

Working class youth priced out of higher education in UK

Alice Summers
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Young people from the wealthiest areas in the UK are far more likely to go to university than their disadvantaged peers from the poorest parts of the country.

On average, in the most disadvantaged 10 percent of postcodes, barely one in five young people go to university. This compares to half of sixth-form students in the wealthiest 10 percent.

In the worst cases, in some areas of the UK, such as in poorer parts of Derbyshire, the figure drops to only 1 in 20. In the richest areas of Buckinghamshire, more than 80 percent of young people progress to higher education, 18 times as many as in the most deprived area.

The figures come from a study, “Beyond Access: Getting to University and Succeeding There,” by educational charity Teach First. Global financial services company Credit Suisse partnered the charity in preparing the report. It provides further confirmation of the fact that social and economic background continue to be the overriding determinants in a child’s educational and career opportunities.

Noting the vast inequalities in the educational system, the Teach First report stated that “[no] route should be easier to achieve simply because of your background or how much money your parents earn. ...

“Yet today, young people from low income families repeatedly find doors closed and paths blocked to them at every stage of their lives. They are less likely to go to schools rated outstanding, less likely to get five good GCSEs and less likely to progress to higher education, employment or training.”

In fact, as a previous Teach First report revealed, poor pupils are less than half as likely to go to an outstanding school as their richer peers. Only 18 percent of children from the most deprived 20 percent of families attend these institutions. By way of comparison, fully 43 percent of pupils at schools rated as “outstanding” by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and

Skills), the regulatory government body, come from the wealthiest 20 percent of families.

In addition, only one in three disadvantaged pupils achieves five GCSEs at grades A*-C, roughly half the rate of their richer peers. As the Teach First report noted, for many working class children from poorer areas, “the path to university is closed before they have even had the chance to consider it.”

In a poll conducted by the social mobility charity, the Sutton Trust, 44 percent of children who did not plan to go to university said that their main reason for this was that they did not think they would be able to get good enough grades.

The Sutton Trust quizzed children between 11 and 16 years old, finding that the number of secondary school pupils in England and Wales who are expecting to go to university has been declining since 2009. While a high of 81 percent of secondary school children hoped to progress to higher education in 2013, this fell to 79 percent in 2015, 77 percent last year and to an eight-year low of 74 percent this year.

While worries about grades were an important factor for many children, by far the most important reasons for not planning on going to university were fears about finances. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the 11-to-16-year-olds polled, who did not expect to progress to higher education, cited reasons such as wanting to start earning money as soon as possible or concerns over debt.

With tuition fees of £9,250 a year at most universities and the scrapping of maintenance grants for many students, young people from the poorest families can expect to incur debts of as much as £57,000 by the time they graduate.

Even among those young people who do plan to attend higher education institutions, more than half (51 percent) said that they were worried about the financial burden this will impose, compared to 47 percent last year.

A survey of 18-to-25-year-olds conducted by pollster ComRes for Teach First found that almost half (47 percent) of the most disadvantaged young people who did not progress to higher education said they felt like they had missed out. Thirty-seven percent felt their career opportunities would be limited by their lack of a degree, while 27 percent of disadvantaged young people felt they had missed out on social opportunities and 17 percent on both.

Teach First explained that in addition to prohibitive factors such as grades and finances, young people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to go on to university as they often do not receive the support and advice on higher education that their wealthier peers—with greater access to school careers and employability services—take for granted.

The research showed that even when disadvantaged students are able to defeat the odds and manage to get a high-quality education, obtain the necessary grades and get the support required to make informed decisions, barriers to completing their university degree are still placed before them. Poorer students are significantly more likely to drop out of university in their first year than their wealthier peers.

According to the Office of Fair Access, in the 2014-2015 academic year, 8.8 percent of full-time undergraduates below the age of 21 coming from disadvantaged backgrounds did not continue with their studies beyond their first year. By contrast, in the same period, fewer than 5 percent of wealthy students dropped out of university.

Polls conducted by Teach First showed that two-fifths (40 percent) of disadvantaged students currently studying at university have considered dropping out. Poorer students are more likely to feel isolated and nervous in an unfamiliar setting, the report stated, with dropout rates for disadvantaged students at their highest levels in five years.

Worries about not having enough money are one of the factors causing students the most stress. The survey found that 44 percent of all students said this caused them stress in their first year. Among disadvantaged students, nearly a third (31 percent) found it difficult to keep up with their academic studies alongside paid work, compared to 20 percent of the wealthiest students.

Nearly half (47 percent) of poorer students said that keeping up with academic work caused them stress.

Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency published in May of this year revealed that a record 1,180

students dropped out of university in 2014-2015, due to mental health problems such as anxiety. This has more than trebled since 2009-2010—in the aftermath of the global financial crash—when 380 students were forced to leave university for this reason.

While documenting the enormous obstacles placed before working class youth, the survey offers no remedy.

Various proposals offered up by Teach First/Credit Suisse in no way deal with the fundamental issues underlying the university “wealth gap”—the stranglehold of the profit system over all aspects of economic life and the drive by the ruling elite to do away with social rights won by the working class in decades of struggle—including the right to higher education.

Teach First/Credit Suisse fully accept that the poorest sections of society are disadvantaged and offer a few mild palliatives, such as the need to attract the country’s best graduates to become teachers—especially to work in the disadvantaged communities that currently struggle to recruit. It states, “The UK government should forgive a proportion [not all] of students’ loans for those who commit to teaching in areas of greatest educational need. ...”

In the foreword, report author Alex Burr states that “2017 is Teach First’s 15th anniversary and we are doing everything we can to focus our efforts on addressing these issues through a year of action, campaigning and mobilisation to help every young person achieve their seemingly impossible dreams.”

The fact that access to higher education is now described in terms of an “impossible dream” for those from poor backgrounds is an indictment of the ruling capitalist elite and its political representatives.



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