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- Sam did his postgraduate studies in Manchester.
- LKMco, the youth and education think and action-tank which exists to help ensure that young people make fulfilling transitions to adulthood
- They conduct research on the crucial issues facing young people and the education system; they advocate for solutions, try to shape society's understanding of young people's lives, and influence the policy process; and work directly with front-line organisations and practitioners, to help them develop and evaluate the work they do.
- **Social mobility:** - being 'socially mobile' is seen as the marker of a 'successful' transition from childhood to adulthood.
- Ending up somewhere that's in some way 'better' than where you started; 'getting on'; 'moving up'; 'breaking free of your roots'; doing things your parents could only dream of – as a society, we tend to deploy some combination of these ideas, or ideals, when we set out what 'success' looks like for young people.
- These definitions of success are at a policy level, in government speeches; at a school level, in mission statements; and we often speak in these terms when we're advising young people one-to-one.
- At face value, this idea of success – in terms of being 'socially mobile' – seems simple, and uncontroversial - as a society, we don't have a very well-developed understanding of 'social mobility', what it means, how we should measure it.
- We are generally not aware of whether or not young people are socially mobile or not, and, crucially, whether it should even be our aim – whether it's the right way of defining 'success'.
- The Social Mobility Commission released its State of the Nation report for 2018/19, and it found that social mobility has remained "virtually stagnant" since 2014. - the better off are nearly 80% more likely to end up in professional jobs than those from a working-class background.
- Even when people from disadvantaged backgrounds land a professional job, they earn 17% less than their privileged colleagues.
- Lots remains to be done to ensure that all young people can make fulfilling transitions to adulthood - a long way to go in order to even come close to a society, and an education system, where all young people have a good chance of getting to where they want to get to
- Underneath headline trends such as the gap in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers, certain groups of young people face barriers at particular stages in their journeys from childhood, to youth, to adulthood.
- Sometimes barriers kick in late, or progress deteriorates over time, or falls off a cliff at particular points of transition, meaning we can never assume that social mobility has been secured.
- We tend to focus on particular headline measures at particular stages, such as the attainment gap between Free School Meal- and non-Free School Meal-

eligible pupils at the end of secondary school, which diverts our attention away from these underlying group differences.

- Is the social mobility narrative actually that helpful? Does it encourage us to look at issues like inequality and disadvantage in the most meaningful, constructive way.
 - Although social mobility neatly captures our broad desire for young people to 'get on', 'aim high', and 'be the best they can be' - Should 'getting on' in life have to mean leaving the area you've grown up in? - more important for young people to earn more than their parents, or to do more highly skilled work?
 - There isn't room for everyone to rise to the top, how should we allocate people to the highest positions?
 - Defining social mobility - Class is still a useful notion when we're describing British society, how we all fit into that society, and why some people's lives turn out so differently to others.
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- **Absolute and relative mobility**
 - The idea of 'absolute' mobility captures mobility that's due to changing occupational structures in the economy around us. The increase in service occupations in the last few decades, and the decline of blue collar work, have driven high levels of absolute mobility as lots of jobs have been created at the 'top'.
 - More young people from all kinds of backgrounds have entered these jobs, because there are more of them – and fewer of the traditional, blue collar, or lower skilled work their parents might've done.
 - To figure out whether our society is becoming fairer or not, we should be interested in whether young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are becoming more or less likely than their advantaged peers to enter high status positions.
 - Relative mobility: Even when absolute mobility is increasing (with lots more people from working class backgrounds ending up in middle class jobs, for instance) this doesn't mean relative mobility necessarily changes, if, for instance, middle class kids are moving into middle class jobs at an even higher rate (Li and Devine 2011).
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- **Upward and downward mobility:** As well as a distinction between social mobility in terms of income versus social class, and absolute versus relative social mobility, it's also crucial to observe that social mobility can involve moving 'down' as well as moving 'up'.
 - This is the access to highly selective and competitive courses and jobs, one young person's successful transition makes it that bit harder for another young person to end up in that same destination
 - The link between social mobility and meritocracy: Social mobility is all about ending up somewhere different to where you started.
 - In a 'socially mobile' society, people can easily 'break away' from their background. This means where they end up is less to do with their background – such as their parents' social class or income – more to do with something else, such as their ability, how hard they work, and their level of education.

- When young people's outcomes are driven less by their background, and more by their effort, skills and qualifications - this is a 'meritocratic' society – one where rewards are distributed according to merit, rather than being ascribed or inherited.
- The term 'meritocracy' was originally coined satirically, by Michael Young, who worried about what would happen, in a 'meritocratic' society, to people who we deemed to be 'less able, or 'less hard-working'. It's now generally used uncritically, along with the idea of 'social mobility', to describe a vision of a just and fair society.
- Meritocracy' is often defined in terms of an 'OED triangle',
- The meritocracy thesis holds that OE and OD will weaken over time (the dotted lines), and ED will strengthen over time (the bold line).
- Advocates of social mobility and meritocracy argue that society is where a young person's background has little bearing on how they do at school, and on where they end up, and the main determinant of where young people end up is the qualifications they secure at the end of education, which are, in turn, earned on the basis of their own hard work and talents.
- Long-term trends in social mobility: is social mobility improving? Is society becoming more meritocratic? Or is the situation getting worse?
- Comparing 1991 and 2005 data, researchers at the University of Manchester find that OE has weakened over time but still remains (i.e. there is still a strong class gradient to educational attainment).
- OD remains strong, but has declined over time.
- These two trends support the meritocracy thesis. Despite remaining very strong, ED has weakened over time (in other words. the occupational returns of high levels of education are slightly slimmer now than they used to be).
- Education is losing its status as an 'exclusive good' over time. A 'socially mobile' or 'successful' transition isn't secured if a young person does well at the end of school, college, or even at the end of university
- The overall consensus is that educational attainment is the major influence on young people's occupational outcomes, but young people's backgrounds still have a strong impact.
- The impact of background on occupational outcomes is partly indirect - shaping how young people do at school (OE). And partly direct – shaping the likelihood of working class kids getting middle class jobs, even when they do well at school (OD) (Devine and Li 2013).
- If your view of the ideal society is one where occupational positions are due entirely to people's efforts and talents, we're clearly a long way from this being a reality.
- The idea of social mobility – and the closely related ideal of the meritocracy – are central to how we talk about 'student success' in the UK today.
- One of the issues with 'social mobility' is its focus on 'starting points' and 'outcomes', which means we overlook the long and winding journey that connects the two.
- Young people who struggle to make successful transitions into adulthood can fall by the wayside at any number of points between birth and their early twenties.

- GCSE results at age 16 tend to be used as the main benchmark of educational success. But this sometimes leads us to ignore the significant gaps that can open up before and after secondary school.
- why do some young people don't make 'socially mobile' journeys through life? We need to take the long view – looking at the stark differences in outcomes between different groups of young people in the early years, primary, secondary, further and higher education, as well as group-based differences that rear up when young people enter the labour market.
- Many of the widest gaps in young people's outcomes, throughout their journey through education, relate to their family's socioeconomic status, income or class.
- Gaps between pupils from high and low income backgrounds; between those eligible for Free School Meals and those not, between those whose parents have professional and managerial jobs, and those whose parents do not – are often the widest gaps.
- Gaps vary for different groups of young people; girls and boys; from different ethnic groups; in different parts of the country.
- Overview of some of the most significant gaps, as they present themselves at different stages in the education system, and some of the gaps that tend to be overlooked: Sam shows how the huge gaps in young people's 'later' outcomes - access to higher education, and the likelihood they will attain particular jobs - in many cases open up much much earlier in their lives.
- Secondly, Sam shows how in some cases, young people who have achieved well through the early years, primary, secondary, and at 18, then struggle to convert these outcomes into successful transitions through higher education and into the labour market.
- The early years: By age 5, children from low-income backgrounds are, on average, 15 months behind their better-off peers in their vocabulary.
- As a recent Save the Children report identifies, there's a gendered dimension to this inequality - disadvantaged boys appearing to have fallen particularly far behind by the time they get to age 5.
- In the Early Years, pupils who qualify for Free School Meals and are from a White Other ethnic background appear to perform most poorly,
- We find that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are the lowest performing group at this stage. This is a group that tend to be systematically overlooked at every stage of the education system.
- At school White British and White Other children from low income homes are also the lowest performing groups at the end of primary school.
- White British pupils then go on to make the least progress throughout secondary school, where they fall further behind. The socio-economic attainment gap is largest amongst White British pupils at all Key Stages (EGSM p.3).
- Black pupils start primary school with levels of attainment broadly in line with the national average, but by the end of primary they have started to slip behind, a trend which then worsens throughout secondary school and leaves
- Black students as the ethnic group with the worst outcomes by the end of Key Stage 5.

- This example of strong beginnings losing momentum is mirrored when we look at the overall attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM and non-FSM-eligible pupils, across all ethnic groups.
- Year-on-year, the FSM attainment gap is closing at KS4.
- Underneath this trend, the FSM/non-FSM progress gap during secondary has been widening since 2009 – for a decade.
- This suggests reductions in the attainment gap at KS4 are being largely driven by disadvantaged pupils' increasing attainment at primary, - their progress then slows when they get to secondary school.
- The Sutton Trust point out it will take over 40 years to eliminate the gap, at current rates of progress (Sutton Trust 2019).
- Analysis by the Education Policy Institute reaches much the same conclusion: And in GCSE Maths and English, the EPI predict that the disadvantage gap won't close until 2155. In 136 years' time.
- Almost all of us in this room will be either retired, or dead, by the time disadvantaged young people are achieving the same as their peers at the end of secondary school.
- We need to be worried about what happens at secondary school for disadvantaged pupils.
- The FSM attainment gaps at KS2 and KS4 tend to be taken as the key benchmarks of equality within our education system, with smaller gaps suggesting disadvantaged young people are more likely to be socially mobile.
- At a national level and within most schools, there's almost as much variation within the group of FSM pupils, and within the group of non-FSM pupils, as there is between those two groups.
- Although on average FSM pupils don't attain as highly, there's a huge spread of attainment around these averages – with many disadvantaged pupils attaining very highly, and many relatively advantaged pupils attaining poorly (DFE 2015).
- The graph shows the KS4 attainment of every pupil in 2015, placed in order from lowest to highest, left to right. Dark bars are disadvantaged students; light bars are other students.
- There are many dark bars over here to the right, and there are many lighter bars over here to the left – disadvantaged pupils are over-represented in the lower-performing part of the spectrum.
- The same goes for the characteristics of these two groups of pupils – in most schools there will be both FSM and non-FSM pupils with behaviour and attendance problems, and with particular learning needs.
- Pupils on Free School Meals tend to be more likely to have these characteristics, that doesn't mean FSM is a neat proxy for pupils who require particular forms of support.
- It's important to note that these gaps vary by region. In London, pupils tend to do better across the board, and there is far less of an attainment gradient by FSM; the same gaps exist, but they tend to be smaller.
- White pupils who have been long-term FSM-eligible tend to fare worst at GCSE across the country, but this gap is significantly smaller in London schools where these White, long-term disadvantaged pupils form a minority of their school's pupil population (Datalab 2018).

- Meanwhile, these long-term disadvantaged White pupils are often in the majority in coastal schools, which may help to explain why many schools in these locations appear to struggle.
- **Further education:** After school, we know that disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers tend to follow different routes, with disadvantaged students more likely to go on to FE colleges rather than sixth forms.
- White British FSM pupils' poor performance persists at KS5, but STEM appears to be a key marker.
- Black and Pakistani/Bangladeshi pupils achieve particularly low grades in STEM subjects, and although girls are generally achieving better than boys at the age of 18, they appear to fall behind boys in STEM subjects.
- **Into university:** When we come to the final stage of students' journeys through education, we see (on the left) that ethnicity has a significant bearing on access to higher education.
- However, the underperformance of White British students is reversed; they are most likely to gain a First or 2:1.
- Black students, meanwhile, don't face particularly significant barriers to accessing higher education but do face barriers to achieving a good degree class (as the graph on the right indicates).
- When it comes to accessing university, GCSE attainment is crucial. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2016 found that "Accounting for which qualifications young people take, in which subjects, and which grades they receive at age 16, can explain all of the gap in university access between the richest and poorest students" (IFS 2016).
- There is still a big gap in FSM vs. non-FSM access to higher education if we control for GCSE attainment narrowly (just controlling for grades, not controlling for subject choices).
- Successful transitions to higher education depend on the subjects students choose, as well as the grades they get.
- **At university:** Once students reach university, we see that socioeconomic status has a big bearing on degree completion and dropout, and level of degree attained (IFS 2017).
- There's a linear relationship between the level of deprivation of a students' home background and their chances of dropping out of higher education.
- Unlike access to HE, this divergence in HE outcomes by socioeconomic status doesn't go away when we compare students with the same prior attainment, on the same courses, at the same institutions.
- A student's background appears to impact directly on their chances of lasting the course at university, regardless of how they did at school, which university they go to and which course they study.
- Compounding the effect of socioeconomic status, Black students are also particularly vulnerable to dropping out.
- **Into the labour market:** We've seen how particular groups of young people struggle to make gains within the education system at various different

stages, and how the groups faring the worst at one stage aren't necessarily the groups who are struggling at the next.

- Even once we've followed young people through to the end of higher education, different groups still tend to face different prospects.
- We know there is a graduate earnings premium, we need to be wary of averages and point estimates.
- Although graduates earn more than non-graduates on average, there is wide variation depending on the institution students attend, the subjects they study and the class of degree they get – and this variation has increased in recent years, as more and more young people achieve degree-level qualifications (IFS 2016).
- A concern is the failure of students from particular ethnic backgrounds to translate their educational successes into labour market outcomes. There appears to be a broken mobility promise for Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people, with unemployment particularly prevalent amongst Bangladeshi women, and both Pakistani men and women relatively unlikely to secure managerial or professional occupations (EGSM p.4).
- **The intergenerational context:** In fact, when we look at the current generation of young adults as a whole, against the context of the generations that came before them, it seems that we're witnessing the breakdown of a historical social contract.
- Today's young adults are the first generation to be earning less, in real terms, than the generation before them did at the same age (RF p.41). And as research from the Resolution Foundation suggests, poor generational pay performance isn't just about the impact of the financial crisis: it also reflects a long-term slowing of the rate at which each new cohort of young people increases its educational advantage over the cohort before (RF p.43).
- While Generation X saw the proportion of 28 year-olds with a degree increase by 16 percentage points in 11 years, for Millennials the increase has been just 6 percentage points over the same time period.
- When it comes to intergenerational social mobility, we're seeing smaller and smaller increases in the proportion of young people holding a degree, and, it appears, smaller returns (in terms of wages) of holding a degree.
- **Area-based differences in mobility:** The way in which young people's prospects are shaped by the areas they live in. Two years ago the Department for Education drew up a Social Mobility Index, which it used to identify a set of Opportunity Areas, which would receive targeted interventions in order to address low levels of social mobility.
- The Index draws together data on a range of indicators, from the quality of early years and school provision in an area, to young people's attainment, NEET rates, HE access rates, salaries, and housing affordability – in order to give an overall impression of young people's chances of 'getting on' in a given local area.
- There are over 300 local authorities in England, so I recently analysed the DfE's data using an area typology from the Office for National Statistics. This groups local authorities together based on how similar they are as places.

- The average scores on the Social Mobility Index for different types of area - we see London and other ethnically diverse, metropolitan centres score highly.
 - Areas described as 'Services and Industrial Legacy' appear to be particularly challenging contexts for young people to make successful transitions.
 - Among the areas falling under this area type are the nearby authorities of Halton, Wigan, St Helens, Knowsley, Sefton, and Wirral.
 - This analysis is a reminder that you're serving challenging areas, where people doing front-line work with young people have a crucial role in supporting their transitions.
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- **Issues with the 'social mobility' narrative:** We've explored how 'student success' is often couched in terms of 'social mobility', and that 'social mobility' can mean a range of different things, all united by the idea of ending up somewhere which is, in some sense, better than where you started.
 - We saw how education is still a key engine in mobility, even if its powers appear to be weakening. We then saw how young people often don't follow neat, linear journeys – instead facing hurdles at particular stages, with their fortunes changing from Key Stage to Key Stage.
 - The 'long view' helps us to see all this complexity for what it is, and also reminds us that 'successful' transitions aren't necessarily nailed down when young people do well at school, or get into university, or even when they do well at university.
 - And, we can also get a sense of how young people's chances of making 'socially mobile' transitions are dependent not just on their individual characteristics, but on the type of area they live in.
 - And this, is one of the most contentious aspects of the social mobility discourse: the idea that in order to 'get on' young people from certain types of area need to 'get out'.
 - Social mobility implies spatial mobility, particularly for young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where there are fewer opportunities.
 - Disadvantaged young people therefore have to pay a higher price to be socially mobile.
 - As the Institute for Public Policy Research argued, "it cannot be right that to succeed, people must leave the places to which they are rooted" (IPPR 2018: 6).
 - The quote on the screen is from Billy, one of the boys who took part in my fieldwork in Manchester. It's clear that Billy was struggling to embrace the idea of 'getting on' if this meant moving away from family; away from home.
 - As a society we often forget about the price we expect young people to pay in order to fit around the economy that we've made for them.
 - As long as our economy continues to be so spatially imbalanced, young people from many parts of the country will continue to face significant barriers to realising 'socially mobile' outcomes, or, if they do, they will have to make far greater sacrifices in other areas of their lives in order to do so.