



# Universities and Social Mobility: Summary Report

The Sutton Trust

## KEY FINDINGS

- Higher education is a key driver of social mobility in this country. Young people from less well-off backgrounds who attend university are more likely to become socially mobile into higher income brackets, and income gaps are lower between graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers compared to non-graduates.
- The research calculates a 'mobility rate' for universities, subjects and individual degrees, based on how many students from disadvantaged backgrounds get in, and how many of them go on to be high earners after graduation. The research uses data from a cohort of young people who attended university in the mid-2000s and recently turned 30, as well as projecting forward for more recent cohorts.
- Many of the top ranking institutions for social mobility are less selective universities located in London, combining high access rates with good earnings outcomes. This is likely due to the higher salaries on offer for graduates in London, as well as the relatively high rates of disadvantaged pupils with high levels of attainment, along with the ethnic mix.
- Less selective universities take on the majority of poorer students who attend university. While they often have lower graduate earnings on average, many of their graduates from poorer homes in fact go on to achieve well in the labour market. This is further emphasised when the characteristics of their students, including their school attainment, is taken into account.
- More selective institutions offer the best chance of becoming a higher earner, even taking into account prior characteristics of their students, as well as having a lower 'class pay gap' among their graduates. Access to these institutions has improved in the last two decades, but some selective universities with high rates of mobility demonstrate that more can be done. The data indicates that improving access does not have a significant negative effect on labour market success.
- Social mobility at English universities appears to be gradually moving in the right direction, largely owing to the work done by universities, charities and others in improving levels of access in recent years. While the role of higher education in social mobility is constrained by wider educational inequalities, this research demonstrates the impact universities can have, as well as the improvements that can still be made.

## INTRODUCTION

This Sutton Trust summary accompanies the report '[Which university degrees are best for intergenerational mobility?](#)', produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in partnership with the Sutton Trust and the Department for Education. The research is a landmark piece of work for the study of social mobility in this country, utilising data on socio-economic background and education pathways linked to adult labour market outcomes for virtually the entire population. This provides the clearest picture yet on the role of higher education in social mobility. Since its inception in 1997, the

Sutton Trust has promoted access to higher education, in particular the most selective institutions, as a key lever for improving social mobility. This piece demonstrates some of the progress made over this time, as well as highlighting the work that still needs to be done.

The report looks in detail at how higher education attendance influences the chances of social mobility. While social mobility can take many forms, the piece looks at income mobility in particular, looking at how many young people who grow up economically disadvantaged move into high income groups when they reach adulthood, and which university

pathway they have taken. Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) at 16 is used as the marker of disadvantage while growing up, while adult earnings are measured at age 30, allowing time for careers to stabilise and mature. The top fifth of incomes, a common threshold used for income mobility,<sup>1</sup> is the primary measure used here, but other thresholds are also explored in the full report.

Social mobility, by its nature, is something which can only be clearly seen through a rear-view mirror. Today's mid-career adults passed through the education system a decade or more ago. The key cohort of young people examined in

2002-2004  
Took GCSEs

2004-2006  
Begin entering  
university

2007-2009  
Begin to  
graduate

2015-2019  
Earnings at age  
30

this study completed their GCSEs between 2002 and 2004 (multiple year groups are combined to ensure the findings are robust), and entered university around 2004 to 2006. They had reached the age of 30 by 2019, when their income and employment outcomes are recorded from HMRC data.

However, in order to understand how the situation may have changed in more recent times, the research also looks at a cohort who completed their GCSEs between 2010-2012 and entered university 2012-2014, as well as making a projection for a very recent cohort who started university in 2018 and 2019.

Because of the size of the dataset, for the first time comparisons can be made across individual universities, subjects and degree courses. Using this Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset, the IFS have published several reports in recent years looking at the income returns to university,<sup>2</sup> but this is the first piece to look specifically at social mobility, broadly replicating a seminal study in the United States by Raj Chetty and his team using census data.<sup>3</sup> That study, and this one, look at how universities contribute to social mobility through the prism of:

- **Access:** how many from disadvantaged backgrounds get in; and
- **Success:** how many of those become high earners after graduation.

A 'mobility rate' for universities, subjects and courses is then calculated by multiplying these two figures. The rate of free school meal eligibility in the population being looked at was 12.5%, and around 35% of graduates enter the top fifth of earnings. So if there was total equality – that is, if there was equal access to university, and an equal chance of success

in the labour market for those who attend – the mobility rate would be 4.4%. So scores should be evaluated in this context. As we will see, a handful of universities actually meet or exceed this benchmark, demonstrating what can be achieved, even in the current context of wider inequality.

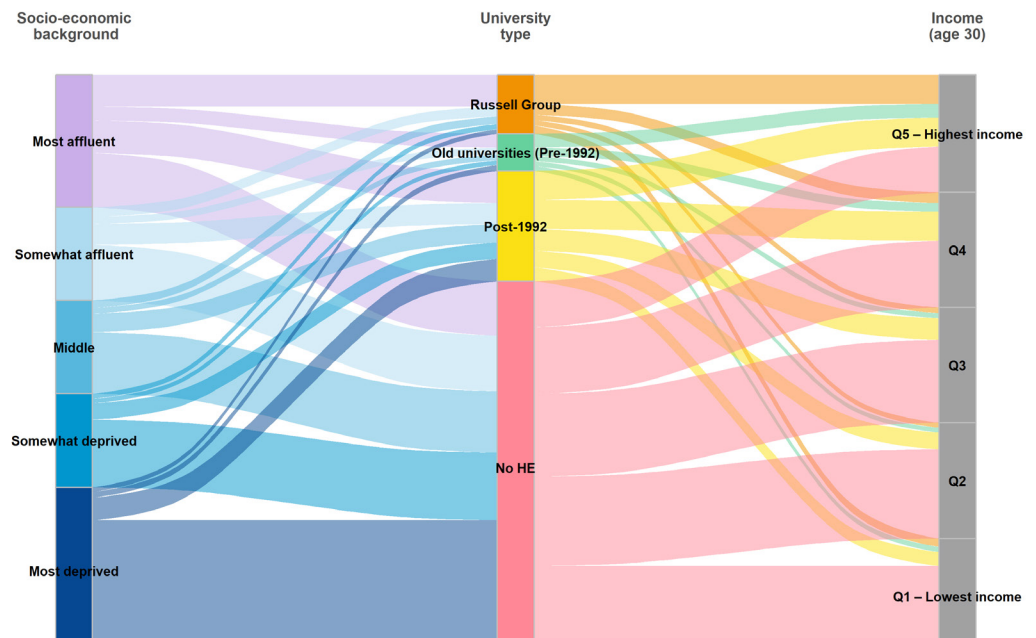
While universities are already rated and ranked on a variety of measures, few of them look at what universities are doing for those from under-represented backgrounds specifically, and the wider social contributions made by these institutions. In fact universities which take on more disadvantaged students actually suffer under many of the measures commonly used in league tables,

including those which reward universities for the grades of their students before they even start. This research aims to provide an alternative view. In early 2021, the Higher Education Policy Institute published a similar exercise.<sup>4</sup> While the results seen here are similar, this research is for the first time able to track labour market outcomes specifically for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than looking at average salaries.

## PATTERNS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND EARNINGS

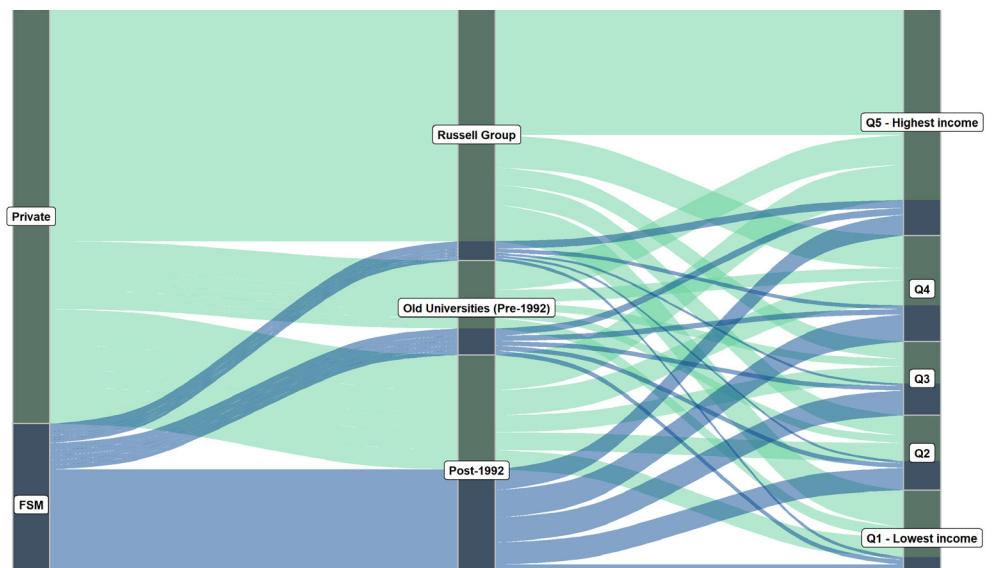
Figure 1 shows the overall patterns of attendance at university by different socio-economic backgrounds, and their earnings afterwards. Those from

Figure 1. Patterns of higher education attendance and earnings



Note: For clarity, the least deprived group includes those who were privately educated, and the most deprived those who were eligible for free school meals.

Figure 2. Patterns of higher education attendance and earnings - private school and FSM pupils



higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend university, and those who attend university are more likely to end up in the higher income groups. Figure 2 shows how these patterns differ for the most and least advantaged groups specifically.

The data shows 22% of graduates from a disadvantaged background (eligible for Free School Meals) achieved earnings in the top quintile of the population at age 30 – the definition of social mobility for the purposes of this research.<sup>5</sup> For those who didn't attend university, this was just 6%, so graduates are almost four times more likely to become socially mobile than non-graduates.<sup>6</sup>

The connection between parental circumstances and a young person's income later in life is lower for those who attend university, with lower 'class pay gaps' among graduates than among non-graduates. As can be seen from Figure 3 below, among non-graduates, the most affluent state

school students are around three times more likely to reach the top 20% of the earnings distribution than disadvantaged students, compared to about 1.5 times among those with an undergraduate degree. Social mobility is therefore more likely among those who attend higher education.

However, gaps in earnings among graduates from different backgrounds do persist. 46% of graduates from private schools achieve earnings in the top quintile, compared to 22% of those eligible for Free School Meals. Among non-FSM eligible state school pupils, 38% of those from the wealthiest areas go on to be top earners, compared to 26% of those from the poorest.

The following sections delve into greater detail on the underlying patterns.

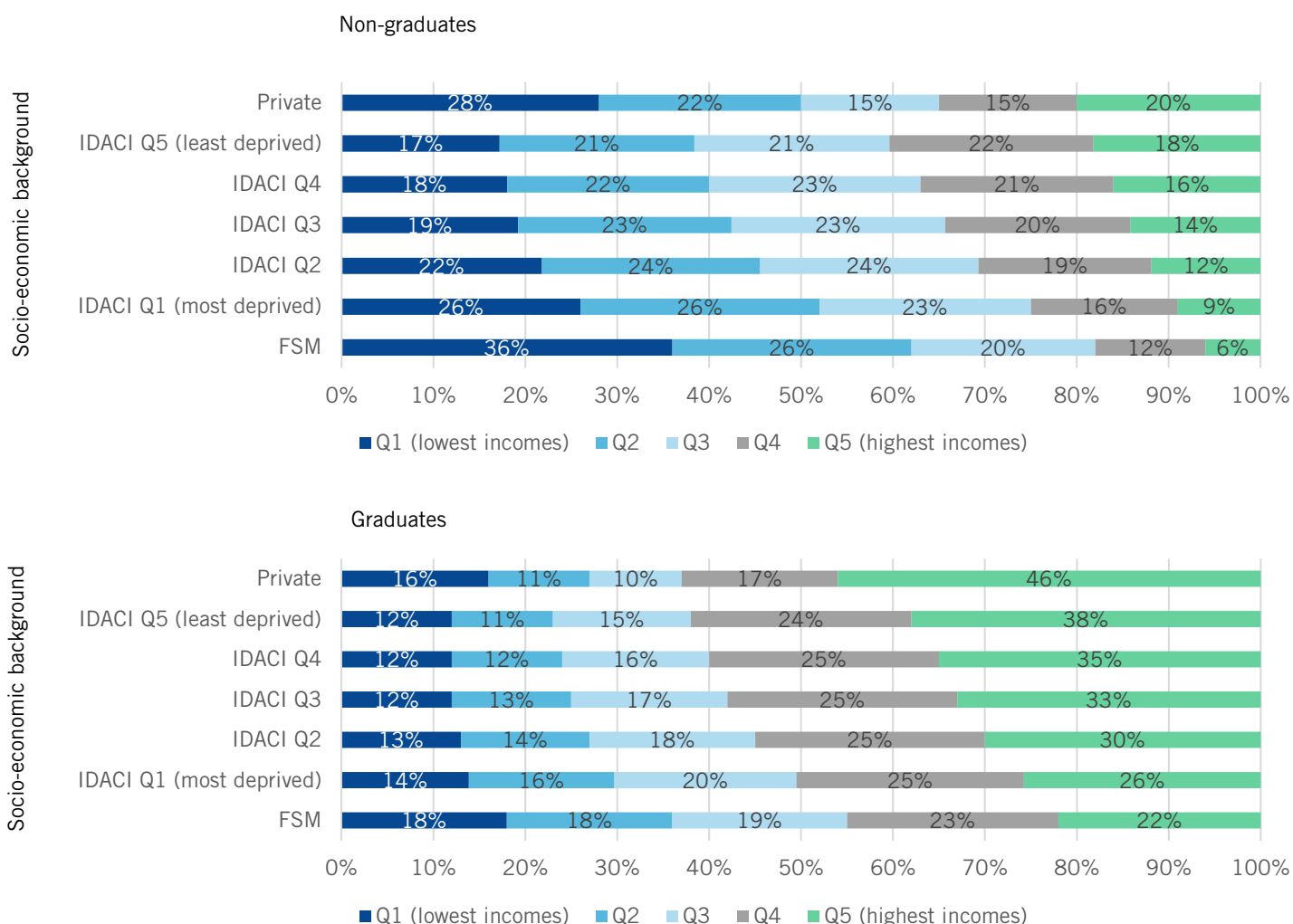
### ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY

For the original cohort looked at in this study overall, 6% of

undergraduates had been eligible for Free School Meals, compared to 12.5% in the population as a whole. Overall, only around 16% of FSM eligible pupils attended university, compared to more than 75% of those attending private school and 50% of state school pupils from the wealthiest areas.

The make-up of intakes varied at different types of university (Figure 4). At the least selective 'post-1992' institutions, 11% of students had been eligible for Free School Meals, compared to just 2% of those at Russell Group universities. Queen Mary University of London (16%) was the only Russell Group university to take more than the national average number of disadvantaged pupils. Conversely, 29% of Russell Group intakes comprised of those from private schools, about four times higher than their share of the school population. At the time these cohorts attended university in 2004-2006,

Figure 3. Proportion in each income quintile at age 30, by socio-economic background and whether attended university



Note: State school pupils not eligible for Free School Meals were divided into five groups based on the deprivation levels in their postcode. Those who attended private schools are shown separately.

FSM-eligible students were 100 times less likely to attend Oxbridge than someone who attended a private secondary school.

However, progress has been made since that time, during which significant resources have been expended on outreach to those from less well-off backgrounds. Figure 5 shows that at the most selective Russell Group universities (Oxbridge, plus LSE and Imperial College) the proportion of FSM-eligible students had risen from 1.7% to 2.2% in 2018-2019, and at other Russell Group universities from 2.6% to 3.7%. 'Old universities', i.e. other 'Pre-1992' institutions, also saw a big jump from 5.3% to 7.2%. FSM

eligibility is just one measure of disadvantage, with university access programmes often targeting progress on other measures, such as POLAR, the measure used by the Office for Students in setting targets.<sup>7</sup>

### LABOUR MARKET 'SUCCESS'

Overall, 35% of university graduates moved into the top fifth of earners at age 30, compared to 12% of those who hadn't attended HE. Of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is 22% and 6% respectively. As Figure 2 also showed, disadvantaged young people who didn't attend higher education were also much more likely to end up in the lowest income groups.

Figure 6 (overleaf) summarises the two major dimensions of the mobility scores across university types, showing the 'success rates' (moving into the top 20% of incomes) for disadvantaged pupils, alongside the access rates. At the most selective universities 59% of disadvantaged students become top earners, and 38% for other Russell Group universities. At post-1992 institutions the figure is lower, just under 20%, but this is still three times higher than for those who don't attend university at all. The figure also demonstrates the negative correlation between access rates and success rates. This reflects existing evidence indicating that the universities with the lowest access rates have the

Figure 4. Composition of university intakes, by university type

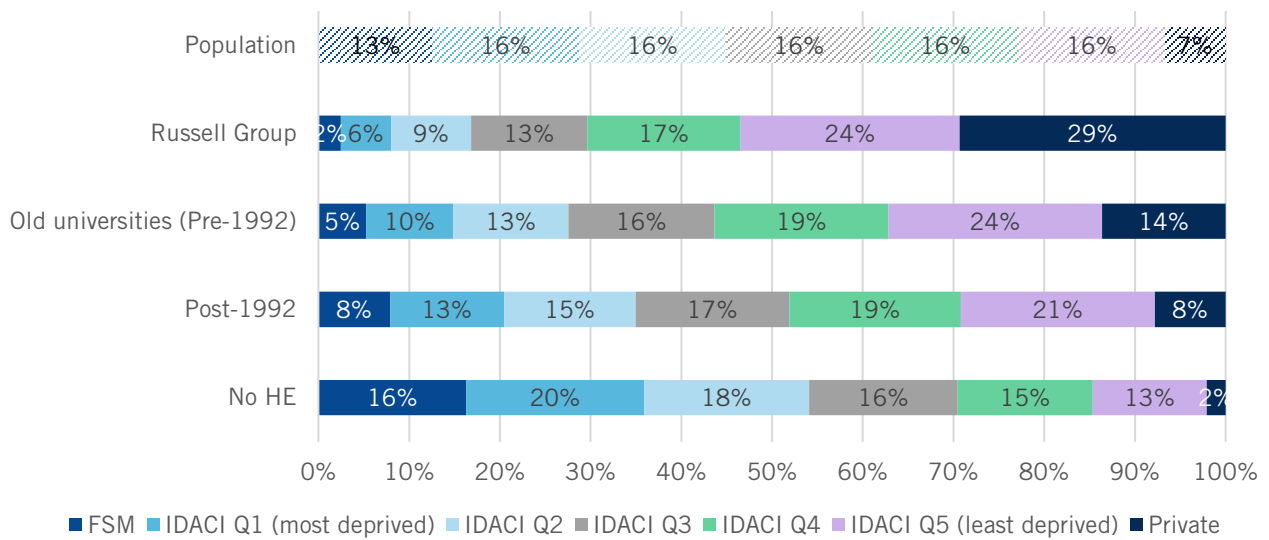
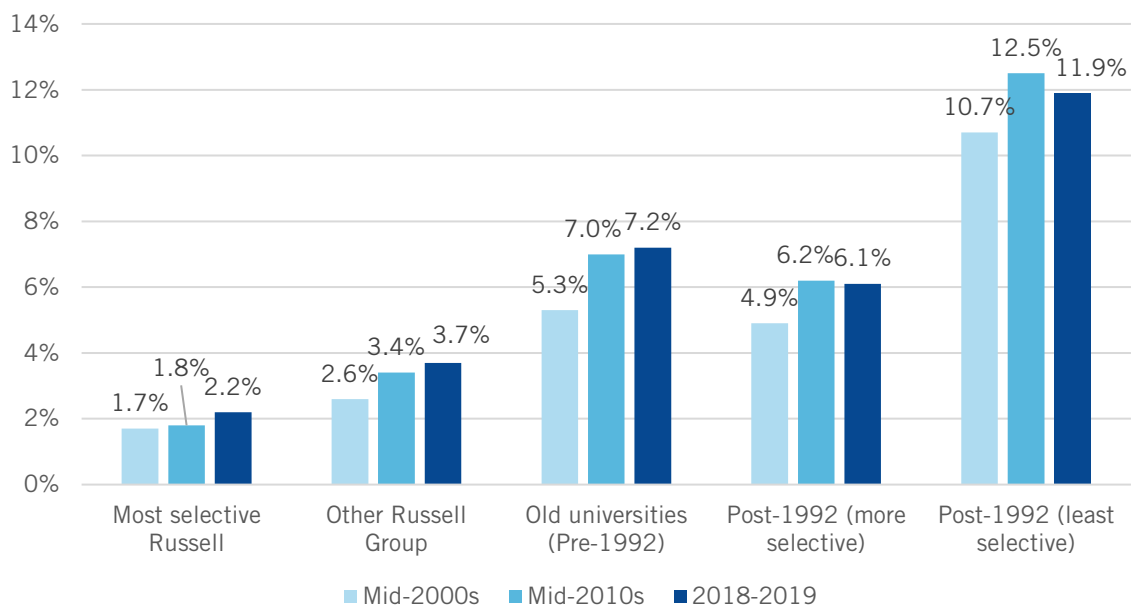


Figure 5. Changes in proportions of FSM-eligible students over time, by university type



Note: 2018-2019 figures are a projection based on trends in POLAR.

highest levels of labour market success, and vice versa for those with high access rates.

Figure 7 shows in more detail how social background and university attendance combine to influence one's chance of become a top earner. Each colour represents students attending a particular type of university, with the x-axis representing groups from different socio-economic backgrounds. The upward slope from left to right shows that those from more advantaged groups are more likely to end up in the top fifth of earners after graduation, even among those attending similar universities. Overall, those eligible for Free School Meals and those who live in deprived areas are less likely to become high earners than those who attended private school or live in wealthy

areas. However the outcomes differ substantially according to the type of university attended. The graph also reinforces that socio-economic gaps are reduced among those who attend more selective universities. A private school alumnus is more than three times more likely to be a top earner than an FSM eligible pupil if neither

went to university, but only around 40% more likely at a Russell Group university, and just slightly more likely at the most selective Russell Group institutions. This of course isn't solely due to the university itself, but is also influenced by differences in prior attainment and other student characteristics.

Figure 6. Access and success rates by university type

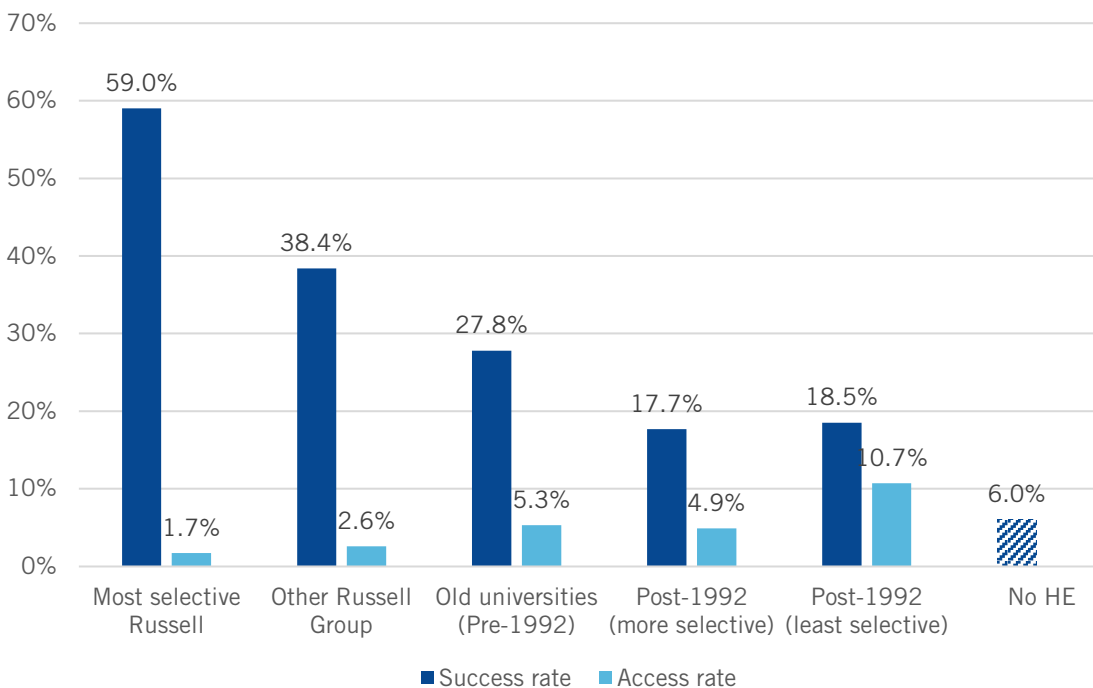
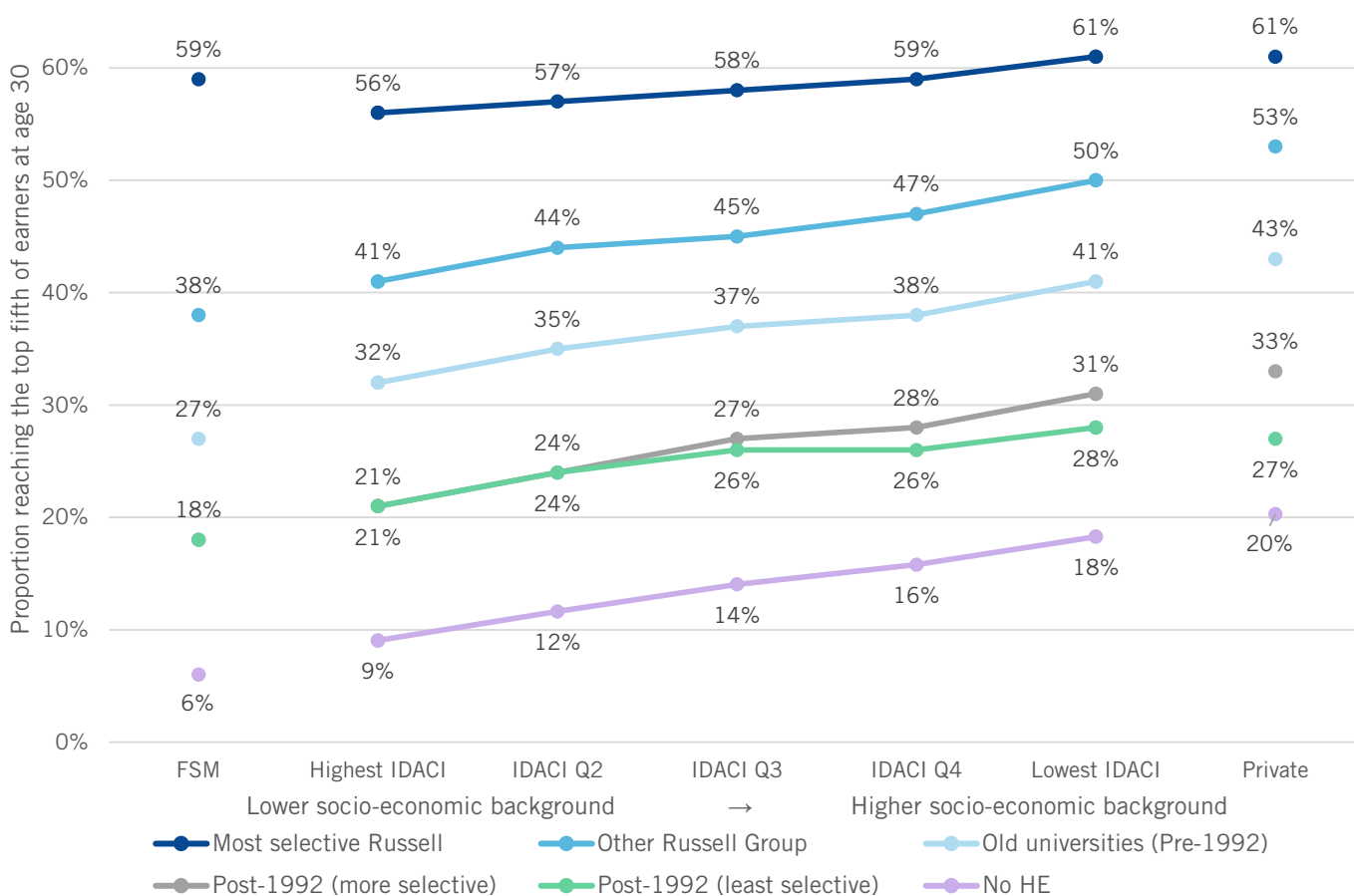


Figure 7 Proportion of young people earning high incomes, by university type and socio-economic background



Note: State school pupils not eligible for Free School Meals were divided into five groups based on the deprivation levels in their postcode. Those who attended private schools are shown separately.

## SOCIAL MOBILITY SCORES

Overall, for the cohort of those entering university in the mid-2000s, the mobility rate was 1.3%. This means out of every 1000 students, 13 were students from a disadvantaged background who would go on to be socially mobile. If there was equal access to university, and everyone who attended had an equal chance of labour market success, the rate would be 4.4%.

The report also projects how levels of mobility may change in more recent cohorts. The overall mobility rate is estimated to rise to 1.6% for the cohort entering university in the mid-2010s, as well as those entering in 2018-2019, owing to improvements in widening participation during this time. While this suggests that the role of university in promoting social mobility is trending in the right direction, these figures show there is much more work to do.

## Universities

The mobility rate for a university is calculated as the access rate multiplied by the success rate, representing its contribution to social mobility. Seven universities meet or exceed the 4.4% target mobility rate, with Queen Mary recording the highest mobility rate of 6.8%. The universities in the top 20 are largely driven by high rates of access, but the highest performing institutions match this with high levels of labour market success.

Table 1 - Top 20 universities for mobility - Mid 2000s cohort

	University	University Group	Mobility rate (Equality: 4.4%)	Access rate	Success rate
1	Queen Mary, University of London	Russell Group	<b>6.8%</b>	16.1%	42.2%
2	University of Westminster	Post 1992 - Less selective	5.6%	22.5%	25.0%
3	City University	Old Universities	5.3%	15.0%	35.1%
4	University of Greenwich	Post 1992 - Less selective	5.0%	20.0%	24.8%
5	London South Bank University	Post 1992 - Less selective	4.6%	25.7%	18.0%
6	Brunel University	Old Universities	4.4%	11.6%	37.5%
7	St George's Hospital Medical School	Old Universities	4.4%	10.4%	41.9%
8	University of East London	Post 1992 - Less selective	4.1%	29.5%	13.8%
9	London Metropolitan University	Post 1992 - Less selective	4.0%	24.6%	16.4%
10	Kingston University	Post 1992 - Less selective	4.0%	13.9%	28.9%
11	Middlesex University	Post 1992 - Less selective	3.8%	20.1%	19.1%
12	Goldsmiths College	Old Universities	3.6%	13.9%	25.6%
13	University of Bradford	Old Universities	3.3%	20.3%	16.4%
14	Aston University	Old Universities	3.3%	10.4%	31.4%
15	School of Oriental and African Studies	Old Universities	3.1%	10.8%	28.7%
16	University of Hertfordshire	Post 1992 - Less selective	3.0%	10.4%	28.9%
17	King's College London	Russell Group	2.9%	5.9%	49.8%
18	London School of Economics and Political Science	Most selective-Russell	2.8%	4.6%	61.1%
19	University of West London	Post 1992 - Less selective	2.4%	16.8%	14.5%
20	Imperial College London	Most selective - Russell	2.3%	3.8%	60.3%

Note: Green indicates universities above the median score, red indicates those below.  
Explore the full list at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/universities-and-social-mobility-data-explorer-rankings>

The universities who do best on both access and success are, in the main, less selective institutions based in big cities, in particular London, including Westminster, City University and the University of Greenwich. 18 out of the top 20 institutions are based in or adjacent to the capital. The report identifies two major reasons for this, impacting both access and success rates:

- Firstly, that graduates from London and the South East are more likely to work in the capital after university, where salaries are higher than elsewhere.
- And secondly, London has a higher share of high achieving students from a disadvantaged background than anywhere else in the country, meaning a bigger pool for universities to draw on. The share of FSM-eligible students from ethnic minority backgrounds, groups more likely to progress to higher education, is also higher.

The top 20 (Table 1) includes a mix of types of universities, with four members of the Russell Group (including two of the most selective category), seven 'old' (pre-1992) universities, and nine post-1992 universities in the 'least selective' group. While King's, LSE and Imperial have relatively low access rates, this is counterbalanced by extremely high success rates for the disadvantaged pupils they do admit. Conversely, the University of East London, London Metropolitan University and London South Bank have very high access rates, but relatively low success rates. Many of the rest of the top 20 have high access rates and moderate success rates, with Queen Mary having outstanding rates of both.

Among the lowest ranked universities number a variety of specialist institutions, including performing arts and drama colleges, who suffer from both low levels of access and relatively low income returns. Both Oxford and Cambridge also rank in the lower reaches of the list for the original mid 2000s cohort. While they have exceptional success rates, they admitted very low levels of Free School Meals

eligible students. However, both universities have made significant changes to their admissions in recent years. In particular, Cambridge were among the most improved universities in the ranking when looking at the mid 2010s and 2018-2019 cohorts.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, while the number of state school students has increased substantially over the last decade at the two universities, there remains much more work to be done in widening access to those from poorer backgrounds.

Table 2 summarises the findings by university type across the three cohorts under consideration. Across all three time periods, less selective post-1992s and pre-1992 'Old universities' lead the way. The former because of high access rates, and the latter a combination of moderate access rates and success rates.

Comparing mobility scores with previous IFS research on the earnings returns to higher education,<sup>9</sup> the report finds that there is virtually no correlation between the universities with the highest earnings returns and those which are best for mobility. This means many institutions regarded as less prestigious, and whose graduates earn less overall, are actually contributing strongly to social mobility. Around 58% of socially mobile university graduates attended a post-1992 university.

Progress made in access since 2004 is also evident, meaning that Russell Group mobility rates are projected to have increased from 1% to between 1.3% and 1.4%, narrowing the gap with, but still trailing, less selective

universities. While rates of free school meal eligibility fluctuate over time, these changes were found to be robust to such compositional effects.

### Mobility scores – subjects and courses

Pharmacology (11.5%), computing (10.8%), law (9.9%), social care (10.5%), and business (8.6%) had the highest proportions of FSM students compared to the average. Among the lowest in terms of access for Free School Meals students were veterinary science (1.2%), geography (1.7%), agriculture (2.2%) and languages (2.3%).

As a result socio-economic access gaps varied across subjects, with pharmacology and social care the subjects with the lowest gap between disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. At the other end of the spectrum, private school students were 25 times more likely to study medicine than FSM students.

The subjects with the highest success rates were medicine (63.2%), maths (42.5%) and economics (41.9%), followed by pharmacology (36.6%).

Putting the two measures together, pharmacology comes out on top overall for social mobility, with a mobility rate of 4.2%, substantially ahead of other subjects. However it takes on a relatively low number of students per year in comparison to others. Computing is in second place, with strong figures for both access and success. Medicine, maths and economics showed the highest success rates for their graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds. Medicine

Table 2 – Overview by university type

	Mid 2000s cohort			Mid 2010s cohort		2018/2019 entry	
	Access	Success	Mobility	Access	Mobility	Access	Mobility
Elite Russell	1.7%	57.7%	1%	1.8%	1%	2.2%	1.3%
Other Russell	2.6%	37.1%	1%	3.4%	1.3%	3.7%	1.4%
Pre-1992	5.3%	30.4%	1.6%	7%	2%	7.2%	2.2%
Post-1992 (more selective)	4.6%	19.5%	0.9%	5.9%	1.1%	6.1%	1.2%
Post-1992 (least selective)	10.7%	17.7%	2%	12.4%	2.2%	11.9%	2.1%
<b>All</b>	<b>5.6%</b>	<b>22.3%</b>	<b>1.3%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>7.1%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>

Note: Success rates are assumed to remain consistent for the mid 2010s and 2018-2019 cohorts.

is an outlier in the top ten, with a low access rate (2.7%), but an extremely high success rate (63.2%). Lowest ranked subjects for mobility include veterinary science, agriculture, geography, languages, and history, all with low access rates and low or moderate labour market outcomes. Creative arts is also notable, with low levels of access and success, despite taking on the largest share of students of any subject grouping. In this original cohort, LEM (law, economics and management) subjects had a mobility rate of 1.9%, STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) had a rate of 1.6%, and other subjects just 0.8% overall.

Table 3 – Top 10 subjects for mobility - Mid 2000s cohort

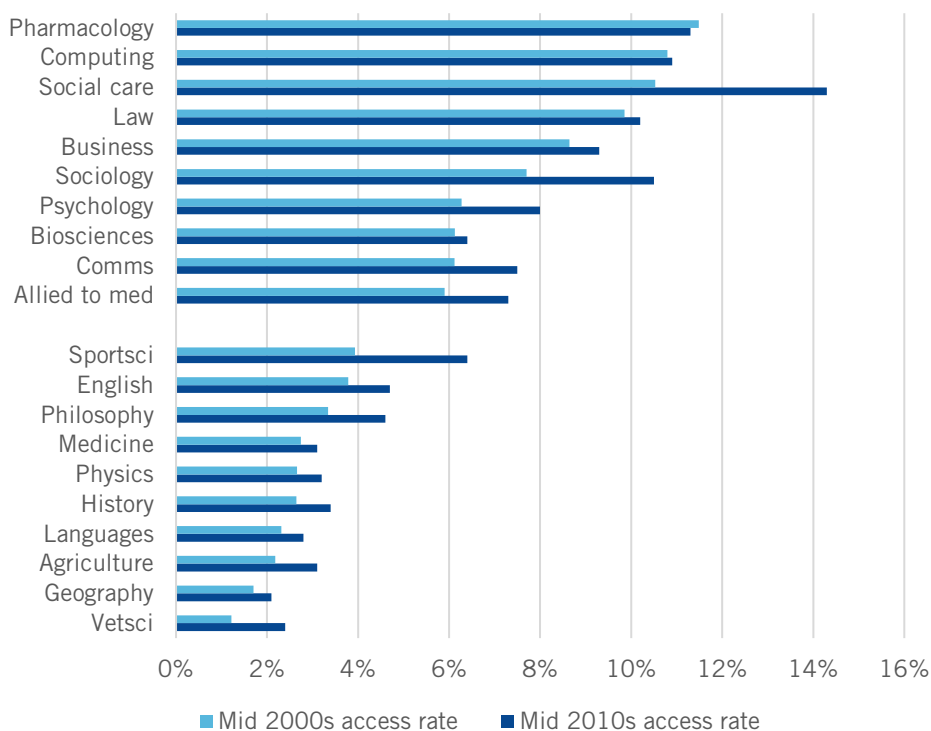
	Subject	Mobility rate (Equality: 4.4%)	Access rate	Success rate	Students per cohort
1	Pharmacology	4.2%	11.5%	36.6%	c.2,200
2	Computing	2.9%	10.8%	26.9%	c.8,500
3	Law	2.2%	9.9%	21.9%	c.9,000
4	Economics	2.0%	4.7%	41.9%	c.6,300
5	Business	1.9%	8.6%	22.5%	c.24,700
6	Engineering	1.9%	5.6%	34.0%	c.9,900
7	Maths	1.8%	4.3%	42.5%	c.6,400
8	Medicine	1.7%	2.7%	63.2%	c.3,700
9	Subjects allied to medicine	1.6%	5.9%	27.5%	c.7,300
10	Architecture	1.4%	4.7%	29.6%	c.3,000

Note: Green indicates universities above the median score, red indicates those below. Explore the full list at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/universities-and-social-mobility-data-explorer-rankings>

Between the mid-2000s cohort and the mid-2010s cohort, access improved across almost all subjects (Figure 8). In particular, veterinary science doubled its access rates and moved off the bottom of the rankings for mobility. Social care also saw a significant increase in the numbers of disadvantaged people studying, as well as sociology and education. Chemistry, on the other hand suffered a drop.

The research also looks at specific degree courses (i.e. a combination of subject and university). The courses with the highest mobility scores include computing, economics and law courses at universities based in London. Computing at Queen Mary comes out top with a mobility rate of 12%. The course takes almost twice the national rate of FSM eligible students, and 50% of them go on to be top earners. Computing courses make up 8 of the top 20, including at City University, Goldsmiths and King's College London. Law, at Westminster, Queen Mary and City, also features highly. As in the university list, less selective universities are strongly represented, along with Queen Mary, and London dominates once again. The full list is also available [here](#) on our website.

Figure 8. Proportion of students eligible for Free School Meals, by subject studied. Top 10 and bottom 10.



### Controlling for other factors

The researchers also looked at the influence of a variety of other factors on social mobility scores. They tested whether a different definition of mobility had an impact, controlled for background characteristics including school attainment, and looked at a broader group of earners (the top

40%), as well as the very top of the income distribution (top 5%).

Universities who sent many students into the top 20% of earners were similarly successful if looking at the top 40%, with the two measures highly correlated. Looking at the top 5%, the most selective universities, as a result of their high earnings



returns, sent more disadvantaged students to the very top of the earnings distribution. For example, Oxford moves from 95th to 30th in the table. Similarly, medicine would improve from the eighth best subject to first place.

One of the primary issues with any educational ranking is that outcomes are frequently driven by the composition of the students who attend, rather than qualities of the educational institutions themselves. For this reason, the researchers also generated mobility scores which adjusted for the characteristics of universities' disadvantaged intakes. This took into account factors such as gender, home region, ethnicity and prior (GCSE) attainment.

Adjusting for student composition reinforces the finding that many low selectivity courses with low average returns actually do very well for social mobility. The most selective institutions, whose intakes tend to have extremely high levels of school attainment, tend to move down the rankings, while less selective institutions move further up. However this underlines patterns already seen in the unadjusted data, rather than fundamentally altering them. Similarly, subjects with students with very high prior attainment, such as maths, medicine and physics, fall lower, while others, such as social care, move up.

As can be seen in Table 1, one of the biggest influences on mobility scores appears to be geography, with London in particular dominating the top of the rankings. In order to look further at the influence of university location, linked data on where graduates were living at age 30 was examined, and the cost of living in their local area incorporated into the mobility scores. This

adjustment helps to account for graduates moving to areas with higher salaries and costs. The net effect of this is to reduce the gap between London and the rest of England. However, London universities still occupy most of the top spots even taking this into account. Another factor influencing these high scores may be to do with the 'supply' of disadvantaged young people with strong grades. Indeed the average access rate at London universities was close to 12%, almost 5 percentage points ahead of any other region (Table 4). 7.5% of London pupils in total were eligible for Free School Meals and had achieved 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE, again significantly more than any other region. The share of disadvantaged pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds is another potential factor, with these groups more likely to progress to university.

As well as the original mid 2000s cohort, the report estimates recent trends in social mobility and higher education. It uses more up to date information on access levels and projections for what the earnings outcomes might be for these cohorts. Looking at the relationship between access and success over time at individual institutions, it found no relationship between increasing access and lower levels of labour market success. This is consistent with similar work in the US, which found a very weak relationship.<sup>10</sup> The report concludes that the increases in access seen since the mid 2000s are unlikely to have a negative

impact on the success rates, and that overall mobility rates are likely to have improved during this time, albeit modestly. Nonetheless, amid pessimism about social mobility in this country, it is positive to see this measure moving in the right direction.

## CONCLUSION

This is a landmark piece of work that illuminates the view of universities as engines of social mobility. It serves to reinforce the broad trends that have been seen in previous work: that going to a selective institution gives the best chance of success in the labour market, but that most young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attend lower ranked universities, or don't attend higher education at all. However the addition of data on close to the full population in England allows for a much more fine grained understanding of the dynamics.

This report focuses on a particular conception of social mobility: moving into a high income bracket having been eligible for Free School Meals while young. Social mobility as a phenomenon is of course broader than that. It encompasses different dimensions of disadvantage, including social class, neighbourhood poverty or parental education, along with other definitions of mobility as an adult including occupation or social class rather than income. The report is also primarily based on a cohort who largely passed through higher education in the mid-2000s, supplemented with estimates for

Table 4. Regional access rates and characteristics of local school population

	Access rate	Proportion of population who are FSM eligible and achieved 5 A*-C at GCSE	Proportion of FSM students from ethnic minority backgrounds	Number of universities
London	11.7%	7.5%	60%	27
West Midlands	7.2%	4.2%	35%	12
North West	6.9%	4.5%	15%	13
East of England	5.7%	2.3%	17%	9
Yorkshire and the Humber	5%	2.8%	23%	11
North East	4.4%	3.6%	3%	5
East Midlands	4.4%	2.3%	18%	9
South East	3.6%	1.7%	13%	16
South West	2.2%	2%	6%	12

more recent cohorts. Only time will tell the impact of recent changes in university access will have on the long-term prospects for young people in the workplace.

Nonetheless, this research is a significant addition to the picture of educational inequality and social mobility in England. In particular it emphasises the value of less prestigious universities for social mobility. 'Post-1992' universities serve more diverse communities, and while the average income returns for such universities may not be as strong, this report reveals the social mobility impact these universities are having for many young people. This highlights that focusing on average income returns does not fully capture the contribution of universities, and many universities and courses which appear to have low returns in the labour market are taking on many more students from less well-off backgrounds and serving them well. Focusing purely on average returns, without taking into account prior student characteristics, is unlikely to promote the cause of widening participation and social mobility overall.

However, it also demonstrates that disadvantaged young people who attend Russell Group universities have high chances of success in the labour market, even when adjusting for prior attainment. Furthermore, at the most selective universities the gap in outcomes between their graduates from different backgrounds is narrower. The Sutton Trust has been working for close to 25 years to widen access to these opportunities. In fact the Trust partners with all

of the top ten universities in terms of their income 'success rates' for disadvantaged students. Many of our partner universities are those that have seen improvements in their rankings over the past two decades. But there is more work to be done, and we look forward to working further with our partners in the coming years.

While wider inequalities in the education sector – especially stubborn attainment gaps at school – significantly shape what universities can achieve as drivers of social mobility, this report does underline the importance of universities continuing to reach out into poorer communities to attract applicants; supporting those young people to make high quality applications; and recognising in selection processes that prior attainment does not always capture future potential, especially for those young people who have faced educational disadvantage.

Any strategy for improving social mobility from higher education must include both greater access at the institutions whose graduates have the highest returns, as well as a focus on widening participation and promoting good outcomes for those attending less selective institutions. It must also take into account that higher education is not the only route to mobility. More than half of socially mobile young people in this cohort took an alternative route, through apprenticeships, further education or progression within the workplace. A broad approach to social mobility must also focus on promoting better alternative routes to higher education, as well as addressing the disparities

that arise before young people get to the stage of applying to university.

While any ranking is by its nature reductive, this doesn't mean comparing institutions is never useful. Universities are already ranked on a variety of measures by a variety of institutions, both in this country and globally. In the main, these rankings fail to reflect issues around widening participation or social mobility, which are key to the value of higher education to individuals and wider society. In fact, some of the common measures used in university rankings actively punish universities with more diverse intakes. In particular, the inclusion of entry grades in rankings rewards universities for the grades achieved by their students before they attend the university, rather than the education they receive while there. This could act as a disincentive to contextual admissions and making reduced grade offers to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a measure crucial for widening participation.

While still working within the restrictions of the data that is available, this research is intended to widen the conversation about how we evaluate the role of universities and to encourage a refocusing on their wider social benefit, at a time when this is under greater scrutiny than ever. Rather than focusing narrowly on average income returns, a more rounded approach to looking at the outcomes from university, accompanied by a greater focus on equity and opportunity, would ultimately benefit the conversation around higher education.

## REFERENCES

1. For example, Chetty, R., Friedman JN., Saez, E., Turner, N., and Yagan, D. (2017) "Mobility report cards: the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility," Working Paper 23618, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/mobilityreportcards/>
2. Belfield, C., Britton, J., Buscha, F., Dearden, L., Dickson, M., van der Erve, L., Sibieta, L., Vignoles, A., Walker, I. and Zhu, Y. (2018) "The impact of undergraduate degrees on early career earnings." Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/13731>
- Belfield, C., Britton, J., Buscha, F., Dearden, L., Dickson, M., Sibieta, L., van der Erve, L., Vignoles, A., Walker, I. and Zhu, Y. (2021) "How much does degree choice matter?" Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15570>
- Britton, J., Dearden, L., van der Erve, L. and Waltmann, B. (2020) "The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings." Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14729>
3. Chetty, R., Friedman JN., Saez, E., Turner, N., and Yagan, D. (2017) "Mobility report cards: the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility," Working Paper 23618, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/mobilityreportcards/>
4. Phoenix, D. (2021) "Designing an English Social Mobility Index". Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/04/an-english-social-mobility-index-new-report-proposes-a-ranking-of-universities-impact-on-social-mobility/>
5. Equivalent to earning above £33,500 per annum (gross) in 2018 prices.
6. While the characteristics of those who attend university are likely to be significantly different than those who don't, particularly in terms of their school attainment, previous work has shown the returns to HE attendance for disadvantaged groups, taking these characteristics into account, are positive, and actually higher than the average graduate: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15383>
7. Jerrim, J. (2021) "Measuring Disadvantage". Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/measuring-disadvantage-higher-education-polar-fsm/>
8. Though note that the 2018 and 2019 data is based on projections from trends in POLAR.
9. Belfield, C., Britton, J., Buscha, F., Dearden, L., Dickson, M., van der Erve, L., Sibieta, L., Vignoles, A., Walker I., and Zhu, Y. (2018) "The relative labour market returns to different degrees". Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/13036>
10. Chetty, R., Friedman JN., Saez, E., Turner, N., and Yagan, D. (2017) "Mobility report cards: the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility," Working Paper 23618, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/mobilityreportcards/>

This summary accompanies the full report 'Which university degrees are best for intergenerational mobility?', authored by Jack Britton, Elaine Drayton and Laura van der Erve of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. All findings are based on the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset, a cross-departmental government data linkage project. The full report, and data tables, are available here: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15845>