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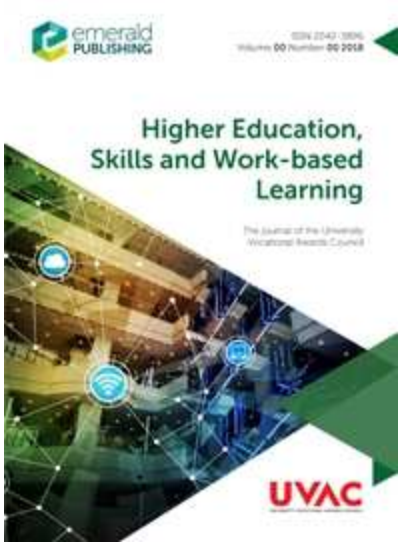

Driving Social Mobility? Collaborative competition in Degree Apprenticeship development

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Abstract

Apprenticeship reforms have paved the way for higher education providers, including universities, to become Degree Apprenticeship (DA) training providers, creating new work-based Higher Education (HE) routes. The changes aim to generate a new cohort of skilled individuals to support national economic growth, as well as improve levels of social mobility. This paper focusses on a HE partnership project which resulted in a number of collaborative models for development that address these aims.

The paper focuses on qualitative interviews undertaken during the process of creating DAs through a consortium of higher education providers. It considers the collaborative relationships which were built on and which developed across the course of the short-term project. It assesses the concept of competitive collaboration and its link to social mobility.

The paper considers the various manifestations of collaboration which supported the DA developments in a competitive environment: collaboration as embedded; collaboration as negotiation and as a driver for social mobility or social equality.

The uniqueness of this large collaboration of colleges and universities is that it has been a vehicle to raise the status of apprenticeships, provide opportunities for development of new DA curricula and enable practitioners to establish this as a new route into HE. The paper questions current but limited knowledge about the impact of DAs on social mobility and equality.

Introduction

This paper considers the *doing of* social mobility, drawing on the findings and recommendations from a short-term project around degree apprenticeships, *Driving Social*

Mobility through Degree Apprenticeships (henceforth DSM), led by a university in the north of England as part of a consortium of higher education providers. The project took place from October 2017-March 2018 and was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (henceforth HEFCE, the functions of which have now be largely replaced by the Office for Students as part of its Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund Phase 2 (DADF2) programme. The article takes the following form. First, it covers the background to the project and the context in which it took place. Second, it considers the concepts of social mobility and competitive collaboration within the broader area of the national drive to create apprenticeships. Third, it sets out the methods employed for the project and for its research and evaluation. Fourth, it focuses on the analysis of interview data from the project evaluation, drawing on these concepts. Fifth, it presents a summary, indicating areas for further research and opening a discussion for how *doing* social mobility in this way enables new understandings of the concept in a fast-changing educational context.

In writing this paper we seek to open up a discussion of degree apprenticeships (DAs) and the possibilities they embody for considering social mobility in contexts of collaboration and in this emergent area. The project which forms the main focus of this paper contributes to the UK government's 2015 commitment to providing 3 million new apprenticeship starts by 2020 (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2015). These reforms have paved the way for higher education providers, including universities, to become degree apprenticeship training providers, creating new work-based Higher Education (HE) routes. The changes aim to generate a new cohort of skilled individuals to support national economic growth. We therefore consider here how these drivers might enable the development of practice-informed theories around social mobility in complex and uncertain times. Our work contributes to an emergent and growing area of practice and research, asking important questions which are relevant for higher education providers developing provision in this area and seeking to address educational inequalities particularly for members of those communities either underrepresented or under achieving in this sector. Although discourses around the promotion of social mobility are within government focus, the concept is not new, it formed the basis for widening access

and participation policy and practice in the further and higher education sectors for over two decades.

Context: the Driving Social Mobility (DSM) Project

The DSM project was supported by the government's DADF2 project funding stream (HEFCE, 2017), aiming to stimulate the development of degree apprenticeships, addressing a range of areas including widening participation and access, productivity and economic performance. The programme was underpinned by governmental ambitions to widen access to higher education and, more broadly, 'to increase productivity and to improve economic performance' (HEFCE, 2017). The DADF2 funding followed an initial HEFCE-funded programme around degree apprenticeships (DADF1) for which the lead institution had been successful in obtaining funding in 2016. This first phase focused on the creation and implementation of degree apprenticeships for 'starts' from September 2017/ and the initial activity contributed to the development of infrastructure at the lead institution and across partner institutions to support the further development of degree apprenticeships.

Areas of degree apprenticeship development

The DSM project had specific objectives for 2018/19 with regards to the creation of specific degree apprenticeships with the five areas of targeted development summarized as building and engineering, childcare and education, healthcare sciences, protective services and social care. The project targets themselves are not the focus of this paper, instead our argument concerns how theories and practices around social mobility come to the fore through collaborative engagement around apprenticeships.

The impetus for the DSM project arose from the collective need to consider specific challenges around skills development and retention in the West Yorkshire region, in line with governmental objectives. Through embedding the project within a partnership of higher education providers and working directly with the regional enterprise partnership, the project team sought to develop routes into higher education that would meet the economic needs of the local area. This was seen an opportunity for higher education

providers and employers to work in partnership to identify, develop and promote the 'talent' of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and mature employees with in organisations. The degree apprenticeships were also strategically designed to address issues around progression while taking into account the economic and skills needs of the region. The overall aim was to generate future opportunities in education and skills for the regional landscape while paving the way for the development of further degree apprenticeships across different fields. Social mobility underpinned the activity, as a thread running through it, with these new routes targeted at marginalized groups who might not currently be able to access higher education for a wide range of reasons.

The five strands

The project had five core strands that provided a unique value gained from their intersectionality and relationship with each other. The first of these focused on working directly with schools, colleges and local communities to ensure a productive dialogue around degree apprenticeships with under-represented groups. The second was concerned with market development and building relationships with employers, ensuring that higher education providers were able to design degree apprenticeships to fit the skills and knowledges required in the workplace and regionally. The third and fourth strands focused directly on institutions. Programme development was a key area, with higher education providers working directly with employers and with expert consultants to build programmes, ensuring that these met the requisite standards and could be approved. Likewise, institutional readiness was a major concern, with higher education providers developing their own systems to prepare for programmes that might differ quite radically from their existing provision. Ongoing evaluation formed the basis of the fifth strand, to include documentation and reflection on how these processes were taking place and how the project could respond to emergent opportunities.

The role of the regional partnership

Although the DSM project was led by a higher education provider, it was developed in close collaboration with a regional partnership of twelve higher education providers. The

partnership's overarching objective is to develop access and outreach and improve educational outcomes for children and young people. This organisation formed a representative body and was considered a suitable fit for the project because of its successful track record of developing collaborative widening participation activities across the region and its focus on social mobility. It also acted as regional hub for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), also HEFCE-funded (now Office for Students), for which the focus was on opportunities for young people from under-represented groups to progress to higher education. The large body of activity developed through NCOP had direct links to the DSM project, and working collaboratively offered multiple opportunities for dialogue with young people, as was the focus for strand one. As the organisation's director explained:

> 'we exist really to sort of broaden…push forward the widening participation and social mobility agendas in our region, and so degree apprenticeships are an interesting answer to the question around why certain particular groups aren't participating in higher education at the moment.'
>
> (interview, April 2018)

This collaboration resulted in a suite of outward-facing resources being developed which aimed to show the reality of working and studying, directly contributing to strand one of the project. It has also served to high light the fact that for many groups, referred to in the interview above, there are a number of external barriers to participation, some of which could be addressed through collaborative partnerships between employers and higher education providers as suggested in the findings of the work of the Social Mobility Advisory Group (Universities UK 2016).

Resources including effective careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) for the engagement of school and college students and their influencers, continue to be developed and disseminated. The role of the umbrella organisation was pivotal in many ways, not solely in terms of the development and delivery of degree apprenticeship focused resources. It facilitated learning networks across the five areas and strands, implemented

to support higher education providers as they invested in staff across this area. These also provided important networking opportunities for those involved, enabling the filtering of up-to-date information for higher education providers and staff, contributing to the institutional readiness and programme development strands. The partnership shed light on the lived experiences of developing degree apprenticeships across different institutions. Higher education partners, although in many ways in direct competition with each other, worked together to create programmes and navigate the administrative and bureaucratic processes required to implement degree apprenticeships. This process foregrounded the complexity of working this way: something which we consider as key learning from this project and which we are defining as *competitive collaboration*.

Questions of social mobility and competitive collaboration

Two overarching themes for the project are social mobility and competitive collaboration. We will now briefly introduce these concepts in the context of the DSM project and in relation to the current policy agenda. While social mobility was embedded within the project as a core concern, competitive collaboration emerged as the partners began to work together to develop and prepare for degree apprenticeship programmes.

Social mobility

Although it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed historical and contextual analysis of the term 'social mobility', we present a short summary of it here in the context of degree apprenticeships. The DSM project is both embedded in and contributes directly to understandings of social mobility, a term which is often problematic and contested (e.g. Reay, 2013). In this sense it contributes to what Diane Reay describes as a 'long history' (2013:660, e.g. Savage and Egerton, 1997), continuing with recent debates around access and higher education (Elliot Major and Machin, 2018). Social mobility is considered key to a fair and just society and how, as a country, we can look to a more equal future. However, is it a case of 'mobility good, immobility bad'? Here we take a critical lens on social mobility, aligning with Reay, who states:

> whilst social mobility is increasingly seen to be a major source of social justice in contemporary society, a strong version of social justice requires much more than the movement of a few individuals up and down an increasingly inequitable social system.
>
> (Reay, 2013:661)

Reay argues that social mobility provides no solution to 'either educational inequalities or wider social and economic injustices' (p.674). Moreover, she goes on to state that it is highly problematic at an individual level, negating the loss that occurs when we might leave a particular place (or class): the problematic nature of 'mobility'. Concerns about the ways in which social mobility is interpreted can cause further issue (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007; Payne, 2017) and the tendency for this to be accepted as a proxy measure for 'equality' make it difficult to unpick the issues which are present for both a technical definition (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007) and the wider emotional explanations. For the purpose of this paper, social mobility will be described as a person's ability to improve on their own parental social and economic position in accessing opportunities and so achieve their full potential in terms of income and occupation (Universities UK, 2016).

Social mobility implies that movement – of multiple kinds - is necessary, a notion which becomes increasingly problematic when considering the needs of individuals and the needs of the local region. In 2010 Stephen Ball described what he called the contradictory nature of educational policy under Blair's Labour government. Social mobility cannot and does not act as a panacea to the multiple injustices people face across wide areas of their lives, for which education plays a central role. Practitioners working in outreach and widening participation recognise that social mobility, although used widely in widening participation policy and practice since the 'massification' of higher education in the 1990s (Stuart, 2012), is a concept that must be unpacked and problematized. There has been a growing argument that the approach to widening participation in higher education needs to shift from a deficit model where the marginalised and therefore excluded, are seen as the problem and hence not participating, to one where the education system per se needs to be examined and barriers addressed (ibid).

What lies behind social mobility (and immobility) and what ethical commitments do we have, as outreach and widening participation practitioners and researchers, to making this visible? We suggest that practitioners have significant contributions to make to ongoing theorising of social mobility and to engaging directly with policy in dialogue, as demonstrated in this paper. Degree apprenticeships occupy an interesting and fertile space for discussion of social mobility, both in terms of how it is understood across different sectors and how we might work together to increase opportunities for young people. As Fuller (2016) notes 'When done well, apprenticeship can significantly enhance the skills and life chances of individuals as well as having economic benefit for the employer' (p. 433).

The activity generated through and by the DSM project therefore questions what we might mean when we use the term social mobility, particularly when working collaboratively across the sectors.

Competitive collaboration

The concept of competitive collaboration emerged strongly as a useful term when considering the ways in which the twelve HE providers in the partnership worked together to design and create programmes together within a highly competitive market. The project was designed as a short-term intervention, or stimulus, with clear and tangible objectives for degree apprenticeship starts. As a concept it is often used in contexts of international business (e.g. Hamel et al., 1989) where it is described as a methodology which includes 'joint ventures, outsourcing, agreements, product licensings, co-operative research' (p.133), Gary Hamel and colleagues consider it as strategic alliance, stating that 'collaboration is competition in a different form' (p.134). In the context of higher education providers and widening participation, it shifts. The collaboration between providers is necessary to develop degree apprenticeships, therefore meaning that institutions must work together to create programmes, working directly with employers, but must then subsequently work in competition to recruit. This takes place within the broader context of governmental educational policy and regional economic development both of which state the aim of promoting a skilled and diverse work force. Put simply, working collaboratively

has a potential impact on the development of education and skills at regional level. However, at the same time, institutions need to recruit to their courses and to develop strategic partnerships with employers, and therefore work in highly competitive and fluid markets. How do we work collaboratively, retain institutional distinctiveness, while acknowledging the competitive environment in which we are working? These questions were foregrounded through the lived experiences of those working to develop degree apprenticeships.

Methodology and approach to the project evaluation

Here we describe the methodology for one part of the DSM project evaluation, which was developed around three stages of the project. The evaluation was carried out with the broad understanding that legacy is a dynamic process (Facer and Pahl, 2017:238). The timeline proposed by Facer and Pahl, in the context of interdisciplinary and collaborative research, centres on three stages: *opening, holding* and *reflecting*.

Opening stage

During the opening stage of the project, the initial aims and purposes were established and outlined in the initial grant application. Key milestones were set out in addition to the methods that would be used in order to meet these milestones. The two important questions for consideration at this stage (adapted from Facer and Pahl, 2017:239) were as follows: *What does success look like for the DSM project?* and *What kind of legacy should the project have*?

Holding stage

The interviews referred to in this article took place during the holding stage of the project, with participants invited to reflect on the project in terms of their own institutions, areas of focus and their role in the project. These first stage interviews were carried out by the project evaluator. Attention was given to responding to both challenges and opportunities that arose and these were documented by the project manager. The evaluation sought to

capture these and how they affected the project development, and, eventually, its legacies. This is a processual issue (p.240) with the processes highlighted during the interviews.

Reflection stage

Reflection takes place at the final stages of the project and is where the outcomes and the processes are brought together. It is at this point that the particular contributions made by this project are highlighted, including its legacy and the opportunities it presents for DAs across HE providers in the region.

Structured conversations

A series of interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, predominately the consultants and institutional leads, during the second half of the project. As the degree apprenticeships commence, additional interviews will be carried out with the apprentices and employers. The qualitative methods employed for the evaluation were iterative and reflexive, with emerging findings fed into the on-going evaluation. The unstructured interviews, or 'structured conversations' (Conteh and Toyoshima, 2005) sought to document a particular stage of the project and demonstrate the complexity of what took place within the project framework but also more widely.

The evaluation was granted full ethical approval. The interviews were audio recorded and the data transcribed. A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken, focusing on the overarching themes of competitive collaboration and social mobility, in addition to the four main areas of awareness-raising with under-represented groups, employer engagement, programme development and institutional readiness. From these data, a series of cases were developed, focusing on the project's four strands.

The process had a number of limitations. The institutions working together for the DSM project were at different stages of developing provision, therefore the relationships, and the ways in which these might develop in the future, differed across institution and across each area. In some cases these were historical relationships and in others these were new and emergent. Interviews gather a particular kind of data and reflect people's

understandings and opinions at a certain point in time – in this case, towards the middle to the end of the project.

Questions and findings

Here we consider the findings from the research undertaken to evaluate the project, focusing on social mobility and competitive collaboration. Over the course of the project the emerging findings were discussed by the project team, in dialogue with the data collected through the interviews and the wider political landscape. A number of significant questions were raised, including:

- How might a focus on degree apprenticeships 'drive social mobility'?
- What is it about degree apprenticeships - as a route to HE and employment - that might drive social mobility? What characteristics should they have and whose responsibility should it be to monitor and document progress? What kinds of characteristics might 'improved social mobility' have?
- What can we learn from the DSM project about social mobility as a concept and as a lived experience?
- How might degree apprenticeships create spaces for rethinking what we mean by social mobility, in HE institutions but also in the workplace and in schools?

The concept of competitive collaboration, in terms of how higher education providers work together to develop the programmes, but also looking forward to how these degree courses would necessitate a way of working in a competitive environment, has implications for how social mobility is being conceptualised and addressed across sectors. This raised another series of important questions:

- How might the concept of competitive collaboration enable an alternative lens on social mobility?
- How does competitive collaboration foreground tensions around understandings of social mobility and how can these be addressed?

- And, is social mobility the right concept, or should we be shifting towards social equality and social justice as underpinning threads for this work?

Here the focus is on a number of extracts of data from the interviews conducted with project members which illustrate some of the initial findings. Three main areas around competitive collaboration and degree apprenticeships are set out, with reference to the data. These are as follows: competitive collaboration as *embedded*, competitive collaboration as *negotiated*, and competitive collaboration as a *potential driver for social mobility*.

Competitive collaboration as *embedded*

> 'There was HEFCE wanting to promote a greater uptake of apprenticeships in the university sector'
>
> (Interview, higher education provider 1a, March 2018)

The concept of *competitive collaboration* arose, not only as a lived reality for higher education partners working together to create and develop degree apprenticeship programmes, but in considering the future for these relationships as the degree apprenticeships launched. Working collaboratively in this way presented opportunities, in terms of diversity of input into the programme design and the sharing of good practice across the different subject areas, but it also presented clear challenges, particularly in the area of competitive recruitment for employer partners and for apprentices as the months went on. Here the role of the regional higher education provider partnership was pivotal, not solely from a logistical perspective and to enable the project to run, but also because of the trust between partners which is fostered by the partnership.

> 'so that's one of the good things about the project is that we had the collaborative platform to start with, so in a way, we were already aware that we were all competing within the same area, but there has been an element of trust built up because that was established and that's been going for a number of years in different guises, so before Go Higher it was the HEART Business

> Engagement Group, and they were looking at different things, but skills, high level skills, have been a real central part of that.'
>
> (Interview higher education provider 1b, February 2018)

Colleagues from competing higher education providers meeting regularly to work on the project was embedded from the start of the project. But it was also a requirement for the funding. The partnership umbrella enabled these working relationships, building in part on existing joint activity over the previous years. It provided an infrastructure for this way of working. Moreover, it provided a space for what could be potential tensions to be brought into the open. The regional partnership's role here was also to mediate and to alleviate these tensions.

Competitive collaboration as *negotiated*

However, although existing regional partnership work existed prior to the DSM project, we found that working together to create and then deliver degree apprenticeships as an innovative model of provision, involved a specific kind of competitive collaboration. This was referred to by one partner institution as a 'tacit understanding' (higher education provider 1a). This tacit understanding requires higher education providers to look backwards at their progress, partnerships and areas of expertise to consider the present, in terms of negotiating cross-institution engagement necessary to develop programmes. It also requires looking forward to the future, envisioning potential scenarios which might arise, and possible tensions and conflicts of interest. One higher education provider explained it in terms of programme design and institutions offering different kinds of provision.

> 'We've mapped out every year, when that would happen, but what we're seeing and what HEI1 is seeing, that's how we're managing to work together on this, is the market could be so big, and as us sort of leading in the country, well, certainly in the region.
>
> ***

> We're also delivering block release, which they can't do, so we're doing…the company that we're working with now, they're doing ten-week blocks, 35 hours a week, so their apprentices are coming to us for ten weeks, then they're going back on to site for ten weeks, and then coming back to us for ten weeks'.
>
> (Interview higher education provider 2, March 2018)

This case exemplifies how higher education providers, working together on a subject-level strand, might negotiate their positions, with institutions offering differing kinds of provision which will suit different employers. This acts to differentiate each provider, building on their strengths and their institutional structures, a way of working which is strengthened by the institutions working closely together.

However the negotiation must be managed at multiple levels. This way of working foregrounds new situations for which staff may not be yet equipped. One institution highlighted the caution expressed by their staff at how much information they might be able to disclose at DSM meetings.

> 'I think some of the other degrees have been a bit more challenging...these were bringing people together from other universities that wouldn't necessarily know each other, and I've had a few conversations with staff, so they've got together, been with the consultants that have asked them loads of questions and have said, *could you do this, how do you do this at higher education provider 3, next meeting could you share this with the group? Or what you do, and how you do it and who do you talk to?* And then I'd get calls from them going, *I don't feel very comfortable about sharing this with the group.* And I was like *so, tell me why,* sort of thing. *Because, well, I just feel as though we're giving away…*'
>
> (Interview higher education provider 3, March 2018)

Creating spaces for articulating these concerns and for responding at an institutional level was therefore of pivotal importance. Higher Education providers had to reflect on this process, driven by the DSM project as a catalyst, and redefine some elements of accepted

cross-institution working. New ways of working collaboratively in competitive contexts had to be considered and put into place.

Competitive collaboration as *a driver for social mobility/social equality*

The social mobility aspect of apprenticeships was important for all partners, but in particular for the lead institution in terms of its widening participation and outreach focus. The institution had a particular investment in understanding how degree apprenticeships might open up opportunities for students who might not access more traditional routes into HE.

> 'We were interested in the social mobility aspect of apprenticeships because of really the institution's interest in providing access to HE for all kinds of groups that perhaps don't get the same opportunities to access HE'
>
> (Interview higher education provider 1b, February 2018)

Social mobility and the perceived affordances of degree apprenticeships to open up new opportunities for students from under-represented groups were central to the lead institution's investment in the project. But as a concept it raised practical questions for higher education providers, keen to ensure they were targeting under-represented cohorts already in the institution, but unsure as to who might fall under this category.

> 'it's a problem with regards to, how do I monitor, how do I monitor who falls under the social mobility remit?...it seems to be very complicated for young people nowadays.'
>
> (interview higher education provider 2b, March 2018)

This related also to documentation and tracking, in terms of project accountability. But also in terms of targeting and working with under-represented groups and in ensuring that potential and actual apprentices are not viewed as being a homogenous group. This

ensured that the project recognised the importance of apprentices' unique protected characteristics and the impact it had on their access to information and recruitment to a degree apprenticeship. If different institutions had different definitions of under-represented or those falling 'under the social mobility remit', how could the project demonstrate its effect on social mobility? In this sense, the broadness of the concept of social mobility can make it challenging for HE providers to be sure they are working with the cohorts the project seeks to reach. A tension lies also with employers wishing to use degree apprenticeships to upskill existing staff, or, 'recruiting from the inside' as one project participant put it. This presents a complexity, particularly when considering the project objectives and different conceptualisations of social mobility. Likewise, the meaning of 'under-represented' differs across fields. In the case of protective services, the degree apprenticeship and its potential integration into the new framework could lead to an expansion of the recruitment base. As one participant put it, 'that's not about social mobility as such, but it is about opening the service to a wider audience' (protective services interview, February 2018). For the employers, these potential recruits may come from under-represented groups but social mobility may not be the primary concern; it is perhaps more about a broader, more diverse talent pool which may ultimately impact the workforce dynamics and performance in a positive way

Social mobility also links to the concerns of the city and regional enterprise partnership and their strategy for investment in the city and the surrounding area.

> 'OK, so within the LEP [Local Enterprise Partnership] and the combined authority, we have an inclusive growth agenda that runs throughout all our work, so it plays a key part in supporting those.'
>
> (Interview city and regional enterprise partnership, March 2018)

Although the focus of the project and the subject areas that became the main focus for the DSM project shifted more towards the public sector than towards the business-oriented side of the city and regional partnership agenda, there was significant alignment in terms of educational attainment and advancement. At a regional level, the interest lay in how degree

apprenticeships might open up opportunities for disadvantaged groups within the region and how they might contribute up-skilling. This was a core thread for the project.

> 'But the city and regional enterprise partnership also has a responsibility for the kind of educational attainment and advancement, so they're interested in the opportunities that apprenticeships might offer for disadvantaged groups in LCR, I think, to either become, you know, through this they can access HE and they can become professional jobs, that might not you know, it's a different route isn't it, to coming through as learning, and going through A levels, undergraduate sort of stuff.
>
> (Interview higher education provider 1a, March 2018)

Degree apprenticeships create a space, not only for higher education providers to work with each other, but also to work directly with employers. The concept of social mobility, therefore, can present as a potential point of tension as different sectors rub up against each other. Higher education providers' definitions of social mobility align with educational policy and, although differing in focus depending on the nature of the institution, must all develop access agreements which meet the requirements of the Office for Students. Understandings of social mobility by different employers involved in developing degree apprenticeships will vary greatly from each other, and may not align completely with those of the higher education sector. This poses a potential area of tension as universities strive to develop employability and progress from higher education into employment. Working together to create degree apprenticeships sheds light on how understanding of social mobility might differ across sectors. Not only do these differences come to the surface but they must be tackled in order to co-create programmes.

Developing programmes collaboratively, across institutions and across sectors, raises questions of alignment. Can higher education providers' understandings of social mobility and commitment to widening participation (including but not limited to what is set out in institutional access agreements) ever align with that of employers? The emerging field of degree apprenticeships therefore creates what might be considered a contact zone (Pratt,

1991) with these different views and approaches made visible and foregrounded. An imperative is created: to move forward there must be communication, negotiation, and then translation. More generally the project required a rethinking of university programme development and shift towards embedding employer needs. This was articulated by one of the project participants, speaking on behalf of the city and regional enterprise partnership.

> They need to have it in their terminology, not in academic speak, so I think there's been a massive culture change there about how their provision engages with the business community.
>
> (Interview city and regional enterprise partnership, March 2018)

Implications and next steps

This paper has sought to open up discussion of two concepts, *social mobility* and *competitive collaboration*, within the context of creating a suite of degree apprenticeships for the DSM project. It has considered the context, the project itself, and a summary of the two concepts in relation to degree apprenticeships. It then focused on competitive collaboration as embedded, as negotiation and as a potential driver for social mobility.

At a regional level, the challenge for the DSM project and for the higher education partnership going forward, is how all those involved in degree apprenticeships might be enabled to retain responsibility for access and social mobility, while also being mindful of the ethics and principles around achieving inclusion and equality. More generally, these findings have implications across the sector for the development and delivery of degree apprenticeships that are inclusive.

Working in this way means that multiple opportunities open up for meaningful dialogue about disadvantage, and social equality, across HE providers and employers. This dialogue has practical implications, in terms of how degree apprenticeship programmes are created and then delivered, theoretical considerations, in terms of how this area opens up new

understandings of social mobility, and ethical considerations, and in terms of how higher education providers and employers work collaboratively to ensure apprentices are well equipped and ready for a rapidly evolving employment market. There is an imperative then, as driven by the DSM project and other initiatives of this kind, to keep the channels of communication across institutions and across sectors open.

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