Centre for Education Policy
& Equalising Opportunities

Briefing Note: What are the evidence-based ways to equalise opportunities?

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Summary

- Britain has low levels of social mobility, with family background strongly influencing children's outcomes into adulthood.
- Informed by this fact, the UK Government has launched its Opportunities Mission, which aims to equalise life chances by weakening the link between parental income and children's outcomes.
- This briefing note summarises the evidence on why equalising opportunities is important and how this can be achieved, particularly through education.

Recommendations

- Education policy should prioritise reducing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people by ensuring consistent access to high-quality provision from early years through to higher education.
- Equalising opportunities requires coordinated action across sectors, including but also beyond the education sector, including the labour market and home life.
- Measuring success with metrics that capture movements across the distribution of income avoids missing groups of people that fall just outside of the thresholds defining low income.

The Issue

Britain is not a socially mobile country. 50% of the variation in earnings can be explained by the circumstances in which individuals grew up. This is higher than in most other developed countries (Corak, 2013; Jerrim and Macmillan, 2015). This is a waste of talent: not fully harnessing the talent of individuals from all backgrounds, hampers productivity and economic growth (Hsieh et al., 2019).

The UK Government's Opportunities Mission seeks to address this, underpinned by the principle that where you end up in life should not be determined by your parents' financial circumstances. This can be measured using the link between *relative* incomes across generations – or, more specifically, intergenerational income mobility. This is, therefore, focused on the concept of equality of opportunities; the idea that by equalising young people's life chances, the link between their parental circumstances in childhood and their adult outcomes can be weakened for children from all backgrounds. So, what is the evidence-base for this focus?

Why equality of opportunities?

The concept of equality of opportunities has been long debated by political and economic philosophers. John Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) argues that individuals with similar attributes and ambition should have similar life chances. The Capabilities Approach of Amartya Sen (1979) built on this by emphasising that individuals should be equipped with the capabilities they need to achieve their full potential, while again recognising that people may have different preferences. While differences in inherent traits and preferences may mean that there is naturally some link between parental characteristics/childhood circumstances and adult outcomes, a principle of equality of opportunities underpins the types of policies aiming to support social mobility, such as equality of access to high-quality education settings at each stage of life. The notion of equality of opportunity therefore offers a broad lens through which to view social mobility, rather than a particular focus on the upward movement of a group of high-achieving disadvantaged children, for example.

There is also debate about whether equality of opportunities should take precedence over equality of outcomes. A study by Ipsos found that 85% of people in Britain thought that inequality was an important problem facing Britain. But when asked what best defines 'fairness', over twice as many respondents thought that a fair society was one where everyone is given the same opportunities, rather than one where everyone enjoys the same quality of life, or the same outcomes (Taylor, 2023). While public opinion on equality of opportunity vs equality of outcomes is more in favour of the former, academic research demonstrates that the two concepts are strongly inter-related. Corak (2013) collates estimates of intergenerational mobility and cross-sectional income inequality across countries and shows that countries that have higher levels of cross-sectional inequalities have lower levels of mobility, i.e., countries with less equal outcomes also have less equal opportunities. Jerrim and Macmillan (2015) find a very similar picture using harmonised cross-country data.

Intergenerational income mobility

Britain fares poorly in terms of both intergenerational income mobility across countries and over time. The UK is one of the least intergenerationally mobile countries in the developed world (Corak, 2013, Jerrim and Macmillan, 2015), rivalled only by the US for the highest levels of income persistence across generations. Since

those inherent drivers of inter-generational persistence would be expected to be the same across countries, this is strong evidence of unequal opportunities in the UK. Estimates from UK cohort studies find that for a cohort born in 1970, up to half of the differences in parents' incomes are passed across generations into income differences between sons (Gregg et al., 2017). There is also evidence that intergenerational income mobility declined over time in the UK for the cohort born in 1970 relative to a cohort born 12 years earlier in 1958 (Blanden et al., 2005; Blanden et al., 2007).

There are various ways in which the relationship between incomes across generations can be measured. Some studies consider the upward movement of those in the bottom quintile group of the income distribution (Chetty et al., 2014). However, the main focus in studies of intergenerational income mobility is either on the intergenerational elasticity (IGE), defined as the association between log incomes of parents and children in adulthood, or, more commonly now, the association in the ranks of parents and children within each of their generation's income distributions. These two metrics are complementary. While the IGE is the most complete measure, the rank-rank association is less affected by issues, such as measurement error and lifecycle bias (Nybom and Stuhler, 2016).

If we think of the relative incomes of parents and their adult children as two generations lined up on parallel ladders, the IGE captures *both* the ordering of parents and their adult children on the rungs of the ladders *and* the space between each rung of the ladder for each generation (the inequality in each generation). The rank-rank association in contrast only captures the ordering of parents and their adult children, keeping the space between each rung of the ladder constant. Comparing the two metrics then tells us how much of the persistence in incomes across generations is driven by changes in the size of inequalities between generations and how much is driven by the re-ordering of parents and children across generations (Gregg et al., 2017).

An advantage of using continuous metrics, such as these, which capture the associations between incomes across the entire distribution, is that they fully reflect the concept of equal opportunities: a weakening of the link between parental background and children's adult outcomes implies that adult outcomes are less related to childhood circumstances or that opportunities are more equal. A further advantage is that these measures are not subject to threshold effects. Metrics such as the upward movement of those from the bottom quintile to the top quintile are simple and easy to understand but they miss movements in large parts of the distributions. For example, the upward mobility measure captures the movement of the person at the 20th percentile but says nothing about the movement of the person at the 21st percentile. This can have unintended policy consequences, missing out groups of people who may also need intervention.

The crucial role of education

Theoretical models of intergenerational inequalities emphasise the importance of human capital – early skills and educational attainment – in the transmission of incomes across generations (Becker and Tomes, 1986; Solon, 2002). Empirical studies confirm the importance of education and skills in this process, with detailed measures of early cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and educational attainment throughout school accounting for upward of 50% of intergenerational income persistence (Blanden et al., 2007; van der Erve et al., 2024).

This can be thought of as a combination of

two processes: the link between family circumstances and educational attainment or skill development, and the returns to those skills or education in the labour market. Rising educational inequality then can drive rising intergenerational income persistence. Blanden et al. (2007) found that 85% of the increase in persistence across cohorts in the UK was driven by a strengthening of the relationship between family incomes in childhood and educational attainment, i.e., rising educational inequality.

Crawford et al. (2017) illustrate that inequalities in educational attainment start early and widen throughout school: the most deprived pupils are already 15 percentiles behind the least deprived pupils by age 7 and this almost doubles to just short of 30 percentiles by age 16. This emphasises the need to ensure that inequalities are tackled throughout childhood, from early years through to tertiary education. Evidence from the recent Deaton Review on educational inequalities illustrates a similar picture of widening attainment gaps between Free School Meal (FSM)-eligible pupils compared to all other pupils, across the education system in a cross-sectional setting based on Early Years Foundational Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1-5 attainment from 2019 (Farquharson et al., 2023). More recent evidence has found that these inequalities have widened further since 2019 (Anders, 2024), and the increase at age 16 is entirely explained by increasing absence levels of disadvantaged pupils since the Covid-19 pandemic (Hunt et al., 2025).

Educational institutions play an important role here throughout the life course. Studies have shown that there are lasting benefits of attending high-quality early years education settings, and that these benefits are stronger for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (Carneiro et al., 2024, Crawford and Outhwaite, 2023). Crawford et al. (2017) highlight the importance of sorting into secondary schools in driving inequalities, illustrating that when we compare young people from different backgrounds within the same secondary school, attainment gaps are far less stark. In the tertiary setting, there are large differences in returns across institutions, and unequal access to institutions (Belfield et al., 2018, Campbell et al., 2022). Equalising access to high-quality educational institutions is, therefore, a potentially powerful policy to equalise opportunities for young people from all backgrounds.

Beyond income inequality

While family income is an important driver of inequalities and a barrier to equality of opportunities, it is not the only dimension of socioeconomic status (SES). Some definitions of SES focus on social class – often defined based on a combination of individuals' occupations and employment relations (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2011) or "people's relative standing in society based on wealth and/or education" (Dubois et al. 2015, p 437). Indeed, there is long history in the academic literature of measuring inequalities and intergenerational mobility through social class (see Antonoplis, 2022 for review). Research suggests that intergenerational social class mobility in the UK appears relatively stable over time compared to continuous income-based measures (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2011). However, other studies highlight that broad social class categories fail to capture rising within-class inequality over time (Blanden et al., 2013, Breen et al., 2016). Using income and other indicators of SES provide a more detailed understanding of how distributions change across generations and offer a clearer link between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes.

Other indicators of SES can be broadly defined as an individual's access to socially and economically valued resources (Antonoplis, 2022). For example, large-scale UK evidence from the 1972 compulsory schooling reform shows that increasing maternal education from no qualification to a basic level had a lasting impact on children's cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes. This effect was driven by the reform's causal impact on parental investments, including health-related behaviours during pregnancy and monetary investments in the home (Macmillan and Tominey, 2023). Similarly, evidence from the US shows that parental education drives their occupations and income, while also indirectly influencing children's outcomes through beliefs, expectations and cognitive stimulation inside and outside of the home environment (Davis-Kean et al., 2021). Other evidence from UK-based cohort studies show that factors, including (but not limited to) gender, ethnicity, special educational needs and disabilities, parental mental health and home ownership also contribute significantly to gaps in attainment and other outcomes across the life course (Blanden et al., 2023; Cattan et al., 2024; Farquharson et al., 2024; Giupponi and Machin, 2024). While there are also area-level indicators (e.g., Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index), individual-level factors are typically more predictive of children's outcomes (Clery et al., 2022).

Importantly, many of these dimensions also often intersect, which can be overlooked when focusing solely on broad trends in attainment and social mobility. For example, children from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be from low-income households, further compounding the inequalities they experience (Cattan et al., 2024). Research also shows that Black African and Black Caribbean men and women are significantly less likely to experience upward mobility and more likely to experience downward mobility than other ethnic groups, even among those with higher education qualifications (Macmillan and McKnight, 2022).

It is also important to recognise that inequalities can also be driven by factors relating to structural barriers within wider society. For example, there are significant regional inequalities across England. At the start of school, nearly 70% of 5-year-olds in London, the South East, and the South West achieved a good level of development on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFS-P), compared to 65-66% in the North West, Yorkshire, West Midlands, and North East (DfE, 2024a). Although this regional gap may appear modest, it is a 5-10 percentage point difference from the government's school readiness target for 75% of 4-5-year-olds meeting a good level of development. This is equivalent to around 50,000 more children reaching expected targets by 2028 (Cattan, 2024).

By the end of school, at Key Stage 4 (ages 15-16), these regional disparities in educational outcomes persist, with the highest levels of pupil attainment still concentrated in London and the South (DfE, 2024b). They are also reflected in employment opportunities, household income, life expectancy and well-being across England (Overman and Xu, 2024). For example, local areas with low life chances typically have fewer professional and managerial occupation jobs, fewer 'Outstanding' schools, more areas of deprivation and moderate population density. For individuals who grow up in these areas, the pay gap between deprived and affluent sons is 2.5 times bigger than in areas of high social mobility (Carneiro et al., 2020).

Overall, this nuanced understanding to inequalities is imperative, as there is also strong evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic has ex-

acerbated many of these existing inequalities across the life course (Anders et al., 2023; Outhwaite, 2025). This means that equalising opportunities and promoting social mobility is now an even bigger task for policymakers than before.

Need for holistic approaches to address inequalities

As described above, different children and young people can face various disadvantages for different reasons. However, additional support for disadvantaged children and young people in education is currently largely limited to those who meet established criteria, such as eligibility for pupil premium, education and health care plans, or looked-after child status. But eligibility criteria for some of this support has been fixed and therefore fallen in real terms over time. For example, the threshold for FSM eligibility is low (£7,400 year) and does not account for other factors associated with poverty, such as housing costs and family size. There are also registration difficulties, with children from deprived areas, ethnic minority backgrounds and those in the early years less likely to register for FSM and pupil premium (Campbell et al., 2025; La Valle et al., 2024). Similarly, in the early years the family income eligibility threshold for the early education entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds has been frozen since 2015. This means that proportion of children eligible for this support has decreased from 40% to just over 25% in 2022 (Drayton and Farquharson, 2023). Overall, this means that fewer children are eligible and accessing support designed to tackle disadvantage, than there should be. This binary approach to categorising individuals as 'disadvantaged' or 'not disadvantaged' also means that those that fall just outside of the thresholds defining these categories cannot usually access support. For example, recent research shows that there are fewer children registered for FSM than estimated to be in poverty (Campbell et al., 2025). A more holistic approach to educational policymaking across the life course is therefore needed—one that accounts for the complexity of disadvantage and supports children beyond rigid eligibility categories.

Sameroff (2010) argues that interactions with the family, institutions and wider societal context influence individuals. The relative importance of these influences' changes across the life course. At each stage, individuals will develop at different rates, with the skills obtained earlier in life determining opportunities available in future. For example, in the early years evidence shows that children's education and home environments both play critical roles in establishing the foundations for children's later attainment, well-being and life chances (Cattan et al., 2024; Oppenheim and Archer, 2021; Sylva et al., 2004). This underscores the value of large-scale, holistic approaches to early education and parenting support as effective channels for intervention. Importantly, such approaches create valuable opportunities for practitioners to engage with families, providing insights into the complex and evolving factors that influence children's experiences. This engagement can help identify and address barriers to children's learning and development. Research consistently highlights the benefits of Sure Start, a comprehensive program offering a "one-stop shop" of support for families with children under five. Findings show that Sure Start significantly improved medium-long term educational and health outcomes (Carneiro et al., 2024; Cattan et al., 2021). Additionally, areas with greater Sure Start centre availability saw higher take-up rates of early education entitlements, with fewer income-related disparities (Campbell et al., 2018). A key factor in Sure Start's success

was its ability to effectively reach disadvantaged families often overlooked by many of the traditional metrics in the established categories.

While this evidence highlights the value of early intervention, it is vital that the principle of "learning begets learning" is not overgeneralised to other skill domains and all areas of children's and young people's lives (Howard-Jones et al., 2012). We need to create more opportunities at all stages of education and the life course to ensure that individuals can reach their full potential. Recent research has highlighted that the impact of early interventions can fade out, if high quality provision is not maintained throughout the education system (List and Uchida, 2024). Beyond compulsory education in the tertiary sector, evaluations of widening participation outreach programmes and contextual offers show that they are positively associated with a greater likelihood of progression to selective universities for disadvantaged young people (Martin, 2024) without compromising students' absolute academic success, though relative attainment gaps remain (Boliver and Jones, 2025). Such efforts are especially important given that high-achieving disadvantaged students are more likely to "undermatch"—enrolling in lower-quality degree programmes—compared to their high-achieving, more advantaged peers (Campbell et al., 2022). Given that graduates from more selective universities tend to have higher lifetime earnings (Farquharson et al., 2024), improving access to these institutions is not only a matter of educational fairness, but also critical for promoting equality of opportunity across the life course.

Beyond the education system

In order for the Opportunities Mission to deliver on its aims, we also need to look beyond the sphere of education. For example, in the early years, while early education settings matter for children's development, the impact of the home learning environment is twice as strong (Sylva et al., 2004). Other studies show that secondary school-aged children who attend extra-curricular activities have a higher probability of progressing to higher education and being in employment in their early 20s, compared to those that do not attend (Robinson, 2024).

Similarly, while educational attainment plays an important role in the labour market, up to a third of the pay gap between deprived and affluent sons in local areas with low social mobility are attributable to family circumstances (Carneiro et al., 2020). Access to and progression within occupations is playing a key role here. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to work in lower ranking occupations that their higher socio-economic background counterparts, even with the same ability (Macmillan et al., 2024). New research using unique application data suggests that, at least among large professional employers, low SES graduates do apply to these jobs but are less successful in the application/interview process (Dilnot et al., 2025). Working class applicants are 32% less likely to get an offer to a graduate training programme than an applicant from a professional background, and even when comparing applicants who look similar on paper, working class applicants are still 18% less likely to receive and offer. This suggests that the focus should be on employers to adjust their recruitment practices to take this into account, rather than further outreach work.

Importantly, half of the socio-economic gap in offers to graduate training programmes opens in the online phase of the process, during application sifts and online testing, while the other half occurs at the face-to-face phase of recruitment.

Employers should consider whether their online tests are capturing potential or screening out talent. They should also consider why applicants from different backgrounds with similar prior attainment who pass online testing still have significantly different offer rates when they reach the face-to-face phase. Universities could play an important role in better preparing students from disadvantaged backgrounds for recruitment processes, including preparation for online testing, and emphasising the importance of early applications to graduate training programmes.

Beyond human capital, there is also likely a role for social and cultural capital in understanding inequalities in opportunities by family background. For example, for individuals from low-SES backgrounds, the proportion of high-SES friends is one of the strongest predictors of upward income mobility (Chetty et al., 2022). Recent work from the Behavioural Insights Team found that the UK is less stratified along these lines than the US but communities with higher rates of economic connectivity are more upwardly mobile places (Harris et al., 2025). Work by Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison on the class pay gap also emphasise the important role for cultural capital in progression in the labour market (Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

Conclusion

Tackling low social mobility in Britain demands a comprehensive, life course approach that addresses the multiple and intersecting dimensions of disadvantage. The evidence is clear: early inequalities—whether related to income, education, home environment, or region—shape life chances long into adulthood. Education policy must, therefore, be designed to narrow the gap between the most and least advantaged, with a particular focus on individuals facing multiple disadvantages and the potential for intersectional impacts. Crucially, equalising opportunities will also require intervention beyond the education sector, in home life and in the labour market. To understand progress, success must be measured using metrics that capture movement across the full income distribution, avoiding the limitations of threshold-based measures. Overall, delivering the ambition of the UK Government's Opportunities Mission will require investment in holistic, evidence-based interventions—from early childhood through to higher education and into the labour market—that give all young people the chance to thrive, regardless of their background.

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