Enhancing Social Mobility in the Digital Learning Age

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As a research institute for social mobility and education, RISE is committed to developing the policies and practices that contribute positively towards a learners' social mobility. For many schools, colleges and universities also committed to supporting social advancement, the rapid shift to digital education in response to the Coronavirus pandemic signals a significant shift in the learning and teaching offering with the potential for social mobility to be marginalised. As the sector now begins to take stock of lessons learnt and reviews plans for learning and teaching in a Coronavirus-aware world, the relationship between institution, social mobility, and the growth in digital education requires both prompt consideration and informed action. Thus, this article maintains a focus on the junction of these three elements of learning (see **Figure 1**) to help ensure social mobility of learners remains central to policy and practice.
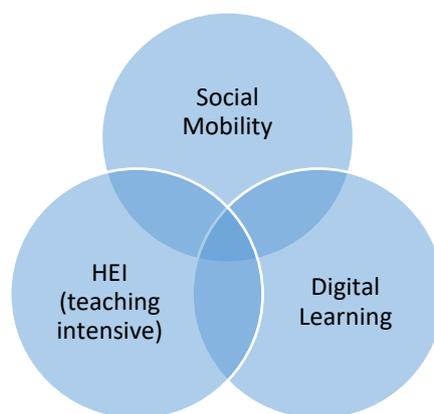

Figure 1: The interplay of social mobility, digital education and teaching intensive higher education institutions (HEIs)

The main aim of this article is to review relevant research and sector practice to inform comment on the role of the institution (in this case teaching intensive HEIs) in enhancing social mobility within digital learning environments. Research and practice relating to each element pictured within **Figure 1** will be discussed under the following headings:

- Social mobility as a product of HE attendance
- Impactful digital learning
- The promotion of social mobility through digital learning.

As a prelude to discussion of these three themes, it is important to consider the current social mobility-higher education policy landscape within which HEIs in England operate. This in turn helps to inform how we view the alignment of social mobility with the moral purpose of HEIs, specifically those that are considered to be 'teaching intensive'.

The Social Mobility - Higher Education Policy Landscape

The Department for Education's blue print for enhancing social mobility through education is outlined within the December 2017 policy paper[1]. Against the backdrop of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*[2] and the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*[3], the *no community left behind* ambition set out in the 2017 policy paper includes a call to 'expand access to the best universities for young people from less advantaged backgrounds' (DoE, p. 8). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are made accountable for actioning this call to widen participation via institution-specific Access and Participation Plans (APP)[4].

But does this action and accountability go far enough?

With repeated calls to establish social mobility rankings for UK universities being ignored and sector reluctance to embrace the idea of institutional social mobility audits, the impact of many social mobility initiatives in HE appear to be falling short. For example:

- **In relation to HE programme offer:** The overall success of higher and degree apprenticeship uptake should be tempered by evidence that they 'are increasingly the province of more privileged learners' (Social Mobility Commision, June 2020, p. 5) and that 'affluent parents are 2.5 times more likely than the less well-off to know about this new route to university' (CMI, 2017).
- **In relation to student experience:** Reflecting on her own experience of university attendance Emily Clark wrote in Times Higher Education (3rd March 2020) 'efforts to improve social mobility are futile until we recognise the serious emotional consequences that higher education can have on working-class students, even when social mobility is desired. If we refuse to consider these consequences, we risk denying whole sections of the working class the full experience of higher education.'
- **In relation to external perception:** Universities Minister Michelle Donelan recently stated that 'universities do need to do much, much more to ensure that all students - and particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds - are recruited on to courses that will deliver good outcomes and that they have the confidence to apply the information they need to make informed choices' (speech delivered on 1st June 2020).

What complicates the issue further is the recent scrapping of the Government's commitment to get 50% of England's young people into university (Richardson, 2020). As such, it could be argued that the positioning of social mobility as a key component of an HEI's moral purpose may be unintentionally compromised.

This invites the question, 'What responsibilities should HEIs have for the social mobility of students?'

Social Mobility as a product of HE attendance

As a recent *Social Mobility Commission* (10th June, 2020) report found, accountability for social mobility is a shared responsibility:

> The government's efforts to advance social mobility have been skewed towards the work of only one department – the Department for Education (DfE). While education is key to boosting opportunities through life, social mobility is not determined by education alone. Opportunities to improve social mobility outcomes do not stop at age 19. Social mobility cuts across departmental silos, with many other delivery departments having the power to drive meaningful change. (p. 12)

Such a sentiment is supported by the National Centre for Universities and Business statement in 2018 that 'Universities and businesses must work together to ensure that students and graduates from all backgrounds are able to reach their potential and succeed in life'.

That's not to say that the HE sector's response to its social mobility responsibilities has not been met without resource allocation and initiative. For example:

- With regards to **resource allocation** the *Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes* (TASO), a 'what works' centre, was created to pool and showcase evidence on how HE contributes to social mobility.
- With regards to **initiative** former Secretary of State for Education Justine Greening celebrated in 2019 the trailblazing work of some HEIs and their commitment to the Social Mobility Pledge, a movement to put social mobility at the heart organisational purpose.

It is important to also recognise the efforts made to date by many teaching intensive HEIs and the commitments and actions they have developed to keep the social mobility agenda moving forward. As the recent *Social Mobility and Elite Universities* report produced by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) stated:

> Much of the heavy lifting on widening participation in higher education to date has been undertaken by newer and less selective higher education institutions. The access challenge therefore remains greater at more selective institutions. They could learn from the best practice that exists in less selective universities. (p. 1)

So, what is this social mobility 'best practice' that exists in teaching intensive HEIs and how is it to be maintained and advanced at a time of significant shift towards digital learning provision prompted by the Coronavirus pandemic? Let us begin by reviewing relevant research relating to the provision of impactful digital learning. This then leads to a discussion that explores implications and makes recommendations for HEIs to further develop social mobility in a pandemic and post-pandemic digital learning world.

Impactful Digital Learning

What is online learning?

Online learning refers to a system of learning, teaching and support, carried out in the absence of face-to face-contact. It usually takes place through the medium of a laptop or computer using specialist education software or technology and generally, although not always, requires the use of an internet connection. For this reason, the term digital learning has been suggested as a more accurate description.[5]

There is a diverse range of digital learning provision within the higher education sector. It is usually delivered through different programmes and in different educational contexts. For example, digital learning offered by private education providers, the Open University, public universities or MOOCs will be very different, and each will have their own methods of delivery and issues. Digital learning can be either:

a) synchronous - resources available at set intervals following the timing of a traditional course
b) asynchronous - all resources are available immediately with the timing left to the student to choose.

The experience of digital learning

It is common for HEIs to make use of a virtual learning environment (VLE): examples of which include Blackboard, Canvas & Moodle. These platforms are multifaceted in their functionality and allow students to access course material, watch or replay lectures, submit work for review, host discussions in forums for peer-peer or peer-tutor discussion.[6] Eliterate, a US-based HE website, estimated that collectively these three platforms represented 78% of the learning management market system in the UK HE sector in 2017.[7] Several technology companies have also established substantial educational technology software, such as Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom. Although not as functional as VLEs, they allow communication through video and message, can host classroom discussion in forums, and assist with and organise administrative tasks. They also have free versions available, unlike VLEs which follow a subscription model.

Staff perceptions

A representative article in *Distance Education*[8] argued that academics typically disliked the emphasis placed on research at the cost of teaching: 'academic perceptions of how technology is detrimental to the university education system can be drawn from many different sources'. However, the authors argued that 'these academic staff scepticisms and misunderstandings are outdated and may stem from a lack of understanding of the pedagogy associated' with online teaching. This paper also cited 2010 research[9] that suggests 'only 54% of Australian academics believe that the introduction of TEL (technology enhanced learning) into universities has a positive impact on student learning'. The same article notes that the time needed for academics to upskill could be a barrier to take up and there was a lack of incentives to balance the required additional workload. Another study [10] has noted that 'educators felt that the eLearning LMS (also known as WebCT/Blackboard) was a tool that suited their teaching and learning needs in terms of flexibility, interactivity and accessibility'.

Student perceptions

Recent research conducted in 2019[11] found that generally students had a positive view of e-learning tools. The survey found:

- 87% of the students agreed that if time is not an issue, assessment/activities involving E-learning tools will engage them, however 80% of the students prefer a blended approach as everything online can be an issue for some students.
- Students highlighted that digital material is easy to download, the major problem is related to the submission process as 68% of students commented that they had doubts if the submission was conducted correctly due to lack of a notification of submission.
- When discussing if they could choose between E-learning approaches and face-to-face 100% of the students attending the focus group preferred face-to-face as they could ask questions and things were easier to take when meeting face-to-face.

These findings were generally corroborated by a 2019 survey[12] which found that the majority of students prefer face-to-face learning. However, the survey did find that 44% of students use mobile apps independently to help them study.

Impact on outcomes

Given student's positive view of digital learning, it is now important to assess its impact on outcomes. Bernard and colleagues (2009)[13] examined different types of interaction within digital learning, comparing student-student, student-teacher, and student-content interaction. They found evidence that student-student interaction had the largest impact on student outcomes. This finding is corroborated by a meta-analysis[14] that found a positive impact for interaction with peers, whether synchronous or asynchronous. A follow-up review[15] found that when student-student interaction was designed into the digital learning the impact was even greater.

The effect of blended or hybrid learning, which is a mixture of both digital and traditional face-to-face instruction, is even greater. [16] Means and colleagues (2013) report on experimental studies that have investigated the effectiveness of differing blends of online and face-to-face instruction compared to conventional face-to-face classes. In all cases, blended instruction has shown to be more effective. This explains in part the increasing popularity and shift towards the design and implementation of blended approaches. Even without a blended approach, digital learning appears to offer a modest advantage over conventional classroom instruction.[17]

Coronavirus and digital learning

The coronavirus pandemic has led to a rapid change in the way HEIs operate. Virtually all campuses were closed during the nationwide lockdown with most not planning on opening in the same way for the foreseeable future. This has meant that all had to quickly develop and expand their online offering, which led to an impact on the student experience. The Student Academic Experience Survey[18] of more than 10,000 UK undergraduates, which was reported in the Times Higher Education (THE) Supplement in June 2020, uncovered a decline in the proportion of students reporting their course was of "good" or "very good" value after most university teaching moved online after the lockdown. However, the reported differences were not large: 40% reporting a course was good/very good value prior to 16 March and 38% after. A poll[19] conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that most university students want exams to continue online. In June 2020, Universities UK – an advocacy

organisation for universities in the United Kingdom - published '[Principles for emerging from lockdown](#)'.[20] It set out practical advice to standardise 'best practice' for digital learning during the post-lockdown period. Included in this advice was the exhortation for Universities to review their teaching, learning and assessment to ensure that there is the required flexibility in place to deliver a high-quality experience and support students to achieve their learning outcomes in a safe manner.

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The Promotion of Social Mobility through Digital Learning

So, the conclusions from this review so far are that:

1. Digital Learning, particularly blended approaches, can have a positive effect on student outcomes and social mobility.

2. To achieve this however requires in many cases a major shift in the pedagogy employed by HEIs.

3. The disruption in learning brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic requires HEIs to make a rapid and wholesale shift in the use of existing and innovative digital learning solutions.

So, what implications does this have for HEIs and their responsibilities for social mobility?

Implication 1 – Embrace Blended Approaches

For many HEIs their current use of digital learning extends simply to the transmission of content rather than building learning capability and independence.

Recommendation: The increased focus on digital learning provision requires multi-level planning in relation to how social mobility will be maintained and advanced at an institutional, department and individual student level. A formal audit and critique of institutional digital learning provision that then informs educators' short and long-term digital learning and CPD requirements should be conducted. The Education and Training Foundation's *[Digital Teaching Professional Framework](#)* can be used to kick-start this process. In re-designing learning around blended approaches it is crucial to focus on the importance of task setting and the creation of opportunities for collaborative endeavour within digital learning spaces.

Implication 2 – Emphasise Meta-cognition

The Coronavirus pandemic has encouraged reflection on what the quality of learning offered to HE students actually means. For many institutions this has meant a re-think of core offering and an embracing of the role digital learning can play in promoting learning skills.

Recommendation: Central to the design and delivery of future learning opportunities should be the identification and development of metacognition[21] and self-regulated learning opportunities. Metacognitive strategies are goal-orientated efforts that influence learning behaviours by focussing awareness on thinking, selecting, monitoring and planning

strategies.[22] These strategies have been shown to have medium to large effects on a number of academic outcomes at HE level.[23] This is why we believe that pedagogy is more important than curriculum to advance the social mobility agenda.

Implication 3 – Eliminate the Digital Divide

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the issue of the digital divide in HE; between the haves and have-nots of digital resources in relation to broadband access and the spaces and means to access digital equipment.

Recommendation: In the short-term educators should avoid making assumptions around universal access to digital learning environments that are obstacle free. Provision of blended approaches to learning such as University of Northampton's active blended learning approach (which espouses students' active engagement in learning via discussion, experimentation, teamwork with links made between face-to-face, online, and offline learning opportunities) should be trialled. In addition, a review of the presence and effectiveness of cross-sector (e.g. HE and industry) collaborations that may contribute to improvements in students' use of and access to learning technologies is vitally important.

Implication 4 – Engage and Act Now

Failure to develop a more student-centred and personalised digital learning offer **NOW** in HE will increase the performance gap and militate against social mobility.

Recommendation: It is crucial that, in terms of social mobility, competence and confidence in independent and autonomous learning be at the heart of digital learning provision. The current pandemic has highlighted the innovative potential of digital learning in HE. The time to act, given the current state of flux, is now. As such the expected growth in digital learning provision over the coming years should be viewed as the 'catalyst for bringing about more equitable access to high-quality education.'[24]

Coda

The question now for HEIs is how to respond to such a cataclysmic event in a morally purposeful, authentic and principled way? Here, we stand full square with McKinsey[25] when they argue that, "Issues regarding equity—that is, ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable are met—should be front and centre, both during the closure and after students return to education." Further, McKinsey has recently set out five steps - *Resolve, Resilience, Return, Re-imagine and Reform* - to move through and beyond the coronavirus pandemic. The real challenge is contained in the last two of these steps:

- *Re-imagine:* leaders think what the "next normal" could be like, and how education systems could re-invent themselves.
- *Reform:* educators reconsider education priorities in light of lessons learned.

The four implications outline above are the drivers for any *re-imagination* of an HEI system that has excellence and equity at its core. Post Covid-19, this is what the "next normal" - the *reform* should look like. The OECD, has recently observed that - "Change – even rapid change – is part of life; it can be both a source of inequality and an opportunity to eliminate

inequities." That is the possibility that this pandemic has presented us with; let us make that positive choice now when we have, however unwelcome, the opportunity. Particularly as we now have the knowledge to ensure that both equity and social mobility can reliably be achieved.

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