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ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,
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PLEASE NOTE THAT THESE ARE NOTES FOR A CONFERENCE
PRESENTATION, NOT A FULLY REFERENCED PAPER. FOR DETAILS OF
THE ANALYSIS AND THE REFERENCES, SEE OTHER OUTPUTS OF THE
PROJECT.¹

1. WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIAL
MOBILITY, HISTORICALLY?

1.1 Reasons to believe education relevant to social mobility

***** slide 1 *****

1.1.1 In all countries, E has a role in mediating OD.¹

That's because conditions in childhood are widely agreed to be important
in explaining OD²³.

1.1.2 Also, OD is weaker at higher levels of E.⁴

i.e. working-class children have to show more ability and effort than
middle-class children.

In some countries, therefore a 'compositional effect' has been noted: more
people entering jobs where education matters more.

eg France⁵, USA⁶, Sweden.⁷

So education is a way of escaping the effects of origins.

1.1.3 E is more important than IQ+effort (Young's definition of 'merit').⁸

1.1.4 OE remains strong everywhere however.⁹

¹ Goldthorpe (2003), Breen (2003, p. 13).

² Erikson and Goldthorpe (1993, p. 369).

³ That's why Breen and Jonsson, in their recent analysis of Swedish data, find a cohort approach to be better
than a period one: Breen and Jonsson (2003, p. 14).

⁴ Vallet (in Breen and Luijckx), Goldthorpe (2003, p.12) and Marshall and Swift (1993, p. 188).

⁵ Vallet

⁶ Hout (1988)

⁷ Breen and Jonsson.

⁸ Breen (2003, p. 13); Deary?

Thus E is the means by which advantage is passed on
and, according to some evidence, increasingly the means.

1.1.5 OE has declined in France, Sweden, the Netherlands, but not in England or Ireland¹⁰. This contrasts with Blossfeld and Shavit, whose authors found almost no decline at all, because more recent.

But also OE has not grown, an important point which, as Goldthorpe argued in 1996, has been inadequately absorbed into the theoretical discussion of educational inequality by sociologists: eg if those with lots of cultural capital really are able to monopolise new opportunities, why hasn't OE grown?

More generally, seems to confirm common sense and anecdote about 'getting on', 'lad o pairs'.

1.2 Reasons to believe education is not so relevant to social mobility: value of Scotland in comparative context

Essentially the lack of any apparent impact on social *fluidity* of comprehensive reforms.

Remind of distinction between fluidity and absolute mobility, mentioned several times today.

1.2.1 Thoroughness of Sc comprehensive reforms, by comparative standards.

The results are no academic selection between institutions in the public sector, lower social segregation among schools (including private) than before reorganisation¹¹, and - by international standards - now levels of among-school segregation that are low by international standards¹².

(Despite parental choice and continuing private sector, including in these measures.)

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Confirmed by Croxford, using data from c.1990 but comparing only with rest of UK.

Comprehensive reforms mean not only ending of selection after 1965,
but also the various changes to curriculum and examinations since then.

⁹ See, eg, Marshall et al, 1997, p. 138.

¹⁰ Breen and Luijkx (2004).

¹¹ McP and W, 1987.

¹² Smith and Gorard.

1.2.2 Even some evidence of effect of Scottish comprehensive reforms on social inequality¹³, eg class differences in showing a reasonable performance in public examinations at approx. age 16.

***** slide 3 *****

(source: SSLS)

Gradient across classes becoming weaker here.

Change in social-class classification since 2001 prevents taking this further. But gradient almost certainly continued to become weaker, especially so far as skilled manual class is concerned:

in 2003 SYPS, % of S4 gaining 5+ SG at 1-3:

prof&mgrl	85% [same as slide]
semi-routine	59% [cf 53% for skilled manual on slide]
routine	49% [cf 49% and 44% on slide for semi-skilled and unskilled]

gender inequality in attainment transformed, as is well known, and religious inequality:

***** slide 4 *****

i.e. [from 1.2.1 and 1.2.2] if independent effect of comprehensive reforms, should expect to see it in Scotland.

1.2.3 But we don't

fluidity has not changed in Sc, as Cristina showed earlier today

power of comparison with England and Wales: most other things controlled for that would not be controlled for in a comparison with, eg, France (eg social structure, structure of labour market, several aspects of mass culture).

Further analysis shows that fluidity has not changed differentially in religious groups

the even greater power of comparison within Sc (even better control for social structure etc).

1.2.4 Relevance of non-UK contrast

Fluidity has increased in Sweden: wider social democratic reforms?

¹³ McP and W 1987; Croxford; Gamoran; Croxford and Raffae.

But it has also changed in a few other places more recently: Netherlands and France:

hence importance perhaps of vibrant economy.

(Scottish growth rates at time of comprehensive reforms lagged behind those in France and Netherlands.)

Summarise so far:

Scotland should show independent impact of education if any would, but doesn't;

c/w E&W and other countries, shows that educational reform not sufficient on own.

Indeed, the similarity of social mobility experience to England and Wales, and increase in fluidity elsewhere, shows wider social and economic reforms more important.

So if policy is relevant it has been:

the Swedish kind of redistributive social democracy that has now gone out of fashion,

or perhaps policy on a social market of the type found in France and the Netherlands, and that is now under threat by policy responses to globalisation.

What seems clear from the comparisons involving Scotland is that increasing social fluidity can not be brought about by educational policy on its own.

2. BUT THAT'S ABSURD: THINGS *HAVE* CHANGED

2.1 Importance of distinguishing between relative and absolute mobility.

This is where focusing only on social justice issues might be missing an important point:

and where a New Labour interest in outcomes could be important.

As Trevor Noble, Geoff Payne and others have argued, people's *experience* of mobility is absolute not relative:

as a rise or fall compared to their parents;

as an achievement of personal ambitions;

as achievement or failure of parents' ambitions.

None of these is intrinsically relative: they are all predominantly absolute.

Absolute mobility increased everywhere in the middle of the twentieth century: eg (men only because of earlier survey):

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Each overlapping birth cohort here can be thought of as describing the labour force some 20 years on from its last date:

eg the first one is roughly people in the labour force in 1970 (entering labour force between 1930s and 1960s),

and the last one is people in the labour force in the mid-1990s (entering between 1960s and 1990s).

But – as here – change is very slow: a finding also of Paul Lambert, Marge Unt and Ken Prandy.

Mainly driven by margins – expanding opportunity (growing middle class, contracting working class).

2.2 Education is the mechanism of recruitment to these new professional opportunities.

So of course policy had an effect: it provided the education, allowing it to expand in a way that benefited all social groups at least equally:

on no dimension did educational inequality widen,

and in some respects, as we have seen, inequality narrowed.

That is true even if all that Scottish policy has done since the 1960s is maintain an advantage compared to England and Wales that was inherited from earlier eras:

eg a larger amount of post-compulsory secondary education, and later a larger amount of higher education.

Gradually that increased the amount of upward mobility in all groups.

2.3 Religion is a good example in Scotland.

Reduction in gap in attainment, as we have seen.

Equal rewards in labour market: eg for graduates, almost no effect of religion:

***** slide 6 *****

(confirmed for all levels of education by modelling).

That led first to more upward mobility among Catholics, and then to convergence as the absolute rates of upward mobility fell for all groups:

***** slide 7 *****

So: patterns of absolute mobility suggest that policy *has* mattered, by facilitating movement.

3. BUT: QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

3.1 Changing implications of changing margins.

As we have seen earlier today, absolute levels of upward mobility have been declining because of prior upward mobility of parents:

***** slide 8 *****

Trevor Noble has pointed out that the significant question is then what are the implications of there being a more homogeneous middle class than there has been for about 3 generations?

In one sense, recent evidence still indicates that policy does not have an impact on *relative* mobility:

the patterns in different countries are similar,

and, within Scotland, the pattern by religious group is similar, as we saw.

But can we still say that policy is relevant to *absolute* mobility?

The contrast is that when mobility was rising education was expanding:

they were both pushing in the same direction, the one social process facilitating the other.

The difference now that mobility has been contracting for about two decades is that educational opportunity has *not* been contracting;

in fact it has continued to widen to unprecedented extents.

3.2 Two possible outcomes:

3.2.1 benign: this might be precisely the moment when fluidity does increase.

The middle class already have such high rates of educational attainment that they can't take up all available new educational opportunities:

that's why, as we saw, educational inequalities among school leavers have been narrowing in the last couple of decades:

if 85% of middle class leavers already get 5 or more Standard Grades,

and if the total proportion with that level of attainment rises further,

then probably most of the benefit is bound to go to non-middle-class groups.

Then – continuing with this optimistic outlook –

having gained these credentials classes lower down compete on equal terms via high educational attainment

- remember the earlier point about the association of origin and destination being weaker at high levels of education: eg:

***** slide 9 *****

and so they gain something approaching a fair share of professional jobs.

So fluidity increases.

3.2.2 But note that any increase in fluidity when absolute rates of upward mobility are declining *must* mean more absolute downward mobility, and that is politically controversial.

The implications of that might appear as support for political programmes that do restrict educational opportunity.

Or support for measures that create differentiation of educational outcomes at the top end
(which might be status distinctions between institutions).

Or support for a return to partly ascriptive criteria of recruitment, so that the labour market operates less meritocratically.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 In the three or four decades after the middle of the twentieth century, policy was indeed relevant to social mobility:

in a few countries, such as Sweden, through the general egalitarian reforms of the welfare state;

in some others, such as France and the Netherlands more recently, through ensuring that employment opportunities are available in an expanding economy;

but in all countries through simply ensuring that educational expansion created the meritocratic oil that lubricated the whole process of expanding upward mobility.

4.2 Thus most of the impact of policy was on absolute levels, not relative levels.

In most places, it did not much affect the social distribution of opportunity, and so did not much affect social justice.

But that is not how people experience mobility:

they probably experience it mainly as a story about themselves and their families, not as a competition between themselves and other families, which is what relative mobility is about.

So they experience policy as facilitating if not actually liberating.

4.3 However, that point about the impact of policy on absolute levels of mobility is no longer relevant now that the rate of absolute upward mobility has been declining.

If education continues to expand and social fluidity continues not to change,

then the ineluctable consequence is that lots of middle class young people will be falling down the ladder of social opportunity.

The implications of that for policy, politics and class culture is far more uncertain.