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Degrees of Difference

Intergenerational social mobility and
higher education internationally: A
comparative perspective





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Key findings

Social mobility across the world

This report assesses the role that higher education plays in social mobility across the world. Drawing on analysis of data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) across developed countries, we find that:

- Higher education participation is associated with better earnings outcomes at the individual level across all countries. Those who attend higher education are generally more likely to make it into the top 20% of earners than those who do not.
- In every system, graduates from non-graduate families fare better than their peers without a degree, but they often do not catch up with graduates from graduate families. This demonstrates both the power and the limits of higher education in terms of social mobility.
- For example, in the UK, one in three graduates from non-graduate families reach the top earnings quintile, compared with one in eight non-graduates from similar backgrounds – a nearly threefold uplift. Yet graduates from advantaged families still maintain a slight edge. The same pattern is seen in the US, where 30% of disadvantaged graduates reach the top compared with 10% of their non-graduate peers, while 41% of graduates from advantaged families do so.
- Across the countries included in this study, there has been an increase in the proportion of young people attaining degrees, particularly among those who have non-graduate parents. Attainment among 35-44 year olds with non-graduate parents rose 11 percentage points between 2012 and 2023, compared to around 5 percentage points for those with graduate parents.
- However, rising attainment was offset by an eight percentage point drop in the earning uplift associated with higher education, for graduates from non-graduate families. This is measured as the gap in the likelihood of being among the top-earning 20% between graduates and non-graduates.

- As a result, overall social mobility was flat and even declining in some countries. Individuals from non-graduate families were 45% less likely to become top earners than their more privileged peers.
- Every country that improved relative social mobility between PIAAC cycles also increased degree attainment. However, many systems expanded access without mobility gains. Expanding higher education alone may be insufficient: without sustained returns to education for those from non-graduate backgrounds, wider access does not deliver stronger mobility.

Identifying examples of good practice

- While our analysis demonstrates that higher education can play some role in social mobility, there is relatively little robust evidence about specific reforms or initiatives that have helped it realise this ambition.
- Despite these limitations in existing evidence, our expert interviews suggested multi-pronged approaches (such as those used in Ireland) may have more success in addressing inequalities.
- There is also evidence to suggest contextualised admissions, in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds are offered marginally lower entry conditions, have a positive impact on access and outcomes. There have been some positive developments in the UK in this area.
- In the US, the outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend elite universities have been shown to be particularly good. However, these benefits are experienced by only a relatively small proportion of disadvantaged students. Thus, the ongoing challenge is to secure such students' equitable access to elite universities, as well as ensure that such effects are experienced by those attending a broader range of institutions.

Recognising other drivers of social mobility

- We must recognise that higher education participation is one factor among many that may shape people's social mobility journey.
- Access to and success within higher education is related strongly to earlier stages of education with academic attainment a key factor shaping higher education participation.
- The outcomes associated with higher education are also affected by the health of the labour market and the practices of employers.
- In addition, other factors can affect social mobility, such as redistributive tax policies and wage differentials.

Policy transfer across national borders

- Higher education systems differ widely in terms of their traditions, histories, scale, horizontal diversity, vertical stratification, and available resources. Thus, what works in one context may not be effective or appropriate in another. For example, although degrees from elite universities were found to have strong signalling effects across most case study countries, equitable access to such institutions is especially relevant in systems that are highly vertically stratified, such as the UK and the US, compared to those with flatter institutional hierarchies.
- The concept of social mobility is also understood and applied differently across countries. This lack of universally defined terminology reflects the diversity of national contexts but also creates challenges in evaluating and transferring effective policies.
- The definitions and policy foci around disadvantaged and underrepresented students also differ across countries. While socio-economic background remains a common reference point, other intersectional dimensions vary. For instance, in Canada and Australia, equity policies often address the specific needs of indigenous students whereas, in China, targeted policy and funding support is provided to students from rural areas and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Role of student funding in promoting student mobility

- Student funding (through mechanisms such as maintenance grants) is an important but not, on its own, sufficient condition for promoting social mobility.
- The available evidence demonstrates how this relationship is frequently complicated, with Canada providing an interesting natural experiment. Although its various provinces and territories have implemented different student funding policies, this has not led to a marked difference in participation by province, with patterns relatively similar.

Relevance of alternative pathways

- Debates about social mobility are sometimes framed narrowly around higher education, with success equated to progression into and through university. This can contribute to the marginalisation of those pursuing vocational or technical routes and the assumption that such educational and training pathways are inherently linked with 'downward mobility'.
- Nevertheless, vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeships, technical qualifications, and lifelong learning make a significant contribution to social mobility and equity in some countries. Heavy reliance on higher education for achieving such mobility risks leaving disadvantaged groups with too few options.
- Where vocational and technical routes are well embedded in integrated tertiary education systems (and connected to labour markets, supported by strong institutions, redistributive policies, and meaningful employer engagement) they can lead to more equitable approaches to education and training and labour market outcomes. Where VET and technical education are marginalised or stigmatised, there is a risk that inequalities are reinforced, by channelling disadvantaged students into less valued routes with limited labour market returns.

Data on intergenerational mobility

- Despite the trends reported above, a key constraint in being able to assess, with any accuracy, the impact of higher education on intergenerational social mobility is the relative paucity of high-quality, linkable data in this area across the globe.
- While many countries track graduate outcomes, analysis of social mobility is limited by our ability to draw connections between outcomes and students' socio-economic origins and educational pathways. Only a handful of systems, notably the Nordic registers, provide this kind of life-course linkage.
- England's Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset represents an important advance, connecting school, college, higher education and early career labour-market records. This is one of a small number of areas in which there is robust longitudinal evidence to demonstrate the impact of attending higher education – albeit a particular type.
- Without improved linked data, researchers and policymakers will be unable to fully assess how education does or does not drive social mobility.

Recommendations

Enhancing policy

- **Take a multi-pronged approach to higher education access and social mobility.** Despite the limitations of the evidence base in this area, a multi-pronged approach may contribute to improved outcomes in higher education access and social mobility. This means recognising that increasing higher education participation among certain groups or offering financial support to students will not alone be sufficient, and that there is a need for better coordination of policy across different parts of the education system. For example, between schools (both primary and secondary), further education colleges and higher education institutions.
- **Acknowledge the interdependencies between higher education institutions and other actors in the system.** As part of the recommended multi-pronged approach suggested above, policy should consider the role played, in particular, by schools (in terms of higher education access) and the labour market (with respect to the demand for graduate labour, and the practices of employers). Industrial strategy and regional development both also play important roles here.
- **View higher education as one part of a wider tertiary sector.** In line with the developing approach in the UK currently, policies should focus, not on the higher education sector alone, but on the wider tertiary sector to smooth movement for students between different educational pathways, and to make better connections between education and the labour market. A key part of this should involve examining how higher and vocational pathways can act in complementary ways as drivers of intergenerational social mobility, acknowledging that diverse educational pathways support diverse pathways to social mobility. Heavy reliance on higher education risks leaving disadvantaged groups with too few options.

- **Widen access to the most selective universities.** This is necessary if the potential for higher education to promote social mobility is to be fully harnessed. This could be achieved through higher education access programmes and a more ambitious and widespread use of contextual admissions, for example.
- **Improve outcomes among those attending less selective universities.** This is particularly important, given that the majority of those from low-income backgrounds attend such institutions.

Strengthening the evidence base

- **Develop further high-quality national datasets,** that enable individuals to be tracked across the life course, and their outcomes related back to their socio-economic origins and educational history. While the UK has done significant work over recent years to enable key sets of administrative data to be linked, robust data about the outcomes of education and how they relate to family background are crucial to be able to draw conclusions about the impact of higher education and/or other forms of post-compulsory education.
- **Conduct studies of the long-term impact of specific interventions** in higher education (and in other forms of post-compulsory education, too). At present, many national governments (and individual universities) have introduced policy measures intended to increase equity in higher education and thus promote social mobility. However, there is very little evidence about the efficacy of particular approaches.
- **Adopt a 'lifelong' perspective.** Given the increasing emphasis on, and importance of, life-long learning, research should examine the contribution of forms of tertiary education – other than higher education – to intergenerational social mobility, as well as the impact of higher education pursued later in life.

Introduction

Social mobility remains a key challenge for both the UK and US. Despite successive governments stating a clear desire to improve social mobility and putting in place bodies to promote this (for example, the UK's Social Mobility Commission), the 2020 Global Social Mobility Index, produced by the World Economic Forum, ranked the UK and US in 21st and 27th positions, respectively. This indicates that there is much work to be done to secure a more equitable future. The current government's announcement of a shift in policy to focus on 'higher level learning' – encompassing technical, as well as academic, learning alongside apprenticeships – presents a timely opportunity to re-examine the role played by higher education in intergenerational social mobility.

Higher education is often thought to provide an important route to such mobility, with universities having the potential to support greater access and success for students from low-income backgrounds and other marginalised groups.¹ Evidence from the US, for example, demonstrates that students from low-income backgrounds have excellent outcomes after attending highly selective universities², and some UK universities perform well with respect to both the labour market destinations of their students and the recruitment of a more diverse student body.³

Nevertheless, there is now a considerable body of work to indicate that universities are often not realising this potential. Within the US, students from low-income backgrounds are poorly represented within elite institutions⁴ and the UK universities that perform best with respect to graduate outcomes often have very few students from low-income

“It is now more important than ever to take an international and comparative perspective to learn from the successes and failures of social mobility policies in different higher education systems.”

¹ Atherton, G. (2020) *Room at the Top. Access and Success at Leading Universities Around The World*, NEON and the Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Room-at-the-Top.pdf>

² Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N. and Yagan, D. (2020) Income segregation and intergenerational mobility across colleges in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, 3, 1567-1633.

³ Britton, J., Drayton, E. and van der Erve, L. (2021) *Which university degrees are best for intergenerational mobility?* Department for Education, Sutton Trust and IFS. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/What-Degrees-Are-Best-for-Social-Mobility.pdf>

⁴ Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N. and Yagan, D. (2020) Income segregation and intergenerational mobility across colleges in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, 3, 1567-1633. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa005>

backgrounds.⁵ Qualitative studies, from both the UK and US, have highlighted some of the specific challenges students from low-income backgrounds experience accessing higher education and then progressing through their degree and into the labour market.⁶

Given this picture, it is now more important than ever to take an international and comparative perspective to learn from the successes and failures of social mobility policies in different higher education systems – to further our knowledge of how education can operate more effectively as an engine for social mobility.

Through focussing on five countries with higher rates of social mobility than the UK and US (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland and Japan) and two countries with lower rates (China and Greece), and complementing this with an analysis of social mobility across OECD countries (using the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)), this report assesses the strengths and weaknesses of our current knowledge base in this area, and puts forward a series of recommendations for further work and action.

⁵ Britton, J., Drayton, E. and van der Erve, L. (2021) *Which university degrees are best for intergenerational mobility?* Department for Education, Sutton Trust and IFS. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/What-Degrees-Are-Best-for-Social-Mobility.pdf>

⁶ Ingram, N., Bathmaker, A., Abrahams, J., Bentley, J., Bradley, H., Hoare, T., Papafilippou, V. and Waller, R. (2023) *The Degree Generation. The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives* Bristol University Press; Jack, A.A. (2019) *The Privileged Poor. How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students* Harvard University Press. Osborne, M. (2024) *Polished. College, Class and the Burdens of Social Mobility* University of Chicago Press. Rivera, L. (2015) *Pedigree. How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* Princeton University Press.

Research methods

The research for this report was conducted between February and September 2025, and draws upon four main sources of evidence: individual expert interviews; analysis of relevant documents; quantitative analyses of secondary data – the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies; and thematic workshops with international experts. As explained above, nine countries were chosen as case studies for the interviews and document analysis: the UK and US, and then five countries with higher rates of social mobility than the UK and US (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland and Japan) and two countries with lower rates (China and Greece).

Individual expert interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with two experts in intergenerational social mobility (achieved through higher education) from each of the nine case study countries (thus, a total of 18 interviews). All interviews were held online, using a semi-structured format, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The aim of the interviews was to develop a detailed understanding of policy measures and challenges, with respect to social mobility and higher education, in each of the nine nations. The sample was comprised largely of academic experts, although a small number of policy actors were also included. Where these experts agreed to be named in the report, they are listed in the Acknowledgements section.

Analysis of relevant documents

Conducted alongside, and informed by, the expert interviews, an analysis of academic and non-academic literature pertaining to the relevant education systems was conducted. This was structured to ensure good coverage of the themes of access and widening participation; higher education funding and student finance; the relationship and balance between higher and technical education routes; and the role of higher education in intergenerational mobility. It also included an overview of the higher education systems (e.g. levels of participation, degree of stratification, level of public and private sector involvement, and funding/fees model) in each of the nine countries.

Quantitative analysis

This part of the project calculated cross-national rates of upward mobility through higher education systems. Using data from the first and second cycles of the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult

Competencies, the analysis examined how higher education contributes to social mobility for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and compared these pathways to alternative routes. The OECD data, covering over 31 countries and economies, provide cross-nationally comparative information on education, family background, skills, and career outcomes (measured through position in earnings distribution and occupation type). The analysis examined data from two cycles of the survey (2011–2012 and 2022–2023) to assess changes in the importance of higher education for social mobility within countries over a period of education expansion. Data restrictions limit the longitudinal analysis and the cross-sectional comparison to 20 countries and economies. While data pertaining to the case study countries were analysed (where available), this strand of work adopted a broader geographical perspective, considering patterns across all OECD countries (for which data were available). (See Appendix 1 for further details about the methods used in this part of the research and replication notes).

There are several methodological issues worth noting here:

- Defining ‘disadvantage’: In this research, we have used parents’ ‘non-graduate’ status as a proxy for disadvantage. While it would be preferable to look at parental occupation, parental income or other proxies for socio-economic status commonly used to discuss social mobility, such international comparative data were not available. We therefore compare outcomes for those who have graduate or non-graduate parents across countries, acknowledging the limitations of ‘non-graduate’ being seen as a proxy for ‘disadvantage’.
- Limitations of survey data: As the analysis draws on survey data, it will be affected by response rates and the panel of respondents.
- Composition of graduates and non-graduates: This analysis does not explore how the composition of graduate and non-graduates may change over time in terms of prior attainment, socio-economic background, and other characteristics. It should be acknowledged that the composition of these graduate and non-graduate groups may affect labour market outcomes and social mobility. These factors play a distorting role in terms of the ‘effect’ of higher education attendance or non-attendance, which is not captured in this analysis.

- Differences within higher education: This analysis does not distinguish between people's attendance at different higher education institutions (e.g. Russell Group versus non-Russell Group universities in the UK). It therefore does not capture how labour market outcomes and social mobility might be shaped by academic experience, reputation, and other differences between institutions, and how different groups are represented in these institutions.

Expert workshops

In the final phase of the research, initial findings from the quantitative analysis and the document analysis were discussed in four expert workshops, conducted online in June and July 2025, each lasting for an hour. Three of the workshops focused on a specific theme (i.e. access and widening participation; higher education funding and student finance; the relationship and balance between higher and technical education routes) as it relates to intergenerational social mobility, while the fourth workshop was more general in its approach. The experts were drawn largely from the networks of two research centres based at the University of Oxford: the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) and the Centre on Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance (SKOPE). They covered some of the case study countries, but other nations as well (Netherlands, Finland, Singapore and South Africa). Overall, 21 individuals contributed to an expert workshop, as well as two colleagues from the Sutton Trust. As above, where these experts agreed to be named in the report, they are listed in the Acknowledgements section.

Evidence from PIAAC

The OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) provides a unique resource for examining the relationship between higher education and social mobility. It enables comparison of mobility outcomes across countries and over time. This section of the report focuses on adults aged 35–44 in 2023 whose parents did not attend tertiary education and asks three questions:

- What are their chances of becoming top earners (the top 20% of the national earnings distribution)?
- How does higher education change those chances?
- How have patterns evolved across countries and over time?

Who reaches the top?

Across countries, individuals with graduate parents are consistently more likely to reach the top of the earnings distribution.

We begin with descriptive probabilities: the share of adults aged 35–44 in 2023 who are in the top earnings quintile, by parental education. These figures provide a picture of absolute mobility, while their ratio indicates relative mobility. That is, how much less likely people with non-graduate parents are to be top earners compared with peers whose parents completed tertiary education. We refer to this ratio as the Relative Social Mobility Index.

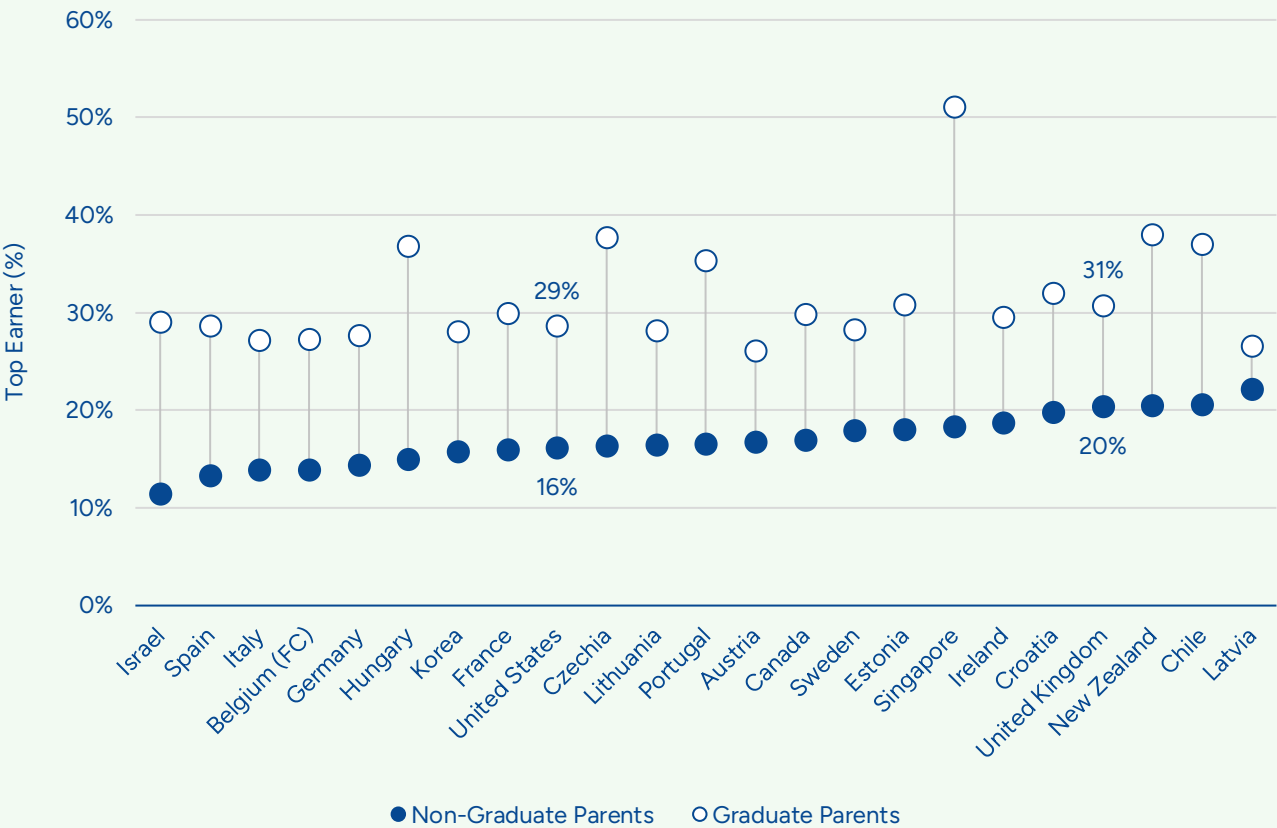
In every country, individuals with graduate parents are more likely to reach the top of the earnings distribution. In the UK, about one in three adults with graduate parents are in the top quintile, compared with one in five of those from non-graduate families. Put differently, disadvantaged individuals are about one-third less likely to reach the top by their late thirties and early forties, compared to 45% less likely on average across OECD countries. This yields a Relative Social Mobility Index of 66%, placing the UK above the OECD median of 55% but still showing persistent background effects.

The United States exhibits a sharper divide: 16% of those from non-graduate families become top earners, compared with 29% of those from

“Across countries, individuals with graduate parents are consistently more likely to reach the top of the earnings distribution.”

graduate families, resulting in a relative mobility index of 56%. Germany records similar figures (14% vs. 28%). By contrast, Singapore, Hungary, and Czechia display the lowest relative mobility, with individuals from non-graduate families less than half as likely to reach the top.

Figure 1: Probability of being a top-earner (age 35–44) by parental education in 2023, selected countries



Overall, this headline comparison highlights the persistence of inequality of opportunity: family background remains a strong predictor of outcomes, although the UK performs relatively well compared with many other high-income countries, while the US sits closer to the middle of the distribution.

The role of higher education in mobility

Higher education is strongly associated with improved life chances but does not eliminate the effects of family background.

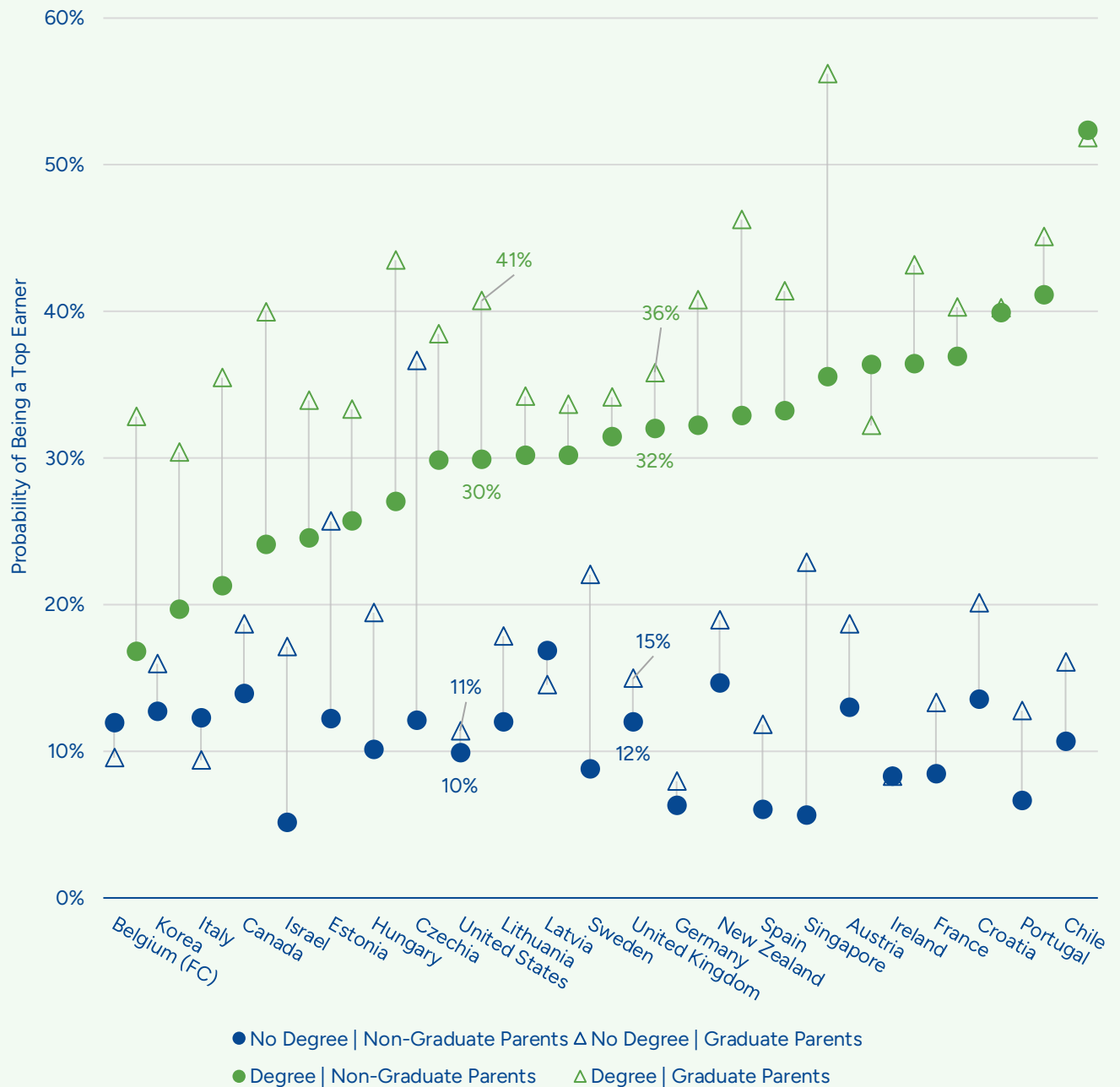
To assess how far HE changes mobility chances, we examine four groups: graduates and non-graduates, each split by parental education. In every

system, graduates from non-graduate families fare better than their non-graduate peers, but they often do not catch up with graduates from advantaged families. This demonstrates both the power and the limits of higher education.

Evidence from PIAAC countries underscores this duality: while those who attain a degree have a substantially higher probability of reaching top earnings brackets for all groups, this relationship is notably stratified by family background. Across OECD countries, those with graduate parents experience an average 29 percentage point earnings uplift on completing a degree. For those from non-graduate families, the average uplift is 21 percentage points.

In the UK, one in three graduates from non-graduate families reach the top quintile, compared with one in eight non-graduates from similar backgrounds — a nearly threefold uplift. Yet graduates from advantaged families still maintain a slight edge. The same pattern is seen in the US, where 30% of disadvantaged graduates reach the top compared with 10% of their non-graduate peers, while 41% of graduates from advantaged families do so.

Figure 2: Probability of being a top earner, by graduate status × parental education



In other countries, the size of the uplift varies. In Chile, disadvantaged individuals' chances rose from 11% to 52% with a degree, nearly equalising outcomes across backgrounds. In Singapore, the leap is from 6% to 36%; in Hungary, from 10% to 27%. But in many systems, graduates from more advantaged families still retain a clear lead.

Among those without a degree, background matters strongly in some countries but barely in others. In Czechia, non-graduates from graduate

families are three times as likely to reach the top quintile as those from non-graduate families (37% vs. 12%). By contrast, in Belgium, Italy, Germany or Ireland, non-graduates from both backgrounds have similarly low chances (around 8–12%).

Overall, the figures show that while higher education is consistently associated with improved life chances, it does not always appear to equalise them, and sometimes even amplifies them. In the UK and US, as in many OECD countries, higher education narrows but does not close the mobility gap.

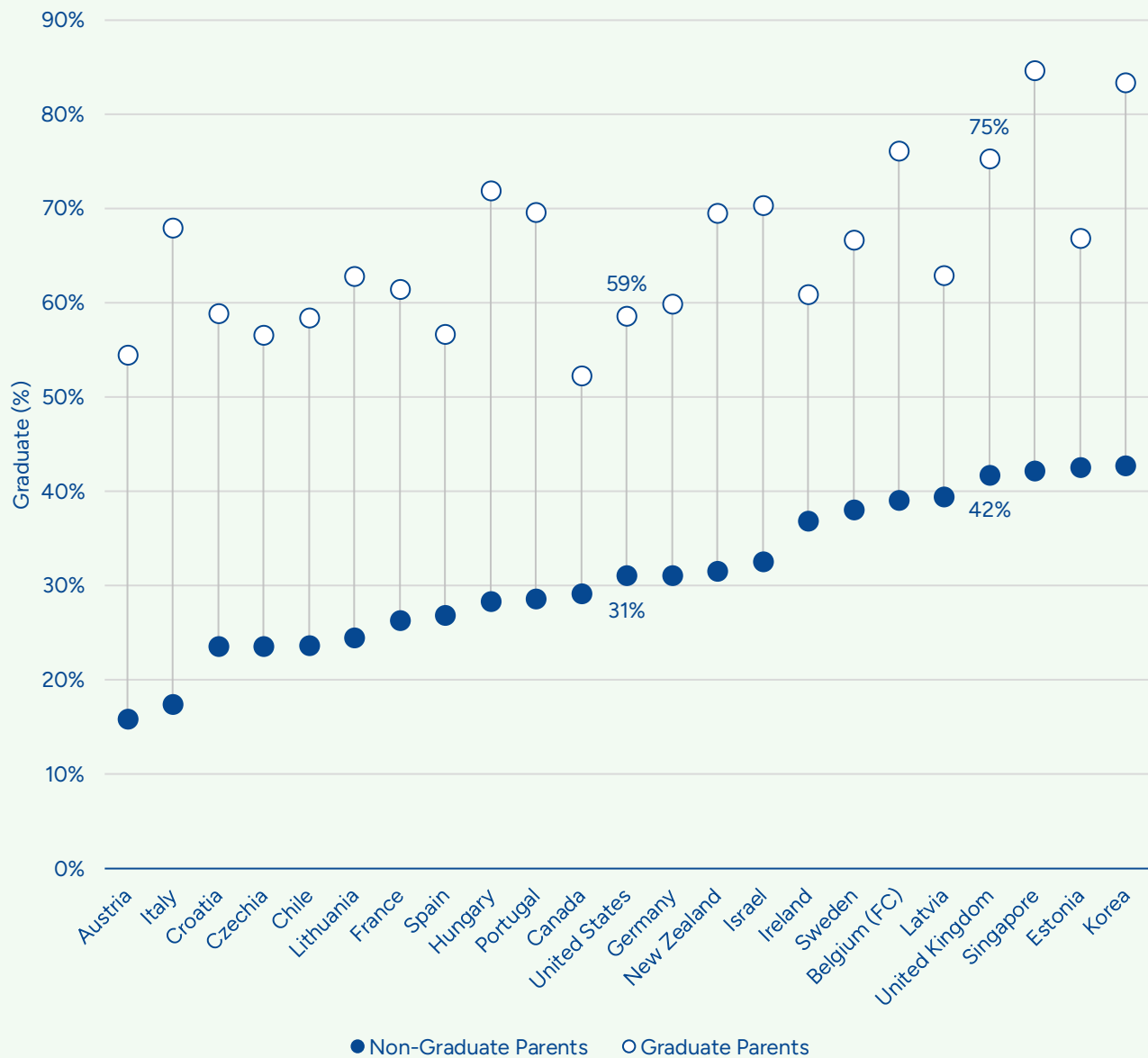
These findings highlight the need to recognise the important role that higher education can play in social mobility, while also acknowledging that it is not a 'silver bullet', with inequalities persisting in the labour market.

Routes to mobility: higher education access versus alternatives

In the UK and US, higher education is the dominant pathway to the top for those from less-advantaged families, but heavy reliance on this route may reflect the weakness of alternatives, unlike in Canada and some continental European systems.

Given the prominent role of higher education in lifting life chances, we looked at the probability that adults aged 35–44 had obtained a degree qualification, split by parental education. This highlights how far higher education systems equalise access. Figure 3 displays the estimates.

Figure 3: University attainment in the age group 35-44 in 2023, by parental education



In the UK, 75% of adults with graduate parents obtained a degree compared with 42% of those from non-graduate families: a gap of 33 percentage points. In the US, 60% of those with graduate parents obtained degrees versus 30% from non-graduate families: a 30 percentage point gap, with these rates aligning closely with cross-country averages.

Cross-nationally, the picture is uneven. Austria and Italy are the least accessible systems in this comparison, with fewer than one in five adults from non-graduate families completing higher education. By contrast, the UK, Singapore, Estonia and Korea all showed relatively higher attainment rates of over 40% for this group. Still, even in these more inclusive

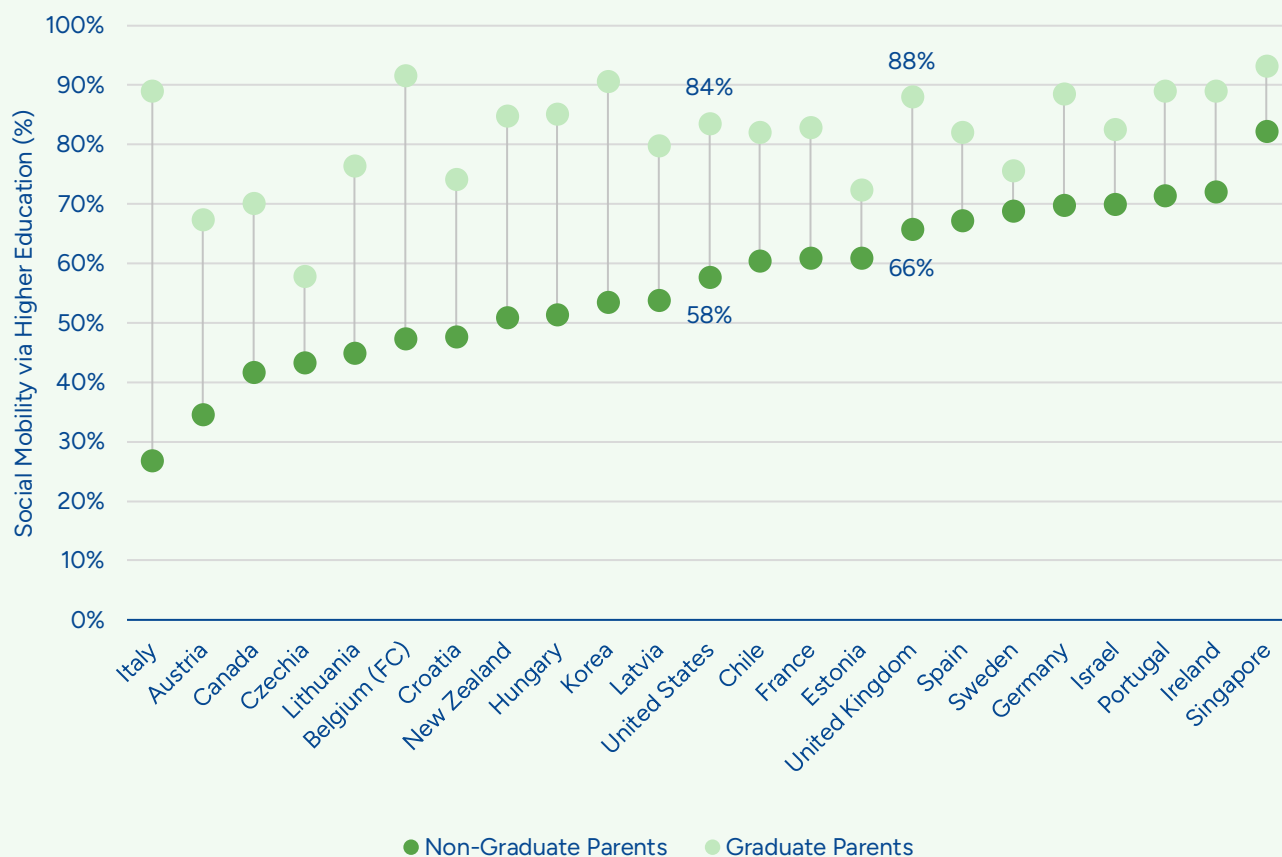
systems, individuals with non-graduate parents were rarely more than half as likely to complete a degree by their late thirties or early forties as their more advantaged peers. We observe the smallest relative gaps in degree attainment in Ireland (61%), Latvia (63%) and Estonia (64%). In other words, in Ireland, this means that for every 100 graduates with tertiary-educated parents, there were 61 graduates whose parents had not completed tertiary education. At the country median, disadvantaged individuals are just under half as likely as their peers from graduate families to hold a degree.

We next combined these attainment measures with the chances of becoming a top-earner (as defined above) to estimate how much upward social mobility occurred via higher education versus alternative routes. Figure 4 displays the results of the computations.

Across most countries, higher education accounts for the majority of upward mobility among disadvantaged groups. In the UK, about two-thirds of upward mobility for individuals with non-graduate parents was accounted for by higher education, well above the cross-country median of 58%. In the United States, the figure is at the cross-country median. By contrast, in Italy, Austria, Canada and Czechia, more than half of upward mobility for disadvantaged groups comes through non-higher education routes.

“Across most countries, higher education accounts for the majority of upward mobility among disadvantaged groups.”

Figure 4: Share of higher education pathway in social mobility, by parental education



This reliance on higher education in the UK and the US may partially reflect weaker vocational and technical routes compared to some other advanced countries. Among 35–44-year-olds from non-graduate families, just 22% in the UK and 10% in the US hold vocational qualifications, compared to 56% in Germany and 48% in Austria, countries with established vocational systems.

However, even in Germany, where vocational training is often regarded as highly valued, alternative routes appear to be weaker engines of social mobility than is sometimes assumed. It should be noted that lower reliance on higher education in some countries could reflect either stronger alternative pathways or simply more restricted access to higher education with limited overall mobility. This distinction cannot be fully disentangled with these data.

There are also systematic socio-economic gaps within countries. In almost every case, people from advantaged families relied more heavily on higher education as a route to top earnings. At the country median, around 83% of mobility into top-paying jobs among those with graduate parents is

through higher education, compared with 58% for those with non-graduate parents; a gap of 25 percentage points. Only in a handful of systems (Czechia, Estonia, Israel and Sweden) are the differences in the importance of HE for becoming a top earner by family background small enough to be indistinguishable.

Trends over time

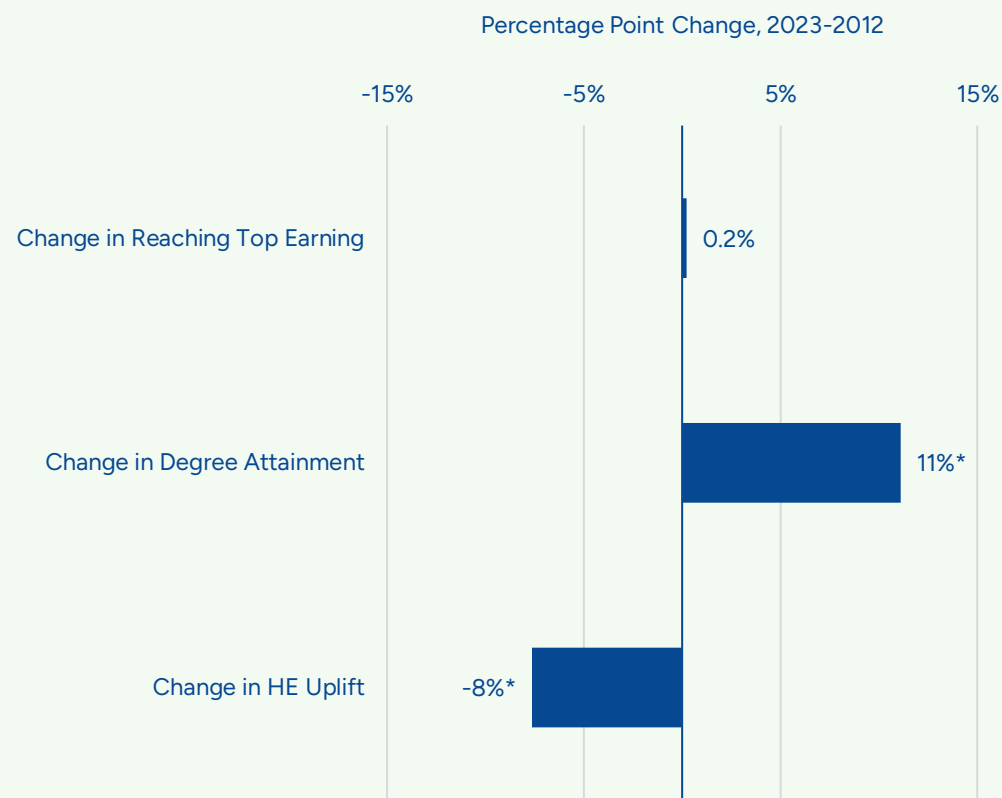
General patterns

Comparing PIAAC Cycle 1 (2011–12) and Cycle 2 (2022–23) shows how mobility has shifted. Using pooled, survey-weighted estimates across 20 countries (N = 43,898), a consistent pattern emerges:

- Access expanded: degree attainment among disadvantaged groups rose by 11 percentage points (from 19% to 30%, representing a 1.6-fold increase) and around 5 percentage points among advantaged groups (from 55% to 60%, a 1.1-fold increase), narrowing but not eliminating the attainment gap.
- Graduate payoff declined: the earnings uplift – measured as the gap in the likelihood of being among the top-earning 20% between graduates and non-graduates – decreased from 28 to 20 percentage points among those from non-graduate families, while remaining relatively stable at around 30 percentage points among those from graduate families. However, the difference between these trend patterns was not statistically significant, so we cannot draw firm conclusions about diverging graduate payoffs by family background.
- Mobility stalled: absolute mobility did not improve, and relative mobility increased slightly but not significantly.

Thus, while more disadvantaged students gained degrees, their relative advantage in the labour market diminished, leaving overall mobility flat (Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Cross-country changes in social mobility, higher education attainment, uplift, and relative mobility for individuals with non-graduate parents



Notes: Estimates are derived from regressions of outcomes on a post-indicator (2023 vs. 2012) in the pooled PIAAC sample for 35-44 year-olds with non-graduate parents, controlling for sex, native-born status, and country fixed effects. Changes are reported in percentage points with conventional significance tests (* indicates $p < 0.05$); relative mobility is the ratio of top-earner probabilities (non-graduate/graduate parents), rescaled to percentage points for display. Countries: Austria, Belgium (FC), Canada, Chile, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Lithuania, New Zealand, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, UK, USA.

Most countries displayed this pattern of rising attainment, falling uplift, and stable mobility (Table 1 below).

Table 1: Changes in social mobility, higher education attainment, uplift, and relative mobility for individuals with non-graduate parents by country, 2012-2023

Country	Chance of Top Earnings (percentage-point change)	Chance of Degree (percentage-point change)	Higher Education-Uplift (percentage-point change)	Relative Degree Attainment Gap (percentage-point change)	Relative Social Mobility (percentage-point change)
Lithuania	5	17	-14	18	21
Chile	5	16	-9	25	20
Ireland	3	20	-4	31	21
New Zealand	2	-1	-1	-13	-15
United States	2	10	-11	17	13
Italy	1	6	-9	8	10
Estonia	1	26	-5	24	3
Spain	0	5	2	13	4
Austria	0	7	-6	4	6
Czechia	-1	12	-12	20	-16
Sweden	-1	17	3	10	-2
France	-1	9	1	15	1
Canada	-2	4	-7	10	-8
United Kingdom	-2	17	-8	16	6
Belgium (FC)	-3	27	-26	14	-2
Korea	-4	18	-14	6	-11
Germany	-4	19	-8	20	-7
Hungary	-4	7	-22	8	-10
Israel	-5	5	0	2	-18
Singapore	-5	6	-11	6	-17

Note: Bold, black font indicates $p < 0.1$. Time periods for Chile, Israel, New Zealand, Singapore: 2015-2023; Hungary: 2017-2023. All figures are survey-weighted estimates; the actual values may be slightly smaller or larger. Small differences should thus be interpreted cautiously.

The relative attainment gap measures convergence between groups. In PIAAC cycle 1, those from non-graduate families attained degrees at 34% the rate of those from graduate families (attainment rate of 19% vs. 57%); by cycle 2, this had improved to 49% (31% vs. 62%) - a 15-point narrowing, indicating that although those from non-graduate backgrounds closed part of the proportional gap, it remains substantial.

In the UK, for those with non-graduate parents, attainment rose sharply by 17 percentage points (25% → 42%), narrowing the relative attainment gap between those from graduate and non-graduate families by 16 percentage points but uplift fell by 8 percentage points (28% → 20%). As a result, increases in relative social mobility were small (6%).

This reveals an important insight: narrowing attainment gaps does not automatically translate into mobility gains. Even where higher education access expanded substantially and converged for less advantaged groups, as in Estonia (26 percentage point increase in attainment, 24 point narrowing of the relative gap) and the Flemish Community in Belgium (27 percentage point increase, 14 point narrowing), mobility improvements remain limited when graduate returns decline.

Only Chile, Lithuania and Ireland combined widening higher education access with noticeable gains in relative mobility.

Singapore and Israel stand out as cases where relative social mobility declined sharply, and the absolute chances of reaching the top-earner group decreased for individuals with non-graduate parents. Higher education access in these groups expanded only modestly, if at all.

Overall, between 2012 and 2023, every country that improved relative social mobility also increased degree attainment. However, many systems expanded access without mobility gains. Expanding higher education alone may be insufficient: without sustained returns to education, wider access does not deliver stronger mobility.

Country case studies

This section offers synopses of the nine country case studies that are appended to this report. The countries covered are, in order, England, the US, Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Japan. Each synopsis briefly introduces the system, describes initiatives to widen access, and explores the role of higher education in social mobility, drawing together relevant academic and policy literature, along with insights from the expert interviewees.

The full country case studies are available in a separate Appendix, to provide further context and detail.

England

System overview

In England, 430 higher education providers are registered with the Office for Students (OfS), the higher education regulator, including 130 universities and 215 further education colleges that offer higher education courses. Established in 2018, the OfS promotes equality, monitors quality, protects student interests, and provides funding to institutions for high-cost courses. UK Research and Innovation is the main government funding body for research. As a result of devolution in the UK, there are different approaches to higher education across the four UK 'home nations', particularly with respect to fees and funding. However, some relevant data are reported only at the UK level; we thus refer to both England and the UK in this section.

Universities in the UK are stratified by prestige. In 1992, 35 polytechnics were granted university status: today these 'post-1992' universities have stronger regional links, a commitment to widening participation, and a greater emphasis on teaching and employability. The 1997 Dearing Report recommended the introduction of tuition fees, and these were then raised to £9000 in 2012 by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government. Since that time, this funding stream for universities has been steadily eroded by inflation, and in 2024, the OfS estimated that up to 70% of universities were facing financial deficits as a result. All students are entitled to apply for income-contingent loans to cover tuition costs, and some students can apply for a means-tested maintenance loan. It was also announced in September 2025 that maintenance grants will be re-introduced for students in England from low-income households and

studying 'priority' subjects.⁷ UK HE expenditure as a percentage of GDP is also higher than the average, 2.1% compared to 1.5%.⁸

The 1999 target of 50% of young people entering university was realised in 2017 for the first time.⁹ In September 2025, the government set a new target – for two-thirds of young people to participate in 'higher level learning' (academic, technical or apprenticeships) by the age of 25. The most recent OECD data indicates that, across the UK, 53% of adults aged between 25 and 64 have some form of tertiary education qualification; this figure is significantly higher than the OECD average of 41%.¹⁰ In terms of educational outcomes, while the relative earnings for those with tertiary education are higher than those who have only upper secondary qualifications in the UK, the magnitude of this difference is lower than the OECD average.¹¹

Widening participation: access and outcomes

In the UK, there is still a notable gap in higher education enrolment between those from low and high socio-economic backgrounds. For example, the difference in the progression rate to higher education for those eligible for free school meals (a commonly used proxy for disadvantage) and those not eligible was 28.8 percentage points in 2022–23 – the highest level recorded.¹² This inequity is at its highest at the most elite institutions.¹³ Inequalities persist throughout higher education where more deprived students are less likely to receive the best grades at

⁷ Department for Education and The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP. (2025). Targeted maintenance grants for students to be reintroduced. Gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/targeted-maintenance-grants-for-students-to-be-reintroduced>

⁸ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

⁹ Montacute, R. and Cullinane, C. (2023) *25 Years of University Access: How access to higher education has changed over time*, Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/25-years-of-university-access/>

¹⁰ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹¹ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹² UK Government. (2024) *Widening participation in higher education*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23>

¹³ Boliver, V. (2013) How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? *British Journal of Sociology*, 64, 2, 344–364. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12021>; Jerrim, J. (2013) Family background and access to 'high status' universities, *The Sutton Trust*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/john-jerrim-report-final-4.pdf>

university.¹⁴ Graduates from more prestigious institutions also have clear labour market advantages when compared to graduates from less prestigious institutions.¹⁵ Such inequalities are recognised by both the government and individual higher education institutions: the sector commits significant resources to widening participation activities. The Office for Students requires universities to produce Access and Participation Plans.

In addition, over the past few decades, there have been a number of high-profile initiatives which have attempted to address higher education access inequalities, not least the work of advocacy groups such as WAHEN (the World Access to Higher Education Network) and charities such as the Sutton Trust. The Office for Students has been argued to have played an important role in coordinating such action.¹⁶ Contextual admissions is an increasing focus for both academics and practitioners in the English higher education space; this refers to policies that enable 'applicants with certain socio-demographic characteristics [to] be offered marginally lower entry conditions'.¹⁷ The results of such approaches have been promising, with evidence that they not only widen access to highly selective institutions but also positively impact outcomes. At Durham University, for example, 'contextual offer making ... has been a success, helping to widen participation without compromising student success in absolute terms'.¹⁸

Role of higher education in intergenerational mobility

Higher education plays a significant role in intergenerational social mobility in the UK, and this has benefited over the past 20 years from massification and expansion. The PIAAC analysis, conducted for this report, suggests that higher education is the primary mechanism for upward social mobility for those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The analysis shows that in the UK, degree attainment amongst those with non-graduate parents

¹⁴ HESA. (2023) *Degree attainment by socioeconomic background: UK, 2017/18 to 2020/21*. HESA. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-04-2023/ah2304-degree-attainment-socioeconomic-background>

¹⁵ De Vries, R. (2014) *Earning by Degrees: Differences in the career outcomes of UK graduates*, The Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Earnings-by-Degrees-REPORT-1.pdf>

¹⁶ Harden-Wolfson, E. (2024) *Reaching for the right to higher education: evidence from 15 countries*, UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392154>

¹⁷ Schulte, J., Benson-Eggleton, J. (2024) Evaluating the Impact of Contextual Offers in a Highly Selective Institution: Results From a Mixed-Methods Contribution Analysis. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 79, 1, e12580. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12580> p.1

¹⁸ Boliver, V. and Jones, K. (2025) Evaluating contextual offer making at Durham University, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 79, 2. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70025> p.1

rose 17% (from 25% to 42%) between 2012 and 2023. However, because the graduate pay uplift fell during this period, relative mobility remained static. There are also significant differences in access to more prestigious institutions, as reported in other studies.¹⁹

Attempts to level these divides have taken place in the context of increased marketisation of the system. Institutional hierarchies are made more prominent by marketisation and increased competition within the higher education system. These have the potential to reinforce existing social class divides and stymie possible social mobility through higher education.²⁰

United States of America

System overview

The US higher education system was one of the first to undergo rapid expansion. In the 1960s and 70s, with economic growth and increasing public demand for higher education, the system 'massified'.²¹ Each of the 50 states has considerable power to shape its own system. The federal Department of Education has historically provided oversight and substantial funding for student aid and research.²² Institutions differ considerably in status: the 'Ivy Plus' group is considered the most prestigious.

About half of US higher education institutions provide vocational preparation through either two-year associate degrees or non-degree certificates, acting as a stepping stone to full degrees. The other half provides bachelor and graduate degrees in four-year colleges and universities. In 2019-20, two thirds of almost 4000 institutions awarded

¹⁹ Boliver, V. (2013) How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? *British Journal of Sociology*, 64, 2, 344-364. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12021>; Sutton Trust (2024) *Fair opportunity for all: A roadmap for the next government to tackle educational inequality and improve social mobility*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Fair-opportunity-for-all-1.pdf>

²⁰ Bathmaker, A-M., Ingram, N., Waller, R. (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34, 5-6, 723-743. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.816041>; Boliver, V. (2015) Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK? *Oxford Review of Education*, 41, 5, 608-627. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2015.1082905>

²¹ Gumpert, P., Iannozzi, P., Shaman, S. and Zemsky, R. (1997) *Trends in United States Higher Education from Massification to Post Massification*, Stanford, CA, National Center for Postsecondary Improvement. Available at: https://web.stanford.edu/group/ncpi/documents/pdfs/1-04_massification.pdf

²² American Council on Education. (2019) *US Higher Education. A Brief Guide*, Washington DC, American Council on Education. Available at: <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/brief-guide-to-US-higher-ed.pdf>

four-year undergraduate degrees. Around 40% were public institutions. In 2019, 78.5% of undergraduate students were enrolled in public institutions, 17% in private non-profit institutions, and only 4.6% in private for-profits.²³

Expenditure on tertiary education (including research and development) as a proportion of GDP is higher than the OECD average – at 2.3% compared to an OECD average of 1.5%. This represents 3.4% of total government expenditure, compared to an OECD average of 2.7%.²⁴

The US higher education system has a complex and highly differentiated tuition and fee structure. The cost difference between a public and private institution, or between an institution with highly selective admissions practices and one that is less selective, can be significant. Although the cost of attending higher education in the US is high, many students are able to access financial support: 80% of students receive some form of funding from public grants, scholarships or loans (public or government-guaranteed).²⁵ Indeed, the US can be considered a ‘high-cost, high-aid’ system, and financial aid is one of the few areas where the federal government plays a significant role, providing funding, regulating and administering loans, and offering policy oversight in this area.²⁶ Despite a range of different forms of student financial aid, the student debt burden is significant, and unevenly experienced, falling most heavily on students of colour and those from low-income backgrounds.²⁷

The US has high levels of participation. In 2022, 45% of those completing high school immediately enrolled in 4-year institutions and 17% in 2-year institutions.²⁸ In 2023, 51% of 25-64 year-olds in the US had some form of

²³ Pell Institute. (2022) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 2022 Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute. Available at: <https://www.pellinstitute.org/pell-institute-indicators-2022/>

²⁴ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

²⁵ OECD. (2024) *Country note: United States*, Education at a Glance 2024, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_fab77ef0-en/united-states_e08bedd8-en.html

²⁶ American Council on Education. (2019) *US Higher Education. A Brief Guide*, Washington DC, American Council on Education. Available at: <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/brief-guide-to-US-higher-ed.pdf>

²⁷ Pell Institute. (2022) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 2022 Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute. Available at: <https://www.pellinstitute.org/pell-institute-indicators-2022/>; Zloom, C. (2019) *Indebted. How Families Make College Work at Any Cost*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

²⁸ National Centre for Education Statistics (2024) *Report on the Condition of Education 2024* Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024144.pdf>

tertiary education, just above the OECD average of 41%.²⁹ Nevertheless, the US position relative to other nations has declined: the proportion of the population aged 25–34 with a bachelor's degree fell from second amongst OECD countries in 2000 to 16th in 2020.³⁰

Widening participation: access and outcomes

The 'California model' was once heralded as an important initiative for widening participation to higher education in the US, facilitating progression from community colleges to more prestigious 4-year institutions.³¹ In practice, there is robust evidence to show that, despite high participation rates, inequalities of access remain. For example, in 2020, among those who graduated from high school, higher education enrolment rates were 85% for those from the highest family income quartile, compared with 59% for those in the lowest quartile.³²

Despite the pervasiveness of the 'meritocratic ideal' in the US, mobility between institutional types has been very limited, and access to the most prestigious universities is highly unequal.³³ Children whose parents are in the top 1% of the income distribution are 77% more likely to attend an Ivy League college than those whose parents are in the bottom income quartile.³⁴

One expert interviewee commented:

“The challenge in the United States has been that it's very difficult for people from low socio-economic origins to get into the best colleges.” (US Expert 1).

²⁹ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

³⁰ Pell Institute. (2022) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 2022 Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute. Available at: <https://www.pellinstitute.org/pell-institute-indicators-2022/>

³¹ Douglass, J. (2000) *The California Idea and American Higher Education*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.

³² Pell Institute. (2022) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 2022 Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute. Available at: <https://www.pellinstitute.org/pell-institute-indicators-2022/>

³³ Duta, A., An, B. and Iannelli, C. (2018) Social origins, academic strength of school curriculum and access to selective higher education institutions: evidence from Scotland and the USA, *Higher Education*, 75, 769–784. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0166-5>

³⁴ Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N. and Yagan, D. (2017b) *Mobility report cards: the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility* (NBER Working Paper no.23618), Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23618>

These inequalities are partly explained by differences in academic attainment between social groups, as a result of disparities in schools, neighbourhoods and other environmental factors.³⁵ However, inequalities persist even among those with a similar level of attainment. Indeed, high-income students are 34% more likely to attend selective colleges than low-income students with the same test scores.³⁶

There are also differences in higher education completion rates by family background.³⁷ For those enrolled in some form of tertiary education in 2012, by 2017, only 63% of those whose parents had less than upper secondary education had completed their studies – compared to 83% of their peers who had at least one parent with a tertiary level qualification.³⁸ While these completion rates are higher than the OECD average, the 20 percentage point gap between groups is higher than the OECD average gap of 14%.³⁹

Research has documented the struggles faced by students from underrepresented families in securing good jobs. Hurst highlights the differences in immediate post-graduation destination by family background. She argues that, even having attended the same type of institution, students' pathways continue to be shaped by the different family-based material resources to which they have access.⁴⁰

Role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

Intergenerational social mobility in the US has declined over the past century, prompting national debates about how this trend can be

“Intergenerational social mobility in the US has declined over the past century, prompting national debates about how this trend can be reversed.”

³⁵ Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N. and Yagan, D. (2020) Income segregation and intergenerational mobility across colleges in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, 3, 1567-1633. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa005>

³⁶ Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N. and Yagan, D. (2020) Income segregation and intergenerational mobility across colleges in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, 3, 1567-1633. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa005>

³⁷ Pell Institute (2022) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 2022 Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute. Available at: <https://www.pellinstitute.org/pell-institute-indicators-2022/>

³⁸ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

³⁹ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

⁴⁰ Hurst, A.L. (2018) Classed outcomes: how class differentiates the careers of liberal arts college graduates in the US, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39, 1075-1093. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1455495>

reversed.⁴¹ In the US, 58% of adults with graduate parents obtained a degree compared with 31% of those from non-graduate families, a gap of 27 percentage points. Our PIAAC analysis, conducted for this report, shows that returns to higher education for those with non-graduate parents have weakened by 11 percentage points between 2012 and 2023, even as access widened by 10 percentage points, leaving overall mobility unchanged. Nevertheless, higher education remains a channel for social mobility for the most disadvantaged.

Intergenerational mobility varies between type of institution. Chetty et al. demonstrated that attending an Ivy League institution instead of a flagship public university tripled students' chances of obtaining jobs at prestigious firms and substantially increased their chances of being in the top 1% of earners.⁴² Nevertheless, the expert interviewees agreed that there had been few initiatives that had promoted social mobility in an effective manner. One exception was the 'affirmative action' policies that were introduced in many universities from the 1960s. US Expert 2 also highlighted the work of individual institutions in enabling access, using the example of Princeton.

The expert interviewees supported the recommendations put forward by Chetty and colleagues⁴³ to give admissions preference to low-income students, in the same way as legacy students (i.e. those whose parents had contributed financially to the institution, as alumni) have often received lower offers. They also recommended clearer pathways into the labour market and doing more to improve students' social capital before and during university to replicate the kind of support more privileged students already receive from their parents.

⁴¹ Connor, D. and Storper, M. (2020) The changing geography of social mobility in the United States, *PNAS*, 117, 48, 30309–30317. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2010222117>; Mitnik, P., Grusky, D. and Bryant, V. (2024) A very uneven playing field: economic mobility in the United States, *American Journal of Sociology*, 129, 4, 1216–1276. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ajs/2024/129/4>; Pell Institute (2022) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. 2022 Historical Trend Report*, The Pell Institute. Available at: <https://www.pellinstitute.org/pell-institute-indicators-2022/>

⁴² Chetty, R., Deming, D. and Friedman, J. (2023) *Diversifying Society's Leaders? The determinants and causal effects of admission to highly selective private colleges* (NBER Working Paper no. 31492), Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31492>

⁴³ Chetty, R., Deming, D. and Friedman, J. (2023) *Diversifying Society's Leaders? The determinants and causal effects of admission to highly selective private colleges* (NBER Working Paper no. 31492), Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31492>

As one explained:

“How do you figure out the right course programme to take? How do you set yourself up with the right internship to get a job? How do you go about looking for a job? How do you go about figuring out the right course plan that links to a job down the road? These are things that many students who come from families with kind of successful and highly educated parents. People often get these things from their parents.” (US Expert 1)

Australia

System overview

Australia has a mass higher education system largely centred on key metropolitan areas, and dominated by the ‘Group of Eight’ research elite. Of Australia’s 43 universities, 37 are public and six are private.⁴⁴ Policy and quality assurance responsibilities are overseen by the federal government’s Department of Education and Training.

Funding of higher education is supported by both government and student contributions. 83.2% of domestic Australian undergraduates hold Commonwealth Supported Places.⁴⁵ For these students, the cost of tuition is significantly lowered: the government covers a large proportion of such costs from the Commonwealth Grant Scheme. The contribution varies by course and aims to incentivise students to take courses that are closely matched to labour market needs. As Australia Expert 2 explained:

“Universities and particularly new universities are either accused of, or praised for, their instrumentalism. Emphasising the returns in the labour market of getting this particular degree, from this particular university. So, instrumentalism is a very strong thing here.”

The Higher Education Loan Plan allows students to receive an income-contingent loan with which they can pay for their tertiary education; this loan is then paid back once students are earning above a specified income threshold and allows for the deferral of tuition payments. One interviewee

⁴⁴ Australia Trade and Investment Commission. (2025) *List of Australian universities*, Study Australia. Available at: <https://www.studyaustralia.gov.au/en/plan-your-studies/list-of-australian-universities>

⁴⁵ Universities Australia. (2022) *Data Snapshot*. Available at: https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/220523-Data-snapshot-2022_web.pdf

noted that this system of funding was ‘borrowed, of course, from the UK’ (Australia Expert 1).

The 2024 Australian Universities Accord aims to ‘improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of higher education, in order to achieve long term security and prosperity for the sector and the nation’.⁴⁶ It contains many bold targets and sets an agenda for the future of Australian higher education. Implementation is the responsibility of the new Australian Tertiary Education Commission.

Widening participation: access and outcomes

The 2008 Bradley Report on Australian higher education led to initiatives seeking to make admissions to universities more equitable. These included the 2010 Higher Education Partnership and Participation Program which focused on students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, those in remote areas, and those who identify as Aboriginal.⁴⁷

Participation rates in Australia increased between 2014 and 2023 from 37% to 41% for 19-year-olds.⁴⁸ 51% of Australians between the ages of 25 and 65 hold a tertiary level qualification, compared to the OECD average of 40%.⁴⁹

Despite these figures, disparities within the system remain. Indeed, the proportion of students attending university from low socio-economic groups has changed little over the past decade.⁵⁰ People from large metropolitan cities are twice as likely to have graduated from a degree when compared to those from remote areas.⁵¹ The most prestigious

⁴⁶ TEQSA. (2024) *Australian Universities Accord*. Available at: <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/About-us/engagement/australian-universities-accord>

⁴⁷ Tomaszewski, W., Xiang, N. and Kubler, M. (2025) Socio-economic status, school performance, and university participation: evidence from linked administrative and survey data from Australia, *Higher Education*, 89, 53-774. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01245-7>

⁴⁸ Australian Government Department of Education. (2024) *Key findings from the 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2023-student-data/key-findings-2023-student-data#>

⁴⁹ OECD. (2023) *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en/full-report/to-what-level-have-adults-studied_7d8f2f94.html; OECD (2023) *Country note: Australia*. Education at a Glance 2023, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/EAGCountryNotes/EAG2023_CN_AUS_pdf.pdf#

⁵⁰ Morris, A. (2024) Inequality and Education in Australia, *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 35, 2, 221-42. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2024.18>.

⁵¹ Universities Australia. (2022) *Data Snapshot*. Available at: https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/220523-Data-snapshot-2022_web.pdf

universities in Australia are weighted towards advantaged students. In 2019, 16.8% of all students were classified as from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In the Group of Eight institutions they made up only 9.7%.⁵²

Continued disparities in access, along with concerns about changing workforce needs and declining public funding, led to the announcement of the Australian Universities Accord in 2022 and a 'whole-of-education' approach to tackling inequalities.⁵³

Role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

There are no studies which explicitly calculate the contribution of higher education to intergenerational social mobility in the Australian context. Wider evidence about social mobility generally suggests that Australia is 'among the most mobile countries in the world',⁵⁴ but it remains the case that parental income directly impacts the income potential of their offspring. The former Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury stated that 'Australia is more socially mobile than the United States, but less mobile than Scandinavian countries. We do ok, but we could do better.'⁵⁵

Young people who have attended higher education have better labour market outcomes when compared to those who have not.⁵⁶ Research has suggested that the main lever to equalise opportunities to access to higher education, and thus reap its benefits, is financial aid.⁵⁷ The introduction of increased financial support for students, for example through the

⁵² Koshy, P. (2020) *Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2013 - 2019*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Perth; Australian Government (2023) *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*, Canberra, Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/download/16699/australian-universities-accord-interim-report/33941/document/pdf>

⁵³ Australian Government (2023) *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*, Canberra, Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/download/16699/australian-universities-accord-interim-report/33941/document/pdf>

⁵⁴ Productivity Commission (2024) *Fairly Equal? Economic Mobility in Australia*, Canberra, Productivity Commission. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/fairly-equal-mobility/fairly-equal-mobility.pdf> p.41

⁵⁵ Leigh, A. (2023) *Opinion Piece: No child's future should be pre-determined from their birth*. Ministers: Treasury portfolio. Available at: <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/andrew-leigh-2022/articles/opinion-piece-no-childs-future-should-be-pre-determined-their>

⁵⁶ Reeves, R. V. and Grannis, K. S. (2013) *Five strong starts for social mobility*, Washington DC, Centre on Children and Families, Brookings Institute. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/five-strong-starts-for-social-mobility/#:~:text=Richard%20Reeves%20and%20Kerry%20Searle%20Grannis%20identify%20the,and%20the%20way%20we%20start%20our%20own%20families.>

⁵⁷ Cunningham, I. (2017) The role of higher education in facilitating social mobility. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 4, 1, 74-85.

Commonwealth Grant Scheme, seeks to address what one interviewee described as ‘mounting evidence to show that if you come from a disadvantaged background...you can’t have access to top jobs or professions’ (Australia Expert 2).

Despite this increased focus on widening participation, such changes have not necessarily led to equality of opportunities. Even once enrolled in tertiary education, successful completion within a given timeframe can be predicted by parental education level: 73% of students with at least one parent with tertiary attainment successfully completed their own tertiary studies, while only 61% of students whose parents had less than upper secondary education did so.⁵⁸ This was corroborated by Australia Expert 2 who noted that there is ‘strong evidence to show that the very high rates of non-retention’ for such students. This is despite the adoption of ‘enabling programmes’, supporting access to higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds and acting as a bridge from schooling to higher education, developing skills and confidence to allow for a successful transition to higher education.

One evaluation of these programmes directly mentions their social mobility benefits:

“Overall they [students on enabling programmes] tended to have a positive experience of transformation and adaptation into academic culture, which can be broadly characterised as “social mobility””.⁵⁹

One expert interviewee pointed to two key barriers to social mobility at the pre-tertiary level: ‘There is social mobility, but there are also a lot of blockers, including streaming students in schools, and very early national testing’ (Australia Expert 1). He pointed to the incentives offered to schools to push students into vocational courses, and the problematic use of ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank), a ranking of all students

⁵⁸ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html; OECD (2024) *Country note: Australia*, Education at a Glance 2024, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_fab77ef0-en/australia_7cd500b6-en.html

⁵⁹ Habel, C., Whitman, K. and Stokes, J. (2016) *Exploring the Experience of Low-SES Students via Enabling Pathways*, Perth, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Available at: <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/exploring-the-experience-of-low-ses-students-via-enabling-pathways/>

based on their school performance, reinforcing inequalities between schools.

Amongst the 47 recommendations of the 2024 Australian Universities Accord are a target of 80% of adults having postsecondary qualifications by 2050, and the proportional representation of four specific underrepresented groups, as well as proposals for outreach funds, university-readiness programmes, needs-based funding and a reform of the loans scheme. A second interviewee was particularly hopeful about the potential of the Accord and its vision of 'equity through growth' (Australia Expert 2).

Canada

System overview

Canada has a highly decentralised higher education system. There is no federal ministry of education, and its ten provinces and three territories assume the major role in legislative, regulative and operational matters.⁶⁰ The federal government funds research, student financial assistance and supports language and cultural initiatives.

There are currently 100 public universities and over 70 private universities in Canada.⁶¹ In addition, there is a well-developed college system. One expert interviewee commented that the relative lack of a university status hierarchy meant less attention to differences in access. Universities tend to have a high degree of autonomy, while the college sector is closely regulated. Some colleges have been granted degree-awarding powers, offering undergraduate programmes alongside more traditional vocational courses.⁶²

Canada's Gross Enrolment Ratio in tertiary education is 78%. 24% of tertiary students are enrolled in non-university provision, compared to only

⁶⁰ Jones, G. and Weinrib, J. (2013) Globalization and higher education in Canada, in King, R., Marginson, S. and Naidoo, R. (eds) *Handbook on Globalization and Higher Education*, Edward Elgar. pp.222-240.

⁶¹ Government of Canada. (2025) *Universities*. Available at: <https://www.educanada.ca/study-plan-etudes/university-universite.aspx?lang=eng>; Sa, C. (2020) Higher education systems and institutions, Canada, in: Amaral, A. et al. (eds) *The International Encyclopaedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* Springer. p.906-914.

⁶² Sa, C. (2020) Higher education systems and institutions, Canada, in: Amaral, A. et al. (eds) *The International Encyclopaedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* Springer. p.906-914.

13% in the UK, partly a result of the strong tradition of professional and vocational education driven by the college system mentioned above.⁶³

Canada is distinguished by its high levels of post-secondary attainment, with 67% of 25-64 year olds qualified at the level of 'post-secondary non-tertiary' and above, compared to an OECD average of 47%.⁶⁴ Canada does not systematically collect administrative data on the social characteristics of its students at federal level,⁶⁵ which impedes analysis of trends with respect to widening participation. One expert interviewee confirmed that, even at the university level, data collection is 'piecemeal' and that few provinces have collected longitudinal data.

Canadian universities receive their income primarily from two main sources: government grants and tuition fees paid by students.⁶⁶ The Federal Government's Canada Student Financial Assistance Program allows students to apply for grants and loans, though arrangements vary by province. Other sources of student support include education savings plans, tax credits and scholarships. These forms of financial support have not had a significant impact on social mobility – primarily because half of the available assistance is available to all students, and is not needs-assessed.⁶⁷

Canada presents a challenge for tracking mobility trends. While national platforms such as the Postsecondary Student Information System and the Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform link administrative education data to tax records and provide rich information on graduate outcomes, they contain limited information on students' social backgrounds. At the provincial and institutional level, equality, diversity and inclusion data are collected inconsistently, and experts described the overall landscape as piecemeal. Thus, while valuable longitudinal linkages exist, they are not sufficient for detailed analyses of outcomes by socio-economic origin.

⁶³ Usher, A. and Balfour, J. (2024) *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada, 2024*, Toronto, Higher Education Strategy Associates. Available at: [2025-04-04_SPEC-2024_v6_Publications-1.pdf](#)

⁶⁴ OECD. (2024a) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

⁶⁵ Usher, A. and Balfour, J. (2024) *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada, 2024*, Toronto, Higher Education Strategy Associates. Available at: <https://higheredstrategy.com/the-state-of-postsecondary-education-in-canada-2024/>

⁶⁶ Sa, C. (2020) Higher education systems and institutions, Canada, in: Amaral, A. et al. (eds) *The International Encyclopaedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* Springer. p.906-914.

⁶⁷ Lang, D. (2022) Financing higher education in Canada: a study in fiscal federalism, *Higher Education*, 84, 177-194. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00761-0>

Widening participation: access and outcomes

Increasing access to post-secondary education has been a longstanding aim of policy throughout Canada, and 'the cornerstone of most provincial policies since the 1960s'.⁶⁸ Despite high participation rates, those from under-privileged backgrounds have continued to be under-represented in higher education, with parental education and income remaining major determinants of post-secondary participation.⁶⁹

Some universities have introduced diversity admissions policies.⁷⁰ One expert interviewee confirmed that universities were particularly focused on addressing racial inequalities, but that more attention needed to be given to indigenous communities. At the same time, as noted above, there has been no systematic collection, at institutional level, of data about students' socio-economic status or whether they have any family history of higher education,⁷¹ which makes it difficult both to target initiatives at particular students, and to track progress. Ford and colleagues⁷² argue that relative to other provinces (with the exception of Quebec), Ontario is the only province where there have been improvements in participation rates for both university and non-university post-secondary education for students from families of all income levels in the past 20 years.

One expert interviewee suggested that 'nobody uses the term widening participation ... it's a non-issue' (Canada Expert 1). He also believed that people 'don't talk about class' because of Canada's self-identity as a post-class society.

⁶⁸ Jones, G. and Weinrib, J. (2013) Globalization and higher education in Canada, in King, R., Marginson, S. and Naidoo, R. (eds) *Handbook on Globalization and Higher Education*, Edward Elgar. pp.222-240. p.223

⁶⁹ Deller, F., Kaufman, A. and Tamburri, R. (2019) *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education*, Toronto, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Available at: <https://heqco.ca/pub/redefining-access-to-postsecondary-education/>

⁷⁰ Tamtik, M. and Guenter, M. (2019) Policy analysis of equity, diversity and inclusion strategies in Canadian universities – how far have we come? *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 49, 3, 41-56. Available at: <https://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe/article/view/188529>

⁷¹ Universities Canada. (2019) *Equity, diversity and inclusion at Canadian universities. Report on the 2019 national survey*, Universities Canada. Available at: <https://univcan.ca/publication/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-at-canadian-universities-report-on-the-2019-survey/>

⁷² Ford, R., Hui, T.S. and Nguyen, C. (2019) *Postsecondary Participation and Household Income*, Toronto, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Available at: <https://heqco.ca/pub/postsecondary-participation-and-household-income/>

Role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

Zemen and Frenette⁷³ argue that, particularly compared to other OECD countries, there is a relatively high level of intergenerational mobility in education for adults whose parents did not have either a college diploma or university degree. Studies using other datasets have, however, reached different conclusions. Connolly and colleagues⁷⁴ identified a steady decline in intergenerational social mobility over time. This trajectory of declining social mobility for those from low socio-economic status groups was also found in the OECD data. In Canada, 29% of adults with a non-graduate parent completed a degree, compared to 52% with a graduate parent. Whilst a more inclusive system than some, individuals with non-graduate parents are about 44% less likely to complete a degree by their late thirties or early forties. Our PIAAC data show an 8% decline in social mobility since 2012; sample limitations prevent firmer conclusions.

Concerns about declining intergenerational social mobility trends are being voiced in public debate in Canada. Indeed, several publications produced by Policy Horizons Canada (the Government of Canada's Centre of Excellence in Foresight) have highlighted downward social mobility as a key, and potentially serious, future social problem.⁷⁵ One expert interviewee confirmed that the policy conversation is now about 'protecting people from downward mobility'.

Our analysis of PIAAC data also show that more than half of upward mobility for disadvantaged groups in Canada comes through non-higher education routes. This is markedly higher than for other case countries.

China

System overview

China has a diverse array of higher education institutions. Of more than 3,100 tertiary education institutions nationwide, just under half offer

⁷³ Zemen, K. and Frenette, M. (2021) *Portrait of youth in Canada: data report. Chapter 3: Youth and Education in Canada*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.903788/publication.html>

⁷⁴ Connolly, M., Haack, C. and Lapierre, D. (2021) *Trends in Intergenerational Income Mobility and Income Inequality in Canada*, Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series, Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2021001-eng.htm>

⁷⁵ Policy Horizons Canada. (2024) *Disruptions on the Horizon*. Available at: https://horizons.service.canada.ca/en/2024/disruptions/Disruptions_on_the_Horizon_2024_report.pdf; Policy Horizons Canada. (2025) *Future Lives: social mobility in question*. Available at: <https://horizons.service.canada.ca/en/2025/01/10/future-lives-social-mobility/pdf/future-lives-social-mobility-en.pdf>

undergraduate degrees.⁷⁶ At the top of the hierarchy are the 42 'Double First Class' (previously referred to as 'Project 211' and 'Project 985') universities: research-intensive institutions that receive substantial government funding and are central to China's ambition of building world-class universities. The remainder of universities ('non-Double First Class') are less prestigious and well-resourced. It has been argued that this stratification actively entrenches inequalities within the national higher education system with increased funding going to elite institutions.

China's higher education system has undergone a rapid expansion in enrolment and participation, with gross enrolment increasing from 9.8% in 1998 to 61% in 2024.⁷⁷ The governance of higher education in China is highly centralised, and the central government maintains strong macro-level control and accountability through policy steering, performance-based funding mechanisms, and strategic priority setting.⁷⁸

Almost all students are admitted through the National College Entrance Exam or *Gaokao*, which relies on standardised test scores. Higher education in China is funded by central government, student tuition fees, and via donations, projects, and other associated but non-recurring incomes.⁷⁹ In 2023, government spending on education represented 4% of GDP.

Social mobility has long been a policy concern in China, although the term itself is rarely used and, instead, concepts such as *educational equity*, *equality*, and *fairness* are employed. As China Expert 1 explained:

“When we talk about social mobility in China, we can use the concept developed primarily from the Western context, but we also need to take into consideration the unique Chinese social and political circumstances.”

⁷⁶ Hu, J., Liu, H., Chen, Y., & Qin, J. (2018) Strategic planning and the stratification of Chinese higher education institutions. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 63, 36–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.03.003>

⁷⁷ Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (1999) *Statistical Bulletin on the Development of National Education in 1998*. Available at: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/tnull_842.html; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2025) *Statistical Bulletin on the Development of National Education in 2024*. Available at: https://hudong.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/202506/t20250611_1193760.html

⁷⁸ Han, S., Xu, X. (2019) How far has the state 'stepped back': an exploratory study of the changing governance of higher education in China (1978–2018), *Higher Education*, 78, 931–946. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00378-4>

⁷⁹ Yang, P. (2018) Higher Education Financing in China. In: Peters, M. (ed) *Encyclopaedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Springer.

In 2019, the Chinese government issued *Opinions on Promoting System and Mechanism Reform for the Social Mobility of Labour and Talent*, marking the first time in which the term 社会性流动 (which can be translated as 'social mobility') was explicitly used in official policy discourse. This policy refers to a broad spectrum of strategies to improve upward mobility, including reforms to the household registration (*hukou*) system, expansion of access to public services, and support for employment and career development across both urban and rural areas. In this policy, education is framed as a key channel to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

China lacks publicly accessible administrative microdata on graduate outcomes, making it hard to assess social mobility trends. Researchers rely instead on large-scale surveys, such as the China Family Panel Studies and the Chinese General Social Survey, which permit analyses by socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and rural/urban *hukou* status, but do not provide the kind of administrative linkage possible in Nordic settings.

Widening participation: access and outcomes

Over recent years, the state has reaffirmed its commitment to equity and access, setting targets to expand enrolment in high-quality undergraduate programmes and postgraduate education, and redistributing new educational resources to less-developed regions, such as central and western provinces and ethnic minority areas.

The impact of higher education on social mobility has shifted over time. Ding⁸⁰ found that access to higher education for urban students equalised in the 1990s. However, from the 2000s onwards, students from more advantaged social and economic backgrounds increasingly gained access to educational resources of superior quality. China's rapid higher education expansion has thus not necessarily led to greater equity or enhanced social mobility.

Student subject choices are also stratified, influenced by labour market dynamics and broader economic developments. China Expert 2 explained how students' choices of majors are related to their socio-economic backgrounds:

⁸⁰ Ding, X. (2007) Expansion and equality of access to higher education in China, *Frontiers of Education in China*, 2, 151-162. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11516-007-0013-z>

“Some majors are more commonly chosen by students from particular family backgrounds. For instance, some research suggests that students from less advantaged families are more likely to choose STEM fields, because they believe those majors lead directly to jobs. Students from rural areas – and their parents – often prefer majors that lead to more stable, well-defined job prospects.”

Access to higher education is important, but is not the only aspect of social mobility, as the other expert interviewee emphasised:

“Access is really important, but we also need to look at the university experiences and post-university options – to what extent higher education can actually help students, particularly those from underprivileged families, to have a meaningful destination, for instance in terms of job and better life opportunities.” (China Expert 1)

No official national-level data have been released regarding higher education graduation or dropout rates in China, nor statistics that reveal differences in completion rates across social groups such as urban–rural background, socio-economic status, gender, or ethnicity. As China Expert 1 explained:

“Students from Western rural areas [in China] have significantly fewer opportunities to go to university and having a meaningful transition from university to the labour market. And of course, if we look at the ethnic minorities, predominantly concentrated in Western areas, they are an additional kind of underprivileged group.”

National-level policies support student retention and completion amongst ethnic minority groups, and those from remote areas and impoverished regions, which aligns with the country’s broader economic and political strategies. Specific measures include giving preferential allocation of university enrolment quotas to designated provinces and opening preparatory programmes and classes to students in ethnic minority regions.

Research has found that in China, education from an elite institution can play a largely positive role in supporting students’ employment within the state system. One expert interviewee explained that stratification becomes more pronounced at times of economic uncertainty:

“Sometimes companies make it very clear in their job advertisements that they are only looking for graduates from [Project] 985 or 211 universities. Others may not say so directly, but when they screen CVs, they use those exact criteria. ... it reflects how clearly stratified China’s higher education system is. The more elite the university, the more access students will have to opportunities, and the greater their potential for intergenerational mobility.” (China Expert 2)

For students at elite universities, higher education opens up significant opportunities for upward social mobility. This is one reason the government has prioritised support to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter top-tier institutions.

Whilst tuition fees are not a major barrier, the lowest tier private colleges are allowed to charge higher fees. This has an impact on inequalities, as students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, and those whose parents have lower educational attainment, are significantly less likely to gain admission to elite universities.⁸¹ Students from poor rural areas are seven times less likely to enter university compared to urban students, and eleven times less likely to be admitted to prestigious ‘211 Project’ universities. These gaps are even more pronounced among subgroups such as female, ethnic minority students from impoverished rural areas.⁸²

In 2024, the Chinese government implemented new policies of financial aid aimed ‘at rewarding outstanding students and supporting those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds’,⁸³ including doubling the number of scholarships, and increasing financial aid and student loans.

The role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

Since China’s market reforms, industrialisation has expanded occupational opportunities, but underlying levels of educational and intergenerational

⁸¹ Luo, Y., Guo, F. and Shi, J. (2018) Expansion and inequality of higher education in China: How likely would Chinese poor students get to success? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37, 5, 1015-1034. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1474856>

⁸² Li, H., Loyalka, P., Rozelle, S., Wu, B. and Xie, J. (2015) Unequal Access to College in China: How Far Have Poor, Rural Students Been Left Behind? *The China Quarterly*, 221, 185–207. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24742007>.

⁸³ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China. (2024) *China refines financial aid for students*. Available at: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202410/14/content_WS670c7b17c6d0868f4e8ebd4c.html

social mobility have declined.⁸⁴ The capacity of higher education to function as a mobility channel has weakened over time.

Wu and colleagues⁸⁵ show that the 1999 expansion did not substantially reduce inequalities in access; instead, new opportunities were largely captured by advantaged groups (urban *hukou* holders, families with high socio-economic status). Policies like the 'Double First-Class' initiatives concentrated resources in a small number of elite universities, turning them into narrow gates for upward mobility.⁸⁶ Mok⁸⁷ argues that 'those who hold top-tier four-year university degrees can enjoy more chances for upward occupational and social mobility'. Meanwhile, non-elite degrees face declining marginal value, contributing to credential inflation and overeducation. Recent data suggest that the employment situation for graduates remains highly challenging. Students from poorer backgrounds experience significantly higher rates of unemployment.⁸⁸

Scholars contend that the massification of higher education has led to institutional stratification, an oversupply of degree-holders, and diminishing educational returns. University degrees no longer guarantee desirable employment but serve merely as minimum qualifications.⁸⁹ As a result, educational inequality is shifting from access-based disparities to those that are outcomes-based, where social and cultural capital, rather than credentials, determine labour market success.⁹⁰ For students from low

⁸⁴ Xie, Y., Dong, H., Zhou, X. and Song, X. (2022) Trends in social mobility in post-revolution China, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119, 7, e2117471119. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2117471119>

⁸⁵ Wu, L., Yan, K. and Zhang, Y. (2020) Higher Education Expansion and Inequality in Educational Opportunities in China, *Higher Education* 80, 3, 549-70. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48736427>

⁸⁶ Zhang, N. and Fan, H. (2024) The intergenerational mobility effects of higher education expansion in China, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 111. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2024.103169>

⁸⁷ Mok, K. H. (2016) Massification of higher education, graduate employment and social mobility in the Greater China region, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37, 1, 51-71. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1111751> p.53

⁸⁸ Mok, K. H. and Wu, A. M. (2016) Higher education, changing labour market and social mobility in the era of massification in China, *Journal of Education and Work*, 29, 1, 77-97. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1049028>

⁸⁹ Mok, K. H. and Wu, A. M. (2016) Higher education, changing labour market and social mobility in the era of massification in China, *Journal of Education and Work*, 29, 1, 77-97. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1049028>; Xu, B. (2021) From massification towards post-massification: Policy and governance of higher education in China, *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 10, 3. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/22125868211046032>

⁹⁰ Mok, K. H. and Wu, A. M. (2016) Higher education, changing labour market and social mobility in the era of massification in China, *Journal of Education and Work*, 29, 1, 77-97. Available at:

socio-economic groups, higher education increasingly fails to deliver upward mobility.

Denmark

System overview

Danish higher education expansion has been underpinned by a commitment to state funding through taxation,⁹¹ and university places nearly tripled between 1979 and 2018.⁹² In the 2000s, a series of mergers reduced the total number of institutions to around thirty. 60% of students attend universities, 30% university colleges, and 10% business and professional academies.⁹³ All are regulated by national legislation and accredited by national, independent accreditation agencies and the national Accreditation Council.⁹⁴ Admission is centralised but transfer from a university college to a master's degree at a university is often difficult. In 2014 policies were introduced – known as the 'sizing' or 'dimensioning' reforms⁹⁵ – to restrict student admission to courses without good labour market outcomes, and required degree programmes to have advisory boards that included employer representatives.⁹⁶ The Danish Government has also sought to incentivise students to move more quickly through their studies and reduce the time for which student grants are payable.⁹⁷

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1049028>; Xu, B. (2021) From massification towards post-massification: Policy and governance of higher education in China, *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 10, 3. <https://doi-org.10.1177/22125868211046032>

⁹¹ Helland, H., Strømme, T.B and Thomsen, J.-P. (2024) Social inequality in dropout rates in higher education: Denmark and Norway, *Studies in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2431588>

⁹² Munk, M.D. and Thomsen, J.-P. (2018) Horizontal Stratification in Access to Danish University Programmes, *Acta Sociologica* 61, 1, 50-78. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48561348>.

⁹³ Ministry of Higher Education and Science. (2025) *The Danish Higher Education System*. Available at: <https://ufm.dk/en/education/higher-education/the-danish-higher-education-system>; Hansen, H.F. (2020) Higher education systems and institutions, Denmark, in: Amaral, A. et al. (eds) *The International Encyclopaedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* Springer. pp.980-985.

⁹⁴ Ministry of Higher Education and Science. (2025) *The Danish Higher Education System*. Available at: <https://ufm.dk/en/education/higher-education/the-danish-higher-education-system>

⁹⁵ Madsen, M. (2019) *Entangled Simplicities. A Metricography on 'Relevance' and 'Graduate Employability' Configurations in Danish University Education*. PhD thesis, Aarhus University. Available at: https://pure.au.dk/portal/files/199271655/Entangled_Simplicities_final.pdf

⁹⁶ Hansen, H.F. (2020) Higher education systems and institutions, Denmark, in: Amaral, A. et al. (eds) *The International Encyclopaedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* Springer. pp.980-985.

⁹⁷ Nielsen, G. and Sarauw, L.L. (2017) 'Tuning up and tuning in: The European Bologna Process and students' time of study', in S. Wright and C. Shore (eds) *Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy*, Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 156-172.; Sarauw, L.L. and Madsen, S.R. (2020) Higher education in the paradigm of speed. Student perspectives on the risks of fast-track degree completion, *Learning and Teaching*, 13, 1, 1-23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2020.130102>

Denmark typically spends around 1.9% of its GDP on tertiary education (including research and development), compared to an OECD average of 1.5%. This represents 4.8% of all government expenditure compared to an OECD average of 2.7%.⁹⁸ In 2023, 43% of 25–64 year-olds in Denmark had some form of tertiary education (5% a short-cycle qualification; the rest at bachelor's level or above), just above the OECD average of 41%.⁹⁹ There are, however, quite considerable differences by gender.

Widening participation: access and outcomes

The Danish commitment to equity in higher education involves state funding the costs of student tuition, and students receive grants to cover their living expenses.¹⁰⁰ The student grant system is generous, and students can also apply for a loan. There is, however, no institutional funding for equity targets, or institutional performance agreements with equity targets. One interviewee commented that this funding system was 'contentious':

“In the sense that a lot of upper middle-class kids, they go to higher education and they get these public transfers and they make a lot of money in their in their lifetime. So it's one of the few transfers in Denmark that is regressive.” (Danish Expert 1)

In general, Denmark has a smaller gap in access to education, by social class, than many other countries,¹⁰¹ but differences remain, with respect to both access and level of qualification attained, and new forms of stratification have emerged. Analysis of PIAAC data, conducted by others, found that only 37% of 25–44 year-olds in Denmark with parents who had not completed upper secondary education had entered higher education, compared to 75% of those with tertiary-educated parents.¹⁰² Similar discrepancies have been found in attainment. Drop-out rates from

⁹⁸ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

⁹⁹ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹⁰⁰ OECD. (2021) *Resourcing higher education in Denmark. Thematic policy brief*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/resourcing-higher-education-in-denmark_c8217325-en.html

¹⁰¹ Munk, M.D. and Thomsen, J-P. (2018) Horizontal Stratification in Access to Danish University Programmes, *Acta Sociologica* 61, 1, 50–78. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48561348>.

¹⁰² Borgonovi, F. and Marconi, G. (2020) Inequality in higher education: Why did expanding access not reduce skill inequality?, *Open Education Studies*, 2, 1, 312–343. <https://doi.org/10.1515/edu-2020-0110>;

Tverborgvik, T., Clausen, L.B., Thorsted, B.L., Mikkelsen, S. and Lynge, E. (2013) Intergenerational Educational Mobility in Denmark, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 57, 5, 544–560. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2012.696211>

university are higher for students from lower socio-economic groups, when compared to their more advantaged counterparts.¹⁰³

The choice of programme of study or institution is also patterned by social background. Thomsen¹⁰⁴ concludes that access is more equitable in degree programmes where the dominant cultural practice is relatively less important for a successful educational career. Munk and Thomsen¹⁰⁵ show that universities in metropolitan areas and with prestigious programmes are more socially selective.

As with other OECD countries, there are significant gender disparities in students' subject choices. In recent years, only 16% of women entering Danish tertiary education were studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects compared to 36% of men.¹⁰⁶

Role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

Denmark has, in general, a reputation for relatively high social mobility.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, research has differentiated between intergenerational *income* mobility, and intergenerational *education* mobility. Indeed, Landersø and Heckman¹⁰⁸ show that the former is much greater than the latter. They contend that intergenerational income mobility seen in Denmark is largely a result of redistributive tax policies, alongside policies that reduce disparities in wages – for example, through facilitating effective collective wage bargaining.

¹⁰³ Helland, H., Strømme, T.B and Thomsen, J.-P. (2024) Social inequality in dropout rates in higher education: Denmark and Norway, *Studies in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2431588>

¹⁰⁴ Thomsen, J.P. (2012) Exploring the heterogeneity of class in higher education: social and cultural differentiation in Danish university programmes, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33, 4, 565-585. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.659458>

¹⁰⁵ Munk, M.D. and Thomsen, J.-P. (2018) Horizontal Stratification in Access to Danish University Programmes, *Acta Sociologica* 61, 1, 50–78. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48561348>.

¹⁰⁶ OECD. (2024a) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹⁰⁷ Clark, G. and Hørlyk Kristensen, M. (2025) *The myth of Nordic mobility: Social mobility rates in modern Denmark and Sweden*, EHES Working Paper, No. 275, European Historical Economics Society (EHES). Available at: https://ehes.org/wp/EHES_275.pdf

¹⁰⁸ Landersø, R. and Heckman, J. (2017) The Scandinavian Fantasy: The Sources of Intergenerational Mobility in Denmark and the US, *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 119, 1, 178-230. DOI: 10.1111/sjoe.12219. Heckman, J. and Landersø, R. (2021) *Lessons from Denmark about Inequality and Social Mobility* (NBER Working Paper 28543), Cambridge, MA, NBER. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28543>; Heckman, J. and Landersø, R. (2022) Lessons for Americans from Denmark about inequality and social mobility, *Labour Economics*, 77, 101999. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2021.101999>

Karlson and Landersø's work¹⁰⁹ demonstrates that intergenerational education mobility increased significantly for cohorts born between the 1940s and the 1960s because of major school reforms in 1958 and 1972. However, mobility has been declining for those born since the 1970s and 1980s. Affluent families have been able to promote, more effectively than less advantaged families, their child's access to higher education. As one of the expert interviewees noted, 'it's been predominantly the middle class and upper middle class that have exploited that expansion ... that's actually driven down mobility in education on average in the population' (Danish Expert 1).

There have been relatively few higher education policies that have aimed to redress inequalities by family background. This may be related to, as our expert interviewees explained, first, an assumption that the expansion of higher education would automatically lead to greater social mobility and, second, a strong tradition in Denmark of treating young people as citizens in their own right – independent of their families. Both interviewees believed that there would be no appetite for means-tested funding, or for considering family background during university admissions processes.

“So generally you would consider, policy-wise, that when you turn 18, you're free of your parents ... so that that would be I think a very large leap, policy-wise, that would be. That, realistically, won't be implemented in any way.” (Danish Expert 2)

The amount of the student grant was increased by 50% in 1988, but this did not have a significant impact on intergenerational social mobility, as one of the interviewees explained:

“There is some suggestion, although it's not very strong evidence, that it might have lifted particular lower class kids' opportunities slightly more, primarily because they didn't have to take part time jobs. But I think, in the aggregate, if you look at time trend source, you can't see that reform changed the world ... it might have created slightly more equal opportunities.” (Danish Expert 1)

¹⁰⁹ Karlson, K. and Landersø, R. (2025) The making and unmaking of opportunity: educational mobility in 20th century Denmark, *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 127, 1, 178-212. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjoe.12567>

Greece

System overview

Greece has a centralised higher education system with 24 public institutions. The Ministry of Education oversees all aspects of higher education, including funding, curriculum, and admissions procedures¹¹⁰ In March 2024, the Government passed controversial legislation allowing the establishment of private universities and campuses of international universities.

Admission to Greek universities is highly competitive and based on performance in the national Panhellenic Examinations, also known as the *panelladikes*. Every student applies to specific departments, not universities, which means degree choice is tightly constrained by exam results.¹¹¹ As Greece Expert 1 noted, 'the universities have very little control over who they accept', because 'a lot is decided by the Ministry of Education'. This limits university autonomy over admissions decisions.

Greece allocates 1.3% of total government expenditure to tertiary education (including research and development), compared to an OECD average of 2.7%.¹¹² The state covers tuition fees, and students cover maintenance costs, and can apply for a housing allowance, and means-tested loans. Greek universities face long-standing challenges related to funding, infrastructure, and staff-to-student ratios. Many institutions depend on EU structural funds to support upgrades and student services.¹¹³

Attainment levels are low in Greece, relative to other OECD countries. In 2023, 34% of 25-64 year-olds had some form of tertiary education, well below the OECD average of 41%.¹¹⁴ However, the number of young people in Greece obtaining tertiary education has risen substantially since the

¹¹⁰ Miliotis, H. (2014) Higher Education in Greece Compared to Canada, *College Quarterly*, 17, 1, p.n1. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1032225.pdf>; Vassilopoulos, A. (2015) Access to the Greek University, *Academia*, 5, 1, 48-75. Available at: <https://pasithee.library.upatras.gr/academia/article/view/2260/2420>

¹¹¹ Verdis, A., Kalogeropoulos, K. and Chalkias, C. (2019) Regional disparities in access to higher education in Greece, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 14, 2, 318-335. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499919846186>

¹¹² OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹¹³ OECD. (2024) *Country note: Greece*, Education at a Glance 2024, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_fab77ef0-en/greece_423881a4-en.html

¹¹⁴ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

early 2000s. As of 2023, 53% of women and 36% of men aged 25–34 held a tertiary qualification.

Rising university participation has not been matched by corresponding improvements in graduate labour market outcomes. The relative earnings of adults in Greece, with tertiary education, compared to those with only an upper secondary qualification, are below the OECD average.¹¹⁵ In 2023, 77% of young women and 76% of young men with a tertiary qualification were employed, both below the OECD averages of 84% and 90%, respectively. Data from Bazoti¹¹⁶ show that the unemployment rate among tertiary-educated individuals in Greece reached 20.4% in 2013, and one in three Greeks in 2019 was employed in a job requiring fewer skills than their qualification level. Such ‘overqualification’ rose by 60.6% between 2008 and 2019. These outcomes, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis, highlight a lack of alignment between higher education output and labour market needs, compounded by limited employer engagement and weak demand for highly qualified labour. As Greece Expert 2 noted, ‘universities focus on areas that are not really aligned with the needs of the economy’.

Widening participation: access and outcomes

Greece has formal universal access to higher education, with public universities charging no tuition fees for undergraduate study. However, students’ ability to enter and succeed is heavily influenced by socio-economic background, school type, and geographical location. Students from more advantaged families, urban areas, and general upper secondary schools are significantly more likely to transition to higher education than their peers from rural areas, vocational schools, or lower socio-economic status families. These disparities reflect broader patterns of intergenerational educational reproduction, with parental education playing a major role in shaping children's educational outcomes.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹¹⁶ Bazoti, P. (2020) *Unemployment in Greece: The Case of Young Higher Education Graduates*. Working Paper No. 110. Athens, Centre of Planning and Economic Research (KEPE). Available at: https://www.eliampep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/110_2020_-WORKING-PAPER-_Pery-Bazoti-.pdf

¹¹⁷ Danchev, S., Gatopoulos, G., Kalavrezou, N. and Vettas, N. (2023) *Intergenerational mobility in education in Greece: an exploration into socioeconomic determinants of students’ performance and future career plans before, during and after the crisis*, Hellenic Observatory Discussion papers on Greece and Southeast Europe. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic->

A major barrier to equitable access lies in the reliance on the Panhellenic Examinations. Success in these exams partly depends on a wide range of private preparatory services. Almost all final-year students now receive some form of shadow education¹¹⁸ and exam preparation called *frontistiria*. The middle classes can invest more in private tutoring, and so dominate access to competitive university departments, such as medicine and law, reinforcing existing social inequalities.¹¹⁹

Geographical disparities are also pronounced. Verdis et al.¹²⁰ show that students from remote or insular regions and parts of northern Greece are significantly under-represented in the most competitive and prestigious university departments, especially those based in Athens and Thessaloniki.

Outcomes after graduation further compound inequality.¹²¹ Students from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to pursue postgraduate studies, secure internships, or enter high-status jobs in urban centres. In contrast, working-class students often lack the networks and financial support needed to transition smoothly into the labour market. Even when academic performance is similar, higher education trajectories diverge sharply. Socio-economic background continues to shape choices even after entry into higher education, with working-class students more likely to choose fields offering secure employment and quicker labour market entry, often at the cost of long-term mobility.

[Observatory/Assets/Documents/Publications/GreeSE-Papers/GreeSE-No185.pdf](#); Kitsoleris, G. and Luong, T.A. (2025) Intragenerational occupational mobility: the effect of crisis and overeducation on career mobility in a segmented labour market, *Public Sector Economics*, 49, 1, 89-127. ; Symeonaki, M.A. and Stamatopoulou, G.A. (2014) Exploring the transition to higher education in Greece: Issues of intergenerational educational mobility, *Policy Futures in Education*, 12, 5, 681-694. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2014.12.5.681>

¹¹⁸ Liodakis, G. (2010) cited in Bray, M. (2020) Shadow Education in Europe: Growing Prevalence, Underlying Forces, and Policy Implications, NESET report.

¹¹⁹ Bazoti, P. (2020) Unemployment in Greece: The Case of Young Higher Education Graduates. Working Paper No. 110. Athens, Centre of Planning and Economic Research (KEPE). Available at: https://www.eliampe.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/110_2020_-WORKING-PAPER-_Pery-Bazoti-.pdf; Danchev, S., Gatopoulos, G., Kalavrezou, N. and Vettas, N. (2023) *Intergenerational mobility in education in Greece: an exploration into socioeconomic determinants of students' performance and future career plans before, during and after the crisis*, Hellenic Observatory Discussion papers on Greece and Southeast Europe. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic-Observatory/Assets/Documents/Publications/GreeSE-Papers/GreeSE-No185.pdf>

¹²⁰ Verdis, A., Kalogeropoulos, K. and Chalkias, C. (2019) Regional disparities in access to higher education in Greece, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 14, 2, 318-335. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499919846186>

¹²¹ Sianou-Kyrgiou, E. and Tsiplakides, I. (2010) Similar performance, but different choices: social class and higher education choice in Greece, *Studies in Higher Education*, 36, 1, 89-102. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903469606>.

The role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

Our PIAAC analysis indicates that, in 2015, Greece had a below-average probability of individuals from non-tertiary backgrounds reaching a top-earning job among OECD countries – only 13% did so, compared to 17% at the country-median. The link between parents' and children's educational attainment remains strong, and opportunities to access higher education are highly unequal, even where expansion and reform have taken place. The evidence points to an educational system where privilege is still being transmitted through generations.¹²² Symeonaki and Stamatopoulou¹²³ note that the effect of the mother's education is particularly strong in the younger cohorts, suggesting that maternal cultural capital may play a key role in educational decision-making.

Anastasiadou et al.¹²⁴ found that 65% of students whose fathers or mothers held higher-level professional occupations were enrolled in prestigious departments such as medicine, law, or engineering. By contrast, students whose parents had lower-status occupational profiles, such as manual workers, were overrepresented in lower-prestige departments. Income was also a strong determinant of subject of study: nearly 69% of students from families earning over €1600 monthly were in high-prestige faculties, compared to just 11.5% of those from households earning less than €700.¹²⁵

These patterns suggest that Greece's higher education system remains highly stratified. Even as enrolment expands, both access and institutional outcomes are tightly linked to family background. Recent OECD data confirm that parental education continues to be one of the strongest predictors of children's educational attainment in Greece. Among 25–64-year-olds with at least one parent holding a tertiary degree, 76% had themselves attained tertiary education. In stark contrast, only 22% of

¹²² Symeonaki, M.A. and Stamatopoulou, G.A. (2014) Exploring the transition to higher education in Greece: Issues of intergenerational educational mobility, *Policy Futures in Education*, 12, 5, 681-694. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2014.12.5.681>; Stylianou, T. and Milidis, A. (2024) The socioeconomic determinants of University dropouts: The case of Greece, *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, 8, 6, 3729. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i6.3729>

¹²³ Symeonaki, M.A. and Stamatopoulou, G.A. (2014) Exploring the transition to higher education in Greece: Issues of intergenerational educational mobility, *Policy Futures in Education*, 12, 5, 681-694. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2014.12.5.681>

¹²⁴ Anastasiadou, F., Kyridis, A., Tourtouras, C.D., Zagkos, C. and Pehlivanos, E. (2021) Socioeconomic profile and study choice. The case of university students in Greece, *Academia*, 23-24, 3-23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26220/aca.3595>

¹²⁵ Anastasiadou, F., Kyridis, A., Tourtouras, C.D., Zagkos, C. and Pehlivanos, E. (2021) Socioeconomic profile and study choice. The case of university students in Greece, *Academia*, 23-24, 3-23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26220/aca.3595>

individuals whose parents had not completed upper secondary education attained a university degree, closely mirroring the OECD average of 72% and 19%, respectively.¹²⁶

The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent decade of austerity measures plunged Greece into unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty. Both expert interviewees believed that this crisis has continued to dominate policy priorities, and that there had been little attention to intergenerational or social mobility. Social origins, including home educational resources and emotional climate, continue to influence student performance and future plans, reinforcing the role of family background in shaping life chances.¹²⁷

Ireland

System overview

Ireland currently has 12 publicly-funded universities (the oldest founded in 1592), two institutes of technology and 11 other higher education institutions that receive public funding.¹²⁸ The age participation rate increased from 11% in 1965 to over 57% in 2002.¹²⁹ Government policies have emphasised the benefits of higher education to both society and the individual. The regulation and governance of the Irish higher education sector is overseen by the Higher Education Authority.

Students from low-income backgrounds are eligible for means-tested grants through the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI). Ireland abolished tuition fees in the mid-1990s. However, students are liable for a €3,000 'student contribution charge'. Students are also expected to cover their own living costs, unless they are eligible for SUSI grants. Expenditure per student in tertiary education (when excluding research and development) is lower than the OECD average, at \$12,361, compared to

¹²⁶ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹²⁷ Danchev, S., Gatopoulos, G., Kalavrezou, N. and Vettas, N. (2023) *Intergenerational mobility in education in Greece: an exploration into socioeconomic determinants of students' performance and future career plans before, during and after the crisis*, Hellenic Observatory Discussion papers on Greece and Southeast Europe. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic-Observatory/Assets/Documents/Publications/GreeSE-Papers/GreeSE-No185.pdf>

¹²⁸ Government of Ireland. (2022) *List of publicly-funded higher education institutions (universities and colleges)*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/publications/list-of-publicly-funded-higher-education-institutions-universities-and-colleges/#publicly-funded-universities>

¹²⁹ OECD. (2006) *Reviews of national policies for education: higher education in Ireland*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2006/11/reviews-of-national-policies-for-education-higher-education-in-ireland-2006_g1gh6a95/9789264014329-en.pdf

the OECD average of \$14,077. Ireland spends 0.7% of GDP on tertiary education which is again lower than the 1.5% OECD average.¹³⁰

Widening participation: access and outcomes

The Irish government places a strong focus on widening participation to higher education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is manifested within a series of National Access Plans. Funds for widening participation are split between different strands of activity, including financial support for the most disadvantaged groups, providing study bursaries, as well as funds for providers to recruit underrepresented students and design inclusive curricula, and support for students with intellectual disabilities.

Role of higher education in intergenerational mobility

The Irish higher education system has expanded over recent years. This has the potential to address existing inequalities through the provision of greater opportunities for those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. Our PIAAC analysis suggests an increase in the proportion of those from underrepresented backgrounds (measured by parental education level) completing universities over the past decade, from 17% to 37%, while the economic returns to higher education held mostly steady. The combination of a sharp increase in degree attainment and stable returns helped to raise relative social mobility by about 20 percentage points (43% -> 63%). Moreover, our analysis indicates that higher education has become more important for those from underrepresented backgrounds in relation to social mobility.

The Irish Government has taken a whole-of-government, whole-of-education approach to social inequalities. This appears to recognise the structurally-embedded nature of educational inequalities and aims to create a coordinated agenda to address interlinked societal inequalities including housing, health, employment, education, and welfare. This acknowledgement of the need for coordination across often traditionally siloed areas is important and signals that the government has both an understanding and a will to improve social issues more broadly.

The policies that contributed to this increase in the number of underrepresented groups attending higher education - and their subsequent beneficial social mobility outcomes - include National Access

¹³⁰ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

Plans, the Programme for Access to Higher Education, free upper secondary education, the expansion of technological universities, and the free fees initiative. Together, they reflect a sustained effort to increase the participation of underrepresented groups in higher education over multiple decades. Ireland offers an example of how higher education can be expanded in a sustainable way by providing opportunities for participation to those who previously did not have them. Nevertheless, structural inequalities persist and students with parents who have some level of tertiary education are more likely to have better education and job market outcomes.

Japan

System overview

After the Second World War, Japanese higher education began its mass expansion.¹³¹ The biggest increase in participation occurred in the 1990s with the proportion of the relevant age cohort enrolling increasing from 25% to 40%.¹³² By the early 2000s, 77% of relevant age cohorts were attending some form of tertiary education. With respect to attainment, in 2023, 56% of 25-64 year-olds had some form of tertiary education, well above the OECD average of 41%.¹³³

Higher education in Japan is split between multiple institution types: universities; junior colleges; colleges of technology; and professional training colleges, which all serve different purposes. The post-war demand for development in science and technology was met by private institutions, and their dominance in the Japanese higher education landscape has remained to this day. By 2008, 90% of tertiary institutions were private and, in 2022, Japan had 3,449 private, 145 national, and 297 local public universities, junior colleges, colleges of technology, and professional training colleges.¹³⁴ Japan relies on private universities for maintaining its high enrolment rate.

¹³¹ Newby, H., Weko, T., Breneman, D., Johanneson, T., and Maasen, P. (2009) *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education*, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2009/03/oecd-reviews-of-tertiary-education-japan-2009_g1ghaa65/9789264039322-en.pdf p.12

¹³² Kariya, T. (2011) Credential inflation and employment in 'universal' higher education: enrolment, expansion and (in)equity via privatisation in Japan, *Journal of Education and Work*, 24, 1-2, 69-94. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2010.534444>

¹³³ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹³⁴ Yonezawa, A. (2023) Japan's Higher Education Policies under Global Challenges, *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 18, 220-237. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12421>

The promotion of higher education reforms through market competition is reflected in the public financing of private institutions.¹³⁵ Government policies in the late 1980s promoted privatisation and the transformation of university education to a market model. Households, rather than government, became the largest contributor to higher education expenditure. Japan currently spends around 1.4% of its GDP on tertiary education (including research and development), compared to an OECD average of 1.5%. This represents 1.6% of all government expenditure (the OECD average is 2.7%).¹³⁶

Japan's significantly ageing population presents a challenge to the higher education sector. Private higher education faces oversupply, where many institutions are no longer meeting their government-allocated quotas, thus decreasing their income from tuition fees and subsidies.¹³⁷ This phenomenon has disproportionately affected small-sized private universities in rural areas.¹³⁸

Japan provides government subsidies to institutions and to individuals in the form of student loans. Over a third of university students receive such loans.¹³⁹ The loans became income-contingent in 2017, whereby graduates repay their student loan debt based on their annual taxable income.¹⁴⁰ Over half of total higher education costs are borne by individual households.¹⁴¹ Studies indicate that this financial burden on households is one of the reasons for Japan's declining birth rate.

¹³⁵ Yonezawa, A. (2023) Japan's Higher Education Policies under Global Challenges, *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 18, 220-237. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12421>

¹³⁶ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹³⁷ Inaba, Y. (2020) Higher education in a depopulating society: Survival strategies of Japanese universities, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15, 2, 136-157. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920910581>.

¹³⁸ Inaba, Y. (2020) Higher education in a depopulating society: Survival strategies of Japanese universities, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15, 2, 136-157. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920910581>.

¹³⁹ Kobayashi, M. (2020) International Comparison of Higher Education Cost Sharing and Japanese Challenges, *Japan Labour Issues* 4, 20. Available at: <https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2020/020-00.pdf#page=31>

¹⁴⁰ Fumitake, F. (2021) The Financing of Higher Education in Japan. In P. Snowden (Ed.), *Handbook of Higher Education in Japan* (pp. 109-121). Chapter, Amsterdam University Press.

¹⁴¹ Kobayashi, M. (2020) International Comparison of Higher Education Cost Sharing and Japanese Challenges, *Japan Labour Issues* 4, 20. Available at: <https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2020/020-00.pdf#page=31>

Widening participation: access and outcomes

Japan is considered to have achieved ‘universal access’ to higher education before most other high-income countries.¹⁴² Nevertheless, despite Japan’s high enrolment and participation rates, the stratification and privatisation of education reproduce social inequalities in access, with parental education and income continuing to determine higher education outcomes.

The Japanese higher education system is also highly stratified by prestige. Students are sorted into high-ranking and low-ranking universities based on entrance examination scores which, Kariya argues, are determined by factors such as family income, attendance at private school, and access to resources.¹⁴³ The result is that students from low-income backgrounds often only have access to low-ranking universities which, in turn, do not offer access to high-paying careers. This stratification has been noted in more recent studies too.¹⁴⁴

There are also inequalities by gender in the Japanese higher education system. Although 62% and 69% of men and women, respectively, had attained a tertiary level qualification in 2023,¹⁴⁵ women are much less likely than men to be enrolled on programmes at postgraduate level and in the area of science and technology.¹⁴⁶ There are also gender inequalities by type of institution and across disciplines. Studying abroad has increasingly become another pathway for students from the most privileged backgrounds.

¹⁴² Kariya, T. (2011) Credential inflation and employment in ‘universal’ higher education: enrolment, expansion and (in)equity via privatisation in Japan, *Journal of Education and Work*, 24, 1-2, 69-94. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2010.534444>

¹⁴³ Kariya, T. (2011) Japanese solutions to the equity and efficiency dilemma? Secondary schools, inequity and the arrival of ‘universal’ higher education, *Oxford Review of Education*, 37, 2, 241-266. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23047903>

¹⁴⁴ Araki, S. (2025) Education and multidimensional inequalities in contemporary Japan and beyond: a call for longitudinal and comparative studies, *Sociology Compass*, 19, 5, e70072. Available at: <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/soc4.70072>

¹⁴⁵ OECD. (2024) *Education at a Glance 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html

¹⁴⁶ Kariya, T. (2011) Credential inflation and employment in ‘universal’ higher education: enrolment, expansion and (in)equity via privatisation in Japan, *Journal of Education and Work*, 24, 1-2, 69-94. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2010.534444>; Uematsu Ervasti, K. and Kawachi, K. (2022) How intercultural experience affects university students’ gender views: potential for transforming higher education in Japan, *Asia Pacific Educational Review* 23, 625–637. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-022-09801-5>

Role of higher education in intergenerational social mobility

The term ‘social mobility’ is not always widely used in Japan, as one of the expert interviewees explained: ‘we use “equality” or “equal opportunity” more often than “social mobility”’. There is ample evidence that family background continues to have a strong influence on outcomes – even for those in possession of a degree.¹⁴⁷ The high levels of intergenerational social mobility from the 1960s to the 1990s were largely a result of changes to the economy, with an increase in professional and/or managerial positions.¹⁴⁸ More recently, social mobility rates have decreased – although not necessarily in a uniform fashion.¹⁴⁹

The ongoing influence of class inequalities reinforces the stratification of the higher education system and, as Japan Expert 1 put it:

“There is a high correlation between the family with high education achievement parents and the economic income, and that is a very big issue we are facing with. We tend to think about it as a system of meritocracy. But if we go to the University of Tokyo, for example, the majority are upper-middle class family students. So that is a very big gap.”

In addition, the hiring practices of large Japanese firms favour graduates from highly prestigious higher education institutions. This is problematic given that admission to such universities depends partially on the ability to pay private universities’ tuition fees, and on the ability to score highly on entrance examinations, which in turn is linked to attendance at private high schools, and family resources and networks. Unlike some of the countries in the research, there is less expectation that higher education will necessarily promote equity. Indeed, as one of our expert interviewees reflected, ‘[In Japan], higher education is never regarded as the equaliser of society’ (Japan Expert 2).

¹⁴⁷ Ishida, H. (2022) Class Structure, Education, and Social Mobility in Post-war Japan. Social Stratification in an Ageing Society with Low Fertility, Economy and Social Inclusion: Creating a Society for All. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-3647-0_2

¹⁴⁸ Ishida, H. (2022) Class Structure, Education, and Social Mobility in Post-war Japan. Social Stratification in an Ageing Society with Low Fertility, Economy and Social Inclusion: Creating a Society for All. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-3647-0_2; Kariya, T. (2012) Education Reform and Social Class in Japan: The emerging incentive divide, London, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203076996>

¹⁴⁹ Ishida, H. (2022) Class Structure, Education, and Social Mobility in Post-war Japan. Social Stratification in an Ageing Society with Low Fertility, Economy and Social Inclusion: Creating a Society for All. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-3647-0_2

Comparing across countries

This section draws together key messages from the various strands of the research reported above and provides context for the report's recommendations.

Declining social mobility across the world

In many places across the world there is evidence that intergenerational social mobility has been flat or even declining. This is notable, too, in the case study countries (in locations as varied as China and Greece) and is discussed explicitly in the country profiles. Moreover, in some of the case study countries, evidence about declining social mobility has promoted national debate about how such trends can be reversed. This is particularly marked in the sources analysed from the US and Canada. For example, as noted in the Canada profile, downward social mobility is framed in several key national documents (such as those produced by the Government of Canada's 'Centre of Excellence in Foresight') as a central, and potentially serious, future social problem. Indeed, a whole report is devoted to this topic (*Future Lives: Social Mobility in Question*)¹⁵⁰.

With respect to higher education, in particular, many of those interviewed for this research explained that there had been a common assumption, in their nation, that increasing participation in higher education through processes of massification, would automatically increase social mobility (see, for example, the profiles for Canada and China), a point echoed in some of the analysed documents. In practice, however, inequalities have endured – even in massified higher education systems.

“In many places across the world there is evidence that intergenerational social mobility has been flat or even declining.”

These sustained inequalities have played out in a variety of ways.

- In some nations, inequalities in access to higher education in general have remained, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds still under-represented (discussed in the profiles for Canada, China, Denmark, England, Greece, Japan and the US). While some of this can be explained by differing levels of academic attainment (see section below about the impact of inequalities at lower levels of education), not all of it can. There is evidence that the actions of both parents (e.g. moving to catchment areas of high-performing schools, paying for private tuition to aid university

¹⁵⁰ Policy Horizons Canada. (2025) *Future Lives: Social mobility in question*. Horizons. Available at: <https://horizons.service.canada.ca/en/2025/01/10/future-lives-social-mobility/index.shtml>

entry) and higher education institutions have served to sustain inequalities in access.

- As higher education has massified, so new forms of inequality have become more pronounced. For example, the country profiles have demonstrated how higher education systems in many parts of the world have become increasingly stratified – by institution type (e.g. Australia, Canada, China, England, Japan and the US) and/or subject of study (e.g. Denmark, Greece). Students from more advantaged families have tended to dominate the more prestigious forms of higher education, and thus reinforce their advantage.
- Related to the two points above, inequalities are also evident with respect to the outcomes of higher education. This is played out with respect to both academic outcomes (e.g. inequalities in drop-out rates by social background noted in the Danish profile) and employment. As our PIAAC analysis has shown, across all OECD countries, individuals from advantaged families remain far more likely to become top earners than those from less-advantaged families. Moreover, our analysis indicates that while higher education is strongly associated with improved life chances, it does not eliminate the effects of family background and its payoff is declining for disadvantaged groups.

Data on intergenerational social mobility

A key constraint in being able to assess, with any accuracy, the impact of higher education on intergenerational social mobility is the relative paucity of high-quality, linkable data in this area across the globe. Amongst the case study countries, Denmark is somewhat unique. It (like Sweden, Norway and Finland) has high-quality register data, which enable individuals to be tracked across their life course, and their outcomes related back to their education and family context. Interviewees from other case study countries frequently contrasted the situation in Nordic countries with the more fragmented data infrastructures elsewhere, which makes robust comparative work difficult.

Canada illustrates the problem well. While national platforms such as the Postsecondary Student Information System and the Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform link administrative education data to tax records and provide rich information on graduate outcomes, they contain limited information on students' social backgrounds. At the institutional level, equality, diversity and inclusion data are collected inconsistently, and experts described the overall landscape as piecemeal. Thus, while valuable

longitudinal linkages exist, they are not sufficient for detailed analyses of outcomes by socio-economic origin. China, similarly, lacks publicly accessible administrative microdata on graduate outcomes. Researchers rely instead on large-scale surveys, such as the China Family Panel Studies and the Chinese General Social Survey, which permit analyses by socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and rural/urban hukou status, but do not provide the kind of administrative linkage possible in Nordic settings.

For policymakers, the key challenge is less the tracking of graduate outcomes, which is now undertaken in many countries through surveys and administrative platforms, and more the ability to link these outcomes back to students' socio-economic origins and educational pathways. Only a handful of systems, notably the Nordic registers, provide this kind of life-course linkage. England's Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset represents an important advance, connecting school, college, higher education and early career labour-market records. Yet even LEO relies on limited proxies for family background and remains less comprehensive than the Nordic models. Without such linkages, policymakers can monitor graduate employment but not social mobility, and thus cannot fully assess how education does or does not drive social mobility.

“England’s Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset represents an important advance, connecting school, college, higher education and early career labour-market records.”

Identifying examples of good practice

Our PIAAC analysis indicates that higher education is an important driver of upward mobility (although it does not fully close socio-economic gaps, and it appears that its payoff is declining for disadvantaged groups). Nevertheless, as the country profiles have demonstrated, and the section above has explained, there is relatively little robust evidence about specific initiatives that have been introduced which have had this effect. As such, the examples of ‘good practice’ identified below are based largely on the views of those who were interviewed or who participated in one of the expert workshops. Moreover, they were typically discussed with respect to making higher education itself more equitable, rather than in relation to automatically enhancing social mobility. (As explained in a subsequent section, concerns were raised whether even a more equitable higher education sector can compensate for inequalities in the labour market, for example.)

First, initiatives that take a multi-pronged approach were thought to be likely to have more success in addressing inequalities. For example, ‘whole-of-education’ approaches have been pursued in Ireland in the recent past, where emphasis has been placed as much on primary, and even pre-primary, education as on what happens in universities. While England has not labelled its policies in the same way, it has nevertheless adopted a

wide range of initiatives to improve access to and equity within higher education (documented in the country profile). It is also an approach that resonates with a key message from the expert workshop that focussed on student funding: that while policies addressing student funding are important, they are not, on their own, sufficient. It is notable that the Universities Accord, recently adopted by Australia, takes a similar approach, emphasising the ways in which higher education is inextricably related to other parts of the education system. Moreover, having a policy actor that co-ordinates such a multi-pronged approach, such as government or, as in the case of England, a regulator, has been argued to be important.¹⁵¹

Second, in the US, the outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend elite universities have been shown to be particularly good.¹⁵² This is one of the few areas in which there is robust longitudinal evidence to demonstrate the impact of attending higher education – albeit a particular type. As explained in the US country profile, Chetty et al.'s research¹⁵³ has shown how attending an 'Ivy League' institution, instead of a public flagship university, tripled students' chances of obtaining jobs at prestigious firms and substantially increased their likelihood of being in the top 1% of earners. Nevertheless, such studies may say more about the signalling effects of an elite education in the US labour market than the contribution of higher education institutions per se. Moreover, it is notable that elite institutions do not necessarily have the same 'propulsive effect' in other countries.¹⁵⁴ Even in the US, however, these benefits are experienced by only a relatively small proportion of disadvantaged students. Thus, an ongoing challenge is to secure such students' equitable access to elite universities, as well as ensure that such effects are experienced by those attending a broader range of institutional types.

Third, there is some evidence to suggest that specific initiatives have had a positive impact on access to and success within higher education, even if

¹⁵¹ Harden-Wolfson, E. (2024) *Reaching for the right to higher education: evidence from 15 countries*, UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392154>

¹⁵² Chetty, R., Friedman, J., Saez, E., Turner, N. and Yagan, D. (2020) Income segregation and intergenerational mobility across colleges in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, 3, 1567-1633. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa005>

¹⁵³ Chetty, R., Deming, D. and Friedman, J. (2023) *Diversifying Society's Leaders? The determinants and causal effects of admission to highly selective private colleges* (NBER Working Paper no. 31492), Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31492>

¹⁵⁴ Reay, D. (2021) The working classes and higher education: Meritocratic fallacies of upward mobility in the United Kingdom, *European Journal of Education*, 56, 1, 53-64. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12438>

there are no data about their impact on social mobility more generally. These include contextualised admissions, in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds are offered marginally lower entry conditions. This has been used in England, with indications that this has had a positive impact on access and outcomes.¹⁵⁵ Within the US context, one of the expert interviewees described the work conducted by individual institutions that had had a beneficial effect on widening access. This included Princeton, which had changed its selection procedures to give less emphasis to non-academic criteria and, as a result, roughly doubled its number of students eligible for Pell Grants (a marker of disadvantage) (see US country profile).

Understandings of social mobility

While not particularly evident from the documentary sources analysed (because they were identified by virtue of their explicit focus on social mobility), a considerable number of the expert interviewees raised questions about the usefulness of the term ‘social mobility’ and how well it transferred across nations.

The expert interviewees from China and Japan described how, in their countries, the term ‘social mobility’ was rarely used, and was often seen in East Asian countries more generally as a Western term with limited resonance. Instead, emphasis tended to be placed on concepts such as equality and fairness, which were felt to better fit their particular social and political contexts. This point is developed further in relation to processes of ‘policy transfer’ below.

Other expert interviewees explained that, in their national context, there was more, or at least equal, concern about inequalities linked to social characteristics other than socio-economic status. For example, experts from both the US and Canada believed that there was more attention, at the level of policymaking and university leadership, to inequalities by race and, in Canada, by indigenous status. One of the Canadian experts also observed that commonly-held assumptions that Canada is a ‘post-class society’ militated against serious discussions about socio-economic inequalities and social mobility. This may be one reason for the publication of the report about the decline in intergenerational social mobility nationally, mentioned above – to challenge such assumptions.

“The expert interviewees from China and Japan described how, in their countries, the term ‘social mobility’ was rarely used, and was often seen in East Asian countries more generally as a Western term with limited resonance.”

¹⁵⁵ Boliver, V. and Jones, K. (2025) Evaluating contextual offer making at Durham University, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 79, 2. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70025>

While such critiques were not brought up by those from the other case study countries, further concerns were raised about how social mobility was conceptualised and measured. Participants in two of the four expert workshops suggested that, given the increasing policy emphasis on lifelong learning and *tertiary*, rather than higher, education, it is increasingly important to have a more expansive perspective – focussing not just on whether a young person progresses to higher education at the age of 18 or 19 but, rather, the education that is pursued across a lifetime. The following questions, raised by one of the expert interviewees, are pertinent:

“To what extent has the ‘traditional’ approach discounted and undermined people who have chosen to pursue technical and vocational education and training, or apprenticeships, or other similar education and training rather than higher education? To what extent has this effectively marginalised particular communities of people/learners and accordingly their institutions/colleges? To what extent does that view affect our understanding of social mobility – or is it only those who use further education as a stepping stone to higher education, another problematic assumption. If we adopt the increasingly more useful and policy-appropriate framing of tertiary – how does/might this help us rethink the issues?” (Ireland Expert 2)

These are discussed further in the section on alternative pathways, below.

Recognising other drivers of social mobility

As noted above, our PIAAC analysis indicates that higher education plays a role in facilitating access to well-paid, professional jobs and upward movement between social classes. Nevertheless, the wider body of evidence raises important questions about the extent to which we should consider higher education as the main driver of intergenerational social mobility. The PIAAC analysis also indicates that individuals from advantaged families remain far more likely to become top earners than those from less-educated families. This was a point underlined by many of the expert interviewees, from various different countries, and reflected in the analysed literature.

A common theme was the key role played by earlier stages of education, which often determine who is eligible to enter higher education in the first place. Several interviewees argued that stratification in the schooling

system had an adverse impact on equitable access to higher education. This was noted with respect to the early streaming of students in schools, alongside early formal testing, in Australia, which had the effect, it was argued, of pushing children from less privileged backgrounds towards vocational education and training rather than more academic forms. Similarly, in China, inequalities between schools – particularly between those in urban and rural areas – have had a considerable impact on a student's ability to enter higher education, with teaching tending to be of lower quality in rural areas.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, as noted in the country profile, many policies in China aimed at improving higher education completion rates amongst disadvantaged students have focussed on the schools sector. Furthermore, one of the Japanese expert interviewees also explained how the more general hierarchical positioning of secondary schools (not relating only to their urban or rural location) shaped inequalities within higher education.

In Greece, the impact of pre-university experiences has played out in a rather different, but no less influential, manner. As explained in the country profile, national examinations exert considerable influence in determining who gains access to higher education. In preparing for these examinations, a large proportion of families make use of various forms of 'shadow education' – i.e. private, informal tutoring, often undertaken outside of school hours. Middle class families typically spend significantly more on this additional form of education than their less advantaged counterparts, which results in substantial inequalities in access to higher education – particularly in competitive subjects such as medicine and law.¹⁵⁷

In Denmark, it appears that *school* reforms, rather than reforms wrought in the higher education sector, have had most impact on social mobility. Academic studies (discussed in the country profile) have indicated that social mobility, across Danish society as a whole, increased significantly for those born between the 1940s and the 1980s. This is linked by researchers to the school reforms introduced in the late 1950s and early 1970s, which

¹⁵⁶ Wang, X., Liu, C., Zhang, L., Luo, R., Glauben, T., Shi, Y. et al. (2011) What is keeping the poor out of college? Enrollment rates, educational barriers and college matriculation in China, *China Agricultural Economic Review*, 3, 2, 131-149. Available at:

https://sccei.fsi.stanford.edu/publications/what_is_keeping_the_poor_out_of_college_enrollment_rates_educational_barriers_and_college_matriculation_in_china

¹⁵⁷ Bray, M. (2020) *Shadow Education in Europe: Growing Prevalence, Underlying Forces, and Policy Implications*, NESET report; Danchev, S., Gatopoulos, G., Kalavrezou, N. and Vettas, N.

(2023) *Intergenerational mobility in education in Greece: an exploration into socioeconomic determinants of students' performance and future career plans before, during and after the crisis*, Hellenic Observatory Discussion papers on Greece and Southeast Europe. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic-Observatory/Assets/Documents/Publications/GreeSE-Papers/GreeSE-No185.pdf>

restructured the system and increased both the minimum number of years of compulsory schooling and the financial resources allocated to the sector.¹⁵⁸ Reflecting on the more recent past in Denmark, evidence (from both the desk research and the expert interviews) suggests that the schooling system has also been influential, but in less positive ways: the residential ‘clustering’ by the middle classes around ‘high performing’ schools has exacerbated educational inequalities which have then shaped admissions to higher education.¹⁵⁹

Recognising these interdependencies between different parts of the education system, some nations are increasingly taking a ‘whole-of-education’ approach to policy, as a means of, amongst other objectives, increasing equalities in higher education, and thus social mobility. This perspective underpins the ‘Universities Accord’ recently implemented in Australia and the approach taken in Ireland where, as cited in the country profile, ‘accessibility becomes the responsibility of everyone across the education system, from pre-primary and post-primary school level to further and higher education’.¹⁶⁰ It was also an approach advocated by one of the expert interviewees from Ireland:

“Also worthy of consideration is the extent to which an all-of-education approach would facilitate a deeper understanding not just of educational trajectories but key crunch points, such as pre-school, but also (as in the UK and other places) the socio-economic stratification of people in secondary education in particular. How would this help us understand and rethink intergenerational mobility – and more importantly, where we put our money.” (Ireland Expert 2)

It is not only other stages of education that can affect higher education inequalities. Indeed, when focussing on the outcomes of a university education, and the extent to which they may be patterned by socio-economic status, the health of the labour market and the practices of employers both exert considerable influence. As discussed in two of the four expert workshops, the reduction in the number of available graduate jobs (for example, because of AI replacing some entry-level positions) has

¹⁵⁸ Karlson, K. and Landersø, R. (2025) The making and unmaking of opportunity: educational mobility in 20th century Denmark, *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 127, 1, 178-212. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjoe.12567>

¹⁵⁹ Heckman, J. and Landersø, R. (2021) *Lessons from Denmark about Inequality and Social Mobility* (NBER Working Paper 28543), Cambridge, MA, NBER. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28543>

¹⁶⁰ Higher Education Authority. (2022) *National Access Plan: a strategic action plan for equity of access, participation and success in higher education 2022-2028*, Higher Education Authority. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2024/07/National-Access-Plan-2022-2028-FINAL.pdf> p.21

had an impact on transitions to the labour market. Moreover, there is evidence that some graduate employers favour those who have attended elite universities, irrespective of the specific education and knowledge individuals may have received at such institutions. This was noted particularly by one of the Japanese expert interviewees (see country profile), but was also a theme raised by participants from numerous countries in the expert workshops. Moreover, as our PIAAC analysis has demonstrated, in the UK, widening access to higher education has not translated into stronger mobility, partially due to a declining labour-market payoff to a degree. When social mobility, in general, is considered, a further set of factors come into play. For example, and as discussed in the relevant country profile, in Denmark, intergenerational social mobility is largely held to be a result of redistributive tax policies alongside those that reduce disparities in wages, through effective collective wage bargaining, for example.¹⁶¹

There are differences, by nation, in the extent to which these various factors are recognised within public and policy debate. While in some countries, such as the UK, higher education is often believed to play a key role in promoting social mobility, this is not uniformly the case. Indeed as previously mentioned one of the expert interviewees reflected ‘[In Japan] higher education is never regarded as the equaliser of society’ (Japan Expert 2).

Policy transfer across national borders

This study highlights the challenges of transferring higher education policies across borders. While various policies and practices were identified across the case countries, what works in one context may not be appropriate or effective in another. This is due to significant heterogeneity in both higher education structures and broader social and policy contexts.

Higher education systems differ widely in terms of their traditions, histories, scale, horizontal diversity, vertical stratification, and available resources. For example, although degrees from elite universities were found to have strong signalling effects across most case countries, equitable access to such institutions is especially relevant in systems that

¹⁶¹ Landersø, R. and Heckman, J. (2017) The Scandinavian Fantasy: The Sources of Intergenerational Mobility in Denmark and the US, *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 119, 1, 178-230. DOI: 10.1111/sjoe.12219. Heckman, J. and Landersø, R. (2021) *Lessons from Denmark about Inequality and Social Mobility* (NBER Working Paper 28543), Cambridge, MA, NBER. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28543>

are highly vertically stratified, such as the UK and the US, compared to those with flatter institutional hierarchies.

Cultural traditions, social norms, and economic realities also play critical roles in shaping higher education policy. In Denmark, both legal and social norms recognise individuals as full adult citizens from the age of eighteen. As a result, it would be considered inappropriate for universities to ask about applicants' family background during the admissions process. In China, a deep-rooted societal belief in the meritocracy of national university entrance examinations limits the public acceptability of contextualised admissions. In Japan, an expert interviewee highlighted demographic changes, particularly an ageing population, as influencing higher education participation rates and policy priorities. In Greece, declining economic conditions, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis, have led to a growing misalignment between higher education provision and labour market demand.¹⁶²

Our study also found that the concept of social mobility is understood and applied differently across countries. As explained in the earlier section, the term is not commonly used in higher education policy discourses in Japan and China, where alternative terms such as educational equity are more prevalent. In other countries, even when social mobility is used, it can refer to different policy targets: ranging from access to higher education, to experiences within higher education, to graduate employment and longer-term life outcomes. This lack of universally defined terminology reflects the diversity of national contexts, but also creates challenges in evaluating and transferring effective policies.

The definitions and policy foci around *disadvantaged* and *underrepresented* also differ across countries. While socio-economic background remains a common reference point, other intersectional dimensions vary. For instance, in Canada and Australia, equity policies often address the specific needs of indigenous students. In Denmark, students with disabilities are eligible for extended financial support, including grants for an additional 12 months. In China, targeted policy and funding support is provided to students from rural areas and ethnic minority backgrounds. Gender-based inequalities are also nuanced. Although gender parity in access to higher education has been achieved in many countries, female students in countries such as Japan and China

“Although gender parity in access to higher education has been achieved in many countries, female students in countries such as Japan and China continue to face structural disadvantages in their higher education experiences and outcomes.”

¹⁶² Bazoti, P. (2020) Unemployment in Greece: *The Case of Young Higher Education Graduates*. Working Paper No. 110. Athens, Centre of Planning and Economic Research (KEPE). Available at: https://www.eliampe.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/110_2020_-WORKING-PAPER-_Pery-Bazoti-.pdf

continue to face structural disadvantages in their higher education experiences and outcomes.

Across all cases, international education both complements and complicates social mobility issues in domestic higher education systems. For instance, in 'student sending countries' like China and Japan, studying abroad has become an increasingly important alternative or additional pathway to upward social mobility, particularly when access to elite domestic institutions is limited or highly competitive. In contrast, 'student receiving countries' such as the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia host large numbers of international students, who constitute a significant portion of the respective higher education sectors and contribute substantially to national and institutional economies. In these settings, tensions can arise between domestic equity goals and considerations regarding international student recruitment.

Finally, most of the countries included in the research are members of the OECD, thus sharing certain structural, economic and policy similarities. Nonetheless, our findings highlight that policy transfer remains far from straightforward. To develop a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of how higher education engages with social mobility, future research could incorporate a broader range of countries and systems, particularly those outside the OECD.

Role of student funding in promoting student mobility

In general, attention to student funding is seen as an important but not, on its own, sufficient condition for promoting social mobility. Student funding is clearly a very broad area covering the level of any tuition fees that are charged and the amount of financial support that is offered to students through grants and/or loans. Alongside the cost of tuition and living, there are other 'hidden' costs that are less well covered, or not covered at all, by funding policies. One example, from Greece, is the cost of pre-university tuition that is taken up by many families (see section above) but which, unsurprisingly, is not covered by any government funding. This, the evidence suggests, has exacerbated social inequalities in access to higher education in Greece, despite the fact that no tuition fees are payable.

The detailed country profiles, provided in the appendix, document the specific funding arrangements for the case study countries, which are often quite complex. They indicate that, in many parts of the world, politicians and policymakers have believed that there is a strong link between how higher education is funded and patterns of intergenerational social mobility. Japan, for example, is one of several countries that has

given a lot of policy attention to student funding, with the intention of addressing inequalities by social background. However, the available evidence demonstrates how this relationship is frequently complicated. Canada provides an interesting natural experiment. As Usher and Balfour have shown,¹⁶³ although the various Canadian provinces and territories have implemented different student funding policies (with, for example, significant variation in the level of tuition fee charged), this has not led to a marked difference in participation by province, with patterns relatively similar.

The academic literature reviewed and the expert interviews conducted emphasised the limitations of some of the policies that have been common in the case study countries. In both Canada and Denmark, the universalist approach to financial assistance has been critiqued. In the former, Lang has argued that funding is as much regressive as progressive (socio-economically), as half of the available assistance has not been means-tested – and is available to all students irrespective of family background¹⁶⁴. Similarly in Denmark, where a commitment to universalism underpins the higher education system, all students are entitled to a non-repayable grant to cover their living costs and none are required to pay tuition fees. While there is a high degree of public support for this funding arrangement, it is considered socially regressive because the middle classes benefit disproportionately (see country profile). Moreover, questions have been raised about whether such generous funding arrangements have positively impacted intergenerational social mobility. One of the expert interviewees, for example, pointed to how the significant increase in the amount of the student grant (by 50%) in 1988 had little impact on such mobility.

In Japan, despite the policy attention given to student funding noted above, the efficacy of this has been challenged not least by the expert interviewees. For example, student financial support and tuition fee exemptions have been applied unevenly across the country, with wealthier universities (typically located in big cities) able to offer more support to their students than other institutions, which – because of the stratified university system discussed previously – exacerbate social inequalities. Similar patterns are played out in China, with students attending higher status universities, most of which are public institutions with relatively low tuition fees, tending to face lower financial burdens and receive higher

¹⁶³ Usher, A. and Balfour, J. (2024) *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada, 2024*, Toronto, Higher Education Strategy Associates. Available at: [2025-04-04_SPEC-2024_v6_Publications-1.pdf](#)

¹⁶⁴ Lang, D. (2022) Financing higher education in Canada: a study in fiscal federalism, *Higher Education*, 84, 177-194. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00761-0>

levels of financial support. As students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to gain access to such institutions (see above and country profile), they are correspondingly less likely to benefit from the higher levels of support.

Relevance of alternative pathways

As highlighted above, several participants across different contexts argued that debates about social mobility have too often been framed narrowly around higher education, with success equated to progression into and through university. Such definitions were viewed by many of the experts who took part in our interviews and workshops as contributing to the marginalisation of those pursuing vocational or technical routes and the assumption that such educational and training pathways are inherently linked with ‘downward mobility’. As indicated in our PIAAC analysis, the UK and the US rely heavily on higher education as a route to mobility, reflecting the weakness of alternative vocational and technical pathways.

Nevertheless, as was particularly emphasised by participants in the workshop on ‘alternative pathways’ to higher education, vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeships, technical qualifications, and lifelong learning can also be viewed as vital in shaping equitable opportunities. Participants argued that such education and training pathways can provide essential opportunities for skill formation and so contribute to career progression, facilitating social mobility rooted in enhanced labour market outcomes. Moreover, heavy reliance on higher education for achieving social mobility risks leaving disadvantaged groups with too few options.

Participants in this workshop particularly pointed to key education and training systems, where holistic, joined up post-16 education and training policy approaches have been taken to create an integrated tertiary system that combines both higher education and VET as complementary pathways. Germany, Denmark, and Singapore were particularly highlighted as examples of more integrated tertiary systems. This is reflected in wider research which suggests that where vocational and technical routes are well embedded in integrated tertiary education systems and connected to labour markets, supported by strong institutions, redistributive policies, and meaningful employer engagement they lead to more equitable approaches to education and training and labour market outcomes.¹⁶⁵ As such, technical and vocational education, when part of an integrated

¹⁶⁵ Robson, J., Xie, X., Neagu, M. and James Relly, S. (2025) *From Competition to Coordination: post-16 education and training in the UK - Industry Case Studies*, London, Nuffield Foundation. Available at: <https://skopec.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/From-Competition-to-Coordination-Final.pdf>

tertiary education system, can be viewed as a genuine engine of social mobility. Where VET and technical education are marginalised or stigmatised, there is a risk that inequalities are reinforced by channelling disadvantaged students into less valued routes with limited labour market returns.

Participants in the workshop on alternative pathways therefore argued for a need to broaden the policy conversation on both social mobility and educational and training pathways. Rather than treating higher education as the single or core driver of social mobility, several participants argued – in line with the points made above – that governments and broader organisations working on equity and social mobility need to embrace more expansive notions of tertiary education, including lifelong learning. As argued in wider research on the development of tertiary education systems, and referenced by participants, holistic, joined up policy approaches to post-secondary education and training are more likely to emphasise complementarity between different education and training pathways and so provide a more diverse range of opportunities for social mobility.¹⁶⁶ More stratified systems, with higher education seen as the gold standard and the sole opportunity for social mobility, inherently limit opportunities.

“Where VET and technical education are marginalised or stigmatised, there is a risk that inequalities are reinforced by channelling disadvantaged students into less valued routes with limited labour market returns.”

¹⁶⁶ Hazelkorn, E. (2023) *Is it time to rethink our model of post-secondary education? Progressing a tertiary education eco-system*, CGHE Working Paper, Oxford, CGHE. Available at: <https://www.researchcghe.org/events/is-it-time-to-rethink-our-model-of-post-secondary-education-progressing-a-tertiary-education-eco-system/>; Robson, J., Sibieta, L., Khandekar, S., Neagu, M., Robinson, D. and James Relly, S. (2024) *Comparing Policies, Participation and Inequalities across UK post-16 Education and Training*, London, Nuffield Foundation.

Conclusion

Higher education has, in many different national contexts, been understood as a key means of furthering intergenerational social mobility. Indeed, it was assumed by many policymakers that increasing significantly the number of people participating in higher education would automatically improve equity of access and thus, ultimately, social mobility. As our PIAAC analysis has shown, there is certainly evidence that, across OECD countries, higher education is a driver of upward social mobility. Moreover, there is robust evidence from the US that when disadvantaged groups access elite higher education institutions, they tend to secure excellent long-term employment outcomes. Nevertheless, the optimistic assumptions that massification of higher education would drive significantly more social mobility have not been realised. Our PIAAC analysis, for example, has shown that higher education does not fully close socio-economic gaps and that its payoff appears to be declining, including for disadvantaged groups. Across all OECD countries, individuals from advantaged families remain far more likely to become top earners than those from less advantaged families. Furthermore, inequalities in access also remain – particularly in relation to more prestigious institutions. Indeed, greater stratification between universities has often been a consequence of massification.

While higher education clearly plays a significant role in furthering intergenerational social mobility, it is important not to overlook other drivers. These include other parts of the education system as well as the health of the labour market, the practices of employers, and various other aspects of social policy such as taxation regimes. These can exert considerable influence on who is able to access higher education and/or the rewards they reap subsequently.

Given the recently-announced government emphasis on ‘higher-level learning’ in England – encompassing apprenticeships and technical education, as well as learning that is more academic in focus – it is useful to take a broader perspective on social mobility, and not assume that success equates only to progression into and through university. More investment in non-higher education pathways is warranted, particularly in the UK and US, which, as our PIAAC analysis has shown, rely heavily on higher education as the route to mobility, reflecting the weakness of alternative and vocational pathways in both countries.

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mobility, which is often weaker and less consistent than may be expected given the emphasis placed on education as a route to opportunity. In particular, across the world, there is a paucity of data that enable individuals to be tracked across their life course, and their outcomes related back to their family background and the education they have received. Without such linkages, it is hard for policymakers and others to assess fully the extent to which higher education drives social mobility. There are also relatively few studies that have examined the long-term impact of specific interventions designed to increase equity in higher education. Both would be worthy of investment in the future. In addition, given the increasing policy emphasis, in the UK at least, on broader forms of 'higher-level learning' – not just higher education – data are needed on the impact of other forms of tertiary education, as well as higher education pursued later in the life course. All of these will help generate a fuller understanding of the role education can play in furthering social mobility.

By drawing on evidence from across the world and, particularly, the nine case study countries, this report has been able to highlight various concerns that are common to many policymakers working in quite different national contexts. It has also identified some challenges associated with this kind of comparative approach. First, 'social mobility' is not a term that is always widely employed. In China and Japan, for example, other concepts, such as equality and fairness, are more commonly used, and carry rather different meanings. Moreover, even when the term 'social mobility' is employed, it can be understood in different ways. For meaningful policy dialogue, clarity about terminology is essential.

Second, there is also diversity with respect to the groups of students countries have targeted as part of equity initiatives. While socio-economic background is a common focus, some countries have put more emphasis, instead, on indigenous students, those from underrepresented ethnic groups, and/or those living in rural areas. This can present a challenge but perhaps also new opportunities for cross-national comparisons and policy learning.

Third, the heterogeneity with respect to both higher education structures and social and cultural norms, highlighted in the report, means that policy transfer across different national contexts is not necessarily straightforward. For example, because young people are typically treated as full, independent citizens in Denmark, it would, one of our experts indicated, be considered inappropriate to ask them about their family background during a higher education admissions process.

Finally, it is important to note that this report has focused heavily on countries within the OECD. Future research could usefully include a broader range of countries to develop a more rounded understanding of the relationships between higher education and social mobility.

Appendix 1: Further information about PIAAC analysis and replication notes

Data

OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), Cycles 1 (2011–12) and 2 (2022–23).

Sample

Adults aged 35–44, to capture established career outcomes.

Definitions

- Top earners: top 20% of national gross monthly earnings.
- Background: parental education (at least one parent tertiary-educated = advantaged).
- Graduate: ISCED level 6 or above.

Approach

- Estimated probabilities of reaching top earnings by background and graduate status.
- Decomposed mobility chances into higher-education vs alternative routes using an accounting identity:
$$P(\text{top earner} \mid \text{disadvantaged background}) = P(\text{HE}) \times P(\text{top earner} \mid \text{HE}) + P(\text{non-HE}) \times P(\text{top earner} \mid \text{non-HE})$$
- PIAAC's Balanced Repeated Replication (BRR) weights used for accuracy.
- Pooled regressions controlled for sex, migration background, and country effects.

Note

All figures are survey-weighted estimates; small differences should be interpreted cautiously.



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