# Leave to achieve

How universities can contribute to social mobility in their regions

Dani Payne

SMF Social Market Foundation

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# FOREWORD

Across the country, too many young people still grow up with their ambitions shaped - often constrained - by the place they are from. Despite real progress in widening access to higher education over recent decades the chances of getting into university, or thriving while there, and of reaping the long-term benefits remain unevenly distributed. Where a student grows up should never determine how far they can go. But today, it too often does. In my constituency of Hyndburn, the number of young people attending university has been dropping year on year since 2020 and currently 25% less attend university than young people in London.

We cannot talk seriously about life chances in Britain without talking about geography. That means recognising that talent is spread evenly, but opportunity is not - and asking what more our institutions, particularly our universities, can do to help close that gap.

This report from the Social Market Foundation offers an important and timely contribution to that conversation. It asks difficult but necessary questions about how universities serve their local communities, and it offers constructive, practical ideas for how they might do so more deliberately and more effectively. In particular, it challenges the long-standing idea that the route to success must involve leaving your community behind.

For many young people - especially those from lower-income families - the expectation to relocate far from home in order to access selective universities comes with financial, cultural and emotional costs. The traditional 'leave to achieve' model may work for some, but it cannot be the only path to higher education or to opportunity. If we are to make good on our shared commitment to a fairer, more mobile society, we must ensure that high-quality, transformative opportunities exist within reach of every community.

I am especially encouraged by the report's call for a place-based approach to widening participation: one that enables universities to unlock additional funding by meeting ambitious local access targets. Alongside this, the proposal to establish Regional Social Mobility Commissions, tasked with setting strategic objectives and aligning efforts across sectors, offers a promising way to bring coherence, accountability and local insight into the system.

This is not about lowering ambition. Quite the opposite - it is about raising our collective sights and broadening our understanding of what opportunity looks like. It is about supporting universities to fulfil their civic potential, not just as educators of students, but as employers, research partners and anchor institutions in the places they serve.

The government's opportunity mission is rooted in a belief that every child, in every part of the country, should be able to flourish and succeed, and that no community should feel forgotten. Delivering on that mission means challenging old assumptions and creating new structures of support that reflect the reality of people's lives. The ideas set out in this report can help us consider how to do that best.

As policymakers, educators, and community leaders, we have a shared responsibility to ensure that the promise of higher education reaches further - into every town, every classroom, and every home. Opportunity should not depend on luck or location. With the right focus and the right partnerships, we can make sure it doesn't.

**Sarah Smith MP**
**Opportunity Mission Champion & MP for Hyndburn**

## FOREWORD FROM THE SPONSORS

In today's rapidly evolving society, universities are pivotal institutions driving social mobility and expanding opportunity for individuals from all backgrounds and communities. Their role in promoting upward social mobility, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, cannot be overstated. Universities not only open doors to high-quality education and employment opportunities, but also foster civic engagement, personal development, and economic growth.

That was the motivation behind commissioning this report. Leave to Achieve? is both a celebration of what the higher education sector has already achieved and a challenge to explore how universities can build on this foundation to further enhance their role in advancing social mobility across the UK.

Yet, the landscape in which higher education operates is increasingly complex. Rising costs, frozen maintenance support, widening attainment gaps, and demographic shifts threaten recent progress. Geographical disparities further compound these inequalities, undermining local mobility and the relationship between universities and their communities.

This report makes a powerful case for reimagining the role of higher education in social mobility. It moves beyond the traditional access and participation agenda to offer a more holistic framework—one that recognises universities not only as educators, but as major employers, civic partners, and engines of regional innovation and growth. It also highlights class as a neglected dimension of inequality, and geography as a powerful—and too often overlooked—predictor of life chances.

We are especially encouraged by the report's call for a long term, place-based government strategy for social mobility. With stronger data, a more inclusive legal framework, and funding mechanisms that reward regional access and impact, institutions can deliver sustainable, equitable change where it is most needed.

Collaboration is central to this mission. It must galvanise universities, colleges, employers, charities, and public sector partners to address local and regional need by creating a coherent ecosystem of opportunity.

This report builds on existing research while also amplifying some of the excellent work already happening across the country. But it also challenges us to go further: to embed social mobility across the whole institution and across the entire student and staff lifecycle.

We hope this work stimulates fresh thinking and renewed commitment across government, the sector, and all those working to ensure that opportunity is not determined by background or geography.

We look forward to continuing the conversation.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Universities are vital engines for social mobility in the UK, but face rising pressures to do more, with less

- Universities provide pathways for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to access high-quality education and employment opportunities
- Graduates earn more, are healthier, and are more civically engaged than non-graduates. Studies have found that attending a higher education institution as a student from a lower socioeconomic background is the best mechanism we have for promoting absolute upwards social mobility
- Yet rising costs, frozen maintenance support, widening attainment gaps and demographic changes threaten to undermine progress made on access
- The government has signalled a strong expectation for institutions to do more on access and outcomes for disadvantaged students, but these structural barriers alongside financial concerns in the sector remain unaddressed
- The sector suffers from a lack of long-term national strategy on social mobility and opportunity; access targets are often institution-specific and can encourage silos and duplication within regions

## Access to university for disadvantaged students has improved, but gaps in who gets in – and where they end up – still remain

- Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still underrepresented at selective institutions – only 6% of students previously eligible for free school meals attend high-tariff institutions
- Less selective institutions have widened access more successfully, partly by offering vocational and alternative pathways into higher education. By nature of being less selective they also have a wider pool of students to recruit from, less constrained by prior attainment
- More selective institutions provide better employment outcomes and have a stronger impact on social mobility for the individual student
- However, more selective institutions disproportionately recruit from London, capitalising on higher school-level attainment. Meanwhile, disadvantaged students are less likely to attend their local selective institution
- Geographical disparities in access compound inequalities, undermine local mobility and put at risk the relationship between the institution and their local communities

## Universities' contribution to social mobility must go beyond student recruitment and take a more holistic view

- Universities are major local employers, anchor institutions and hubs for civic and economic activity
- Through research, knowledge exchange and innovation, they can play key roles in their regions
- The traditional focus on widening student access has limited impact:

    - Selective institutions can be perceived to fall short in reaching local communities facing deprivation
    - Meanwhile, whilst great progress has been made on race, gender, and ethnicity, institutions have been slow to consider the socioeconomic diversity of their workforce
    - Institutions and researchers can struggle to translate research into tangible benefits for local communities. Although there are some examples of best practice across the sector, this should be more widespread and only achievable with a more diverse academic pipeline
    - Civic engagement has too often consisted of a grab-bag approach of individual local engagement activities. Instead, a 'whole-system' approach to the local education ecosystem – where universities are central to local education and skills planning, and where all education providers work in partnership alongside local authorities, business and third-sector stakeholders – is needed to ensure sustained impact
- Rebuilding trust and demonstrating local impact will be critical to securing public and political support. All institutions have a duty and responsibility to their local area and local communities

## A holistic view of the mechanisms through which universities can contribute to social mobility is needed to understand and communicate the sector's social purpose

- Universities have suffered from policy-churn and a lack of a clear, long-term government strategy for higher education and social mobility
- England suffers for not having clear national access targets for universities to work towards. Scotland, in comparison, has benefited from strong political focus on widening access, with clear institutional and national targets
- As a result, policymakers and stakeholders perceive higher education to be a sector lacking a clear sense of its overall purpose and mission, and the public can sometimes view universities as out of touch with local needs and too inward looking
- Traditional measures of social mobility focus too narrowly on how many 'disadvantaged' students get into university, how many complete their degree, and what degree and graduate outcomes they attain
- The sector must adopt a more holistic approach that reflects their full institution impact – on staff, students, communities and regions- but this must be supported by a long-term government strategy
- This broader view should inform regulation, funding and institutional strategy, and help universities better articulate their value to society

## Social class remains a significant but largely unaddressed axis of disadvantage which risks fuelling populist narratives

- Despite considerable progress in advancing equality of other marginalised groups, social class remains a largely unaddressed axis of disadvantage

- The sector is perceived to be hesitant to discuss class in relation to their workforce, and the exclusion of social class from the 2010 Equality Act has had broader implications within universities and other organisations
- Without explicit legal recognition, universities and other employers are under no obligation to report on or take action to address class-based inequalities
- As a result, interventions to address social mobility are often piecemeal, discretionary and vulnerable to shifting institutional or political priorities
- When people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds see their experiences of disadvantage overlooked it can fuel feelings of alienation and resentment
- The omission of social class in the Act drives the actions and priorities of organisations but also sets the framework for political and policy conversations
- Feelings of being 'left behind' or ignored is a well-documented driver of populism; if the government is serious about tackling the root cause of political disillusionment it must ensure social class is given equal weight in national conversations about equality and opportunity

## Recommendations

- Government should develop a **ten-year strategy for social mobility and opportunity which will then be delivered by regional Social Mobility Commissions**, setting ambitious national and regional higher education targets that recognise universities' roles as educators, employers, research hubs and civic actors
- Universities should **begin collecting the socioeconomic data of their employees to track socioeconomic diversity in the workforce**, and HESA should collect National Insurance numbers to allow linkage with existing education and workforce datasets
- Government should **launch a review into the 2010 Equality Act to determine whether it should be amended to include social class** or socioeconomic background as a Protected Characteristic, placing a legal obligation on universities and other organisations to monitor, report on and take action to address class-based inequalities
- Universities should be **increasing opportunities available to local disadvantaged pupils** by strengthening partnerships with local schools and colleges, offering guaranteed and contextual admissions and creating articulation agreements with local further education providers
- The Office for Students should require providers to report the proportion of FSM students who are from the local region, and Government should incentivise a place-based approach to widening access through **allowing institutions to unlock additional funding for meeting regional targets**

# CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

**Chapter summary**

1. Social mobility and equality of opportunity have been central themes in UK political discourse for decades, with successive governments pledging to break the link between background and life outcomes
2. Whilst the UK saw gains in upward mobility in the 20th century, recent decades have suffered from stagnation, with low rates of mobility and high rates of inequality compared to other countries
3. Public attitudes reflect a strong desire for a fairer society, but there is tension between focusing on equal opportunities (inputs) and equal outcomes
4. Education is a powerful social mobility tool, but persistent attainment gaps at school and higher education level hold back young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

## Across the political spectrum there has been a desire to break the link between a young person's background and their life chances

Social mobility has long been a central theme of political discourse in the UK, championed as a fundamental pillar of fairness and opportunity. Across the political spectrum, successive leaders have articulated visions of a society where individuals can transcend the circumstances of their birth through talent, effort, and aspiration.

In a speech at a Conservative rally in Cardiff – a month after winning the 1979 election – Margaret Thatcher stated that *"the real driving force in society […] [is] the desire for the individual to do the best for himself and his family. […] That's the way society is improved, by millions of people resolving that they'll give their children a better life than they've had themselves."*.[1] Here, Thatcher refers to *absolute* (upward) social mobility: the extent to which children are able to become economically better off than their parents. John Major later stated that the Conservatives were "the Party of opportunity", before bemoaning "Labour Councils" for "the years of levelling down", and "kicking away the ladder of opportunity by those who climbed up it themselves".[2] In his 2004 Labour Conference speech, Tony Blair stated that Labour were building "an opportunity society where all have equal chance to succeed", and that "There is a glass ceiling of opportunity in this country. We have raised the ceiling. We haven't broken it".[3] *Equality of opportunity* refers to one's ability to have a fair chance to succeed, regardless of their occupational, financial or social background.

In the 2010s the term 'social mobility' took greater prominence in political discourse. In 2015 David Cameron spoke of the "stall[ing] of social mobility and […] lack of economic opportunity"[4], and in a speech in 2011 Michael Gove (the then Secretary of State for Education) stated that "schools should be engines of social mobility, places where the democratisation of knowledge helps vanquish the accidents of birth".[5]

Theresa May aimed to create a "truly meritocratic Britain".[6] Boris Johnson stated that, whilst potential was fairly distributed across the country, opportunity was not, and said "it is the mission of this government to unite and level up across the whole of the UK".[7]

The current Labour government has returned to the language of equality of opportunity. Their Opportunity Mission aims to "break down the barriers to opportunity", stating that Britain is "failing" on the promise that "if you work hard, you'll be able to get on, no matter what your background". Reminiscent of Blair's 2004 speech, they promise that "Labour will shatter the class ceiling in Britain".[8] In a speech at Mid Kent College in 2023, Keir Starmer reflected on his own journey of social mobility: "To go from an ordinary working class background to leading the Crown Prosecution Service and now the Labour Party, I feel both privileged and proud". He vowed to fight the idea that "your circumstances, who you are, where you come from, who you know, might shape your life more than your talent, your effort and your enterprise".[9] The Opportunity Mission is spearheaded by Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education, who has stated that "opportunity [should] not [be] just for some of our children, but for all of our children".[10]

As well as equality of opportunity, Starmer spoke about *respectability* – the idea that everybody in society should be respected, regardless of their economic or social status.[11] Speaking of his father, who was a tool-maker, he stated that he was "looked down upon, disrespected" bemoaning a "snobbery" which looks down upon working class skilled jobs.[12]

The current focus on *equality of opportunity* and *respectability* may reflect partly the criticisms of the concept of social mobility. Equality of opportunity – where everyone has the same chance to succeed, but not necessarily the same success – is attractive because it avoids the issue that, if there are limited seats at the top, someone moving up the social mobility ladder inherently means that someone else must move down. Levelling up similarly dodged this issue, by aiming to grow the top across the country.

The British public feel similarly. Polling from Ipsos in 2023 found that 85% of Britons felt that inequality is an important issue facing Britain. 35% felt that people's life chances were determined more by factors beyond their control than merit and effort, and 28% were unsure. When asked what they felt a fair society looked like, more leant towards feeling that a fair society is where everyone is given the same *opportunities* (46%) than those who see it as one where everyone enjoys the same quality of life (20%).[13]

Here represents a fundamental tension between those who care most about *input* – that is, what resources, experiences and opportunities are available based on one's background – and *outcomes*, that is, where someone from a disadvantaged background could reasonably expect to end up later in life. It is perhaps politically easier to focus on inputs, for example by raising school standards or broadening access to extra-curricular experiences. But implicit in this work is still a hope that these inputs will broadly correlate with outputs – that investing in, for example, education will improve the life chances of the individual. Equality of opportunity is a

means through which to achieve social mobility, even if the term social mobility is now less commonly used in political discourse.

## Definitions and terminology: We are interested in upward relative social mobility and equality of opportunity

As you will have already seen, definitions can be crucial in this area. Whether politicians and policymakers are talking about equality of opportunity, social mobility, meritocracy or respectability, all share a common aim of breaking the link between a child's background and their life chances. But which one(s) we decide to focus on does influence what type(s) of political or policy action are possible.

In this report, we look relatively widely at how universities can help break that tie between background and outcomes. However, our main focus will be on upward *relative* social mobility and *equality of opportunity*.

- **Upward relative social mobility:** The extent to which people from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to catch up with, or overtake, their more advantaged peers and achieve positions of prosperity and privilege. This is measured by comparing the chances that two different groups have to reach the same outcome, for example the chance to attend university, work in a certain occupation or earn a certain amount of money
- **Equality of opportunity:** The extent to which someone's background determines the opportunities they get in life, whether that is occupationally, financially, or socially.

But we will also refer to absolute social mobility and meritocracy, and differentiate at times between occupational social mobility and income social mobility.

- **Upward absolute social mobility:** The extent to which people are able to do better than their parents, as measured by the percentage of people who are in a different occupational or income class than their parents
- **Meritocracy:** A society where people succeed based on their abilities, rather than their background, income or social position
- **Occupational social mobility:** The extent to which someone is able to move into a different occupational class than their parents
- **Income social mobility:** The extent to which someone is able to move into a different income bracket than their parents

Whilst this report predominantly focuses on how we can achieve *upward* mobility, it's important to note that in all of these definitions of social mobility you can also see individuals moving down the ladder. Downward social mobility – that is, someone doing worse than their parents, either based on income or occupation – is not a focus of this paper but, as discussed later, is becoming more common in the UK.

Throughout this report we also refer to different terminology for different types of universities. 'High tariff', 'low tariff', 'selective', 'non-selective', 'research intensive' and 'Russell Group' are all used at different points. This is because different research has defined these groups in different ways, and it is important to accurately report

what each paper measured. When we are talking about different types of providers we generally refer to 'high' and 'low' tariff institutions to align with Department for Education data, and sometimes differentiate between 'research-intensive' and more teaching focused institutions when it is relevant to the specific discussion. It is important to note that we are not making value judgements when using these terms, and recognise that some of these terms can sometimes be counterproductive for narratives of collaboration and student choice.

Similarly, we use 'working class', 'lower socioeconomic background' and 'disadvantaged' when referring to background, and use free-school meals as a measure of disadvantage. Again, the terms we use at different points will be based on the research we are citing. When we are referring to this ourselves, we use 'lower socioeconomic background'.

## The UK as a country has low levels of social mobility and high inequality

The starting point for this paper is that the UK, as a whole, is a country with low levels of (upward) social mobility. In fact, whilst Britain saw significant positive shifts in upward social mobility in the 20th century following a boom in the managerial and professional classes, we are now "on the verge of becoming a country where individuals' chances of moving down the class structure are greater than their chances of moving up".[14] And whilst we see some social mobility within the middle classes, there is particularly immobility amongst those at the very top and the very bottom.[15]

Compared to other countries, Britain has similar levels of intergenerational social mobility as the United States, but performs significantly worse than Canada and the Nordic countries. Intergenerational social mobility has also fallen in the UK in a way it hasn't in the US: someone born in 1970, for example, has less chance of having moved up the ladder than someone born in 1958 in Britain.[16]

If we think about the chance someone has to get a good job and earn a good salary, about 50% of someone's advantage or disadvantage is passed on from their parents. This is higher than France, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, and the Nordic countries.[17] People in the United Kingdom have less chance of achieving a good job and good salary through hard work because one's background plays a much larger role than in other parts of the world.

The UK also has high levels of income inequality compared in other countries. Income inequality is also higher than it was in the 1960s and 70s and, whilst the overall level has stagnated since the 90s, the share of income going to the top 1% has increased. In 2022/23, 36% of disposable household income in the UK went to the fifth richest households, whilst 9% went to the poorest.[18] The UK is one of the most unequal countries in the OECD – of those measured, only the United States and Costa Rica have higher income inequality than the UK.[19]

Inequality and social mobility are linked. Countries that have higher inequality also tend to have lower levels of social mobility. This is because it is not just income that is unequally distributed, but opportunity: "Inequality of opportunity is the missing link between the concepts of income inequality and social mobility: if higher inequality

makes intergenerational mobility more difficult, it is likely because opportunities for economic advancement are more unequally distributed among children. Conversely, the way lower mobility may contribute to the persistence of income inequality is through making opportunity sets very different among the children of the rich and the children of the poor."[20]

## Education is a powerful tool to improve social mobility, but persistent attainment gaps hold disadvantaged young people back

> *"I think it's very hard to fix social mobility only with the education system. At the same time,* ***it's hard to fix social mobility without fixing the education system****. It's a necessity, but not sufficient on its own." Academic*

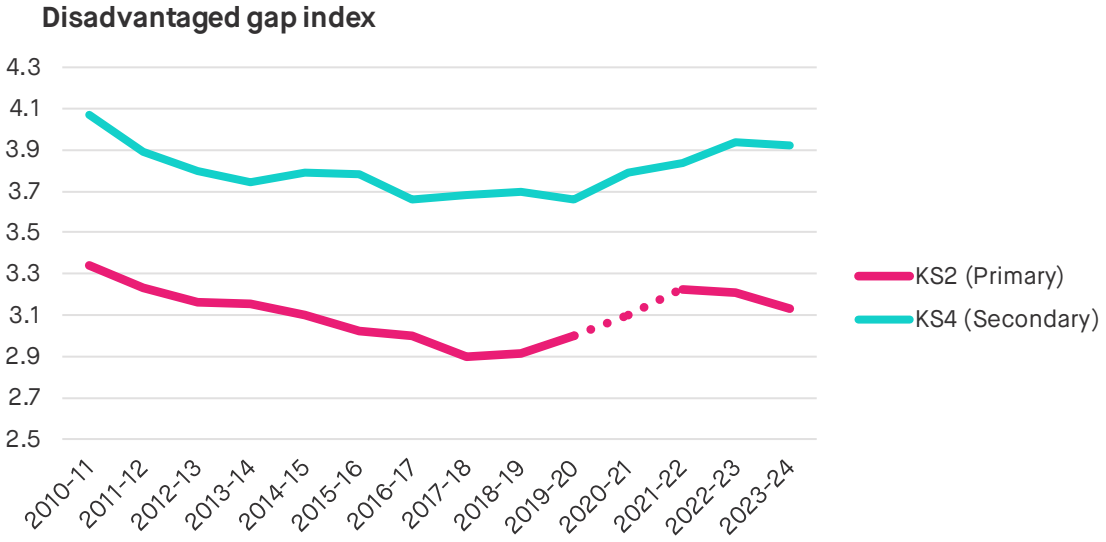
### Socioeconomic gaps in child development and educational attainment have stubbornly persisted despite decades of efforts to close them

In the face of a particularly socially immobile nation, many have looked to education, hoping that it would act as the great social leveller. Blair's "opportunity society" ran alongside his "education, education, education" priority, and between 1997 and 2007 he had increased the core per pupil funding in schools by 48% in real terms.[21] This reflected the belief of many policymakers and academics that education was the best driver of social mobility, and that if you could close attainment gaps in education then gaps in employment and earnings would follow.

Unfortunately, the "education system as a whole has failed to function as the great social leveller".[22] Inequalities based on socioeconomic background persist despite decades of work to attempt to close them and, in some cases, these gaps have been widening, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. These inequalities can be seen as early as we can measure them. The first official measurement of child development in educational settings occurs at the end of the academic year in which a child turns 5, at the end of the early years foundation stage. In 2023-24, 72% of children not eligible for free school meals were deemed to have a 'good level of development' at this stage, compared to only 51.5% of those eligible.[23] At the point at which a child starts school, the poorest pupils are already 11 months behind their peers.[24]

This gap only widens as a child moves through the education system. At the end of primary school, the disadvantaged attainment gap sits at 3.13. At the end of secondary school, this has risen to 3.92. Whilst progress in narrowing this gap can be seen in the 2010s, it had started to rise again by 2018, before been accelerated by Covid-19 to its highest level recorded since 2010-11 at KS4 level in 2022-23 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Chart showing the disadvantaged attainment gap index at Key Stage 2 (Primary school) and Key Stage 4 (Secondary school) level, from 2010-2024. Note: data at KS2 level unavailable for 2019-20 and 2020-21 due to Covid-19**




*Source: SMF analysis of Department for Education data*

## The mass expansion of higher education saw in huge progress on access, but strong headwinds put this at threat

Higher education is one area where expansion has allowed increasing numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to 'get in'. The proportion of pupils previously eligible for free school meals progressing into higher education by age 19 has risen from 14.2% in 2005-6, to 29% in 2022-23. For those not eligible for free school meals, progression has risen from 33.5% to 49.8% in the same time period.[25]

Higher education is a key driver of social mobility in England. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do enter university, they are also then more likely to experience upward social mobility. Sutton Trust analysis found that 22% of graduates from a disadvantaged background achieved earnings in the top quintile of the population by age 30, compared to just 6% for those who didn't attend university. The 'class pay gap' was also smaller for graduates, suggesting that a university education at least in part helps offset the connection between family background and adult earnings which is particularly acute in the UK.[26] TASO – the What Works Centre for higher education – similarly found that a university education led to higher wages and a lower likelihood of being unemployed. For graduates from a disadvantaged background who attended a 'top third' (more selective) university, they earnt on average approximately £36,000 16 years after KS4, compared to £25,000 for graduates from a less selective institution, and £16,000 for those with no known qualification after KS4.[27]

Despite recent progress, there are concerns that strong structural headwinds may cause a retrenchment. In 2022-23, the progression rate for FSM pupils declined for the first time since measurement began in 2005. The cost of living pressure on disadvantaged students is significant: previous research found that 54% of students felt their academic performance was suffering due to financial pressures, and 1 in 5

had considered dropping out.[28] The Higher Education Policy Institute calculated a £8,405 gap between the maximum level of maintenance support available for a student and the essential costs for a student studying outside of London.[29] The household income threshold at which a student is entitled to the maximum maintenance loan has been frozen in real cash terms since 2008.[30] The rising costs of the traditional three year residential model of university education has seen an increasing number of students decide to commute, study part time, or work increasingly long hours alongside their studies.[31]

Universities themselves have also come under financial pressure. Financial modelling from the regulator for higher education in England has predicted that 72% of providers could be in deficit by the end of the academic year.[32] At the time of writing, 93 providers are reportedly undertaking redundancy or restructuring programmes,[33] and there are fears that over 10,000 staff members could lose their jobs across the sector.[34]

It is clear that the current government will not accept a reduction in access or outcome rates for disadvantaged students. In fact, the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, wrote to universities in November 2024 and outlined that she expects institutions to do more on access and outcomes. "The gap in outcomes from higher education between disadvantaged students and others is unacceptably large and is widening", she wrote.[35] The message that disadvantaged students deserve more, and that gaps in participation and outcomes are unacceptable, is welcome, but an undoubtedly challenging task for the sector to live up to in light of these structural headwinds.

Alongside this, the upcoming boom in 18 year olds – set to increase by around 200,000 over the course of the 2020s – will heighten competition for places.[36] Universities may well have to work harder – and with less resource - to just maintain current levels of access, let alone improve it.

### The picture on whether increased access has successfully translated into increased social mobility is mixed

There is a tension between research which shows that higher education is a key driver of social mobility in the UK, and data showing that social mobility has stalled in this country, despite a significant increase in access. These can be broadly reconciled as follows:

1. University is a great driver of upward social mobility at an *individual* level, boosting the earnings and life outcomes of those who attend.
2. However, university can also entrench disadvantage for those who do not attend, particularly as more and more professional jobs require degrees that previously did not.

Because the social mobility returns from higher education rely on participation, increasing access has been the main focus over the last decade. But ironically, as access to higher education expands, the individual returns to the marginal student declines. This can be seen across all high-participation systems around the world – the declining graduate premium, especially for those who attend less selective

institutions, is the direct result of widening access.[37] And in terms of social mobility, this may be a positive thing – countries that have higher graduate premiums tend to have lower social mobility, because the 'reward' of higher education is reserved for a smaller 'elite' group.[38]

Despite the mass expansion of higher education to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, attainment gaps remain - and are in some cases widening. Young people whose parents have a degree are almost twice as likely to progress into higher education than those whose parents did not attend university.[39] Once in university, awarding gaps are present for students based on socioeconomic status. HESA analysis found a linear correlation between socioeconomic status and achieving a first or an upper second class degree – that is, students from more disadvantaged areas are the least likely to achieve such a degree. The awarding gap between the most and least deprived deciles is 16 percentage points.[40]

Higher education *can* be an extremely powerful tool for social mobility. However, the picture isn't clear-cut and focusing too heavily on access risks downplaying the larger structural headwinds that impact whether or not a disadvantaged student is able to fully realise the benefits of their degree. It is not a wholesale celebration of the widening access agenda, but nor is it a commiseration: improving the lives of disadvantaged individuals en-mass in a country with high inequality is hard, it will get harder, and the expectation on universities that they need to do more, with less, is unlikely to go away.

## This paper seeks to take a more holistic view of higher education's contribution to social mobility

Traditionally, discussions on how universities can contribute to social mobility have been focused on the number (or proportion) of disadvantaged students into an institution, and their destinations after graduation. More recently, a greater focus has been put on students' experiences whilst at university - the "getting on" bit after "getting in".

However, universities do far more than just teach students. They hire staff – academics, professional staff and outsourced and casual staff. They are significant contributors to research and innovation in this country and support current businesses as well as founding new spin-offs. Civic engagement work has become more prominent. Previously the endeavour of more regionally focused, less-selective institutions, now almost all universities see a role for themselves in their local area. The ways in which institutions can contribute to social mobility is multi-faceted and extends outside of student recruitment and support.

Despite this, little research has been carried out on the role of social mobility in the broader work of the universities – for example, how does class manifest in the institutional workforce? Are institutions providing good jobs – not just any jobs – to local residents? In what ways can institutions harness research to drive social mobility? Are universities recruiting disadvantaged students from their local communities, or relying on the high attainment populations in London? When they do

recruit from their local communities, are those students getting jobs in the region post-graduation? And does it matter either way?

This paper seeks to look holistically at higher education's contribution to social mobility. Early conversations for this paper revealed a common concern that the sector lacks a sense of purpose and direction and struggles to communicate its value to the public and to policymakers. There was a sense that the sector struggles to form and articulate a holistic view of social mobility, traditionally focusing on access and widening participation.

Access and widening participation are important – and we dedicate the next chapter to this issue. But with increasing financial pressure on institutions, and wider demographic and societal factors putting pressure on admissions, it may be time to rethink traditional approaches.

In November 2024, the Secretary of State for Education wrote to universities to set out her priorities for the sector.[41] In return for an uplift in the tuition fee cap, she expects higher education providers to:

- Play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students.
- Make a stronger contribution to economic growth.
- Play a greater civic role in their communities.
- Raise the bar further on teaching standards.
- Commit to a sustained financial efficiency and reform programme.

Most would agree that these – access, local communities, economic growth, teaching standards and financial sustainability – are broadly fair expectations to hold of institutions that receive public funding. However, the tuition fee uplift was relatively small: in lieu of a wider set of funding reforms from government, the expectation is that they should be doing more, with less. On access and outcomes, there will be a need for institutions to think creatively and critically about efficiency in the WP agenda. But it is also right to note that access and outcomes is not fully in the control of the individual institution – demographic factors, the national and local levels of deprivation and poverty, and school attainment all play a significant role in who can "get in" to higher education. Taking a broader and more holistic view of how institutions can contribute to social mobility *as a whole,* throughout the whole institution and in various areas of activity, should be a priority for any institution concerned with improving and communicating their public contribution.

In 2012 the Rt Hon Alan Milburn wrote "public services - including universities - have to prove, in a climate of fiscal austerity, that they are delivering the best outcomes for the resources they receive".[42] This is as true today as it was thirteen years ago.

Drawing on the existing literature and approximately twenty in-depth interviews with sector leaders, academics, and policymakers, and a roundtable held in May 2025, this paper seeks to broaden the conversation on social mobility in higher education, and to find new avenues forwards in the face of significant structural headwinds.

# CHAPTER TWO – STUDENTS

**Chapter summary**

1. Access to higher education for disadvantaged students has improved, but significant gaps remain in who attends the most selective institutions and in the outcomes achieved following graduation
2. More selective institutions deliver a large graduate premium for disadvantaged students, but admit disproportionately fewer students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially outside of London
3. High attainment concentrated in London for disadvantaged students has masked low local recruitment and limited opportunities for disadvantaged pupils outside of the capital
4. Contextual admissions, targeted outreach and improved support are key strategies for closing access and outcome gaps, but progress has been uneven and further action is needed, especially on regional inequalities

*"Who gets into university and how they get on once they have left will have a critical role in determining whether Britain's sluggish rates of social mobility can be improved." Rt Hon Alan Milburn, 2012*

A university education can be a powerful tool for individual social mobility. University graduates, on average, earn more than those who have not attended university, and are less likely to be unemployed.[43] [44] Beyond employment, there are many individual and societal benefits to university: higher life satisfaction, better health outcomes, reduced criminality and increased participation in democracy.[45] For an individual from a disadvantaged background, attending university can transform the trajectory of their life, opening doors to opportunities, networks and career pathways that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

Who gets into university, how they are supported whilst they are there, and where they end up after university is critical to the overall social mobility of the country. High-paid, prestigious and professional roles increasingly require a university degree as part of the job criteria. In a knowledge-based economy, universities act both as a sorting house to identify promising intellectual students and as a training ground for the middle-class professions. This may not be the role universities see themselves as playing, but it is increasingly hard to deny that, alongside their enduring missions of advancing knowledge, fostering curiosity and providing high-quality teaching and research, the career outcomes of their students have become one of their core societal functions.

Universities currently train 49% of the workforce, and an even larger proportion of the middle-class occupations.[46] As the requirement for a university degree has extended to many skilled – though often low-paid – professions such as nursing, teaching and social work, equality of access to higher education now plays a central role in determining equality of access to the professional workforce. If entry to university is

restricted or skewed towards those from more advantaged backgrounds, the doors to those professions, and the social mobility they can offer, are effectively closed to many. Widening access to university is not just about fairness in education- it is a prerequisite for a more equitable and socially mobile society.

The following chapter will explore the barriers to university faced by those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, seek to evaluate the effectiveness of the current widening participation agenda, and consider what more can be done to ensure that higher education fulfils its potential as a key driver of social mobility in Britain.

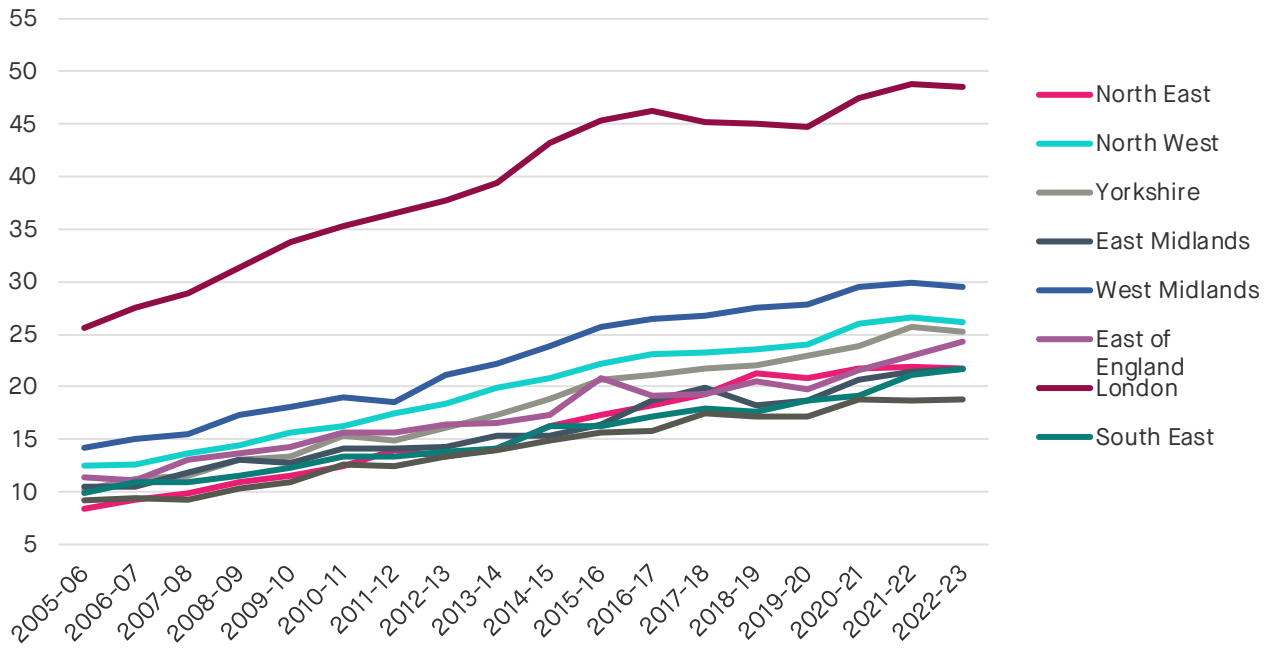
## Access to higher education for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds has increased significantly over the last decade

In 2012, when the tuition fee cap was increased from £3,000 per year to £9,000 per year, a deal was made.

> *"The deal was, you [universities] need to put more resource into driving social mobility, because it's important for the country, and we [the government] are going to help you do that by increasing your amount of resource. […] There was an identified fraction of the uplift that we received to spend on [widening access], and we accepted that entirely. It was the right thing to do." University Vice-Chancellor*

Over the next decade, the proportion of disadvantaged students accessing higher education ballooned. In 2011/12, 20% of pupils who had been eligible for free school meals progressed into higher education by age 19. In 2022/23, this was 29% (after a small fall from 29.2% in 2021-22). For those from Inner London, the progression rate sits at over half (51%).

**Figure 2. Chart showing the FSM progression rate (%) by age 19 by region, from 2005-2023**.




*Source: SMF analysis of Department for Education data*

This upward trend has been driven in part by an overall increase in the number of young people choosing the higher education pathway. In 2022/23, the number of home undergraduates in higher education reached 2,053,520, a 33% increase from the 1,541,225 undergraduates in 2000/01.[47] In 2012, the Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, said that "the expansion of student places over recent years provided a benign environment for universities to progress their widening participation agenda".[48] Essentially, many disadvantaged students benefitted from a broader expansion of the sector – a sort of 'rising of the tide lifts all boats' scenario. This overall expansion also allowed universities to increase the number of disadvantaged students without reducing opportunities for their more advantaged peers.

> *"I think it's fair to say, over the last 20 or 30 years, the higher education sector has been very, very good at supporting a huge increase in the number of people coming into university. And that huge increase has seen a significantly higher proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds [coming to university].* ***I think we've been very successful at the 'getting in' bit****."* *Pro-Vice Chancellor*

However, whilst the overall expansion of the sector helped, institutions have also invested significant resource into rising to the challenge set by government. In interviews, many experts in widening access and participation policy, and university leaders, noted that the rate in the increase of disadvantaged students entering higher education has outpaced overall growth. This suggests that, alongside expansion, institutions have made substantial investments in widening participation.

The environment of unrestrained expansion undoubtedly meant that institutions did not face the same pressures in their widening access endeavours as they would have under strict student number caps. At times, this may have led to a greater focus on demonstrating activity such as offer-holder fairs, delivering talks in schools, or expanding access teams, rather than investing in evaluation to ensure that these interventions were genuinely impactful in supporting disadvantaged students to enter higher education.

As John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, remarked in 2022: "For 20 years or more of widening participation work, we have nowhere near 20 years' worth of evidence about what works. We can't share what works, and we can't make it work better, if we don't actually know what does work!"[49] Over time, the regulator has increased its focus on evaluation and data. In 2019, the Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), the What Works centre for higher education, was formed to help the sector identify effective interventions (although, as set out in our previous report on the experiences of care experienced and estranged students, there remains a significant amount of university activity in these areas that have poor or no evidence of efficacy).[50]

Nevertheless, it is clear that many universities have responded by investing heavily in access and participation work. A review of institutional strategies and leadership teams undertaken for this report found that, out of 106 universities reviewed, almost

all had widening access and participation as a substantial part of their organisational strategy. Most also employed at least one member of staff to lead work related to widening access and participation in their senior leadership teams. According to the UPP Foundation, the sector collectively spent £859 million on access and participation in 2022/23.[51]

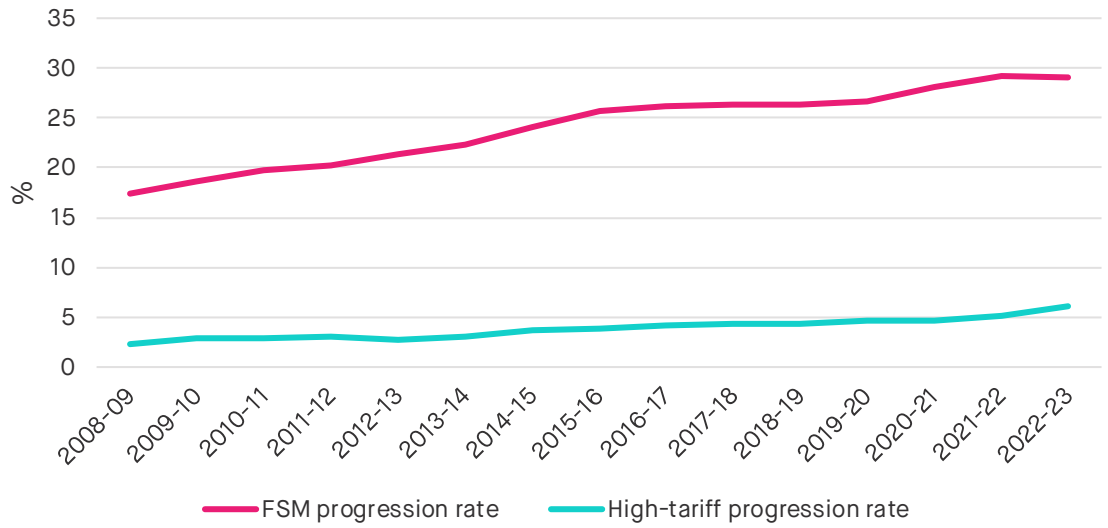
It is also important to recognise that, while the lifting of student number caps benefitted institutions and expanded access for students, other structural factors – such as the rise in tuition fees, the cost of living, and persistent issues with maintenance support – have continued to act as barriers for disadvantaged young people. It is in this context that it is actually impressive that institutions have still managed, until last year, to continue to increase FSM progression rates.

> *"The issues of university tuition fees rising, knowing that young people from lower income families are more debt adverse, it's a factor to put young people off university. At the same time, there's loads of things happening in the wider economy – increased cost of housing, and issues of the student maintenance levels not going up. All of these things in various ways will impact on young people's decisions.*
>
> ***It's likely that over this period of time where there have been lots of factors pushing against access, that university access and participation programmes and efforts are doing something collectively to basically stop a reverse in the number of disadvantaged students going to university that might have been happening otherwise**." Education policy expert*

**Whilst access has risen collectively across the sector, there are significant differences based on the types of institutions attended**

> *"For the students who get [into highly selective institutions], that really supercharges their life trajectories. **But the students who get there are not nearly as broad as they could be**, even when you control for prior attainment." Academic*

**Figure 3: Chart showing FSM progression rate and FSM high-tariff progression rate, between 2008-2023.**




*Source: SMF analysis of Department for Education data*

Whilst access to higher education has risen collectively across the sector, there remain significant differences in who benefits, particularly when examining the types of institutions attended. Figure 3 illustrates this divide: whilst the overall progression rate for disadvantaged students (measured by free school meal eligibility) rose from 17.4% in 2008/09 to 29% in 2022/23 – representing a 67% increase – high-tariff institutions increased from 2.3% to just 6.1%. In practice, approximately 20% of undergraduates at research-intensive institutions are from a working class background.[52] Although the rate of access to high-tariff institutions remains significantly below that of less selective universities, the relative increase since 2008 is much larger (a 165% rise), reflecting a particularly low starting point.

The most significant barrier for disadvantaged pupils progressing into higher education is prior attainment. Less selective institutions can mitigate this by setting lower barriers to entry, and accepting a broader range of prior qualifications, including vocational routes. There's no doubt that this has been successful in terms of access: at some lower tariff institutions disadvantaged students make up the overwhelming majority of their intake.

In contrast, more selective institutions face a different set of choices if they are to widen access meaningfully. They can:

1. Lower barriers to entry through contextual offers
2. Invest in school-based interventions to raise attainment, and/or
3. Develop targeted outreach to identify and support high-achieving, disadvantaged students who might not otherwise apply

Contextual offers are a key mechanism for widening access at highly selective institutions. This approach involves considering an applicant's achievements in the context of their individual circumstances, such as attending a low-performing school, living in an area of high deprivation, or being eligible for free school meals.

Contextual offers typically involve lowering entry requirements for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the University of Manchester and the University of Bath may make offers up to two grades lower for eligible applicants, looking at factors such as FSM-status, postcode, school performance or care experience. This is in recognition that grades are influenced by a range of different social and economic factors, and that a student who achieves high marks in a challenging context may have demonstrated greater potential than one with similar grades from a more advantaged background.

> *"We know empirically that if you come from a particular type of school you will achieve two grades lower, on average**. Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not.** We had a huge and really soul-searching and agonising process of moving to contextual offers, which was one of the few things not done by consensus. It was imposed, and was really resented and quite significantly fought against by people for a number of years.*
>
> *One of the expectations of the critics was that students would come in on contextual offers, and they would struggle, they would fail, and it would be a big disaster. But of course, the evidence was precisely the opposite. **We know that in nearly all subject areas the grades you come in on are not reflective of your final degree classification. Those students came in on contextual offers and did really well**." University Vice-Chancellor*

Evidence suggests that these offers can have significant impact on widening participation. A recent study at Durham University found that as the number of contextual offers made by the university increased, participation for those from areas of highest deprivation increased from 15.4% to 22.3%. Whilst contextually admitted students did have slightly lower average marks and were less likely to graduate with a first class degree, pass rates did remain high at 90%, and more than 80% graduated with at least a 2:1. Importantly, there is little evidence to support the claim that contextual offers 'set students up to fail'- rather, they provide opportunities for academically talented individuals who might have otherwise been overlooked.[53]

Contextual offers are an important tool in an institution's widening participation toolkit, but it is unlikely to significantly move the dial on its own. Most students with a contextual offer end up meeting the original grade requirements anyway. Contextual offers seem to have more impact on a student's confidence, potentially helping them secure a place at a more-selective institution than they would have applied to otherwise, but they are unlikely to be bringing in new students who wouldn't have gone to higher education otherwise. Moreover, not all universities use contextual admissions, and even for those that do, they do not always advertise this publicly to prospective students. Disparities in policies create a complex landscape for applicants to navigate, which is a barrier particularly for students without graduate parents who are less likely to understand the higher education system.[54]

**Case study: Warwick Scholars Programme, University of Warwick**

The Warwick Scholars programme is an example of how targeted university initiatives can drive social mobility and widen access to selective higher education providers for disadvantaged pupils. Launched in 2019, the programme was designed in response to the persistent underrepresentation of students from low-income and non-traditional backgrounds in high-tariff and selective institutions. By combining academic, financial and pastoral support, the programme aims to ensure that "access to a world-leading university [is] open to people from all backgrounds".[55]

In the West Midlands, the gap in progression into higher education between the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals and those who aren't stands at 19%. To help combat this, the programme specifically targets high-achieving but disadvantaged pupils in the West Midlands who are most likely to be excluded from elite university pathways.

Crucially, the programme offers long-term, holistic support for Scholars. From Year 12 onwards Scholars are offered a blend of academic enrichment, mentoring and practical career advice and guidance. This includes one-to-one A-Level tuition, revision bootcamps, skills workshops and opportunities to meet current Warwick students as part of aspiration-raising initiatives. The academic support aims not only to help improve attainment but also to demystify the university application process, which can often beopaque or intimidating to pupils who may be the first in their family to attend university.

Recognising the financial barriers are often major obstacles to university access, Scholars receive up to £4,500 per year in bursary support and a 50% reduction in tuition fees. Whilst the tuition fee reduction helps to alleviate some of the issues around disadvantaged students being more debt adverse, the bursary supports with accommodation costs, helping mitigate the need for students to undertake paid work at the detriment to their studies or engagement with extra-curricular activities.

Alongside academic and financial support, Scholars also receive a contextual offer to study at the university. Typically, the university will make reduced offers of two to four grades below standard entry requirements.

Since its inception the number of Warwick Scholars has grown rapidly, with over 1,600 students supported to date. 85% of scholars graduate with a First or Upper Second Class degree.

## Whilst access has improved, gaps in outcomes based on socioeconomic status persist

> *"Empirically what we see is that as higher education expands, rather than leading to equalisation [between socioeconomic groups] other processes start to kick in whereby we see people from advantaged backgrounds trying to secure ever-higher qualifications." Academic*

Despite notable progress in widening access, significant gaps remain in student outcomes based on socioeconomic status. These disparities can be seen across the student lifecycle, from graduate rates and degree classifications, to employment prospects and long-term earnings.

Students from less advantaged backgrounds are still less likely to complete their degrees and, when they do, are less likely to graduate with top honours.[56] Much of these gaps can be attributed to differences in prior attainment, but not all of it. Persistent inequalities in support, networks, and financial security continue to influence student outcomes.

These gaps extend into the labour market. University graduates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do see substantial returns from higher education, but they are less likely than their more advantaged peers to enter high-status professions and achieve top earnings. Analysis from the Sutton Trust shows that only 22% of disadvantaged graduates go on to earn in the top quintile, versus 46% of those who attended private schools. And a significant "class pay gap" persists even after controlling for institution and subject studied.[57]

The graduate premium is larger for graduates who attend high-tariff, selective institutions. A longstanding debate has centred around whether this is simply a reflection of selectivity: are these institutions just admitting high-attaining students who would have achieved strong outcomes regardless of where they study? Recent analysis by TASO has helped clarify this question. By controlling for prior attainment and other demographic factors, they found that graduates from the most selective institutions still received a larger graduate premium. For students who had been eligible for free school meals that attended a top third HE provider, they benefit from a £13,200 earnings increase 16 years after Key Stage 4, compared £6,600 for those who attended a non-top-third institution.[58]

> *"Universities have a very large effect on students' future trajectory.* ***Attendance at very top schools especially not only makes students much more likely to be economically successful****, but it's especially impactful in putting students on a trajectory to leadership positions in society. They are much more like to attend elite graduate schools, more likely to end up working in their early careers at high-paying firms." Academic*

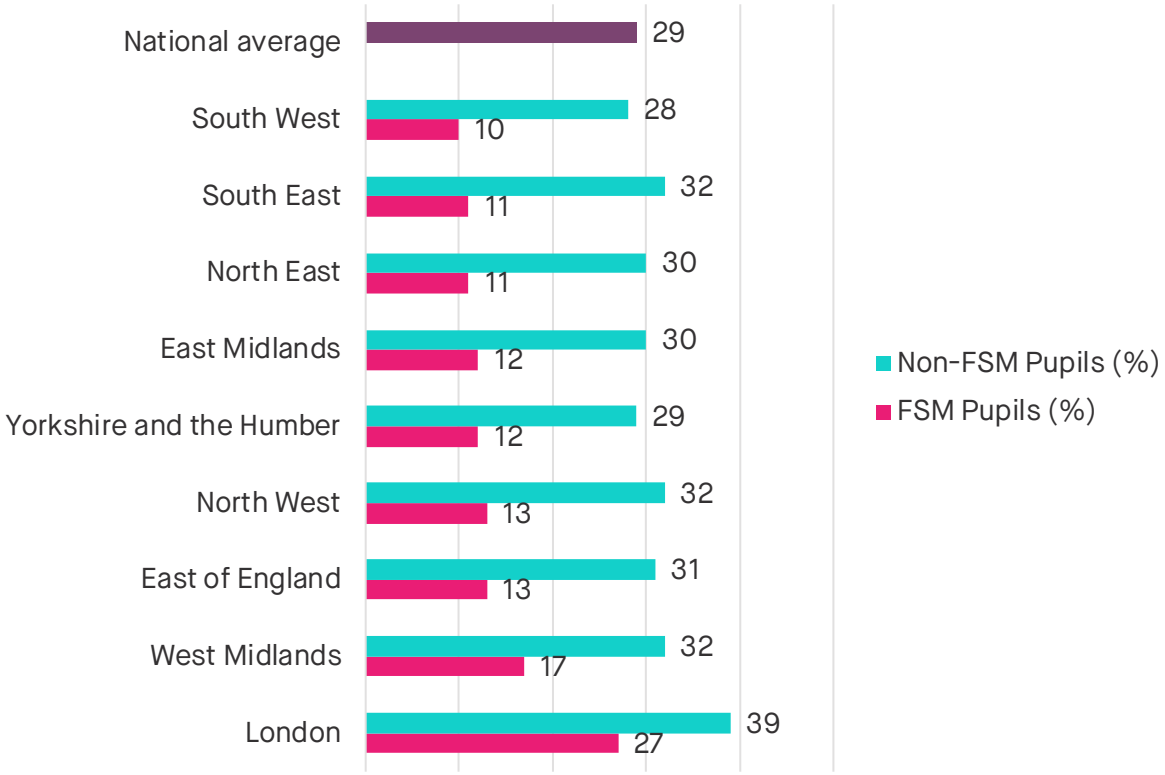
Similar findings were made by the Sutton Trust, who calculated a 'mobility rate' for individual universities, subjects and degrees based on access and outcomes.[59] The picture is positive for students who do attend higher education: graduates are almost four times more likely to become socially mobile than people who do not attend university. Whilst access rates were lower for selective universities, success is higher – for the most selective Russell Group institutions, the access rate is just

1.7%, but the success rate of moving into the top 20% of incomes is 59%. The least selective post-92 universities, in comparison, have an access rate of 10.7% and a success rate of 18.5%. More selective institutions offered the best chance for disadvantaged students of becoming high earners later in life, and is associated with a lower class pay gap amongst their graduates.

Many of the top-ranking universities for social mobility are less selective institutions located in London, such as Westminster, City and Greenwich. These universities combine relatively high access rates with good graduate earnings, likely reflecting the higher salaries available in the capital and the larger pool of high-achieving disadvantaged students in London. In contrast, most Russell Group institutions, whilst delivering strong labour market outcomes, admit so few that their overall mobility rates are below average. Queen Mary University of London is a notable exception, performing exceptionally well on both access and outcomes and taking first place of all other universities. It's also important to note that these types of league tables of social mobility show a relatively narrow picture of student access and graduate outcomes. They don't, for example, measure staff diversity, knowledge exchange or civic engagement, and taking a more holistic view of an institutions contribution to social mobility may yield different results.

## And socioeconomic gaps in access and outcomes are compounded by regional disparities

**Figure 4: Chart showing the proportion of FSM and non-FSM pupils with an undergraduate degree by age 22, by region**




*Source: SMF recreation of Sutton Trust data*[60]

The London bubble of attainment does not just influence London institutions, which have a wider pool of high-attaining disadvantaged students to recruit from. Outside of London, more selective institutions that have increased their access rates have predominantly recruited from pupils within London. The gap between disadvantaged students in, for example, the South West, and disadvantaged students in London accessing higher education stands at 30%. New Sutton Trust analysis, which combined school, higher education and employment data, calculated a social mobility score for each constituency in the country. The top 20 constituencies for social mobility are all in London, and all in the top 50 bar 8 were also in the capital.[61] Looking at higher education outcomes, 27% of FSM pupils from London hold an undergraduate degree by age 22, compared to 10% in the South West, and 11% in the South East and North East (Figure 4).

The issues of "cold spots" in higher education, referring to geographic areas where access to university level study is limited or absent, is becoming of increasing concern as financial pressures risk course closures or, in extreme cases, the possibility of whole institutional failure. Cold spots can significantly constrain the educational and economic prospects of residents, limiting opportunities for young people to develop skills and for universities to contribute to regional growth and social mobility.

Recent mapping by the British Academy and others has highlighted that cold spots are not evenly distributed across England. For example, the South West region is widely recognised as a higher education cold spot, with some of the lowest rates of HE progression and social mobility in the country. At age 17, 36% of young people in the South West stated that they were very likely to go to university, compared to 63% in London.[62] These disparities in access cannot be explained by deprivation alone. Factors such as rurality, poor transport links and a lack of local provision play a significant role, particularly for coastal and rural communities.

Subject-specific cold spots also exist, and are becoming of more concern as arts, humanities and language courses are often some of the first to be cut in institutional restructuring programmes. The British Academy's interactive map shows that for SHAPE subjects (Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy), many students must travel more than 60km to access degree-level provision.[63] This is a particular challenge given that previous research has shown that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to want to study closer to home.[64]

Structural changes in the sector have left limited policy and regulatory options to address these gaps. Since the abolition of student number controls and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, there is no requirement for regional planning of provision. The Office for Students has no specific mandate, powers or funding to support new providers in underserved areas, nor to incentivise current providers to expand the geographic range of their current provision, for example through regional collaboration or online courses.[65]

Whilst the issues of cold spots in provision is important, we should not overlook the fact that simply having a higher education provider in the local area does not

guarantee access for local disadvantaged pupils. Conversations with senior staff across the sector revealed a widespread perception that more selective institutions were benefitting disproportionately from the high attainment of London, with the majority of their students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being recruited from the capital. Local recruitment, particularly in the areas of most deprivation, was perceived to be low (although data on the number of local FSM students by provider is not publicly available).

> *"I think geography and demographics work is so important. It gives a lot of perception challenges for the institution... for example**, if a local student attends an open day and all they hear when they speak to staff and student ambassadors and other applicants is, frankly, a London or South East accent, as opposed to the local regional accent... It creates a bit of a perception of actually, well, would I belong in this kind of environment?"***
> *Head of Widening Participation at a selective university*

On the one hand, it could be argued that this is not necessarily a negative. Numerous studies have found that the aspect of university requiring students to be geographically mobile – to move, live and learn away from home – is associated with higher earnings later in life, preparing students for a workforce that often requires geographical mobility to large cities for graduate jobs.[66]

On the other hand, there is a compelling case that universities have a duty and responsibility to their local region. That it should not be left solely to the less selective institutions to provide opportunities for local people, and that it is not acceptable for higher tariff institutions to claim progress on widening access if they aren't bringing those benefits to those outside of the capital. That it matters not just if a university is contributing to social mobility for *anyone,* but that they are promoting social mobility *in their region.*

This is an issue both of fairness and of perception. It seems fundamentally unfair that a disadvantaged but high-achieving student from London might have a greater chance of gaining entry to a selective university a hundred miles away, despite having multiple high-quality providers on their doorstep, whilst a similarly disadvantaged pupil living near the institution has less opportunity. Social mobility and opportunities are unequally distributed in this country and, as Figure 2 illustrates, access to university is disproportionately concentrated among those from the capital. The public perception of universities is closely tied to their role in serving local communities. When universities are seen to provide for local students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, it strengthens their legitimacy and value in the eyes of the public. Communities are more likely to view universities as forces for good in their region when they see young people around them, or they themselves as a young person, benefitting directly from their presence. Conversely, if universities seem disconnected from their local context this can erode public trust and support.

### Leave to achieve?

> *"The traditional model is that you take a promising but disadvantaged young student, you take them away from their home and their local community, and*

> *you put them in an elite university where they get taught how to be middle-class… how to speak and dress middle-class and how to act 'professional'." Policymaker*

The traditional narrative that upward social mobility requires leaving home to attend distant, elite universities is increasingly misaligned with the lived realities of many disadvantaged students. Financial pressures, cultural ties and care-giving responsibilities can make relocation impractical or undesirable. A growing number of students are choosing to stay local, commute, or study part time.[67]

The Sutton Trust found that disadvantaged students are over three times more likely to commute from home.[68] Financial constraints are a significant factor; a survey by Blackbullion found that 46% of higher education students identify as a commuter student and 20% were commuting out of necessity. These students reported a financial shortfall of £782 per month, £160 higher than the average student.[69]

The level of student maintenance as it is currently set is clearly a key barrier to social mobility for young people. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds should have the full range of opportunities to pick the university and course that is right for them and their career aspirations, and to be financially supported in doing so. Maintenance support has failed to rise with inflation: the gap between the maximum level of maintenance available and the actual cost of being a student stands at £8,405 for a student studying outside of London.[70] The household income threshold at which a student is entitled to the maximum maintenance loan has been frozen in real cash terms since 2008.[71] If we are to close access and outcome gaps between richer and poorer students, maintenance needs to be addressed.

But it's important to note that not all commuter students are doing so out of financial necessity – in fact, if we take the Blackbullion survey as representative, approximately 80% have chosen to commute for other reasons. In interviews there was a strong sense that the 'leave to achieve' mentality left students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feeling disconnected from their local communities, with interviewees discussing the cultural cost of social mobility that left them feeling "from everywhere and nowhere", and that it could put off young people who wanted to retain their local roots from going to university.

> *"When we speak to disadvantaged kids in schools, they often don't want to move away. They want to keep that local connection.* ***It's like this idea of going to university and having to move away contributes to a feeling of social disconnection****." University Pro-Vice Chancellor*

> *"You end up having different priorities, different views, and you end of feeling very disconnected from your home community. I think I personally benefited from getting to move away to university, but* ***it was also really hard and upsetting from a personal identity point of view. You end of feeling like you are from everywhere and nowhere****." Third-sector representative*

Throughout interviews the idea that true social mobility was about giving young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the fullest range of options and pathways possible came up repeatedly. As did the concern that for disadvantaged young people who wish to stay local, outside of London their options may be limited.

Importantly, this is not about forcing - or even necessarily incentivising - disadvantaged pupils who would have otherwise been geographically mobile to stay local. Geographical mobility stimulated by higher education has been shown to reduce the inequalities in opportunities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, and mobility should be facilitated where it is the right choice for the individual student.[72] Rather, the goal is to ensure that local opportunities exist for pupils who want or need to stay close to home, who might otherwise not consider university at all.

This approach would also encourage institutions to take a more active interest in the attainment of local school-age pupils, as these students would represent a larger proportion of their recruitment pool.

**Case study: Durham Inspired North East Scholarships, Durham University**

Durham University's Durham Inspired North East Scholarship scheme, launched in 2020, aims to break down barriers to higher education for talented students from the North East of England. This programme was set up in recognition of the persistent underrepresentation of young people from the North East in selective institutions.

Every year, approximately half a dozen students from the North East who demonstrate academic ability and potential, but who face financial or other disadvantages, are awarded scholarships worth up to £5,000 per year for the duration of their undergraduate studies. The scholarships are open to applicants from County Durham, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, and Teesside, with eligibility based on household income, school background, and other widening participation criteria.

Demand for these scholarships has been strong. Between the 2023-24 academic year and the 2025-26 academic year applications rose by 29%.

> *"Individual bursaries based just on socioeconomic status only get you so far. The idea was to bridge the final gap for regional low income students. Historically, in the North East families have a lot of concern about debt, and they may have reservations about student debt. We wanted to remove that barrier to access."*

The programme, representatives of the university said in an interview for this project, aims to help local disadvantaged young people see Durham as an option for them. Whilst maintaining it's global reputation and reach, the University also recognises its regional responsibility: "we see ourselves as a global institution, and our roots and connections in the North East are really important to us.".

Critically, the scholarships don't just enable local pupils to access Durham's educational offering, they also allow them to be able to fully participate in the full range of university life when they are there. Many awardees cite that it has helped them not have to undertake so many hours of paid work, and thus

enables them to be able to take part in extra- and co-curricular activities. It enables them to engage with the wider student experience, participate in college life, take part in sports, performing arts and so on, which is particularly powerful for pupils who may have come from schools with limitations on such facilities and opportunities.

**Case study: Guaranteed offers for local applicants, Middlesex University**

Middlesex University has developed a strategic partnership with their local London Borough, building on a longstanding relationship with local schools and public services. This collaboration acts as an example of how locally focused universities can act as an anchor institution, supporting social mobility for local residents.

Recognising that many students in the local borough were familiar with the traditional, residential three-year university model, often associated with Russell Group institutions, Middlesex identified a gap in awareness from pupils, parents, carers and teachers regarding high-quality, local and technical education pathways.

The university therefore launched a guaranteed offer scheme for all applicants from schools within the local area who reach the entry criteria for a given course. This scheme is designed to raise awareness of alternative, local pathways and position the university as a first-choice destination for students who would like to stay close to home. For professional courses such as nursing, midwifery and education, which require interviews as part of professional body standards, the university guarantees local applicants an interview.

This partnership extends beyond admissions, with significant engagement with local schools. Academics regularly visit schools to deliver masterclasses, and run workshops on university applications, personal statement writing, and interview preparation for professional courses. The university also offers career workshops and a personal statement review service, helping to demystify the application process and raise aspiration among local pupils.

When students are at Middlesex, the university works closely with the Local Authority to secure placements for students in local health and education settings. Many Middlesex students go on to work in the borough, contributing to the local economy and to the workforce of local public services.

# CHAPTER THREE – STAFF

**Chapter summary**

1. There has been increasing political and policy attention on widening access for disadvantaged pupils into higher education, and yet very little focus across the sector on the socioeconomic diversity of staff
2. Data in this area is little or non-existent. Very few institutions collect socioeconomic data of their employees, and the last study on the class background of academics in the UK was carried out more than 30 years ago. Interviewees report that institutions can be hesitant to discuss class
3. Based on the limited existing evidence, the proportion of academics from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is likely to be small relative to the wider population. Early educational disadvantage and poor representation at postgraduate level restrict the pool from which universities can recruit from
4. The exclusion of class from the 2010 Equality Act was identified as the direct cause for this lack of data. Despite established and successful equality initiatives around race, disability, and gender, class has been sidelined

> ***"Universities are big employers in their regions and have the potential to drive social mobility not just for students, but for staff as well****. But it's not always seen as a strategic priority in the same way as student access."*
> *University leader*

## Socioeconomic inequality in the university workforce is deeply entrenched and reflects broader social structures

### Universities are significant employers, and yet we know little about the socioeconomic background of those they employ

Universities in the UK are significant employers. They employ locally, nationally and – particularly in the academic workforce - internationally. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that, across the sector, higher education institutions employ 398,170 full-time equivalent staff members across academic, professional, skilled trades and service occupations.[73] Analysis in 2020 found that universities were often among the largest local employers; 19 higher education institutions directly employed more than 5,000 individuals, and 10 of these were employing at least 5% of all jobs in their local authority area. In London, this amounts to 150,000 jobs. Smaller cities can be heavily dependent on their local university for employment – in St Andrews, for example, students make up a third of the local population and the university provides almost 5,000 jobs in the local area.[74]

Much has been made of universities in their roles as employers. Particularly as the financial context for institutions worsens, their role as significant local employers is often cited by university leaders, mission groups, and MPs, evoking a feeling that institutions are simply 'too big to fail'. In a debate on university funding in April 2025, Janet Daby, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, said:

> *"Higher education providers are vital employers in their local communities and across England. They provide not only jobs for academic staff, such as professors and researchers, but a wide range of non-academic roles in administration, facilities management, IT, student support services and many more."*[75]

And yet despite being such significant employers, there is little data available on the socioeconomic makeup of the university workforce. Whilst HESA report on the age, disability status, ethnicity, nationality and sex of staff members, and on the socioeconomic background of students, data on class background is not collected or published for those employed by universities.

One study published in 2022, which examined the socioeconomic background of tenure-track professors in the United States, found that faculty are up to 25 times more likely than the general public to have a parent with a PhD. The study collected national level data on education, income and university rankings of over 7,000 tenure-track faculty across eight different disciplines. Almost all of the 7,000 faculty surveyed grew up in high socioeconomic status families. Half had at least one parent with a master's degree or a PhD, and faculty were more likely to have grown up in wealthy and urban neighbourhoods. These trends were even more acute for more prestigious institutions.[76]

Comparable studies have not been carried out in the UK, at least not recently. One study published 30 years ago, utilising data from 1989, found that only 13% of professors had fathers in manual occupations. A 2011 survey of 2,500 academics found that 23% reported coming from a working-class background.[77] The Sutton Trust's 'Elitist Britain' report found that academia had one of the worst representation of employees from working-class backgrounds.[78]

The socioeconomic data of staff is not publicly available through HESA because most institutions do not collect this data themselves. Throughout interviews with leaders across the sector, I was able to find just two institutions that currently collect socioeconomic data of new starters at the institution. Now, this was not a representative survey – the real number of institutions collecting this data is likely to be more than two, but unlikely to be much more than a handful.

> *"I know that a lot of corporates have been [collecting socioeconomic data] for a while. They've done something about it, at least, which we [the sector] haven't really. We do collect data on social class when people are coming into the university, and as far as I'm aware, we're one of the only ones that do it.* ***If we don't collect this data we have no way of responding, for example, to things like the class pay gap. We don't even know if we've got one****."*
> *Director of Widening Participation*

Across interviews there was a sense that universities in particular are behind the times on discussions about class. It was commonly noted that whilst the sector has established and successful equality charters for, for example, gender and race, we still do not even know the class background of the university workforce. In comparison, the Civil Service now collects data on the socioeconomic background of staff, having committed in their 2017 Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy to have established a baseline of current socioeconomic diversity by 2020.[79] The BBC similarly collects this data, having been the first UK broadcaster to collect and publish this.[80] The Solicitors Regulation Authority requires law firms to collect and report socioeconomic data, and the Financial Conduct Authority has previous recommended voluntary reporting of socioeconomic background.[81] [82]

The lack of data on class in the university sector is thought to stem from its exclusion from the 2010 Equality Act. The Equality Act aims to protect individuals from discrimination on the basis of nine protected characteristics including race, sex, disability, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, and marriage and civil partnership.[83] However, social class or socioeconomic status was not included as a protected characteristic. This means that discrimination or disadvantage based on class is not explicitly protected under UK equality law, and individuals who experience bias due to their social class have no direct legal recourse under the act. It also means that many workplaces do not collect data on socioeconomic status. Many have argued that class should be included under the act, including the Social Mobility Commission, the Trade Union Congress and the British Psychological Society.[84]

> *"I think employers overall are very behind on class diversity as an issue. I think the reason for that is just the fact that it wasn't in the Equalities Act, and because it isn't a protected characteristic**. People view protected characteristics as the things they should be doing stuff on, and then class has taken much longer to get up into the conversation**." Third sector representative*

> *"A lot of work on the diversity of university staff members sits with HR departments. And HR departments are informed by legislation, and by employment rights, and that focuses on the protected characteristics. **The lack of focus on socioeconomic status for staff is as a direct result of what was included, or not included, in the Equality Act**." Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at a university*

In interviews there were also common misconceptions about collecting the socioeconomic data of staff. Many university staff members cited concerns about which measures to use, and whether they would be appropriate. For example, highlighting that measures used for students (such as free-school meals status) may not appropriately reflect the class background of an academic in their mid-forties. Others raised concerns that collecting data of this nature would be onerous, difficult and bureaucratic. In reality, collecting such data is unlikely to be any more difficult than the diversity and inclusion data institutions already collect. As a staff member from the university which has recently begun collecting this data said:

> *"It's essentially just a couple of extra questions on the EDI survey when people join. It wasn't really much of a problem. It took a while, just because things do take a while at university. We had to go through X amount of committees and get approvals, but it was fairly okay. Actually, I thought there might be some squeamishness about asking some of these questions, but it wasn't really much of a problem." University staff member*

And there are many established question sets that institutions can use to collect such data. Both the Social Mobility Commission and the Sutton Trust have toolkits available for employers.[85] [86]

### Long-standing socioeconomic differences in education outcomes shape the academic workforce

Socioeconomic and class inequalities in terms of who gets access to more prestigious and better compensated jobs is deeply entrenched and a product of an array of structural inequalities and barriers. Universities, in their roles as employers, are both shaped by and contribute to these broader inequalities.

> *"We are in a situation where **deep, structural, historical inequality is extraordinary powerful [in England]**. There is massive structural inequality between richer and poorer, between the South of the country and the North. All of these things are deeply embedded, and universities, sitting in and serving particular communities, are therefore really impacted by this." University Vice-Chancellor*

Despite the lack of reliable data on socioeconomic diversity in the UK higher education workforce, there's little reason to believe that it would be much better than the United States, where studies find that the academic workforce is highly exclusive. Socioeconomic inequalities start early in the academic pipeline and worsen as people progress through the system.

In school, disadvantaged pupils have lower attainment on average than their more affluent peers, and this gap widens through the education system.[87] School attainment then determines the pool of students from which universities, particularly selective universities, recruit, and much of the difference in access can be explained by prior attainment gaps. However, even when controlling for prior attainment, fewer students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attend selective institutions than you would expect based on their grades – there are about 4,000 'missing' state school kids from the higher education sector, who have not gotten into university but should have based on their grades.[88] There are then significant gaps in access to postgraduate degrees; only 4% of those from the poorest quintile of state school students progress into postgraduate study, compared to 27% of advantaged private school pupils. Critically, these gaps can all be explained by prior educational and university attainment gaps.[89] Research has also shown that the type of institution attended at undergraduate level plays a significant role on postgraduate progression, which in turn limits those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds progressing into 'elite' postgraduate programmes. "First-degree institution [for postgraduate entry] appears to be particularly important [...] there are considerable inequalities in initial access to first degrees in universities of differing status; thereafter, graduates tend to 'stay in their lane' during their postgraduate transitions".[90] Improving initial access

to undergraduate degrees could therefore go a long way in increasing diversity at postgraduate level, too.

> *"There's a very strong filter. You've got good diversity at undergraduate level, pretty good diversity at postgraduate taught level. Then you go into postgraduate research. And* ***then there's a great funnel, a kind of narrowing to social mobility****. […] We know that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have a different attitude to incurring debt. Once you get to a certain level, you don't want any more. So that precludes some people from taking part in postgraduate study. And, of course,* ***that's the engine room that drives your academic staff, and the engine room that'll therefore drive your social mobility****." University Vice-Chancellor*

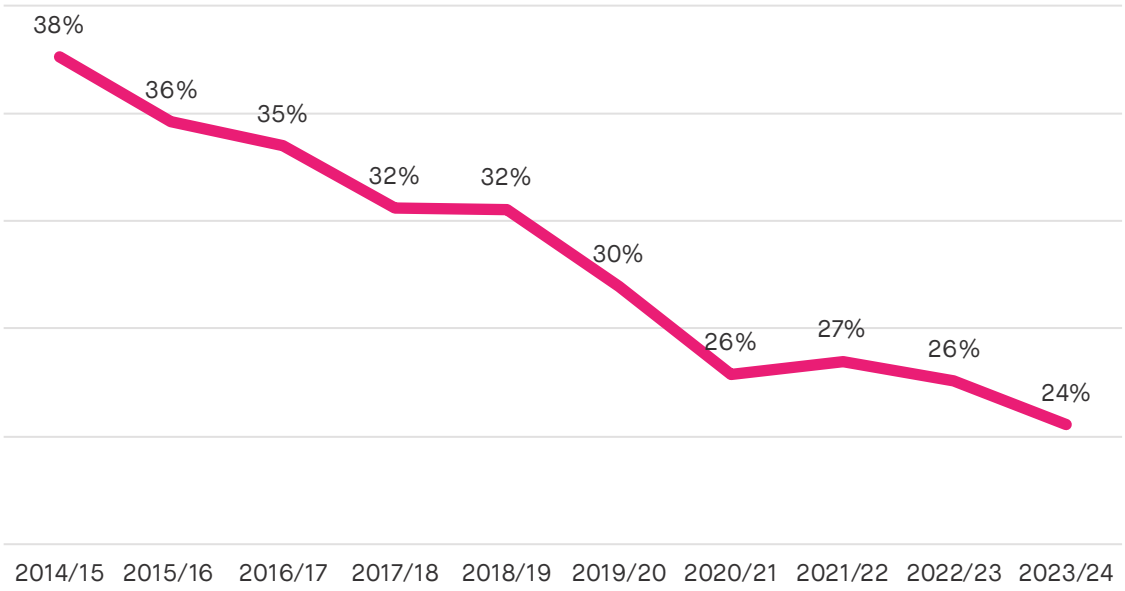
These gaps in socioeconomic outcomes matter because they determine for the most part the academic recruitment pool. To work as an academic at a university you need a PhD, but this is also often the case for the top senior managerial and leadership roles too. Roles such as Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Pro Vice-Chancellor almost always require a doctorate, a professorial title or an academic background.[91]

> *"Graduates of research intensive universities are much more likely to do a PhD, PhDs are much more likely to be based in the research intensive universities, especially the most elite ones. And then* ***getting a job in an academic role increasingly depends on having a degree from a certain sort of institution and having had other opportunities as well, some of which are more affordable if you're from a more advantaged background already****." Academic*

### Academia as a career is often too precarious for those without a financial safety net

For an aspiring academic from a disadvantaged background, even if they have managed to attain highly and complete an undergraduate and postgraduate degree, many may be prevented from progressing due to the nature of academic work and contracts. Commonly raised throughout interviews were the barriers of insecure, short-term contracts. These contracts are a common 'first step' into the academic job market post-PhD, and a fundamental part of an industry which implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) requires employees to move – move research groups, institutions, and countries. In 2023/24, 24% of all academics employed across the sector were on 'atypical' contracts, which includes those on short-term (e.g. less than four consecutive weeks) or one-off contracts (Figure 4).

**Figure 5: Chart showing the percentage of academics employed on atypical contracts across the sector, from 2014-2024**




*Source: SMF analysis of HESA data*

As shown in Figure 4, the proportion of academics employed on these contracts has actually declined over time – as has the proportion on fixed-term contracts. However, academics seem to be spending more time on temporary contracts throughout their careers. Interviewees raised that, traditionally, early career researchers would have undertaken one or two fixed-term positions after finishing their PhD, before securing a lectureship. This is the "postdoctoral" phase of an academic career, which had previously come with a reasonable expectation that the researcher would secure a permanent role within the next few years. Now, early career academics more commonly jump from one temporary contract to another, and with a third of university researchers having been on temporary contracts for more than 10 years this phase is increasingly less transitional and no longer confined to just those early in their careers.[92] The University and College Union (UCU) stated that "while a generation ago many colleagues considered a period of casualisation a 'rite of passage' or a necessary career 'stage', in 2025 job insecurity is the norm, and a form of working condition rather than a 'stage' in an academic career".[93]

In interviews it was noted that whilst obtaining an academic career may be seen as experiencing occupational social mobility for someone from a lower socioeconomic background, precarity of contracts and comparably lower salaries to the corporate sector holds back the extent to which academia is a viable route for social mobility in terms of financial security.

> *"I think [the barriers for working class academics] specifically, and I'm speaking a little bit to my experience of doing a PhD, and seeing the world from that point of view... Part of the reason I didn't go into it is it's loads of really short term contracts, that are not reliable and you have to move or be willing to move potentially all over the country or internationally.* ***If you don't have much of a safety net, it's a really big problem****." Third-sector representative*

> ***"A large part of the [academic] system is predicated on you being a mobile person**. The majority of research funding will be provided by project grants. Your contracts are linked to a project grant, which will be three to five years long. So it's not necessarily precarity, but it is fixed term, and that's how we run the research system." Mission group representative*

## Experiences of working class academics

The image of a high-achieving, ambitious working class person who manages to beat the odds and overcome pervasive barriers of educational disadvantage and 'make it' in an academic career is one of aspirational social mobility. That is, that through grit and hard work they can escape the confines of their background and are able to reap the rewards of a career in a prestigious sector. Scholars writing about class have described it as a "[belief] that entry into the academic world is a ticket out of the working class".[94] But accounts of the experiences of working class academics in academia, and insights shared through interviews for this project, highlight that escaping one's working class background is often neither achievable nor desirable.

Academics from working class backgrounds report facing systemic barriers to career progression because of their background, ranging from implicit to explicit bias and general feelings of being 'out of place' in academia. A survey on the experiences of class by staff in the post-16 education workforce from the University and College Union found that more than half of working class staff felt that there were barriers to recruitment because of their class background, and 61% felt that there were barriers to progression. These feelings were more common from staff in higher education institutions, compared to further education staff. 40% reported experiencing discrimination because of their accent, and 27% of working class staff in higher education reported being disadvantaged because of their family income.[95]

Commonly working class academics report a general feeling of not fitting in, lower sense of belonging to the institution, and a sense of alienation. This seems to be an extension of the experiences of working class students: the sense that you neither belong to the academy nor (anymore) to your background and home community continues into academic careers. Working class academics have described their experience as a 'liminal existence', a life of 'a class traveller betwixt and between different social worlds', and that they would often be reminded that 'they were strangers seeking to fit in in places not created for them'.[96]

When considering how class impacts career progression in academic, we are again hindered by poor data. Whilst qualitative insights paint a compelling picture of alienation, bias, and disadvantage, there is not sufficient data to determine whether this leads to socioeconomic disparities in the types of roles secured by working class academics. Nationally, professionals from working class backgrounds are paid 12% less per year[97] - larger than the gender pay gap - but we have no idea the extent of the class pay gap in the higher education sector.

## Experiences of professional staff members

> *"For non-academic staff, we do a huge amount of work. We have apprenticeship programmes. We do job shops in [the local city], to try and attract people in. We've increased the local makeup of our non-academic*

*staff body quite significantly, particularly since COVID." University Vice-Chancellor*

Of course, it is not only academics who work in universities. Across the sector there are approximately 160,000 non-academic staff members who work across professional, administrative and support functions that keep a university running.[98] Professional roles within universities are often seen as middle-class occupations with competitive salaries and pensions, and perhaps greater employment security compared to academic contracts.

Whilst data on the socioeconomic background of academics is poor, data on the backgrounds and experiences of professional service staff members is even worse. Socioeconomic background of these staff members is also not routinely collected by institutions and, whilst academic studies on class have interrogated the experiences of working class academics, very few have investigated the professional services part of the higher education workforce.

Research that has been carried out finds similar themes for the experiences of academics: a feeling of being out of place in the academy, and of facing progression barriers due to class.[99] The issues of educational disadvantage are likely to be experienced similarly, as many professional roles within universities also require a degree. In interviews, the tensions of experiencing social mobility as a staff member and how this can cause divisions with family and home community members who were socially immobile were commonly expressed. Professional staff members in particular reported not feeling like they properly belonged in the institution, and that to try to 'fit in' there was an experienced pressure to reject or hide their working class upbringing. They discussed feelings of isolation in the ways that colleagues spoke about local and working class communities, invoking classist stereotypes painting these groups as uneducated and unintelligent. This has been previously documented; Crew (2021) presented an interview with a working class academic at a Russell Group institution, who recounted a colleague consistently describing research respondents as "chavs".[100]

**Case study: University of Southampton Social Mobility Network**

The University of Southampton's Social Mobility Network stands as a pioneering initiative within the UK higher education space, having been recognised as an example of best practice across the sector in supporting both students and staff from working class and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While much of the sector's social mobility work has predominantly focused on students, the Network specifically recognises that staff from working class backgrounds also face barriers in recruitment, retention and career progression. Through a member-led, grassroots approach, the Network provides a platform for advocacy and peer support.

Launched in late 2021, responding to calls for greater representation and support for those from working class backgrounds, the Network was established jointly by the Students' Union and the University's Widening

Participation and Social Mobility team. The Network is open to staff and students who self-define as being from a low socioeconomic background, providing a safe and confidential space where staff can share their experiences of class-based barriers in the workplace. Events such as dedicated discussion forums and social gatherings allow staff to build networks and find solidary amongst the challenges of being working class in a predominantly middle-class academic environment.

The Network has contributed to awareness-raising campaigns, staff training and the development of more inclusive HR practices, such as successfully advocating for the collection of socioeconomic employee data. They also run events to actively celebrate working class culture and achievements, challenging deficit narratives and promoting pride in diverse backgrounds.

Initiatives like the "Class Ceiling" podcast and photography exhibition have provided platforms for students and staff to share their stories and foster greater understanding and representation across the university community. The Class Ceiling photography exhibition, for example, showcased portraits and testimonies of staff and alumni from working class backgrounds, sparking conversations about class, aspiration and the subtle barriers that persist in higher education.

> *"The exhibition was open to students, so they could go and see people who were like them some years ago and have managed to succeed in higher education. That was the key thing from the exhibition, but the point is for us to keep reinforcing the message that university isn't for a particular type of person or a particular class. It's there to develop people no matter what your background is."*

### Established equality charters and duties for other groups but class has been missed out

Over the past two decades, the university sector has made significant progress in advancing equality and diversity for staff, particularly through the establishment of sector-wide charters focused on gender and race. The Athena Swan Charter, introduced in 2005, was founded to address underrepresentation and barriers to career progression faced by women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) roles. Over time, its remit has broadened to encompass gender equality more widely within institutions and departments. Universities seeking Athena Swan accreditation undertake a self-assessment process, complete action plans, and are subject to an external review. They can then either be awarded bronze, silver, or gold. The Charter is a particular success story for the sector: 93% of participating institutions report a positive impact on gender issues,[101] and studies have shown a positive correlation between Athena Swan participation and gender representation in managerial and professorial roles.[102] Athena Swan status had also previously been closely linked to eligibility for certain research funding streams – it was, until 2020, a requirement to access funding from the National Institute for

Health Research, for example – embedding gender equality as a strategic priority across the sector.

Building on the perceived success of Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter (REC) was launched in 2016 by the Equality Challenge Unit (now Advance HE) as a response to persistent racial inequalities in higher education. The Charter aims to help universities and research institutes improve the representation, progression and success of Black, Asian and Minority ethnic people in HE. Similar to Athena Swan, the exercise consists of a self-assessment and action plans to close gaps between different ethnic groups.[103] Uptake of the REC has been slower, with 64 awards held across 100 members, compared to 985 Athena Swan awards held across 121 institutions and 864 departments.[104] [105] The efficacy of the Charter in improving staff diversity is also less well evidenced.[106] Despite this, participating institutions note that they found the process of applying to the REC of equal importance to the award, because it provided a framework for institutions to begin exploring discussions about racial equality at a strategic level, often for the first time.[107]

> *"**University workplaces are not seen to be credible aspirations for people in [working class] communities**. […] The great thing about a Charter is that it requires you to do things. You don't just have a Charter. You have a Charter because you have to do things, and then you're measured against the things that you have done and whether you've done them well or not. Something like that [for class] would be really productive." University Vice-Chancellor*

Despite these advances, there is no comparable charter or national framework for addressing socioeconomic background or class within the university workforce. While data on gender, ethnicity, disability and age are routinely collected and published for staff, the socioeconomic background of university employees remains largely invisible. Interviewees commonly felt that there was a nervousness to discuss class within institutions, despite a recognition that socioeconomic background is important at the student recruitment level.

> *"In my view, **people are really uncomfortable talking about class**. When you bring it up, people don't like talking about it, or they don't fully understand it. They're more open to talking about other protected characteristics and sorts of marginalisation of those groups. But for some reason, they don't want to talk about class." University staff member*

It is unlikely that this blind spot can continue for much longer. Increasingly policy and political discussions have started to turn to the underperformance of the white working class – particularly white working class boys and men. A recent paper in the Higher Education Policy Institute found that half a million young men have missed out on higher education over the past decade, resulting in more economic inactivity and a vulnerability to polarisation.[108] Similar trends were highlighted for the employment of white working class men by the Centre for Social Justice.[109] As mentioned previously, the class pay gap in the UK is thought to be larger than the gender pay gap. Intersecting identities will hit some groups particularly hard. For example, one interviewee who works on ethnic diversity in the research workforce noted that almost all of the initiatives shown to be most impactful in increasing racial diversity are initiatives that are actually about socioeconomic status, due to the correlation

between ethnicity and poverty.[110] At least when looking at educational outcomes, class seems to be a bigger driving force for disadvantage than other forms of marginalisation.

The reluctance to discuss class, paired with a lack of data and strategic focus, means that class-based disadvantage remains largely unaddressed within university workforces. Yet, the evidence is mounting that class is a powerful axis of inequality, often intersecting with other characteristics that compound disadvantage. As policy attention increasingly turns to the outcomes of the white working class and persistent class pay gaps, it is clear that universities cannot afford to ignore this issue any longer.

> *"**I think that a big reason of why the efforts of movements such as Reform have been so successful is in part that all these diversity initiatives are missing a huge chunk of [inequality], which is this class question**, and making sure that socioeconomic background is considered, because it does have a really big impact on where someone ends up.*
>
> *And also, in combination with other characteristics... working class women, or working class people who are Black, will have a certain set of circumstances and challenges because of their background. I would argue that you can only tackle these kind of diversity issues if you do them together, rather than focusing on one thing." Education policy expert*

# CHAPTER FOUR – LOCALITIES

**Chapter summary**

1. Universities are major civic institutions and employers within their regions, shaping local economies and communities beyond recruitment
2. Effective civic engagement requires moving beyond isolated outreach activities to adopt a whole-system, collaborative approach with local authorities, schools, businesses and community groups
3. Universities are part of a wider local ecosystem of education, but institutions' involvement in regional planning and development, including LSIPs, is sporadic
4. Local ecosystems of education should work harmoniously for young people and that pathways through and between stages and providers should be articulated and coherent. To enable this, universities must become more embedded in their regional planning systems

> *"The thing I've observed is that **as other arms of the state have stepped back, universities have stepped forward into so many spaces that were traditionally the purview of local government**. We've got examples of universities putting on mental health services, running bus routes, providing affordable housing." Mission group representative*

Universities have long been conceptualised as key drivers of social mobility in their regions through their educational mission, offering pathways for disadvantaged students to progress. However, their potential to drive broader social mobility extends beyond the classroom and lecture hall. As significant anchor institutions, embedded into their local economic and social ecosystems, universities have both the opportunity and responsibility to provide broader opportunities to their entire regional communities. As well as being educators and recruiters, university leaders hold key leadership roles in their local communities, working alongside MPs, Mayors, Councillors, local businesses and civic partners. This chapter examines how universities contribute to social mobility in their local areas through civic engagement, inequality reduction, economic development and regional collaborations.

The expectation on universities to do more not just on access but also in civic engagement has risen over recent years. Traditionally, the idea of a 'civic university' was largely discussed in relation to (ex)polytechnics. These were "local institutions explicitly founded to respond to local needs", as opposed to international research universities that focused on national and global needs, recruitment and impact.[111] Over the last fifteen years, a growing recognition that all universities, including more selective and research-intensive institutions, have a duty to their locality has characterised the current civic university movement. In a written statement in

January 2025 Bridget Phillipson, the Secretary of State for Education, set out what she wanted from higher education institutions in return for the uplift in the tuition fee cap. She said the increase would "help cement higher education providers' roles as engines of growth in the heart of communities across the country", and asked the sector to "demonstrate that, in return for the increased investment [...] they deliver the very best outcomes [...] for the country", and "play a greater civic role in their communities".[112]

The contemporary view of universities as anchor institutions – in the *heart of communities* – recognises their permanence and commitment to place. Unlike private corporations that might relocate for financial advantage, universities typically maintain their original geographical roots (whilst sometimes setting up satellite campuses elsewhere in the country and abroad). This stability positions them as natural catalysts for long-term social mobility in their localities and has resulted in a growing view that civic engagement is not a 'nice to do', but a fundamental duty of an institution.

> *"There is no university that doesn't have links to the local area. You took their name, you're responsible for them. Working people in that area... **you owe them something as the bearer of the name of this place.**" Higher education policymaker*

> *"I do think that the clues in the name. We are the University of Southampton or we are the University of Brighton or the University of Sussex or wherever, right? **I do think that we belong to our regions, and we have a responsibility to them.** It's in our civic charters going way back to when we were established. And I think that's very important." Head of Widening Participation at a Russell Group university*

The importance of civic mindedness in the sector has perhaps never been more imperative. In 2019 the UPP Foundation wrote "as universities have become magnets for global students and massive research programmes, their connection to their place and the people who created them can sometimes be called into question: how are the people in a place benefiting from the university success story?".[113] This question is particularly pressing as universities face unprecedented financial and political challenges, and as a small but vocal and potentially growing minority of the public question the value and purpose of the sector.

In an era of rising populism – where low levels of graduate attainment and local economic decline fuel populist narratives[114] [115] – universities in both the UK and US have increasingly become targets, portrayed as out-of-touch "establishment" institutions. In this context, civic engagement is not just a matter of social responsibility but one of institutional survival. As Lord Kerslake wrote in 2019, "while universities are vital to their places, they also need the active support of their communities in these turbulent and challenging times".[116] Without the trust and recognition of local communities, universities risk losing the social and political legitimacy needed to garner public and political support, especially for continued funding during periods of fiscal constraint.

## Universities can contribute to social mobility in their region by providing high-quality, high-paid jobs for local residents

As discussed in chapter three, universities are major employers in their localities, creating both direct employment and stimulating job creation through supply chains, student spending, and knowledge transfer activities. Analysis by Hatch Regeneris for the University and College Union found that for every person a university directly employs, on average they support another additional job in the immediate local economy.[117] The quality of employment provided by universities also contributes positively to local social mobility. Universities typically pay above-average wages: in 2023, 40% of the sector were an accredited Real Living Wage Employer, compared to 28% of Local Authorities and 17% of NHS Trusts.[118] In the North East, the number of local people employed by a university is more than double those employed in car manufacturing, and the average salary at the University of Sunderland is more than a third higher than the local average.[119]

Universities generate employment across a spectrum of occupational and skill sets, from maintenance and service roles to highly specialised research and academic roles. This diversity of opportunity is particularly valuable in regions with limited professional employment options.

> *"The university is generally seen as being quite a posh place. So the cleaners talk to the cleaners and they say, you know, this is a little bubble. It's not for us. We work here, but it's not for us." University Vice-Chancellor*

> *"We were really very heavily involved in the City of Culture as an employer, to be an employer of note, to do things like respect the Living Wage Foundation's rates of pay. Those sorts of things are really important parts of civic engagement." University Vice-Chancellor*

However, the extent to which these jobs lead to *social mobility* for local individuals specifically is mixed. Universities have previously received criticisms from unions and other lobbying groups for outsourcing certain roles, particularly service, security and domestic roles. Outsourced staff are provided by an external third-party instead of employed directly by the university, which also means that they are not entitled to the wider employment benefits that the institution offers such as staff development and pension schemes. Previous data from freedom of information requests made by the Guardian found that institutional spending on outsourced staff from universities in England, Scotland and Wales had increased by almost 70% between 2010 and 2017.[120] After protests which took place against the University of London in 2019 they agreed to end the outsourcing of security and domestic staff.[121] Other institutions have kept outsourcing, but committed to providing equivalent pay and benefits to outsourced staff.

There was a sense in interviews that, across the sector, the roles which local people are employed in are often predominantly lower paid, and sometimes outsourced or casual, jobs.

> *"I was visiting [a selective university]. You really noticed that when you went to the canteen, all the staff there had the regional accent. But when you*

*when to speak to professional staff, to university leaders, none of them had a regional accent. None of them were from the local area." University staff member*

## And institutions can play a critical role in facilitating community wellbeing and cohesion

Universities can contribute to social mobility not only through economic mechanisms, but also through cultural and social engagement which enhances community wellbeing and cohesion. Writing for the Higher Education Policy Institute in 2024, Jane Robinson, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Engagement & Place at Newcastle University, observed that "while industry partnerships often take centre stage, universities' collaboration with a diverse range of partners – spanning culture, sports, and the voluntary sectors – plays a vital role in enriching the heritage and identity of our communities".[122] These collaborations contribute to vibrant local communities that attract and retain talent, business, and investment.

The Civic University Network emphasises universities' role as "place-makers", who bridge divides through social and cultural contributions.[123] Student volunteering, support for local arts and culture, and community-based research initiatives all generate social capital that can translate into improved economic opportunities and outcomes for local residents.

The What Works Wellbeing Centre found that place-based arts and culture interventions and mass-participation events can lead to a greater sense of local community, increased happiness and life satisfaction, and helps to bridge social capital for local residents with poor levels of wellbeing.[124] Studies have found that universities can help foster this, bringing local people together, facilitating new connections, and organising communal activities that can help strengthen people's pride in place.[125]

Universities can also strength community bonds through providing students opportunities to volunteer in the local area[126], supporting local community organising through Students' Unions, and opening up their facilities for use by local residents and local groups.

## Universities are part of a wider local ecosystem of education and opportunities that determines the pathways available to young people

A critical mechanism through which universities promote local social mobility and opportunity is by addressing educational inequality within their regions. Importantly, these efforts should be motivated via responsibility to their local area and community and not seen as a student recruitment tool.

When local people are asked what they consider a universities' core civic responsibility to be, their role in education is front of mind.[127] Polling by Public First for the University of Manchester found that half of local residents felt that providing access and opportunities for local people, from all backgrounds, to study at university is one of the main benefits of local universities.[128] This is not just about the provision of a traditional three-year residential undergraduate degree, and whilst it is important to ensure these opportunities are accessible for local residents the wider educational offering of institutions is perhaps even more important to local people. Focus groups

run for the UPP Foundation found that 'local people being able to learn without being full-time students' was one of the top four identified benefits of local universities. The contribution of universities to the local educational ecosystem encompasses work with schools to raise aspirations and attainment, adult education initiatives and collaborative partnerships with other education providers in the region.

> *"What I think is almost more important than the individual universities' allegiance to its local area is* ***a local ecosystem of education and opportunities that works harmoniously together for the good of the residents in the area****, the communities of an area. It's perfectly acceptable and probably right that if a university is very good at research based things, for example, that it focuses on that. If a university is very good at vocational training, it focuses on that. If a university's mode of study lends itself better to more flexible pathways, focus on that. As long as there's an ecosystem that can adequately serve an area, alongside FE colleges, apprenticeship routes and so on." University leader*

### Partnerships with schools are critical to reducing local educational inequality

The most significant barrier for pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attending university – and one of the most significant barriers to social mobility generally – is prior school-age attainment. As previously discussed in this report, the attainment gap by socioeconomic status is already present at the start of schooling and only widens throughout the system. Working in partnership with schools to raise attainment and close attainment gaps is a prerequisite for social mobility. Analysis of collaborative outreach programmes found that students receiving an intensive package of outreach through Uni Connect had significantly higher probability of attending higher education.[129] However, this isn't just about higher education access: whether that pupil desires to go onto higher education or not, having a good level of education is critical for success in further education, training, and work.

Research consistently demonstrates that educational attainment at school is the strongest predictor of future life chances. The Education Policy Institute found that the socioeconomic attainment gap at the end of secondary school stands at over 19 months of learning, having been rising since 2017.[130] The Social Mobility Commission have argued that unless the attainment gap is addressed, interventions further along the educational pipeline will have limited impact.[131]

Universities, as anchor institutions in their regions, are uniquely positioned to work in partnership with local schools to raise attainment. These partnerships take many forms, from sustained outreach programmes and tutoring schemes to collaborative curriculum development and teacher professional development.

One of the most widely adopted approaches is university-led tutoring. The UPP Foundation highlighted the "win-win-win" model of university-led tutoring: universities provide trained students as tutors for local school pupils, raising attainment for the pupils, offering work experience for university students, and strengthening civic engagement and public perception of the university itself. In their pilot scheme, pupils who were tutored by undergraduates showed 100% improvement in their basic writing skills.[132] School leaders highlight the value of

university staff and students in conducting tutoring by giving pupils exposure to what a university education looks like and helping to raise aspirations of pupils.[133]

Universities' involvement in school tutoring is perhaps even more important given the recent discontinuation of the National Tutoring Programme, which had been launched in the 2020/21 academic year to provide tutoring in primary and secondary schools as part of the government's Covid-19 response. The programme aimed to close attainment gaps by targeting pupils eligible for pupil premium funding, pupils who had fallen furthest behind due to Covid-19, vulnerable pupils and pupils with SEND.[134] Analysis by Public First found that the programme led to a total of 390,000 grade improvements, with 12% of pupils who received tuition improving by a full grade. They estimated that the gain of the programme to the Exchequer, through increased education and employment outcomes for individuals, amounted to approximately £1.83 billion, far exceeding the cost (£660 million).[135] Unfortunately, the programme ended in 2024.

Beyond direct academic support, many university-school partnerships focus on raising aspirations and broadening pupils' understanding of educational and career possibilities. Aspiration raising activities are varied but typically include open days, campus visits, summer schools, subject tasters and mentoring. Unlike tutoring, aspiration rising activities do not have strong evidence demonstrating a causal link between activities and pupils' attainment.[136] However, summer schools in particular, such as those run by the Sutton Trust, have been shown to increase the likelihood that a pupil attends university and has a particularly strong impact on giving them the confidence to apply for high tariff or more selective institutions.[137]

Improving pupils' understanding of education and career options is particularly important because young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to understand the different education and career pathways on offer. For example, pupils formerly eligible for free school meals are less likely to understand how the student finance system works, what degree apprenticeships are, and what qualifications you need for which careers.[138] The importance of university involvement in careers advice and guidance is highlighted in the Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance. The guidance, adopted by over 4,700 schools in England, states that by the age of 16 every pupil should have had meaningful encounters with the full range of learning opportunities, including universities, and that by the age of 18 all pupils who are considering applying to higher education should have had at least two visits to universities to meet staff and students.[139]

Some university-school partnerships go beyond pupil focused interventions to support whole school improvement, through supporting teacher professional development, curriculum co-design, and research-led school improvement projects.

### Universities also provide lifelong learning opportunities to support local residents through career transitions

Beyond their work with schools, universities can also play a vital role in supporting local social mobility through adult education and lifelong learning programmes. These initiatives are particularly valuable in regions experiencing economic transition, where workers may need to reskill for emerging industries and changing labour

markets. Flexible delivery models – including part-time study, distance learning and modular qualifications – are essential for making continuing education accessible for adults juggling work and family responsibilities.

**Case study: Widening access and meeting regional skills needs through degree apprenticeships, University of Cumbria**

The University of Cumbria, situated in a region with historically low higher education participation, has leaned into alternative pathways into and through university that supports both social mobility and local economic development.

Responding to local workforce shortages in the health sector, the university launched a paramedic degree apprenticeship programme in 2021, enabling existing NHS Trust employees such as emergency medical technicians to gain paramedic qualifications in two years whilst continuing to work and earn.

- Today, the university supports seven of England's 11 ambulance trusts, including its key regional partner the North West Ambulance Trust
- 96% of apprentices move into paramedic roles after competition
- The programme has expanded to include provision for the Isle of Man and other UK regions

This model supports social mobility by offering non-traditional routes into and through higher education, especially for those who may not have previously seen university as an option or a desirable pathway.

- Most apprentices are mature students, with many balancing family responsibilities
- In 2022/23, 25% had additional learning support needs
- The university maintains a high success rate at 90%, with 79% earning a 2:1 or a first-class degree

Beyond initial training, the Centre of Excellence in Paramedic Practice supports progression into teaching and academic roles. Experienced paramedics are supported to become associate lecturers, mentoring new apprentices, and the university also offers postgraduate qualifications and PhDs to support career progression from practitioner to educator.

In 2024, the university introduced a Certificate in Higher Education with one year's tuition cost, offering a low-barrier route into paramedic training and employment in three underserved counties.

Whilst attainment-raising work with schools is widespread across the sector, work to contribute to local social mobility through adult education and lifelong learning

programmes are less common. Too often university-led civic engagement still concentrates on outreach to young people, with adult learners often overlooked in policy, funding, and practice.[140] Where adult and lifelong learning initiatives do exist, they are disproportionately concentrated in lower-tariff and less selective institutions, alongside specialist adult education providers such as Birkbeck, University of London, and the Open University. Adult education has been found to be particularly transformative for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Previous SMF analysis found that adults in the bottom income quartile who studied at a university or college saw their income grow by more than 60%.[141]

Despite alternative local education pathways polling well with local residents, participation tells another story. Participation rates in adult education have almost halved since 2004,[142] and those who do participate tend to be wealthier and with existing high levels of educational qualifications.[143] This is against a backdrop of a 45% decline in funding for adult skills over the last ten years.

Recent government efforts to expand lifelong learning – most notably the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) – have so far failed to capitalise on the apparent public appetite for such courses. The LLE aims to provide individuals with the equivalent of four years of tuition loans to use flexibly over their lifetime on short, modular courses. However, the pilot for short courses in higher education saw just 125 enrolments out of an anticipated 2,400, and only 17 courses at 10 providers actually launched.[144] The pilot evaluation by the Office for Students highlighted low student demand, limited public awareness and the practical challenges for providers of rapidly developing and marketing new, short courses.

The low success of adult education initiatives is perhaps not surprising. The funding and regulatory environment has suffered from frequent policy churn undermining stability and long-term planning, alongside devastating cuts to budgets. And those who may benefit most from access to adult education are often not aware of what is on offer. As the Worker's Educational Association has previously said: "Participation surveys show how difficult even those already in the education system find it to discover information about learning and funding. For anyone who is not already engaged in adult learning it is unsurprising that participation rates are dropping partly because of the paucity of information available about what's available".[145] The current LLE model has also been criticised for being too rigid, with an arbitrary 30-credit minimum and a requirement that modules be part of a full "parent" programme, and not reflective of the realities of adult learners lives or needs.[146]

We do not yet know what this government's version of the LLE will look like, and whether any of these concerns will have been addressed. However, institutions may benefit from broadening their view of alternative adult education offering. Whilst much of the focus on adult education has been on skills for jobs and economic outcomes, this has perhaps been at the expense of broader personal, social and civic benefits of lifelong learning. Adult education has been shown to help develop self-confidence, empowerment, and connectedness. Particularly for adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, engaging in 'leisure' or 'hobby' courses such as amateur photography, art or pottery increases health outcomes, improves mental

health and life satisfaction. Adult education can also have a knock-on positive impact on families, as engaging with lifelong learning is associated with better parenting skills and greater involvement in their children's education.[147] As Aveek Bhattacharya argued in the Higher Education Policy Institute, "if part of the objective of the civic university is to close the gap between the research carried out by academics, and the communities they are embedded in, we can certainly imagine small, accessible courses in subjects like history, psychology, sociology that help to kindle and sustain love of learning among adults in the community".[148] These courses may act as a gateway for adults who then later decide to pursue full qualifications, but either way the personal and social benefits make them worthwhile in and of themselves, and could help to improve community relations with their local institution.

### Higher education is a critical part of local skills planning, and devolution must come with a greater expectation on providers to be involved in regional planning

The challenge of creating a local ecosystem of education and opportunity that truly works for all residents cannot be met by any single institution acting alone. Achieving meaningful social mobility at the local level requires joined-up, strategic planning across the entire education and skills landscape – including universities, further education providers, schools, employers, and local authorities. However, current policy and funding frameworks often encourage higher education institutions to act in isolation, undermining the coherence and impact of local provision.

### The case for devolved, collaborative Access and Participation Plans

At present, Access and Participation Plans (APPs), required by the Office for Students for institutions that want to charge the full tuition fee cap, incentivise universities to set and meet their own individualised targets for widening access and participation. Whilst this approach has driven improvements in access and outcome measures at an institutional level, it has reinforced a fragmented system in which each provider focuses on its own metrics rather than the needs of the local community as a whole.[149] As a result opportunities to collaborate across institutions can be missed, especially if the sector is busy fire-fighting larger financial issues. The system at a regional level can struggle to provide clear and coherent pathways for learners, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may move between schools, further education, and higher education, and may drop in and out of the education system throughout their life.

The Office for Students has made steps towards encouraging more collaborative approaches. This has largely been delivered through Uni Connect, which aims to "support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage with higher education outreach, enable schools to engage with attainment raising activity, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups".[150] The OfS also encourages institutions to reference collaborative and partnership work in their APPs.[151] However, the influence of place, despite being described by the Social Mobility Commission as one of the largest constraints for social mobility in this country,[152] has taken a backseat in regulatory discussions about widening access and opportunity, and in practice incentives and

accountability structures for universities remain focused on individual institutional performance.

A more effective approach would see APPs devolved or reimagined as regional, collaborative plans, co-created by all education providers in a locality. Under this model, universities, FE colleges, schools and employers would jointly assess local skills needs, set shared targets, and coordinate provision to close attainment and opportunity gaps. A "whole-system" approach such as this in a region would not only reduce inefficiency and duplication but also ensure that pathways between education providers were deliberate and clearly articulated. The OfS do seem to be moving in this direction. In a speech in 2024, John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation, reiterated partnership as a 'core principle' of APPs, noting that this is essential in the current financial context to ensure efficiency. He also announced a "deepening of our commitment to collaboration", focusing on regional partnerships to tackle local and regional challenges in opportunity. This would involve all providers in a region who are required to submit APPs to collaborate on their submissions, as they will be renewed as a cohort instead of individually.[153] Unfortunately, due to the OfS' remit, this does not necessarily require schools and other providers not regulated by the OfS to be involved in a consistent and meaningful way.

### More joined up local education planning could help facilitate articulation in England

Taking a more 'place-based' approach to widening participation by requiring universities to work closely with local education providers in their provision planning could also help open the door to the development of articulation in England. Articulation refers to an agreement between a further education provider and a university that allows a student to start their degree at a college and finish it at a university. These are established in Scotland and typically take a 1+3 approach, where the student studies for one year in a college and the remaining three in a partner university.

Articulation has become a cornerstone of widening access policy in Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council's annual reports show that articulation is a significant route for disadvantaged students, with nearly half of all articulating students from the 40% most deprived areas.[154] Articulation also helps avoid duplication between FE and HE and ensures that curriculums complement one another. In contrast, England's approach to progression from FE to HE remains fragmented.

> *"If we look at the broader education and skills system, and what we know from industry, there's a demand for skills. We need people to be moving through the education skills system more quickly, and articulation offers a route to do that, providing it suits the learner." Policymaker, Scotland*

Whilst a small number of English providers have piloted articulation agreements with local colleges, it remains a rare and underutilised widening participation tool. Articulation has many benefits for both providers and learners. It provides clarity and coherence between levels of study, creating well-signposted routes from FE to HE. It is a great route for disadvantaged young people, who are often well represented at FE level but drop off in the transition to higher study. Articulation can also be tailored to local economic needs. Interviewees highlighted that in Scotland, for example,

articulated routes were popular for healthcare qualifications, and are going to become more important in the move to Net Zero to upskill people quickly.

### The missed opportunity of Local Skills Improvement Plans

The other main mechanism for planning the local education ecosystem is Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). These were introduced following the Skills for Jobs 2021 white paper, representing a significant shift towards place-based skills planning in England. LSIPs bring together employers, education and training providers and other key stakeholders in a region to identify skills needs and agree a set of shared actionable priorities to close these gaps. The aim is to ensure that provision is responsible to local economic prioritises and that employers can help shape the system.[155]

However, universities involvement in LSIPs has so far been limited and inconsistent. While some universities have engaged actively in their regions LSIPs – especially those with strong local or regional missions, and those that provide more vocational training – many remain at the margins of LSIP development and implementation.[156] This is partly a result of the policy design, which set up LSIPs to primarily focus on technical and vocational programmes and provision at the FE level.

This mindset division between FE providers which focus on skills and HE providers which focus on academic teaching and research and are, as a whole, left to their own devices is increasingly out of step with the reality of the post-16 landscape. In their manifesto, the current government committed to working towards a more joined up tertiary system, reflecting the fact that boundaries between academic and technical pathways are blurring (or were perhaps completely arbitrary to begin with), and that universities are now major providers of higher and degree apprenticeships, professional qualifications, and, in the future, lifelong learning.

On top of this, Ofsted is currently, at the time of writing, consulting on plans to assess FE colleges on how well they meet local skills needs in their new inspection and performance framework.[157] However, there are no equivalent requirements for higher education providers, who remain outside of the scope of these new accountability measures. This reinforces a two-tier system in which FE providers are held to account for their contribution to local economic priorities while universities are left to determine their own provision, with consideration of local need optional.

Such a system poses huge barriers to ensuring that education and training pathways are truly articulated and coherent, that transitions for students are supported, and that the provision of an education provider (including universities) reflects and works to meet the needs of local people. In a fragmented and competitive system it is undoubtedly the most marginalised residents, pupils and students who miss out, left to try and navigate a complex system that has emerged more by accident than design. The result is a patchwork of provision, with learners left to navigate sometimes incoherent and often poorly signposted routes, posing significant risks for duplication, gaps, and missed opportunities for progression.

**Case study: Greater Manchester's Civic Agreement**

One example of a truly whole-system, place-based approached is the Greater Manchester Civic University Agreement. In 2021 the five higher education institutions in Greater Manchester, alongside local councils and the combined authority, launched a 'flagship agreement' with mayor Andy Burnham.[158] The agreement pledges for all institutions to work together on six priority areas for the region, including education and skills, reducing inequalities, jobs and economic growth, the digital economy, net zero, and cultural economy.

What sets this agreement apart is its genuinely holistic and collaborative ethos. It's a recognition that education and civic work is not separate but inherently intertwined. The plan was developed in collaboration with political and civic leaders and informed by engagement with local residents, whose feedback drove the identified priorities. The agreement recognises that universities cannot operate in isolation if they are to maximise their impact on social mobility and regional prosperity. As the University of Manchester notes, "we've developed a joint Civic University Agreement with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and its ten local authorities to drive social and economic change in the city region".[159] This reflects a shared commitment to training professionals, creating jobs, conducting practical research, widening access to higher education, attracting talent to the region, and providing cultural opportunities to local residents.

Early evidence on the impact of this partnership is promising. Research commissioned by the Greater Manchester Civic University Board found that by 2027 the universities would collectively:[160]

- Train learning **9,500 nurses, 3,500 medics and 8,500 teachers**;
- Provide over **£366 million of support and services to small enterprises**, business and not-for-profits;
- Undertake research with businesses and non-academic organisations worth over **£1.3 billion**;
- Deliver **6,288 years of professional development training** and education courses to businesses and charities;
- Create over **1,000 new companies** and charities.

This model demonstrates the potential of devolved, collaborative planning that moves beyond individual institutional targets to a shared vision for education, skills and opportunity. It stands as a blueprint for how universities can embed themselves within local ecosystems, recognising their collective role in working with other providers and civic partners to boost social mobility and regional prosperity.

## Towards a whole-system civic approach for a harmonious local educational ecosystem

> *"If I could say one thing to government, it would be: have a proper long-term strategy. What makes the difference is real partnerships between universities and schools - supporting pupils early, building confidence, building pipelines. But that takes time, and consistency, and proper backing.* ***You can't just go into one school for a year and expect change, especially in cold spots. It needs to be structured, long-term work, or it's just a resource drain.****" University leader*

To build a local ecosystem of education and opportunity that works harmoniously for all residents, universities must be integrated fully into local planning systems. This includes LSIPs but is also relevant for the planning of almost all public services including health, schools, and local civic and cultural programmes.

This requires a shift from institution-centric planning and accountability to a genuinely collaborative and place-based approach. Devolved, collaborative APPs could provide a model for this, although the split between providers regulated by the OfS and providers regulated by Ofsted remains a concern for a genuine whole-system approach. Ultimately, achieving social mobility at scale in a given region requires more than isolated institutional efforts, or optional and inconsistent partnerships. It also requires a move away from competition between educational providers towards collaboration, recognising that different providers will have different strengths and contribute in different ways to their local communities. This diversity is important and should be protected, but only through collaborative working towards shared goals can we ensure that the ecosystem as a whole delivers opportunities for local people and the skills needed for the local economy.

The best way to achieve this would be through establishing a Social Mobility Commission for each region. The Commission would bring together education providers, local leaders, businesses and third-sector organisations to collectively plan and improve opportunities for the local areas. Devolved, regional APPs and LSIPs could compliment the work of the Commission, but having an overarching body bringing together skills, education and the local economy would help focus efforts, reduce duplication and provide better coherence to local systems.

### Case study: South West Social Mobility Commission

The South West Social Mobility Commission (SWSMC) is an example of how a regional, cross-sector body can galvanise action to identify and address local inequalities and barriers to opportunity. The SWSMC was established in response to the report, *Social Mobility in the South West*, by Dr Anne-Marie Sim and Professor Lee Elliot Major. The report found that the South West had one of the lowest levels of upward occupational mobility, and suffered from the worst educational outcomes in the country for young people from poorer backgrounds. The report recommended the establishment of a dedicated regional body to bring together key individuals and organisations to drive forward work to address the barriers to young people from under-resourced backgrounds.[161]

### A whole-system approach for a forgotten region

What distinguishes the SWSMC is that unlike other schemes that have brought together just educational institutions, or just businesses, the Commission is genuinely holistic and collaborative across all sectors of society. The Commission brings together twelve Commissioners from education, business, local government and the voluntary sector from across the South West. This broad coalition is then supported by a small team at the University of Exeter, acting as both a research hub and an operational arm. As a representative of the Commission explained, "we realised that what we really are now is a 'do-tank' – not just producing reports, but actually trialling and scaling up interventions in the region and then nationally".

The SWSMC's approach is led by evidence and research, and sensitive to the lived realities of local communities. The original report highlighted the region's distinct challenges: geographical disconnectedness, a lack of impetus for change, and a low-wage, seasonal economy.

*"The South West gets forgotten [...] it kind of gets lumped in with the rest of the South of England, even though parts of Cornwall are as far away from London as the North East. [...] The reality is, outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are among the worst in the country."*

### From research to action

The SWSMC's impact is built on its ability to turn research into delivery. The Commission runs a series of interventions designed to promote social mobility in the region, following a "South West first" approach that aims to prove what works in a region often neglected by national initiatives. Initiatives are designed to be scalable, low cost and sustainable. Key interventions include:

- **Tutoring for young people at risk of falling behind:** The Commission partnered with colleagues in the University of Exeter and local schools to create a sustainable, low-cost tutoring scheme. Undergraduate students taking the 'Learning to Teach' module can deliver structured tutoring to local disadvantaged pupils; this is part of their placement and counts towards the credits of their degree. "We call it a win, win, win scheme. It targets struggling pupils in local schools, gives students employability skills, and potentially helps build a teacher pipeline in an area". The programme has been taken up by Uni Connect partners in the South West and beyond, and is now being considered by other universities for wider adoption.
- **Equity Scorecard:** SWSMC developed a practical tool for schools to reflect on and improve their approaches to disadvantage and equity. The resource combines data with prompts for best practice and suggestions for innovative solutions, supporting schools to sharpen their focus on supporting disadvantaged learners. This is currently being piloted with 20 schools in the South West.
- **Tech careers experience:** The South West tech sector is growing fast, and presents an opportunity for both economic growth and social mobility. Based on SWSMC research, two fully funded programmes are trialling centralised work experience to help young people from under-represented backgrounds get into tech careers. Centralised work

experience reduces the burden on individual employers, allows participation by a larger cohort (~30 young people for each programme), and allows for schemes to be specifically targeted to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**A blueprint for other regions**

In just three years the SWSMC has made significant progress on what others have been trying to do individually for years. By bringing together key stakeholders across all different sectors and areas of society, SWSMC has not only helped focus minds on social mobility in the South West region, but also now acts as a case study for how regional commissions could work across the country.

SWSMC demonstrates that a regional social mobility commission can:

- **Unite diverse actors** behind a shared agenda, moving beyond institutional silos
- **Embed locally relevant research** at the heart of strategy and delivery
- **Pilot and scale practical interventions**, tailored to the local context
- **Act as an exemplar for national policy**, showing what works in "left behind" regions

# CHAPTER FIVE – RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

**Chapter summary**

1. Universities play a key role in regional innovation ecosystems, supporting social enterprise, informing policy and driving economic growth
2. Research and innovation have the potential to address social and economic inequalities, but this potential is not always realised in practice
3. Effective knowledge exchange and community partnerships can help translate research into tangible benefits for local people and support regional development
4. Embedding social mobility and local engagement as strategic priorities in research agendas will help ensure the benefits of innovation are shared more widely across local regions

> *"There's definitely an opportunity when you can take complicated research, interpret it and make it practically applicable and useful to people's lives. Again, some people do this well, and where I've seen it work I think it's brilliant.* ***But too often people are trapped inside academic concepts and frameworks to see the bigger picture of, how is this knowledge going to be used and how is it going to make a difference to people's lives?"*** *University leader*

Alongside teaching, staff recruitment and development, and civic engagement, universities can make significant contributions to social mobility through their research and innovation activities. All universities undertake some form of research, whether they are research-intensive or more teaching focused. This research can contribute to social mobility in a variety of ways: researching the causes of, and solutions for, inequality; translating research outputs into tangible community benefits; and fostering inclusive research environments.

## Countries with higher levels of innovation tend also to have higher levels of social mobility

A growing body of research demonstrates a positive relationship between research, innovation and social mobility at the regional and national levels. The Social Mobility Commission have previously argued that "innovation and social mobility are two sides of the same coin", with innovative economies tending to offer more opportunity for upward mobility.[162] Innovation has been shown to foster social mobility through the process of 'creative destruction', in which new technologies and innovators disrupt established industries and create new opportunities for talent from diverse backgrounds. The Institute of Fiscal Studies also notes that, whilst research and innovation in the UK is conducted by the private sector and businesses as well as higher education and non-profit organisations, research carried out by the public sector is more likely to be inequality-reducing.[163]

Policies and practices that foster innovation – such as supporting start-ups, investing in research and development and facilitating knowledge transfer – can all promote social mobility. However, this must also come with efforts to broaden who is able to become a researcher or an innovator. A Nobel Laureate's father typically comes from the top 10% of their country's income distribution, and up to 60% come from families in the top 5%.[164] In the UK, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to choose less innovative courses at university, and the extreme geographical disparity in the location of innovative firms restricts opportunities for young people outside of big cities. The Social Mobility Commission says that investing in a high-quality and inclusive education system would lead to greater innovation and growth, which in turn would increase social mobility.[165] Universities clearly have a significant role to play in this endeavour.

### Universities carry out a significant amount of research aiming to understand and reduce inequality

The UK benefits from one of the world's most influential research environments. UK universities consistently rank among the global leaders for research quality and impact: in the 2024 QS World University Rankings, four UK institutions were in the top ten.[166] The UK accounts for 6.3% of published academic articles, in third place behind the United States and China, and also maintains third place for world share of citations.[167] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 found that 41% of research submitted by UK universities were judged as "world-leading", and 43% were "internationally excellent".[168] The scale of investment is substantial. In 2022/23 universities received £7.3 billion in research grants and contracts.[169] The UK's research ecosystem is characterised by both breadth and depth, publishing across the full range of research fields with particular strengths in Medical Science, Social Science and Humanities.[170]

Research carried out in UK universities to investigate the root causes of inequality – across education, healthcare, employment and housing – can provide the evidence base for effective policy and practice and translate into direct benefits for local communities.

> *"A lot of our members research is focused on translational research, so the kind of research with real-world impact. Their research often links quote closely to lots of the research addressing inequality, for example research in health fields looking to reduce health inequalities." Mission group representative*

Many institutions have established dedicated inter-disciplinary research programmes to address complex societal challenges. Inter-disciplinary approaches are essential, as inequalities are rarely confined to a single sector nor do the causes or solutions fit neatly into defined academic disciplines. The University of Glasgow's "Research Beacons" initiative, for example, brings together academics from across different disciplines with other institutions, funders, practitioners, policymakers and charities to understand and address inequality.[171] Their GoWell programme, launched in 2005 as a ten year programme, used longitudinal research to drive improved social regeneration and health outcomes in deprived neighbourhoods and communities in Glasgow, using university research to directly improve the lives of local residents.[172]

Similarly, the University of Manchester's Global Inequalities research centre focuses on understanding and addressing disparities in food, healthcare, infrastructure and resources, both locally and globally. Within the Greater Manchester area, the university launched #BeeWell, a programme led in partnership with the Gregson Family Foundation and Anna Freud aimed at understanding and improving child wellbeing in the region. The programme includes an annual survey which examines the wellbeing of young people in schools, and has collected responses from over 63,000 young people in 192 secondary schools across Greater Manchester. This allows schools to better understand the current wellbeing of their pupils across different demographics and target evidence-based interventions where they are most needed.[173]

### Co-producing research with communities is critical to ensure local people feel a tangible benefit

A recurring theme in both the academic literature and interviews carried out as part of this project is the importance of co-producing research with the communities it seeks to benefit. Across interviews there were concerns that whilst some universities are advanced in this area, others struggle to articulate the value of their research to local residents. This was seen to be because either they failed to translate their research into tangible benefits for local communities, or because a combination of low socioeconomic diversity in research staff teams and limited use of participatory models of research sometimes meant that research activity was 'out of touch' with local needs.

> *"**Universities are in a difficult place, financially and politically, because they haven't done a good job of selling what they are doing to the public**, and that includes their research activity." Representative from a research funder*

Participatory research models, which involve community members in setting the research questions and scope, collecting data, and interpreting findings, can help address this.[174] The University of Greenwich, for example, has carried out research into inequalities in healthcare outcomes for minority groups including Black, Asian, Eastern European, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities which took a strong participatory approach.[175] The University of Staffordshire runs a Get Talking programme, described as 'community-led participatory action research', which works with local artists to use creative techniques to engage people who might otherwise have been sceptical or afraid of taking part in formal academic research.[176] Similarly, the University of Reading ran a series of participatory research projects aiming to understand and tackle inequalities faced by minority ethnic individuals accessing healthcare in Reading.[177] Such partnerships not only enhance the quality and impact of research, but also empower communities to take an active role in driving change in their local areas.

The strength of institutions' ability to create and disseminate research that speaks to disadvantaged and local communities will also depend on the diversity of their research workforce. As discussed in chapter three, there are many barriers for researchers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

> *"It all links back to who comes into academia, and then therefore what questions are they asking, and are those questions actually relevant to communities from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It's the classic thing where the Daily Mail runs a headline on a specific research project being 'woke rubbish'. I'm very much putting that in inverted commas – that is very much not my view. There's no problem with that research project happening,* ***but the question is, why are there not [research projects] that do speak to working class communities?*** *And think that very often it's because the kinds of people who go into those roles are not from those kinds of backgrounds, and they don't necessarily see the research questions that could be asked to make them relevant to those communities."*
> *Third sector representative*

The Russell Group has previously highlighted the importance of promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in academic research, arguing that "the creation of a diverse and supportive intellectual community, informed by researchers from all backgrounds and the widest possible talent pool, is fundamental to economic, scientific and societal progress".[178] Research has shown that this isn't just a question of fairness, but also of research quality: diverse teams are more likely to generate innovative ideas and challenge entrenched assumptions.[179]

### Translating research into tangible community impact

Universities are increasingly evaluated on their knowledge exchange activities – the ways in which they share research insights with external partners and translate academic findings into practical solutions for communities. Interviewees commonly noted that research-intensive institutions tend to perform less well on UKRI's Knowledge Exchange Framework, whereas locally focused and civic institutions score highly.

**Case study: Improving young people's engagement with education in Bristol**

UWE Bristol's "Engagement with Education" programme exemplifies a holistic, place-based approach to driving social mobility and reducing inequality through research, partnership and innovation. As a university deeply embedded in their local region, UWE has made it a strategic priority to work in partnership with local schools, colleges, creative industries and community organisations to address educational inequality and open new pathways for disadvantaged learners.

> *As part of this project researchers at UWE have investigated the reasons for low take-up of higher education in their local region since 2005. The depth of insight from young people themselves in this research unveiled complex reasons that they didn't attend university, and corrected some formerly held assumptions about young peoples motivations:*
>
> *"Rather than passively drifting out of education as was often assumed, the young people had made active decisions: for example, they valued taking up work and family life early. They wanted immediate benefits such as the*

*ability to earn. Early employment or even teenage parenthood gave them a sense of choice and control."*

The report recommended new partnership models of school governance, in which representatives from the wider community would become involved in governing bodies, including further and higher education institutions. Since then, UWE Bristol has worked in partnership with local schools to improve attainment and deepen local connections. A key feature of this work has been the integration of research, teaching, and civic engagement, utilising the university's education researchers to work alongside practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and ensuring that best practice can be shared and scaled up across the region. 45% of students at the school supported by UWE Bristol achieved five or more A*-C grades in their GCSEs in 2012, compared to only 11% in 2006, and the success of this programme has since been used to inform interventions across the country.[180]

**Case study: Knowledge exchange at London Metropolitan University**

London Metropolitan University stands out as an institution using knowledge exchange to support social mobility and social justice. The institutions scores highly for public and community engagement in UKRI's Knowledge Exchange Framework,[181] and ranked ninth in England for social mobility by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, with a mobility rate around three times the national average.[182]

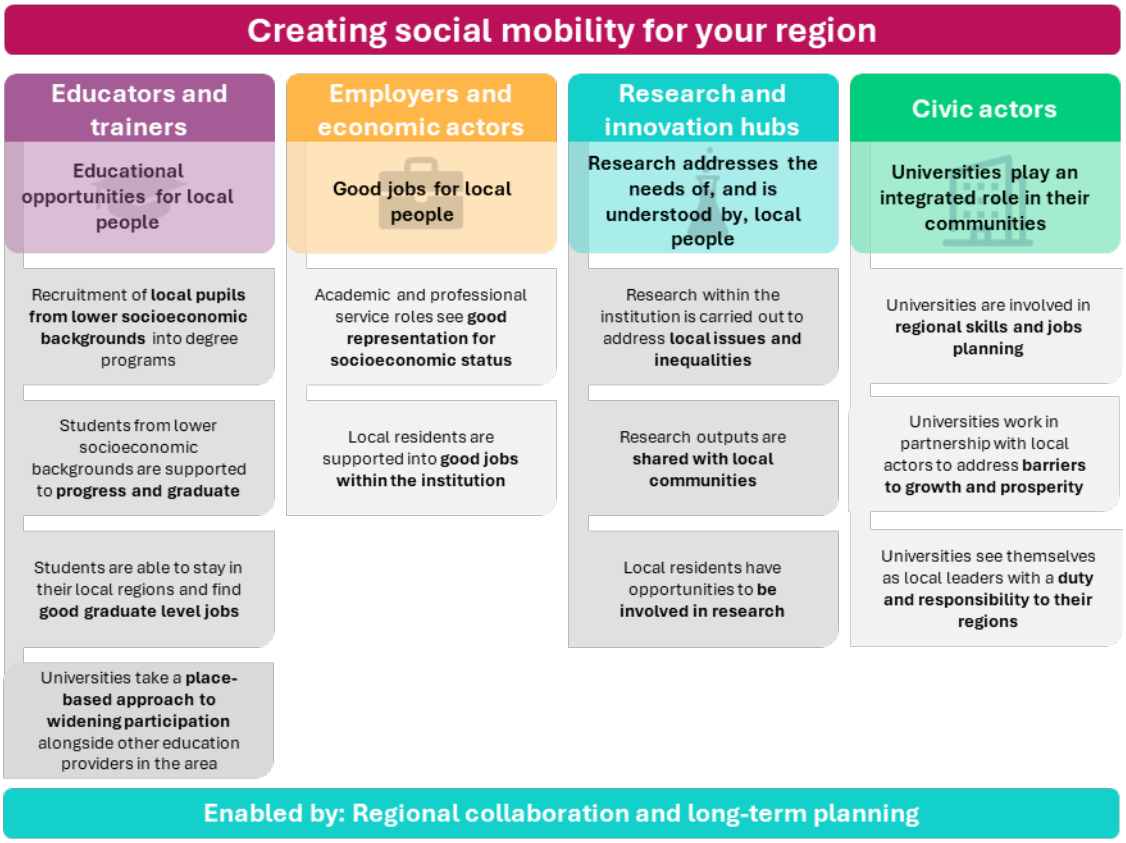
London Met's research agenda is explicitly driven by a mission to advance social mobility and tackle systemic inequalities. Their inter-disciplinary Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre, for example, seeks to not only understand inequalities but also to develop practical solutions that create pathways for upward social mobility.[183] This includes research which:

- Uses participatory approaches to investigate the experiences and outcomes of those under the Home Office Afghan Resettlement schemes, with a focus on safeguarding for women and children in accommodation[184]
- Research seeking to better understand the barriers and enablers towards meaningful and inclusive engagement between local authorities and the communities they service in London, in order to support regeneration teams pursuing inclusive recovery[185]
- The 'Precarious Female Academics' Voices project' investigates how gender inequality intersects with precarious employment for female academics in London[186]

The university actively invests in innovation and impact through research seed-funding, prioritising projects that explore and promote social mobility and those which reach out to partners outside of academia. This is guided by the University's Education for Social Justice Framework, which embeds principles of fairness, inclusion, and opportunity into all aspects of teaching, research, and knowledge exchange.

# CHAPTER SIX – RECOMMENDATIONS

**Figure 6: SMF's framework for a regional approach to social mobility.**




This report has set out the current context in regard to how universities contribute to social mobility in this country, and has identified both opportunities and barriers to improving their impact. We have evidenced why taking a regional, place-based approach to social mobility is critical, both to ensure that opportunity is more evenly distributed across the country and in the pursuit of building universities' relationships with their local communities. In this chapter, we move on to developing some recommendations for how we can move forwards.

To reiterate, university is the single most impactful pathway for a disadvantaged young person in terms of improving their likelihood of experiencing social mobility, and we welcome the Secretary of State's focus on improving access and outcomes for these students. However, strong structural headwinds may put past progress at threat. We are hearing from third-sector organisations that long-term established access programmes run in partnership between charities and universities are being cut or put at risk. The current financial challenges that the sector faces means that there has never been a more important time to ensure that access and participation work is protected and evidence-based. Collaboration between educational institutions, to avoid duplication and to create coherence in regional systems, is critical. Furthermore, the rates of progression for free school meal pupils fell for the first time on record, and an upcoming demographic boom in 18 year olds could very well exacerbate this. Universities will need to be strategic in their access and

participation work, and Government will need to provide clear, long-term direction to allow the sector to be confident in allocating resources to these areas.

Moreover, local students have too often been forgotten, especially by selective institutions. The high school-age attainment for disadvantaged pupils in London has created a large pool from which universities can easily recruit, driving up their access numbers but failing to reach local areas of deprivation in the process. We feel strongly that opportunity should be available for all young people across the country, and that universities are well placed as key civic anchors to drive this forward.

Traditionally when the sector and government have spoken about social mobility and universities, they have focused on student access and participation. This is an important area but only one area of activity that makes up a vibrant and dynamic education institution. Universities also carry out research, and employ academics and professional service staff members. They are often the largest or one of the largest employers in their region. They carry out civic work in local communities, including running interventions to raise attainment in schools, cultural and arts activities, and can help to facilitate community wellbeing and cohesion. Most importantly, they are only one actor in a larger regional education ecosystem. There is a need for all educational providers, alongside local authorities, businesses, and third-sector organisations, to come together in regions to ensure pathways for learners are articulated, complimentary, and respond to local needs. As shown by recent research by the Sutton Trust, social mobility is a regional issue. Universities can help drive social mobility, but not alone.

There is a need to take a whole-system, place-based approach to social mobility, because students do not study at an institution in isolation. They learn from the research carried out and are taught and supported by the university employees. They live in the local area whilst studying and have sometimes come from the local area too. However, class and socioeconomic status has too often been pushed aside in equality and diversity discussions across the sector. There are concerns that this has contributed to the rise in populist narratives and particularly anti-higher education sentiment. Universities have a duty to their regions and need the support of the public at a time where the fiscal situation is challenging. In this chapter, we present our recommendations that seek to move the sector and government towards a whole-system, place-based approach for social mobility.

## A regional whole-system approach to social mobility is needed to address regional disparities, and government will need to provide a long-term vision for higher education to enable this

> *"Our programme works so well because it's built on partnerships—teachers identifying talented students who might not reach selective universities due to family circumstances or lack of resources. By providing tutoring, support, and building their confidence, we see real differences. But it's not just about sixth form; starting earlier helps build strong pipelines. We also need to address 'cold spots' – what would it take for an institution to take responsibility for a cold spot area? Or for institutions to come together to do so collectively?* ***If I could advise the government, I'd advocate for a 10 year***

***strategy focused on fostering these local and regional partnerships between universities and schools.*** *" University Vice-Chancellor*

Regional disparities in social mobility remain a persistent challenge for the UK. Too often the prospects of young people are determined by where they grow up as much as their individual talents, aspirations, or hard work. The evidence presented throughout this report highlights that whilst higher education is a powerful driver of social mobility, access to its benefits is unevenly distributed across the country.

Tackling these regional disparities in social mobility requires a shift from piecemeal interventions to a genuinely whole-system approach that recognises the complexity of the challenge and the multiplicity of levers available to universities beyond their educational offer. As this report has shown, social mobility and opportunity is shaped not only by who gets into university and what happens to them post-graduation, but also by the broader ecosystem in which providers operate and the diverse ways in which they interact with their regions. Disadvantage starts before university, so partnerships with local schools and colleges is critical. And the extent to which universities can contribute to upward social mobility is limited by the national and local economy, through the availability of good graduate jobs across the country.

A whole-system approach means looking beyond the traditional student lifecycle and recognising that universities are anchor institutions, with the capacity to influence social mobility through multiple and complimentary channels. This includes their roles as major employers, their research agendas and knowledge exchange activities, and their civic engagement and partnerships with local communities, schools, and businesses. Through this report we have identified four key roles that universities play, and through which they can contribute to social mobility (Figure 6):

**Universities as employers and economic actors:** Universities are often among the largest employers in their regions and should contribute to social mobility through providing high-quality jobs to local people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Universities as educators and trainers:** Universities are just one of the educational providers in a region. To ensure opportunity for local students, they must work with schools, FE providers, local councils and businesses to ensure that provision meets local skills needs and that pathways through and between different stages of education are articulated and clearly signposted.

**Universities as research and innovation hubs:** Universities' research can be powerful drivers of local economic development and innovation, contributing to new industries and technologies, supporting local businesses, and addressing region-specific challenges. Universities should be aligning research priorities with the needs of local communities and seeking to utilise research to reduce inequality and increase opportunity wherever possible.

**Universities as civic actors:** Universities are key institutions in their regions, and they hold a responsibility to that region. Effective civic engagement means working in partnership with local authorities, schools, colleges, employers and the voluntary sector to address barriers to growth and

prosperity in that region across education, health, employment, transport, and housing.

It is vital to move away from judging universities' contribution to social mobility solely on the basis of student intake and graduate outputs – though these metrics are important and universities should continue to be held to account for them. However, students do not learn in isolation from the wider institutional and regional context; their outcomes are shaped by the quality of local schools, the availability of work experience and mentoring, and the broader socioeconomic environment. They also cannot be disconnected from the staff that teach them nor from the research that they learn from. We recommend that efforts to evaluate the success of an institution at contributing to social mobility should take all four of these areas into account, compared to historic exercises that have focused narrowly on student outcomes. As the Research Excellence Framework recognises that there are many aspects of high-quality research outside of citation counts, government and the sector should also recognise this for social mobility.

**Government should set out a ten year strategy for social mobility and opportunity, which will be delivered at a regional level by Social Mobility Commissions set up across the country**

For a whole-system approach to succeed, government must provide a clear, long-term vision for higher education's role in advancing social mobility, backed by policy coherence across departments. The vision should set out expectations for universities as regional anchors and support place-based funding. This strategy should:

- Create a ten-year vision for social mobility and opportunity, and establish a Social Mobility Commission in each region to both tailor the strategy to local context and deliver for each region
- Set ambitious targets for the higher education sector, focusing on closing the socioeconomic gaps in access and outcomes
- Targets should be set for regional attainment raising and recruitment, recognising that selective institutions can no longer simply piggyback off the high attainment of London
- Take regard of the other mechanisms through which universities can foster social mobility, such as staff diversity
- Create incentive structures for institutions performing well, for example by linking this to funding, as has been the case in Ireland since 2013

**Recommendation one – Government should set a ten year plan for social mobility and opportunity**

Government should develop a ten-year, cross-departmental strategy for social mobility in higher education, setting ambitious regional and national targets and recognising universities' roles as educators, employers, research hubs, and civic actors. Evaluation and funding structures should assess and

incentivise institutions across all four areas of contribution, not solely student outcomes.

Social Mobility Commissions should be set up for each region of the country, who would be charged with bringing together educational providers, local leaders, businesses and the third-sector to create and deliver regional plans.

## Universities should collect the socioeconomic data of employees

The collection of socioeconomic data on university employees is a crucial, yet often overlooked, step in advancing social mobility. While much attention has been paid to widening participation amongst students, and work carried out on other areas of disadvantage for staff, there is a growing recognition that progress on social class in the workforce lags behind.

This report has shown that universities play a key role in advancing social mobility as employers. Yet, the absence of robust data on the socioeconomic backgrounds of staff makes it difficult to assess the extent to which class-based inequalities are present in recruitment, retention and progression within academic, professional and service roles. Without this data universities are unable to identify barriers that may be preventing social mobility for their staff members, and unaccountable for class disparities in career opportunities.

Universities should embed the collection of socioeconomic data into existing equalities monitoring processes. This is usually collected via a voluntary Equality and Diversity form given to new employees. They should follow established question sets to allow for comparison across the sector, such as guidance provided by the Social Mobility Commission and the Sutton Trust. They should also carry out awareness raising initiatives, ensuring that staff understand the purpose and value of disclosure, and give existing employees the opportunity to voluntarily submit their information too.

However, it will take time for institutions to build up enough data to make any meaningful inferences or analysis. In the meantime, HESA should require institutions to submit National Insurance numbers, which would allow them to link employees with other education and labour market datasets. HESA would therefore then be able to establish a baseline of socioeconomic status in the higher education workforce.

**Recommendation two – collect the socioeconomic data of university employees**

Universities should begin collecting the socioeconomic data of their employees to track socioeconomic diversity in the workforce and identify barriers to recruitment, retention and progression.

HESA should require institutions to submit National Insurance numbers, which would allow them to link employees with existing datasets and create a baseline of socioeconomic diversity across the sector.

## Government should launch a review into the 2010 Equality Act to determine whether it should be amended to include social class

> *"The Equality Act... **it's totally unjustifiable that class isn't included.** I don't understand why it's not. And if you think through the implications of what that means, that means it's not against the law to deny someone a job because of what their parents did, or because they currently don't have much money. That just seems like a bizarre thing to be able to do in a civilised country." Academic*

Despite considerable progress on advancing equality of other groups, social class remains a significant and largely unaddressed axis of disadvantage. The 2010 Equality Act provides a legal framework for protecting individuals from discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as race, gender and disability, but it does not currently include social class or socioeconomic background as a protected characteristic.

This omission has both practical and symbolic consequences. Without explicit legal recognition, universities and other employers are under no obligation to monitor, report on or take action to address class-based inequalities. As a result, interventions to promote social mobility are often piecemeal, discretionary, and vulnerable to shifting institutional or political priorities. The omission also means that whilst it is illegal to not hire someone for being a woman, or being disabled, it is not illegal to not hire someone or discriminate against them in other ways for being working class. Amending the Act to include social class would represent a transformative step, placing a legal obligation on universities and other organisations to consider the impact of their policies and practices on individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

> *"We see a lot of cases in employment tribunals where someone is bringing a case of discrimination based on sex or race, but actually the evidence they provide relates to accent or dog whistle terms that relate to socioeconomic status. There is certainly a lot of [class] discrimination that is happening which is not currently covered by the Equality Act." Barrister, specialising in employment law*

The exclusion of social class from the Equality Act also has wider societal and political implications. When people from working class backgrounds consistently see their experiences and disadvantage overlooked by the very legislation designed to protect against discrimination, it can fuel feelings of alienation and resentment. Many people may not explicitly know what is or is not included in the Act, however what the Act includes very much drives the actions and priorities of organisations and sets the framework for political conversations.

The sense of being "left behind" or ignored by mainstream politics is a well-documented driver of populism and support for reformist or anti-establishment movements. In the UK, those most likely to vote for Reform are also those most likely to say that they feel disrespected by society. If the government is serious about addressing the root causes of rising populism and political disillusionment, it must ensure that social class is given equal weight in the national conversation about equality and opportunity. Legal recognition of class-based disadvantage would send a powerful signal that all citizens are entitled to a fair chance in life, regardless of their background.

The way in which social class is defined and incorporated as a protected characteristic would be crucial in determining the practical impact of any addition. Under the current Act, positive discrimination – giving preferential treatment solely based on a protected characteristic – is generally unlawful. Furthermore, a protected characteristic goes both ways: men can claim sex discrimination in the same way that women can, and therefore in theory those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds could also bring a claim of discrimination. Concerns were raised within the roundtable for this project that this could prevent universities, and other organisations and programmes, who currently take action to improve representation of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds such as contextual admissions.

However, disability is a notable exception within the Equality Act. Only those with a disability (or perceived to have a disability) are protected, and therefore someone cannot claim discrimination for not having a disability. Employers are therefore permitted and sometimes required to make reasonable adjustments and treat disabled people more favourably than non-disabled people. If social class was simply added as a broad protected characteristic there would be a risk that initiatives aimed at supporting those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could be challenged as unlawful positive discrimination, and individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds could claim discrimination if they were treated less favourably. However, if the wording mirrors the approach taken with disability, where only those who are disadvantaged are protected, there would be greater scope for lawful positive action and targeted interventions. Careful drafting would be essential to ensure that the addition achieves the intended aim of promoting social mobility and addressing class-based disadvantage, and therefore such undergo extensive consultation to determine appropriate terminology and language.

It is clear that the inclusion of class or socioeconomic status within the Equality Act would help focus university efforts on addressing existing disparities. We've also shown that the potential negative consequences identified would either be fairly minor (i.e. additional data collection burden), or could be mitigated with careful drafting of the bill (such as with disability). However, we also recognise that this is a complex issue which will impact many organisations outside of the higher education sector. We also recognise that defining lower socioeconomic status or class would not be without challenges or potential controversy. We deem the exclusion of class as a key axis of disadvantage, and the way that this has contributed to groups feeling left behind by society, as showing sufficient need to warrant further consideration. We'd recommend that the Government launch a review into the 2010 Equality Act to

determine whether, and how, socioeconomic status and/or social class could be included as a protected characteristic.

**Recommendation three – Government should launch a consultation on amending the 2010 Equality Act to include social class as a protected characteristic**

The 2010 Equality Act should be amended to include social class or socioeconomic background as a protected characteristic, placing a legal obligation on universities and other organisations to monitor, report on, and take action to address class-based inequalities. This would require extensive consultation to ensure that the amendment is appropriately worded so as not to restrict initiatives that aim to increase representation where there is underrepresentation.

This would help ensure fairer treatment in employment and education and send a strong signal that tackling class-based disadvantage is a national priority. This is crucial for addressing feelings of exclusion that can fuel political disaffection and populism.

## To support regional access, universities must pay more attention to local recruitment; contextual offers and articulation agreements have great potential in this area, alongside regional Access and Participation Plans

Closing regional gaps in access to higher education is essential for improving social mobility across the country, not just in the capital. As shown in this report, universities that succeed in driving social mobility for students often combine high access rates with strong graduate outcomes. However, many institutions continue to focus their recruitment efforts on national or international markets, sometimes at the expense of their local communities.

To address this, universities must give greater focus to whether, and how, they are reaching disadvantaged pupils on their doorsteps. This involves strengthening relationships with local schools and colleges and providing targeted outreach and support to students who may not otherwise consider higher education. We envision most of this work being facilitated by regional Social Mobility Commissions. But the Office for Students should take a role here too and ask providers to report what proportion of their FSM students are from the local region. We have considered the possibility of setting explicit quotas for regional recruitment, and/or following a similar model to the United States where local students benefit from reduced tuition. We think there is merit in exploring these options further by regional Commissions, but the risk of these initiatives either becoming box-ticking exercises or reducing geographic mobility should be considered. However, it should be clear to institutions that they cannot merely piggyback off the success of London, and that it is not only the less selective providers who should be providing education opportunities for

local people. Regional Access and Participation plans could play a critical role in this area, especially if schools and colleges and involved too.

To improve access for local disadvantaged pupils, we would recommend institutions offer guaranteed and contextual admissions. Contextual admissions should be used for all students from a disadvantaged background, recognising that an applicant's background has a significant impact on prior attainment. Guaranteed offers should be used for disadvantaged pupils from the local region, providing them with the security of an offer as long as the meet the advertised grade requirements. This could of course be used in conjunction with a contextual offer, by lowing the advertised grades for certain groups, following a similar model to the Warwick Scholars programme. By recognising that academic achievement is shaped by context, guaranteed and contextual offers can help to level the playing field between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Similarly, articulation agreements between universities and local further education colleges can create clear, supported pathways for students to progress from vocational or technical qualifications into degree programmes. These arrangements not only expand access but help to ensure that universities are responsive to local economic needs and labour market outcomes.

To maximise the impact of these approaches, universities should systematically review their admissions policies, set ambitious targets for local recruitment and invest in sustained partnership work with local education providers. Government should support this as part of their ten year social mobility plan by incentivising collaboration and providing funding for initiatives that promote regional access and progression.

**Recommendation four – Universities should provide opportunities for local disadvantaged students through contextual and guaranteed offers, and make greater use of articulation agreements**

Universities should increase recruitment of disadvantaged local students by strengthening partnerships with local schools and colleges, offering guaranteed and contextual offers and creating articulation agreements with local further education colleges. Institutions should set targets for local recruitment and review admissions policies accordingly.

The Office for Students should require providers to report the proportion of FSM students who are from the local area. Government should incentivise this as part of the ten year social mobility strategy.

## All of this requires fundamental shifts in policy, funding and practice to support collaboration

A risk with taking a more holistic approach to social mobility is the trap of 'everythingism'. Everythingism is the "belief that every proposal, project or policy is

meant for promoting every national objective, all at the same time", which leads to "never [being] able to do one thing well [and doing] everything badly".[187] Especially considering the current financial constraints of educational institutions it's important therefore that priorities are clear, justified and realistic. This paper does not fundamentally argue for institutions to do many *new* things, but simply to view their existing work differently. They already carry out widening participation work – we think they should do so through a place-based approach. They already do research, and many do lots of locally focused research, but we would like this to be more widespread. Similarly, considering the socioeconomic diversity and local mix of staff does not seem to be any more onerous than existing equality initiatives. A lot of what we have proposed is more about a mindset shift, which we then hope to inform activity.

Still, we do not expect every institution to be star players in all four pillars. The diversity of different providers and actors within a region should allow, with collaboration and planning, for institutions to specialise in certain areas, and do less in others. Our framework (Figure 6) allows institutions to take a more holistic view of their overall performance in social mobility but does not suggest they must excel in all areas. In regard to financial constraints, interviews and roundtable discussions highlighted that there is certainly scope to do more if done collaboratively. Currently, competition creates duplication within the market and prevents effective sharing of resources and expertise.

The most significant barrier to genuine collaboration across institutions and regions is that the system as is incentivises competition. Providers compete for students, and as financial difficulties have worsened many have expanded their provision to try and tap into 'new markets'. This has sometimes been without regard to the existing market and whether that destabilises or negatively impacts other providers, and without regard to whether that provision is needed in that economic area. APPs require institutions to set and meet individual targets, leaving providers in a region not only competing generally but competing specifically for underrepresented students, who may have been better served by other providers or pathways. Meanwhile, competition law restricts the types of collaborations that can take place, including on planning to share parts of a market.[188] Moreover, as access has expanded the differentiation of the 'status' or 'prestige' of an institution has become an increasingly important value signal of a degree.[189]

> *"**What would it look like to have a productive market, a social market that operated in a region?** Do institutions, colleges, universities and others have a duty to place? Can I, as a university, college or another provider enter a market somewhere without regard to whether it is productive? Should I have regard, if I'm looking at growing provision in a certain area, to whether that's destabilising or adding points of complementarity? Do you have a duty to think about local skills improvement plans? Should we be thinking about who is leading on what, and where competition is productive and where it is precisely unproductive? **Currently, competition is highly unproductive in the education market, in terms of every social or economic outcome we might want**, and in terms of the financial sustainability of all of the institutions in an area." Further education policy expert*

This is clearly not how we would want a regional education ecosystem (or market) to work, if thinking of the best interests of the student. Different providers will have different strengths and weaknesses, and the diversity of the sector should mean that a diversity of students can find a pathway that is right for them. But for young people to be able to navigate these systems they must be clear and coherent, with pathways in, out, and between different institutions. And for institutions to be able to achieve any of the above they will have to share resources and expertise, especially within the current financial constraints.

For regional collaborations to be possible, there needs to be a shared vision, incentives for involvement, and policy and legal constraints need to be addressed. On vision and strategy, we envision that this will be fulfilled by regional commissions which create local targets and plans that feed into the national ten year strategy. Incentives will be required: we have recommended that institutions be able to unlock additional funding for reaching regional targets. Government could also consider taking a similar approach to Ireland, where up to 10% of institutions block grants are contingent on meeting performance measures, but given the current financial constraints this would likely only work in combination with additional funding.[190]

To resolve the current policy and legal constraints, devolved APPs as previously mentioned should help facilitate meaningful collaboration between institutions. We also see this as a fundamental role of the regional commissions, to convene and bring together different actors in the local area. But clarity will need to be provided by government on competition law, and the extent to which providers can collaborate specifically on student planning. The ten year strategy may also wish to consider whether a greater degree of student number and market planning may help reduce incentives to compete for the student market.

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