

CSI 25: Trends in educational mobility in the UK

Summary

- In terms of absolute educational mobility, children whose parents had no educational qualifications became more likely to experience upward mobility after the post-1965 changes in secondary and tertiary education. The improvement was greater for women than men.
 - Higher up the educational distribution, however, absolute educational mobility declined for both men and women.
 - In terms of relative mobility, the educational mobility of men did not change significantly over this period, but it improved for women.
 - The major changes in the education system were accompanied by improvements primarily for those women whose parents had had the least education.
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Introduction

The Education act of 1944 extended free education to all state secondary schools and introduced the ‘tripartite’ system of grammar, technical and modern schools. However, concerns soon developed about the educational inequalities produced by this system. A little over 20 years later, in 1965 the ‘Circular 10/65’ was issued to encourage local education authorities to move away from the tripartite system to non-selective secondary education in comprehensive schools. The proportion of pupils at comprehensives subsequently increased from 9% in 1965 to 91% by 1985¹. In addition to this change to secondary education, there was expansion to tertiary education in the 1960s and again in the early 1990s when polytechnics were brought into the university sector. These educational policies had the aim of reducing inequalities and giving all pupils, regardless of their background, the chance to get a good education and be socially mobile. But did they have the desired effect?

In this briefing note we examine the *intergenerational transmission of advantage* by comparing individual educational attainment to the educational attainment of their parents. A close relationship between child and parental outcomes implies a rigid society in which family background exerts a strong influence on life chances. On the other hand, a looser relationship implies a more fluid society in which a child can attain high qualifications regardless of how well their parents did. We look at these relationships between parents’ and child’s education for two cohorts and ask whether the changes to the educational system influenced the intergenerational transmission of advantage. The first cohort we examine is of individuals born between 1943 and 1954 and who entered secondary school before the 1965 circular and left before the major expansion to the university system. Our second cohort comprises individuals born between 1964 and 1984 who came through the newer system.

Data and Measures

Data: For the analysis of the impact of school type in the older cohort we used the British Household Panel Study (BHPS). The survey asked people what type of school they attended, when they left school and their highest educational level. We do not know in which UK country the person received their secondary education, but we select UK-born people living in England and Wales in 2003 for the analysis. To compare intergenerational mobility, we use Understanding Society (USoc) for both cohorts. We select UK-born respondents born between 1943 and 1954 and 1964 and 1984, respectively, and interviewed in the first wave (2009-10). Subsequent waves were used to obtain additional information. The minimum age at which qualifications are measured for this cohort is 25, making them old enough to have obtained a degree. Weights to provide a representative cross-section of the UK population were used in the analyses.

Measuring Relative Mobility: To measure relative rates of mobility we calculate expected probabilities of educational attainment imagining that obtaining qualifications is entirely independent of the education of one’s parents. We then compare this “perfect mobility” with the actual rates to generate a measure of relative mobility, one that is standardised for the changing frequencies in each category. This measure is calculated using the generational persistence measure

Generational Persistence Measure (average number of generations): Suppose there are 1000 women from the 1943-54 cohort in the class whose parents have a degree. Of those 52.3% (see Fig 1) themselves obtained a degree, and therefore 523 will be found in the degree class in the next generation, $1000 \times 0.523 \times 0.523$ (=274) will be found in the third generation, $1000 \times 0.523 \times 0.523 \times 0.523$ (=143) in the fourth generation and so on. We obtain the average of time spent in the degree class by summing all of these terms and dividing by 1000. The sum of such an infinite series is given by the formula $1/(1-0.523)=2.10$.

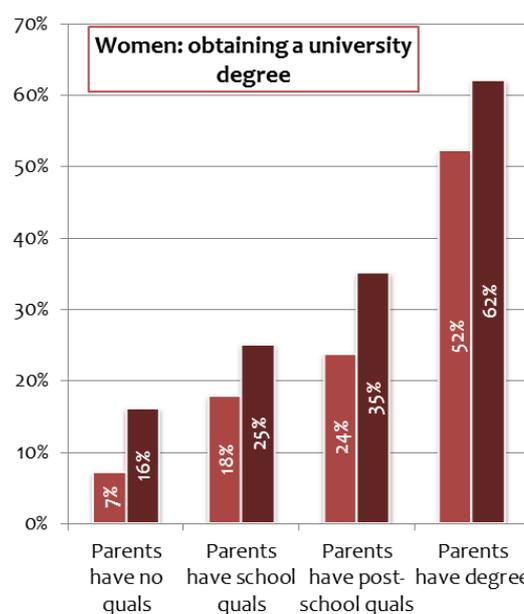
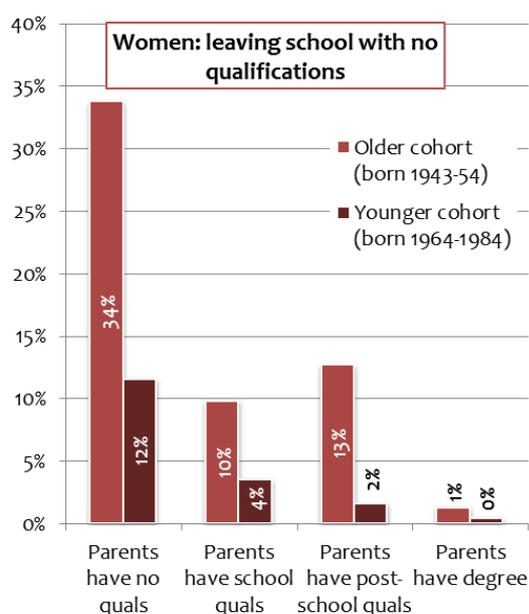
Did absolute educational mobility increase?

Figure 1 compares, for each level of parents' education, the chances of women from the two cohorts leaving school with no qualifications and obtaining a university degree. Looking at the left-hand panel, firstly, we can see that for all levels of parents' education, the percentage leaving school with no qualifications was higher in the older cohort (lighter bars) than the younger (darker bars). Of those women born between 1943 and 54, whose parents had no qualifications, 34% themselves also left school with no qualifications. After the reforms, this fell to 12%. Although this was a substantial decline, this figure is still far higher than for the children of parents with educational qualifications of any level. Children of degree-educated parents in both cohorts were particularly unlikely to leave school with no qualifications (1% in the older cohort and 0% for the more recent cohort).

In the right-hand panel of Figure 1, we see the effects of the expansion to the university system: women from all backgrounds in the younger cohort were more likely to get a degree than the older cohort. However, family background continued to exert a powerful influence. Among the older cohort women of degree-educated parents were 46 percentage points more likely to get a degree than women of parents with no qualifications (62% compared to 16%). The attainment gap among the older cohort had been almost the same at 45 percentage points. Further, the chance of obtaining a degree among daughters of degree-educated parents increased from 52% to 62% indicating a rise in *immobility*

Figures 1 and 2: After the 1965 educational reform fewer women (Fig 1) and men (Fig 2) left school with no qualifications while more obtained a degree. Educational attainment was strongly influenced by parents' education in both cohorts

Women: leaving school with no qualifications



Men: leaving school with no qualifications

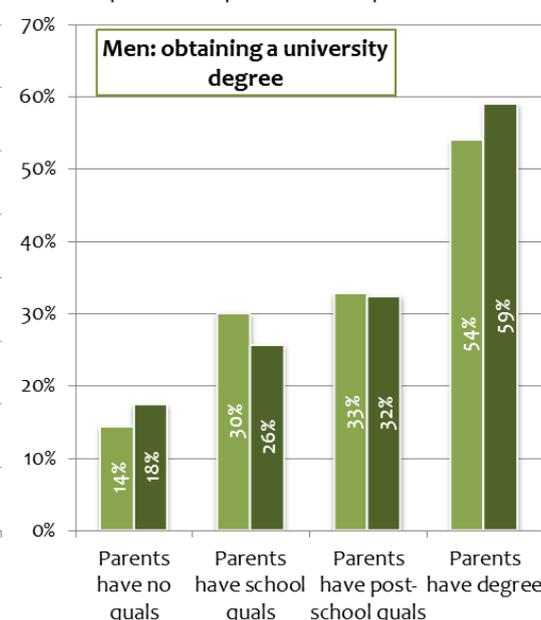
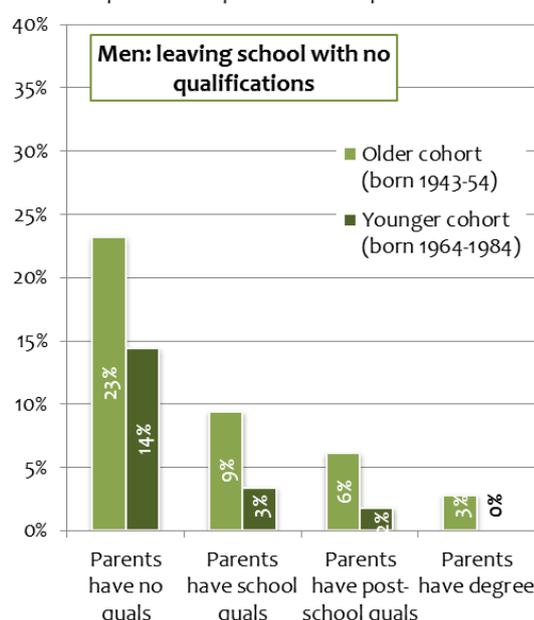
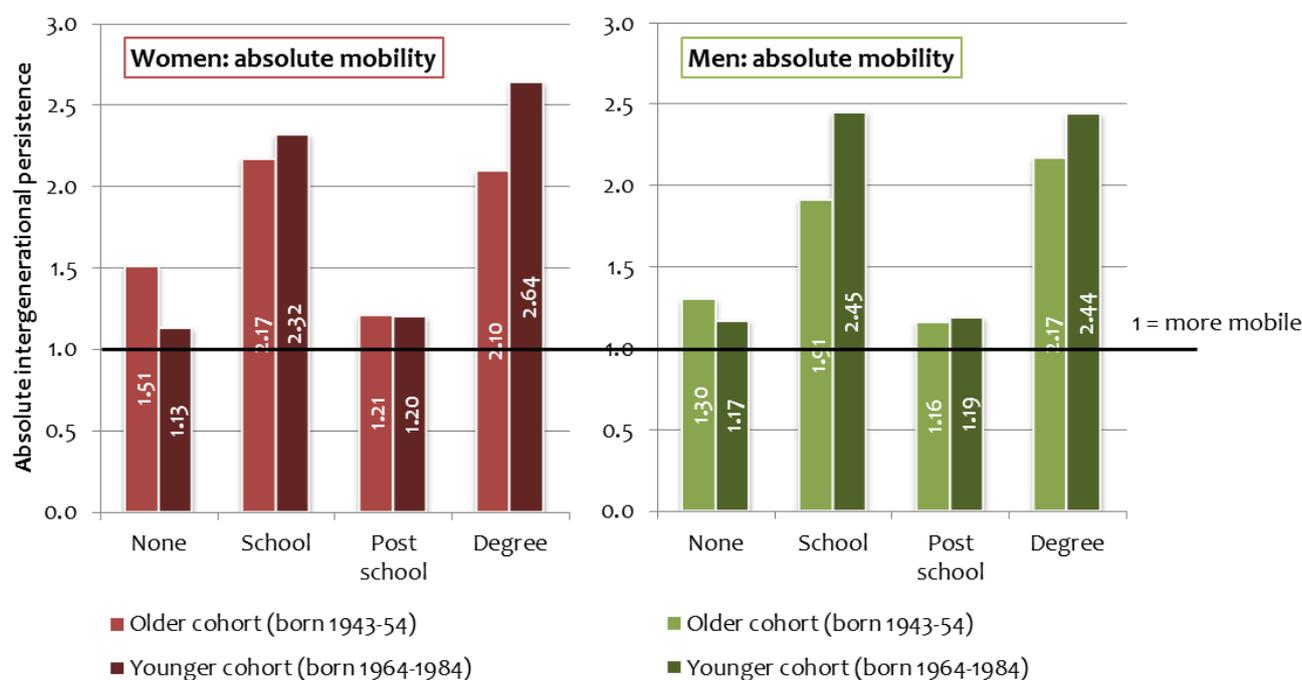


Figure 2 shows a similar overall pattern for men. However, there are several differences to women: firstly, the percentages of men leaving school with no qualifications among the older cohort were far lower than for women (e.g. of the children of parents with no qualifications, 23% of men compared to 34% of women). Among the younger cohort, the percentages for men and women are more similar. Secondly, the cohort differences in obtaining a degree were smaller for men. It appears that the new education system with expanded opportunities to go to university opened up new opportunities for women to a greater extent than for men.

Until now we have just looked at two ‘starting points’ – no qualifications or degree. In Figure 3 we introduce a measure to determine whether intergenerational educational mobility increased or decreased for each of four educational outcomes: no qualifications, secondary, post-secondary, and degree. This measure (also see box *Data and Measures*) is derived from the percentages of children attaining the same level qualifications as their parents and calculated as the *average number of generations* spent in that class: the closer to 1, the more mobility. Comparing the two cohorts we can see that educational mobility increased for both daughters and sons of parents with no qualifications but by a greater extent for daughters. Conversely, mobility declined for those having degree-educated parents (as we also saw in Figs 1 and 2) and for those with school-level qualifications.

Fig 3: Absolute mobility increased for those with parents without qualifications. Mobility declined for men and women with school-level qualifications and degrees.

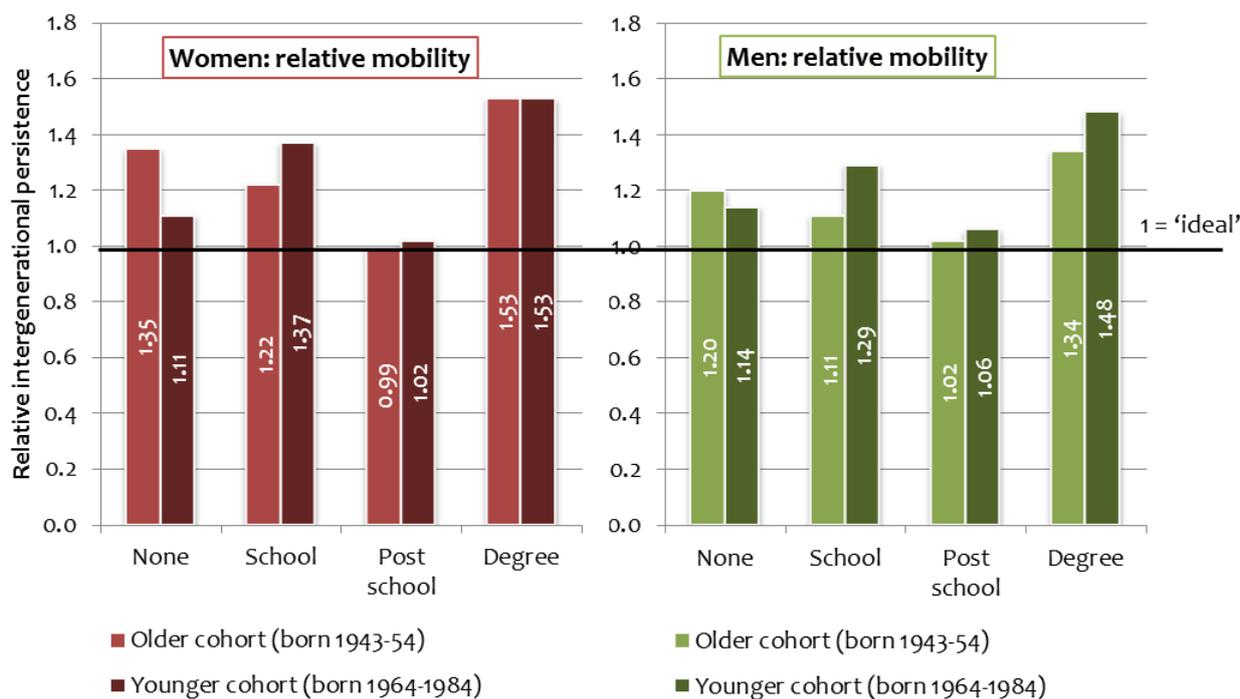


Relative mobility

When discussing absolute mobility, as above, we are asking ‘what proportion of the adult population is in a different educational class from their parents?’ On the other hand, when discussing relative mobility, we are asking ‘how big is the difference in mobility chances of someone with, say, degree-educated parents relative to someone whose parents had no qualifications?’ Relative rates of mobility are a way of telling us how ‘fluid’ or ‘sticky’ educational reproduction is. Measures of relative mobility also account for the changing educational profile of parents, many more of whom are degree-educated, for example, in the younger cohort than the older. This measure is also calculated using the generational persistence measure where scores closer to one indicate more fluidity.

Figure 4 shows that relative mobility improved for women whose parents had no qualifications (the measure of relative intergenerational persistence fell from 1.35 to 1.11) but there is evidence of deteriorating relative mobility among women whose parents had a school qualification. Broadly similar trends are seen for men but the improvement in relative mobility among the bottom origin groups is larger for women.

Fig 4: Relative educational mobility improved for men and women whose parents had no qualifications, but to a greater extent for women. Relative mobility in attaining school-level qualifications deteriorated for both men and women



Conclusions

In terms of absolute educational mobility, the children of parents lacking educational qualifications became more upwardly mobile after the major changes in secondary and tertiary education, but of course the number of parents with such limited education became much rarer. The trend was more pronounced for women than for men. At the top of the education distribution, however, women's absolute mobility did not improve. Looking at the entire education distribution, absolute mobility increased for women and declined for men. Men's relative educational mobility also did not change significantly, and it is therefore difficult to argue that the major policy changes to secondary and tertiary education improved the educational mobility of men. It may be that other aspects of society such as primary education or the important influence of family have larger impacts on educational mobility than educational policy and therefore there has been considerable stability in mobility processes. In contrast, however, there has been a significant increase in women's relative mobility. We conclude that the major changes in the education system were accompanied by improvements for those women whose parents had had the least education. However, we cannot prove causality as this was a period in which the lives of women changed in many other ways too.

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¹ Bolton, P. (2012) *Education: Historical Statistics*. London: House of Commons Library (SN/SG/42)

