

Designing an English Social Mobility Index

Introduction and background

Social mobility delivers benefits to both individuals and society at large, in the form of enhanced economic productivity and wider social good. Social mobility is widely regarded as a key outcome of education. If universities agree it is an important part of their mission, they need to consider how it can be effectively measured. Several previous HEPI reports have already considered the extent to which the existing league tables reflect universities' achievements in terms of promoting social mobility, and some have recommended the introduction of social mobility benchmarking.

This report written by Professor David Phoenix, Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University, proposes an English version of a US higher education social mobility index. The US index recognises institutions' success in boosting the outcomes of a high proportion of students. It also recognises institutions that push a smaller proportion of students a bigger distance - results shake up the typical league-table order. The development of the English Social Mobility Index (SMI) arose from a desire on the part of the London South Bank University Group to find a social impact measure which worked in higher education.

The author acknowledges that this first draft of an English SMI will need to develop over time as better data become available - there will be different opinions on the choice of data used here and on issues such as weighting. Suggestions for improvements are welcome.

Key findings

Measuring the impact of higher education on social mobility

- Analysis of individual university contributions to social mobility has usually been limited to looking at the numbers of pupils taken from particular socio-economic groups, such as those categorised as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic or those from areas with low participation in higher education. Universities are often also increasingly assessed in terms of the earning power of their graduates, for example through Graduate Outcomes (GO) and Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data. These datasets are sometimes used as a proxy for contribution to both social mobility and to productivity.
- However, these metrics tell us little or nothing about universities' contributions to social mobility in terms of the added value they provide to their graduates given their socio-economic position at the outset of their higher education journey.
- The longer-term approach to Access and Participation Plans adopted by the Office for Students (OfS) challenges institutions on both access and equality of outcomes, but it fails to provide measures around the social distance travelled.
- Some of the widely used measures used in university rankings arguably incentivise institutions to avoid students from lower socio-economic groups who, on average, present with lower UCAS points and more challenges. This creates a cycle whereby institutions are encouraged to exclude on the basis of lower attainment in order to maintain their league table position. The resultant aura of privilege and exclusivity further discourages the less advantaged from seeking entry to higher ranked institutions.
- There have been several attempts to measure the value which universities add to an individual's outcomes. However, most of these are salary based and take little note of the graduate's social mobility journey or geography.

The US social mobility index

- The US SMI provides a comparative social mobility impact analysis of US higher education institutions which challenges the traditional analysis and rankings. It measures the extent to which a college or university educates more economically disadvantaged students (with family incomes below the national median) at lower tuition rates and graduates them into well paid jobs.
- The most sensitive variables in the US SMI are tuition fees and the economic background of the student body. The remaining 3 less sensitive variables are graduation score, early career net salary, and endowment. The endowment is a sum of money which US universities can invest, yielding returns which fund a portion of the institution's operational expenses, and help ensure that it survives in perpetuity.
- The top 10 institutions listed in the US SMI are not those typically associated with excellence in US universities, but are institutions that take in students from a breadth of backgrounds, while also delivering relatively high completion rates and salaries upon graduation. High prestige universities such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford sit outside the top 1,000 in the US SMI. They have tuition fees 5 times higher, and a proportion of students from low-income backgrounds 5 times lower, than those which the Index judges to be delivering the greatest social mobility.

Designing an English Social Mobility Index

- The methodology developed for the English SMI reflects what are seen as the most relevant aspects of the US SMI methodology, taking into consideration the data available in the English sector. It is made up of 3 factors: access, continuation (progression through the academic journey) and graduate salaries, with key data drawn from the English Index of Multiple Deprivation, Access and Participations Plans, and the Longitudinal Education Outcomes data.
- Universities' Access and Participation Plans provide data on access (the makeup of students entering higher education); continuation rates; the number of students who achieve a first or upper second class degree; and progression (i.e., whether students are in highly skilled employment or study at a higher-level six months after leaving higher education).
- The Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) provides data on salaries, one year after graduation. Although it has gaps and cannot identify differences in outcomes between socioeconomic groups, it is increasingly regarded as an important dataset for assessing the salary outcomes of higher education.
- The English Index of Multiple Deprivation measures relative levels of deprivation in 32,844 small areas or neighbourhoods, called Lower Layer Super Output Areas. These are grouped into quintiles. The English SMI looked at the proportion of the enrolled students from the bottom 2 quintiles.
- The English SMI ascribes a score to an institution linked to each of the above measures. The total normalised scores are added together to arrive at an overall score.
- Access to higher education has been given the highest weighting, as it is the initial admission to higher education that is key to subsequent social mobility. Next ranked is continuation, as the completion of a qualification is vitally

important to social mobility. The salary element has the lowest weighting because there is more to social mobility than earnings, and because this measure is based on all of those in the LEO population from a given institution, not only those from IMD quintiles 1 and 2.

Results

- There is diversity across the institutions which appear in the top 10 according to the English SMI. There are 3 Russell Group institutions (Queen Mary University of London, Imperial College London, and King's College London). Also in the top 10 are 2 MillionPlus institutions (London South Bank and Wolverhampton), 4 other pre-92 institutions and one further post-92 institution.
- This diversity in the types of institution may be partially driven by the fact that US universities are largely free to determine their tuition fees, whereas the English system pushes universities to compete on areas other than price, since tuition fees are essentially the same at most universities.
- The leading institutions in the English SMI are Bradford and Aston universities, which have similar histories as former Colleges of Advanced Technology. They achieve this position by having enrolments of over 50 per cent from IMD quintiles 1 and 2 (nearly 80% in Bradford) and achieving continuation rates of over 90 per cent by these cohorts.
- Contrary to potential preconceptions, the Index does not appear to bias against highly selective or research-intensive universities. Russell Group institutions appear at all levels in the ratings. Reasons for this vary from institution to institution, but on the whole it is because the most highly rated institutions deliver outstanding levels of continuation irrespective of the proportion of the cohort from IMD1 and 2.

Conclusions

- The English SMI can provide provides a mechanism for institutions to demonstrate their positive contribution to social mobility.
- In order to rise up the table, elite institutions could focus on identifying more of the most talented learners from lower socio-economic groups and admitting them in greater numbers.
- All universities should reconsider the use of widening participation expenditure on bursaries or similar incentives to secure talented students from competitor institutions. According to the Milburn report: 'financial support to students seems to have little or no impact on widening participation and fair access, and an unknown impact on retention'.
- The English SMI can help learners from lower socio-economic groups to judge the likelihood of acceptance and the social mobility outcomes they are likely to achieve at any institution.
- Rather than encouraging all universities to seek out the same learners, the English SMI can encourage them to serve the differing needs of the wide cohort of learners that any country with an accessible higher education system needs to support.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/04/an-english-social-mobility-index-new-report-proposes-a-ranking-of-universities-impact-on-social-mobility/>