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# CAN YOU GET THERE FROM HERE?

## POST-16 EDUCATION, SOCIAL PROGRESSION AND SOCIO- ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

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February 2020



## COLEGAUCYMRU

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Post-16 Education, Social Progression  
and Socio-economic Resilience

Over the last five years, policy debates about post-16 education in Wales and across the UK have predominantly focused on the funding of provision. Important though this funding debate clearly is, this discussion paper, which has been prepared for Colegau Cymru, seeks to contribute to a broader policy debate about whether current educational provision supports social mobility and adequately enables young people to secure a life of 'well-being'. Although the focus of this paper is post-16 education, it also considers educational provision more generally and draws on wider comparative experiences to inform the discussion. The central question it seeks to consider is: whether current education provision supports social progression and socio-economic resilience for young people from deprived communities and disadvantaged personal backgrounds. In addressing this question, the paper stops short of offering particular solutions, which will be the subject of further work, but it begins to develop a narrative and conceptual framework to address the question.

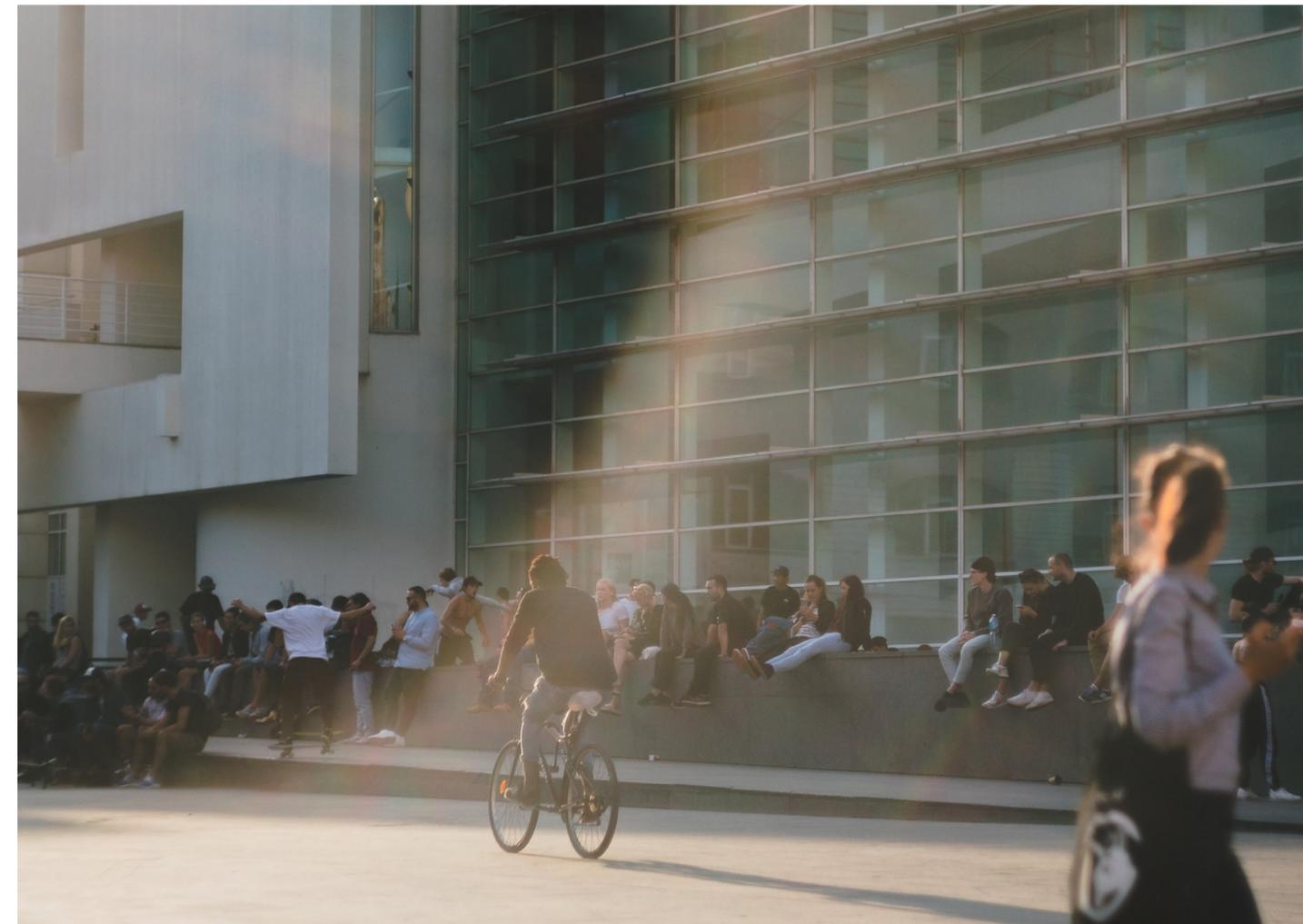
The educational progression of young people with disadvantaged backgrounds and from deprived communities is a particularly salient issue in Wales and the UK more generally, as skills inequality is now higher, and social mobility lower in the UK than in any other developed country (Janmaat and Green, 2013). Furthermore, economic and social inequality in the UK is now at unprecedented levels (Oxfam, 2016).

The Social Mobility Commission (2019) commented that '...social mobility has stagnated over the last four years at virtually all stages from birth to work', moreover being born disadvantaged '...means that you will have to overcome a series of barriers to ensure that you and your children are not stuck in the same trap'.

The recent Augar (2019) report suggested a longer term trend exists, where there has been '...no improvement in social mobility in Britain over half a century: increases in wealth and changes in the overall structure of the job market have had no impact on the relative chances of people born into less advantaged groups'.

These issues are not confined to the UK, and a recent OECD (2018) report found that social mobility has frozen or is declining in many countries. Nevertheless, the UK is particularly badly affected, and the OECD estimates that, on current trends, it would take five generations for a low-income UK family to reach the average UK family income. The report also observes that those born between 1945-75 had much greater chances of social mobility than those born afterwards. These inequalities are set against the background of growing uncertainties about the future of working patterns. Automation and artificial intelligence is already having a massively detrimental impact on traditional forms of employment and these are predicted to increase significantly over the coming decades (Buchanan, 2018). Moreover, new forms of 'disruptive capitalism' are undermining traditional notions of wealth creation, and there is growing urgency in the need for environmental rebalance that asks fundamental questions about what forms of economic activity national and local governments can permit and should support.

Given these global concerns, there appears to be a surprising shortage of comprehensive data sources that provide reliable and recent information on education and social mobility in Wales. The Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES) have previously used data from the Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to assess educational and other determinants of adult skills



inequalities. By comparing data for selected countries on skills distributions among 28-31 year olds in 2013 (from PIAAC), with data on distributions of skills amongst 15 year olds in 2000-03 (from PISA), LLAKES was able to assess the durability of skills inequality and the effect that post-compulsory and adult learning have in increasing or mitigating such inequality. Unfortunately, this data was not available for Wales. Furthermore, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) formerly published figures on how many people from working class backgrounds – as defined by the official NS-SEC classifications – went to university, but production of this data ceased in 2015 (Worrall, 2017).

The ONS UK Labour Force Survey is, perhaps, the best available source of data, particularly as it captures information on educational attainment on entry to the workforce, as well as asking questions on parental occupation. Henehan's (2019) analysis of this data, which is referenced at points in this discussion paper, is limited to the 22-64 year old age group as the default working age<sup>1</sup>.

The Annual Population Survey<sup>2</sup>, which appears to be used by Welsh Government to identify attainment levels, can be used to identify absolute levels of educational attainment by local authority areas and a variety of other factors.

This discussion paper is structured around various perspectives, or 'lenses', through which an answer may be subsequently postulated. These lenses include: economic, social, delivery and spatial, as well as a concluding evaluative lens.

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<sup>1</sup> 22, rather than 16 or 18, is used to mark the first year of working age as this is when the majority of university-educated adults leave full-time study and enter into the labour force. Capturing educational outcomes an earlier age could, they argued, serve to artificially depress the reported proportion of graduates within a particular cohort or age group.

<sup>2</sup> The APS is not a stand-alone survey; it uses data combined from two waves of the main Labour Force Survey, collected on a local sample boost.

## 2. THE ECONOMIC LENS

Since the Financial Crisis of 2007-08, concerns with the wealth inequalities that are seemingly inherent in the globally dominant Neoliberal economic model have been growing (see, for example: Atkinson, 2015; Castells et. al., 2012; Dorling, 2015). As inequalities have deepened, the much promised ‘trickle down’ effect appears more elusive than ever. Instead, there has been a significant polarization of wealth. Oxfam (2016) has identified that the richest 62 individuals now have more wealth than the World’s poorest 50 percent, and one percent of people now have as much wealth as the other 99 percent. In the UK in 1997, the wealth of the richest one percent was 18 times that of the bottom 90 percent, by 2017 it was 60 times greater (Gulliver, 2016), and, consequently, the UK is now one of the most unequal countries (OECD, 2017). This degree of inequality is closely linked to low levels of social mobility (RSA, 2019).

Although it has been argued that education cannot entirely compensate for the scale of inequality found in modern societies, it, nevertheless, has the potential to make a

difference (Whitty and Anders, 2014). This is not entirely a matter of increased national spending on education, which is best understood as necessary, but not sufficient (Buchanan et. al., 2017). The ability of education to help overcome economic inequalities depends, to some extent, on the particular nature of educational provision. National education systems play an important role in the reproduction of social class structures through the effects of qualifications on life chances. Since the Second World War, skills formation for economic competitiveness has been the principal objective of national education policy (Green, 2011). Since the 1980s, alongside its impact on economic policy, Neoliberalism has had an increasing influence over education policy.

Green (2011) and Janmaat and Green (2013), who focused largely on lifelong learning in the UK, identified three global political and economic regimes in the ‘developed’ world. Each of these regimes, they argued, has its own distinctive form of educational provision and degree of social cohesion.

Liberal	Social Market	Social Democratic
Found in the UK, USA etc. - even though participation in lifelong learning in these countries can boost employment rates and competitiveness, they tend to have unequal skills outcomes that undermine social cohesion.	Found in the countries of north-west continental Europe- even though these countries tend to be less polarised, there is generally far less participation in lifelong learning, which reduces educational attainment and progression.	Found in the Nordic countries- these countries have more equal skills outcomes and tend to be more cohesive societies; and higher levels of lifelong learning, as well as active labour market policies, increase economic competitiveness.

Economic inequality appears to be highest in Liberal and Social Market regimes, and lowest in Nordic Social Democratic countries that tend to employ less selective and track-based approaches (Green, 2011). In Liberal regimes,

education and skills policy agendas appear to have a more overt regard to growth and competitiveness (Buchanan, 2017) than well-being.

The chart below, which is based on the 2018 Annual Population Survey, provides a succinct overview of the average level of qualifications held across Wales as a whole (more detail on individual local authority areas is provided

later in this paper). It shows that 79 percent of the Welsh population is qualified above Level Two, whilst 38 percent are qualified above Level Four.

PERCENTAGE OF WORKING AGE ADULTS QUALIFIED AT NQF LEVELS, ALL WALES

Fig. 1



Source: Welsh Government Analysis of the Annual Population Survey, 2018

Recent research by ColegauCymru (2019) identified that in Wales the three Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) (North Wales, South East Wales, and South West and Mid Wales) are the primary mechanisms to establish common regional (sub-regional) skills agendas, which seek to influence post-16 education provision. The RSPs were established by the Welsh Government to produce Regional Employment and Skills Plans, which are required to integrate with other economic programmes such as City/Growth Deals, City Regions and Enterprise Zones. It should be noted that these

programmes appear to be entirely consistent with the liberal regime emphasis on growth and competitiveness (Lang and Marsden, 2018).

In 2015, the World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group released their New Vision for Education: Unlocking the Potential of Technology report, which, as shown in the table below, identified the skills they argued were necessary to survive in the modern world.

Foundational literacies	Competencies	Character qualities
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy</li> <li>Numeracy</li> <li>Scientific literacy</li> <li>ICT literacy</li> <li>Financial literacy</li> <li>Cultural and civic literacy</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critical thinking and problem solving</li> <li>Creativity</li> <li>Communication</li> <li>Collaboration</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curiosity</li> <li>Initiative</li> <li>Persistence and grit</li> <li>Adaptability</li> <li>Leadership</li> <li>Social and cultural awareness</li> </ol>

Source: WEF/BCG, 2015 (quoted in Buchanan et. al., 2017)



This skills matrix appears to be based on the long-standing generic employability skills discourse that influences competency-based training regimes, which Buchanan et. al. (2017) argued, provides little that can assist in overcoming the pervasive, implicit Neoliberal logic of economic development based on deepening inequality.

In the Liberal regime countries, growth, as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), has become the generally accepted measurement of economic progress. It tends to be assumed that, because growth produced some worthwhile social outcomes for a limited period of time, that it is always a desirable objective (Spretnak and Capra, 1986). The central assumption of economic policy has, therefore, been that everyone benefits from a growing economy. During the 1960s and 1970s there was much to support this perspective, as there was a strong correlation between GDP per capita and some indicators of well-being such as life expectancy and literacy rates (Bleys and Whitby, 2015). Today these correlations are less clear in developed countries (Stiglitz et. al., 2010).

The main issue with growth, as a measurement of success, appears to be a reliance on GDP as the metric on which it is commonly assessed. GDP is defined by the ONS as the value of goods and services produced during a given period. Kuznets, who is credited with the original development of

GDP, suggested that anything detrimental to welfare, such as inequality (including inequality of educational outcomes), poverty, and ecological degradation, should be excluded. The way that economic growth is calculated today, however, disregards Kuznets' concerns (Pilling, 2018). Consequently, GDP is not a measure of economic well-being as it fails to discriminate between costs and benefits. So pervasive has the growth-based narrative become, that even more progressive thinking often appears to be based upon it, albeit under an 'inclusive' variant.

The limits to growth have become increasingly apparent with the rise of disruptive technologies and new forms of capitalism that cannot be calculated in traditional GDP measures. Similarly, the impact of automation on jobs has also undermined faith in the ability of growth to produce beneficial outcomes. While there has been some increase in more highly-skilled work, this has not occurred at the same rate as middle range job destruction. If this trend continues, many of those displaced by automation will be forced to take on less qualified jobs, thereby not only reducing their income, but also increasing competition amongst lower-paid workers (Buchanan et. al., 2018). These trends have significant implications for education policy, as well as social cohesion, particularly for countries most closely allied to the Liberal regime.

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### 3. THE SOCIAL LENS

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During the 1960s, it was generally believed that education was a potential solution to a variety of social problems. Since then, however, economists in particular have displayed less interest in social challenges and, consequently, their imagination regarding the variety of benefits that education can bring also reduced (Leigh, 2001). As discussed above, what has been lost in the Neoliberal perspective on education, as on the economy more generally, was a sense that the education system should be concerned with people. Education, Smyth (2016) argued, should be a right and entitlement for all citizens. The target driven approach to education tends to be concerned more with winners and losers, than with such entitlements. The generic employability skills model of educational provision tends to assume parity, but there are important provisions (Buchanan, 2018), such as the impact of social and cultural capital (see: Bills et. al., 2017), and the correlation between family income levels and the later earning outcomes of young people (see: Britton et. al., 2016).

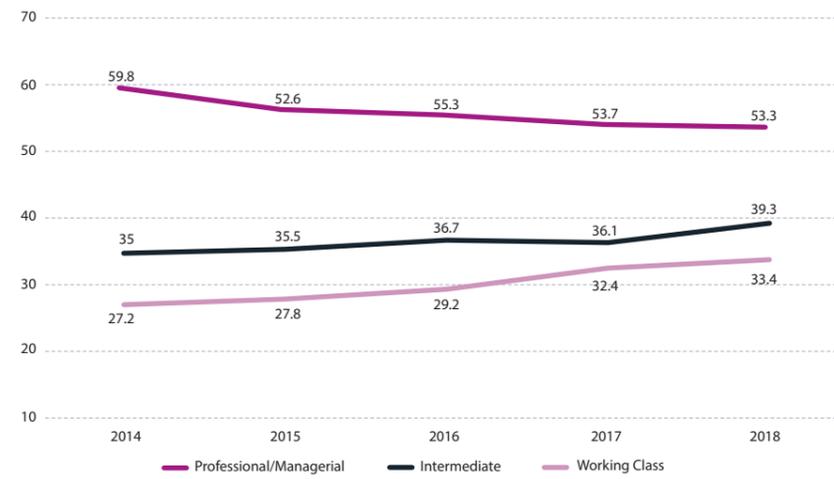
Although education has the potential to help overcome economic inequalities, Buchanan et. al. (2017) argued that it should not simply be about redistribution. Education should be about the wider human and social benefits, not just economics. Education, they suggest, should nurture the human capacity to adapt by creating 'learning dispositions' (which we shall return to later in this paper). McMahon (1999) (quoted in Leigh, 2001), introduced the term 'endogenous development' into education policy discourse. This is a much broader concept than 'endogenous growth' in that endogenous development is concerned with improvements in the non-market aspects of life. Better educated people tend to be healthier and live longer (McMahon, 1999), and experience a greater sense of well-

being (Schuller et. al., 2001). Countries with more equal skills outcomes tend to have greater income equality, higher rates of mobility and are generally more socially cohesive (Green, 2011).

Despite the overall UK trend towards decreased social mobility, there is evidence to suggest that some improvement in social mobility has been experienced in Wales and Scotland over recent years, and the chart below identifies the trends in Wales since 2014. It should be noted, however, that this data relates to the percentage of the total population in professional/managerial professions by parental backgrounds, and is not limited to new entrants to the job market. It does not, therefore, conclusively identify recent social mobility trends for young people in Wales.

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE IN PROFESSIONAL/MANAGERIAL PROFESSIONS, BY PARENTAL BACKGROUND, ALL WALES

Fig. 2



Source: Social Mobility Commission (2019) Analysis of Labour Force Survey (ONS)

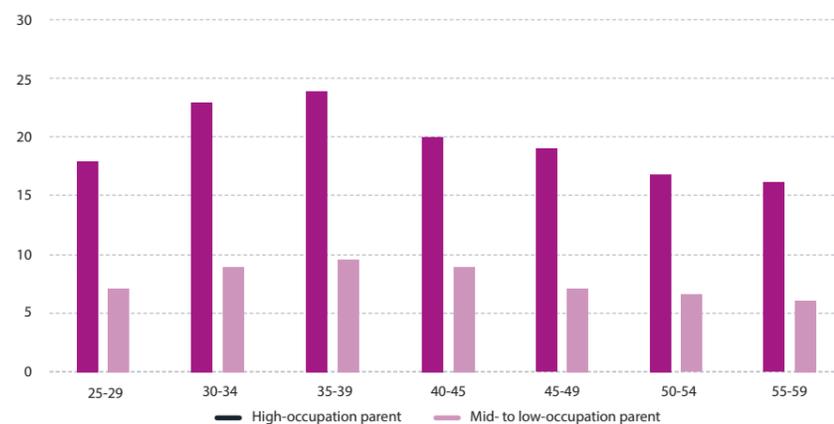
In Liberal regime countries in particular, there is strong evidence of a socio-economic gradient in attainment even before the beginning of compulsory schooling at age five, and this appears to continue throughout the education system (Whitty and Anders, 2014). In the UK, evidence concerning educational attainment variation is mixed. In their review of data derived from the UK Labour Force Survey, Henehan (2019) found strong evidence of social inequalities in degree attainment rates. They found that 37 percent of today's 30-34 year olds with a parent who worked in a highly skilled occupation have attained a degree, compared with 22 percent of those whose parents worked in either a mid- or lower-skilled role. Although these differences among younger people are notable, the inequalities are larger for

older age groups. Amongst 50-54 year olds, the proportion of people from higher socio-economic backgrounds who went on to attain a degree (25 percent) is more than twice as large as the proportion from mid- to lower-skilled households who did so (12 percent). The fact that the size of these differences is lower for younger groups suggests the class-based gap in degree attainment has weakened.

The social class attainment gap has not, however, particularly narrowed at post-graduate level. As the table below illustrates, the class-based difference in master's degree attainment across the UK is not substantially smaller for those aged 30-34 than it is for those aged 50-54.

SHARE OF AGE GROUP WITH MASTER'S DEGREES OR HIGHER, BY PARENTAL OCCUPATION AT AGE 14 (2014-18)

Fig. 3



Source: Henehan (2019) using UK Labour Force Survey





Two theories have emerged that help explain these patterns. According to Raftery and Hout's (1993) theory of 'Maximally Maintained Inequality', as a phase of the education system expands, higher social groups can maintain their advantage so long as their participation in that phase of education grows as fast as, or faster than, that of lower groups. When participation by elite students reaches saturation levels however, then positional competition tends to shift to a higher level of education. Hence, to maintain their advantage, young people from higher skilled families have gained master's degrees at a higher rate than those young people from low and mid-skilled families. Furthermore, according to the theory of 'Effectively Maintained Inequality' (Lucas, 2001), mass provision at the lower level develops more differentiated pathways, increasingly organised into a status hierarchy. Elite students tend to colonize the most prestigious tracks with the best progression routes to higher education. Consequently, for example, pupils from private schools tend to be significantly and disproportionately overrepresented in studying certain subjects such as medicine and law at HE level.

In the UK, a significantly higher percentage of young people from professional family backgrounds attend a Russell Group university, than those from an unskilled family background (Machin et. al., 2009). Meanwhile, as the Augar (2019) report observed, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately likely to attend 'low tariff institutions' and more likely to drop out. These students, it suggested, are also less likely to achieve first or upper second-class degrees compared with their more advantaged counterparts and tend to earn less after graduation. Moreover, debt adversity appears to deter entry into HE for those from lower income households and, it would seem, with some justification, as students from low-income households are likely to graduate with the greatest debt. Therefore, although participation differences may appear to decline, this is likely to be illusory (Croxford and Raffe, 2013; Green and Pensiero, 2016).

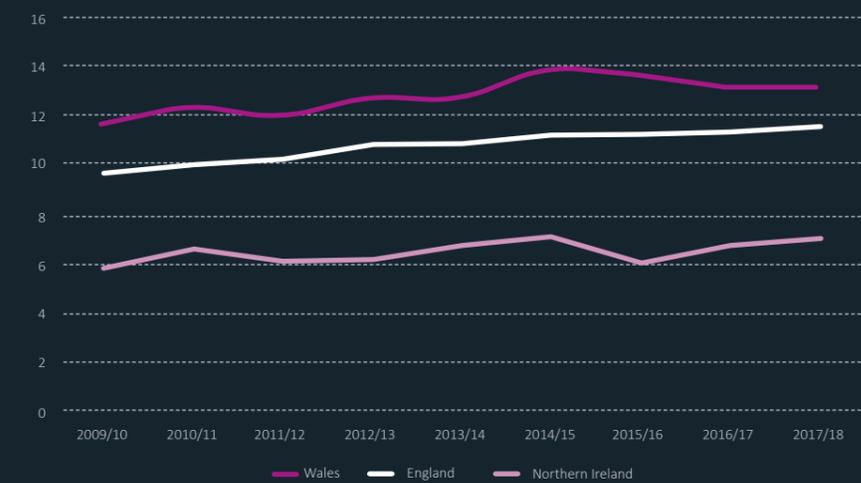
Field (2013) suggested, that although generation is unlikely to provide an all-encompassing explanation of different values, behaviours and attitudes, sensitivity to generational

differences is important to practice and policy. Henehan (2019) also suggested that the declining socio-class attainment variables may be more complex than an overall increase in the number of young people with low- or mid-level skilled parents. In previous decades, white men, for example, had above-average levels of degree attainment, while white women and women from many ethnic minority groups displayed levels at or below that average. Today the reverse is true. White young people in receipt of free

school meals are now the least likely (next to those from Gypsy/Roma backgrounds) of any group to enter university. White students make up the majority of 'low participation neighbourhoods', those areas where university attendance is the lowest (Atherton and Mazahi, 2019). Today, all minority ethnic groups, other than Afro-Caribbean, are more likely to apply to higher education than their white equivalents (Augar, 2019).

PERCENTAGE OF UK DOMICILE ENTRANTS FROM LOW PARTICIPATION NEIGHBOURHOODS, BY LOCATION OF HE PROVIDER (YOUNG PEOPLE, FIRST DEGREE ENTRANTS)<sup>3</sup>

Fig. 4



Source: HESA (using POLAR 3)

Overall, females in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are 66 percent, 54 percent, and 43 percent respectively more likely to apply to higher education than males in the same country. In England, the ratio has decreased slightly from 1.36 to 1.35. This trend does not appear to extend to white females from low participation neighbourhoods and working class backgrounds, who remain significantly less likely to enter university than middle class females (UCAS, 2019).

A wide range of factors influence choices made by young people at school transition points, and the resulting choices are ongoing determinants of later attainment. For Boudon (1974) (quoted in Parker et. al., 2015), the attainment differences for 'at-risk' groups (such as immigrants, minorities, indigenous populations and low socio-economic groups) at transition points emanate from two sources: achievement differences (primary effects), and systematic

differences in rational choice behaviours (secondary effects). 'Primary effects' refers to differences in academic achievement distributions for these at-risk groups when compared with their same-age peers (such groups tend, on average, to have lower educational achievement). 'Secondary effects' refers to the choice behaviours and resources of young people and their families at educational transitions, which influence young people's destinations. More succinctly, these are the factors that lead to at-risk children choosing less ambitious transition pathways, even when they have similar levels of academic achievement. Boudon's 'Positional Theory', therefore argues that the extent of cultural capital in different families leads to different choices by young people (see also: Green et. al., 2016, and Jackson et. al., 2007).

<sup>3</sup>This data is not available for Scotland.

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## 4. THE DELIVERY LENS

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Buchanan et. al. (2018) asked: what qualities do we need to instil in our children, so they may ‘thrive and not just survive’ in the 21st Century? The focus of their paper was on the impact of AI, which they suggested will have both overt and covert impacts. Overtly, they argued that task and job redesign are likely to affect jobs with higher-level skills involving routine, analytical and predictable work in the professions, as well as low skilled jobs. Covertly, they argued that algorithms, the development of which is being driven by the private sector for a profit driven motive, are making more and more decisions that impact on our lives. These decisions are having increasing effects on a wide range of social, as well as economic, aspects of life. Formal education, they argued, must therefore develop people’s creative ability to adapt by developing ‘learning dispositions’ (the capacity to concentrate, resilience, curiosity and ability to function in learning relationships), rather than the generic employability skills identified above. Although the foundations for such dispositions are built in early years education, they are best developed in the context of mastering specific disciplines or fields of vocational expertise. As currently taught, they argued, these do not necessarily deepen learning dispositions. The delivery of the Welsh Bacalaureate would appear to provide an opportunity to develop such dispositions in Wales, but it has been recently described, by one committee of the National Assembly for Wales, as ‘inconsistent’ (Wightwick, 2019).

The Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES) at University College London, which suggests that there are weaknesses in current approaches to vocational education, is investigating whether school-based or apprenticeship-based VET is more effective in reducing the unequal outcomes of compulsory schooling. There are distinctive processes, they suggest, that govern the reproduction of skills inequality in different phases of education and training. When applied to 14-19 education and training, the theories of Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequalities would suggest that differentiated and diverse systems, with more branching points,

counterintuitively tend to increase inequalities of both opportunity and outcome. Conversely, more standardised systems may have the opposite effect.

Green and Pensiero (2016) suggest two explanations. Firstly, that systems that do not mandate the learning of maths and the national language on all upper-secondary programmes will be more likely to promote skills inequality. Secondly, that systems which contain pathways of very unequal durations will have the same effect. Moreover, they suggest that where vocational tracks are of high quality and attract students from across the ability spectrum this is likely to lead to a mitigation of skills inequality. In Liberal regime countries, the students of vocational courses are often assessed on the basis of their ability to demonstrate competences, rather than on their knowledge of a syllabus, and programmes often do not have a prescribed duration. Green and Pensiero argued that education systems that have more universal access to longer 14-19 programmes are better at mitigating skills inequality than systems with programmes of divergent lengths.

Janmaat and Green (2013) argue that although, in theory, lifelong learning could help reduce attainment gaps and enhance social mobility, in reality it tends to magnify such inequalities as, in the UK at least, the well-educated and people in work have higher participation rates in adult education than the less well educated and unemployed people. The OECD’s (2005) Promoting Adult Learning report, found that this is a common feature of most OECD countries. Furthermore, employers also tend to offer less-frequent training to workers with lower-level qualifications, and, in general, training rates and the length of training programmes have fallen for workers in most occupations (Henehan, 2019).

Overall attainment levels in the UK have, nevertheless, increased significantly over the last 20 years. The proportion of 22-64 year olds with lower levels of attainment fell from 45 percent in 1996-98 to 30 percent in 2016-18. Over the same time period, whilst the proportion with mid-level qualifications held roughly flat at 30 percent, the proportion



with higher-level qualifications more than doubled, from 14 to 33 percent. The share educated to degree level more than doubled from 10 to 21 percent, while, notwithstanding the class differentials identified above, the share with a master’s degree or higher more than trebled, from around four to 12 percent (Henehan, 2019).

Where students undertake HE courses also appears to have a social class influence. In all four countries of the UK, HE programmes may be provided in HE institutions (mostly universities) or in colleges of further education. Croxford and Raffe (2014) found that the proportion of full-time HE students who are based in colleges was significantly higher in Scotland (15.8 percent) and Northern Ireland (11.2 percent) than in England (1.6 percent) and Wales (0.6 percent)<sup>4</sup>. They also found that in all parts of the UK, college-based HE students are more likely to come from less advantaged social backgrounds. In 2018-19, a total of 6,727 students were studying for HE courses in Welsh colleges, including 3,478 full-time and 3,249 part-time<sup>5</sup>.

Where students obtain qualifications prior to undertaking HE courses also appears to have an impact on the type of HE

institution they tend to subsequently study. When college-based students applied to HE institutions, applicants in Wales and Northern Ireland were less likely to receive an offer from a pre-1992 university than comparably qualified peers based in schools. College applicants in England were as likely as their school-based peers to enter a pre-1992 university, in Scotland they were much more likely to do so (Croxford and Raffe, 2014).

With regard to raising attainment rates in vocational education provision, the Welsh Government is, for example, over half-way to hitting its target to create 100,000 apprentices. A key aspect of Welsh Government’s apprenticeship strategy, however, is to deliver fewer Foundation Apprenticeships and increase the number of Apprenticeship and Higher Apprenticeship starts. There is, as yet, little sign of a fundamental shift in favour of Higher Apprenticeships (Boshier, 2019). More generally, vocational education in Liberal regime countries such as the UK, have tended to cement their perceived secondary status by defining themselves as ‘the other’ relative to academic courses (Buchanan, 2018). There is, therefore, a major issue of parity of esteem between the two routes.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on 2009–2010 figures.

<sup>5</sup>These included: HNC, HND, FdSc, FdA, BSc, BA, PCET/PGCE, and Masters programmes. Based on a ColegauCymru survey of members.

## 5. THE SPATIAL LENS

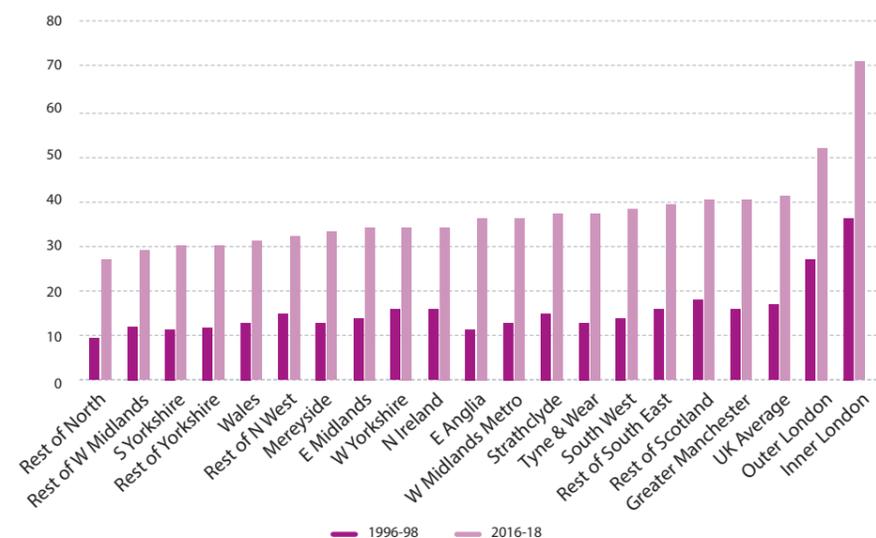
Place can have a significant impact on the quality and effectiveness of education that young people receive. Parents with higher incomes tend to live in neighbourhoods with more effective schools (Janmaat and Green, 2013). This effectively produces socially-segregated schooling, as the uneven social class composition of neighbourhoods is mirrored in the uneven social class composition of schools. Schools with more professional social class compositions tend to achieve higher attainment rates overall, as a school's composition also tends to affect pupils' educational attainment. A pupil's performance is influenced by the social composition of the school as well as by their own social background (Willms, 1997). In a segregated system, disadvantaged pupils can face both the disadvantage of a

negative school-composition effect as well as the influence of their own disadvantaged background.

Regional gaps in educational attainment appear entrenched. Whilst attainment growth over the last 20 years has occurred across the UK, it has been strongest in those regions that already had a more qualified workforce. The Sutton Trust (2018) report for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility identified the regional attainment gap at GCSE level. In addition, those regions that experienced the largest percentage point growth in their degree-holding 25-28 year old populations between the late 1990s and today, are the same regions that began the period with an above-average share of degree holders (Henehan, 2019).

REGIONAL SHARE OF 25-28 YEAR OLDS WITH A DEGREE OR HIGHER

Fig. 5



Source: Henehan, 2019

Henehan (2019) suggests a number of reasons for this spatial imbalance in attainment growth. The UK Labour Market Survey, from which this data is derived, calculates the share of 25-28 year olds adults currently living in a region who have a degree, and not the share of 25-28 year olds adults who were born, or grew up, in that region and went on to attain a degree. To some extent, therefore, agglomeration effects are likely to drive the data. Henehan does suggest that the impact of agglomeration effects can be overstated, as nearly half of individuals in the UK only ever live and work in the place in which they were born. Although Wales is a net exporter of graduates, and those

who migrate tend to have higher educational attainment, research by Bristow et. al. (2011) suggested that '...the notion of a clear, unequivocal brain drain has to be qualified'. Nevertheless, as the chart below identifies, children from professional socio-economic background are more likely to move away from their childhood region in every British region except London.

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE AGED 25-60 THAT MOVED AWAY FROM THEIR CHILDHOOD REGION, BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Fig. 6



Source: Social Mobility Commission (2019) - Analysis of Labour Force Survey (ONS)  
London professional data not provided in the source, but it is confirmed to be less than working class

Regional immobility means that a region's skills base is likely to be largely a product of its own education institutions. Indeed, the Social Mobility Commission (2017) found that better off regions tend to produce more highly skilled education-leavers and, for instance, found that they also outperform the rest of the country in terms of the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds that attain 'good' GCSEs in Maths and English, as well as the proportion from disadvantaged backgrounds who go on to university. Although it is argued that schools in more affluent locations

generally receive less funding, according to Hobbs (2016) they nevertheless have 'superior teaching resources'. This is, they suggest, because schools with more affluent social class compositions tend to recruit more effective teachers. Moreover, staff turnover rates are lower in schools with such social class compositions. Lower teacher turnover rates are believed to be beneficial to pupils' educational achievement.

The table below, produced from Welsh Government analysis of the Annual Population Survey (2018), identifies the percentage of working age adults qualified at selected NQF levels in each of the Welsh local authorities. Using this data, it is possible to identify a clear correlation between those local authority areas with higher levels of affluence, and those with higher attainment rates. The four local authorities

with the highest percentage of residents qualified below Level Two are: Merthyr Tydfil, Torfaen, Blaenau Gwent and Newport. The four local authorities with the highest percentage of residents qualified above Level Four are: Monmouthshire, Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan and the Isle of Anglesey.

PERCENTAGE OF WORKING AGE ADULTS QUALIFIED AT SELECTED NQF LEVELS, BY WELSH LOCAL AUTHORITY

Fig. 7

	Below Level 2	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4+
Isle of Anglesey	12	18	24	40
Gwynedd	11	18	26	39
Conwy	15	22	18	39
Denbighshire	13	23	21	35
Flintshire	13	22	25	31
Wrexham	14	23	21	36
Powys	13	19	23	38
Ceredigion	10	16	29	39
Pembrokeshire	12	22	21	37
Carmarthenshire	13	22	18	38
Swansea	10	17	26	37
Neath Port Talbot	14	25	20	31
Bridgend	15	19	19	36
Vale of Glamorgan	12	15	19	48
Cardiff	8	16	19	49
Rhondda Cynon Taf	14	21	21	33
Merthyr Tydfil	21	22	18	24
Caerphilly	14	24	22	31
Blaenau Gwent	16	21	23	25
Torfaen	17	20	23	32
Monmouthshire	11	16	16	51
Newport	16	21	20	36
Wales	13	20	21	38

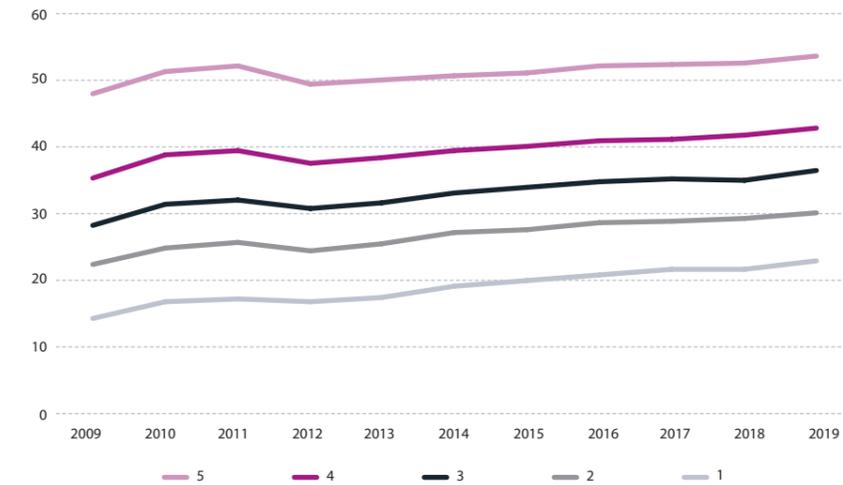
Source: Welsh Government Analysis of the Annual Population Survey, 2018

There is clear evidence that, despite an overall increase during the last twenty years in the share of young people with higher-level qualifications, the annual rate of increase has slowed. Across the UK as a whole, attainment levels continue to grow, but the growth has been smaller over recent years than it was during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Notably, master's degrees and higher qualifications have not experienced a particularly sharp slowdown. This could reflect the Effectively Maintained Inequality theory outlined above. The slowdown was relatively broad based across each region. The slowdown has also occurred across genders, and across ethnic minority status students (with the exception of men from a Black, Asian or other ethnic minority backgrounds) (Henehan, 2019).

POLAR4 is a measure of disadvantage that divides areas into quintiles based on the proportion of their young population who enter higher education. Areas classified as POLAR4 Q1 are those with the lowest rates of higher education participation, and are considered to be the most disadvantaged areas, while those in Q5 have the highest participation rates and are considered to be the most advantaged areas. The chart below shows the 18 year old application rates for each POLAR4 quintile since 2009. Notwithstanding the observations made above about the theories of Maximally and Effectively Maintained Inequality, application rates have increased for all quintiles. The gap in application rates between advantaged and disadvantaged applicants has narrowed over this period, but only slightly.

FIGURE EIGHT: UK 18 YEAR OLD UNIVERSITY APPLICATION RATES, BY POLAR4 QUINTILE (2009-19)

Fig. 8



Source: UCAS, 2019

Anders and Dorsett's (2015) longitudinal study examines how young people's early transitions from school to work have changed between cohorts born in 1958, 1970, 1980, and 1990. The paper considers how young people's characteristics predict how successful this transition will be, and whether this has changed between the four cohorts. They find that family socio-economic status, as captured through a combination of indicators, remains a powerful predictor of young people's chances of experiencing a transition that is a 'Potential Cause for Concern'. Hobbs (2016), for example, found that 81 percent of 16 year olds in England with fathers in 'higher professional' occupations achieved five or more GCSEs grades A\*-C or their equivalent, compared with just 59 percent with fathers in 'intermediate'

occupations, and only 42 percent with fathers in 'routine' occupations.

Janmaat and Green (2013) suggest that skills inequality need not be problematic if people of modest social backgrounds can attain higher levels of skills relatively easily, but that in the UK skills inequality appears to go hand in hand with strong social inheritance. Low socio-economic status remains particularly problematic in terms of university entry across Liberal regime countries. There is a large gap in higher education participation rates between students from high and low socio-economic status backgrounds: in the UK the gap is 46 percent, it is 36 percent in the United States and 32 percent in Australia (Janmaat and Green, 2013).

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## 6. THE EVALUATIVE LENS

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Economic and educational attainment inequalities appear to be linked. Educational attainment inequality is now higher, and social mobility lower in the UK than in any other developed country. Place has significant impacts on educational attainment, as spatial economic inequalities tend to be mirrored in a socio-economically polarised schools' system. Regional and local attainment rates are consequently heavily skewed toward more affluent locations. The UK has significant economic spatial imbalances, and this has major implications for achieving more equal educational outcomes.

Uncertainty about the future of work makes skills inequality a more urgent issue than ever. The Liberal economic regime found in the UK, however, appears far less able to deliver more equal educational outcomes than those found in Social Market and Social Democratic regimes. The generic competency-based skills training perspective, which has become the dominant methodology in Liberal regime countries, does not appear to recognise the socio-economic contextual factors that impact on educational achievement. This perspective also appears to offer certainty about what skills are required for work in the future economy, whereas no such certainty exists.

The Social Mobility Commission (2019) suggested that, although there is no national data evidence on well-being by social background, people who live in more deprived areas

typically have lower life satisfaction, are less likely to think that the things they do are worthwhile, and are less likely to feel happy and are more likely to be anxious. Deloitte's (2019) Global Millennial Survey found that two-thirds of millennials believe that, as a result of their backgrounds, some people never get a fair chance to achieve success irrespective of how hard they work. Moreover, they found that millennials do not feel that social mobility is one of their respective government's highest priorities, and that millennials in the UK are amongst the most pessimistic that the world and their place in it will improve.

If they are to deliver human well-being, rather than simply aim to achieve economic competitiveness, whether successfully or not, then education policy and delivery methodologies need to be more focused on nurturing what Buchanan et. al. (2017) have called 'learning dispositions'. As currently being taught, neither academic nor vocational education appears to satisfactorily engender such dispositions. Education should also focus on improvements to the non-market aspects of life and its success should be, at least in part, judged by these factors. In Wales, at least, there is now a statutory requirement to focus on the broader aspects of well-being and quality of life as a result of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. With twice the number of disadvantaged 16 to 18 year olds studying in further education than in school sixth forms (Social



Mobility Commission, 2019), further education institutions have a critical function in supporting social mobility and achieving well-being for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Social mobility in the UK and beyond is under threat from terminal decline as never before. We cannot abandon social mobility in the face of this growing social crisis, and FE institutions in Wales can, and should seek to, support mobility along with Welsh Government and other public, private and third sector organisations. This paper did not set out to identify particular recommendations with regard to the role of FE institutions in supporting social mobility, but rather to place social mobility centrally on the agenda of FE institutions. There is a relatively new interest in Wales about the role of what have been termed 'anchor institutions', which include FE institutions. It is important, however, that such interest is not limited in a rather reductionist way to local wealth anchoring. In developing their 'anchor missions', as we believe they must, FE institutions must demonstrate a strong commitment to improving social mobility in the communities they serve. There is, quite rightfully, a strong commitment by colleges to enhance attainment, but there also needs to be a similarly strong commitment to enrich experiences. Credentialisation is a reality in educational provision, but FE must also address wider issues. FE institutions are almost uniquely placed in communities

across Wales to bring post-16 education to the widest possible mix of people. With the increasing threat of growing social immobility, this is a significant responsibility. Over the next few years ColegauCymru needs to work with its FE members, Welsh Government and others, in developing specific and codified anchor missions for each FE institution in Wales. Such missions need to centrally address the question of what colleges can do to support social mobility, and Welsh Government needs to be responsive to these discussions and proposals as they emerge across social, delivery and spatial lenses, and not just the economic lens.

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