of names has been approached for this research. But other names are the same: Frank Field MP, former Labour Junior Minister, was asked to report on child poverty, on which he has commented before, and Graham Allen, Labour MP for Nottingham North, has produced two reports on early intervention. Alan Milburn, ex-Secretary of State for health under Labour, who was
commissioned by the Brown Government, after the publication of *New Opportunities* (Cabinet Office, 2009), to produce a report on fair access to the professions, was appointed early on in the Coalition ministerial group process (by letter on August 11th, 2010, to be precise) to be an ‘independent reviewer on social mobility’. This involves, among other things, presenting an annual report to Parliament. For his first year, Milburn has decided himself to examine access to higher education, joining Simon Hughes and others. And the policy concept – more on this below – was that the independence of these people adds to the strength of the policy process.

*Implementation Mechanisms; asking the right questions*

So, there are similarities in social mobility aspirations between the two governments, the same complex process of policy formation with documents cross-referenced between departments, and some continuity of people. But there, it seems, the similarity ends. The process of complex policy conception and writing has often been considered a strength of the English Civil Service (see Barber, 2008, for example), but the basic question to ask – of officials, special advisers, ministers – is what happens then once the policy is decided and written. What will actually change as a consequence, and why do ministers and officials think it will?

*Delivery chains*

During the last Labour Government, it became obvious what the intended levers of power were and how they were supposed to work. It was possible to ask an official what would change as the result of a particular new policy in the sense of what, for example, a teacher, head teacher, social worker, local authority, would do differently as a consequence; then what may be different for children, families and communities, or particular schools as a result of this change. The idea was to establish a connection between policy decision and the children or adults it was intended to benefit directly.

What was less clear, in discussion with officials responsible for individual policy levers, was how collective policy initiatives would impact on individuals, say teachers or heads, who may have been subject to lots of them, for example in urban schools. It was possible to discuss in general how, for example, raising the attainment of eleven year olds might contribute to the regeneration of a local community long term, but not specifically the mechanisms for it. Discussions with officials in the mid 2000s often included references to not being joined up enough yet. But nevertheless, implementation would be monitored on the basis of continuing performance data against targets, of course often siloed (but collected), and the responsible individuals would be ‘held to account’ and, sometimes, ‘reconfigured’ or replaced at local level as various Government documents used to say. At its grandest, this was the process underlying the last Government’s National Challenge (see Riddell, 2009, for an analysis of this strategy), which the Coalition has decided to continue, albeit with higher floor targets.

This stepped approach became formalised into a theory of change, with the setting up of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (in 2001) and appointing Michael Barber as its head. Barber has termed this whole process ‘deliverology’ (see Barber, 2008), whereby the ‘delivery chain’ was identified for particular service improvements, ranging from rail to literacy: who was
responsible at each stage and for what, and what data was available to enable the monitoring of progress. Data were monitored and policed through a regular framework of meetings and reporting lines across Government and, by extension, in schools’ case, down to local authority and individual school level (sometimes via a government appointed member of staff such as a literacy consultant). This process at its height began in Number 10 and officials from other departments were held to account for service improvements as measured by data. The process had begun to develop from the Treasury from 1999 whereby, in response to the first three-year Comprehensive Spending Review of the Labour Government, spending department officials were held to account for ‘delivering’ improvements against Public Service Agreements (PSAs) in return for the often large increases in their budgets. Barber himself, however, did not consider that the two processes – delivery chains and CSR – came together satisfactorily until the late 2000s.

So, in the earlier years of the Labour Government, at least, a new initiative would often come wrapped up with a new performance target and a centrally owned budget, with often little discretion of how to use it (Riddell, 2003), together with central government-employed project staff. This had become modified with time, and the moves towards greater devolution in the late 2000s mentioned above may have marked a different ‘direction of travel’ towards more local discretion, as one official put it to me at the time, a process started with the publication of the primary and secondary (later to be National) strategies in 2003. It is not clear that this was the process identified by schools! More recently, the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit was abolished at the end of 2010.

The question following the establishment of a delivery chain, though, is did it work, and what would this mean more widely? Why did officials think particular changes would occur and how did they think they would they contribute to wider social change, including social mobility? This involves having some theory about social change, or set of beliefs, even if often and implicit, about how things work. Even when the risks were being minimised and the delivery chains kept as short as possible, such as with Education from 1998 through the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy, there could be problems. These include what we know about the various stages of the process through which people create meaning, interpret the intentions of those above them and then implement their own version of particular reforms. There are ‘interpretation chains’ as well as delivery chains, entailing slight or more serious adjustments to activities to be experienced by children or others, the longer the chain – something we have known for a long time (Ball, 1990). Not all policy makers are aware of this.

The length and complexity of such implementation chains, particularly in services like Education can also be more or less serious for a reform depending on the nature of, for example, teachers’ commitment to and level of understanding of them (Fullan, various, but see 2001). This must hold true for all activities providing services to people, even medicine, despite fulminations on the so-called medical model. Leaving aside the other problems – multiply impacting (on individuals and/or institutions) but separately-initiated change, already mentioned, together with unintended and unanticipated consequences for workload, and the need to respond to short term pressures being at the expense of the longer term coherence
and improvement (Riddell, 2003) – such implementation/delivery chains beg the question of how aggregating up change for individual clients will then lead to anticipated, measurable, national change, for example in social mobility – and how you work it out. Barber’s model had involved attempts to develop a mathematics for such change, but even with complex computer modelling, this must be an imprecise process for millions of individuals, though it is possible to identify actions that need to take place to end practices at the micro-level that might impact negatively on mobility.

Policy realisation under the Coalition: a first interpretation

The approach of the Coalition is quite different from this, following the abolition of the Delivery Unit (and the end of ‘Barberism’ as one official termed it), however the implementation of change under the Labour Government was considered to be developing. It still depends on some assumptions, however, or an implicit social theory about how change occurs and why.

From the documents mentioned and interviews to date, the following developing features and mechanisms of a new approach to policy realisation can be identified provisionally. Partly, these seem to be grounded in an initial articulation of the ‘localism’ behind government policy and the emphasis on ‘transparency’ – one of the buttons on the Cabinet Office website (others include Government Efficiency, Big Society and National Security). The intention is that understanding of these mechanisms may be reinterpreted and refined with more data, leaving aside what we know in general about the gaps between intention, implementation and the experience of reform by people who are its focus. There is always some chain, but the issue is how it can be realistically conceived and described.

The first feature is that Government does not regard itself as solely responsible for achieving major social objectives, or even, necessarily, playing the ‘strategic leadership’ role described in relation to public service reform in Excellence and Fairness (Cabinet Office, 2008). It too though talks about ‘policy levers’ in the context of devolved administrations (Cabinet Office, 2011a). This is not at all an ambiguity, but itself is formed on the basis of a belief in the way things should (and can) happen. Before the abolition of Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, the Prime Minister made a speech to senior officials in July, 2010 (Cameron, 2010) in which he described the delivery chains considered above as ‘bureaucratic accountability’, and as ‘top down, centralised’. He said that:

... let me be very clear: I do not want you and your colleagues to think your role is to guarantee the outcomes we want to see in our public services - or to directly intervene in organisations to try and improve their performance (p5).

In a longer piece, these intentions would need to be reviewed in the light of, for example, the nature of Department of Education-directed intervention into ‘underperforming’ schools, especially academies. Or alternatively, the way the DWP manages Job Centre staff. But Cameron was being as clear as it is possible to be that it was not the role of the civil servants to intervene in public services, or to ‘drive’ change themselves. Teachers should try to impress parents, he said, rather than the Department for Education. This new approach is also being
taken across central government, particularly in the relationships, for example, between say the Cabinet Office, Treasury and the major spending departments (officials confirmed this).

More broadly, at national level and local level, and a second feature of the new processes, is that Government invites a variety of independent, non-Governmental and private sector organisations to participate in the process of change, as integral partners, not just consultees. This is by no means a new process (see Ball, 2007 and his continuing work on private public networks and the new philanthropy). But for the Coalition, this has been elevated to the notion of joint public and social objectives and a very public process. For example, in his speech at the launch of Every Business Commits with Business in the Community in December, 2010 (see http://www.bitc.org.uk/business_and_the_big_society/business_commits/index.html), the Prime Minister credited business with

> ...the power, the creativity, and the enterprise to help us tackle some of the most pressing social problems and challenges we face in our country. By meeting our shared responsibilities, we can build that shared future: a stronger future and a better Britain.

He was received warmly. The setting up of Professions for Good, a development from the Collaborative Forum, and a similar intended future partner in social change will be discussed below.

Although formal partnerships with private and voluntary sector organisations existed before this Government, for example locally through PFI, or in the running of particular public services, this is becoming more formalised nationally, with the setting up of national bodies to oversee national developments. Reaching for a mechanism such as this is the third feature of the new approach. In the second Allen Report (Allen, 2011b), for example, and trailed in the social mobility strategy, an independent Early Intervention Foundation (of central and local government and particular agencies) is proposed, among other things, to:

> ‘champion and promote Early Intervention, (improve) the evidence base so that investment is targeted on what works, ... acting as a source of advice on social investment for Early Intervention’ (page xxv).

This is ‘Government and Non-Government together’, as the report said earlier (p xv). But he political promotion of Early Intervention, across Government, should be done through an Early Intervention Task and Finish Group reporting to the Social Justice Cabinet Committee, but this too was to have an independent chair.

A further example of this third feature has been in connection with the provision of the pupil premium, initially to be allocated on the basis of registered entitlement to free school meals, as has been explained, and the second component of the ‘Fairness Premium’. It was originally announced in the autumn and featured in Opening Doors. Parallel to this development, the Schools White Paper (DfE, 2010) announced the setting up of an Education Endowment Fund, open to bids from local authorities, schools and others for ‘innovative projects to raise the attainment of deprived children in underperforming schools’ (ibid, p14).
The government has provided £125 million for this fund, and it is to be overseen by the Sutton Trust (www.suttontrust.com), a charitable organisation concerned with the achievement of disadvantaged children, and not uncritical of aspects of Government policy, in conjunction with the Impetus Trust, after an ‘open competition’. Again, the issue is that a formally separate organisation will be responsible for public money. The Sutton Trust is setting up an Education Endowment Foundation to oversee the fund, whose chief executive has just been appointed.

The setting up of an independent Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, announced in both Opening Doors and the Child Poverty Strategy (DWP, 2011), now promised for early 2012, will be further example of such an independent body. However, this was also a recommendation of the Milburn Report (Milburn, 2009) accepted by the last Government (BIS, 2010). The appointment of Alan Milburn may also be interpreted in this way: someone outside Government holding it to account, as ‘part of the architecture... we’ve created’ as a senior official explained.

The fourth feature of the implementation process arises from the core roles of the Early Intervention Foundation and Education Endowment Foundation: the provision of the ‘best kind of evidence available’ (a senior official again) to schools, agencies and other providers when designing and delivering their services. Both of the Allen Reports make a list of the ‘best early intervention programmes in the UK’. And the Sutton Trust commissioned Durham University to produce a ‘toolkit’ to enable schools to spend the pupil premium (Higgins et al, 2010). This lists a variety of ‘broad approaches against one another, rather than advocating specific schemes’ (p4), although the intention may be in time to develop ‘specific resources for teachers to explore’. As this publication makes absolutely clear, ‘whatever approach is chosen... it will still be necessary for each school to evaluate the actual benefits of any changes in a real context (to ensure) the investment really does help’.

This fourth feature is related to the next – the ‘transparency’ priority – that engendered the early publication of departmental plans (‘structural reform plans’), soon after the election in 2010, together with monitoring reports, and structure charts for the major departments including contact details. Significantly, though, in addition to the evidence published nationally about the best-evidenced approaches (by independent organisations as above), it is also the intention, across Government, to develop and make public a much greater amount of data, on all aspects of performance, throughout public services, nationally and locally, from government departments to schools, colleges and universities (DfE, 2010 and BIS, 2011). This programme has begun, but the data is not always currently easily accessible. If schools are aiming to please parents, as the Prime Minister said, the idea is that, beyond the selection of schools for admission, parents will be able to continually access a much greater amount of data than now, including financial, for example, and how the children behave (presumably according to Ofsted). This is intended to bring about a more direct accountability of public services to their local consumers.

Overall then, the (now) absence of bureaucratic driving – whatever view is taken about it – allied with the rich, easily available local data, gives the future framework for public service
improvement under the Coalition, whichever sector the provider is in. The intention, as expressed by a senior official, is to provide:

... a different form of accountability which is less about pulling levers, more about... giving people freedom and then having the transparency for, ideally, ...local people and service users to hold them to account.

This sort of view has been echoed in a number of senior official interviews. So, in summary, the model is as follows: a national expectation of social change; an expressed view that this is a joint responsibility of Government and other social and economic organisations, including in the private sector; an invitation to join in national and local efforts; the setting up of independent organisations or the commissioning of independent individuals to oversee and monitor particular national developments, including by the provision of evidence of what works; the development of data about all aspects of the performance of publicly funded organisations, nationally and locally; schools and other agencies and providers choosing strategies on the basis of good evidence about what appears to be effective and local priorities and needs, allocating funding accordingly; local accountability, sometimes on a contractual basis, but to other stakeholders such as parents; and intervention or ending of contract if necessary at the appropriate level and by the appropriate body.

A possible sixth feature, from the transparency, data-driven approach, could be the use of ‘payment by results’. This was foreshadowed in David Cameron’s speech to the civil servants in July 2010, and also in the launch of the Public service reform white paper (Cabinet Office, 2011b). This has always been the basis in one sense of contracts with private sector providers of public services; a pilot application of this, however, is now proceeding with Sure Start Centres to ‘incentivise a focus on the core purpose of children’s centres: to improve child development and school readiness among young children and to reduce inequalities’ (DfE, 2011: 1). This will need to be considered in due course.

Will all this work? This and other questions will be returned to in the final section of this paper.

Access to the professions: the Collaborative Forum; continuity and change

The final part of this paper will provide a vignette, rather than a case study, of the work of the Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum. Although this had been set up as explained earlier, in response to the Langlands Report, it was ‘reformed’ for the last Government’s response (BIS, 2010) to the Milburn report – chiefly, to be one of its major vehicles, after it had worked closely with the Fair Access Panel. Its membership was expanded (additional professional bodies were invited to participate) and under the governance of the Executive Group that comprised 10 senior representatives of large and influential professional bodies, chaired by the BIS Minister responsible for higher education. Five sub-groups had been established to deal with the major themes of the Milburn Report (role models, mentors and employer links; information and support; quality and kitemarks; recruitment, training and progression and regulatory and corporate issues), but in October, 2010, the Executive Group decided to focus the work of the Forum on a small number of task and finish groups.
Over 60 professional groups are now represented on the Forum (eg major ones such as the BMA, Engineering Council, CIPD, RICS, General Teaching Council, various accountancy organisations for the UK, the Law Society and Bar Council, the TUC and the university mission groups), often at Chief Executive or Director Level. There are, of course, many more groups than this nationally that define themselves as professional, though this will not be discussed here.

The significance for public policy of the professions is fourfold:

- The size of the contribution to GDP. Leaving out the public sector professions such as medicine, teaching and social work, it is variously estimated at more than 8% (more than the creative industries) and more than half of the £29 billion of internationally traded services (Ingham Brooke and Catalano (2009) – the SPADA Report);
- The Milburn Report estimated that there would be a further 7.5 million professional (plus managerial) jobs in the UK economy by 2020, echoing earlier claims (Cabinet Office, 2009) that the global middle class would grow to a billion over the same timescale. These are pre-recession figures, and before double dip is confirmed or otherwise; even if they are revised downwards, it seems likely that the ‘hollowing out’ process that seems to be a developing feature of the UK economy (UKCES, 2010: 89) will continue and that the overall change in proportions remain the same, if not numbers;
- This is both a competitive issue, therefore, in terms of matching employer need to employee availability at the right level of skill from the UK (or alternatively other countries), and a social mobility/opportunity one in the sense that wider groups of people could have access to the ‘better jobs’ desired by the last Government, achieving greater ‘Fairness’ in Coalition terms;
- If professional status is achieved by a greater proportion of the UK population, will this change in occupational structure result in a modified social structure with reconfigured expectations and actions concerning lifestyle, education, social reproduction, housing, consumption (including cultural), and so on?

Hence the significance of these Government policies and the broad policy areas across government that might contribute. The picture that was painted by Milburn (2009) on access to the professions is well-known by now and will not be rehearsed here in detail. A significant part of the data for its conclusions in chapter 1 were provided by the Sutton Trust, but one of the striking things about the submissions to the Fair Access Panel was the unanimity in favour of widening access, partly as a fairness matter, but also because of changing labour needs. Everyone seems to believe this is important; all the professional groups represented on the Forum interviewed expressed their commitment to it. The engineers in particular interviewed to date have stressed the need for much greater numbers of professionally-qualified engineers, so there clearly is a market need as well.

Members of the Collaborative Forum have done work on a number of barriers to widening social access to the professions. One identified by Milburn is the link between independent
schools (and certain universities) to the domination of certain professions. Professions for Good (discussed below) have showcased school leaver schemes run by some companies to recruit young people from state schools, pay for their university education at certain institutions, and offer employment thereafter.

Another barrier is the ‘opportunity hoarding’ (ibid: 21) by professional middle class families in relation to the unpaid internships necessary to enter certain professional jobs in a number of occupational areas, including politics. Work continued on both sides of the election in developing a voluntary code of practice for internships, that sets out the requirements of the minimum wage legislation and is clear about the distinction between a volunteer (who cannot be asked to turn up at a certain time or do specific tasks) and an intern who can and is therefore undertaking work that needs to be paid.

Professions for Good (www.professionsforgood.com) was launched on July 18th, in the City of London, at the Hall of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, on the back of (and by association with) the Collaborative Forum. According to them, they are a ‘public information campaign, made up of a collaboration of the representative bodies for the UK’s largest professions’. ‘Together’, they say, ‘we seek to unite the leading professions to maximise their contribution to a fairer society, a strong economy and better informed policy making’ (from the website).

The ‘campaign’ for 2011/12 includes:

- Promoting the Common Best Practice Code for High Quality Internships (explained above and officially launched at the same event, attended by David Willetts).
- Surveying participating professions to establish benchmark levels of social mobility, to be regularly monitored to measure progress.
- Identifying and expanding the routes into the professions – to include non-university paths.
- Defining the most telling indicators of progress in social mobility.
- Creating and hosting an online “Social Mobility Toolkit” for professional associations and regulators in relation to their own role.

Again, these are from the website and reflect both the Collaborative Forum’s work programme and Government expectations, again, largely before and after the election. There was much talk at the launch event of ‘public interest’ matters for the professions and how many professions had ‘transformed themselves’.

There are six further points to make at this stage. First, the independent school/’prestigious’ university/top of the profession nexus identified by Milburn, and whose social mechanism is analysed elsewhere (Riddell, 2010), is not threatened by any of this process, given the need to increase professional and managerial recruitment – ie more than replace those dropping out of the workforce - over the next decade. So, independent schools will remain a sound investment for a particular chosen social trajectory unless national skill forecasts are wrong.
Second, given that most professions require a university first degree before acquiring the relevant professional qualification (indeed, the SPADA report used this tentatively as a definition), access to HE remains a central matter to address if there is to be widening access to the professions. Employer-sponsored schemes will no doubt provide important contributions to this, but much more important will be how the new arrangements in the HE White Paper (BIS, 2011) work out in practice across the sector and for all students. There has been much speculation about this, including the stratifying effects of AAB recruitment on an already stratified university system, the effect of fees on recruitment from NI-SEC 4-7 backgrounds, and so on. This will not be added to here. At the same time, though, although the evidence is not conclusive for the strategic effectiveness of schemes such as AimHigher or the gifted and talented programme, these have now ceased and so will not now be able to contribute at all.

Third, there could absolutely be no non-graduate entry to professions like Medicine – though there is a graduate scheme and it is possible to become a doctor from being qualified for an allied profession. So widening the social basis of the medical profession depends entirely on recruitment, largely, but not exclusively on an AAA basis, to a small group of university schools. Again, all the medical organisations are committed to this as an aim, but BMA figures (BMA, 2009), based on UCAS datasets, show there has been no progress (to 2008, strictly) in terms of the occupational backgrounds of students admitted to UK medical schools (and there is not much difference from applications either). Some evidence in the Sutton Trust’s submission to the Fair Access Panel, not used in the Milburn Report, was that some previously socially exclusive professions – like barristers – had made progress over the last few years (though informally the chambers recruits went to were possibly affected by social background, as were hence the cases they took). But these professions did not include Medicine EXCEPT by proxy from some individual medical schools, for which the figures look positive – much effort (and money) and commitment has been expended on this over the past ten years. All medical schools undertake widening access activities, but not the same ones as each other, and no organisation speaks for the profession as the whole – there is the BMA itself (the ‘trade union’), the General Medical Council (the regulatory body) and the Medical Schools Council on which all the university medical schools are represented, but which is not their governing body. There is a further discussion to be had on this, including the social nature of aspiration and how this is wrapped up with learning and attainment, and the regimes of potential medics’ state schools and colleges. But potential projected student costs with the new fees regime could also be prohibitive for individuals and may undermine recruitment in some schools that have been successful in widening social access.

Fourth, the Government has expressed an interest in non-university routes into the professions, as well as widening access ones. These still exist in accountancy (proudly announced at the Professions for Good launch), law and other places, though are becoming less common because of the increasing currency (and middle class expectation) of the university first degree (more than 40% of the UK population has Level 4 qualifications now, and this is increasing – UKCES, 2010). One of the interesting aspects to emerge from non-graduate engineers interviewed who had attained Chartered Status (masters’ equivalent) was the rigour required of submissions (at doctoral level?). Does this create barriers? And another was that this status was important for
quality assurance and conduct matters, vital if an engineer wished to join a consultancy, but less so a construction company, where (supervisory) experience was the key. Finally, having chartered status did not affect social status; that remained unaltered in the eyes of the C.Engs – and their families, friends and colleagues!

Fifth, will the Government intervene in professions whose indicators, perhaps like Medicine’s, get no better socially over the next few years? No conclusion can be drawn here – it remained an area of doubt under the last Government, even after the publication of their response to Milburn, which included a review of recruitment practices scheduled for 2010. Would they take on independent organisations like the professions (perhaps after considering their role with the banks, for example)? David Willetts made clear in his speech to the annual HEFCE Conference in the Autumn (Willetts, 2010) that the Government did not wish to micromanage universities, that have a similar independent status (though that is not the view currently being taken publicly by some of the universities themselves). Time will tell – officials thought that ministers wished to make progress in this area and to look at widening social access to the professions quite publicly if no progress were to be made.

Sixth, and last, does any of this add up to much? The work of the Forum and Professions for Good is largely invitational, consistent with the rest of the Coalition’s policies as outlined here. If the Code of Practice for internships is to work, it has to be adopted, but as some of the blogs after the launch pointed out, it was all very well – aside from meeting the requirements of the law on the minimum wage – to advocate such schemes, but many of the professional companies involved were very small with a handful of partners. This begs the question of whether such companies would be offering internships, of course, but the publication of such a code puts some pressure on those big ones who do, to which some will respond. The social mobility toolkit when developed will provide advice on good practice and recruitment and employee benchmarking, of course, which will be used by employers and professional groups who wish to avail themselves of such advice. So what can be said is that some people will attain professional status over the next ten years who might not have done so otherwise, partly because of these policy actions and partly because of the economic demographics. Will we be able to tell? And although this is positive, will this engender a sea change in opportunity? Only bit by bit; it depends how big the bits are. But related to this is the question of whether any national policy drive on social mobility could work simply and cleanly given how much it has to effect.

Further questions for the research and for further reflection

So, much of the Coalition’s policy is invitational. Although there are always chains of people that have to implement any policy and that connect with those who might benefit from them, the greater or less nature of direct control on the chain may not, according to the arguments made above, necessarily affect the outcome, at least by itself. There is now a clear intention NOT to have the driven chains of the previous government.
So part of the answer to whether the Government will see its intended outcomes for society achieved more generally will depend on how other organisations engage with the objectives and join in doing something about achieving them. In that sense, probably quite rightly, the Government is only responsible for what it makes available to these organisations and the sort of climate it helps create in which they work. They have to respond. The outcomes of the deficit reduction – and wider economic progress - will clearly play some role in this.

Another part of the answer lies in how intervention will take place, in extremis or in the event of non-compliance – in schools and by whom – on the basis of the better and more transparent data. We wait on the Government for this, and how local authorities may act in this new climate. There is a big question about which parents in what circumstances will be able to take advantage of new data and what they could do about it. The schools system in the UK is steeply stratified, especially in urban areas (Riddell, 2003); freeing up further access to information and market mechanisms, allied to middle class strategies in the market, will make it more so. It remains to be seen whether acting on unsatisfactory performance data will magnify these effects, either on the schools themselves, or in terms of increased middle class exit from public services.

There is one final question. The child poverty strategy (DWP, 2011) does consider the ‘bane’ of worklessness and its potential physical, motivational and aspirational effects on children. This was a concern of the last Government, and much work was expended on worklessness and workless estates from the setting up in 1998 onwards of the Social Exclusion Unit (later the Task Force). One of the key aspects of thinking then, however, was a sort of social counterpart of the hollowing out of the UK economy discussed above. A range of indicators may put people at risk of poverty – unemployment, disability, poor health, etc – but once in poverty, the social processes involved tend to magnify the risks even more for individuals, families and communities. The poor indicators tend to cluster once you get one, and you are more likely to develop more than one risk, especially if you experience one of these indicators of deprivation as a child. This was the thinking behind the Children’s Plan (DCSF, 2008), but it has a strong research base in terms of the experience of multiple deprivation, for example, by the age of 30 (see for example, Feinstein et al, 2007).

Does the coalition believe that these processes of clustering of indicators are important? The answer to worklessness currently on the table is enhanced services to remove the barriers to employment for individuals (through Job Centre Plus), putting ‘conditionality’ on job seekers (through the same set of services) – ie they can be expected to do some extra things to take on work - and reform of the benefits system to make it worthwhile to be in work. Officials said that there is also some consideration of the supply side of jobs in areas where this has become a problem. More measures may emerge through the social justice strategy.

Does this matter? Well it does if you think there are compositional effects on the provision of public services, making them much harder to provide, for example in universal services like schools, or with higher qualifying thresholds in services provided to individuals, in areas where deprivation is concentrated.
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