

in brief...

The educational background of postgrad students

Has the boom in postgraduate courses in the UK over recent years had a negative impact on intergenerational mobility? Research by **Stephen Machin** and **Richard Murphy** suggests that there is a small but significant imbalance in favour of undergraduates who have been privately educated.

Students who went to independent schools are more likely to study for a postgraduate degree than students who went to state schools, according to our research, which has been commissioned by the Sutton Trust. This is despite the fact that students from state schools of the same class and background are more likely to get a good university degree than similar students who come from independent schools.

Our study, which is feeding into the government's review of postgraduate education, finds that the number of postgraduates studying in the UK increased by 48% from 129,700 in 1995 to 248,400 in 2008. Over the same period, the proportion of postgraduates from overseas has increased from 30% to 55%. Full- and part-time postgraduates pay at least £2.75 billion in university fees a year.

One in six (17%) of those studying six months after graduation were educated privately as compared with 14% of undergraduate students and 7% of school pupils. Nearly a third (30%) were from higher managerial or professional families as compared with 27% of undergraduates and 13% of the population as a whole.

More than two thirds (68%) of independent school educated university students obtained a first or upper second class degree (the usual requirements for pursuing a postgraduate course) in 2008 compared with 64% of state educated students.

But comparing like-for-like students (those studying the same degree subject and from the same university, ethnic group and family background), those educated at independent schools were 4% less likely to achieve a first or upper second class degree than otherwise similar students educated in state schools.

Our survey also finds that postgraduates with a masters

degree earn on average £1.75 million over their lifetimes, while postgraduates who complete a doctorate earn on average £1.9 million – 15% and 23% more respectively than a university graduate with £1.5 million in average lifetime earnings. The average starting salary for a UK postgraduate was £24,000 in 2008 compared with the average starting salary for a UK undergraduate of £19,500.

Comparing students with the same characteristics (and averaging over the years 2004/06/08), those educated in independent schools are 1.2 percentage points more likely to carry on to

postgraduate education than their state-educated counterparts. This difference is small but it is statistically significant. It is also present despite the fact that university students educated at independent schools are slightly less likely to achieve a first or upper second class degree than otherwise similar students educated in state schools.

We also find that three quarters (76%) of independent school pupils who went to university (in the years 2004-08), graduated from a leading research university, compared with four in ten (39%) state school pupils who went to university.



One in every six postgraduate students went to an independent school

This article summarises 'The Social Composition and Future Earnings of Postgraduates', the interim report of a research project commissioned by the Sutton Trust and being undertaken by Stephen Machin and Richard Murphy (www.suttontrust.com/reports/Sutton_Trust_Postgraduate_report_01032010.pdf).

Stephen Machin is CEP's research director and professor of economics at University College London. **Richard Murphy** is a research economist in CEP's education and skills programme.