Impossible?
Social mobility and the seemingly unbreakable class ceiling
About Teach First

Since 2002, Teach First has been challenging the deeply-rooted reality that a child’s socioeconomic background is the biggest determining factor in their chances of future life success.

By working with fantastic teachers, schools and communities, we’ve seen first-hand how it is possible for all young people to scale the hurdles to social mobility and achieve incredible things. Yet it is still the case that those from low-income backgrounds face a litany of barriers to achieving their full potential.

2017 is Teach First’s 15th anniversary and, over the coming months, we will be doing everything we can to focus our efforts on addressing these issues through a year of action, campaigning and mobilisation to help every young person achieve their seemingly impossible dreams.

By the time they leave school we want every young person to be in the position to make an informed and ambitious decision about their future, to have secured a place on the route that is right for them and to possess the skills and mind-sets that will help them succeed throughout their lives.

No child’s future should be determined by their background.

Will it be a challenge? Yes. Impossible? No.

Report author: Ben Gadsby

BRIDGE group

With thanks to The Bridge Group for their expertise and advice in bringing together the evidence underpinning this report.
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Executive Summary

This report reveals that, through a mere accident of birth, poorer young people find doors closed and paths to the top blocked again and again and again. At every stage of their lives – from cradle to college to career – new hurdles to social mobility appear that simply don’t exist for those from more advantaged backgrounds, making it virtually impossible for them to break through the so-called ‘class ceiling’ and reach as high as their talents allow.

In the wake of Brexit, there is more need than ever before to ensure our country’s skills needs are met by home-grown talent. Ensuring every child gets a great education is not simply a matter of fairness, it is an economic imperative.

In the years ahead, the British economy is expected to experience a shortage of 3 million workers to fill 15 million high-skilled jobs. By contrast, there are likely to be 5 million more people with ‘low skills’ than jobs they are equipped for:

We already know that only one in three young people from low-income backgrounds achieves basic school grades at 16, compared to two thirds of their wealthier peers. We believe this gap continues to be the biggest problem in our education system.

Yet, in this new analysis, we reveal how the GCSE gap is only the tip of the iceberg. By delving below the surface, we now truly understand how the implications of growing up in a low-income family reach far beyond exam results and university access.

We identify that the path to success is blocked by an increasingly insurmountable series of social mobility hurdles that children from low-income communities are forced to clear. And, even when they do succeed at school against the odds, their chances of achieving their full potential continue to be limited, purely because of where they happen to have been born.

These barriers to social mobility are preventing us from achieving a country that works for everyone; where equal opportunities for all is a reality, not an impossible dream. These are the hurdles the Prime Minister must focus on clearing away if we are to achieve the vision she has set out for social mobility.

1 The terms “high skilled”, “medium / intermediate skilled”, and “low skilled / routine occupations” are based on the three class NS-SEC classification.
This report reveals that:

- The first hurdle to social mobility rears its head even before a child starts school, with half a million children – disproportionately from low-income backgrounds – failing to be school-ready by age five in the last decade.

- Even among those who clear the first hurdle, primary school presents a new challenge. By age 11 just 35% of pupils from low-income backgrounds achieve the expected standards in reading, writing and maths, compared to 57% of their better-off peers.

- The gap widens in secondary school as a higher proportion of poorer young people fall at the next fence. Only one in three teenagers from low-income backgrounds achieves five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths, compared to twice as many teenagers from wealthier backgrounds.

- By Year 13, almost one in three 17-year-olds who are eligible for free school meals have failed to make it this far, meaning they are no longer participating in education. Only one in seven 17-year-olds who aren’t eligible for this benefit have dropped out. In every region of the country, young people from low income backgrounds are less likely to become an apprentice than their wealthier peers.

- Because young people born into families who are just about managing generally do not clear all of the previous hurdles, for every such young person who goes to university, seven do not. And young people from better-off backgrounds are 5.9 times more likely to go to the most selective institutions.

- For those young people who’ve battled against the odds and made it to university, the obstacles don’t stop there. Of those who make it to higher education, one in 12 freshers from a low-income background drops out each year; some 2,000 students in total. The figure for those from wealthier families is nearer one in 20.

- Even having made it this far, if a student from a low-income background graduates, they continue to face disadvantage, earning 10% less than their wealthier peers, even when accounting for subject area and institution. Across all those employed in top jobs three years after graduation, privately-educated graduates earn £4,500 more than their state school counterparts.

- Choosing further study over entering the workforce presents a different challenge. Russell Group graduates, who are more likely to come from wealthier backgrounds, are more than four times as likely to do a postgraduate research degree after graduating as graduates from other universities.

- The difficulty young people from low-income backgrounds face in clearing these hurdles is why only 4% of doctors, 6% of barristers, 11% of journalists and 12% of solicitors have working-class origins.
From cradle, to college, to career

The educational path of a child from a low-income background

**Half a million**

- Children from poor families are not ready for school by age 5.

**1 in 4**

- Pupils from poor families make it to university. Nearly double the amount of other children make it.

**1 in 1,500**

- The chances of a child from a poor family getting to Oxford or Cambridge compared to 1 in 20 children from private schools.

**1 in 12**

- Freshers from poor families drop out of university each year, compared to 1 in 20 of their classmates.

**Only 1 in 3 children**

- From poorer families achieve the expected levels in reading, writing and maths at age 11.

**Poorer children have less than half the chance**

- Of their wealthier peers of going to a school rated as outstanding.

**10%**

- Graduates from poor families earn 10% less than their wealthier peers.

**1 in 3**

- Teenagers from poor families achieve basic school grades, compared to two thirds of their classmates.

**87%**

- Of parents, regardless of how well-off they are, say that a good or outstanding Ofsted rating was important or very important when choosing a school.

**10%**

- Graduates from poor families earn less than their wealthier peers.

**Only 4%**

- Of doctors, 6% of barristers, 11% of journalists and 12% of solicitors come from working-class backgrounds.
Parents know how important a good school place is to their child in having a chance to overcome these hurdles. Working with ComRes, we found the following factors influence parental choice:

- 85% of parents said the average grades that a pupil achieves at GCSE is important or very important when choosing a school. There was little difference in how parents with different family incomes answered this question. Whilst there was some variation across regions there was no clear pattern or a north/south divide.

- 87% of parents say that a good or outstanding Ofsted rating was important or very important when choosing a school. Again, this figure barely varies regardless of where in the country, or how well off, parents are.

- 93% of parents said their child attending their first choice of school was important or very important to their child’s future. This varied little regardless of parents’ wealth.

- But wealthier parents are more likely to be very or fairly confident that their school choice would help their children get into a good job or university. 87% of the wealthiest parents said this, compared to 79% of the least well off.

- Wealthier parents were also more likely to appeal against their child being sent to a school that wasn’t their preference: 78% of the wealthiest parents said they would do so, while only 68% of the least well off parents said they would.

Our analysis also lays bare the shatterproof nature of the class ceiling, identifying the existence of social mobility barriers even among young people who possess similar qualifications. Our analysis finds that:

- Pupils living in the same neighbourhood and with similar GCSE results make very different post-16 choices depending on whether or not they are eligible for free school meals.

- 24% of pupils eligible for free school meals attend higher education, compared to 42% of non-free school meals pupils, and over a quarter of this participation gap arises from students within the same neighbourhood and with the same GCSE attainment.

- Among pupils with the GCSE grades to access Russell Group universities, those eligible for free school meals are much less likely to attend the most prestigious universities, even if they live in the same neighbourhoods as their wealthier peers.

- And it’s the same story for access to Oxbridge. Young people from low-income backgrounds who overcome the hurdles to achieve A* grades at GCSE are still much less likely to attend Oxbridge than their wealthier neighbours.
• Only 11.5% of children from low-income backgrounds who achieve level five in English and maths SATs at age 11 make it to an elite university. If they progressed at the same rate as a child from one of the least-deprived families, that figure would be nearer 40%. This suggests that, every single year, there are around 2,160 bright but poor children missing out on the education opportunities they are clearly capable of achieving.

• Nearly half of the difference in university dropout rates between young people from different family backgrounds is accounted for by their family’s circumstances, rather than their grades or other factors known to cause poor university performance.

Our analysis shows that the playing field is far from even – this is not yet a country that offers young people a fair chance at success – and the myriad of different problems and hurdles are present to different degrees in different parts of the country.

However, progress is being made. Indeed, in some areas – such as the welcome increase in university admissions in the last ten years – there are already strong foundations to build on, with many young people showing that it is possible to chip away at the ceiling with the right support. In other areas, our findings show not just the devastating reality, they also shine a light on where we need to look to find solutions.

In the coming months, we will put forward our recommendations for the changes we believe are needed in government, business and society to address some of the issues this report has identified. We’ll look at:

• How to deliver the high-quality careers information, advice, and guidance young people from low-income backgrounds need to make the best decision about which route to take after school.

• How to spread existing best practice in these areas to ensure young people from low-income backgrounds access our top universities and successfully graduate.

• How overseas study and internship opportunities can be made accessible to all so that undergraduates from low-income backgrounds can make the most of their time at university.

Training great teachers and leaders is vital, but it is only one of the ways that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be helped to fulfil their potential. The government and society have to work together to break down the barriers if we are to enable every child the opportunity to finally smash through the class ceiling.
The class ceiling: Why it matters

Public debate about education is a series of stories about individuals and local areas; the child with no school place; the area where pupils have no access to A-level provision; the straight-A student off to Oxford. What is the combined impact of all of these individual stories on our country?

When a child leaves education without the skills they need to be successful, that’s a problem not only for them, but for all of us. By 2022, 9 million low-skilled people are expected to be competing for 4 million low-skilled jobs, with a shortage of 3 million workers to fill 15 million high-skilled jobs.²

Both sides of this equation cause problems. Under-skilled workers are going to find their employment prospects restricted, and their lives limited. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a lack of high-skilled workers will either limit economic growth, or force employers to look abroad for talent. In the wake of Brexit, that last option seems unlikely to result in more immigration – instead of workers coming here, many jobs may leave Britain to go to them. That is unless we develop more home-grown talent and equip people with the skills they need for our future jobs market. In addition, countries where income inequality is decreasing grow faster than those with rising inequality.³ Never has the need for home-grown skills been more acute.

Two generations ago – when low-skilled workers could expect a lifetime of steady employment in mining, factories or clerical work – ensuring every young person left education ready for high-skilled employment was a luxury. Today, it is an economic imperative. It is estimated that failing to improve low levels of social mobility will cost the UK economy up to £14 billion a year by 2050 – or an additional 4% of Gross Domestic Product.⁴

Britain is more than capable of developing a highly-skilled workforce. Our universities are world-renowned, major multinationals across a range
of sectors are located here, and we have a thriving start-up scene. But we need more of today’s schoolchildren to complete high quality apprenticeships, top degrees and excellent training.

Young people from wealthier backgrounds generally get the education they need to access these opportunities. But our future economic success depends on making sure young people from all backgrounds have access to the same opportunities. In the UK, the link between family income and educational outcomes is stronger than almost anywhere else in the developed world.5

And it’s simply not the case that “lower-income backgrounds” is a polite way of saying “eligible for free school meals” or “poor”. The government’s widening of the focus to include families who are “just about managing” reflects the fact that, while the very poorest undoubtedly find it hardest to progress, families with an annual income of around £22,500 also face similar challenges.6

For the country to thrive we need many more young people to be equipped to take on high-skilled jobs and drive our economy forward. And this is why educational inequality isn’t just the biggest problem in our education system – it’s one of the biggest problems in our country.

£14 billion The cost of poor social mobility to the UK economy per year, by 2050
0-5: The importance of Early Years

Prevention is better than cure, and the easiest way to tackle educational inequality might seem to be to build an education system that never allows attainment gaps to open up. Sadly, this simplistic analysis misses a key point: the gap between children from low-income backgrounds and their wealthier peers starts even before those children start school.

In the last decade, half a million children from low-income backgrounds were not school-ready by age five. Given that approximately a third of the variation in pupils’ GCSE performance can be predicted based on indicators observed by age five, it is simply not credible to ignore the impact of the early years on long-term life chances.

Of course, schools are not the only early years education option. While we need our formal education system to start closing the gap from day one, we also need a range of early years interventions and support targeted at the critical 1000 days from conception to age two – a child’s development at as young as 22 months has been proven to be a good predictor for educational outcomes at age 26. By age five, children from low-income backgrounds are, on average, 15 months behind their better-off peers in their vocabulary; the linchpin of key communication skills like reading and writing.

Young children are greatly influenced by their families, and their parents’ background is strongly linked to their development. For example, families where both parents are highly educated spend on average of 110 minutes per day on educational activities with their young children, compared to 71 minutes amongst parents with lower levels of education. This is not to blame parents, who almost invariably want the best for their child, but serves to highlight the need for support for families in the early years.

The age at which a child’s development can be used as a predictor for educational outcomes at age 26
One of the most obvious areas to target this support is through childcare. The cost of childcare for a family with two young children is higher than the average mortgage, and poorer children are twice as likely to access low-quality childcare as their better-off peers.\textsuperscript{12} The government’s welcome focus on addressing the cost issue for parents is rightly popular; twinning this with improvements in quality is also necessary to transform life chances.

It is also worth remembering that, even where support is targeted in the right places, this isn’t a guarantee of impact. Two-year-olds from the poorest families are eligible for 15 hours of free early education, but almost half – around 113,000 toddlers – have not taken up their place in any type of setting.\textsuperscript{13} These children are missing out on quality childcare that would benefit their development, even though they are the children that are most likely to start school behind their wealthier peers.

**Key Question:** How can we ensure every child is supported in the early years to become school-ready?
5-11: The primary hurdles

Children spend more time in primary school than in secondary school, and strong attainment at age 11 is key to setting them up for the next stage of their education. Unsurprisingly, given their advantages at age five, children from wealthier backgrounds are approximately 20 percentage points more likely to meet the expected standards at 11 than those from low-income families across all key subjects:¹⁴

- Overall, just over a third (35%) of pupils from low-income backgrounds achieve the expected standards in reading, writing and maths, compared to 57% of their better-off peers.
- Taking reading in isolation, 69% of better-off pupils achieve the expected standard compared to just 49% of those from low-income backgrounds.
- For writing, 59% of poorer pupils meet the expected standard, compared to 77% of better-off pupils.
- On the spelling, punctuation and grammar test, 57% of pupils from low-income backgrounds achieve the expected standard, compared to 75% of their better-off peers.
- And in maths, 54% of pupils from low-income backgrounds achieve the expected standard compared to 73% of their better-off peers.

Progress measures similarly show better progress for students from wealthier backgrounds – even when taking prior attainment into account – than those from low-income backgrounds.

But paying attention in class isn’t the only thing that matters. Engagement in a range of extracurricular activities from age five is associated with better social, emotional and behavioural outcomes at age 11.¹⁵ While the relationship between participation in these activities and attainment is of much debate, these activities are proven to be beneficial and should be available to all young people, regardless of background.

Yet children from low-income backgrounds currently have less access to them. At age seven, twice the proportion of children whose mothers have a postgraduate degree take part in sports activities each week as those whose mothers have no formal qualifications. (Figure 1).¹⁶
This finding is echoed in music lessons and additional tuition. Seven times as many children whose mothers have a postgraduate degree took music lessons as those whose mother has no formal qualifications. 17 11-year-olds with parents in managerial or professional jobs were 50% more likely to receive private tuition as those whose parents undertake semi-routine or routine occupations. 18

Government measures including music hubs and the PE and Sport Premium are a welcome investment in addressing the extracurricular gap.

**Key Question:** How can we ensure key extra-curricular activities are accessible to every child?

At age 7, **twice as many** children whose mothers have a postgraduate degree **take part in sports activities each week**, as those whose mother’s have no formal qualifications.

11-year-olds with parents in managerial or professional jobs were **50% more likely** to receive **private tuition** as those whose parents undertake semi-routine or routine occupations.
11-16: Secondary stumbling blocks

GCSE results at age 16 are usually considered the main benchmark by which society measures educational success. But young people from low-income backgrounds start secondary school behind their wealthier peers, and do not catch up; doing worse at GCSE on every measure.

The most recent government statistics show:

- Only one in three young people from low-income backgrounds achieves five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths, while twice as many of their wealthier peers do so.
- The average pupil eligible for free school meals leaves school with the equivalent of seven D grades and an E grade at GCSE. Their wealthier peers, however, average seven C grades and a B grade.
- Pupils on free school meals make less progress at secondary school, and on average get the equivalent of five fewer GCSE grades than if they’d progressed at the same rate as their wealthier peers – for example, five Ds instead of five Cs.
- In 2015, only 5% of children eligible for free school meals gained at least five GCSE A grades (including at least a C in English and maths), compared with 17.5% of other children.

These GCSE results are one of the things parents value when picking a school for their child. Teach First commissioned ComRes to interview 2,017 British adults online between 10 and 16 February 2017. Data were weighted by age, gender, region and socio-economic grade to be representative of all British adults.

85% of those who were parents said the average grades that a pupil achieves at GCSE is important or very important when choosing a school. This figure hardly varied regardless of how well off the parents were, and while there was some variation when looking at different regions, there was no clear pattern or north/south divide.

Parents are right to care. Even though young people are now required to remain in education or training beyond their GCSEs until the age of 18, attainment at 16 is a stronger predictor for higher education participation than qualifications attained at later stages, including A-levels. It is also key to accessing almost all post-school opportunities, with a minimum of five

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1 Based on the Progress 8 measure. As English and maths are double weighted, and only subjects eligible for Attainment 8 are included, a fuller explanation is: pupils on free school meals get equivalent to five fewer GCSE grades in Attainment 8 eligible subjects excluding English and maths.
good GCSEs – particularly English and maths – being essential for A-levels and university, but also most training, apprenticeships and jobs. The expected decrease in low-skilled jobs in the coming years only makes this more acute.

And parents know how important the choice of a good secondary school is to their child achieving good GCSE grades. Our survey found that 93% of parents said their child attending their first choice of school was important or very important to their child’s future. This varied little, regardless of parents’ wealth. But wealthier parents are more likely to be very or fairly confident that their school choice would help their children get into a good job or university. 87% of the wealthiest parents said this, compared to 79% of the least well off.

They were also more likely to appeal against their child being sent to a school that wasn’t their preference: 77% of the wealthiest parents, with children of primary school age, said they would be likely to do so, while only 68% of the poorest parents said they would.

These facts about parental choice do not demonstrate, however, the extent of the limitations less well-off parents have in choosing a school for their child in the first place.

While there are 1.8 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010, there are still 1 million children in schools not yet good enough.

The poorest areas are half as likely to be served by an outstanding secondary school as the wealthiest. While nearly all secondary schools (93%) in the wealthiest areas are rated outstanding or good by Ofsted, just two-thirds of schools (67%) in the poorest areas reach this level. 43% of children from the wealthiest 20% of families are attending outstanding secondary schools, while only 18% of children from the least well off 20% of families in the UK attend an outstanding school.

**Figure 2: Pupils in schools by Ofsted rating and socio-economic background**
By contrast, low income communities are five times more likely to be served by a school rated less than good. While just one in fourteen (7%) of secondary schools in the wealthiest areas require improvement or are inadequate, this rises to more than a third of schools (36%) in the poorest areas.

Comparing a school’s Ofsted grading to its location highlights this lack of outstanding schools in deprived areas, as well as the large numbers of schools that are not good. (Figure 2).²²

Our survey found that 87% of parents say that a good or outstanding Ofsted rating was important or very important when choosing a school. Again, this figure barely varies regardless of where in the country, or how well off, parents are.

But the quality of the school is only a part of the cause of the attainment gap – a young person’s family background plays a much bigger role than just influencing the kind of school they go to. While one fifth of variability in a pupil’s achievement is attributable to school quality, the remaining fourth-fifths is attributable to pupil-level factors, such as family background and the area in which they live – and family income makes a bigger difference than either the ethnicity gap or the gender gap.²³ Even if every child went to an outstanding school, the achievement gap between the poorest and wealthiest pupils would only be cut by a fifth.

Key Question: What strategies should schools and society be using to close the attainment gap?

85% of parents, regardless of how well-off they were, said the average grades that a pupil achieves at GCSE is important or very important when choosing a school.*

87% of parents, regardless of how well-off they are, say that a good or outstanding Ofsted rating was important or very important when choosing a school.*

*According to a ComRes Poll of parents
16-19: Further education, further difficulties

Having typically achieved less at secondary school, by Year 13 (age 17), almost one in three young people eligible for free school meals are not participating in education, compared to only one in seven of those not eligible. And even after controlling for GCSE attainment, pupils from low-income backgrounds are one third more likely to drop out of education at age 16.

And even if they do progress, young people from low-income backgrounds are 30% less likely to choose the A-levels that are needed to study at a top university. In part, this is due to the difficulties in navigating a complex 16-19 system, with over 16,000 qualifications but little data on outcomes or benefits. Pupils eligible for free school meals, living in the same neighbourhood, and with similar GCSE attainment as non-free school meals pupils make very different post-16 choices. This cannot be explained by differences in the available options alone.

A-levels remain the principle qualification needed for access to higher education, particularly the most selective universities and courses which often hold the key to accessing leading professions. But young people from low-income backgrounds often find themselves locked out of these opportunities, with barely one in 200 pupils who have ever been eligible for free school meals going on to achieve three As and Bs at A-level in the key facilitating subjects that Russell Group universities are looking for. (Figure 3)

Part of the gap in A-level attainment reflects the increasing numbers of young people from low-income backgrounds taking vocational qualifications. Between 2006 and 2014, the number of pupils completing BTECs trebled, and the number of students entering university with a BTEC qualification doubled to almost 100,000 annually.

These undergraduates with BTECs are more likely to come from areas sending fewer students to university – one fifth of students with BTECs come from areas in the bottom fifth for HE participation, compared to under one in ten students with A-levels and one in eight students overall. While the ability of students to choose vocational options post-16 and still access higher education is positive, it isn’t without consequences, as more selective institutions frequently only accept more traditional, academic qualifications.

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\[^{iii}\] Those A-level subjects more frequently required for entry to degree courses than others. Choosing them at A-level leaves open a wide range of options for university study.
Figure 3: Percentage of students born in 1991 achieving various qualifications, by family income

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<th>Ever FSM</th>
<th>Never FSM</th>
<th>Always FSM</th>
<th>Not always FSM</th>
<th>Most deprived</th>
<th>Least deprived</th>
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<th>Selective secondary</th>
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<td>Percentage taking A levels</td>
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<td>56.8</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>86.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ A*-C in EBacc subjects at GCSE</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ A*-C in EBacc subjects at GCSE</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4+ A*-C in EBacc subjects at GCSE</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5+ at KS2 in English and Maths</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5+ KS2 in English or Maths</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3+ at KS1 in reading and maths</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>19.77</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3+ KS1 in reading or maths</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>94,036</td>
<td>406,596</td>
<td>33,039</td>
<td>467,593</td>
<td>92,467</td>
<td>104,118</td>
<td>482,354</td>
<td>18,278</td>
<td>20,352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another option for 16- to 19-year-olds is apprenticeships. Historically, these opportunities have been of varying quality, with some apprenticeships yielding low or no wage increases. A construction apprenticeship is estimated to yield a 32% premium compared to those who fail the apprenticeship, while a secretarial subject apprenticeship is estimated to yield only a 7% uplift in the same circumstances.

However, the increased engagement of universities with the delivery of degree apprenticeships gives hope for the future. In a very short space of time, around 40 universities have developed – and are now delivering – degree apprenticeships. From no degree apprenticeships in 2014–15, there are now over 2,000 starts. This presents an opportunity for improving the status and quality of apprenticeships.

Key Question: How can we support young people from low-income backgrounds to successfully make good post-16 choices?
Entering adulthood: Higher education hurdles

Universities are dominated by young people with the highest attainment – generally those from better-off families. Amongst ‘just about managing’ families, for every child who goes to university, seven do not.\textsuperscript{30} 24% of pupils eligible for free school meals attend higher education, compared to 42% of non-free school meals pupils, and over a quarter of this participation gap arises from students within the same neighbourhood and with the same GCSE attainment.\textsuperscript{31} Of two young people from the same area, with the same grades, the child whose family earn more is still far more likely to make it to university.

A university education dramatically improves life chances. It can give a huge range of social, cultural and economic benefits, and is the gateway for most high-status professions.\textsuperscript{32} UK graduates are more likely to be employed than non-graduates, and the number of managerial, professional and associate professional jobs, typically graduate entry-level jobs, has increased by 2.3 million in the last ten years.\textsuperscript{33}

Similarly, long-term employment prospects remain strong, with three-quarters of new jobs created by 2020 expected to be in occupations with high concentrations of graduates; and labour market projections estimate 1.5 million more professional and managerial roles in the economy by 2024.\textsuperscript{34} The line between university and vocational education is increasingly blurred due to new degree apprenticeships, which is welcome, but university remains the primary route to a degree.

The problem of unequal access to universities worsens as you look at increasingly selective institutions. The wealthiest applicants are 2.2 times more likely to enter a university with mid-range entry requirements than those from low-income backgrounds. But for the most selective universities, that figure is 5.9.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{1 in 1,500} the chances of a child from a poor family getting to Oxford or Cambridge compared to \textbf{1 in 20} children from private schools.
And the odds of a child eligible for free school meals at secondary school being admitted to Oxbridge are 1500 to 1, compared to 20 to 1 for the privately educated. Despite these shocking inequalities, this represents progress – pupils eligible for free school meals are 30% more likely to enter university today than five years ago, and 65% more likely than ten years ago.

And contrary to popular opinion, it is not as simple as young people from low-income backgrounds not getting the grades. As much as half of the gap in access to Russell Group universities comes from pupils living in the same neighbourhoods, and with similar GCSE attainment. Among those with the GCSE grades to access Russell Group universities, there is a seven percentage point gap in progression rates between those eligible for free school meals and their wealthier peers. Such pupils are much less likely to attain GCSEs at grade A*, but even among those who do, there is a 3.6 percentage point gap in progression rates to Oxbridge (Figure 4).

Looking at attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 shows that even top performers at age 11 from low income backgrounds are unlikely to end up at the most selective institutions. Only 11.5% of children from low-income backgrounds who achieve level five in English and maths SATs at age 11 make it to an elite university. If they progressed at the same rate as a child from one of the least-deprived families, that figure would be nearer 40%. This suggests that, every single year, there are around 2,160 bright but poor children missing out on the top education opportunities they are clearly so capable of achieving.

**Key Question:** How can we make sure young people from low income backgrounds access our top universities?

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**Figure 4:** Progression rates to higher education by attainment group and free school meals status

- **Mean GCSE A* attending Oxbridge (%):**
  - FSM Cohort: 10%
  - Non-FSM Cohort: 42%
- **Mean GCSE A attending Russell Group (%):**
  - FSM Cohort: 50%
  - Non-FSM Cohort: 60%
- **Mean GCSE C attending Higher Education (%):**
  - FSM Cohort: 70%
  - Non-FSM Cohort: 80%
For too long, widening participation work has focused purely on getting young people into university. But getting accepted on to a course is not an end in and of itself: universities can only support social mobility if good learning is matched with positive graduate outcomes. The reality is that, even if they overcome the odds and secure a place, compared to their better-off peers on similar courses, young people from low-income backgrounds are generally less likely to complete their degree.42

Each year, one in 12 university freshers from a low-income background drops out, some 2,000 students in total. The figure for those from wealthier families is nearer one in 20. Hundreds more disadvantaged students continue their studies elsewhere, and more still drop out after the end of the first year.43 At some institutions, drop-out rates for young people from low-income backgrounds are particularly high: for example, nearly one in four students from low-income backgrounds do not complete their degree at Bolton University (Figure 5).44

The difference in the retention rates amongst students from higher- and lower-income backgrounds is most extreme at some of the UK’s most prestigious institutions. (Figure 6).45 Nearly half of the difference in university dropout rates between young people from different family backgrounds has nothing to do with their grades or other factors known to cause poor university performance.46

Key Question: How can we ensure that young people from low-income backgrounds who get to university end up graduating successfully?

1 in 12 freshers from poor families drop out of university each year, compared to 1 in 20 of their classmates.
### Figure 5: Retention rates amongst students from different socio-economic groups in UK higher education (2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>% dropout from POLAR3 backgrounds</th>
<th>% of dropout from other backgrounds</th>
<th>Percentage point difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Bolton</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College Birmingham</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Mary, University of London</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds College of Art</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Worcester</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Durham</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Chester</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen’s University, Belfast</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Suffolk</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Essex</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 6: Differences in higher education retention rates by institution and students’ socio-economic background (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Drop-out rate: young entrants from low-participation neighbourhoods (%)</th>
<th>Drop-out rate: young entrants from other neighbourhoods (%)</th>
<th>Ratio of drop-outs: low participation vs others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Durham University</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sussex</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Oxford</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Bristol</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Cambridge</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Exeter</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds College of Art</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newcastle University</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keele University</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The graduate wage and opportunity gap

If you’re a young person from a low-income background who’s overcome every hurdle and managed to achieve good GCSEs, good A-levels in the subjects you need to get to university, a place at a good university from which you have successfully graduated with a good degree, your background may still limit your prospects. It can seem like a never-ending challenge.

For a start, you’re likely to earn approximately 10% less upon graduation.\(^47\) This effect is not temporary; there is a significant pay gap experienced by those from low-income backgrounds of up to £11,200 annually in the finance sector.\(^48\) Based on a simple measure of parental income, students from higher-income families earn around 25% more than those from lower-income families.\(^49\)

The prospects of graduates three and a half years after graduation are similarly linked to their childhood background.\(^50\) Across all those employed in top jobs, privately educated graduates earn £4,500 more than their state school counterparts. Their salaries also increase more quickly than for state schooled graduates, growing by £3,000 more over the same three-year period.\(^51\) Half of this pay difference can be explained by things like university attended and prior academic achievement. But half cannot.

Among the factors that likely lead to this gap in graduate outcomes are internships and work placements, which are offered by 90% of the country’s top graduate recruiters, providing a total of around 14,000 places. Amongst large recruiters, around a third of positions are filled by graduates who have already

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**Figure 7: Proportion of interns that convert to graduate hires, by sector**

- Engineering or industrial company
- Construction company or consultancy
- Energy, water or utility company
- Investment bank or fund managers
- Public sector
- Accountancy or professional services
- Retail
- Law firm
- Banking or financial services
- Overall

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%
worked within their organisations. In some sectors, over half of student interns secure a graduate role with the same employer (Figure 7).\textsuperscript{52} Inequitable access to these opportunities contributes to inequitable graduate outcomes.

Of particular concern are unpaid internships, unadvertised internships and a lack of internship programmes that are designed to engage under-represented groups. Young people from low-income backgrounds in particular struggle to overcome barriers presented by costs, lack of information and lack of networks.\textsuperscript{53}

Employers also value graduates with global experiences, and work and study opportunities overseas offer a significant boost to students’ employability. But while students from better-off backgrounds are also much more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities and study or work abroad, those from low-income backgrounds are more likely to undertake work unrelated to their course. (Figure 8).\textsuperscript{54}

Similarly, a study on the impact of the Erasmus student exchange programme found that graduates with international study experience were significantly more successful in the job market.\textsuperscript{55} These students were half as likely to experience unemployment and, five years after graduation, their unemployment rate is 23% lower than their peers. The study also found that graduates with international experience were more likely to be in more senior roles five years after graduation, compared with graduates who had not spent time overseas during studies.\textsuperscript{56}

Access to these opportunities is too often the preserve of the privileged, with participation rates skewed towards those from wealthier backgrounds. Students from low-income backgrounds need additional support to access these opportunities.\textsuperscript{57}

**Figure 8: Experiences of students by socio-economic background**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Higher Soc-economic Group</th>
<th>Lower Soc-economic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Related to Course</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work unrelated to Course</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-Curricular Activities</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities Abroad</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Question:** How can we support undergraduates from low-income backgrounds to make the most of their time at university?
Diverging postgraduate pathways

One option for students after completing their degree is to go on to postgraduate study. As with every other highly-competitive career path, young people from low-income backgrounds are less likely to take this option than their wealthier peers.

While research student numbers in the UK have been largely static for some time, there has been considerable growth over the last decade in the number of taught postgraduate courses. This could be because a complex, knowledge-based economy increases demand for very highly-skilled labour.

Equally, qualifications are a signal to employers of the general aptitude of potential employees. This increases the demand for ever higher qualifications as individuals look to secure an advantage in the queue for the most sought-after positions. If access to postgraduate study is unequal, efforts to widen participation to first degrees could easily be annulled by those inequalities simply passing up to the postgraduate level.

There are known inequalities in access to master’s degrees for students from low-income backgrounds. First and foremost among these are the costs of studying, since the UK student loan system stops after the first degree.

Around two-thirds of research students in the UK are publically funded, which compares to only around one quarter of post-graduate masters students - fees are typically higher per annum than those at undergraduate level. Clearly, those without access to independant financial support will not be able to continue, no matter how well qualified.

In England, the introduction of £10,000 loans for postgraduate study from 2016/17 will partially bridge the funding gap. The University of Oxford has one of the widest range of scholarship schemes in the UK, yet its own research suggests that inability to pay is the most common reason why students decline offers (45% of those turning down the offer of a place cite this as the reason).

However, finances are not the only barriers to postgraduate access. Just as at undergraduate level, questions of information, advice and guidance, participation cold spots, and social and cultural capital feature in patterns of progression into postgraduate study for graduates of different backgrounds.

At doctorate level, students are concentrated in a relatively small number of universities. 19 of the top 20 universities for size of research student body are in the Russell Group, and these universities also have by far the highest rates of transition to research degrees from first degrees. Russell Group
graduates are over four times as likely to go on to a research degree as their first graduate destination compared to post-1992 university graduates.

Nearly all of those progressing from a first degree at a selective university to a research degree remained within selective institutions, while only a quarter of those from less selective institutions did their postgraduate study at a selective university. Inequalities in access to first degrees cause inequalities in access to postgraduate opportunities.

Postgraduate qualifications are beneficial to their holders’ subsequent career prospects. On average, those with postgraduate qualifications are more likely to be employed, more likely to be in a job which fits their skills, and over time will accrue a salary premium in comparison to those with a first degree only.62 Indeed, the postgraduate premium has grown even while postgraduate numbers have increased, bucking the usual expectations regarding supply, demand and price.63

**Key Question:** How can we ensure postgraduate study is an option for talented graduates from low-income backgrounds?
The labour market and skewed skills

Young people from low-income backgrounds are more likely to end up as adults with low income. This is partly a construct of the labour market. 20% of all UK workers are in low-paid roles,64 compared with 17% in Australia, and 8% in Finland and Denmark; all of which are countries associated with higher levels of social mobility.65

Last year there were 6 million workers earning below the living wage, with over half aged under 25.66 Working in a low-paid job is partly a problem of education – of the 5.6 million working-age adults in relative poverty, a quarter have no qualifications.67 One of the biggest differences in the UK labour market compared to other European countries is the lack of intermediate jobs, which means that there are fewer jobs for low-paid workers to be promoted into. Occupations that traditionally required mid-level skills (and provide mid-level pay) are predicted to suffer the biggest decline by 2030.68 Between 2002 and 2014, 135,000 skilled trade jobs, and over half a million administrative and secretarial occupational jobs, disappeared in the UK.69

Based on past patterns of performance, it is predicted that by 2020 the UK will fall to 28th out of 33 OECD countries for intermediate skills.70 But countries with good intermediate skills often have a larger pay gap between medium- and low-skilled workers. For example, medium-skilled workers in the Czech Republic, which is ranked top out of OECD nations for intermediate skills, earn nearly twice as much as low-skilled workers, a higher than average ratio.71

And, although a higher percentage of the working population have degrees in the UK than in Germany (44% vs 28%), the UK is behind in other qualifications. Just 18% of the UK working population has a post-secondary non-degree qualification, compared with 59% in Germany. While secondary school education is the highest level of attainment for 21% of people in the UK, in Germany this figure is just 10%.72

**Key Question:** How do we build an economy that works for everyone, with intermediate level jobs and qualifications to match?
Accessing top jobs from the bottom rung

Given all the hurdles outlined in previous chapters, it is unsurprising that young people from low-income backgrounds – indeed all young people with a state school education – are particularly unlikely to access the very top professions. Despite public schools educating just 7% of young people, three quarters of the judiciary attended independent schools, as did more than half of top journalists.\textsuperscript{73}

In politics, every graduate Prime Minister since 1945 has been an Oxford alumnus. Justine Greening is the first fully comprehensively-educated Secretary of State for Education. Similar stories can be told in the upper echelons of many top careers, including law, journalism and medicine – only 4% of doctors have working-class origins and only 6% of barristers, 11% of journalists and 12% of solicitors.\textsuperscript{74} Just over three years after graduating in 2010-11, those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were 11% less likely to be in professional employment than those from the most advantaged.\textsuperscript{75}

Once again, this is not simply a measure of the different qualifications young people have. Comparing privately educated graduates to state school graduates with the same grades, from the same universities, and the same postgraduate qualifications, the private school graduate is 2.5 percentage points more likely to work in a top profession after graduation than the state school graduate.\textsuperscript{76} Private schools can help young people get things that are less easy to measure than qualifications including social and cultural capital.

Part of the challenge for addressing this issue is that employers can only hire those who apply for the jobs. Differences in application rates can partly be explained because elite firms recruit predominantly from elite universities, where the student base is not representative of society at large, but concerns about “fitting in” also deter qualified applicants from low-income backgrounds. As well as young people missing out on great jobs, this also leads to businesses missing out on top talent.

Those who do buck the trend and move into the professions do not enjoy the same salary as colleagues from middle-class backgrounds. Those in elite occupations whose parents were unemployed or in semi-routine and routine working-class jobs earn, on average, 16% less than those from privileged backgrounds; roughly £7,350 lower annual earnings. This difference is partly explained by these socially mobile people being employed in smaller
firms and working outside London, but it remains around a £4,300 a year difference even after controlling for a variety of important factors such as these.  

Of course, this figure varies dramatically by sector. While engineering has negligible differences in pay regardless of social background, the finance sector has predicted earnings of £11,200 per year less for those from low-income backgrounds. These pay differences are larger for those who have seen the biggest improvement in their own career compared to their parents.  

Key Question: How can we set young people up to reach the very top jobs in our society?

Only 4% of doctors, 6% of barristers, 11% of journalists and 12% of solicitors come from working-class backgrounds.
Different landscapes, different pictures

Everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere, which is why in education the right question is “Under what conditions does this work?”

Dylan Wiliam

The sheer diversity of England – from coalfields to coasts to cities – means there is no single solution to many of these problems. While the figures highlighted thus far are, broadly speaking, national, it is impossible to truly understand these problems without understanding the impact of geography.

In early years, it is important to remember that the gap between children born into poorer families and their richer peers at age five is most pronounced in wealthiest areas. Of 150 local authorities, the worst performing for young children eligible for free school meals include Bath, York, and Windsor.  

In primary school, it is important to remember that the lack of good or outstanding schools in deprived areas means the better off are more likely to go to better schools. There are more than four times as many inadequate primary schools serving the poorest fifth of communities as the wealthiest fifth; and twice as many outstanding primary schools serving the wealthiest fifth of communities than the poorest fifth.

In secondary school, it is important to remember that the lack of good or outstanding schools in deprived areas is even more pronounced. Children in the wealthiest areas of the South East are two and a half times more likely to attend a good or outstanding school as those from low-income backgrounds, and over two times as likely in the North West.

In further education, it is important to remember that in 16 local authorities, over 15% of disadvantaged young people did not participate in education beyond age 16. In Nottingham, one in five young people were in this position. Pupils from low-income backgrounds in areas with school sixth-forms do better, but in 20 places in the country there is a lack of access to a sixth-form. In these areas, pupils from low-income backgrounds do worse than their peers in similar areas with sixth-forms.
backgrounds are 18% less likely to take level 3 qualifications.82

In university access and success, it is important to remember that many parts of the country lack higher education providers. In Devon and North Yorkshire there are areas with no such provision at all, and limited or no choice available in the surrounding local areas. In these regions, many aspirational pupils have no choice but to move if they want to achieve educational progress. Since many young people stay in the area where they attend university, this dynamic draws the brightest people away from these areas, with little prospect of them returning, further exacerbating problems about skills gaps and skewed labour markets.83

And young people from low-income families generally don’t move as far away for university. While students with higher attainment travel further, the gap between those from low income backgrounds and their wealthier peers is larger for those with higher attainment.

High-attaining pupils from low-income backgrounds travel an average of 71km to attend university, whereas their better-off peers travel on average 110km (Figure 9). In the East of England and the South West, both of which only have one Russell Group university, progression rates for high attaining free school meal-eligible children with good GCSEs are among the worst in England.84

In graduate outcomes, it is important to remember that work experience is becoming increasingly crucial to securing a graduate job, but work experience opportunities are not fairly distributed across the country. While 62% of businesses in London have employed an intern, only 28% of businesses in the Midlands, 39% in the East and 33% in the North have done so.85 Graduates from outside London who are unable to live with their parents while working in the capital often face significant cost barriers to participating in internships, given the higher accommodation and living costs.

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**Figure 9: Average distance travelled to attend university (km) by attainment levels and socio-economic background.**
In terms of accessing postgraduate education, it is important to remember that these opportunities are particularly concentrated at Russell Group universities, and therefore there are less opportunities in areas with limited access to these institutions. This is especially the case given that Russell Group graduates are over four times as likely to go on to a research degree as their first graduate destination compared to post-1992 university graduates.

When it comes to accessing the labour market, it is important to remember that just under half of the local authorities in England have more than one in four workers earning below the Living Wage. 28 out of the 39 local authorities in the North West fell into this category, compared with just 16 out of 67 local authorities in the South East. In Boston, Bolsover, North Norfolk, West Somerset and Weymouth, workers paid below the Living Wage made up over 40% of the workforce last year.

And when it comes to accessing the very top jobs, it is important to remember that high paying, professional jobs are strongly concentrated around the capital: the number of managerial, professional and associate occupational jobs has increased by 700,000 in the last ten years but by under 56,000 in the North East. In total, managerial and professional jobs account for more than 40% of employment in Inner London, whereas they account for under 25% in Tyne and Wear.

This geographic diversity, and the unique problems it presents, is why the government’s Opportunity Area programme is so promising – tailored local approaches are a better path than national programmes.

**Key Question:** How can we develop tailored solutions to these problems that work in practice and not just in theory?
International inspiration

It doesn’t have to be this way. While disadvantaged young people around the world struggle compared to their better off peers, in the UK the hurdles they must overcome to fulfil their potential are greater than elsewhere in the world.89 While this is clearly not good news, it does mean we can learn from what more successful countries are doing.

In Britain today, a young person’s background has a much bigger impact on their secondary school achievement than in most other countries. (Figure 10).90 Indeed, measured in PISA tests, the portion of attainment influenced by parental background is larger than the attainment gap between the average British student and the average student in table-topping Singapore.14

As we have already seen, inequalities in secondary education translate into inequalities in university access and wages. The OECD has looked at social mobility from angles such as wages and education levels, and finds that – while some countries have relatively low levels of social mobility across a range of measures – others, such as Nordic countries, are doing much better. In Britain the link between a father’s earnings and his son’s is higher than other OECD countries, up to three times as strong as in top-performing Denmark. (Figure 11).91

Having put the challenges in context, the OECD has also looked at policy choices that make a difference to social mobility, finding:92

- Social mobility depends more on how resources are spent for schooling rather than how much – though, of course, a minimum amount of funding is crucial for schools to be able to deliver an outstanding education.

- Teacher quality matters not only for average student performance, but also for equality of opportunities in secondary education.

- Early childhood education and care can promote social mobility, reinforcing the importance of the points we make about early years on outcomes up to 20 years later.

- School practices that group students at early ages, such as selection at 11, tend to undermine social mobility.
• Increasing the social mix of students within schools could increase the relative performance of disadvantaged students, without any apparent negative effects on overall performance.

• Redistributive and income support policies seem to enhance social mobility – a reminder that the education system does not operate in isolation when it comes to young people’s life chances.

**Key Question:** How can we learn from international best practice to tackle our social mobility problem?

**Figure 10:** The influence of parental background on student achievement in secondary education across OECD countries

**Figure 11:** Strength of the link between individual and parental earnings varies across OECD countries

*The gap of around 50 points shown in Figure 10 is greater than the gap between the performance of Britain and Singapore in science and reading in the PISA 2015 results.*
Conclusion

The challenges faced by young people from low-income backgrounds in getting on in life are significant and pervasive. For every hurdle they overcome, a greater one appears at the next stage, with fewer people from low-income backgrounds progressing at each stage.

After each hurdle the field becomes increasingly made up of those from wealthier families. So, unsurprisingly, by the time the hurdles stop, the top professions and positions in society are dominated by the better off, particularly the privately educated.

This lack of social mobility is the biggest problem in our country. If left unchecked, the likely changes in the British economy and labour market will leave millions of people – mostly those from low income families – unemployable in the UK. This is unacceptable.

The list of issues that need tackling is long, and the problems are deeply-rooted. Is solving educational inequality “Impossible?”

Fortunately, that is a lot easier to answer. A challenge? Yes. Impossible? No.

In the coming months, we will put forward our recommendations for the changes we believe are needed in government, business and society to address some of the issues this report has identified. Specifically:

- How to deliver the high-quality careers information, advice, and guidance young people from low-income backgrounds need to make the best decision about which route to take after school, including quality guidance on vocational education.
- How to spread existing best practice to ensure young people from low-income backgrounds access our top universities and successfully graduate.
- How to ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to the extracurricular opportunities to enable them to break through the class ceiling, including overseas study and internship opportunities.

Training great teachers and leaders is vital, but it is only one of the ways that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be helped to fulfil their potential. The government and society have to work together to break down the barriers if we are to enable every child the opportunity to smash through the class ceiling.
Poor social mobility will not improve overnight. But it’s bad for young people, it’s bad for our economy and it’s bad for our country.

We cannot ignore it any longer.
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