

Social mobility and Covid-19

Introduction and background

This briefing from the Sutton Trust looks at how the current Covid-19 crisis is likely to impact the most disadvantaged young people during their time in education and into the workplace. It looks at the possible impact across early years, schools, apprenticeships, higher education and access to the workplace. The Trust will soon be releasing research looking at these challenges in greater detail, along with policy recommendations on how best to lessen the impacts of the pandemic on social mobility.

Key findings

Early years

- Early years education is vital for social mobility; the poorest children are already 11 months behind their better-off peers before they even start school.
- A large proportion of early years provision is in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, which provides 77 per cent of registered childcare places in early years settings. Many PVI settings were already facing financial difficulties prior to the current crisis.
- The government has taken action to help these providers: for example, they will continue to receive funding from local authorities for the free entitlements for 2, 3 and 4-year-olds, even if they are closed and they are also now included in the government's business rate holiday. If they are closed, they can furlough workers, although many should still be open for the benefit of key workers.
- However, there will be lost payments from parents above and beyond the help which the government will give. These payments often fill gaps resulting from the low hourly rates of government funding. Some providers are more reliant on parental contributions than others. Furthermore, those who do not offer the 30 hour entitlement (about 1 in 10) will not be entitled to as much local authority support as those which offer both the 15 and the 30 hour entitlement.
- The home learning environment and parental engagement will be more important than ever at a time when settings are closed. Making sure parents from all backgrounds have the right support, could help to reduce the impact of differences in the home learning environment between children from different backgrounds. Based on its earlier work with the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Sutton Trust has put together guidance for parents, including links to high quality online resources.
- In the short term, the closure of early years settings is likely to have the biggest impact on the poorest children, who benefit most from structured provision and who are less likely to have a positive home learning environment. There could be long term impact if providers do not receive enough support and are forced to close permanently, and if provision is slow to recover in the wake of the crisis.

Schools

- As with early years, the closure of schools will have the largest impact on disadvantaged families. It is already known that time away from school, for example during the summer holidays, widens the attainment gap between pupils from different backgrounds. The ongoing economic crisis caused by the pandemic will present many more families with other challenges which indirectly impact on attainment, such as increased poverty and food insecurity.
- Disadvantaged young people are less likely to have access to additional activities and support at home and will therefore be more reliant on online provision from school. However, they are also the least likely to be able to access the provision. Previous Sutton Trust research found that 34 per cent of parents with children aged 5-16 reported their child does not have access to their own computer, laptop or tablet through which they can access the internet at home. These children are also less likely to have a suitable space in which to study.
- Although some schools have been working to provide hard copy versions of resources to their students, this is unlikely to make up fully for a lack of access to online resources. In the coming months, it will be important to look at how to ensure that all children have access to online learning. Possible solutions may include a fund from government, businesses or charities to help to supply children with the necessary equipment.
- As school closures continue, many parents are likely to turn to private tuition. Tuition is known to be an effective intervention, but students from poorer backgrounds are less able to access it. Previous Sutton Trust research has found that while 34 per cent of students from richer homes have had tutoring, just 20 per cent of those from poorer homes have done so. The above-mentioned lack of access to the internet could also be a barrier to online private tuition.
- The Sutton Trust has already been proactive in calling for an expansion of programmes which connect tuition agencies with disadvantaged schools. There are agencies with innovative models in this area, such as MyTutor and Tutor Trust. Taking steps to increase access to private

tuition for lower income students, through wider use of these models, or increasing central funding through a voucher scheme would help to mitigate the impact of current closures and to enable poorer children to catch up next academic year. The Sutton Trust invites any agencies who are interested in working with them to support disadvantaged pupils to get in touch immediately.

- There is much more confidence amongst teachers in more advantaged schools and in the private sector in terms of delivering lessons remotely. For example, 69 per cent of private school teachers feel prepared to deliver video lessons compared to only 40 per cent in the state sector. Steps to provide resources to all children are welcome – the BBC is intending to produce daily online lessons and Eton is giving free access to its online learning platforms to all Y11 and Y13 pupils.
- Once schools restart, it will be vital to help students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to catch up. This could include measures such as increasing the pupil premium or catch up sessions for this group before the others return.
- The Trust welcomes the introduction of a voucher scheme for pupils who were in receipt of free school meals, but there are families, particularly those whose circumstances have worsened due to the crisis, who may miss out.

Apprenticeships

- The Trust welcomes the government's recent announcement that furloughed apprentices should be paid at least the Apprentice Minimum Wage (or other relevant minimum wage), even if it is more than 80 per cent of their standard wage. However, this may put additional financial pressure on some employers who will be required to make up the difference.
- Apprentices from lower socio-economic backgrounds will be most severely affected by the crisis. They are more likely to be doing lower level apprenticeships and less likely to receive financial support from their families. Some may be forced to leave their apprenticeships altogether.
- Due to the pandemic, employers are now able to pause an apprentices' learning for up to 12 weeks, but providers will not be paid for apprentices during any breaks, which could lead many to close, some permanently.
- As apprenticeships have only started to rise again in popularity over the last few years, there is a danger that employers may not prioritise the long-term benefit of apprentices in the aftermath of the crisis.

Higher education

- With A levels cancelled, the grades which determine university admissions will now be governed by a system based on teacher assessment and how teachers would rank students compared to others. This information will then be used by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), to assign grades, and adjusted to reflect the balance of prior attainment and previous exam results in the school or college. If students are unhappy with their grade, they can appeal and sit an exam as soon as it is feasible to do so or wait until the summer 2021 exam series.
- The Trust has welcomed the decision not to decide final grades on the basis of predicted grades alone. However, previous research has shown that teacher assessment can unconsciously disadvantage students from certain groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For example, teachers have been found to be less likely to judge low income students as having above average ability in reading or in maths, even when their previous test

scores indicate that this is the case.

- The standard appeals process for exams can be difficult to navigate and there is a cost to any appeal. These barriers may prevent disadvantaged students from making appeals, thereby widening inequalities within the system. Furthermore, students from poorer homes are less likely to be in a position to resit exams, either soon after the summer or the following year.
- There is a danger that an entire cohort of students could miss out on outreach activities which support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into university. This could in turn have a substantial impact on university access in 2020-21 and beyond. The Sutton Trust is working with its partners to ensure face to face provision is replaced by content delivered online or alternative provision later in the year.
- Many universities have already replaced their exams with online assessments, but concerns have been raised as to whether this process will be fair for students who do not have access to the necessary technology (a computer and a good enough internet connection) or a suitable space to work in. Students may also have caring responsibilities which could further hinder them in studying or taking exams.
- Many disadvantaged students are likely to have been working in some of the roles most vulnerable in the current crisis, such as hospitality or retail; without this income they may face considerable hardship. Problems will be exacerbated if their parents have lost income, and so are no longer able to make the contributions which they are expected to under the student finance system.
- More information is needed on how many students are facing financial hardship during this crisis, and systems need to be put in place to get money to those who need it most. One potential means of providing additional funds in the short term could be through the current student finance system.

Access to the workplace

- Recessions are known to have considerable impacts on educational aspirations and opportunities. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have their educational decisions influenced by labour market conditions, while those from more advantaged backgrounds often stay in education even if the economic benefit is less certain.
- In the coming months and years, interventions to promote and protect social mobility in the job market will be vital. The Trust encourages all employers to keep this in mind, and use best practices in their recruitment practices, including contextual recruitment and paid fully advertised internships. They should do their best to ensure that advantaged young people are not gaining an unfair competitive edge. The Trust will be releasing detailed guidance on social mobility in the workplace later this year.
- In the short term, formal internships and work experience placements are likely to decline, as physical offices have closed. If possible, employers (particularly those with large and/or well-established work experience programmes) should consider moving these experiences online.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-Social-Mobility-1.pdf>