Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham

Evidence-Informed Policy Brief

Character and Social Mobility

'When it comes to opportunity, we won't entrench the advantages of the fortunate few, we will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you'
(Rt. Hon. Theresa May MP, Inaugural Prime Ministership Speech, July 2016).

'"…whatever qualifications you might have, where you are on the character scale will have a big impact on what you can achieve in life"'
(Character and Resilience Manifesto, APPG on Social Mobility, January 2014).

Executive Summary

Social mobility is an issue at the forefront of political debate in Britain. This brief seeks to highlight the value of social mobility to broader society, using the prism of character and character education to explain what a socially mobile Britain could and should mean in practice. It brings together a selection of evidence to outline how character can enhance social mobility and places this evidence within the Jubilee Centre's character framework.

Whilst various studies focused on character have highlighted a link between the concept and social mobility, these accounts often use a narrow, individualistic definition which is not expressly concerned with broader society. This brief suggests that a richer and more accurate account of how character contributes to social mobility can be drawn from the Jubilee Centre's definition, using a model of four different types of character virtues. Research highlights how the development of moral, civic, performance and intellectual virtues could help improve social mobility in the UK. In applying a new definition to this evidence, this brief suggests that social mobility should not only focus on individualism and performance virtues, but should be a mechanism for citizens and society to flourish together.

A working definition of social mobility

Ensuring that all individuals can cultivate the necessary moral, civic, performance and intellectual character virtues which will enable them to benefit from and contribute to a flourishing society.

Social mobility and the political agenda

One of the final acts of Gordon Brown's administration in 2010 was to create the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC), which was established to provide advice, and an annual report to ministers, on the state of social mobility in the UK. This mantle was taken up by the Coalition government, who spoke of 'unlocking' social mobility in their founding agreement[1] and went on to create an APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group) for Social Mobility in 2011. The trend has continued under Theresa May, who has placed the issue front and centre of her political vision for the country[2]. Documenting the increasing salience of the issue in its most recent report, the SMCPC noted how 'social mobility has become a new holy grail of public policy'[3].

The issue seems to have assumed such prominence as a result of a declining trend, as a recent NatCen social attitudes survey suggested UK citizens feel social mobility has fallen over the last decade[4]. The term itself is contentious; appearing across the political spectrum, and often assuming different meanings. A number of recent policy publications have linked the concept to 'character', 'social and emotional learning', and soft or 'non-cognitive skills', with evidence from both the UK and further afield[5] suggesting these skills can be as important to social progress as academic attainment[6]. Whilst such studies can provide evidence of the benefits for social mobility, they often conceive of character in quite an individualistic way.

Social mobility as 'the flourishing of individuals and society'

In 2013, the Jubilee Centre published *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, which outlined the overall philosophy of the Centre and the role it envisaged for character education within schools and society. Whilst this framework was widely distributed and used by educators, policy-makers and the public, it also contains a distinct vision for broader society exemplified by the following quote:

> 'The ultimate aim of character education is not only to make individuals better persons but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish'[7].

This framework not only highlights the importance of individual cultivation of character, but also acknowledges the social boundaries individuals might face in this pursuit. This richer definition emphasises two broader aspects of character: 1) that an overarching *moral*

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[1] HM Government (2010), *The Coalition: Our plan for government*, Cabinet Office: London, accessed at
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf
[2] May, T. (13/07/2016) accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may;
and (05/10/16) accessed at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/
[3] Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC), (2015) *State of the Nation 2015*, London: HMSO, p.4
[4] NatCen, 2016; SMCPC, 2014
[5] For an example of International Organisations, see OECD, *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*, OECD Skills Studies, 2015.
[6] De Vries, R., and Rentfrow, J. (2016), *A Winning Personality: The Effects of Background on Personality and Earnings*, Sutton Trust; see also Tough, P. (2012), *How Children Succeed*, New York: HMH Publishing
[7] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2013), *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, p.2, accessed at http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Framework%20for%20Character%20Education.pdf

dimension must inform any education focused on character; 2) that this must include respect for fellow citizens and a sense of *civic* and *social* responsibility. These aspects of character development are absolutely critical in ensuring that individuals are not just enabled to be socially mobile, but that social mobility occurs within a context where individuals and society can flourish together and work towards the common good.

Social mobility and individualistic conceptions of character

The above definition is particularly important, as all too frequently discussions of character and character education focus on resilience, grit, and so-called 'desirable' behaviours without this guiding moral dimension. With particular regard to social mobility, a focus *only* on these performance virtues not only belies the rich history of character-based philosophy, but can actually be damaging in the pursuit of a more socially mobile society. The danger is that one can approach the subject from an individualistic deficit-model, disregarding the societal constraints encountered by those who seek happiness and success. As a recent Jubilee Centre paper highlighted, to ignore such barriers '…betrays an individualist bias which unreasonably de-politicises the cultivation of character'[8]. Even some studies which discuss the benefits of social mobility more broadly often fail to explicitly address the guiding social framework or outlook behind their work. Discussion tends to focus on 'life outcomes', or monetary income, with little or no mention of a flourishing life or society[9].

Evidence on how the four types of character virtues enable social mobility

In this light, this brief aims to use the Jubilee Centre's definitional lens to show the ways in which this evidence can be viewed within a richer character context. The Centre has developed a model of four different virtue categories – moral, civic, performance, and intellectual – all of which contribute to the development of an individual's character. These categories are outlined below, along with evidence for how the application of these virtues can help to enhance social mobility (see **Figure 1** overleaf).

Moral Virtues: Whilst a number of studies highlight the relationship between virtues like courage, self-discipline, respect and tolerance and employers' concern to recruit graduates and employees who display these characteristics[10], it is also the case that the development of traits like honesty and empathy can help young people to be socially mobile. The ability for young people to be able to empathise with colleagues is also an essential part of

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[8] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2016), *Is Grit the Magic Elixir of Good Character?* Jubilee Centre Insight Series, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, p.6, accessed at http://jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/Is_Grit_the_Magic_Elixir_of_Good_Character_InsightSeries2016.pdf

[9] Paterson, C., Tyler, C. and Lexmond, J. (2014) *Character and Resilience Manifesto*, APPG on Social Mobility; Blanden, J., Gregg, P., MacMillan, L. (2006), *Accounting for Intergenerational Income Persistence: Non-cognitive skills, ability and education*, Centre for the Economics of Education, accessed at http://cee.lse.ac.uk/ceedps/ceedp73.pdf; Bowles, S., Gintis, H., and Osborne, M. (2001), 'The determinants of earnings: A behavioral approach', *Journal of Economic Literature* 39:4, pp. 1137–76; Heckman J. and Rubinstein, Y., (2001), 'The Importance of Noncognitive Skills: Lessons from the GED Testing Program', *The American Economic Review*, 91:2, pp. 145-149

[10] CBI and Pearson (2016), *Education and Skills Survey 2016*, accessed at http://www.cbi.org.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/pdf/cbi-education-and-skills-survey2016.pdf ; De Vries and Rentfrow, 2016

teamwork and is proven to be something employers look for in order to create a flourishing and effective work environment[11].

Civic Virtues: Participation in youth social action (YSA) and other volunteering activities not only enhances the opportunities for young people themselves to be socially mobile, but also contributes to a flourishing community[12]. These methods of developing the civic virtues of service and citizenship can, therefore, be mutually beneficial – illustrating a concept YSA charity Step Up to Serve calls the 'double benefit'[13]. Evidence from various studies also highlights the effects involvement in YSA can have on career prospects – with a recent CIPD survey suggesting 67% of employers believe candidates with YSA experience demonstrate better employability skills[14].
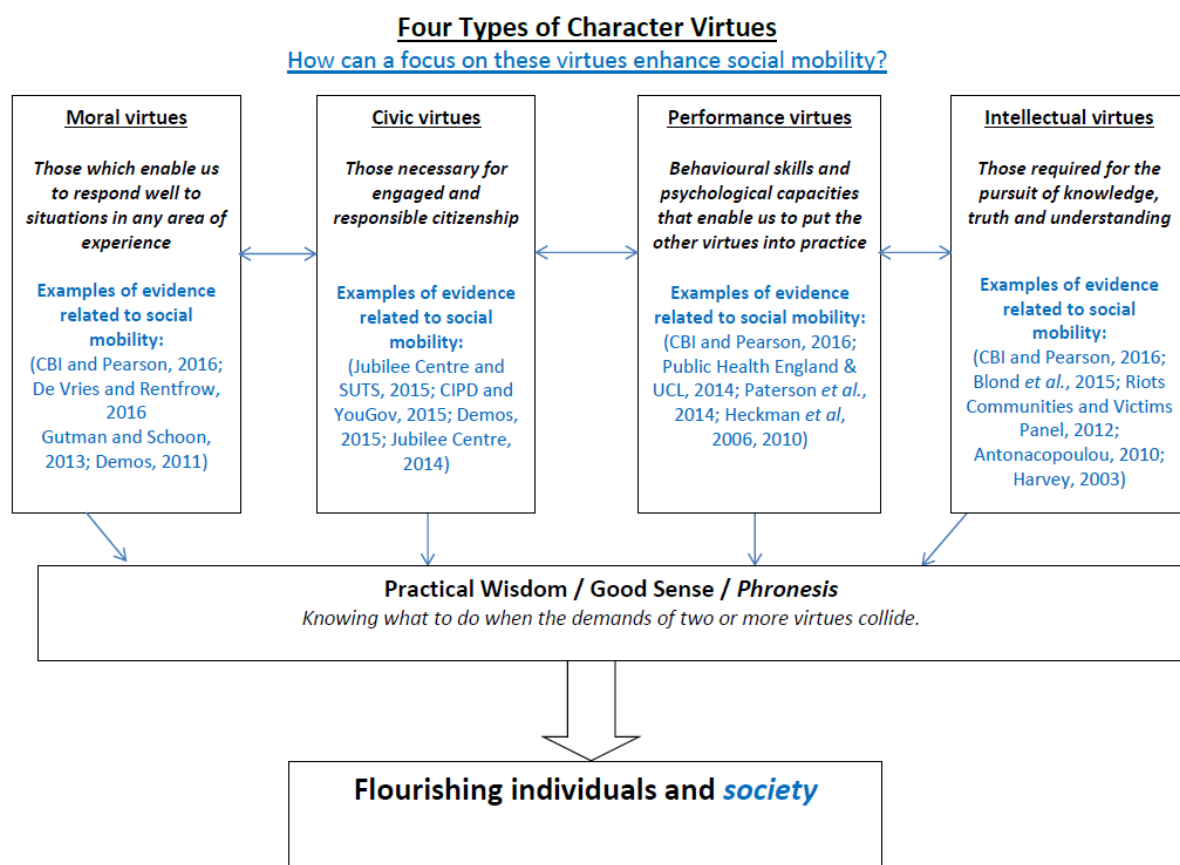
Four Types of Character Virtues
How can a focus on these virtues enhance social mobility?

Moral virtues	Civic virtues	Performance virtues	Intellectual virtues
Those which enable us to respond well to situations in any area of experience	*Those necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship*	*Behavioural skills and psychological capacities that enable us to put the other virtues into practice*	*Those required for the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding*
Examples of evidence related to social mobility: (CBI and Pearson, 2016; De Vries and Rentfrow, 2016 Gutman and Schoon, 2013; Demos, 2011)	Examples of evidence related to social mobility: (Jubilee Centre and SUTS, 2015; CIPD and YouGov, 2015; Demos, 2015; Jubilee Centre, 2014)	Examples of evidence related to social mobility: (CBI and Pearson, 2016; Public Health England & UCL, 2014; Paterson *et al.*, 2014; Heckman *et al*, 2006, 2010)	Examples of evidence related to social mobility: (CBI and Pearson, 2016; Blond *et al.*, 2015; Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2012; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Harvey, 2003)

Practical Wisdom / Good Sense / *Phronesis*
Knowing what to do when the demands of two or more virtues collide.

Flourishing individuals and *society*

Figure 1: Jubilee Centre's Four Types of Character Virtues (A Framework for Character Education in Schools, 2013)

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[11] Paterson *et al.*, 2014; Gutman L, and Schoon, I. (2013), *The impact of non-cognitive skills on outcomes for young people*, Educational Endowment Foundation and Cabinet Office, accessed at https://v1.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Non-cognitive_skills_literature_review_2.pdf; Demos (2011), *The Character Inquiry*, London: Demos

[12] Demos (2015), *Character Nation: A Demos Report with the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues*, London: Demos

[13] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2014), *Statement on Youth Social Action and Character Development*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, accessed at http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/StatementSocialAction.pdf; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and Step Up To Serve (2015) *Transforming Young People and Communities*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, accessed at http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Transforming_Young_People_and_Communities.pdf

[14] CIPD and YouGov (2015), *Learning to Work Survey*, accessed at https://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/learning-to-work_2015.pdf

Performance Virtues: There is a strong evidence base to suggest development of virtues such as resilience, enthusiasm and creativity can boost social mobility through enhanced career prospects. For instance, a recent survey suggested 85% of employers prioritise character and attitude over academic results[15]. James Heckman and colleagues have also developed a substantial body of evidence in this area, showing that non-cognitive ability and development can affect productivity and life outcomes[16]. These traits are not only linked to employability and the capacity for individual social mobility through career progression, however. There is also evidence to suggest that building performance traits such as resilience can contribute to 'healthy behaviours, higher qualifications and skills, better employment, and better mental well-being'[17]. Yet the shortcomings of an exclusive emphasis on performance virtues, mentioned above, must be borne in mind.

Intellectual Virtues: The development of intellectual skills such as reflection, focus, critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoned judgement are also essential skills both for employment and addressing aspects of society or the workplace which could be improved. Research indicates that employability can be enhanced through the development of 'critical reflective abilities'[18], with reasoned communication, leadership and problem-solving prioritised by employers across the professions and business[19]. Once again, the cultivation of intellectual virtues does not just serve to enhance career prospects for young people. There is also evidence to suggest that these skills contribute towards community cohesion and can help to build understanding throughout society[20].

Practical Wisdom/Good Sense/Phronesis: In order to create a society, not only where individuals are empowered to achieve their potential, but where both every member and society as a whole can flourish, it is crucial that people exercise 'good sense' in their capacity as citizens, students and employees. This is the ability of knowing what is the right thing to do when some of the above four virtues collide in a given situation, both personally, but also in a professional capacity. As the Jubilee Centre suggests:

> ''Good sense' forms part of all the other virtues; indeed it constitutes the over-arching meta-virtue necessary for good character. It requires a well-rounded assessment of situations, thinking through and looking ahead to potential actions and consequences'[21].

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[15] CBI and Pearson, 2015, p.31

[16] Heckman, J., Stizrud, J., Urzua, S. (2006), 'The Effects of Cognitive and Noncognitive Abilities on Labor Market Outcomes and Social Behavior', *Journal of Labour Economics*, 24:3, pp. 411-482; Heckman, J., Moon, S.H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P.A., Yavitz, A. (2010), 'The rate of return to the High Scope Perry Preschool Program', *Journal of Public Economics*, 94, pp. 114-128

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[21] Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2013

This quality, in combination with awareness of the other four types of virtues, is essential to the enhancement of social mobility for individuals and to the creation of a better society for all[22].

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