

Conference briefing

Shaping Social Mobility: Education & Employment

Esme Lillywhite



Foreword



This briefing document has been prepared to guide and inform discussions at **Shaping Social Mobility: Education & Employment**, the cross-sector conference we are holding at Cumberland Lodge on 7-8 March 2022. It provides an independent review of current research, existing practice and background information about increasing social mobility in the UK.

The conference brings together academics, teachers, representatives from charities and businesses, policymakers and young people to explore the underlying issues around social mobility and rethink best ways to improve it. In particular, we will identify promising practice, based on the diverse perspectives and experiences of our conference delegates and speakers.

We are grateful to our freelance Research Associate, Esme Lillywhite, for preparing this resource. Esme will be taking part in the conference and writing a final report to sum up emerging themes, ideas and recommendations. We hope that you find this briefing useful, for both the conference discussions and your wider work and study.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edmund Newell".

Canon Dr Edmund Newell
Chief Executive

About the author



Esme Lillywhite has been commissioned as a freelance Research Associate, to support this project on **Shaping Social Mobility: Education & Employment**.

Esme is currently undertaking PhD research in the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde. Her work is focused on the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and she is part of the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures Doctoral Research Centre. Her research interests include mixed methods, the impact of inequality and intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Prior to beginning her doctoral research, Esme completed a Masters in International Development from Sciences Po, Paris and a BA(Hons) in Politics from the University of Exeter. She was also selected to take part in the Nuffield Undergraduates Scholars Institute in 2019 at the University of Oxford.

Outside of academia, Esme has been an advocate of social mobility in the UK since participating in the Aspiring Professionals Programme run by the Social Mobility Foundation in 2014. Since then, she has volunteered for the educational social mobility charity CoachBright and was shortlisted for the Government and Public Sector Award in the upReach Social Mobility Awards 2019.

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Introduction

“As we come out of the pandemic, we have a tremendous opportunity for the government, employers, educators, and communities to rescue the next generation from long-term hardship.”¹

(Steven Cooper, Co-Chair of the Social Mobility Commission 2020-2021)

In the UK, household income can play a decisive role in socio-economic and educational outcomes. People from low-income backgrounds are less likely to excel in school, access higher education, or have a professional occupation. Even those who defy the odds and are upwardly mobile can face many social and cultural barriers to further progression within society. The UK is consistently ranked as one of the least socially mobile nations amongst developed countries, along with the US and Italy.²

Social mobility is an indicator of fairness, equality and social justice, and it has wide-ranging political and economic consequences. Due to inequalities across education and employment, generations of young people are not given the support or opportunity to reach their full potential, therefore talent is wasted and the country’s productivity is constrained. According to one estimate, if social mobility in the UK rose to the average level across western Europe, it could lead to an increase in annual GDP of approximately 2%, equivalent to £29bn to the UK economy.³

A person’s perception of whether or not society is meritocratic has a significant effect on their aspirations. If we believe that our outcomes are strongly influenced by our background, and not our skills or hard work, we may have less motivation to channel into our work and education. Any interventions to address the UK’s social mobility problem must ensure that people’s socio-economic and educational outcomes are achieved on merit, and not on their family circumstances.

The narrative of social mobility is one that has long fascinated us – the story of ‘rags to riches’ is a well-known trope in literature,

film and television – and increasing social mobility has been considered a ‘silver bullet’ in addressing inequality by successive UK governments. However, social mobility is complex and multi-faceted. Structural barriers cause an intergenerational transmission of poverty resulting in stasis in social mobility. Where upward mobility takes place, there becomes less room left at the top resulting in downward mobility for others. This also creates added pressure on young people who need to deploy significant social and cultural capital in order to retain their position, let alone aspire to climb the socio-economic ladder further.

i. Disadvantage here refers to students who have been eligible for free school meals at one point in the last six years, which is the same definition as for the Department for Education. Generally, in this conference briefing, the term disadvantage is used to refer to measures of socio-economic disadvantage or being from a low-income background. The briefing also acknowledges the limitations of this terminology. Ofsted also uses this definition.

The pandemic has put a spotlight on worsening child poverty and widening inequalities, demonstrated by footballer Marcus Rashford’s free school meals campaign in 2020. In his March 2021 Budget speech, Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced a £4.8bn Levelling Up Fund, intended to improve everyday life across the UK. While this fund is a step in the right direction, there is still a long way to go. Building back after the pandemic presents an opportunity to incorporate greater fairness and equal opportunities into the system.

Education and employment play key roles in improving social mobility. Successive UK governments have hailed schools and higher education institutions as engines of social mobility, and government policy and numerous third-sector initiatives to improve social mobility focus on these areas. However, there is an attainment gap in the UK, with disadvantaged students¹ estimated to be around 18.1 months of learning behind their more privileged peers by the end of their GCSEs in England.⁴ The pandemic has only exacerbated these gaps.⁵ In the highest performing schools and universities, working-class students remain underrepresented, and even if admitted, they face significant cultural and other barriers to being socially mobile. Meanwhile students who undertake vocational courses or leave the education system at 18 to go straight into work, may be perceived to warrant lower rates of pay than university graduates.

In the world of work, people from low-income backgrounds certainly face pay disparities. The government's social mobility arm, the Social Mobility Commission, found that those from working-class backgrounds are paid less, even when controlling for factors including education and job type.⁶

In November 2020, Cumberland Lodge held a webinar, as part of the Dialogue & Debate series, with guest panellists discussing the question: is education the key to social mobility? One of the key themes to emerge from this webinar was education and employment must work in tandem: employers must attract, retain and develop socially diverse talent if the benefits of a more socially mobile approach to education are to be realised.

This briefing document has been prepared to inform discussions at the Cumberland Lodge Shaping Social Mobility: Education and Employment conference on 7-8 March 2022. The conference brings together people from across sectors to identify promising practice in the UK and further afield to address socio-economic inequality in education and employment. The panel discussions and conversations that take place will be developed into a report to be published later in 2022.

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What do we mean by social mobility?

“Social mobility is about having access to opportunity and informed choice.”⁷

(Jouja Maamri, Sustainability & Impact Manager at Regenerative Creations)

Social mobility is the link between a person’s socio-economic status (e.g., occupation, social class or income) and the socio-economic status of their parents. Where there is a strong link, there is a lower level of social mobility. Where there is a weak link, there is a higher level of social mobility.⁸ Social mobility is about breaking this link.

Mobility can be measured in absolute or relative terms. Absolute mobility compares a person’s socio-economic status to that of their parents. Upward absolute mobility is akin to ‘The American Dream’ and refers to children earning more than their parents over their lifetimes. Relative mobility refers to a person’s position or ranking in society, and how this compares to that of their parents. Both kinds of social mobility are important measures. Absolute social mobility is indicative of changing wages and living standards whereas relative social mobility signifies the extent to which there is equality of opportunity within society.

When talking about relative and absolute, upward and downward, the question comes to mind: what is the optimal level of social mobility? At one extreme, a world with complete mobility would mean that a person’s outcomes would not be related to their parents at all. At the other extreme, a world with complete persistence would mean a person would always end up in the same position in society as their parents. Neither seem realistic, nor desirable. The question of the optimal level of social mobility is highly contentious and difficult to answer, particularly as upward mobility for some means downward mobility for others, and everyone wants the best for their children. Rather than seeking a certain level of mobility, the challenge for social

mobility in the UK is equipping every child with the equal opportunity to excel in life. This means not wasting anyone's potential talent by guaranteeing that success is based on merit and not on parental income, and removing obstacles in the workplace and elsewhere which can hinder the progress of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also means ensuring diversity in the workplace and in positions of power, leading to a less fragmented society.

Inequality

Social mobility and inequality are inextricably linked. If upward social mobility is described as climbing a ladder, the level of inequality is represented by the spacing between the rungs. It was once believed that a certain amount of inequality was good for social mobility, as it would incentivise people to work harder to improve their socio-economic status. However, international research has shown that there is an inverse relationship between inequality and social mobility.⁹ This relationship is known as the Great Gatsby Curve. While the evidence on the causality of this relationship is less certain, some believe that high inequality leads to low social mobility.¹⁰ This is particularly worrying in the UK context, as it has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the Western world, measured by Gini coefficient.¹¹ Currently, the poorest 20% of the population earn 8% of total income, whereas the top 20% earn 40% of total income. Whereas income measures the flow of money you receive, wealth measures the stock of valuable possessions, including the money in your bank account, shares or bonds, and the value of properties like your house or car. Inequality of wealth is even greater than inequality of income, with the poorest 50% of the population owning just 9% of wealth in the UK, compared to the top 10% of households holding 44% of all wealth.¹²

Social class

Most research into social class uses an occupation-based classification, such as the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). However, the class categories are not static and must reflect societal changes. Consequently, research conducted by Mike Savage and the Great British Class Survey uses seven new social class classifications based on job status, income, education and in particular, social capital and culture. This research shows that there is a polarising trend in the UK: an elite (roughly 6% of the population), who continue to pull away from the rest of society, and a precariat, (roughly 15% of the population), which is an emerging class of people who face job insecurity and precarity.¹³ This research highlights the continuing importance of social class in Britain today, in addition to increasing fragmentation and the role that culture and identity play.

This is also confirmed through the findings of the Social Mobility Barometer in 2021, which showed that 48% of adults in the UK identify as working-class, 36% identify as middle-class and none identify as upper-class. 11% of adults said they identified with none of these, and five per cent said they didn't know. These statistics were broadly similar across age groups, although 18–24-year-olds were more likely to not know (11%).

3

Social mobility in the UK

An overview of inequality in the UK

Inequality begins from birth. Even before starting school, children from poorer backgrounds are at an academic disadvantage to their peers. In the UK it was shown that children eligible for free school meals and living in disadvantaged areas were 2.3 times more likely to have speech, language, or communication educational needs.¹⁴ The gaps appear from early years education and only increase from then on.¹⁵

There is a pronounced divide in our education system across private schools, selective and non-selective schools, and the socio-economic consequences for life chances. For instance, while only 7% of the UK population are educated at independent schools, 39% of the Cabinet, 44% of newspaper columnists and 65% of senior judges were privately educated. The same pattern is found amongst the elites across other professional fields, according to research by The Sutton Trust.¹⁶ Fortunately, our education system also presents opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds too. For example, tens of thousands of means-tested bursaries are awarded each year for students to attend fee-paying schools, and the number of means-tested bursaries is increasing, meaning more opportunities for disadvantaged pupils.¹⁷

There is of course, much room for improvement. Today, you are still 60% more likely to be in a professional job if you were from a privileged background rather than a working-class background.¹⁸

Even when defying the odds and overcoming all the educational inequalities present, working-class employees still face pay disparities. According to research by the UK Social Mobility Commission, on average there is a class pay gap of £6,800 per year within professional occupations.¹⁹ When controlled for factors such as education and job type, those from working-class backgrounds still face an annual pay gap of £2,242 on average compared to their colleagues. Women, minority ethnic

communities, and those working in finance, medicine, and IT, are especially affected by this pay gap.²⁰

People's perceptions of the state of the nation also reflect levels of inequality today. Four in five adults now believe that there is a large gap between different social classes, and three quarters of adults believe there are large differences in opportunities across Britain. In the aftermath of the pandemic, 56% of adults believe that the coronavirus outbreak increased inequality in Britain, a third saying by 'a lot'.²¹

Amongst the most worrying issues is the level of child poverty. In 2019-2020, one in three children were living in poverty in the UK. This is around 4.3 million children, and children from Black and minority ethnic groups were around 1.8 times more likely to be in poverty than children from White British families.²² Experiencing poverty during childhood has consistently shown to be damaging to a range of outcomes, from behavioral and emotional issues, and educational attainment, to general health and wellbeing, meaning that one in three children today do not get a fair start in life.

Intergenerational transmissions

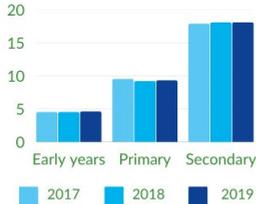
Researchers and academics have been estimating the rate of intergenerational persistence of income in the UK for decades.

Intergenerational elasticity is a measurement of intergenerational persistence of income in a society, in other words, relative social mobility. Recent estimates put the rate of intergenerational elasticity in the UK at 0.43.²³ This would mean that a doubling of family income during childhood would be associated with an increase in the child's lifetime earnings as an adult of 43%.

However, these estimates are an average for people from across the income distribution. When breaking down the rate of intergenerational persistence for people in different income brackets, the results show that those in the poorest or richest quintiles experience the highest levels of persistence. For example, data from the British Cohort Study shows that only 10% of those from the poorest fifth of society make it to the top

INEQUALITY IN THE UK TODAY

THE ATTAINMENT GAP ¹



*Months behind in learning in school

£6,800

Annual pay gap between graduates from a working class background and others within professional occupations.

£2,242

Annual pay gap when controlling for factors such as education and job type.

THE CLASS GAP ²

Today, you are 60% more likely to be in a professional job if you were from a privileged background rather than a working-class background. ³

TYPE OF SCHOOL MATTERS ⁴

School type attended by the elite compared to the current UK school population.



OUR PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY ⁵

79% of people now believe there is a large gap between different social classes.

74% of people think there are large differences in opportunities across Britain.



1 IN 3 CHILDREN NOW LIVING IN POVERTY ⁶

SOURCES

- <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>
- <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20211025-the-employee-class-gap-leaving-workers-behind>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2021-social-mobility-and-the-pandemic>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/elitist-britain-2019>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-barometer-2021>
- <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>



fifth of earnings. This is known as the ‘rags to riches’ trajectory, and represents long-range social mobility, which is much less common than going from one quintile to the next quintile up or down. This is compared to 41% of those who are born in the top fifth remaining in the top fifth.²⁴ See figure I for an illustration of this.

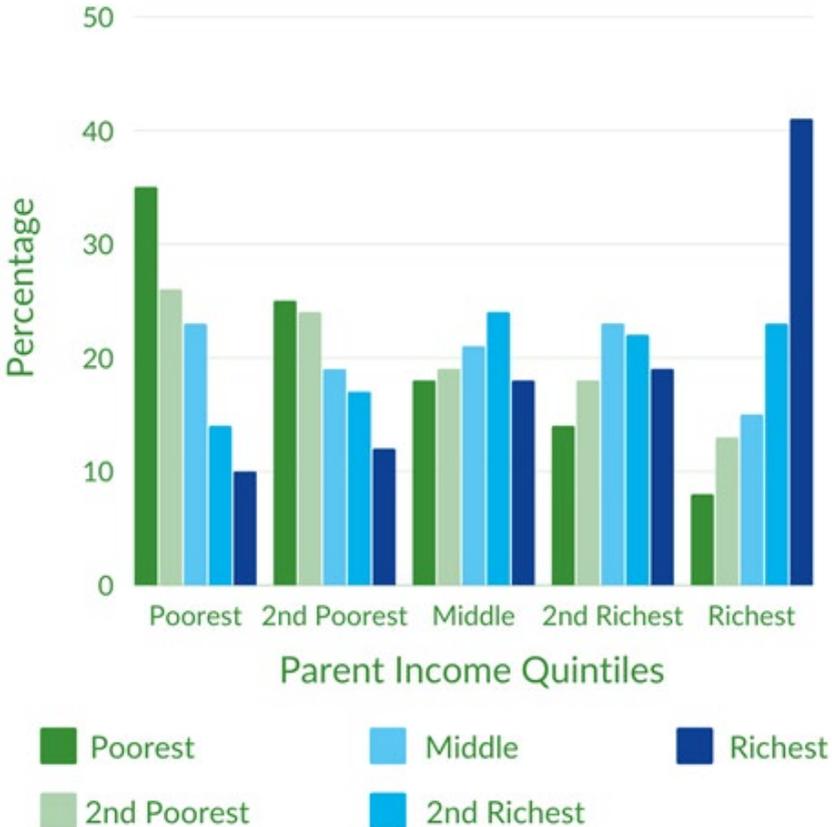


Figure I- Intergenerational mobility (Major and Machin, 2018:7)²⁵

On their own, these figures do not tell us much about how well Britain is doing as a country. An international comparison puts these statistics into perspective.

Cross-national comparisons

By comparing mobility in the UK to other countries, it becomes clear that the UK is a low mobility, high inequality society. According to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), social mobility in the UK is below average. In the UK, it takes around five generations on average to reach the mean income when you start out as low income (i.e., bottom 10% of income distribution). This is compared to the OECD average of 4.5, ranging from two generations in Denmark, up to an extreme of nine generations in Chile.²⁶ See Figure 2 below.

Expected number of generations it would take the offspring from a family at the bottom 10% to reach the mean income in society

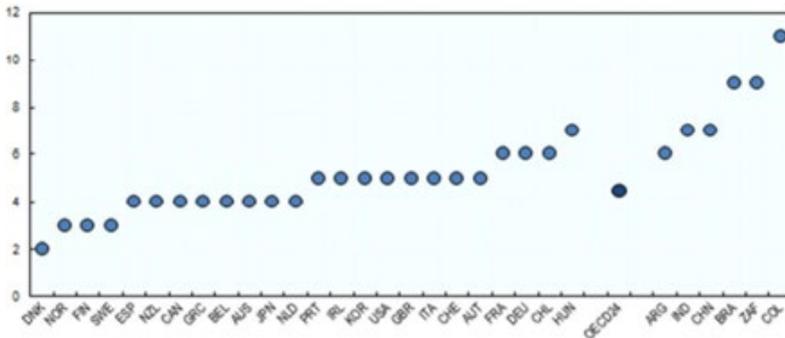


Figure 2- Expected number of generations it would take the offspring of a family at the bottom 10% to reach the mean income in society (OECD, 2018)²⁷

These international comparisons should be taken with a pinch of salt, as rates of intergenerational elasticity are notoriously difficult to compare meaningfully. Figure 3 shows rankings of intergenerational income mobility across 12 different countries compiled in research from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).²⁸ It also shows the confidence intervals, proving that there is a lot of uncertainty in these figures. Despite issues with measurement, a clear pattern across comparisons finds that Nordic countries are highly socially mobile, and

countries such as the UK, US and Italy have lower social mobility. In general, low- and middle-income countries have much lower mobility as demonstrated by the cases of Chile and Brazil.

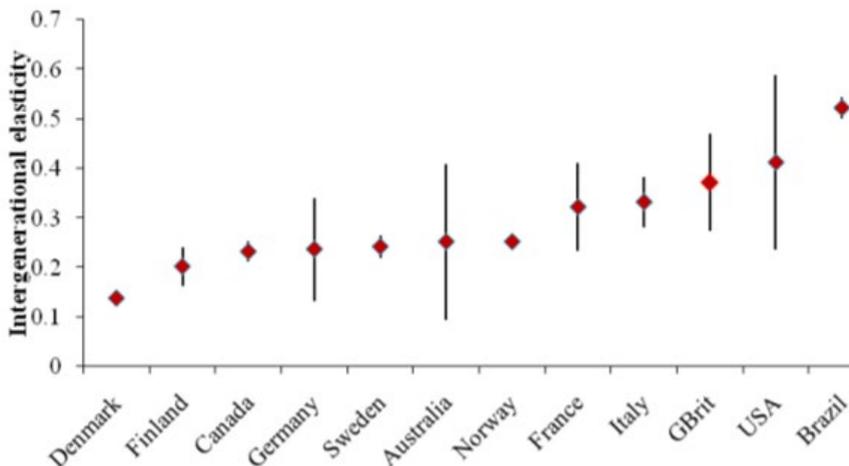


Figure 3- International comparisons of intergenerational earnings mobility (Blanden, 2013)²⁹

Using a different measure of social mobility that focuses on the drivers of relative social mobility by looking at policies, practices and institutions that foster social mobility, the Global Social Mobility Index 2020 ranked the UK 21st out of 82 countries, putting it behind countries such as France, Germany, Australia, and Canada. Out of the G7 countries, the UK only comes ahead of the USA and Italy.³⁰

Finally, many international comparisons focus on trends such as the Great Gatsby Curve. As described on page 5, the curve shows that the more inequality there is in a country, the less social mobility there tends to be. Research puts the UK firmly into the category of low mobility, high inequality, along with the USA and Italy.³¹

The Great Gatsby Curve: More Inequality is Associated with Less Mobility across the Generations

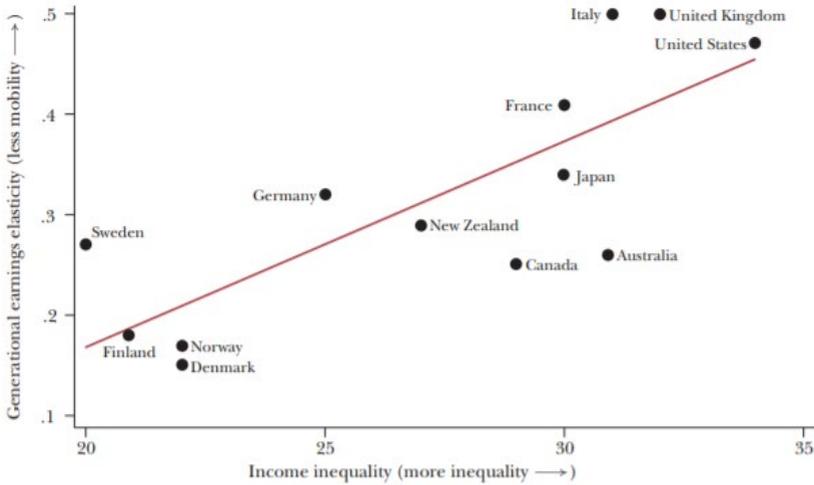


Figure 4- The Great Gatsby Curve (Corak, 2013)³²

Social mobility over the years

Research on social mobility inevitably involves longitudinal studies conducted over decades.

Research using data from the National Child Development Survey and the British Cohort Study, shows that the income of parents and children was more closely related for the cohort born in 1970 compared to the cohort born in 1958, pointing to a decrease in intergenerational income mobility over those years.³³ However, despite being cited in public policy debate, these findings have been contested;³⁴ they were sometimes used in the wrong context as they demonstrate a decline in *income* mobility and not *social* mobility.³⁵

Research that followed on from this controversial study argues that while it appeared income mobility had declined, overall levels of social mobility had not. It was further argued that even the income mobility measures may be misleading due to data limitations,³⁶ although the authors still contest this.³⁷ Another

piece of research confirmed that overall social mobility was not in decline, it was even increasing for women from successive birth cohorts, however absolute rates of upward social mobility were becoming less common.³⁸

This finding of falling rates of absolute upward mobility — the chance that your children will earn more than you — has also been seen in the USA. Harvard economist Raj Chetty's popular social mobility research relies on US tax records. This huge cache of data has allowed some of the most detailed insight into social mobility trends in the USA and has shown that rates of absolute upward income mobility are in decline.³⁹ Accessing administrative data such as this in the UK may provide researchers with the opportunity to achieve a more accurate understanding of social mobility over time as well.

Finally, a study using surname analysis shows little progress in social mobility across generations over a very long period. Research and tracking of the education status of certain surnames in 1170 and 2012 in England show a correlation of 0.75-0.85.⁴⁰ This suggests that historically, status has been more inheritable compared to genetic factors such as height, and that despite many societal changes, social mobility today is not much different than social mobility centuries ago.

In summary, we are not sure to what extent social mobility, in all its forms, has changed over time in the UK due to data limitations. It is important to note that most of the research in the UK has focused on cohorts born before 1970, which does not provide an up-to-date assessment of the situation. We have seen many changes in the UK since 1970, from the expansion of higher education to improvements in technology, meaning that young people today are facing a very different context to that of their parents' generation. When speculating on what levels of social mobility we are to see for young people today, considering the effects of the pandemic, experts have warned we may see a decline in social mobility.⁴¹ Furthermore, 42% of people aged 24-49 believe that it is getting harder for people from less

advantaged backgrounds to progress in British society in the aftermath of the pandemic.⁴²

Finally, despite the important place social mobility has taken in the social and political history of the UK, there is relatively little written about its terminology, and how its meaning and people's perception of it has changed over time. In her book *Snakes and Ladders*, Selina Todd looks at people's experiences and perceptions of social mobility over seven generations between the 1880s and the 1990s. She finds that both upward and downward social mobility has been a feature of each of these generations, and that during some generations there were more opportunities for upward mobility than others. She concludes though, that widespread upward mobility has always been a myth: those born at the top of society have always tended to stay there, and those at the bottom have lacked opportunities to move up the ladder.⁴³

Geography of social mobility

So far, we have considered rates of social mobility for the UK as a whole, however there are clear geographical divides, with research finding stark regional differences in opportunity across the country.

A report by the Social Mobility Commission in 2020 examined differences in opportunities across England. They measured the median earnings for sons at age 28 who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) at age 16. The median earnings were £13,500 nationwide, however the study revealed steep differences across different areas. For example, the median was £6,900 a year for sons in Chiltern, and over £21,000 in areas such as Uttlesford in Essex or Forest Heath in Suffolk (see figure 5 for a map of these geographical differences across England.)⁴⁴ The study was not able to measure the difference in opportunities for women due to data limitations, which is a common problem across social mobility research. The data used could not be adjusted for part-time work, which is much more common for women at age 28 due to family circumstances. Hence, it is important to note that

this research does not reflect the experience of women in the UK.

The report also measured mobility in different areas by looking at the difference in earnings between sons from the most and the least deprived families growing up in the same region. At the national level, advantaged sons (average over £27,000 a year) earned double the income of those from the most deprived families (average around £13,000 a year).⁴⁵

This research identified localities with low life chances, which were typified by having fewer professional and managerial occupations, fewer 'Outstanding' schools, more areas of deprivation and moderate population density, and included places such as Bolton, Bradford, Chiltern and Thanet.

Areas with high rates of social mobility and social mobility opportunities are referred to as hotspots, and conversely those with low rates and few opportunities as cold spots. In general, London is a hotspot, thought to have higher mobility rates in comparison with other parts of the country, while areas in the North and coastal seaside towns are thought to have relatively low mobility.⁴⁶ These findings of regional inequalities have spurred policy initiatives such as the Levelling Up Fund, which decentralises power to local partners and communities and invests in them. Data is also collected on the rate of state school pupils going on to access higher education in different areas, providing a map of 'low participation areas' which can be used for contextual admissions to higher education, as will be explored in the next section, along with more on regional policies.

Unsurprisingly, perceptions of social mobility also differ regionally. Only 31% of people in the North-East believe there are good opportunities to progress in their area, compared to 74% in London. In sum, it is clear that geography and social mobility are related and that where you come from has a significant effect on where you are going in the future.

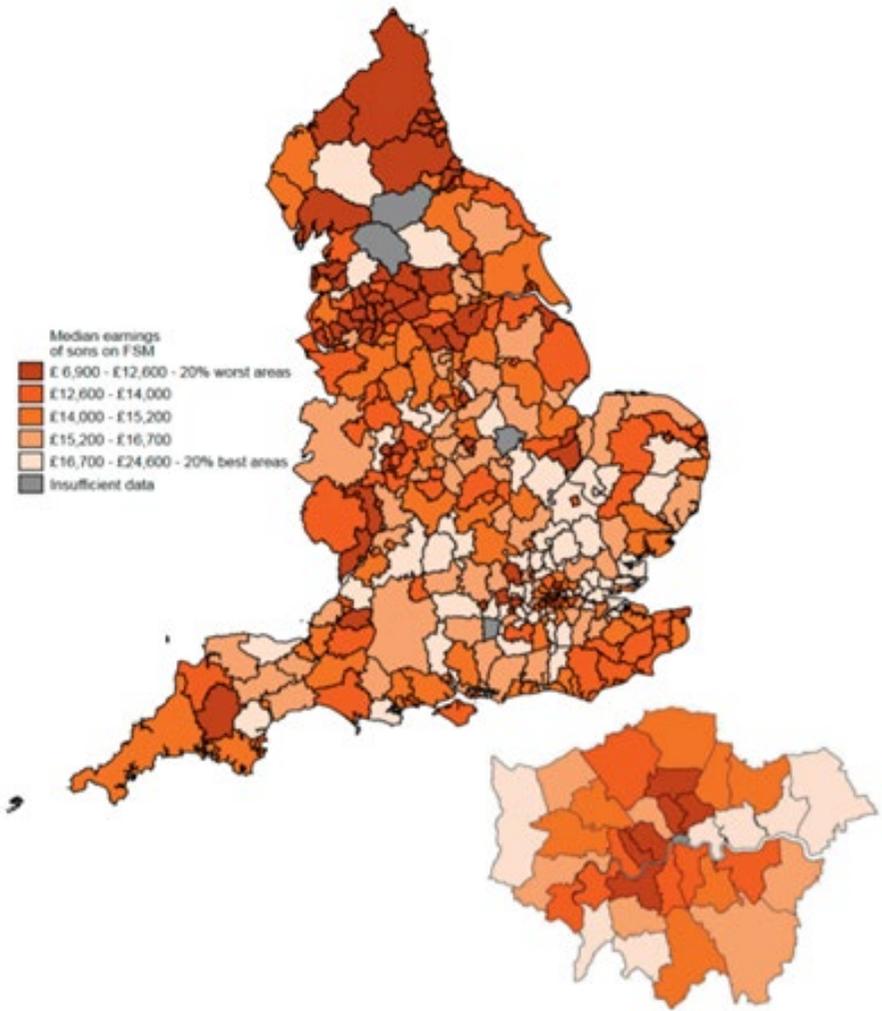


Figure 5- Earnings at age 28 for disadvantaged sons at age 16, across local authorities in England where they grow up (Social Mobility Commission, 2020)⁴⁷

Intersectionality in social mobility

Do ethnicity, migrant status, and gender matter for social mobility? Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of different aspects of people's identities, such as race, class and gender, that creates overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage. Other intersections include English as an additional language, migrants, special educational needs and disabilities, and people from the LGBTQ+ community.

Despite some evidence showing that social mobility for women is generally increasing,⁴⁸ there are worrying findings on educational and labour market outcomes for minority ethnic communities, and in particular for the intersection of gender and minority ethnic. Furthermore, women and people from minority ethnic communities are more likely to experience downward social mobility than their male or White counterparts.⁴⁹

A report by the Social Mobility Commission in 2016 found that White children from low-income homes were the lowest performing groups at primary school.⁵⁰ This group was also the least likely to access higher education, with only one in 10 attending university, compared to three in 10 for Black Caribbean children, 5 in 10 for Bangladeshi children and nearly 7 in 10 for Chinese children from low-income backgrounds. This trend was shown in 2021 by a report on underachievement, confirming that White working-class children underachieve at school in many different metrics throughout their education. This is particularly true for boys.⁵¹

However, these educational inequalities do not necessarily translate to differences in labour market outcomes or earnings. When looking at earnings, White working-class boys do comparatively better than other groups.⁵² Despite performing well in education, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Muslim Black African women earn relatively less than their male counterparts, and Chinese male graduates earn on average 25% less than White male graduates despite being some of the highest performers in education.⁵³

Please be aware: part of this report has been redacted, pending the publication of another upcoming report.

This highlights the importance of gender and ethnicity in understanding social mobility and opportunity, and the importance of the labour market as a factor in determining social mobility. Even when controlling for education, certain minority ethnic groups still earn less compared to White people.

Disabled people too face increased disadvantage when it comes to social mobility. The Social Mobility Commission found that just 21% of disabled people from working-class backgrounds enter the highest occupations versus 43% of disabled people from professional backgrounds.⁵⁶

In conclusion, the evidence shows that not everyone has the same experience of social mobility, and that socio-economic background can interact with multiple identities creating added disadvantage in some cases, so it is important to take these into consideration when thinking about social mobility.

Social mobility and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic led to disruption and chaos in educational institutions, and long-term changes in the labour market. National lockdowns highlighted some of the deep inequalities present in British society, including low wages and poor working conditions for essential workers as well as increasing people's appreciation of key workers. Child poverty was put high on the agenda with Marcus Rashford's campaign against ending free school meal vouchers during school holidays.⁵⁷ So, how has the pandemic affected our perceptions and the reality of social mobility?

The Social Mobility Barometer 2021 found that over half of the public believe the pandemic has increased social inequality, and when asked what the government's key priorities should be in any pandemic recovery plan, the largest number of respondents said employment opportunities, followed by addressing mental health issues and improving access to education.⁵⁸

As schools shut in 2020, private tutoring significantly increased. With private tutoring on average costing upward of £35 per hour,

low-income families are priced out.⁵⁹ The roll out of the National Tutoring Programme in 2021, which aimed to give targeted support to state school students whose education had been most disrupted by the pandemic, has seen many problems with its roll out, failing to reach its targets in outreach.⁶⁰

As for employment, the pandemic has had a huge impact on the labour market with a rise in remote working, the financial implications of furlough, and an increase in the number of people leaving employment.⁶¹ In the initial waves of the pandemic, occupations such as social care, health care and hospitality were most affected as workers put their lives at risk to work. Young people have been amongst the worst affected by the pandemic, with data showing that the employment rate decreased the most amongst those aged 16-24.⁶² However, with job vacancies reaching a record high in late 2021, the labour market remains tumultuous. At a time when one in four workers are planning to change job,⁶³ it may be time to rethink how we measure success, prestige, and fulfilment in employment.

Clearly, the pandemic has had a huge impact on our perceptions, and the reality of, social mobility in the UK. By helping to highlight issues such as child poverty, inequality, and the nature of work, a silver lining to the pandemic is that it has created an opportunity to address the structural issues that underlie these inequalities. According to the Social Mobility Barometer 2021, 53% of people said that central government should be doing more, and 42% expected further support from local government to improve social mobility. The following two sections identify emerging good practice in policy and across education and employment, and highlight the gaps, and urgent areas for change.

4

The role of education

*“I didn’t realise the impact that being a first-generation university student would have on my understanding of how university worked”
(Participant, Youth Advisory Session.)⁶⁴*

Education is considered one of the key drivers of social mobility, sometimes referred to as ‘the great equaliser’. However, it can also pose barriers to increasing social mobility. This section examines the role that education plays in social mobility in the UK, provides an overview of education policies, and discusses the barriers present in the education system.

From early years to postgraduate education, people from low-income backgrounds face structural barriers to making progress while disadvantaged people leave school without basic qualifications.⁶⁵ Over the past few decades, successive governments in the UK have implemented changes in the education system to equalise opportunity. The 1970s saw the phasing out of grammar schools, and the replacement of the grammar/secondary modern system with comprehensive schools, and more recently participation in higher education has increased considerably, with over 50% of students staying in full-time education compared to 15% in the 1980s.⁶⁶ University undergraduate tuition was free until the late 1990s, whereas now, three years of university can put a student into almost £30k of debt. The Assisted Places Scheme introduced by the Conservative Government in the 1980s provided subsidised places in private schools for eligible pupils, and the Education Maintenance Allowance introduced in 1999 paid for low-income pupils to attend further education. Investment in early years education, the London Challenge, and the Opportunity Area programme have seen a policy focus on geographical differences and disparities from young ages. Attainment gaps have decreased over time; for example, between 2011 and 2019, attainment gaps at the end of primary school reduced by 12.8 percentage points, however progress has slowed down.⁶⁷



Figure 8- Trends in the disadvantage gap in months at primary school have slowed (Education Policy Institute, 2020)⁶⁸

Early years

The attainment gap between children from low income and higher income backgrounds appears early in life. It is estimated that only 51% of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieved a good level of development at age five,ⁱⁱ compared to 69% of other children. This gap varied regionally, with only 40% of FSM children in areas such as Herefordshire and Leicestershire demonstrating a good level of development at age five while 60% of FSM children did so in Inner London, up to rates of 70% in places such as Lewisham.⁶⁹

ii. Good level of development is a performance measure for early years students of an expected level of development in key areas such as mathematics and literacy.

Research increasingly emphasises the importance of early childhood education and care for children’s development and wellbeing. The first four years of a child’s life play a significant role in determining their chances later in life, and it only gets harder from that point on for children from low-income backgrounds to catch up with their peers. Early childhood and education provide a window of opportunity to disrupt cycles of disadvantage, yet interventions are often too late.

Currently in England, working parents are eligible for 30 hours of free early years childcare and education per week. There are similar schemes in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

While the provision of free early childhood education and care is a step in the right direction, according to The Sutton Trust's Fair Start campaign, early education in England is "underfunded, underappreciated and unequal". The Sutton Trust's research found inequality in access, with 70% of those families eligible for the full 30 hours in the top half of the earnings distribution, while only 20% of families in the bottom third of the earnings distribution were eligible.⁷⁰ Recommendations from the campaign include expanding the eligibility for the programme, improving quality of schooling, and increasing funding.

There are examples of good practice from around the world on how high-quality early education and care programmes can help improve life chances for disadvantaged children, most notably, the Perry Preschool Project. Launched in the 1960s in Michigan, USA, participants of this programme were more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to hold a job and have higher earnings, had fewer teenage pregnancies, and committed fewer crimes.⁷¹

Primary and secondary school

The attainment gap widens throughout compulsory schooling, as can be seen in Figure 9.⁷² There are deep inequalities in the education system, with children's outcomes varying on location and type of school.

While the majority of the UK's population attended state comprehensive schools, those who progress to professional careers are disproportionately represented by those who went to fee-paying schools, as seen in section three of this brief. With boarding fees upwards of £12,000 per term, this form of education is beyond the means of most families.⁷³

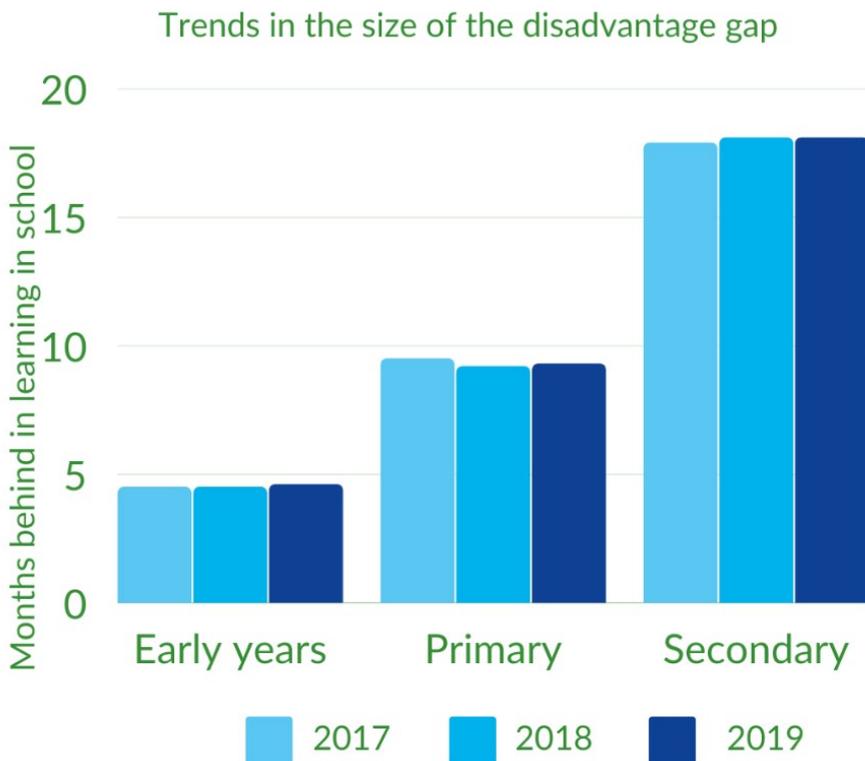


Figure 9. Based on data from EPI (2020)⁷⁴

Grammar schools garner debate too when it comes to social mobility, with former Prime Minister Theresa May MP promising 140 new grammar schools in 2017 with the goal of increasing opportunities for children from low-income backgrounds.⁷⁵ While the pledge to end the ban on new grammar schools was eventually abandoned, it did spark debate on the effectiveness of selective schooling with regards to social mobility. Results are mixed on grammar schools, finding that while they may help individual students from poorer backgrounds to excel, they often lead to worse results overall for children from low-

income backgrounds. Furthermore, a smaller proportion of such children attend grammar schools, and research shows that peers from higher income backgrounds are more likely to be selected to attend grammar school even when they had the same attainment grades.⁷⁶

Not only does attendance at a private school increase predicted earnings and educational attainment, there are significant non-academic benefits as well. These include teaching highly-valued soft skills such as communication and confidence, access to advice on getting into university, help with personal statements, and more opportunities for extracurricular activities to develop powerful social networks. Even outside of the school day, inequalities persist. The use of private tutors has substantially increased, adding to educational inequality, or as some have dubbed it, ‘the education arms race’. One government policy to combat this, in response to the increased attainment gap following the pandemic, is the National Tutoring Programme.⁷⁷ This scheme, introduced in 2020, provided access to high-quality subsidised tutoring provision for primary and secondary state school pupils. However, the scheme faced controversy, reaching less than 150,000 students in England — less than two thirds of its targeted outreach almost one year into the scheme.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, within schools, there is no shortage of policies, recommendations, programmes and interventions aimed at decreasing the attainment gap. Yet, as many have remarked, teachers and schools are already strained in terms of delivering a good standard of education to all. Better funding for state schools, higher pay for teachers, and fairer access to high-quality schools may be part of the solution to addressing the attainment gap.

Further education and skills

On completion of compulsory schooling, 16-year-olds can either enter further education, start an apprenticeship, or begin part-time work and part-time education and training. Apprenticeships

(and adult skills) are one of the seven key pillars of recovery outlined in the Social Mobility Commission report 2021.⁷⁹

Apprenticeships have the potential to be a key driver of social mobility. However, there is a stigma attached to them, as well as a lack of availability of high-quality apprenticeships. While apprentices can earn up to £50,000 more over their lifetime on average than graduates, 64% of teachers said they would rarely or never advise high-performing students to opt for apprenticeships.⁸⁰ There is not yet enough information on the opportunities that apprenticeships present to improving social mobility. Work by organisations such as Amazing Apprenticeships aims to counter this, working with schools, colleges and employers to tackle misconceptions and promoting the benefits of apprenticeships.

Degree apprenticeships were launched in 2015 in England, offering the opportunity to ‘earn while you learn’ and earn a university accredited degree qualification. However, research has shown that there are disadvantage gaps at every stage of the apprenticeship journey, from employer selection to career earnings, and these have widened over recent years.⁸¹ It is crucial that the government targets disadvantaged learners to equalise access to high-quality apprenticeships.

Higher education

State school students are underrepresented at the top universities, and face fierce competition for oversubscribed places, on top of a complex admissions procedure. The University of Oxford admits more students from eight top performing schools than almost 3,000 state schools combined, and 42% of places in Oxford and Cambridge went to private school students between 2015 and 2017.⁸² Russell Group universities also have a representation problem, and the controversy over algorithm-predicted grades in 2020 leading to lower grades for more disadvantaged students highlights the difficulty for poorer students to get a leg up into higher education.⁸³ Students from low-income backgrounds face many

barriers, being less likely to be advised to apply for Oxford and Cambridge, and often having less volunteering, work or extra-curricular experiences to fall back on. This representation problem goes hand in hand with the elite cultures that are replicated at elite universities, with working-class students reporting feeling out of place in the middle-class cultures prevalent at Russell Group universities. In response to these barriers, one student founded the 93% Club with the hopes of evening things out, enabling students from working-class backgrounds to help each other “get on in life” and feel proud of their backgrounds.⁸⁴ The social mobility charity has gone on to impact over 10,000 students from over 45 universities.

Even after getting past the admissions process, there is rising variation in access to different subjects. For example, in the mid-2000s, privately educated pupils were nearly 25 times more likely to study medicine than their peers who were eligible for free school meals. Research shows that there is variation in how different subjects aid social mobility, finding that computing, law and economics at London-based institutions dominated the top 20 courses for mobility rates, while arts and humanities courses were generally rated poorly.⁸⁵ Furthermore, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly women, are more likely to choose courses that lead to low-earning careers. Those from a privileged background are roughly 30% more likely to take a course leading to a high-earning career than those in the most deprived group.⁸⁶

Improving careers advice, widening participation bursaries and initiatives, and contextual admissions can help diminish some of these barriers. There are several notable programmes that tackle these disparities, such as The Social Mobility Foundation and upReach, through helping talented state school students navigate higher education and career choices. This is achieved through internships, mentoring, seminars and networking events. Many universities also run widening participation programmes and keep funding available to help increase the diversity of their student bodies, such as the UNIQ programme at the University of Oxford that provides a summer school and admissions

support for state school students. Collecting data on the socio-economic background of pupils and staff is key to these widening participation efforts.

In summary

Education remains a key driver of social mobility, and it is concerning that the educational attainment gap widened for the first time in 12 years in 2020 during the pandemic.⁸⁷ Ensuring that students from low-income backgrounds have access to good and quality education is important for increasing social mobility, including vocational training opportunities such as apprenticeships. Adult education and lifelong learning have also been underlined as key to improving social mobility and productivity in the UK, and can be of particular help to those from disadvantaged backgrounds who missed out on earlier educational opportunities.

5

The role of employment

“I had an initial barrier of impostor syndrome as no one in my immediate circle had a professional job making me feel like an outsider in corporate sessions.”

(Participant, Youth Advisory Session.)⁸⁸

The labour market is also crucial to enabling social mobility, though its role is less discussed than that of education, which is where most policy initiatives have been directed. This is changing, however. A 2021 study shows that 42% of people in the UK think that employers should have to take action to improve social mobility, up from 31% in 2019. Minority ethnic groups and young people are most likely to say that employers should act in this way.⁸⁹

Employment is important because education does not perfectly translate to employment outcomes. In fact, incomes are affected by social class and background even when controlling for education, with graduates from lower income households earning 10% less than others studying the same course at the same university.⁹⁰ This demonstrates that a degree does not have the same value for all graduates. Women and minority ethnic graduates are also hit by pay penalties once they enter the labour market.⁹¹ There could be many reasons behind these disparities, including social networks, cultural capital, soft skills and other possibilities discussed in this section.

Employment, then, is a crucial factor in determining social mobility. The Social Mobility Commission has therefore started to focus on the labour market, producing toolkits for employers on how to make their hiring practices less exclusionary, and on the benefits of hiring people from diverse backgrounds. Many businesses and organisations are already playing their part in improving social mobility, with widening access and equal opportunity schemes aimed at people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Unpaid internships

Unpaid internships can be the key to kickstarting certain careers, yet often people from disadvantaged backgrounds are unable to take them due to financial barriers. According to research by The Sutton Trust, 40% of young people who have carried out an internship have done at least one of them unpaid. Their analysis shows that roughly 10,000 graduates were carrying out an internship at six months post graduation, with around 20% of them doing so unpaid.⁹² Certain industries rely on unpaid internships more than others, such as retail, the arts, and the media.⁹³ Another barrier for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is unadvertised internships which are offered through networks.

While, under current UK law, interns classed as workers should receive the National Minimum Wage, employers can exploit a loophole by classing interns as volunteers or student interns who are exempt. This is a live issue attracting considerable attention at present. There are calls for a government ban on unpaid internships, and for employers to ensure that all posts are publicly advertised and recruited based on merit and not on networks.⁹⁴ Many firms already adhere to these practices and work with social mobility organisations to connect disadvantaged pupils with paid internship opportunities. For example, Creative Access is an organisation that specialises in opportunities for underrepresented groups in the creative industry, working with over 500 employers to offer paid opportunities.

Soft skills, social networks, and cultural capital

Soft skills such as resilience, confidence, creativity, and self-motivation are highly sought after by employers. These skills also protect people from the increasing automation of jobs as they cannot be replicated by AI. Soft skills can be improved with extra-curricular activities during school, but according to a report by The Social Mobility Commission, opportunities to

participate in extra-curricular activities are driven by household income, with children from the poorest households much less likely to take part.⁹⁵

Other non-educational barriers to certain occupations can include top firms valuing ‘middle-class characteristics’ over objective measures of ability. In interviews, employers may judge candidates based on how much they have travelled, places they have been, and even their accent.⁹⁶ Valuing experiences such as travel, particular sporting activities or particular schools can lead employers to favouring more privileged candidates based on ideas of cultural fit, which amounts to discrimination against those from lower income backgrounds.

Recruitment practices

Some sectors are much less representative of the population than others. Some employers are beginning to recognise the value of ensuring that their recruitment practices are fair and open to everyone. Employees from disadvantaged backgrounds often perform better than their more advantaged colleagues. For instance, a study shows that employees educated at state schools are 75% more likely to feature in the top decile of performers in seven leading law firms compared to those educated at independent schools.⁹⁷ Furthermore, employers are widening their talent pool by ensuring fair hiring practices, and improving their image by building a diverse workforce that might also lower employee turnover and attract more candidates. Increasingly, recruiters are adapting their strategies to increase socio-economic diversity. Accountancy and law recruiters are the most likely to have targeted strategies, while engineering and construction firms tend to do the least.⁹⁸ Big Voice London is one organisation that helps state school students explore law as a career, aiming to improve diversity in the legal profession.

There are toolkits available to employers regarding best practices in recruitment at all levels. Contextual recruitment can help improve equality opportunity – that is, recruitment practices that place attainment and successes achieved in

the context of disadvantage, for example attendance at underperforming schools and low attainment neighbourhoods. Realrater, developed by upReach, is a contextual recruitment tool that aims to indicate what an individual could have achieved in the absence of educational and socio-economic disadvantage, based on 14 indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, to provide contextualised A-level grades.⁹⁹

Measuring socio-economic diversity is number one on The Sutton Trust's employer toolkit on social mobility.¹⁰⁰ While more firms are beginning to monitor diversity in terms of socio-economic background, only around 40% of recruiters did so in 2015, compared to over two thirds that monitored employees' diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and disability. Data is a crucial first step to improving diversity because it helps a firm know what needs to be done. Employers should collect data in order to better inform their recruitment practices. For example, PwC UK published socio-economic background pay gaps for the first time in 2021 as part of its Financial Year Annual Report. The report showed that the median socio-economic background pay gap was 12.1%, a larger gap than both the ethnicity pay gap and the gender pay gap. Based on these results, PwC introduced a targeted action plan to increase social mobility through its recruitment, development and progression of employees.¹⁰¹

In summary

Making employment practices fairer offers a valuable opportunity for improving social mobility in the UK. Increasing socio-economic diversity in the workplace is beneficial to employers as well, and can be achieved through using employer toolkits and following best practices for recruitment developed by the organisations dedicated to increasing diversity.

The public sector might set an example for other sectors to follow. However a report states that only 18% of senior civil servants are from low-income backgrounds, compared to 43% in the most junior grades. Civil servants from working-class backgrounds also reported struggling to fit in.¹⁰² This

demonstrates that there is a long way to go for equalising employment and career progression opportunities.

The rise of the gig economy has seen an increase in jobs epitomised by low pay, low security, and lack of career progression. The jobs of low-skilled workers are disproportionately threatened by automation over the next few decades, meaning that upskilling and training need to be a priority.

Moreover, good quality jobs need to be available across the UK, not just London. Research has shown that those from low-income backgrounds are less likely to move geographically, particularly those from minority ethnic groups. Ensuring good quality jobs are available throughout the country can help improve mobility coldspots and improve regional disparities. Levelling up funds and other regional initiatives can help with this.

The pandemic has shaken up the labour market, with a third of workers planning to change jobs, and others moving to remote working. Faced by an increasing attainment gap, it is now more important than ever for the labour market to respond to this challenge by making efforts to increase social mobility and opportunities for all. This needs to be a cross-sector collaboration, from government and employers.

Finally, while this conference focuses on education and employment, it is important to be mindful of the other factors that also play a role in social mobility. Wealth inequality, health, and the socio-economic profile of neighbourhoods are three factors that have been shown to be barriers to social mobility in the UK and need to be considered alongside education and employment.

6

Rethinking social mobility

This briefing has examined social mobility in the UK and identified some of the integral barriers and key opportunities for improvement, with a close examination of the key roles that education and employment play. Looking at the state of social mobility in the UK today, it is clear that there is a problem. Progress on eliminating the attainment gap at all levels of education is slowing down, and the gap is even widening at primary level, while people from working-class and state school backgrounds are underrepresented across the professions. Systemic changes are needed to tackle these challenges. Reducing inequalities between people from different backgrounds and ensuring people get equal opportunities from the start must be key objectives. This also includes ensuring inclusive cultures and welcoming people from different backgrounds across institutions. Geographical inequalities must also be addressed, providing equal opportunities across the country no matter where you are from.

In 2021, the Social Mobility Commission produced a report that built on three years of research and strategic thinking to set out a programme of reform to drive social mobility forward in the face of the pandemic. It recommends seven key pillars to recovery, demonstrating areas of opportunity to improve social mobility:

- geography and local power
- poverty and raising living standards
- early years
- education
- apprenticeships and adult skills
- digital access
- work and career progression.

This briefing has highlighted the difficulties people from low-income backgrounds face in becoming upwardly mobile, and the presence of a precariat: those stuck in poverty with low job security, low pay and few opportunities to improve their life chances.

When focusing on upward mobility trajectories for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, we must acknowledge that upward mobility for some means downward mobility for others – something that those with higher socio-economic status are likely to resist. We must also acknowledge that certain paths of upward mobility through prestigious higher education institutions and elite professions are not suitable for everyone. A socially-mobile society therefore means a society where people have the opportunity to pursue the right life path for them. Ensuring that occupations at all levels, and alternative routes through education and training, are respected and useful may help achieve the goal of equal opportunities and fulfilling potential for all. We must consider how we measure success and merit and reframe our priorities to support people’s wellbeing.

Social mobility is a complex issue. The aim of this briefing is to equip the reader with the fundamental information to provide a base for what is to be discussed in more depth at the conference. We will tackle these multifaceted issues from a cross-sector perspective, including the voices of young people, charities, businesses, policymakers and government, who span different ages, social class and backgrounds, to reflect the diversity of our society.

Before attending the conference, we encourage you to reflect on the following questions and any others that may have emerged through your own reading:

- Does the term social mobility still have currency?
- Does it describe the problem of intergenerational immobility in a useful way?
- How has COVID-19 affected our perception of, and the reality of social mobility?
- How can we support people from all backgrounds to engage with educational and employment opportunities on the basis of pride, worth, enjoyment and work/life balance, rather than on prestige, family legacy, social class or tradition?
- What shifts are needed for our systems to embrace and value socio-economic diversity?

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