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The Role of Education and Skills in Driving Social Mobility*

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I. Introduction

One of the great unresolved debates in our thinking about social mobility is the role of education. Does it act as the great social leveller, as popularly imagined? Or does it actually enable the privileged to consolidate their position in society? Or does it play little causal role at all – instead simply responding to the bigger societal and occupational shifts that define opportunities, as some prominent sociologists have argued?

The problem is that the arguments to date have often been based on assertion and anecdote rather than evidence or evaluation. The papers in this Special Issue are among the vanguard of studies that are now taking the first tentative steps towards understanding the role that education may play in determining the life prospects of children from different backgrounds.

This is important work: if anything, the policy stakes have risen since the social mobility literature burst into the political mainstream in 2005. Improving social mobility is now the government's avowed primary social policy goal. There are implications from this research for both educational and social policy.

II. England's high-achievement gap

For some time, we have known that the link between family background and the test scores of teenagers is stronger on average in England than in most other developed countries. In his paper on cross-national comparisons, John

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Jerrim discovers that this association is particularly strong among the highest achievers in England. The highest-performing but poorest 15-year-olds are around two years behind the highest-performing most privileged pupils in England on average – twice the equivalent gap observed in some other developed countries.

These findings, from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 data set, prompt immediate questions for policymakers. What is being done in state schools to ensure that highly able children from poorer backgrounds are being supported and stretched so they reach their full potential? And what role is there for universities to ensure equitable access onto their degree courses if this high achievement gap is already so apparent during secondary schooling?

The demise of the government's Gifted and Talented programme and the emerging accountability regime for schools in England indicate that much more needs to be done to support high achievers if this stark gap is to be narrowed. Universities, meanwhile, need to divert more energy to engage with potential students much earlier in their schooling.

This second point chimes with the results of the study by Jake Anders on the link between household income and university applications and attendance. Anders confirms that the stark gaps in university attendance observed in England between students from different income backgrounds are largely driven by application patterns and school attainment. The key to improving university access for the less privileged lies behind the school gates, not within the ivory towers of universities.

There are important messages here for higher education policy. Universities are spending hundreds of millions of pounds on university outreach and efforts to widen access. But how much of this work is focused on earlier school interventions? How much is evaluated properly to see what, if any, impact it is having? And to what extent does the access watchdog recognise the very different challenges faced by highly selective universities?

III. Future prospects for mobility

These two studies relate to the world before an unprecedented hike in university tuition fees in England and a double-dip recession. Can we predict the consequences for mobility for the current crop of children and graduates whose future lives are being shaped today?

Reforms to university fees and student finance are notorious for being badly designed as they are born out of political controversy and compromise. But in their review of the higher education funding regime to be introduced in English universities in September 2012, Haroon Chowdry, Lorraine Dearden, Alissa Goodman and Wenchao Jin conclude that, overall, the new

arrangements will be more progressive than those before. This is despite fees increasing to up to £9,000 a year (paid after graduation) and the average graduate being roughly £8,850 worse off over their lifetime. In fact, the poorest 29 per cent of graduates will be better off under the new system, according to the analysis based on simulated lifetime earnings profiles among graduates, and the richest 15 per cent of graduates will pay back more than they borrow. The authors conclude that the reforms could 'increase, rather than reduce, social mobility in the long run'.

That, however, could all depend on one big IF: the ability of the government and universities to provide students, particularly those from less privileged homes, with clear information about the likely costs of going to university. This is a huge task. The fees charged and financial support available across the English university system are a dizzying confusion for those on the inside, let alone for prospective students for whom higher education is alien territory. We must also ensure that fear of debt does not hold back those from poorer backgrounds.

An enduring challenge for researchers (and, indeed, governments) concerned with social mobility is that no one will know for sure the actual impact of current policies and conditions until quite literally a lifetime later, when today's children are tomorrow's adults. By which time, of course, the world has changed.

Paul Gregg, Lindsey Macmillan and Bilal Nasim are able to highlight a possible impact of the current recession by investigating what happened to a previous generation of children facing similar circumstances. They study children born in 1970, tracked in the British Cohort Study, whose fathers lost their jobs in the recession of the 1980s. What impact did this family trauma have on the children's school results and later earnings?

The authors find that children with 'displaced' fathers obtained, on average, half a GCSE at grades A*-C less than similar children whose fathers remained employed, although there was no direct impact on the children's earnings during their early 30s. Children from lower-income homes were most affected by the job losses – suggesting that the current recession may have significant long-term consequences for many of the children of parents who have lost their jobs.

These children face the prospect of being losers in what has been termed the ever-escalating 'social mobility arms race'. Joanne Lindley and Stephen Machin document this quest for educational advantage among the privileged as they reassert their position in society.

People from relatively rich family backgrounds have acquired more educational opportunities as they have expanded; meanwhile, the wage differentials for the more educated have risen. Putting these two trends together 'implies increasing within-generation inequality ... reinforcing already existing inequalities from the previous generation'.

The overriding message of Lindley and Machin's paper is that education has hindered, not helped, social mobility. This is not to say, of course, that it cannot be a force for greater mobility in future. The papers in this issue all highlight the uphill challenge facing policymakers to deliver education reforms, based on good evidence, that improve the prospects for the many, not the few.