

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP: ENABLING SOCIAL MOBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The final report of the Social Mobility Advisory Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In October 2015, Universities UK was invited by the Minister of State for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson MP, to provide advice on how universities in England could build on their contribution to social mobility. Universities UK was asked to form an advisory group to focus efforts on improving educational and career outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with a disability, as well as those from black, minority and ethnic backgrounds. The focus of the report is England.

Universities recognise their role in improving social mobility. However, the sector does not operate in isolation. There is an overwhelming correlation between a student's experience at school, and their outcomes at university. The role of employers is also critical in terms of graduate outcomes, for young and mature students alike. Schools, colleges and employers all need to be part of the solution. There are also many charities which play an important role as a broker to support universities in widening access and engaging with employers. Partnership working and improved collaboration at every level is a theme that pervades the report.

Exploring patterns of disadvantage inevitably involves generic characterisations of social groups, for instance in relation to socio-economic status, race, gender or disability. These characteristics overlap and, at the heart of widening participation and success, each student is an individual. Effective responses must take account of both the generic and the individual, and these two approaches to identifying and responding to disadvantage are reflected in the terms of the report.

Throughout its work, the Advisory Group has directed its focus towards the entire student journey, from application to university, to experience at university and then graduate outcomes, whether postgraduate education or employment.

THE EVIDENCE

Based on extensive analysis, evidence gathering and input from experts and practitioners the Advisory Group has grounded its findings and recommendations in the evidence.

The report starts by summarising the evidence as to where disadvantage lies. It demonstrates that socio-economic disadvantage continues to be the most significant driver of inequality in terms of access to and outcomes from higher education.

Eighteen year-olds from the most advantaged groups remain 2.4 times more likely to enter university than their disadvantaged peers, and 6.3 times more likely to attend one of the most selective institutions in the UK¹. Having graduated from university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to go into professional jobs, and if they do they are likely to be paid less².

The data also reveals the pervasive gap in degree attainment and labour market outcomes between ethnic groups and between disabled and non-disabled students. Research by HEFCE³ found that in 2013–14 there was an unexplained difference of 15 percentage points between the proportions of white and BME graduates achieving a first or upper second degree, and an unexplained gap of three percentage points between the proportions of disabled and non-disabled graduates doing the same. HEFCE also found⁴ that graduates from almost all BME groups were less likely than white graduates to go into employment after graduation, with an unexplained difference of over seven percentage points for Chinese and black African graduates and with the gaps in the proportions going onto professional employment actually increasing over time. The differences in the proportion of disabled students going into employment ranged from two to three percentage points immediately after study, and again gaps in the proportions going into professional employment grew over time.

Age poses different challenges, including the importance of the availability of opportunities to study flexibly. Mature students also need to be part of the solution. This is not only important in terms of promoting social mobility, but critical in relation to economic growth and enhancing productivity.

Although the report primarily refers to undergraduates, addressing the inequalities in access at the postgraduate level is also important, particularly as there is a gap of two percentage points between the proportion of graduates from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds who go on to postgraduate study.

The existence of ‘cold spots’ where higher education participation is low illustrates the complex and important relationship between person and place. Effective responses to inequality in higher education must therefore be grounded in localities or regions.

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Prior attainment at school has a significant influence on the higher education outcomes for young people, with research for BIS⁵ finding that GCSE attainment was the strongest predictor of whether pupils went on to higher education. This reinforces the importance of universities working collaboratively across the education sector. The report highlights the many forms this collaboration takes, the impact this has already made and how these partnerships can be improved. The merger of higher

¹ UCAS (2015) *End of Cycle report 2015*

² HEFCE (2015) *Differences in employment outcomes: Equality and diversity characteristics*, IFS (2016) *How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background*

³ HEFCE (2015) *Differences in degree outcomes: The effect of subject and student characteristics*

⁴ HEFCE (2015) *Differences in employment outcomes: Equality and diversity characteristics*

⁵ BIS (2015) *Socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences in higher education*

education teaching into the Department for Education presents an unparalleled opportunity for supporting this process. The report also notes the important, often undervalued, role of the charitable sector in acting as a broker for outreach and graduate employability.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) play a central role in shaping students choices. Students from more privileged backgrounds benefit from effective IAG from their schools, their parents and broader networks. This is often absent, or less effective, for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have the same cultural capital at home and through their networks. The quality of IAG in state schools is also often patchy, reinforcing disadvantage for state school pupils. In an increasingly differentiated sector where student choice shapes outcomes, it will be critical to ensure that IAG is broadly coherent and joined-up between schools, colleges, universities, charities and employers. IAG for mature students is largely non-existent. The report therefore recommends improving IAG relating to opportunities for mature students, including information on the increasing diversity of routes both into and through higher education and the role of higher and degree level apprenticeships.

The report highlights the critical role of employers for improving social mobility, given the mass of evidence which points to socio-economic background still being the most important factor in determining a graduate's career – often irrespective of the university attended. There is a need to enhance collaborative activity between the higher education sector and employers, particularly with small and medium enterprises, with more needing to be done to improve the inclusivity of recruitment practices, including the monitoring and publication of recruitment data, especially from underrepresented groups, and sharing effective practice and interventions.

POLICY AND THE CHANGING HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The environment in which universities work has a significant impact on social mobility. The role of government policy, for instance in relation to funding, regulation and increased competition between higher education institutions, impacts on social mobility, as do Local Enterprise Partnerships, local government, the media and university league tables. The report notes the importance of national structures aligning with the new funding models, acknowledging that the creation of the Office for Students, working with the sector, provides an opportunity to develop a clearer and more joined-up national approach for tackling the priorities identified in the report.

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

The sector is committed to tackling social mobility and inequality. There are numerous examples of serious and innovative initiatives across the country. However, the report also reveals that there is more still to do, particularly in widening participation for under-represented groups and solving the attainment gap in graduate outcomes and employment.

In part this will involve enhanced collaboration with schools, with different forms of collaboration reflecting an institution's strengths and mission and the particular needs of the locality or region. It may also require wider use of contextual admissions processes in which universities identify an applicant's potential as well as their prior attainment in determining admissions. More still needs to be done to ensure that contextual admissions are better understood by potential applicants and the wider public, and more generally to identify and share good practice across the sector.

The report describes the importance of developing an institution-wide approach to addressing the differences in degree attainment between different ethnic groups and between disabled and non-disabled students. The evidence clearly reveals that there is no single solution and a variety of approaches need to be adopted with interventions and strategies of necessity varying from institution to institution. Activity that is already under way needs to be built on in terms of developing an inclusive curriculum as well as addressing wider issues such as the culture of a university and the diversity of the staff population. Resources already available in the sector, and the impact that these tools are securing, need to be evaluated and more widely shared across the sector.

The evidence also demonstrated that there are a range of interventions that could help address differences in graduate outcomes. These include collaborations with employers on the development of degrees, the embedding of employability into the curriculum, and the provision of opportunities for students to engage in social action, volunteering or participation in outward mobility programmes. University careers' services are also integral to brokering links with employers, for instance in facilitating work experience including internships and placements.

In summary, more effective evaluation of policies and interventions is needed across all parts of the student lifecycle, with an emphasis on interventions that maximise outcomes. To support this, the report recommends the establishment of an 'Evidence and Impact Exchange' that would systematically evaluate and promote the evidence relating to higher education's role in supporting social mobility. It would also support the dissemination of data to help build greater strategic coherence and coordination, as well as greater use of evidence to inform policy, funding and regulation, institutional decision making, and the effective use of resources.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in the report reflect the fact that change can only be achieved if the education sector, government, employers, students' unions and the charitable sector, all work together in a more collaborative way to provide greater coordination and coherence at a policy, regional and institutional level. To facilitate this, better and more consistent use of data will be required and a greater priority accorded to effective communications, particularly to students (young and mature). More effective evaluation of policies and interventions is also required and a focus on 'what works' underpinned by a robust and systematic use of the evidence.

The recommendations summarised below reflect the fact that the sector is diverse, with different challenges, missions and strategies. The evidence shows that ensuring

that institutions have the flexibility to respond to different local regional and national circumstances within the changing funding and regulatory environment will be critical if faster progress is to be achieved.

- The establishment of an independent 'Evidence and Impact Exchange' to systematically evaluate and promote the evidence relating to the role of higher education in supporting social mobility and to support the sharing of data from schools through to employers. This will help build greater strategic coherence and coordination between all parties and allow for more effective targeting of interventions at each stage of the student lifecycle.
- A greater focus on outreach activities by universities, colleges and employers to support attainment in schools. This should be supported by a systematic review of the evidence on the impact and effectiveness of these interventions by the Evidence and Impact Exchange.
- Further consideration to be given to developing, strengthening and expanding universities links with schools. The form this takes will depend on institutional mission and local circumstances and should include an evaluation of impact.
- Higher education institutions to monitor their admissions, retention, attainment, transition to postgraduate study and graduate employment data to identify where there may be gaps, particularly in relation to race, socio-economic status, gender and disability, and to explore how these gaps can be addressed. This could include using higher education sector frameworks already in place.
- The expansion of datasets to enable universities to assess their work on social mobility, including the development of a shared basket of indicators in relation to socio-economic disadvantage.
- Greater use of contextual data to inform offer-making, supported by the identification and sharing of good practice.
- The development of a directory of charitable third sector organisations across the country to enhance school, college, university and employer collaboration.
- Greater coordination of information and advice across schools, universities and employers, particularly in terms of the impact of subject choice and the qualifications taken at school and graduate careers.
- Universities UK to work with government to develop a more robust approach to information, advice and guidance, including greater alignment between government and higher education sector communications around

social mobility and higher education. To include raising awareness of the different routes into and through higher education and the promotion of the value of lifelong learning and the value of part-time study.

- Universities UK to work with employers and other local partners including Local Enterprise Partnerships and the new Metro Mayors to tackle disadvantage at a regional level. This will include monitoring and publication of data on the recruitment of underrepresented groups by graduate employers.
- Universities to work with league table providers to understand the potential impact of league tables on social mobility.

NEXT STEPS

This report is as an initial assessment of social mobility in higher education. It identifies a number of areas for action as well as specific recommendations for different stakeholders as set out in chapter 5. Following the publication of the report, Universities UK will work with the sector and with partners to implement the recommendations. A report on the progress made against the recommendations will be published by Universities UK by the end of 2017.