

Success isn't just about money: rethinking social mobility

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The current conflation of success with money prevents us from understanding, and therefore addressing, social mobility problems, writes [Graeme Atherton](#). What we need to do is adopt a more holistic definition of success, one that includes progression in well-being across a range of areas, as opposed to one that measures it solely on salary and occupation changes.



The way social mobility is currently understood is leading us down an economic and social cul-de-sac. [New research](#) released by Professor John Goldthorpe, showed that social mobility in this country stalled in the latter part of the 20th century and earlier part of the 21st. This builds on [work](#) released this year by the Sutton Trust showing unequal access across powerful and influential positions – from acting to universities. As Goldthorpe argued, relying on education alone to address these issues will not work; he instead suggests reforms to economic policies and to how work is defined.

But something more far-reaching is required. We need to change how we answer the question at the very heart of social mobility: what does *success* mean? The present [definition](#) of social mobility says that the way to achieve success is to improve your position in the economic hierarchy – or at worst defend it. There are four problems with this definition.

Firstly, it doesn't fit with the 21st century labour market. Middle class jobs are [at risk of automation](#). There are not enough jobs for everyone to achieve the middle class dream. It is absolutely the right thing to attack inequality in educational attainment but this needs to be accompanied by a re-appraisal of the objectives of this exercise.

Secondly, the actual case for upward economic mobility is not as clear-cut as its proponents suggest. [Not everybody wants to move up the ladder](#). Many people would rather stay where they are but work in jobs that have better status, conditions, and pay whilst focusing their real attention on family and leisure.



Thirdly, mobility, certainly when it is understood in terms of greater pay does not produce the results we think. [Evidence](#) suggests that, beyond a certain level, additional income does not lead to greater well-being. Unfortunately, we live in a society geared around convincing us otherwise, and social mobility is part of that problem.

Finally, improving social mobility is seen as a fundamental part of reducing inequality. But to do this, a different vision for social mobility will be required. Far greater redistribution will be needed to address inequality. But as inequality has risen in the past 30 years, support for redistribution in the UK has [fallen](#). The more we strive for material things, the harder it is going to be to get the support for the kind of redistributive policies that could make a real dent in inequality.

The comforting news is that most people think there's more to life than money. But we need to recognise this more openly. This is not to say that money does not matter, or that gaps in educational opportunity are not a scandal; it is the central position of money which is the issue. Social mobility should be focused not on the fuelling of a hyper-materialism through a narrow obsession with economic mobility, but acting as the basis for sustainable 21st century capitalism.

This means broadening the scope of what it means to embrace progression in well-being across the spectrum of dimensions including health, work-life balance, self-actualisation at work, environmental quality, life satisfaction as well as changes in income and occupational status. The need for this shift in understanding progress from an economic base to one constructed on well-being is increasingly being [recognised](#) at societal level. But these changes will only happen if we change what is happening at the individual level.

This shift from understanding social mobility as purely changes in occupation/income to improvements in well-being will not be easy. It challenges the orthodoxy in social mobility thinking and has to be done carefully. We must not take attention away from the fundamental economic differences which underpin broader issues regarding quality of life. But as argued above, it is actually the only way that these economic differences will be addressed. Shifts in

well-being are also harder to measure than whether someone's income has increased or job has changed. But it can be done, as work by the [OECD](#) and the [ONS](#) is illustrating.

Seeing social mobility through a purely economic lens is preventing us from seeing the bigger problems that the commitment to social mobility is meant to address. There is a crisis in social mobility. The root of it is not, however, in an unequal education system, or a sluggish labour market. It is in how we understand social mobility itself.

About the Author

Dr Graeme Atherton is Director of the National Education Opportunities Network ([NEON](#)) which is the professional organisation for access to higher education (HE) in England. He writes and researches on access to HE and social mobility. His [latest book](#) is '*The Success Paradox: why we need a holistic theory of social mobility*'.



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