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**To cite this article:** Rachel Brooks, Benjamin Hart, Golo Henseke, David Mills, James Robson & Xin Xu (10 May 2026): Facilitating intergenerational social mobility through higher education: three challenges for policymakers, Policy Reviews in Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/23322969.2026.2669090](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2026.2669090)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2026.2669090>



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Published online: 10 May 2026.



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## Facilitating intergenerational social mobility through higher education: three challenges for policymakers

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### ABSTRACT

Social mobility remains a key concern for policymakers in many countries across the world. Despite widespread initiatives to improve the life chances of disadvantaged groups, rates of intergenerational mobility have, over recent decades, either slowed or been resistant to change. As higher education has often been positioned as an effective driver of improving mobility, this article draws on an internationally-focused study to assess what we can learn about the relationship between this sector of education and intergenerational social mobility. On the basis of interviews and focus groups with experts, plus analysis of nine case study countries, it outlines three key challenges for policymakers seeking to draw on international evidence to improve practice in their own nation-state. These relate to the importance of thinking critically about processes of policy transfer; the quality of data available; and understandings of higher education as a driver of social mobility.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 January 2026  
Accepted 27 April 2026

### KEYWORDS

Social mobility; higher education; policy transfer; data

## Introduction

In many countries of the world, there is considerable concern about levels of social mobility. In Canada, for example, the government has highlighted downward social mobility as a key, and potentially serious, future social problem (Policy Horizons Canada 2024). In England, a 'Social Mobility Commission' was established in 2010 (originally called the Child Poverty Commission), with a remit, underpinned by law, to both monitor progress in improving social mobility across the UK and promote social mobility in England specifically (Social Mobility Commission 2025). As part of such national debates, higher education is often positioned as an important lever for increasing social mobility, and considerable effort has been made in many nations to widen access to university for traditionally under-represented groups. Massification of higher education, for example, has often been justified on the basis that it would help to equalise life chances by giving many more young people the opportunity to gain a degree. Nevertheless, there is now strong

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evidence that massification, per se, has not led to more equitable outcomes: social divisions remain in both access to higher education (and particularly to more elite forms) and outcomes of higher education (e.g. Cantwell, Marginson, and Smolentseva 2018; Mountford-Zimdars, Gaulter, and Harrison 2024).

Given the nationally-focused nature of many policy debates about the relationship between higher education and social mobility, we were interested in exploring what can be learned from the international evidence, and in assessing the extent to which messages from specific nation-states can be transferred across national borders. While there are still significant differences between national higher education systems (Atherton, Lewis, and Bolton 2024; Brooks et al. 2022), there are also important commonalities that suggest that the experiences of one nation-state may be valuable to another. Indeed, in the face of globalising pressures and the emergence of a global 'market' for higher education (e.g. Robertson and Keeling 2008), in some respects, higher education systems are becoming increasingly similar – with emphasis placed on increasing vertical stratification, for example (e.g. Wang, Chung, and Xu 2014). In this article, we draw on three sources of international evidence: interviews with experts (on higher education and social mobility) from nine case study countries; analysis of academic evidence and policy documents relating to the nine countries; and focus groups with a wider set of international experts. On the basis of this evidence, we outline three key challenges for policymakers keen to engage with the international evidence in this area to improve practice in their own nation. These relate to processes of policy transfer; the quality of data available; and understandings of higher education as a driver of social mobility.

The article proceeds as follows: after describing our research methods, we then discuss each of the three challenges in turn. These are first contextualised by drawing on some of the wider academic literature before we discuss our own data and the key messages emanating from them.

## Methods

This article draws on research that was commissioned by the Sutton Trust (a UK social mobility charity), and funded by the Carnegie Foundation as well as the Sutton Trust, to explore what is known, internationally, about the relationship between higher education and intergenerational social mobility, and what the US and the UK could learn, in this area, from other nations. We were particularly interested in examining the role, if any, played by specific policy initiatives (relating to widening access and improving outcomes for traditionally under-represented groups) and higher education funding and student finance, as well as the relationship between higher education and technical education routes. Although the wider research project involved a quantitative aspect (see Brooks et al. 2025a for full details), in this article we draw only on the qualitative aspects. We focus on nine case study countries. These were selected using the Social Mobility Index produced by the World Economic Forum in 2020 (World Economic Forum 2020). Alongside the UK and US (representing the two countries that funded the project), we chose five countries with higher rates of social mobility than the UK (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland and Japan) and two with lower rates (China and Greece).

For each case study country, between February and June 2025, we conducted online, semi-structured interviews with two national experts: these were typically academics

(from the disciplines of education, sociology and economics) who had studied the relationship between higher education and social mobility, but the sample also included a small number of those working in a relevant policy-focussed role. 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; this underpinned the structure of the interview schedule. The national experts (18 in total) were purposively sampled on the basis of the research team's knowledge of the field. The names of those to whom we spoke, and who agreed to be named in publications emanating from the research, are listed in the Acknowledgements section. In the text, however, we refer to them only by country and number (e.g. US Expert 1, Greece Expert 2). Interviews typically lasted about an hour, were digitally recorded, and analysed using both inductive and deductive methods. Alongside the expert interviews, we conducted an analysis of the academic and policy literature pertaining to the relevant education systems (and which also focused on the relationship between higher education and social mobility). The full list of documents we analysed is provided in a separate publication (Brooks et al. 2025b); in this article, we list only those to which we refer directly. Material from both the interviews and literature analysis was combined to write a case study profile for each country (see Brooks et al. 2025a, 2025b). These profiles were then subjected to a comparative analysis to identify key points of similarity and difference.

Findings from these first two parts of the project were subsequently discussed in four expert focus groups, which were conducted in June and July 2025. These were held online and each lasted about an hour. Three of the four groups focused on one of the specific sub-topics of the project – i.e. the contribution to social mobility of access and outcomes initiatives; higher education funding and student finance; and the ways in which higher education interfaces with technical education routes. The fourth group had a more general orientation. Each group was facilitated by one of the authors of this article, and the discussion was structured around some of the key findings from the interviews and literature analysis. Participants were recruited so as to ensure diversity with respect to gender and country expertise, and were drawn largely from the networks of the two research centres involved in the project: the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) and the Centre on Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), both based in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. They covered some of the case study countries, but other nations as well (the Netherlands, Finland, Singapore and South Africa). Overall, 21 individuals contributed to an expert workshop, as well as two colleagues from the research funding organisation. As with the interviews, where these experts agreed to be named in the report, they are listed in the Acknowledgements section and we refer to them by country and number when quoting them directly. Ethical approval was received from the University of Oxford (reference number EDUC\_1167288).

## **Challenge 1: policy transfer across national borders**

### ***Background***

Policy transfer is typically defined as the process through which 'knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements,

institutions and ideas in another political system' (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, 5). Although it can refer to transfers at the level of domestic governance – between sectors of state activity, and between governments over time, for example – and at an inter-institutional level, as ideas move between organisations (Hulme 2006), it is most commonly discussed, certainly within the education literature, with respect to the international or global level. Indeed, there is now a sizable body of research that has explored the process of policy transfer across nation-states.

To some extent, this scholarly interest reflects the growth in practices of policy transfer worldwide, driven by the increasing interdependencies of economies through global economic pressures; the ease of communication across national borders, linked to the development of new digital technologies; and the increasingly powerful role played by international organisations such as the OECD, the International Monetary Fund, UNESCO and the World Bank (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Ozga and Jones 2006). Policy transfer has also been facilitated by the emergence of both 'policy entrepreneurs' – groups and individuals who 'sell' their services (linked to particular policy platforms) in the academic and political marketplace – and common discursive frameworks within which solutions are discussed (Ball 1998). The literature documents some examples of specific policy transfers that have, the authors argue, been broadly successful. One example is the transfer of income-contingent loans, for financing higher education, from Australia to the UK, New Zealand and South Africa (Chapman and Greenaway 2006). In assessing the reasons for the relatively smooth transfer from one context to another, Chapman and Greenaway (2006) identify four factors that they argue were key: consensus among policymakers about the required direction of change; existing taxation systems that could be used to collect efficiently student repayments; similar higher education systems, with most institutions in the public sector; and the presence of an apparently successful model (in Australia) that motivated others.

Nevertheless, more common in the academic literature are examples of attempted policy transfers that have been much less successful. These studies have typically argued that insufficient attention to differences in the local context can significantly impede such transfers (e.g. Lewis and West 2018; Probert 2022). Research has also revealed the relatively common disconnect between politicians' and policymakers' rhetoric, in relation to policy transfer, and their actual intentions. For example, with respect to the take up of European higher education policies, Vukasovic and Huisman (2018) contend that 'in most cases, European initiatives primarily serve as legitimising labels for pre-existing policy preferences, thus leading to convergence of policy rhetoric and ideas, while allowing for significant diversity of policy instruments and outcomes' (p.269). Some scholars suggest that part of the challenge lies with the concepts of policy 'transfer' and 'borrowing' themselves, as these terms risk over-simplifying the complexity, timescale and politicisation of policy change (James and Lodge 2003).

When we turn our attention to policies to promote social mobility through higher education, there is a paucity of evidence about transfers across national contexts to draw upon. Nevertheless, our document analysis, as well as the interviews and focus groups we conducted with international experts, all point to some of the particular challenges in this area. In this section, we discuss some of these challenges with the aim, not of discouraging conversations about sharing effective practice across national borders, but rather of highlighting key issues that should be addressed in any such cross-border policy discussions.

### *Structure of higher education system and the wider context*

As our wider analysis, published elsewhere (Brooks et al. 2025a), has shown, despite the impact of globalisation and the emergence of a global higher education market (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2019), national higher education systems continue to vary quite considerably in terms of their traditions, histories, scale, degree of horizontal diversity and available resources. For example, a key enduring difference is the extent to which national systems are vertically stratified. While some nations have introduced measures to increase such stratification (such as the ‘Excellence Initiative’ in Germany and the ‘Double First Class’ policy programme in China), there are some that remain noticeably ‘flatter’ than others. This diversity in structure has implications for where policy attention is focussed. For example, although degrees from elite universities were found to have strong signalling effects across most of our 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.

There are also interesting differences between countries that relate to their engagement with international student mobility. Indeed, across all nine of our countries, 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 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. Indeed, while English higher education institutions are required by government to take action to ‘widen participation’ among their student body, policies commonly focus exclusively on home students (Tannock 2018). Moreover, unlike their domestic counterparts, data are not collected about the social background of international students (ibid.) (see also Hayes 2019).

As the literature on policy transfer, discussed previously, attests, the broader social context also exerts significant influence. For example, the health of the national labour market can have a direct effect on transitions from higher education to full-time employment and, ultimately, the extent to which intergenerational social mobility is achieved. Thus, in our country sample, in Greece, declining economic conditions, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis, led to a growing misalignment between higher education provision and labour market demand (Bazoti 2020) in ways not necessarily experienced in the other case study contexts.

### *Terminology and its application*

At a fundamental level, to facilitate cross-border policy conversations, policymakers and others need to be sure that they are talking about the same issues, and are able to use language that has meaning and resonance in their own national contexts. With respect to our study, the data revealed that the concept of social mobility is understood and applied differently across countries. Several interviewees and workshop participants

pointed out that this term is not commonly used in higher education policy discourses in Japan and China; 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 a shared understanding or universally defined terminology reflects the diversity of national contexts, but also creates challenges in evaluating and transferring effective policies.

Relatedly, the definitions and policy foci around disadvantaged and underrepresented students also differ across countries. While socio-economic background remains a common reference point (particularly in the UK, where social class has been a frequent focus for policy interventions across the whole of education (Lauder, Brown, and Halsey 2009)), 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 continue to face structural disadvantages in their higher education experiences and outcomes.

Such differences can clearly serve to complicate cross-border discussions if it is assumed that the targets of equity initiatives are all the same. However, they also represent an opportunity for the sharing of effective practice (with respect to particular disadvantaged groups) and of challenging possible nationally-grounded assumptions about who should be targeted in such initiatives. One of our American expert interviewees, for example, explained how he believed that the relative lack of attention given to inequalities by socio-economic status by US universities had fed into the current anti-university sentiment in his country. He commented:

There were always problems with implementation of affirmative action [policies introduced in many universities from the 1960s, with the aim of reducing racial inequalities] because non-white kids were not the only ones who were in positions of disadvantage, even if their disadvantage was to some extent in general greater. And the universities never systematically put in place a system of affirmative action on the basis of social class. And a consequence of this was that it was really quite difficult for the children of white working class families to get into a highly competitive course because they couldn't compete with their children of doctors and lawyers and they didn't have a policy-based advantage. (US Expert 1)

Similarly, an expert interviewee from Canada observed that 'we don't talk about class' because of Canada's self-identity as a post-class society (Canada Expert 1). Thus, while Canada's universities have devoted significant effort to tackling inequalities by race and, more recently, by indigenous status, action with respect to socio-economic status has often been lacking.

### **Cultural norms**

Finally, our research indicates that national cultural norms can also contribute to some of the 'friction' of policy transfer in this area. For example, although there is growing evidence of the effectiveness of 'contextualised admissions' (i.e. where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are offered marginally lower entry conditions) (Boliver and Jones

2025) and other measures that take account of students' background prior to entering higher education (Bastedo 2025), such approaches are not necessarily socially acceptable in all national contexts. 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, one of our interviewees explained, for universities to ask about applicants' family background during the admissions process:

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)

Indeed, the wider literature has drawn a distinction between 'familialised' and 'individualised' youth citizenship (e.g. Chevalier 2018). In the former, it is assumed that parents are responsible for supporting their children while in education, and student support is seen as part of family policy. In contrast, 'individualised' citizenship approaches position young people as social citizens with their own rights, and parents have no legal obligation to support them after compulsory schooling. In countries with individualised citizenship regimes, young people are able to claim their rights directly – not through their families – and student support systems tend to be universal, and based on grants and/or loans that are not dependent on parental income (Chevalier 2016).

Similarly, in China, a deep-rooted societal belief in the meritocracy of national university entrance examinations limits the public acceptability of contextualised admissions. China Expert 2 explained:

Although China's *Gaokao* [the national exam for university entry] has all kinds of problems, it is still a relatively fair selection approach. We can see, for example, why China's independent admissions (*zizhu zhaosheng*) were cancelled. The biggest issue here is that once you stop using exam scores as the sole criterion and start relying on various other selection standards – actually, this is the same in other countries too, like in the United States – you have to do all kinds of activities to make your application look better. But for students from poor families, they just don't have those opportunities. It's the same in China: independent admissions allowed universities to lower the admission score threshold for some students. If the parents are capable, or the family is well-off, they can package the student very well. That's why the system of independent admissions wasn't continued – because there was actually very strong opposition from society about its unfairness. ... So, I would say the *Gaokao* system in China does allow, to some extent, students from families who really have no other resources and have to rely solely on their own academic effort to have a chance.

Jia and Li (2025) argue that one of the reasons the *Gaokao* is so well-supported in Chinese society is because of the relatively weak nature of other social institutions. They contend that 'in China, weak institutions – ones that are easily influenced by connections and corruption – have driven citizens to buy into a single-score system to reliably ensure transparency and objectivity. When other areas of life can be influenced by connections and corruption, transparent and objective scores have become the standard for success' (13).

## Challenge 2: data availability and quality

### Background

The second key challenge for policymakers and researchers interested in the contribution higher education can make to intergenerational social mobility relates to data availability

and quality. This is an issue that is relevant to nearly all of our case study countries, irrespective of the differences discussed above with respect to policy transfer. In many nations, particularly those in the Global North, there is considerable focus on the most effective use of data within the higher education sector. Universities are increasingly understood as 'data-led' institutions, with data believed to have the capacity to increase the efficiency of operations, improve the quality of teaching and learning, and reduce social inequalities (Gulson, Sellar, and Webb 2022; Williamson, Bayne, and Shay 2020). Data infrastructures are clearly not, however, only national. Indeed, Mills (2022) identifies three specific groups of metrics that drive global higher education: statistical indicators (such as those published by the OECD in their annual 'Education at a Glance' publication); global rankings (notable examples are those published by QS and *Times Higher Education*); and citation indexes (including Scopus and the Web of Science). These are all typically structured around forms of knowledge and practices emanating from the Global North yet have influence across the world. Mills (2022) thus contends:

The easy 'globalisability' of education indicators such as citation 'impact' factors and rankings gives them discursive and policy power. The data produced by these infrastructures gets scrutinised and acted on by universities, governments and students. They lead universities to 'see' globalisation as both an organising principle and a competitive marketplace. (475)

Such data frequently reinforce particular power relations, favouring certain agendas over others, imposing hierarchical relations between countries and/or institutions, and conferring status to only a limited number of institutions (Decuyper and Landri 2021; Pusser and Marginson 2013).

Nevertheless, despite these concerns, data also have emancipatory potential. They assist governments (and other social actors) in charting progress towards policy goals over time, and can enable politicians and other policymakers to be held to account for the actions they take. In addition, comparative data can allow national governments to benchmark their own progress towards particular goals, and identify countries from which they can potentially learn. Comparative data can thus help to detect 'best practice' internationally. The importance of data to policy and practice regarding higher education and social mobility has also been noted by policymakers themselves. For example, the *Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper*, published in England in 2025, called for further strengthening of the use of evidence in plans that universities put together to improve access to and participation in higher education for disadvantaged groups (HM Government 2025).

### **National-level administrative data**

Amongst the nine countries in our study, Denmark is unique. It (like its Nordic neighbours 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. A Danish interviewee commented:

It's fantastic. So basically the reliability of the education information in Denmark is fantastic. It's recorded centrally through administrative procedures. There will be some errors, but it's a bit like the tax income, right? It's a highly centralised way of registering it and so you also have very granular information, you know exactly which programme at which university

and so on for each response, right ... These are the kind of, you know, education registers you get in Denmark. And so because we can link parents and children we also have, you know, pretty reliable information. Of course, when you go back, if you say someone born in 1960, their parents would maybe be born 1945, and of course there the information might be a bit more sketchy ... But from around the year 1980 we have complete education records in Denmark. (Danish Expert 1)

Such register data has been used in studies of social mobility and higher education. Drawing on register data for individuals born in 1984, Munk and Thomsen (2018), for example, show how there is social stratification with respect to both programme of study and institution. In relation to the former, they contend: 'students are particularly likely to study a given field if that field is closely related to their parents' occupation; for example, students have a much greater chance of studying in humanistic-classical, creative, and soft social science programmes if one of their parents is in the teaching or in the arts and social sciences professions than students whose parents are in unskilled occupations' (65). They also identify differences *within* broad fields of study – showing, for example, that business economics programmes are more socially selective than business communications programmes. Interviewees from other case study countries frequently contrasted the situation in Nordic countries with the more fragmented data infrastructures elsewhere, which make robust comparisons difficult.

Nevertheless, some innovative work has, however, taken place in other countries. US Expert 1 reflected, for example, that:

We're not at like Scandinavian levels of administrative integrated datasets, but there are increasingly well linked datasets that include an ability to follow individuals over long periods of time, where they're growing up, who they're growing up with, where they go to college, if they go to college, where they end up living, what type of job they have if they're working; we can follow that pretty well.

A good example of this kind of approach is Chetty et al.'s (2020, 2023) research, which has linked several sources of administrative data: information from parents' and children's tax returns; attendance records from the Department of Education; data on standardised test scores; and application and admissions records from a variety of public and private higher education institutions. Their analysis demonstrated 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 one per cent 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.)

In England, progress has been made towards linking various relevant forms of national administrative data, although not through a single registration number, as in the Nordic countries. The Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset represents an important advance, connecting school, college, higher education and early career labour-market records. Nevertheless, LEO relies on limited proxies for family background and remains less comprehensive than the Nordic models.

Despite these exceptions, however, our nine-country analysis indicates that the more general evidence base, upon which to explore the long-term impact of higher education, is weak. Canada illustrates the problem well. It does not systematically collect

administrative data on the social characteristics of its students at federal level, which impedes analysis of trends with respect to widening participation (Usher and Balfour 2024). 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. Moreover, because 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 (Universities Canada 2019), it is difficult both to target initiatives at particular students, and to track progress.

China, similarly, lacks publicly accessible administrative microdata on graduate outcomes. 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. 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 residency 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. Without such linkages, policymakers can monitor graduate employment but not social mobility, and thus cannot fully assess how higher education does or does not drive such mobility.

### *Data on impact of specific initiatives*

In addition to the relative paucity of data to examine the long-term impact of higher education, in general, on social mobility, data on the impact of specific initiatives is perhaps even more markedly absent. Across all nine of our case study countries, we found very few examples of interventions that had a clear and evidential impact on subsequent social mobility. This is perhaps unsurprising given the limitations in ability to link data longitudinally, discussed above, and the difficulty (as well as cost) of isolating the impact of particular higher education programmes and policies.

### *Internationally comparative data*

International comparisons are also hampered by the problems with national-level data reported above. However, some researchers have made use of the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Skills. This allows them to link attendance at higher education with subsequent employment outcomes. We have used this in our own analysis (Brooks et al. 2025a), but it has also been used by other researchers who have sought to compare the performance of their own country with that of others

(see, for example, Borgonovi and Marconi 2020). There are, however, limitations to this dataset. It reports only whether higher education was pursued or not, not the nature of higher education pursued or the type of institution attended, and only parental education, not other aspects of family background that may be relevant (e.g. income level). Moreover, it focuses on OECD countries only, thus restricting the geographical scope of any analysis.

### **Challenge 3: understandings of higher education as a driver of social mobility**

#### **Background**

While much of the policy debate in the US and UK has assumed that higher education can play a key role in facilitating intergenerational social mobility (a process that may well be aided by better quality data to draw upon, and more attention to the socio-political context when considering the ‘transfer’ of policies from other national contexts), in this part of the article we raise some more fundamental questions about this relationship. In the sections that follow, we discuss the role played by other parts of the education system which can, we suggest, be equally or even more important in driving social mobility. We also examine the influence exerted by the labour market and wider policy environment.

In doing so, we are informed by studies that have taken a more critical approach to discourses of social mobility. A key contribution in this area is by Ingram and Gamsu (2022), who have focussed both on the work of the UK’s Social Mobility Commission and expectations of the UK’s higher education sector. They identify three particular framings of social mobility within political discourse that they consider to be problematic: ‘room at the top’, ‘race to the top’ and ‘resilience’. ‘Room at the top’ framings position the achievement of social mobility as securing a ‘good life’, and suggesting (erroneously, Ingram and Gamsu maintain) that there is space in the labour market for all who wish to obtain jobs of higher social status than those of their parents. In contrast, the ‘race to the top’ discourse acknowledges that spaces at the top are limited, and that competition is thus required. However, it typically suggests that upward mobility can be achieved through hard work and talent, and pays little attention to the material contexts that often shape journeys through both education and employment. Moreover, this discourse fails to make explicit that, from this perspective, if some are upwardly mobile, others will have to be downwardly mobile. The ‘resilience’ discourse also fails to attend to material constraints – suggesting that, to succeed, individualised attributes such as resilience are key. Ingram and Gamsu contend that ‘none of these framings provides a productive means to engage critically with the fundamentals of challenging inequalities and only serves to obfuscate the material barriers to social fluidity, let alone deeper equality’ (202). They also assert that the language that frequently accompanies such discussions of social mobility – with an emphasis on ‘unlocking talent’ and ‘breaking out’ (from one’s original social position) – ‘construct the issue as one of personal escape, as if working-class people are held hostage in their communities and simply need to be shown the door and welcomed with open arms into the middle-class fold’ (202). This avoids the need, they argue, to discuss more difficult issues, particularly around questions of redistribution of resources.

Developing similar arguments, in some respects, is the growing number of scholars who have pointed to the important role employers play in shaping ‘graduate outcomes’. They have argued that the employment secured by graduates, and the salaries they earn, cannot be understood as primarily the responsibility of universities. Not only does the social position of graduates (and thus the types of economic, social and cultural capital they have access to) have a strong bearing on the employment they are able to secure (Ingram, Bathmaker, and Abrahams 2023), but the practices of employers themselves are also significant. Many of those recruiting into highly-paid, high-status roles, choose from very limited pools, often dominated by those who have attended prestigious universities and come from advantaged backgrounds, and often employ specific recruitment practices that favour the already-privileged (Dilnot, Macmillan, and Tyler 2025; Ingram and Allen 2019; Rivera 2015).

### *Earlier stages of education*

When discussing the influences on intergenerational social mobility across our nine case study countries with the sample of experts, a common theme was the key role played by earlier stages of education, which often determines who is eligible to enter higher education in the first place. Several interviewees argued that stratification in the schooling system has had an adverse impact on equitable access to higher education. This, for example, 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. Australia Expert 1 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 particularly highlighted the incentives offered to schools to push students into vocational courses, and the problematic use of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (known as ATAR; a ranking of all students based on their school performance), reinforcing inequalities between schools.

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 (Jia and Li 2025; Wang 2011). Both China experts echoed the point that educational inequalities start well before higher education, often within primary and secondary schooling:

In small towns where there are many farmers, they’re very aware that, for families in that area, going to school locally makes it impossible to get into a good university. It’s just not possible at all. If the quality of local teaching is poor, then no matter how hard the student works, they are still unlikely to get into a good university. From the standpoint of intergenerational mobility, this is a fundamental issue – you don’t even reach the starting point of having a chance to enter a good university. (China Expert 2)

Thus, many policies in China aimed at improving higher education completion rates amongst disadvantaged students have focussed on the schools sector.

In Japan, there are also significant differences between schools that help shape patterns of access to higher education. However, unlike in China where they are often related to their geographical location (in rural or urban areas), they are more likely to

be determined by their private or public status. Indeed, a process of ‘bright flight’ has been documented, whereby high-income families began to enrol their children in private secondary schools; private schooling increased from only 2.9 per cent of the population in 1985, to 7.2 per cent in 2009 (Kariya 2009). Opportunities for low-income families to access higher education decreased in the context of this increased privatisation of secondary education, alongside growing income inequality. This was commented on by one of the expert interviewees:

In University of Tokyo and the University of Kyoto – these are the two best and top Imperial universities – the majority of new students are from private secondary schools. ... Those academically homogeneous students are mostly from the middle class, [with] educationally able and very aspiring parents ... [who are] economically rich and culturally rich. (Japan Expert 2)

Within Greece, the impact of pre-university experiences has played out in a rather different, but no less influential, manner. 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 (Bray 2020; Danchev 2023). One interviewee, Greece Expert 2, described how, after school, students have an ‘additional four or five hours in the afternoon going to a private language school or having private tuition for exams or support with applications’.

Similarly, within Denmark, it appears that *school* reforms, rather than reforms wrought in the higher education sector, have had most impact on social mobility. Academic studies have indicated that social mobility, across Danish society as a whole, increased significantly for those born between the 1940s and the 1980s (Karlson and Landersø 2025). This was caused, Karlson and Landersø (2025) argue, by major school reforms in 1958 and 1972 which restructured the system and increased both the minimum number of years of compulsory schooling and the financial resources allocated to the sector:

The 1958 reform, which abolished the rural school system and led to large investments in secondary schools especially in rural areas, raised not only educational attainment and mobility but also cognitive skills and income as adults, pointing to a general and long-lasting impact on human capital. In contrast, the 1972 reform, which increased the minimum years of compulsory schooling from seven to nine, affected educational attainment and thereby intergenerational mobility, but it did not affect skill formation and adult income, possibly because the reform merely pushed a small, remaining fraction of a cohort into completing lower secondary school. (Karlson and Landersø 2025, 208–209)

Reflecting on the more recent past in Denmark, evidence 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 (Landersø and Heckman 2017), which have then shaped admissions to higher education:

The persistence of inequality in human capital formation and education in Denmark suggests that it will be fruitful to pursue a much deeper understanding of how parents affect child development, including both direct interactions and purposive sorting in making

neighbourhood choices (and thereby influencing school quality among other aspects of neighbourhood). (Landersø and Heckman 2017, 27–28)

This was echoed in the interviews, with one interviewee commenting: ‘You see increasing segregation and parents manipulating what type of public school catchment area their children belong to and so forth. So they can get the best schools.’ (Danish Expert 2).

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 equality in higher education (and thus social mobility). This perspective underpins the ‘Universities Accord’ recently implemented in Australia (TEQSA 2024) and the approach taken in Ireland, where ‘accessibility becomes the responsibility of everyone across the education system, from pre, primary and post-primary school level to further and higher education’ (Higher Education Authority 2022, 21). 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 rethink intergenerational mobility – and more importantly, where we put our money? (Ireland Expert 2)

### *Vocational education and lifelong learning*

Similar arguments, about the importance of recognising other educational drivers of social mobility, were made by our participants with respect to later stages of education, too. Indeed, many of those involved in the focus groups contended 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 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’.

Nevertheless, as was emphasised particularly by participants in the focus group 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 focus group identified 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 (e.g. Robson et al. 2025). As such, technical and vocational education, when part of an integrated 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.

One of the interviewees from China asserted that there were particular opportunities, connected to current economic developments, which offered new routes to social mobility for those from disadvantaged groups:

I think it's also a really exciting opportunity to open up new spaces – for competition and for expanding access and mobility. It's a chance to transform vocational and technological education, especially given the rise of the AI industry. I think it's a great opportunity for students from relatively underprivileged backgrounds to pursue skills that will be truly relevant – for instance, in AI and the digital economy in the future. Given how quickly AI has developed – much faster than we anticipated – alongside the rise of the digital economy, there's now a real opportunity to open up new spaces for upward social mobility. (China Expert 1)

She went on to claim that there was already evidence of AI bringing about greater equality with respect to the labour force participation of women from low-income families:

In the Western regions [of China], many of the women entering the AI industry are those who have traditionally faced limited opportunities – for instance, women with disabilities or single mothers who struggled to find work. Some of them used to work in Eastern cities like Shanghai or Guangzhou as housekeepers or cleaners. What is interesting is that they've now found employment opportunities in the AI industry. ... many women have been able to take up flexible jobs – for example, working on data labelling tasks in front of a computer, rather than doing physically demanding and stigmatised labour like household cleaning. So, I genuinely believe that transforming China's vocational and technological education could help open new pathways for social mobility, especially for marginalised groups like these women. (China Expert 1)

Participants in our research, 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 maintained – in line with the points made above – that governments and other organisations working to promote 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 (Hazelkorn 2023; Robson et al. 2024; 2025). More stratified systems, with higher education seen as the gold standard and the sole opportunity for social mobility, inherently limit opportunities.

### ***Beyond education: The labour market and wider policy environment***

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 brought

up in two of the four focus groups, the reduction in the number of available graduate jobs (for example, due to increasing labour market constraints rooted in technological change, wider economic challenges, and geopolitical shifts) has had an impact on transitions to employment. Moreover, widening access to higher education has not translated into stronger mobility – in the UK and elsewhere – because the labour-market payoff to a degree has weakened (Brooks et al. 2025a).

There is also 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 the Japanese and Chinese expert interviewees (see below), but was also a theme raised by participants from numerous countries in the expert workshops.

The stratification in China's higher education system is extremely pronounced. Even in the Chinese labour market, it's quite explicit – sometimes companies make it very clear in their job advertisements that they are only looking for graduates from 985 or 211 universities. Others may not say so directly, but when they screen CVs, they use those exact criteria. ... This is why people talk about the importance of one's *first degree* – that is, your undergraduate institution – it reflects how clearly stratified China's higher education system is. (China Expert 2)

...

That's also part of why some people today is saying things like 'education is useless'. What they mean is that if you attend a very ordinary university, you might pay tens of thousands of RMB a year in tuition, but after graduation, your salary might not even reach that level – or you might not find a job at all. Everyone is asking: How are Peking and Tsinghua graduates doing in the job market this year? Of course, they're fine – 100 per cent employment. But on the other end, with the economic instabilities, students from lower-tier institutions are struggling. (China Expert 2)

These highly established universities are closer to the best career opportunities, for example, to become a lawyer, a medical doctor, or accountant ... This is based on the examination open to everybody, but there's still some kind of a closer pathway. And the civil service, also the big companies ... tend to hire students from the elite universities. ... If you go to a less prestigious university, first of all, sometimes they simply cannot get a job. Or, even if they get a job, but it is not an attractive job, they will leave the job within three years and they go through very unstable and peripheral career for a long time. (Japan Expert 1)

When social mobility, in general, is considered, a further set of factors come into play. For example, within 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 (Landersø and Heckman 2017).

There are differences, by nation, in the extent to which these various influences 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 one of the expert interviewees reflected, '[In Japan] higher education is never regarded as the equaliser of society' (Japan Expert 2).

## Conclusion

This article has outlined three key challenges for policymakers seeking to draw on international evidence to facilitate intergenerational social mobility through higher education

in their own national context: the importance of thinking critically about processes of policy transfer; the quality of data available; and understandings of higher education as a driver of social mobility.

It has shown how the very concept of 'social mobility' is itself culture-bound, emerging after the Second World War in economically-stratified societies such as the UK and US. It was here that policymakers adopted educational expansion as an effective engine of social mobility and the best way to address inequalities of class, race and gender. What Michael Young once satirised as 'meritocracy' is now a UK policy priority (Young 1958). Today there are more than 150 UK charities and organisations involved in what Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2025) call the social mobility 'industry'. This level of policy focus is relatively unique. The interviewees in our research highlighted the economic, social, political and institutional specificities of their national settings that complicate this policy framing, as well as the challenge of creating appropriate and comparable data to even measure inequality in this way.

Integral to all these issues are the interdependencies between higher education institutions and other sectors. In many countries of the world, successful initiatives within higher education to improve equity in access and outcomes for students often depend on school-level reforms, or on effective labour market policies that promote demand for skilled graduate labour. Higher education is rarely the sole driver of intergenerational social mobility. Both policymakers and academics can, at times, be neglectful of these relationships and, as a result, expect higher education to resolve problems that may be caused elsewhere.

Connected to this is the importance of situating universities within a wider tertiary sector. A diversity of higher and vocational pathways can provide complementary routes to social mobility. Whilst universities – and especially elite universities – can be engines of mobility, a heavy reliance on higher education risks leaving disadvantaged groups with too few options. There is also the risk of what Mountford-Zimdars, Gaultier, and Harrison (2024) call 'helicopter mobility', where a few benefit from elite educational opportunities whilst not addressing the wider structural inequalities that are reproduced by precisely this institutional elite.

The article has also shown that 'social mobility' does not have the same policy resonance or meaning in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Indeed, common definitions of this and related terms are often absent. The UK debate around social mobility focuses primarily on mobility by income and occupation. In countries such as Canada and Greece, the debate is less focused on socio-economic stratification than on the inequalities around race (US), indigeneity (Canada), rurality (Greece) or disability. In others, the policy conversation revolves around 'equality' and 'fairness' (e.g. Japan). Understanding how such terms and policies travel, and when they do not, is key to understanding why policies are, at best, translated, adapted and reassembled, never simply transferred.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Sutton Trust for commissioning the research upon which this article is based, and to Mannat Khan, Xingyou Lu and Usman Tahir who helped us with some of the initial literature searching. We would also like to thank all those who took part in an interview or focus group. (Those who agreed to be named in our research are: Graeme Atherton, John Blake, Vikki Boliver, Thomas

Brotherhood, Hamish Coates, Ariane de Gayardon, Thomas A DiPrete, John Friedman, Sonia Giebel, Ellen Hazelkorn, Niki Kalavrezou, Takehiko Kariya, Kristian Bernt Karlson, Ewart Keep, Jussi Kivistö, Rasmus Landersø, Wolfgang Lehmann, Thandi Lewin, Ye Liu, Matt Lumb, Liping Ma, Li Mei, Chris Millward, Kaneko Motohisa, Leping Mou, Ruoyi Qiu, Shamit Sagggar, Emer Smyth, Jonny Sung, Nikos Vettas, Peidong Yang, and Akiyoshi Yonezawa).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Sutton Trust.

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