

# WIDENING OPPORTUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

THE THIRD PHASE: BEYOND  
GRADUATION



Universities UK

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## FOREWORD

Universities have always been institutions that expand the opportunities open to their students – opportunities for personal advancement and for enhancing broader contributions to society. During recent years, attention has been rightly given to the equity of admission processes to ensure that all individuals capable of benefiting from a university education have an opportunity to do so, including those who present with qualifications that reflect their backgrounds as well as their talents. Advances have been made, though much remains to be done. Equally, some progress has been made towards ensuring that higher education is delivered and received in such a manner that student achievement while at university genuinely reflects ability and commitment, rather than a student's background, including socio-economic status.

The focus of this report is on what we are calling the 'third phase' of widening opportunity, namely achieving equity of opportunity after graduation for individuals of similar academic achievement, regardless of their socio-economic background. This is arguably the most complex of the three phases of widening opportunity to address, but we show that, while there is undoubtedly a case for further rigorous research, there is clear evidence of inequity at this stage of individual progression. We argue that universities have the chance, if not the obligation, to contribute to addressing this issue. We note the benefits of a partnership approach with employers, both in augmenting curricula for the acquisition of more than purely academic skills (narrowly defined), and in ensuring that the selection criteria used by employers do not introduce, albeit unintentionally, biases against individuals with particular backgrounds. Through such a partnership approach, we should be able to make genuine advances in social mobility and social justice, ensuring that individuals' career choices and successes are fair and not held back by their backgrounds.

Many universities already offer programmes that are relevant to succeeding in this third phase of widening opportunity, and there is much good practice in place to guide future efforts. Too often, however, such programmes are optional, extra-curricular add-ons, rather than being integral to an academic programme, and present post-graduation success in the reductive contexts of 'employability' or graduate salaries. It is likely that some of the measures introduced to address the first two phases of widening opportunity will also contribute to the third. It is essential, however, that rigorous research by social scientists is conducted to assess the effectiveness of initiatives in addressing inequity in each phase of the widening opportunity framework that is proposed here. We urge research funders – public and private – to support such work in order to enhance the evidence for the effectiveness of actions to achieve widening opportunity across all three phases.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion paper concerns the influence of socio-economic background on graduate success and explicitly the notion of a ‘third phase’ of widening opportunity to supplement widening access and the optimisation of academic achievement regardless of socio-economic background.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, much of the focus of universities, policymakers and governments on higher education’s impact on social mobility has been on disadvantaged students’ access or admission to university, while focus on such students’ successful participation and attainment is growing. The third phase beyond access and participation – disadvantaged individuals’ success beyond graduation – has often been overlooked in comparison. Within the wider public debate about graduate outcomes, however, it is important that sufficient attention is paid to the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged students in building the skills and individual attributes often most valued – and in some cases demanded – by employers. For universities and employers, working to address these challenges can be complicated by narrow definitions of what constitutes an individual graduate’s success, and indeed in actually defining what is meant by the term ‘disadvantaged’ and how it is best measured.

Just as gaps between the most and least disadvantaged exist in terms of access, retention and attainment (even when controlled for prior academic qualifications), so do they also exist in rates of transition to postgraduate study and in employment outcomes. The impact of an individual’s disadvantage does not begin or end with their university experience. Many universities (and employers) are working to address these gaps, with some effect. This includes focusing on the much-debated concept of an individual’s ‘social capital’, and in undertaking innovative approaches to help diversify employers’ workforces. In considering the evidence, however, universities should contemplate the value of implementing programmes to develop individuals’ specific skills in communications, networking and cross-disciplinary thinking, which are inclusive, intra-curricular and personalised. Further, the measurement of the impact of initiatives, and the judgement of their success, should also emphasise their consistency with academic skills, and look at benefits beyond ‘employability’ and earning power. Evaluation of initiatives must also be built in from the start.

There is a key role for employers to partner with universities in developing new skills programmes, and to understand fully the role played by conscious and unconscious bias in recruitment practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Socio-economic background relates to a combination of an individual’s income, occupation and social background. Socio-economic background is a key determinant of success and future life chances (The Open University, 2019).

Much still needs to be done to both:

- shine a light on the under-emphasised third phase of widening opportunity in the higher education context and highlight what works in addressing disparities in outcomes between different socio-economic groups
- inform a more evidence-based discussion about what graduate success can represent, given that students of different backgrounds begin their higher education experience with different levels of financial and social privilege.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS DISCUSSION PAPER

This paper:

- reviews the concept of ‘widening opportunity’ in the higher education context and proposes a framework of three phases, namely access, academic success and graduate success
- considers the various ways that ‘graduate success’ is defined and assessed, including whether it relates to progression into further study, employment opportunities, or salaries
- outlines the drawbacks of narrow definitions, including the focus on remuneration
- highlights how the issue of imperfect proxies extends to characterisations of socio-economic background
- as part of this discussion, considers what is meant by ‘social capital’ and how this might affect graduate opportunities
- considers the nature of barriers that disadvantaged students may face in seeking rewarding and fulfilling roles after graduation
- examines some of the evidence that shows how the influence of socio-economic background follows a student throughout their studies and beyond graduation
- highlights examples of how universities and employers are addressing the influence of background on graduate opportunities (generally in the context of programmes to enhance ‘employability’), and suggests how these initiatives might be assessed.

The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for universities and employers to address the challenge of the continuing effect of socio-economic background on graduate success, and emphasises the need for rigorous evaluation of success.

## WIDENING OPPORTUNITY IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

This section outlines the three phases of widening opportunity through higher education and contextualises the continuing effect of disadvantage on students beyond graduation.

### THE THREE PHASES OF WIDENING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

- **First phase: Fair access** to higher education, including narrowing gaps in access between students of different backgrounds
- **Second phase: Successful participation**, including the completion of studies and elimination of any attainment gaps between students of different backgrounds
- **Third phase: Graduate success** after higher education, based on ability and academic achievement and not socio-economic background, thus elimination of any ‘post-graduation gaps’

### FIRST PHASE: FAIR ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The objective of widening participation in higher education has been deservedly prominent in all the nations of the UK for many years. The sector has made substantial advances, though major discrepancies remain between participation rates for individuals from the most and least disadvantaged backgrounds (Clarke and Beech, 2018).

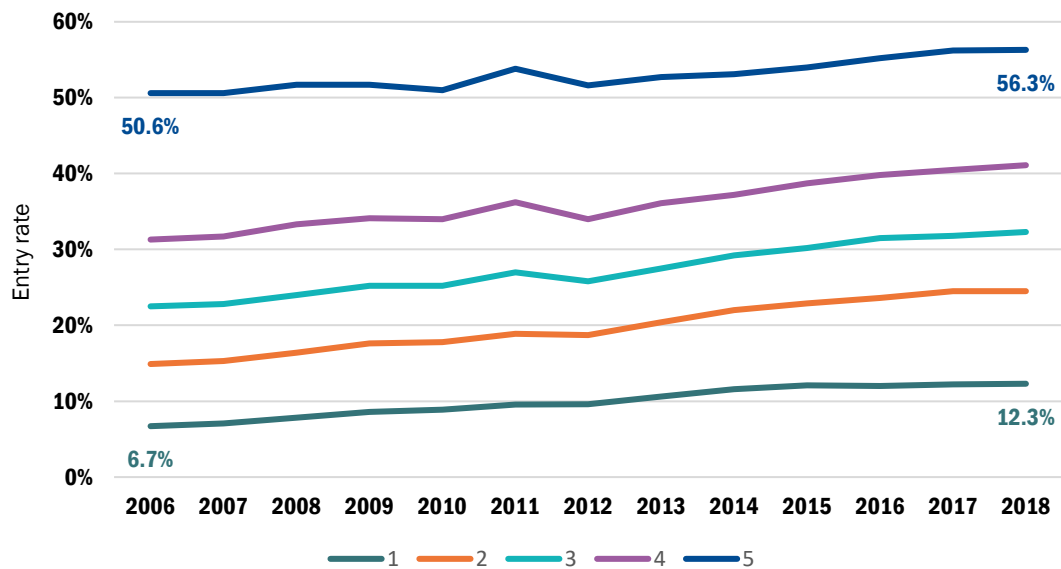
Figure 1 and Figure 2 summarise the evidence of the progress made in this first phase of widening opportunity, and the work that remains to be done. Figure 1 outlines the entry rate of England-domiciled 18-year-old students, according to the UCAS Multiple Equality Measure (MEM).<sup>2</sup> This indicates that the entry rate of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds is increasing (up from 6.7% in 2006 to 12.3% in 2018), but remains significantly lower than the entry rate of students from more advantaged backgrounds (56.3% in 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> The UCAS MEM is based on statistical modelling techniques and uses National Pupil Database data on English school student characteristics to produce an evidence-based measure of equality. English school student statistics included in MEM include POLAR3 quintile, ethnic group, gender, free school meals status, Index of Multiple Deprivation, and school type. For more information, see UCAS (2018b).



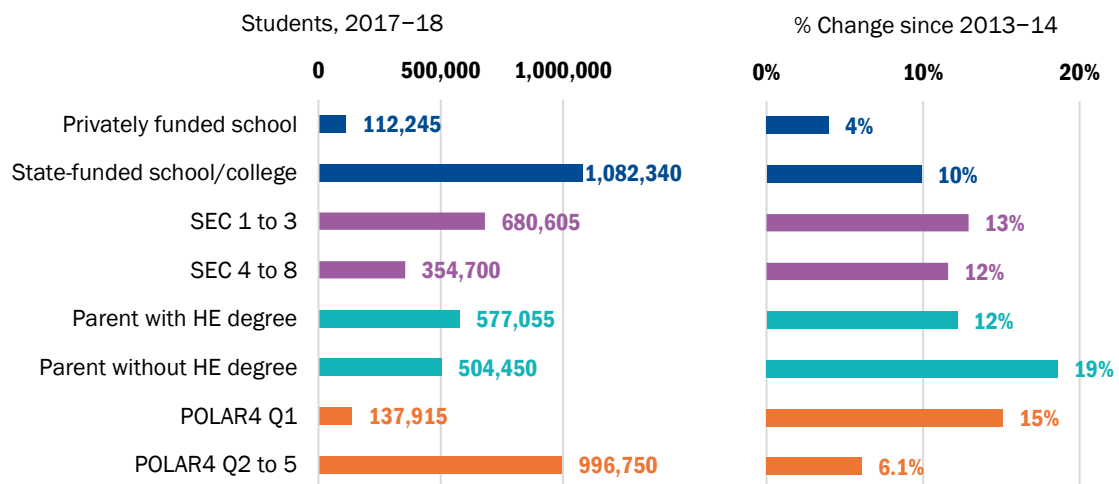
**FIGURE 1: ENTRY RATES FOR ENGLAND-DOMICILED 18-YEAR-OLD STUDENTS BY MEM GROUP (GROUP 1 = MOST DISADVANTAGED)**



Source: [UCAS, 2018b](#)

Figure 2 shows the total numbers of undergraduate enrolments at UK higher education institutions in 2017–18 by participation characteristics, and indicates how these figures have changed since 2013–14. In several cases, the numbers of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds have increased at a higher rate proportionally than students from more advantaged backgrounds since 2013–14. For example, the number of students without HE-qualified parents increased 19% between 2013–14 and 2017–18. This compares with a 12% increase in the number of students with an HE-qualified parent. Figure 2 also shows a range of characteristics used to measure disadvantage.

**FIGURE 2: NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE CHANGE OF UK-DOMICILED, FULL-TIME, UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENTS BY PARTICIPATION CHARACTERISTICS 2013–14 TO 2017–18**



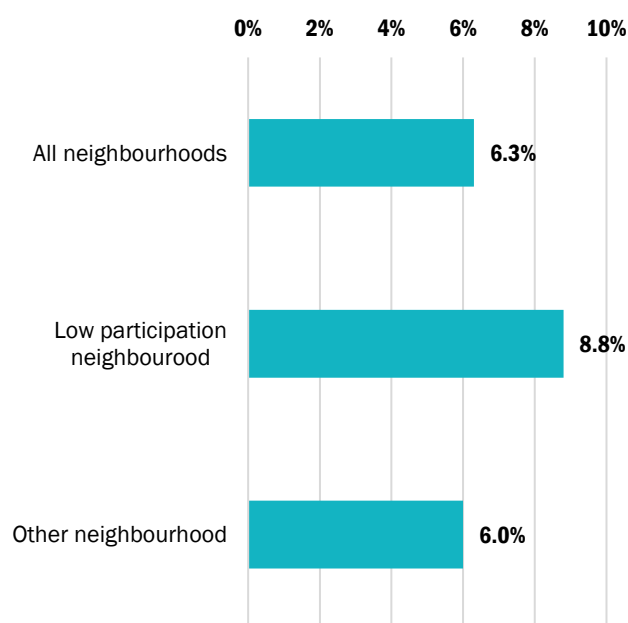
Source: [HESA Student record, 2013–14 and 2017–18](#)

## SECOND PHASE: SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION

It is now widely recognised that it is not enough to focus only on access to higher education. Universities also need to attend to adjustments – for example, of pedagogy and assessment methods – to meet the needs of students of different backgrounds, thereby ensuring academic success consistent with ability (Clarke and Beech, 2018; Office for Students (OfS), 2018a). Disparities remain between different groups of students in the rates of continuation and final degree attainment. Some of these disparities are ‘structural’ (eg, entry qualification, subject of study and age), while others are ‘unexplained’ once these structural factors are taken into account (OfS, 2019a).

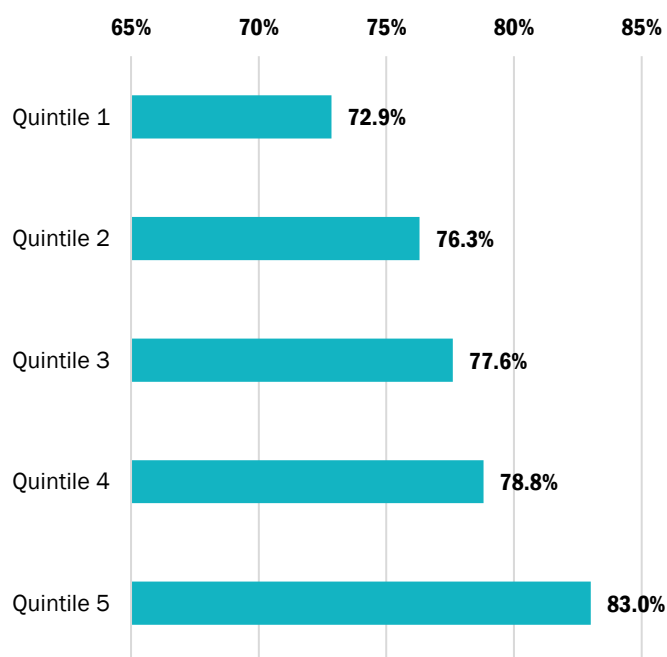
Figure 3 shows the percentage of UK-domiciled, young (aged under 21), full-time, undergraduate students who entered university in 2016–17 and did not continue after one year (the ‘non-continuation rate’), by participation neighbourhood. Figure 3 shows that students from low participation neighbourhoods are more likely to drop out (8.8%) than students from other neighbourhoods (6.0%). Figure 4 shows that the number of UK-domiciled, young, first-degree qualifiers obtaining a first or upper second classification degree was 10 percentage points higher for students from POLAR4 (Participation of Local Areas) quintile 5 than for those from quintile 1.

**FIGURE 3: NON-CONTINUATION RATES OF UK-DOMICILED, YOUNG, FULL-TIME, FIRST-DEGREE STUDENTS FOLLOWING YEAR OF ENTRY (YEAR OF ENTRY 2016–17)**



Source: [HESA Student record, 2017–18](#)

**FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF UK-DOMICILED, YOUNG, FIRST-DEGREE QUALIFIERS ACHIEVING A FIRST OR UPPER SECOND CLASSIFICATION DEGREE BY POLAR4 QUINTILE, 2016–17**



*Source: OfS analysis of HESA Student record, 2017–18*

*Note: Only includes higher education institutions funded by HEFCE in 2016–17*

### **THIRD PHASE: SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION**

This paper primarily concerns a third phase of widening opportunity that has so far received insufficient explicit attention, namely the equalisation of opportunity post-graduation for students of a given ability (as judged by the potential of the applicant to succeed) and level of achievement while at university, regardless of their social or financial background. Thus, we are concerned with the possible influence of socio-economic background on graduate success beyond that which may be explained by previously recognised attainment gaps in student performance. We summarise the available evidence that shows this is a problem, suggest scope for further systematic study, reference initiatives currently under way that directly or indirectly address the issues, and suggest further approaches that might be considered.

In summary, this discussion paper is intended to contribute to the extended debate on how widening opportunity in the broadest sense may be achieved through the work of the UK higher education sector and in partnership with employers.

## DEFINING AND CONTEXTUALISING GRADUATE SUCCESS

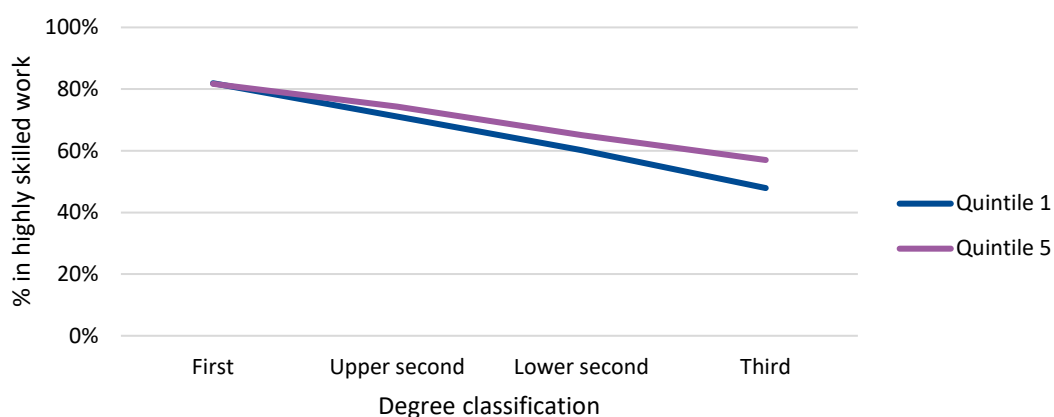
Graduate success may be qualitatively defined as the achievement of a fulfilling role (whether in continuing education or employment) commensurate with both the innate ability and educational achievement of the individual. This definition has the advantage of implicitly subsuming benefits to both individuals and to the societies of which they are a part. An alternative approach would be to consider achievement consistent with the aspirations of the individual, but this requires the potentially invalid assumption that ambition is not itself conditioned by factors beyond ability and achievement. Nevertheless, ambition frustrated by unequal opportunity would represent an important example of any continuing effect of a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

Alternative definitions of graduate success exist, including ‘everyone achieving their potential in rewarding careers’ (Department for Education (DfE), 2017), ‘the opportunity to build a good life for themselves and to reach their potential, regardless of background and identity’ (OfS, 2019b). Many variations of this can be found in universities’ mission statements.

### GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

However acceptable these definitions may be, it is clearly problematic to measure such success in quantitative terms, and (at least for now) proxies must be sought. Entry into ‘graduate employment’ is an inadequate (and simply binary) measure of success, not least because of the varying definitions of ‘graduate jobs’ as those performed by graduates, those requiring a degree qualification, or those deemed to require ‘graduate skills’. In England, the OfS has shown that the size of the gap between graduates in highly skilled work in POLAR4 quintile 1 and quintile 5 differs depending on their degree classifications. As Figure 5 shows, while there is only a small difference for graduates with a first class degree (0.2 percentage points), the difference is nine percentage points for graduates with a third class degree.

**FIGURE 5: UK-DOMICILED, FIRST-DEGREE GRADUATES IN 2015–16 WHO RESPONDED TO THE 2016 DLHE SURVEY, BY POLAR4 QUINTILE, 2015–16**



*Source: OfS analysis of HESA DLHE record, 2016–17*

*Note: Only includes higher education institutions funded by HEFCE in 2015–16*

## FURTHER STUDY

Entry to postgraduate programmes (at master’s and doctorate levels) is sometimes suggested as evidence of graduate success. In 2016–17, postgraduate master’s loans of up to £10,000 were introduced to assist students with tuition fees and living costs. Research from the OfS showed that UK-domiciled students from low-participation areas at English higher education institutions had the highest take-up of postgraduate loans, as well as the largest proportional increase in entrant numbers and one-year transition rates to loan-eligible postgraduate courses (OfS, 2019c). This means that students from the lowest undergraduate participation areas are now proportionately ‘more likely to enter postgraduate study immediately after undergraduate study than those from the highest participation areas’ (ibid).

Figure 6 suggests that this is indeed the case for students from low-participation neighbourhoods, although other measurements of disadvantage used here suggest that more disadvantaged students are less likely to enter further study six months after graduating. Additionally, research from the Resolution Foundation outlines how ‘very large educational advantages for those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds persist, and show few signs of abating’ (Henehan, 2019, p.23).

**FIGURE 6: DESTINATIONS OF UNDERGRADUATE, UK-DOMICILED, FULL-TIME LEAVERS BY PARTICIPATION CHARACTERISTICS, 2016–17**

Widening participation characteristic	UK work	Overseas work	Combination of work and further study	Further study	Unemployed	Other
<b>Low-participation neighbourhood marker</b>						
Low-participation neighbourhood (POLAR 3)	65.8%	1.0%	6.7%	18.0%	5.0%	3.5%
Other neighbourhood (POLAR 3)	65.2%	1.8%	5.6%	17.8%	5.2%	4.3%
<b>State school marker</b>						
Privately funded school	58.8%	3.5%	4.6%	21.6%	5.2%	6.3%
State-funded school or college	65.7%	1.6%	5.8%	17.8%	5.1%	4.0%
<b>Socio-economic classification</b>						
SEC 1 to 3	64.7%	2.1%	5.7%	18.6%	4.7%	4.3%
SEC 4 to 8	66.7%	1.3%	5.7%	17.1%	5.4%	3.9%
<b>Parental education</b>						
Yes	63.7%	2.3%	5.4%	19.2%	4.9%	4.4%
No	66.6%	1.2%	6.1%	17.2%	5.1%	3.9%

Source: [HESA DLHE record 2016–17](#)

Further research is required to understand the decision-making by individual graduates with respect to entering postgraduate study. The OfS survey on graduates' intentions after graduation identified course fees as the main factor students would take into account when deciding whether to progress to further study or not (OfS, 2019d); however, research by a consortium led by the University of Sheffield has shown that a countervailing factor may be a perceived need among students from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve further qualifications to overcome a competitive disadvantage associated with prior educational experience (Strike, Toyne, 2015). In addition, research commissioned by the DfE has identified barriers to learning such as cost, childcare, awareness of opportunities and employer support (Pennacchia, Jones, Aldridge, 2018).

Improved understanding of graduates' decision-making would benefit both strategies for support of postgraduate students and a more general understanding of the effect of socio-economic background on graduate success. Future research might build on the work done in a number of universities (such as the consortium cited above) to promote the benefits of postgraduate study to undergraduate students, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

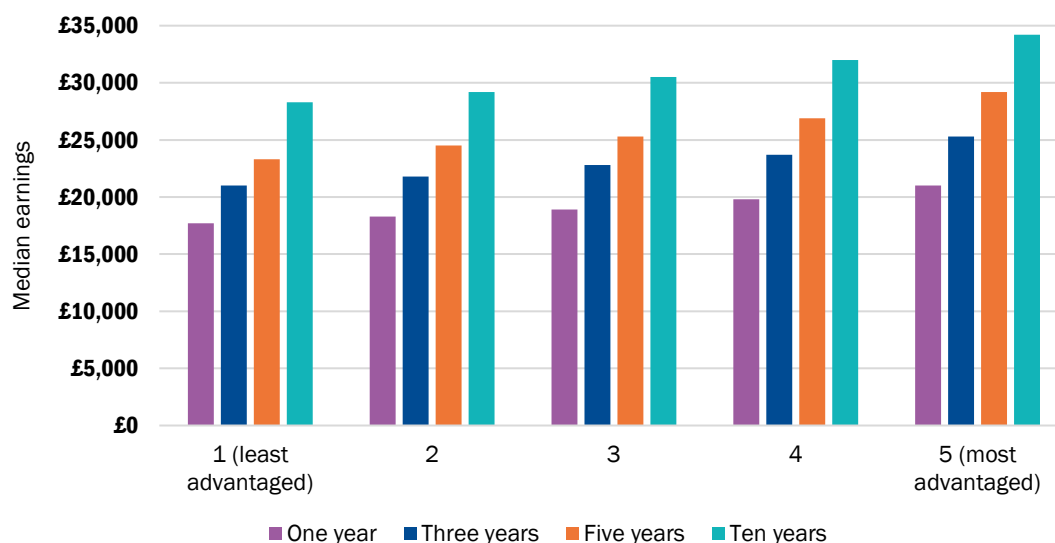
## GRADUATE SALARY

For reasons of ready quantifiability (and arguably because, however regrettably, the prevailing UK national narrative has long been that the primary purpose of a university education is to enhance personal financial status), graduate success is commonly measured by graduate salaries. This has three obvious disadvantages.

- There is a wide discrepancy between salaries associated with 'success' in differing fields (eg, the arts versus banking) and different geographical areas.
- Individual graduates may value attributes other than remuneration more highly, and going to university provides benefits beyond future earnings.
- The societal benefit of differing employment after graduation is not always reflected in personal remuneration. This is especially true for graduates from programmes that prepare for careers in (for example) the arts, charity sector, nursing or the public sector, all of which benefit culture, society and the economy but can have below-average earnings (UUK, 2019a). In other areas (such as innovation and entrepreneurship), a personal financial return may be delayed.

While recognising the above limitations, it is noteworthy that there are significant discrepancies in the salaries of graduates from more and less disadvantaged backgrounds. As Figure 8 shows, the salaries of graduates from POLAR3 quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) are lower than the salaries of students from other quintiles, one, three, five and 10 years after graduation.

**FIGURE 8: MEDIAN EARNINGS ONE, THREE, FIVE AND 10 YEARS AFTER GRADUATION, BY POLAR QUINTILE**



*Note: Coverage: Young (under 21 at start of course) UK-domiciled male and female, first-degree graduates from English higher education institutions, alternative providers and further education colleges. Cohorts: 2005–06 (10 years after graduation), 2010–11 (5 years), 2012–13 (3 years), 2014–15 (1 year). Tax year: 2016–17*

*Source: DfE (2019)*

We return in the Conclusions section to the need for further research on the assessment of graduate success and its quantitative measurement. Moreover, as we discuss below, understanding of any continuing effect of socio-economic background on graduate success requires the disaggregation of the effects of university entry qualifications, university attended, and academic success while at university.



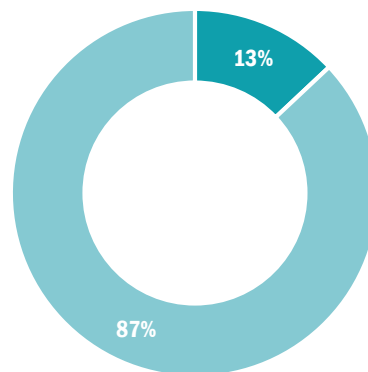
## CHARACTERISATION OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

There are equivalent problems in defining and quantifying socio-economic background if one acknowledges its multi-faceted nature. There are several indicators used for measuring socio-economic background, including Participation of Local Areas (POLAR), A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods (ACORN), Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), Multiple Equality Measure (MEM), socio-economic class (SEC), parental education, household salary, free school meal (FSM) entitlement and school type. As an example of a single proxy, Crawford and Vignoles (2014) used attendance at a private school as a basis for binary classification of socio-economic background.

### IMPERFECT PROXIES

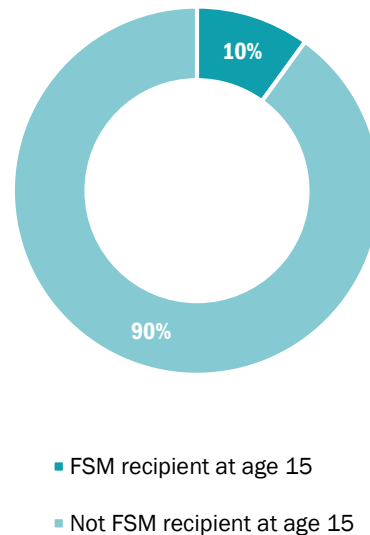
This can mean that imperfect proxies must be used to characterise socio-economic background. In discussing those aspects of background that are influential beyond university, it is important to understand both the complexity of the issues and the significant risks of over-simplification. For example, a geographical area-level measure such as POLAR may result in some disadvantaged students not being recognised as such because they live in areas considered to be less disadvantaged than others. Research from Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui notes that ‘offering contextualised admissions to individuals living in disadvantaged areas but not known to be personally disadvantaged, and rendering ineligible for contextualised admission individuals who are known to be disadvantaged but just happen to live outside of disadvantaged areas, is likely to be ineffective at widening participation and may even be counterproductive’ (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2019, p. 5). Figures 9 and 10 highlight the risk of false negatives and false positives.

**FIGURE 9: PERCENTAGE OF THOSE RECEIVING FSM AT AGE 15 WHO LIVED IN A DISADVANTAGED AREA (TRUE POSITIVES) AND WHO DID NOT LIVE IN A DISADVANTAGED AREA (FALSE NEGATIVES)**



- FSM recipient lived in a disadvantaged area
- FSM recipient did not live in a disadvantaged area

**FIGURE 10: PERCENTAGE OF THOSE LIVING IN A DISADVANTAGED AREA WHO RECEIVED FSM (TRUE POSITIVES) AND WHO DID NOT RECEIVE FSM (POSSIBLE FALSE POSITIVES) AT AGE 15**



*Source for both above: Boliver, Gorard, Siddiqui (2019)*

It is important, however, to determine (or, at least, to surmise, based on current incomplete evidence) what characteristics of socio-economic background might be significant. When considering ‘employability’, for example, Rich (2015) has suggested that there are three components – knowledge, skills and social capital – where the first two are determined by ability and the educational experience, whereas the third reflects socio-economic background (Rich, 2015). Furthermore, in which ever way socio-economic disadvantage is measured, those deemed to be from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have access to the ‘social capital’ that is most valued or deemed necessary for success.

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL**

The concepts behind the term ‘social capital’ are a contested area for sociologists (Tzanakis, 2013). Some (notably Putnam, 2000) regard social capital as primarily a characteristic of communities or societies, which accordingly may demonstrate a relative (to other communities or societies) deficit or surplus depending on the connectivity demonstrated between individual members of the group. As well as highlighting the collective aspect of social capital, Putnam also drew attention to the individual aspect; for example, ‘if we lack that social capital, economic sociologists have shown, our economic prospects are seriously reduced, even if we have lots of talent and training (‘human capital’) (Putnam, 2000, p. 289).

Others use the term more exclusively to describe the position of an individual within a society (and this is the sense in which Rich has used it), so that a deficit or surplus (relative to other members of the society) can affect an individual's success, for example in obtaining rewarding employment.

Social capital may be seen as an enabler of social mobility, where individuals' opportunities to succeed in education and employment are untied from their socio-economic backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Social mobility is characterised by fairness and a levelling of the playing field, despite previous experiences of inequality (Bridge Group, 2017). It is commonly recognised that higher education has a key role to play as a driver of social mobility, significantly advancing the earning potential of some graduates over a lifetime (Belfield, Britton, Buscha et al, 2018). Overall, universities are engines for social good; thus, graduates live longer and are more likely to vote, volunteer and have higher racial tolerance than those with lower levels of qualifications. Furthermore, an increase in the number of graduates has been found to promote economic growth and workforce productivity, as well as reduce crime and the associated costs (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). However, for the social mobility of individuals to be fully realised, universities and employers need to play their part in promoting Putnam's 'civic interconnections'; otherwise, social mobility gained through attending university could, for example, be undone by inequities in degree attainment or unfair employment or recruitment practices (Bridge Group, 2017).

It is indeed likely that employers will look for characteristics such as communication and networking abilities (arguably on the borderline between Rich's 'skills' and 'social capital') that are expected to influence an individual's success. Characterisation of a perceived lack of these attributes as a personal social capital 'deficit' risks overlooking or undervaluing a richness in social capital associated with, say, membership of a close-knit and strongly connected community. Thus, this characterisation may say more about a lack of recognition by employers of diverse forms of social capital than it does about the individual. Employers, therefore, should consider both the individual and community aspects of social capital. Similarly, universities should help to strengthen their students' recognition of the social capital they have to draw on, and to deepen and widen this in its variety of forms, by integrating relevant skills and experiences into curricula (Gaskell, Lingwood, 2017).

## MEASURES OF DISADVANTAGE

**A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods (ACORN):** A postcode-based tool that categorises the UK's population by level of socio-economic advantage

**Free school meals (FSM):** A means-tested benefit to show income background (as measured by whether a person was in receipt of free school meals, a means-tested benefit while at school

**Household salary:** A measure of the combined incomes of all people sharing a particular household or place of residence

**Income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI):** Measures in a local area the proportion of children under the age of 16 that live in low-income households

**Multiple equality measure (MEM):** UCAS-developed principal measure of equality, which brings together information on several equality dimensions for which large differences in the probability of progression into higher education exist. These equality dimensions include sex, ethnic group, POLAR3 and FSM

**Parental education:** Records information about whether an entrant's parents have higher education qualifications

**Participation of local areas (POLAR):** The POLAR4 classification is formed by ranking five groups from quintile 1 areas, with the lowest young participation (most disadvantaged), up to quintile 5 areas with the highest rates (most advantaged), each representing 20% of the UK young cohort. Students have been allocated to the neighbourhoods based on their postcode. Those students whose postcode falls within middle-layer super-output areas with the lowest participation (quintile 1) are denoted as being from a low-participation neighbourhood

**Socio-economic classification (SEC):** HESA collects the socio-economic classification of students participating in higher education if aged 21 or over at the start of their course or parental classification if under 21

**School type:** HESA collects information about whether the student went to a state school or private school

## BARRIERS TO GRADUATE SUCCESS

In this section, we review and categorise some of the evidence for key barriers that may affect the success of graduates from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

### LESS REGIONAL MOBILITY

Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to go to university in their local area and to live at home. This is especially the case for students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (Wiseman, Davies, Duggal, et al, 2017; Keohane, Petrie, 2017). Moving regions has been shown to increase social mobility; however, the Social Mobility Commission (2019) recently found that those from working class backgrounds are less likely to move regions and less likely to move to London where there are proportionally more jobs (ibid). If graduates from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to move in order to find better employment opportunities, their career outcomes are likely to be negatively affected.

It is important, however, to acknowledge a key tension in the wider narrative of graduate mobility. Graduates remaining in the area where they studied are of significant benefit to the economy where an institution is based. To encourage more graduates to move to the cities with higher wages could have a potentially damaging effect on some local economies (Swinney, Williams, 2016). Thus, there may be significant social benefits to limited geographical mobility, even if this is accompanied by 'poorer' individual outcomes, as measured by personal salary. Perhaps in recognition of this tension, the OfS launched a competition for funding in 2018 for universities to develop and implement projects that improve the outcomes for graduates seeking employment in their home region (OfS, 2018b).

### INEQUALITIES IN ATTAINMENT

In this paper, we are focused on inequalities post-graduation after correcting for ability and academic attainment; however, it is the case that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been found to have lower levels of attainment at *all* stages of education due to differences in the quality of schooling and structural societal inequalities (OECD, 2015). Correcting attainment gaps at university level is the subject of the second phase of widening opportunity, discussed briefly above. In 2018, the Institute of Student Employers (ISE) found that about two-thirds of graduate recruiters set an upper second-degree classification as a minimum requirement for a graduate job (Coughlan, 2018a). While inequalities in attainment remain in higher education, it will be difficult for employers to increase the diversity of their graduate intakes (and workforce more generally), without contextualising academic qualifications.

## EMPLOYER RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

Traditionally, top graduate employers target high-tariff, research-intensive universities for recruitment (Ashley, Duberley, Sommerlad et al, 2015), universities that are more likely to have a disproportionately high number of students from private schools. Thus, while only 7% of all UK pupils attend private schools (Coughlan, 2018b), the number of private school students entering high-tariff universities in 2018 was as high as 42% at one institution (Weale, Barr, 2018). Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be concentrated at low-tariff universities (UCAS, 2018a) even when equally academically able. Without fresh thinking by employers about their recruitment practices, they will not benefit from a diverse workforce, and talented graduates from more disadvantaged backgrounds will be further disadvantaged by some combination of their prior attainment, employer perceptions of the universities they attended, their lack of traditional social capital, and a lack of opportunity to prove their worth to top graduate employers. Furthermore, research has shown that even students from 'more modest' socio-economic backgrounds educated at Russell Group universities may 'self-select out' of applying for roles at prestigious firms (Ashley et al 2015, p. 11).

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AND WORKPLACE CULTURES

In the current graduate employment market, which places value on the social capital of more privileged students at high-tariff universities (High Fliers, 2018), those who present differently to employer expectations, and who have less experience of professional environments or knowledge of how to navigate them effectively, are disadvantaged in recruitment processes – if indeed they get as far as being considered. Careers guidance and paid work-experience opportunities, tailored to the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged students, can mitigate present inequalities in recruitment and employment. Universities with large student cohorts from lower socio-economic backgrounds face, by scale, a more significant challenge in resourcing support for graduate success, but are also more likely to be aware of the issues and have greater expertise in engaging their student body and to lead conversations with employers. Employers, for their part, have an important role to play in changing their cultures to ensure that people backgrounds are equally valued and respected in the workplace.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE EFFECT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND ON GRADUATE SUCCESS

It is not intended here to produce an exhaustive review of work done to evaluate any relationship between socio-economic background and graduate success; rather it is to answer the question whether sufficient such evidence exists to substantiate the notion that optimising the success of individuals post-graduation does indeed represent the third phase of the widening opportunity challenge.

There is a general paucity of evidence that fully deconvolutes the effects of socio-economic background on admission to university, academic achievement at university and graduate success. The longitudinal education outcomes (LEO) surveys, for example, provide a source of data to enable comparisons over time of earnings between groups of graduates, based on ethnicity, area of residence (POLAR data), etc (DfE, 2019). The data as presented, however, does not allow deconvolution of the effects of socio-economic background, entry qualifications and success while at university.

In a series of working papers from the Institute of Fiscal Studies, researchers have explicitly examined whether the objective of enhanced social mobility through a university education might be compromised by a continuing influence of socio-economic background on graduate salaries. For example, Crawford and Vignoles (2014), who also reviewed relevant earlier work, investigated whether a link remained between family background and post-graduation salary outcomes, even when account is taken of attainment at school and university. They found that individuals who attended private schools (as an admittedly imperfect proxy for socio-economic privilege) earn around 7% more a year, on average, than state-school students some three and a half years after graduation, even when comparing otherwise similar graduates and allowing for differences in degree subject, university attended and degree classification (Crawford, Vignoles, 2014).

Britton, Dearden, Shephard and Vignoles (2016) conducted a comprehensive study of the effect on graduate earnings of gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background. A main finding was that a graduate's family background – specifically whether they come from a low- or high-income household – continues to influence a graduate's earnings long after graduation. This study did not, however, normalise for any effect of socio-economic background on attainment levels of students during their university studies.

An extensive study (Crawford, Gregg, Macmillan et al, 2016) investigated the impact of socio-economic background at each of the stages that we here characterise as the three phases of widening opportunity through higher education. The authors conclude that graduates from affluent families are more likely to obtain a professional job and to see higher earnings growth, even when allowance is made for university attended and degree attainment.

In addition to the limitations associated with the difficulties of characterising both socio-economic background and graduate success (discussed in preceding sections), it must be noted that studies such as these necessarily reflect conditions of university entrance that applied some time ago (preceding, for example, the relatively recent increase in personal liability for coverage of fees).

In summary, notwithstanding imperfect means of assessing both graduate success and socio-economic background (which emphasise the scope for further focused research), there is substantial evidence to suggest that the effect of a student's background carries through into success after graduation, regardless of the student's abilities and academic achievement.

It is expected that the new graduate outcomes survey conducted by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) will provide important new data on graduate success (HESA, 2019). This resource presents an opportunity to assist universities in assessing the relationship between success and socio-economic background. In particular, it is anticipated that a rich research resource will be provided by the combination of the new quantitative data and qualitative information from graduates on their career trajectories, augmented by data available through the LEO surveys (based on information from the DfE, along with information on employment, benefits and earnings from the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs). Importantly, qualitative information will be sought on whether, 15 months after graduation, individual graduates feel that what they are doing is meaningful or important to them, and whether it is aligned with their future plans. Thus, new insights should be available into graduate success, beyond the narrow discourse of occupation and salary.



## CURRENT INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE GRADUATE SUCCESS

In addressing the disparity for some social groups between ability and academic attainment at university on the one hand, and graduate success on the other, three general factors come into play for universities and employers:

- i. the ambition of the individual graduate
- ii. the skills of the individual, beyond academic achievement, in areas such as communication, cross-disciplinary thinking, networking, etc that optimise career opportunities
- iii. the willingness of employers to contextualise the candidate's achievements before, during and after university

Universities have the opportunity to address factors (i) and (ii) and indirectly influence factor (iii) through engagement with employers, who themselves have important contributions to make. Below is a case study which reports the work of one major employer to reduce the influence on recruitment of preconceived, rather than objectively justifiable, criteria.

### **CASE STUDY 1: IMPROVING CRITERIA USED IN RECRUITMENT DECISIONS**

EY receives around 34,000 applications for its graduate, apprenticeship and internship schemes every year, offering approximately 1,200 student places annually. In 2015, EY made several changes to its student recruitment process to open the profession to a more diverse pool of candidates and respond to a survey of young people which had found that recruitment processes could be stressful, lengthy and narrowly focused on academic grades. EY removed its academic entry criteria, which had been set at 300 UCAS points (equivalent to three Bs at A-level) and an upper second degree classification. It also introduced a 'blind CV' policy to reduce the impact of unconscious bias.

It was found that 18% of EY's 2016 graduate and school-leaver intake would not have been eligible to apply if the changes to entry criteria had not been made. There was also an increase in the number of new joiners from state schools and those who were first in their family to go to university (EY, 2018). EY found that standardised online tests are a better predictor of professional success than academic performance (O'Connor, 2016).

Some organisations outside the higher education sector (but working with it) are also doing important work to drive improvements in outcomes for disadvantaged graduates. The case studies below provide examples.

## **CASE STUDY 2: DEVELOPING STUDENTS WITH CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE AS AN INDIVIDUAL ASSET**

Common Purpose is a global, not-for-profit organisation, founded in the UK, that develops leaders who can cross boundaries. They work with over 100 universities worldwide to deliver co-curricular experiential leadership programmes, which develop the skills and competencies of over 4,000 students each year. These programmes equip students with cultural intelligence – the ability to cross divides and thrive in multiple cultures.

Many universities work with Common Purpose because their programmes create unique opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to international experiences and develop key competencies. The programmes, which combine online learning with short-term outbound experiences, often inspire students to take up further opportunities offered by their university.

The impact of the programmes is measured through a self-assessment. Of the 510 students who completed Common Purpose programmes in the UK in 2018, 94% or more said that they are:

- able to adjust their behaviour in culturally diverse situations
- better able to engage with people who are different from them
- better able to lead or operate within a diverse team
- better able to contribute to their university or community

## **CASE STUDY 3: GO WALES**

The Achieve through Work Experience programme is funded by the European Social Fund, HEFCW and higher education providers to create work-experience opportunities for students on higher education courses in Wales who may face barriers to gaining work experience. GO Wales works with employers in Wales to create tailored, flexible work-experience opportunities designed to fit around students' other commitments.

The programme sources:

- work shadowing: up to three days of work experience where the student observes someone in their role to understand how they do their job
- work tasters: up to four weeks of work experience where the student has the opportunity to learn about work and the working environment by observing and undertaking some tasks
- work placements: four to six weeks of paid work experience getting hands-on experience or working on a project

Students who take part in the programme receive the support of an adviser to help with decisions about what kind of work experience would work best for them, and to help to prepare for it, learn from it and decide on their next steps. The programme aims to improve students' chances of securing sustainable employment, further training or education on completion of their course. Help may be given with travel and other costs so that participation in work-experience opportunities is an affordable option.

It is, of course, true that initiatives taken by universities (for example, by adjustment of pedagogic approaches) to improve the academic attainment of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may also enhance attributes likely to improve graduate success. Nevertheless, one purpose of this discussion paper is to suggest that explicit attention to the graduate success of disadvantaged students is both justified and desirable.

Many universities have introduced programmes for their students that seek, explicitly or otherwise, to instil supplementary (often described as 'soft') skills to improve 'employability' (Yorke, 2006). The terms themselves are arguably unhelpful: 'employability' carries an implication of minimalist ambition, while 'soft' skills, when taken to refer to abilities in, say, communication, cross-disciplinary thinking and networking, might underemphasise the importance of these skills, which are critical to success in a high proportion of careers.

Case studies 4 to 8 give some examples of current initiatives at UK universities that are relevant to the objective of enhancing graduate success. Some of these examples are extra-curricular and targeted to particular student groups.

#### **CASE STUDY 4: QUEEN MARGARET UNIVERSITY**

Queen Margaret University (QMU) is launching qmploy, a package of employability training and work-based opportunities for all students, with the aim of improving retention and enhancing graduate employment for widening participation (WP) students.

In 2019–20, qmploy aims to further engage WP students in several scaled-up interventions:

- tailored careers education programmes in the curriculum, developed by careers advisers with heads of subjects. These could include job searching, applications/CV support, group interview practice and work-experience modules
- qmploy+ tailored careers support throughout the student journey, a specially designed programme for students articulating to a course at QMU into level 2 or 3 from a college and the Scottish widening access programme
- employer and enterprise mentoring
- work-experience careers fair
- industry visits
- internship opportunities

#### **CASE STUDY 5: UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

Dedicated teams engage with students to ensure interventions to maximise engagement and facilitate progression to graduate careers or postgraduate study. Alumni and employers play a key role in providing expertise, and their time and experience. The programme includes events tailored to the needs of target groups, mentoring and support to maximise involvement in work-experience placements, and study abroad. An example of this is the development of shorter work-experience placements to meet the needs of students who may not be able to participate in longer placements due to caring responsibilities, for example.

Leeds has also been part of two government-funded collaborative projects focused on progression to postgraduate study by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research from the first project, led by the University of Sheffield, found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often chose postgraduate study as a means of addressing a perceived or actual deficit as a result of their prior educational experience. While the barrier of financial support has been partially addressed through the loans system, the absence of a coherent framework of advice and guidance to inform decision-making can often act as a barrier. Leeds has led an

OfS-funded project (evaluated via randomised control trials) and is working alongside four other institutions (Universities of Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and York) to test interventions to inform third-year undergraduates from low-participation neighbourhoods and BAME backgrounds about postgraduate study opportunities.

#### **CASE STUDY 6: UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS, LONDON**

Creative Shift is a team based in the careers and employability service of University of the Arts, London (UAL). It has a dedicated focus on supporting students from groups underrepresented in the creative industries. Creative Shift works in partnership with brands and companies to inspire creatives to support such students.

UAL offers the following initiatives for home, undergraduate students whose parent(s) or guardian(s) have not completed a university degree:

- graduate internships
- mentoring
- student-led creative network
- events, workshops and visits
- industry partnership projects
- work-based learning

#### **CASE STUDY 7: ASTON UNIVERSITY**

Aston University is leading the OfS 'levelling the playing field' project, which is working to reduce differential graduate employment outcomes for individuals from BAME backgrounds, and those with low-socio-economic status or disabilities. Research by Aston University shows that taking part in work-based learning has a moderating effect on differential employment outcomes.

The project brings together Aston University, Birmingham City University, City, University of London, and Ulster University. The aim is to engage 1,800 students in the following scaled-up interventions:

- professional mentoring
- micro-placements
- recruitment matching service
- speed recruitment events
- embedded employability modules

The two-year project includes an assessment of institutional replicability of the interventions and the development of a sector [employability toolkit](#). While it has not yet been possible to measure the long-term outcomes within the timeframe of the project, shorter term measurable outputs have shown positive results. Evaluation for all partners showed that project interventions had significant positive impact on students' confidence and resilience levels, and on their career readiness. The gap in placement take-up between target groups and the baseline population was also reduced in all cases.

### **CASE STUDY 8: UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON**

The University of East London (UEL) has a very diverse profile in its more than 18,000 students and is located within an area of significant economic expansion and opportunity. It has an ambitious strategy to focus on improved graduate employability by integrating the competencies and characteristics demanded by employers into its curricula.

UEL's approach is to embed employers within its virtual and physical spaces and, from 2019-20, to embed into all programmes, externally accredited or not, a 'mental wealth' module, which will be a vertical, spiral-curricular project from levels 3 to 7, where topics are revisited over time in order to build competence iteratively. Through the levels of study, this module will develop core employability skills from 'awareness' to 'expertise', and allow students the opportunity to provide tangible evidence (through a 'careers passport' in the form of an e-portfolio) to support their employability narrative at interviews, not just postgraduation, but at interim points throughout their academic studies. The careers passport contains evidence of competencies that are validated by the university and a selection of best-in-class employers, who are also becoming anchor employers for six UEL career zones, so bringing industry alongside academic disciplines.

UEL's mental wealth module covers nine domains, which link to the core competencies: digital proficiency; emotional intelligence; social intelligence; physical intelligence; cultural intelligence; cognitive intelligence; industry connections; community connections; UEL give-back (placements in industry, charities or social enterprises).

From 2020, the partnership between UEL and Amazon Web Services intends to become the first mental wealth and career passport ambassador and provider of digital badges specifically for cloud computing for its digital cluster/career zone.

## ASSESSING INITIATIVES

While there is frequently clear evidence for the immediate benefit of programmes such as those described above to the student participants, the data is generally not yet available to determine whether the initiatives are having a significantly broad effect in reducing the influence of social background on graduate success. Indeed, a number of universities acknowledge the need to scale up their initiatives, and note the challenges inherent in doing so. Furthermore, it is clear that a full evaluation of initiatives to address the third phase of widening opportunity will require long-term follow-up. Thus, as noted above, it is inevitable that any rigorous study that evaluates graduate success beyond immediate postgraduation job and salary prospects necessarily relates to the experience of individuals who entered higher education up to a decade or so before the time of the research. In common with other areas of widening opportunity, therefore, there is an unavoidable delay between any new initiative and a complete evaluation of its effects. This is not to justify a delay in introducing and broadening initiatives designed to address the issues summarised in this discussion paper. It does, however, emphasise the importance of rigorous monitoring from the outset, to contribute to essential development of the evidence base.

The need for contemporaneous and long-term evaluation of specific initiatives is set in the context of the requirement for further rigorous research to investigate the relationship between socio-economic background and graduate success. Nevertheless, there are several questions pertinent to both the design and immediate evaluation of university-based initiatives (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1: QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE DESIGN AND EVALUATION OF INITIATIVES**

QUESTION	COMMENTARY
<b>Which skill sets are being addressed?</b>	Graduate success in finding appropriate employment and achievements of both personal and societal benefit is likely enhanced by improved skills in communication (oral and written, small group and public), networking (with a wide range of social groups), cross-disciplinary thinking, and leadership. Initiatives are likely to benefit from the employer involvement, to discover the skills, behaviours and qualities they value and whether this perception disproportionately benefits students from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In recruitment, qualities such as confidence and ‘polish’ can be mistaken for ability (Bridge Group, 2017).

<p><b>Who are the intended participants?</b></p>	<p>The enhancement of skills most relevant to the correction of such disadvantage (including communication, networking, cross-disciplinary thinking, etc) is advantageous to <i>all</i> students, regardless of background. To respond to students' varying starting levels of skills, it may be appropriate to think in terms of <i>personalisation</i> when considering inclusive interventions. This has the advantage of avoiding the inevitable inaccuracies of targeting and the risk of missing disadvantaged students not otherwise inclined to take part.</p>
<p><b>Is the scheduling of new programmes appropriate?</b></p>	<p>There is increasing awareness that skills in communication, networking and cross-disciplinary thinking (for example) are essential to success in all disciplines. This being the case, the use of extra-curricular options for all disciplines avoids awkward decisions about which course content must be sacrificed or condensed to make room for the initiative. Importantly, the students most able to extend their timetable commitments with extra-curricular activities may be those least in need of the development of the skills discussed here. Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds often need to undertake paid employment outside regular university hours (Social Mobility Commission, 2019).</p>

Where there is evidence of intersectional disadvantage for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with one or more protected characteristics, inclusive and exclusive targeted interventions could be beneficial (as long as they are applied legally according to the Equality Act 2010). This could include, for example, inclusive interventions in the curriculum for all students or exclusive bursaries to support students doing work experience. The OfS has published guidance on both forms of targeted interventions for students (Stevenson, O'Mahony, Khan, et al, 2019).



## CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE SUCCESS

The introduction by HESA of the graduate outcomes survey may provide an improved opportunity to conduct research by introducing perspectives beyond personal financial remuneration. This source of data should be fully exploited in future research.

The need for further research should not delay the introduction by universities of new schemes to enhance graduate success. It is recommended that there be a focus on:

- applied and applicable oral and written communication skills
- collaboration and networking skills that enable students to develop their own networks, engage with employers or work with local communities before graduation
- critical and creative thinking fostered by cross-disciplinary working
- the development of leadership potential

While the advocacy of such content is entirely consistent with arguments presented elsewhere concerning the importance of ‘soft’ skills to graduate success, it is recommended that the vocabulary of ‘soft’ skills be avoided, in recognition of the centrality of such attributes to the majority of career choices (including academic).

### INCLUSIVE AND PERSONALISED PROGRAMMES

While students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are expected to be the primary beneficiaries of such new programmes, it is recommended that participation be inclusive, to enable all students to benefit, to allow peer learning, and to avoid the (erroneous) implication that the programmes are remedial or that they are designed to correct a ‘deficit’ in social capital. Nevertheless, a degree of personalisation of an individual student’s programme may be appropriate in recognition of specific aspects of background and their intersectionality.

Incorporation of the new programmes within the curriculum – rather than as extra-curricular activities – is preferred to facilitate participation by all students, regardless of their obligations outside the university. Data on participants should be collected from the start to allow rigorous prospective studies of the effectiveness of new programmes.

## UNIVERSITY-EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS

Alongside the provision of additional opportunities for students to engage during their studies with employers, it is recommended that universities further develop their relations with employers to help the latter refine recruitment practices to avoid conscious or unconscious bias based on socio-economic background.

## SHARING INFORMATION

The higher education sector agencies and representative bodies should consider how best to achieve effective information-sharing and good practice in addressing the continuing effect of socio-economic background on graduate success. The new Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO, the What Works Centre for widening opportunity in higher education) provides a key opportunity to facilitate this, notably through its upcoming work to identify proven, impactful initiatives working to reduce gaps in the student (and graduate) experience.

There are numerous and diverse initiatives already under way to improve graduate success for disadvantaged students within universities, business and the third sector. Where not the case already, universities should consider the value of implementing programmes to develop individuals' specific skills in communications, networking and cross-disciplinary thinking that are inclusive, intra-curricular and personalised. Further, the measurement of the impact of initiatives, and the judgement of their success, should also emphasise their consistency with academic skills, and look at benefits beyond 'employability' and earning power. Evaluation of initiatives must also be built in from the start.

There is also a key role for employers to partner with universities in developing new skills programmes and understanding fully the role played by conscious and unconscious bias in recruitment practices.

Much still needs to be done to:

- shine a light on the underemphasised third phase of widening opportunity in the higher education context and to highlight what works in addressing disparities in outcomes between different socio-economic groups
- inform a more evidence-based discussion about what graduate success can represent, given that students of different backgrounds begin their higher education experience with different levels of financial and social privilege

## FURTHER RESEARCH

The notion seems uncontroversial that the achievement of equal opportunity in relation to higher education is incomplete without attention to graduate success. Indicative evidence, summarised in this paper, suggests a continuing effect of social background on graduate success, beyond its effect on access to university and academic achievement. The evidence remains incomplete and open to interpretation, however, suggesting that the design of corrective measures will to some extent depend on further work to elucidate the extent and the nature of the issue. The need for further research is increased by the recent changes in the composition of graduating cohorts, associated with much greater numbers attending university.

Thus, the evidence currently available is based on the career development of individuals who graduated with cohorts of significantly different demographic composition to those graduating today. It is recommended, therefore, that further research be conducted to assess a correlation between socio-economic background and graduate success, defined both in terms of personal reward and societal benefit. Such is the importance of this work that it should not be delayed by uncertainty as to which agency should take responsibility for its funding. It is recommended that the representative bodies of UK higher education institutions (Universities UK, GuildHE, Independent Higher Education and the Association of Colleges) collectively approach possible funding agencies (such as the Economic and Social Research Council) to urge receptiveness to proposals from qualified researchers in the social sciences.

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