

Social Mobility Report summary

Today the Social Mobility Commission published [Time for change: an assessment of government policies on social mobility 1997 to 2017](#). It analyses the policy initiatives from the last 20 years assessing their impact on early years, schools, young people and working lives. While there have been successes within each sub-area, overall the report concludes the policies have failed to deliver sufficient progress. The document sets out a number of recommendations, which address the policy shortcomings and warns that without major reform social and economic divisions within Britain's society are set to widen:

“Our country has reached an inflection point. If we go on as we have been, the divisions that have opened up in British society are likely to widen not narrow. There is a growing sense in the nation that these divisions are not sustainable, socially, economically or politically. There is a hunger for change. The policies of the past have brought some progress, but many are no longer fit for purpose in our changing world. The old agenda has not delivered enough social progress. New approaches are needed if Britain is to become a fairer and more equal country. It is time for a change.”

Overall the report talks of a divided nation: geographically, economically and generationally. *“Whole tracts of Britain feel left behind. Whole communities feel the benefits of globalisation have passed them by. Whole sections of society feel they are not getting a fair chance to succeed.”* The document is consistent with current political themes including Theresa May's [JAMs](#) (just about managing families) and the Department for Education's contemplation of [ordinary working families](#).

HE's contribution to social mobility: widening access

HE policies are considered one of the more successful areas, although there are clear gaps still to address. HE is measured (RAG rated) against three aspects:

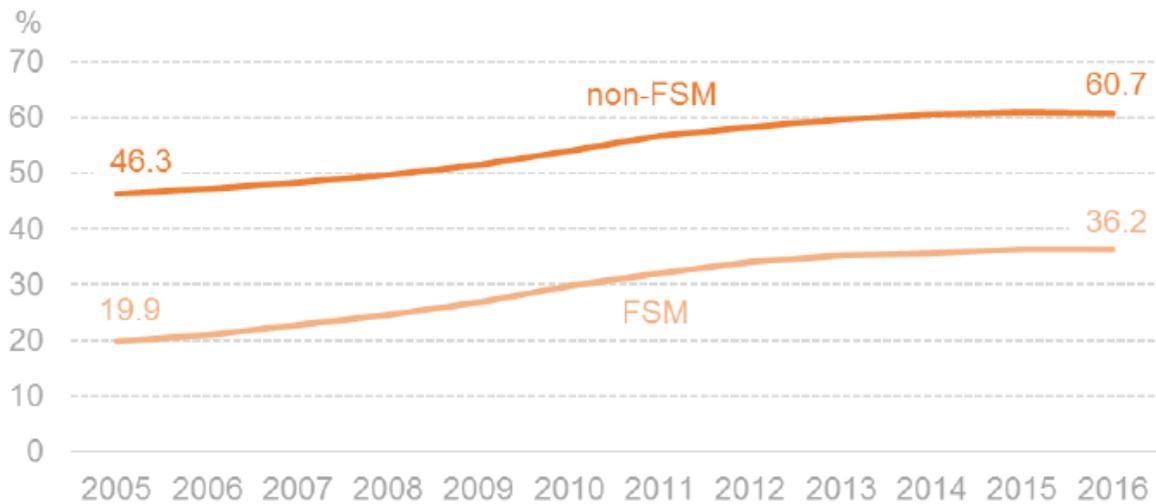
- Disadvantage students' access to university
- Disadvantaged students' access to selective universities
- Disadvantaged students' retention and success rates



The report acknowledges that opening up access to higher education has been a success story with more working-class young people at university than ever before. Since 2006 disadvantaged students accessing HE almost doubled from 11% to 20% at non-selective. The success is attributed to intensive widening participation efforts, the removal of the student number cap and the increase of locally-taught degrees at FE colleges. The selective universities are criticised for their lower WP access and tardiness to change.

Widening access success is also attributed to **higher attainment at school**. During the 20 year policy period qualification levels increased sharply. The poorest students – those eligible for free school meals (FSM) – were almost twice as likely to achieve either A levels or equivalents at the end of the period. However, because the advantaged students have also benefited from the interventions the overall increase in qualification levels across the board meant that the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students shrank by just two percentage points (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Percentage of 19-year-olds qualified to level 3 (A levels or equivalent), 2005 to 2016, England



Source: Department for Education, *Level 2 and 3 Attainment in England*, [various years](#)

The report acknowledges **OFFA** with their power to veto Access Agreements as helping to focus attention on outreach and experiment with different approaches. Yet, it goes on to criticise stating there is still too little clarity on which initiatives are most effective. It cites the launch of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (which aims to increase access to HE from good GCSE disadvantaged student in low-participation areas) and the Government's drive for universities to sponsor schools and drive up attainment. The report acknowledges it is too soon to determine the social mobility impact of either of these recent endeavours but states '*wider efforts to boost the attainment of disadvantaged kids will be necessary if the persistent gaps in participation are to be eliminated*'.

The report continues on the attainment theme stating widening participation has been hampered by disadvantaged students' low attainment combined with many universities' continued inflexibility on grades. It acknowledges league tables exacerbate the problem as contextual offers can result in decreased league table performance. Further barriers are stated as: long courses, a disconnect with labour market needs, and lack of local courses in 90 areas, which all deter lower-income students.

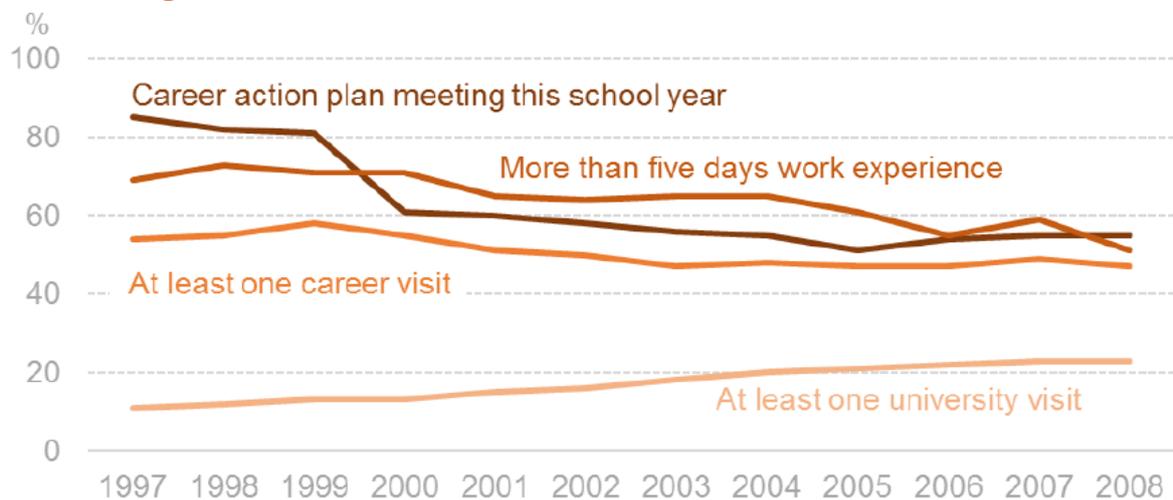
The role of careers advice in access to HE

Careers advice for pupils is an essential social mobiliser, encouraging aspirations to HE and other pathways. However, the availability of careers advice and work experience has declined significantly over the policy period. This has had a marked negative impact on disadvantaged students who may not have friends or family with the required knowledge and contacts to fill the gap. Key points:

- From 1997–2008, the number of students saying they learned 'some' or 'a lot' from careers advisors or teachers fell from 49% to 25%.
- Schools became 30% less likely to offer careers meetings and 18% less likely to organise work experience of more than 5 days (see Figure 3.5 overleaf).

- The Connexions programme with its limited funding, frequent mission changes and shift from careers advice to other services, along with lack of skilled advisors is blamed for the decline.
- University visits mitigated the lack of advice by promoting progression.
- Over the period, all students became more likely to study vocational courses and less likely to study A levels. This was especially true of disadvantaged students – believed, in part, to be due to limited advice as well as prior attainment and other factors. Even the high-attaining disadvantaged students became more likely than other high-attainers to choose vocational routes.
- The result has been a two-tier system in which most disadvantaged students end up on the vocational route, while most advantaged students end up on the academic route.

Figure 3.5: Percentage of schools offering careers support, 1997 to 2008, United Kingdom



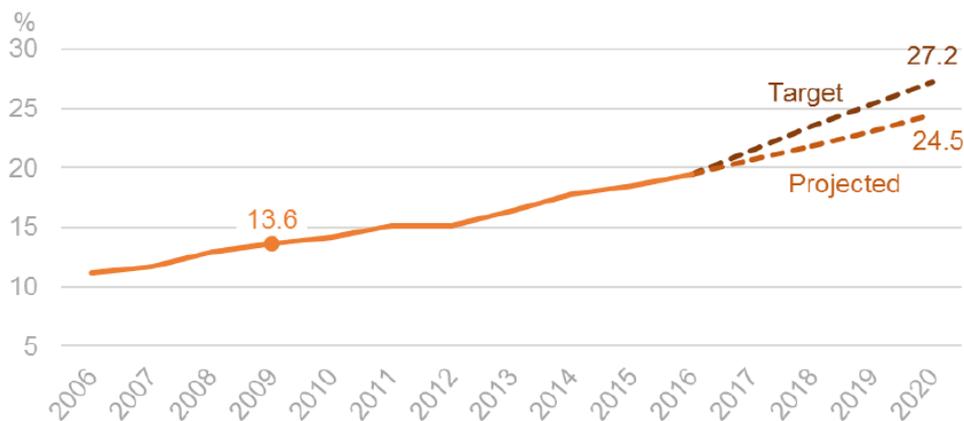
Source: Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University, *Careers Guidance and Participation in Education: Findings from the YELLIS Dataset*, 2009 – Figure 1

The report states the Government has acknowledged the careers advice problem and plans to publish a careers strategy alongside the introduction of a simple application portal for technical education

HE Access: Still falling short of targets

In conclusion the report acknowledges that while access measures have been a success they are still falling short of the Government's ambitious 2020 target (see Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13: Progress against government's 2020 participation goal to double university access for students from low-participation areas, 2006 to 2020



Source: UCAS, Equality and entry rates data explorer, [2016](#)

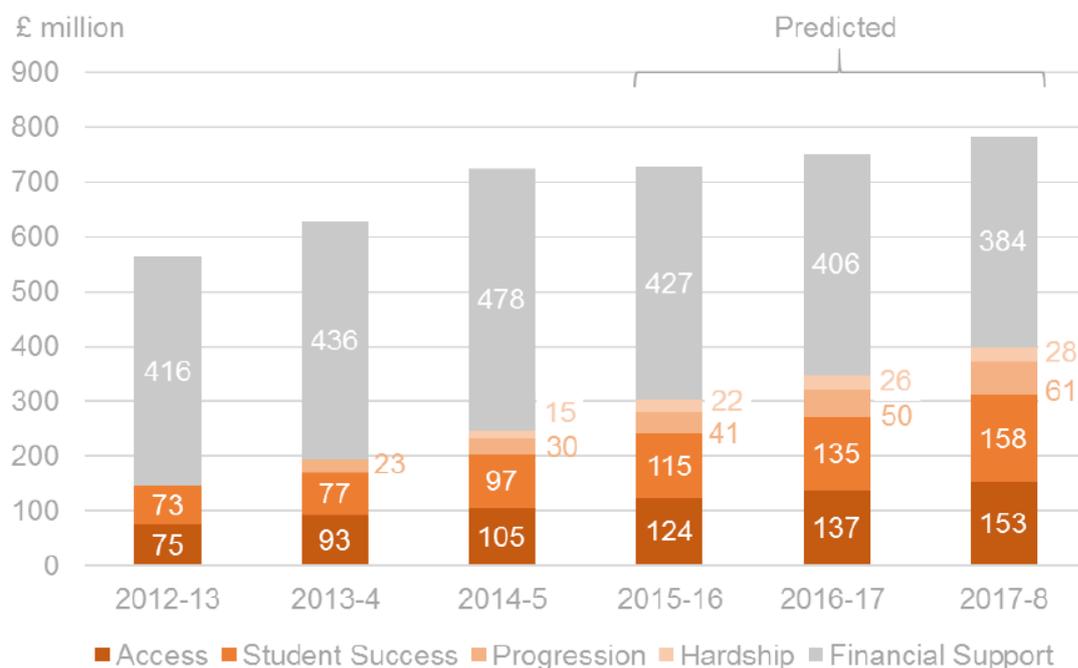
HE: Retention and Employment Outcomes

Less successful, and rated amber, are the retention rates and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students which remain low, with initiatives resulting in minimal improvement over the 20 year period.

The report finds that disadvantaged graduates are 7% less likely than other graduates to find professional work and tend to earn less than other graduates. Furthermore, disadvantaged students experienced higher drop-out rates than other students (8% disadvantaged versus 6% overall rate). Since 2009/10, drop-out rates actually deteriorated at 50 universities.

The report critiques universities saying they've done little to tackle these issues. It states insufficient spend was made on teaching, guidance, pastoral care, or careers advice for disadvantaged students. Moreover, even today disadvantaged students are still less likely to participate in internships or other extra-curricular activities known to boost employability. The report states the Government aims to address both the retention and outcomes deficits through the TEF, the transparency duty, and the updated Access Agreements' focus which pushes universities to spend more on disadvantaged students' success and progression. Figure 3.14 (overleaf) gives the national picture of Access Agreement spending across the full six years they've been in force.

Figure 3.14: University access agreement spend (£ millions), financial years 2012/13 to 2017/18



Source: Office for Fair Access, 2017-18 access agreements: institutional expenditure and fee levels, 2017 – Figure 1

Notes: Spend on Access covers any activity to encourage under-represented groups to apply and enter higher education. Student Success covers activities to improve retention and study outcomes, Progression covers activities to improve the transition to work or further study.

Placements and Internships

The report also tackles the dramatic increase of placements and internships which, unfortunately, are often unpaid or unadvertised. It states this is a further job outcome barrier for people from less advantaged backgrounds because of the lack of access to networks and financial support. The report states placements and internships at top graduate employers have increased by 49% per cent since 2010; however, 31% of these roles are not paid. The report blames Government for not using legislation to drive improvement in social mobility in the workplace, citing the proposal within the 2010 Equalities Act to place a duty on public bodies to assess their decisions in terms of the potential impact on social mobility which was not enacted.

Conclusion and Recommendations to Government

The education system prioritised qualifications more than work experience, employability, or the transition into work. Careers advice all but disappeared over the two decades. Reforms to the vocational route failed to create parity of esteem with the academic route due to lower funding and focus. The rebirth of apprenticeships promised new chances for disadvantaged young people, but quality was an issue and most new apprenticeships went to older workers. In the higher education space, wider access was a significant achievement, but retention and employment outcomes did not improve enough for disadvantaged students. A contradiction also endured between ambitious targets for university access and aims at parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes. Overall, increased participation in education has been welcome, but educational institutions have

not played their part in ensuring students' success after finishing study, leaving far too many disadvantaged young people with poor outcomes.

There has been very little progress at closing the attainment gaps between poor young people and their peers. At the current rate, it will take 120 years before disadvantaged young people become as likely as better-off peers to achieve level 3 qualifications. In higher education, it will take 80 years before the participation gap between students from disadvantaged and more advantaged areas closes.

Recommendations: The report states to improve social mobility, the Government should commit to reducing the attainment gap and ensure that educational qualifications translate into better labour market outcomes, especially for disadvantaged young people. In higher education, the Government should build on past successes and ensure progress does not stall by increasing labour market relevance, which would boost university's appeal and impact for poor young people.

"The Government should make a commitment that every young person, including every disadvantaged young person, has the opportunity to enter a genuine career path – via an apprenticeship, a vocational course, or university. This requires education policy to shift focus from qualifications to employability and also for government to hold schools, colleges, and universities to account for their students' success after leaving."

The report makes the following high level recommendations to Government:

- **Set a new aim to halve the attainment gap in level 3 qualifications within the next decade through new policies including T levels, apprenticeships, and extra support and accountability reforms for further education colleges.**
- **Refocus apprenticeship policy on young people and on higher-quality apprenticeships.**
- **Ensure careers advice and support is available in all schools via greater emphasis on destinations measures plus increased training and time in the curriculum.**
- **Ensure that higher education is available via further education colleges in social mobility coldspots.**
- **Encourage universities to focus on helping students succeed in the labour market by measuring graduate outcomes and offering better careers advice and work experience opportunities.**

And:

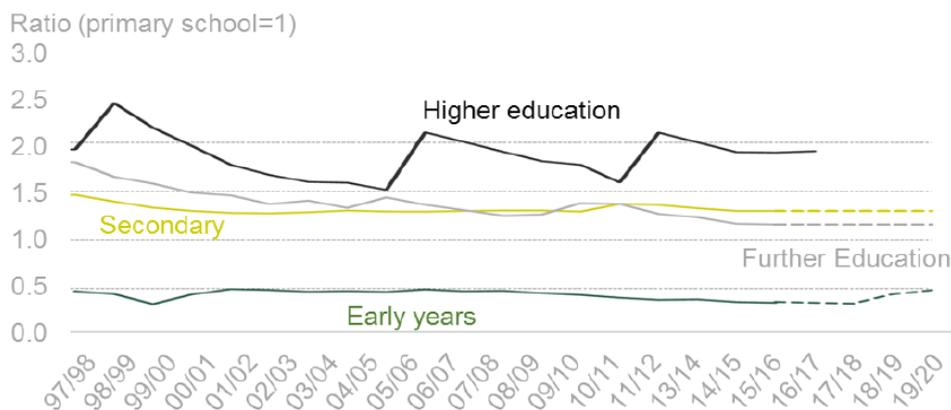
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Other sectors

There are a number of interesting points made in the other sectors. I provide a very brief summary of the key aspects which relate to the HE agenda within its wider context.

Figure 3.10 compares the relative levels of spend per pupil/per student at the different educational stages over the past 20 years.

Figure 3.10: Relative yearly spending per pupil at different stages of education compared to primary school; further education, higher education, secondary schools and early years (primary school=1), financial years 1997/98 to 2019/20



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, Long-run comparisons of spending per pupil across different stages of education (2017) – Figure 6.1b

Notes: Higher Education refers to resources per student, all others are spending per pupil.

Vocational education is the post-school destination for the majority of lower-income children but it remains the poor relation of academic education both in terms of resources and esteem. There have been too many reforms and while the renewed focus on apprenticeships has been positive the emphasis on quantity not quality alongside young people losing out on places to older adults are seen as weaknesses. Today, two major reforms (T levels and further apprenticeship reform) aim to create a simpler and more employer-led system, but the pace and scale of change remains a challenge.

Speaking during the Queen's Speech debates on Wednesday 28th Justine Greening said:

"We are focused on raising social mobility and on levelling up opportunity for people who do not have it. That is why we have made investment in technical education a priority... For too long, there has not been parity of esteem between technical and academic routes in education... It has...created inequality between those who go to our world-renowned universities and those young people who do not have the chance to do so. That inequality stretches across communities and regions. It has cost us dearly in the loss of the human capital and productivity that high-skilled people in a high-skilled economy provide."

On **Further Education** the report notes that up to 80% of disadvantaged students attend a FE college before the age of 24, making FE a critical lever for social mobility, but 20 years of 'underfunding, perverse incentives, and constant reform' have resulted in no improvement. Today, college students who complete level 3 qualifications remain almost 20% less likely to enter higher education than school students.

Within **Early Years** child poverty has been deprioritised. Early gains in reducing poverty and parental worklessness were reversed by recession and budget cuts. Investment has had a clear impact on young children’s attainment. However, despite establishing early years services and spending the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children shrank but only recently and not by a great enough rate – it would take another 40 years to close the attainment gap.

Schools saw an investment increase in the first decade, falling spending in the second. Geographical inequality has increased. Attainment gap persists at the same rate as 20 years ago. Schools are not the engines of social mobility they should be. It would take another 12 years to eliminate attainment gap at Key Stage 2, there is no prospect of eliminating the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged at GCSE or A level.

Five key failings

Finally the report summarises five key failings of the policies to address social mobility and sets out its recommendations to redress progress.

Shortcoming:	Rectify it by:
Successive governments have failed to make social mobility the cornerstone of domestic policy. The social mobility agenda has tended to be skewed towards children and the education system with too little emphasis on young adults and the labour market.	In future Prime Ministers should ensure the whole of government owns the social mobility agenda by putting in place a single cross-departmental plan to deliver it
Long-term progress has too often been sacrificed to short-term change. There has been a bewildering array of almost continual structural reforms to all parts of the education system.	Across each policy area there should be ten-year targets introduced to chart progress and to ensure that public money is being spent effectively.
Piecemeal policy design has been misaligned preventing social mobility. Closing the attainment gap in schools has played second fiddle to raising the standards bar. Apprenticeships have become the preserve of adult workers not young people who need them most.	In future there should be a social mobility test applied to all relevant new public policy to focus it on bringing about sustained improvements in outcomes.
Public resources (spend) has not been properly lined up behind social mobility policies. Spending on older people - including wealthy pensioners – has been protected while spending on young people and on poorer working adults has been cut. Except Pupil Premium there has been a hesitation to focus resources on tackling disadvantage.	In future each annual Budget should identify how public spending is being redistributed to address geographical, wealth and generational divisions in our country
Governments have overly limited their scope of action. They have focussed on improving the education system but shied away from improving parenting. They have assumed that if	Governments should pursue a more activist agenda and build a coalition with councils and communities and with employers and professions behind a shared national effort to

more people could be moved from welfare to work, the labour market would then do the heavy lifting to move people from low pay to living pay. Governments have largely absented themselves from addressing progression in employment and elitism in the professions. They have assumed that Britain could get by with imbalanced economic growth and have been too tentative in addressing market failures in local and regional economies

improve social mobility

Press attention:

- The Guardian: [“Social mobility: radical reform urged to repair divided Britain”](#)
- The Telegraph: [“Social mobility tsar warns aspiration gap between UK's rich and poor 'will take 80 years to close'”](#)
- TES: [“Progress on social mobility too slow, commission report warns”](#)
- The Independent: [“Britain becoming more divided with 'whole tracts of country left behind', says Social Mobility Commission”](#)
- The BBC: [“Divisions in society leading to 'sour mood'”](#)
- Schools Week: [“Secondary school attainment gap still 'stubbornly large', social mobility study finds”](#)
- New York Times: [“Britain's Broken Ladder of Social Mobility”](#)

New releases: Other WP reports

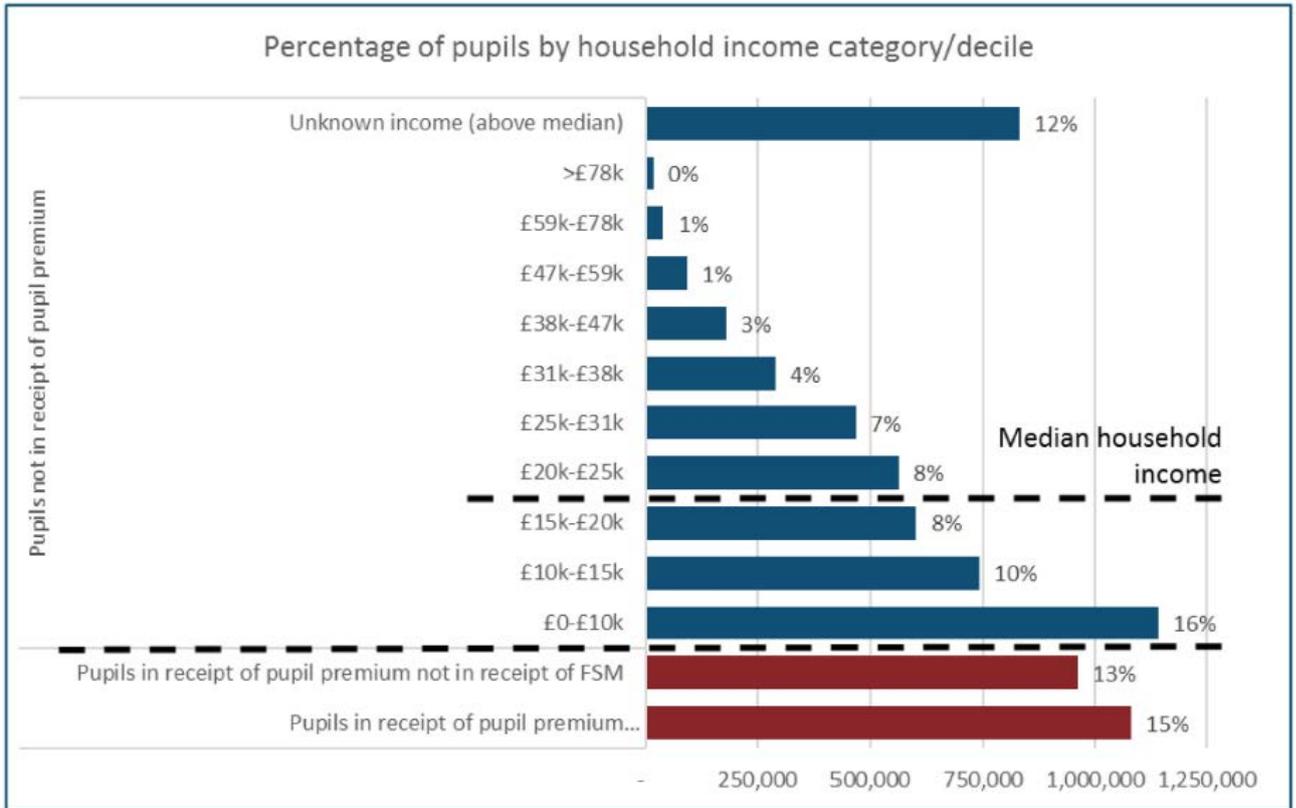
Research Councils UK released their [Measuring Doctoral Student Diversity report](#) yesterday.

On Thursday 28th OFFA will publish their [2015/16 monitoring outcomes](#). It notes:

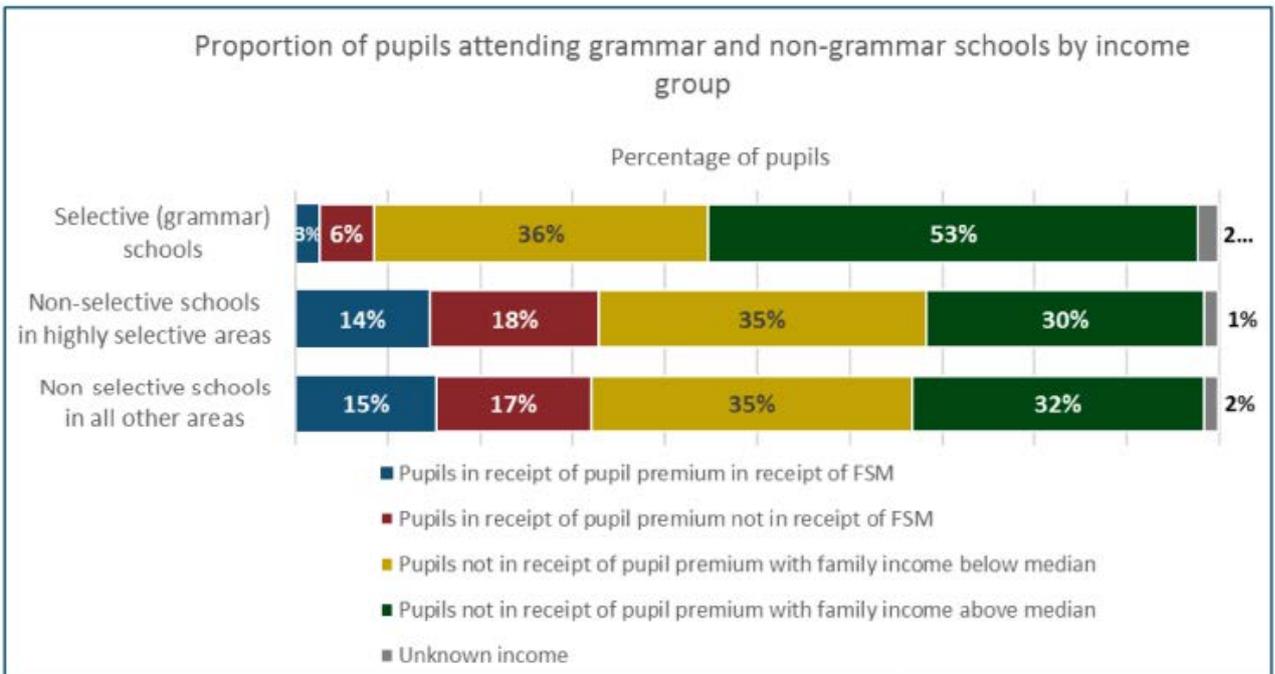
- no sign of improvement in access for mature and part-time learners
- little or no progress has been made against a substantial proportion of targets for mature and part-time students
- a lack of flexible options can present an insurmountable barrier – particularly for mature students
- non-continuation of mature students (withdrawing at double young rate) is concerning, particularly as OFFA report mature students go on to good jobs from completion.

The DfE are currently consulting on [their analysis of family circumstances and educational outcomes](#). Within the documentation there is a focus on 'ordinary working family' (not entitled to pupil premium and earning modest incomes). It aims to provide a basis for clearer analysis of educational outcomes for the children of these ordinary working families. The documentation contains some interesting charts.

The distribution of pupils subdivided into household income category



Relevant to the recent grammar schools/WP enabler debate



And on HE, as we'd expect – moderate correlation where geographically abundant above-median income families attend HE in higher proportions (figure 36), than geographical areas where there are higher clusters of pupil premium funded children participate less in HE (figure 37)

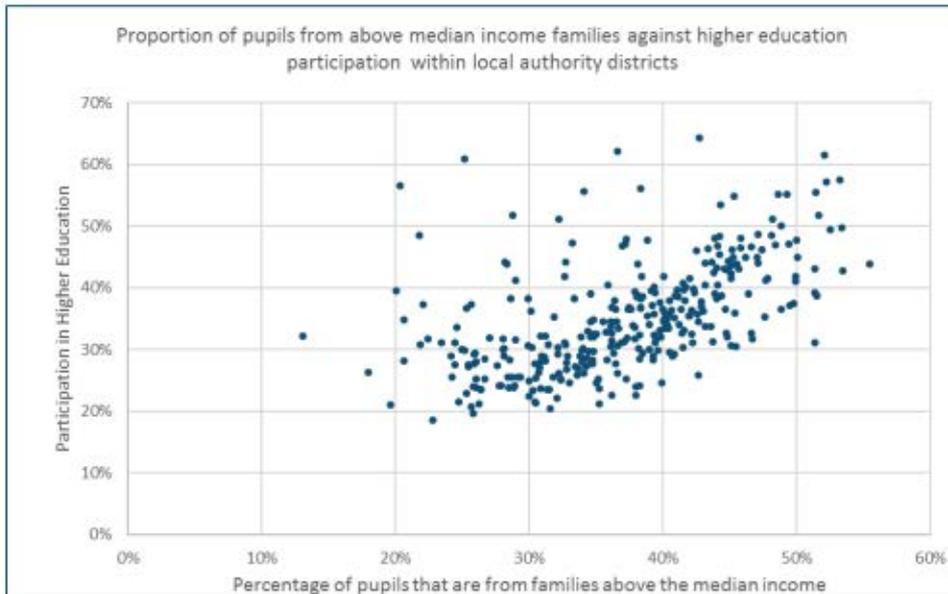


Figure 36: Proportion of pupils from above median income families against higher education participation within Local Authority districts

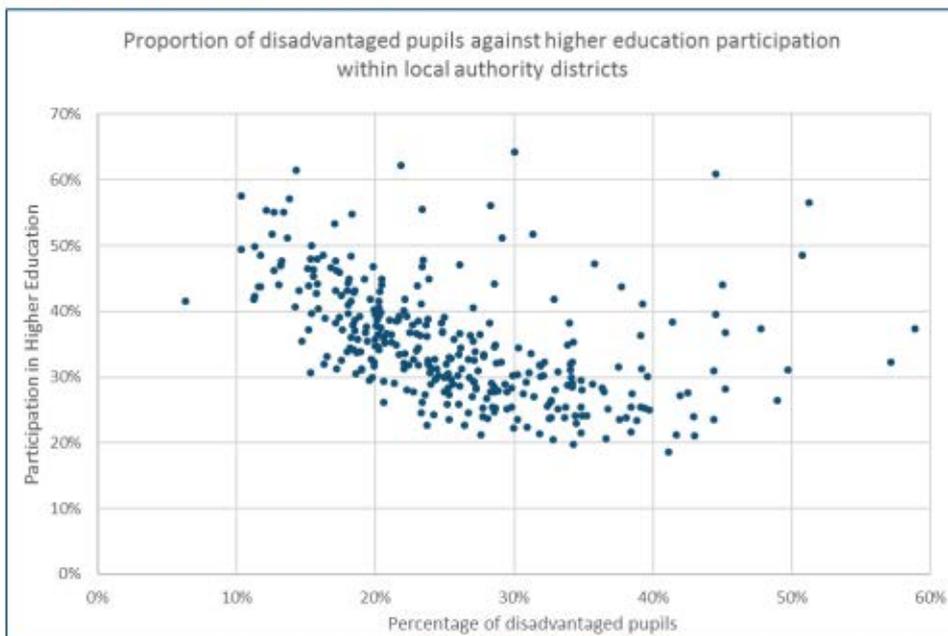


Figure 37: Proportion of disadvantaged pupils against higher education participation within Local Authority districts

And the morass in between (interesting from WP intervention perspective):

101. As can be seen in figure 38, those areas with higher proportions of families below the median income but not classified as disadvantaged, when not considering other groups, do not show a clear trend. This may be because in some cases lower proportions of these families indicate higher proportions of those above the median or those caught by disadvantage measures.

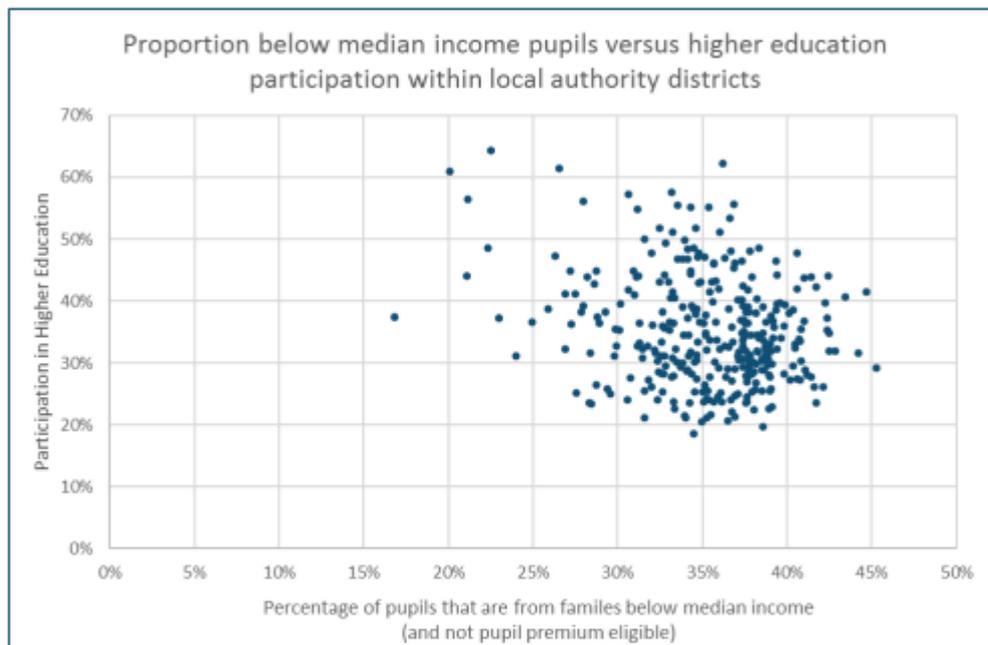


Figure 38: Proportion of below median income pupils against higher education participation within local authority districts

102. Grouping below median income families with either their wealthier peers or disadvantaged pupils simply gives the inverse of the trends already discussed. The percentage of disadvantaged pupils combined with below median income families is simply 100% minus the percentage of pupils above the median income. In a similar way, the percentage of pupils in below median income families and above median families is equivalent to just those in disadvantaged families.