
Social inequalities in educational attainment: The changing impact of parents' social class, social status, education and family income, England 1986 and 2010

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There is controversy regarding trends over time in the association between social origins and educational outcomes in the UK. An explanation may lie in different methods of analysis. This article provides new evidence about trends in inequality between the 1980s and 2010s and informs the debate about the conceptualisation and operationalisation of social origins. It expands the multidimensional conceptualisation of social origins proposed by Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013) by adding a separate indicator of family income to those of class, status and education of parents. Results from two UK age cohorts born in 1970 (BCS70) and 1989/90 (Next Steps) show that social class, social status, education and income all have independent effects on educational attainment and can show different patterns of stability or variability over time. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of transitions to upper secondary education for a more comprehensive understanding of inequalities in educational progression and attainment.

Key words Educational opportunity • UK cohort studies • conceptualisation of social origins • family income • social class

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Introduction

A series of longitudinal studies has confirmed social origins as important determinants of educational attainment. However, there is still controversy about the trend across British cohorts in educational inequalities, that is in the association between social origins and educational attainment (Blanden et al, 2013; Goldthorpe, 2013; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2016). The UK seems to have followed an equalising trend in educational attainment in the first half of the 20th century (Breen et al, 2009), while throughout the second half, when radical changes in educational policy occurred,

1 it is not clear whether educational inequality was falling, rising or on a flat line
2 (Goldthorpe, 2013, 2016).

3 Plausible explanations of the diverging evidence concern differences in methodology
4 and conceptualisation of constructs. Some researchers model education outcomes
5 as the highest level of qualification attained (for example Breen et al, 2009), while
6 others consider a sequence of transitions from lower to higher levels (Mare, 1981,
7 1980). The definition of individuals' educational attainment can also differ in respect
8 to absolute versus relative value assigned to education (the latter treating education
9 as a 'positional' good; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2016).

10 This article argues that the uncertain direction of trends has another cause that has
11 received relatively little attention: the incomplete conceptualisation and measurement
12 of social origins (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013; Bukodi et al, 2014; Bukodi et al,
13 2018). We use four distinct indicators of social origin, i.e. social class, social status,
14 family income and parental education.

15 We conceptualise educational attainment as a series of three transitions of increasing
16 difficulty up the qualification ladder up until A-levels, the higher set of school leaving
17 exams, which are the gateway to university. Our analysis of these transitions examines
18 variations in the influence of social origins at different stages of the education
19 progression instead at a ~~distinct~~ outcome.

20 In analysing the effect of social origins on the probability of obtaining qualifications
21 in England, the present article advances existing research in three ways. First, it
22 includes four key indicators of social origins: social class, parental education, social
23 status and family income. Second, it updates evidence on recent trends, using cohorts
24 born in 1970 and 1989/1990. Third, viewing educational attainment as progress
25 transitions, it explores variations in the influence of social origins at different stages
26 of education progression instead of one distinct outcome. The results should help
27 inform interventions to boost education equality at critical windows of development.
28

29 **The conceptualisation of social origins**

30
31 By social origins we refer to different strata of hierarchy in society, which can be
32 conceptualised in different ways. Traditionally, among sociologists, social origins
33 have been seen through a one-dimensional lens, focusing primarily on parental
34 social class (Shavit et al, 2007; Breen et al, 2009; Goldthorpe, 2016). The notion
35 of social class identifies the worker's position within the relationships of production
36 in firms and labour markets (Erikson et al, 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992).
37 Parental education has been also included to complement the definition of social
38 origins, especially when the outcome of interest is the child's education. Economists
39 have mostly used family income instead of parental social class, ~~as for example in~~
40 ~~the literature on educational inequalities in Britain~~ (Blanden et al, 2005; Gregg
41 and Macmillan, 2010; Blanden and Macmillan, 2016). Others suggested that the
42 predominantly one-dimensional treatment of social origins is inadequate and might
43 partly explain the divergent findings on trends in educational inequalities (Jæger,
44 2007; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013; Goldthorpe, 2013; Bukodi et al, 2014).

45 Jæger (2007), following Bourdieu (1984), proposes that in analysing the effect of
46 social origins on educational outcomes, social class should be accompanied by other
47 factors aiming at capturing the resources that social class might proxy – parental
48 economic, cultural and social capital. In this way he argues the effect of social class

1 can be decomposed into more specific effects. While Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013)
2 endorsed the multidimensional treatment of social origins, they criticised Jæger's
3 approach from a Weberian perspective. In particular they contend that commonly
4 used social class schemata such as such as the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP)
5 or the Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations (CASMIN)
6 (Erikson et al, 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992) are not designed to proxy other
7 kinds of resources, but rather are intended to distinguish occupations in terms of social
8 relations in the labour market and in the production process. Social class thus defined,
9 it is argued, is a valid indicator of income levels, security and prospects (Goldthorpe
10 and McKnight, 2006; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007) and therefore it well covers
11 parental economic resources, making the use of an additional indicator of economic
12 resources unnecessary. Furthermore, social class is at the same level of abstraction
13 of socio-cultural resources rather than serving as a proxy for them and is, similarly,
14 a relational concept. Thus, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013) suggest decomposing
15 social origin instead of decomposing social class. They would complement social
16 class with social status as an indicator of socio-cultural resources. Social status is
17 understood as an indicator of a structure of relations of perceived social superiority,
18 social equality and social inferiority, as expressed in selective intimate relationships and
19 in distinctive lifestyles. While the class structure is grounded in relationships within
20 labour markets and production units (Erikson et al, 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe,
21 1992), the social status order refers to relations of perceived social standing. It
22 distinguishes between those who, by virtue of their higher position and ascribed
23 attributes, behave as superiors and those who have a less advantaged position and
24 consequently behave with deference. Although the expression of social status is less
25 overt and more implicit nowadays, it is still recognisable in social networks (Chan
26 and Goldthorpe, 2007, 2010).

27 Another indicator considered is parental education, understood as an indicator
28 of 'educational resources', providing a supportive home learning environment and
29 knowledge about how to navigate the educational system (Erikson and Jonsson,
30 1996; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013). Although they did also find some very small
31 independent effect of family income in one cohort, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013)
32 conclude that social status in combination with social class and parental education
33 should comprehensively account for social origin effects on educational attainment.

34 In this article we follow Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013) and Bukodi et al (2014)
35 in decomposing social origins into social, occupational and educational components,
36 but add family income as a separate indicator. A substantial portion of permanent
37 income, in fact, is unrelated to social class, which therefore might not be a sufficient
38 proxy of the variation in economic status between families (Grusky and Weeden,
39 2001; McIntosh and Munk, 2009; Blanden et al, 2013). Furthermore, the relevance
40 of social class for children's educational attainment is not limited to the opportunities
41 that income entails. More generally, social classes specify the social relations within
42 the labour market and can determine standards of living and life chances. Apart
43 from the opportunities for income, social class also determines the quality of work
44 conditions (job security, career opportunities, working hours and stress) which in
45 turn have a specific relevance for children's educational attainment by influencing the
46 quality and quantity of the relationship between family members including family
47 disruptions (White and Keith, 1990; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001; Menning,
48 2002; Perry-Jenkins et al, 2007).

Changes in the educational system

In considering trends in educational inequality it is important to take account of the changing socio-historical context. Both of our cohorts faced a compulsory school leaving age of 16 (introduced in 1973), but this study covers a period of further educational expansion and major changes in the education system from the late 1980s onwards. In 1988 there was a switch from GCE O-levels system (General Certificate of Education, Ordinary levels) to GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education); see Table 1. Under the former regime, more academically oriented students took O(Ordinary)-levels at age 16 and A(Advanced)-levels at age 18. A-levels are the requirement for entering higher education. Less 'academic' pupils could take the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) at 16 (which we treat as the lowest academic qualification) or vocationally oriented programmes. The 1970 cohort was one of the last to be educated under the GCE O-level system. The 1988 reform combined O-level and CSE exams into General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs), which were usually taken at age 16. Students no longer had to decide whether to take the less academic CSE or the more academic O-level exams. This, in turn, is thought to increase the participation of those in the middle of the skill distribution and in particular of those at the borderline between academically oriented and less academically oriented students. Moreover, the GCE O-level system was based exclusively on exam performance while the GCSEs also take into account the coursework.

Table 1: Education qualifications of cohort members across the 1970 and 1990 cohorts

	Less than level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
1970 cohort (BCS70)	No academic qualifications	CSE grades 2–5	Ordinary (O)-levels/ CSE grade 1	Advanced (A)-levels
1990 cohort (Next Steps)	No academic qualifications	GCSE level grades D–G	GCSE level grades A*–C	Advanced (A)-levels

GCSEs turned out to be more accessible than O-levels and the result of the reform was that a higher proportion of students – 93% of members of the Next Steps (1990) cohort against 76% of the 1970 cohort – left school with at least some academic qualifications. Focusing on the post-compulsory phase, 38% of the more recent cohort attained an A-level qualification, against 16% of the previous (Table 2). Level 2 academic qualifications were reached by 58% of the more recent cohort. The previous cohort's attainment of level 2 appears higher (64%), but this could reflect an overstatement of GCSEs qualifications as discussed later.

In the 1980s, participation in post-compulsory education in the UK was low by international standards. In an attempt to raise it, two other major policies were introduced. The first was designed to enhance the labour market value of vocational qualifications. The second was the introduction of an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which paid individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds a small means-tested allowance if they stayed on in full-time education beyond the age of

Table 2: Descriptive statistics: row percentages unless otherwise specified

	Academic qualifications				1989/90 cohort (weighted values)				
	1970 cohort				None	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
	None	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3					
Sex									
Male	24.97	13.54	44.94	16.55	8.70	37.64	20.38	33.28	100.00
Female	20.69	13.19	48.52	17.60	5.35	31.99	20.84	41.82	100.00
Total	22.77	13.36	46.78	17.09	7.05	34.85	20.60	37.50	100.00
N				8,480					12,264
Social class									
Routine occupations	34.18	18.72	39.29	7.80	19.21	53.22	14.61	12.96	100.00
Semi-routine occupations	31.84	17.09	45.31	5.76	12.63	48.52	18.66	20.19	100.00
Lower supervisory occupations	29.22	16.39	47.51	6.89	8.39	52.94	20.86	17.81	100.00
Small employers	25.29	15.69	45.69	13.33	5.41	40.30	22.09	32.19	100.00
Intermediate occupations	23.77	15.24	50.66	10.33	4.04	34.60	25.41	35.95	100.00
Lower managerial and professional occupations	15.41	9.95	49.23	25.41	2.93	26.14	22.50	48.43	100.00
Higher managerial and professional occupations	9.29	5.52	44.53	40.66	2.27	14.29	18.47	64.97	100.00
Total	22.86	12.56	48.30	16.28	6.26	34.34	20.88	38.52	100.00
N				7,638					11,214
Social status (mean)	-0.33	-0.38	-0.10	0.50	-0.52	-0.15	0.32	0.74	0.26
N				7,682					11,686



		Academic qualifications									
		1970 cohort			1989/90 cohort (weighted values)						
		None	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total	None	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Parental education											
No qualifications	30.55	19.18	43.83	6.45	100.00	18.54	49.38	14.67	17.41	100.00	
Level 1	27.75	15.76	48.43	8.06	100.00	11.07	53.82	17.43	17.68	100.00	
Level 2	20.82	12.52	49.69	16.98	100.00	5.53	40.94	24.55	28.98	100.00	
Level 3	15.53	8.82	54.61	21.05	100.00	3.39	25.98	23.78	46.85	100.00	
Level 4	8.70	3.98	43.18	44.14	100.00	2.19	11.58	17.79	68.45	100.00	
Total	22.48	13.33	46.79	17.40	100.00	7.01	34.62	20.62	37.76	100.00	
N					7,771					12,029	
Family income (percentile)											
I group (7%)	29.27	19.27	42.93	8.54	100.00	15.23	42.72	15.87	26.18	100.00	
II group (30%)	30.00	15.39	45.30	9.30	100.00	13.15	45.30	18.57	22.98	100.00	
III group (34%)	22.07	14.36	50.29	13.28	100.00	5.37	39.78	21.63	33.22	100.00	
IV group (29%)	18.14	10.63	47.22	24.00	100.00	2.11	19.64	22.04	56.21	100.00	
Total	22.50	13.29	47.10	17.11	100.00	7.12	34.52	20.53	37.82	100.00	
					7,283					9,468	

16. Evaluations of the EMA suggest that the subsidy increased participation not only in full-time education beyond the compulsory **[[minimum?]]** school leaving age but also in full-time education subsequently. Started in 1999 on a pilot basis, EMA was rolled out throughout the UK in 2004 and would have been available to the Next Steps cohort. Research suggests that it is one of the factors that have enhanced the post-compulsory participation (Dearden et al, 2005).

The most recent reforms of the vocational education system, the development of the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), introduced in 1992 and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) from 1998, have not, overall, been successful in terms of enhancing the labour market value of vocational qualifications (Dearden et al, 2002; Machin and Vignoles, 2006). The system of vocational training and qualifications in the UK is complex and is not unified, **as in** other countries such as Germany or Austria. **[[ambiguous – by ‘as in other countries’ do you mean Germany and Austria are also not unified, or that they are and the UK is different? Suggest, if not unified in Germany and Austria too: ‘as is also the case in other countries, such as Germany and Austria’. If contrasting the situations, and Germany/Austria are unified, ‘and is not unified, unlike other countries such as Germany and Austria’]]** Regulation and governance is generally more liberal and market-oriented than in other systems, with much diversity in programmes and types of providers, including private training organisations (Raffe et al, 2001; Green, 2002; Wolf, 2011; Crawford-Lee, 2016). The perennial attempts to enhance the attractiveness of vocational qualifications have not succeeded in increasing the esteem of the different vocational qualifications available. Despite the confusion that this has generated regarding the value of vocational qualifications, full-time vocational education represents a substantial part of the UK education system and the proportion of children choosing it has risen from 15% in the mid-1980s to around 25% of all 16- and 17-year-olds in the 1990s in the UK (West and Steedman, 2003). Research documents that NVQs and GNVQs have little value in the labour market and in the case of NVQs they are even detrimental to wages (Dearden et al, 2002; Dieckhoff, 2008). **[[When the variability of the content and economic value of vocational qualifications across subsequent reforms, we decided to exclude vocational qualifications from the definition of children’s educational attainment and to focus exclusively on the academic ones. Academic qualifications have a higher status and have retained their esteem and labour market value in the period of expansion of education that is under investigation (Machin and Vignoles, 2006).**

Another major transformation of the UK education system that might have affected social inequality in educational attainment is the introduction of market mechanisms. In response to widespread concerns about falling standards in UK education, Conservative as well as Labour governments in the 1980s and 1990s set up ‘market mechanisms’ in the UK education system, including parental choice, parent representation on governing bodies and linking school funding with student enrolment numbers (Lupton et al, 2009; Gregg and Macmillan, 2010; Heath et al, 2013). Alongside greater parental choice, the reforms also made more information about the effectiveness of schools available to parents and the public, in the form of publicly available test score information, known as ‘league tables’ (Hansen and Vignoles, 2005; Machin and Vignoles, 2006). Increased competition among schools and decentralisation of school finance can potentially enhance attainment, but can raise inequality as well because advantaged families are better able to take advantage

1 of the diverse opportunities created by a more market-oriented system (Blanden et
2 al, 2005; Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles, 2005; Gibbons and Machin, 2008). While
3 the 1970 cohort was educated in the period prior to the market-oriented reforms,
4 the 1990 cohort experienced a system that was already transformed by those reforms.
5 Whether the reforms are reflected in a change in social class differentials in attainment
6 is explored in the next section.

7 8 **Previous research** 9

10 Previous evidence suggests that the dependence of educational attainment on
11 household income has increased over time in the UK at the tertiary level, while
12 it has gone down for secondary qualifications after the introduction of GCSEs in
13 1988. Blanden and Gregg (2004) found that the relationship between family income
14 and final educational outcome has been strengthening across cohorts born in 1958
15 and 1970. By contrast, Gregg and Macmillan (2010) showed that the gradient of
16 educational attainment at age 16 by social origins (income or class) has lessened
17 between generations born in the 1970s and those born in the 1980s and early 1990s.
18 They relate the improvement in equality of educational opportunity in educational
19 attainment at age 16 to the 1988 reform introducing GCSE qualifications.

20 Blanden et al (2005) confirmed an initial increase in inequality in post-16
21 participation by family income, followed by a decline after the introduction of GCSEs
22 in 1988, and an increase at the tertiary level. The rapid expansion of higher education,
23 they argue, had benefited children from wealthier families, disproportionately. The
24 argument is supported by Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles (2005). They examined the
25 relative importance of family background and ability and found that the importance
26 of ability in accounting for educational attainment has declined over time, while
27 that of parental class and parental education has increased. They attribute this partly
28 to the fact that less able children from advantaged backgrounds have benefited most
29 from the largest increase in educational participation.

30 Boliver (2011) has shown that educational expansion, in and of itself, has not
31 caused educational inequalities to decline in the UK. Instead, she found that social
32 class inequalities in British higher education (HE) have been maintained both
33 quantitatively, in terms of persistence of social class differentials in HE enrolment, and
34 qualitatively, in terms of differential access to higher status courses. Similarly, Schoon
35 (2010) confirmed that the association between academic attainment and a composite
36 index of family social background comprising parental education and social class has
37 remained stable over time, while the association between academic attainment and
38 general cognitive ability decreased for the 1970 cohort compared to the 1958 and
39 1946 cohorts. Social background (whether as class or parental education) also showed
40 persisting associations with transitions at 16 to A-levels and at age 18 to university
41 in cohorts born from 1958 to 1991 (Jackson, 2013).

42 Most of these studies examined a limited variety of family background factors.
43 Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013) have dealt with the omission of relevant factors
44 from a conceptual perspective, by decomposing social origins into parental class,
45 parental status and parental education. Using evidence from the 1946, 1958 and 1970
46 British birth cohorts, they found that these three components of social origins have
47 independent and distinctive effects on children's educational attainment. In detail
48 they found a stable effect of parental class, a weakening effect of parental status and

1 a stronger effect of parental education. From this follows that if any of these factors
2 was chosen as the sole indicator of social origin, it would cause an overestimation of
3 the effect of that factor and an underestimation of the total effect of social origins.
4

5 **Research questions**

6
7 This article contributes to the debate over trends in educational inequality by
8 addressing the following questions. Do parents' class, education, social status and
9 family income show an independent effect on children's educational attainment? If so,
10 which of the different socio-economic family resources are implicated in producing
11 educational inequalities? Does one set of resources become more important compared
12 to another? Do the different indicators show similar or different trends?

13 For the younger cohort, we include information on highest qualifications attained
14 by 2010, as collected at age 19/20. By then most cohorts members will already have
15 attained level 3 qualifications (entry to university qualifications), but not all of them
16 will have decided whether to enter university. For this reason we focus on level 3
17 qualifications as the final educational outcome, which enables us to assess inequalities
18 before making the step to university.
19

20 **Data and operationalisations**

21 *Data*

22
23
24 We use data from two cohort studies, the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) and
25 Next Steps, formerly the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE).
26 The BCS70 has collected rich information from a sample of around 17,000 individuals,
27 all of whom were born in one week in 1970 (Elliott and Shepherd, 2006). Subsequent
28 surveys took place when the cohort members were aged 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34, 38
29 and 42 years. Our study sample comprises around 8,500 study members who lived
30 in England at age ten and participated in both the ten-year survey (for the social
31 origins indicators) and 30-year survey (when education history was collected through
32 self-reports).

33 Next Steps is a cohort study of pupils in England born between September 1989
34 and August 1990 and their parents (or carers). Data were collected annually between
35 2004 and 2010 (waves 1–7), with data currently available up to wave 8, collected
36 in 2015 at age 25/26. A sample of around 15,800 members participated in wave 1.
37 Next Steps uses a complex survey design to oversample deprived areas, thus requiring
38 the use of sample weights in order to restore population representativeness. The data
39 on educational qualifications are taken from administrative records, the National
40 Pupil Data (NPD) which were linked to the survey members by the Department of
41 Education. This study sample comprises 12,264 individuals who participated in the
42 13/14-years-old survey and had non-missing values on educational attainment by
43 age 20/21 (from the NPD).
44

45 *Variables*

46
47 In operationalising cohort members' highest educational attainment, we focus on
48 academic qualifications (i.e. excluding vocational qualifications). The coding of

educational qualifications reflects the step structure of the UK education system. Our sequence of qualifications has a baseline of no academic qualifications (level 0); Level 1 is attainments immediately above this: GCSE grades D–G; and CSE grades 2–5; level 2 is O-levels CSE grade 1 and, for the second cohort, GCSE grades A*–C; level 3 for both cohorts is A-levels (see Table 1). Data on completed qualifications in the Next Steps are available up age 20/21, using NPD. In order to generate a comparable indicator for the BCS70, we used the history data of qualifications reported by the BCS70 members at age 30. From the retrospective self-reported information regarding qualifications, we were able to derive the A-level qualifications obtained at age 20. The definition of the qualifications implies that if cohort members have not gained A-levels by age 20 they are assigned to level 2 qualifications (if they have one) regardless of qualifications attained later on. It should be noted that in the BCS 30-year-old survey, level 2 qualifications are likely to be biased upwards. More than 1,000 cohort members reported having obtained one or more GCSEs before the introduction of GCSEs examinations (1988) (Shepherd, 2001: 42), possibly due to confusion of CSE and GCSE qualifications (the former are more likely to have been level 1 than GCSE). On the other hand, in Next Steps, there is a possible small downwards bias to records of Level 2+ qualifications due to under-reporting of students attending independent schools (personal communication, Dr Morag Henderson). The variables available in the data sets on parental social class allow us to code class origins in the Goldthorpe schema, seven-category version. The BCS70 contains information on the Socio-Economic Group of both parents (SEG) at respondents' age ten. Following the recoding procedure described in Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007) we recoded the SEG to the Goldthorpe class schema. In the Next Steps cohort we coded parental class using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), which represent the Goldthorpe class schema for Britain (Goldthorpe, 2007; see also Office for National Statistics, 2018). In cases where both parents are employed we select the higher of the parents' class in line with the dominance approach (Erikson, 1984).

Our indicator of parental social status is based on the scale proposed by Chan and Goldthorpe (2004), which is derived from the occupational structure of close friendship relations. Cohort members' parents are coded to the 31 categories of the scale on the basis of the allocation to Standard Occupational Classification 1990 (SOC90) occupational unit-groups. Where both parents can be allocated to the scale, we adopted the dominance approach. In the first wave of the Next Steps, there was insufficient detail on both parents' occupational unit group, so we used data from the second sweep to construct the social status indicator.

Parental education is defined as the highest academic qualification of either parent (dominance approach). It has been shown that the commonly used qualifications variable, which treats vocational and academic qualifications (NVQ) as equivalents has less predictive power of children's educational outcomes than a variable giving prominence to academic qualifications (Sullivan et al, 2013). Accordingly we classified parental education on the basis of academic qualifications in the same way as the cohort members, adding level 4 for a degree-level qualification or higher.

Information on family income is banded in both in the BCS70 and Next Steps, therefore income cannot be directly operationalised as an interval variable (or percentiles). We constructed an indicator of four groups that is the finest-grained possible given the limits imposed by those bands. The resulting variable distinguishes between the bottom 7% of families, a second group comprising the next 30%, a third

group of 34%, and finally the top 29% of families. We did not attempt to construct a continuous estimate of income because the covariates that would be used to impute values within intervals might introduce multicollinearity.

In order to deal with the potential issue of multicollinearity arising from the use of different indicators of social origins we used two main diagnostic procedures: regressing each of the independent variables on the others (and a dummy variable indicating the cohort) and calculating the (pseudo)-R-squared value; and, second, latent class analysis of the different indicators, assuming that they are manifestations of a single latent factor (Muthén, 2001; Hagenaars and McCutcheon, 2002). The findings disconfirm that multicollinearity is an issue that might bias the estimates of our models. The (pseudo)-R-squared value for the multinomial logistic regression estimating social class is 0.2, the adjusted R-squared value for the OLS regression estimating social status is 0.39, and the pseudo-R-squared values of the ordinal logistic regression estimating parental education and family income are respectively 0.16 and 0.12. The magnitude of the (pseudo)-R-squared values does not reach the threshold of 0.8 one would expect in the case of large communality. The highest R-squared value found in the case of social status (0.39) indicates a low level of multicollinearity. If multicollinearity was an issue and the use of a common factor was the best-fitting strategy, then the results from the latent class analysis would show the number of classes to be 'limited', most cases would be found in classes representing consistent combination of indicators, for example a class comprising cases with high scores on all indicators, a class with middling scores on all and one with low scores on all indicators. Inconsistent classes in which indicators behave differently (high scores on one indicator and low scores on other indicators) should not emerge or would only contain a residual proportion of cases in such a hypothesis. The results show that the solution with eight classes including inconsistent classes fits better the patterns of relationships between the indicators than the consistent four-class solution. The sample-size adjusted Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), in fact, equals 328,693.437 in the first case and 343,358.265 in the second.

Results

Table 2 shows that a considerable number of cohort members did not achieve level 2 qualifications by age 20: 42% of the 1990 cohort compared to 36% in the 1970 cohort, pointing to persisting low levels of achievement. However, it has to be taken into account that while BCS70 data is based on self-report, information about qualifications in Next Steps is taken from the NPD. We also see that there had been an increase in level 3 qualifications for the later-born cohort and a decrease in children not attaining any academic qualification.

Do social status, parental class and education, and family income show an independent effect on children's educational attainment? We adopt a sequence of logit models that reflect the ladder structure implied by the English education system (Mare, 1980, 1981) to estimate the likelihood of attaining (1) at least level 1 qualifications versus none; (2) at least level 2 versus staying at level 1; and (3) attaining level 3 qualifications versus staying at level 2. The results of logistic regression model are presented in Table 3.

The estimates show a monotonic relationship between parental social class and educational attainment of their offspring at the first transition: the social class advantage

of completing the first transition becomes, as expected, stronger as we compare the routine class (VII) with more advantaged classes. At the second transition, the same monotonic pattern is observed, yet, this time, the attainment gap between classes becomes significant from the small employers (IV and below).

Table 3: Transitions through three academic levels by age 20/21 by cohort, parental class, social status and education, and family income: main effects, binary logistic models, odds ratios

	Level 1 and higher vs No qualifications	Level 2 and higher vs Level 1	Level 3 vs Level 2
Cohort (Ref.: 1970)			
1989/90 cohort	3.93*** (0.265)	0.24*** (0.013)	4.37*** (0.230)
Female	1.45*** (0.079)	1.42*** (0.063)	1.20*** (0.058)
Parental Class (Ref.: Routine occupations (VII))			
Semi-routine occupations (VI)	1.19* (0.119)	1.11 (0.103)	0.90 (0.125)
Lower supervisory occupations (V)	1.32** (0.156)	0.98 (0.099)	0.86 (0.131)
Small employers and own account workers (IV)	1.68*** (0.219)	1.35*** (0.144)	1.28* (0.189)
Intermediate occupations (III)	1.80*** (0.171)	1.52*** (0.145)	1.06 (0.140)
Lower managerial and professional occupations (II)	2.17*** (0.238)	1.50*** (0.149)	1.30* (0.174)
Higher managerial and professional occupations (I)	2.76*** (0.427)	2.00*** (0.248)	1.71*** (0.248)
Family social status	1.07** (0.030)	1.16*** (0.031)	1.13*** (0.031)
Parental education (Ref.: No qualifications)			
Level 1	1.09 (0.082)	1.04 (0.075)	0.97 (0.096)
Level 2	1.47*** (0.113)	1.63*** (0.110)	1.36*** (0.116)
Level 3	2.12*** (0.237)	2.57*** (0.213)	1.72*** (0.162)
Level 4 and higher	2.52*** (0.306)	5.31*** (0.536)	2.89*** (0.276)
Family income (Ref.: I group (7%))			
II group (30%)	1.00 (0.125)	1.15 (0.113)	0.97 (0.138)

1	III group (34%)	1.33**	1.23**	0.99
2		(0.169)	(0.120)	(0.137)
3	IV group (29%)	1.54***	1.78***	1.19
4		(0.209)	(0.184)	(0.167)
5	Constant	1.08	1.57***	0.16***
6		(0.146)	(0.189)	(0.028)
7	Observations	15,466	13,524	9,797
8				

9 Standard errors in parentheses.

10 *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

11
12
13 Whether cohort members have parents with semi-routine occupations (VI) or lower
14 supervisory occupations (V) rather than the routine class (VII) makes no significant
15 difference for the transition to level 2 qualifications. At the higher transition (to level
16 3), social class differentials are like those observed at the lower transition, except for
17 intermediate occupations whose chances this time are not different from the most
18 disadvantaged classes. Social status shows a significant and moderate association across
19 all transitions. The findings confirm that the categories of social class and social status
20 indicate distinct and non-overlapping constructs.

21 Parental education shows generally a significant and monotonic relationship with
22 children's educational attainment at each of the three transitions. Children of parents
23 with level 2 qualifications have higher chances of educational progression across all
24 transitions than children of parents with no qualifications. Children of parents with
25 levels 3 or 4 qualifications have even higher relative chances. However, children of
26 parents with level 1 qualifications do not have a significant relative advantage over
27 parents with no qualifications.

28 Family income shows some independent association with both earlier transitions,
29 over and above the other social origins indicators. There is a significant difference
30 between children from families at the bottom income group and children from families
31 at the third and the top income group at transitions 1 and 2. At the third transition,
32 the likelihood of success does not seem to be associated with family income.

33 To assess the relative importance of the predictors, we looked at the proportion of
34 correctly predicted cases in the full model and then remove one predictor at a time
35 to assess how much predictive power is lost each time. The full model for progressing
36 to A-levels correctly predicts 68% of cases; parental education is the most important
37 variable (predicted cases drop to 67.2%), followed by income (predicted cases drop
38 to 67.8%), social status (predicted cases drop to 67.9%) and social class (predicted
39 cases do not drop).

40 In summary, Table 3 suggests that when considered together, parental social class,
41 social status, education and family income each exerts an independent effect on
42 educational attainment. Consequently social origins indicators should be regarded
43 as distinct aspects of social origins, with the implication that if one or more of them
44 were missing, the total effect of social origins would be underestimated.

45 We now turn to the question of whether the effects of parental class and education,
46 social status and family income on children's educational outcomes changed across
47 the two birth cohorts, addressed by adding an interaction term between cohort and
48 each of the social origins indicators into the logistic models.

Table 4 shows various patterns of change and stability of inequality in educational attainment across the social origins indicators.

Table 4: Transition analysis with interactions by cohort, binary logistic models: odds ratios

	Level 1 and higher	Level 2 and higher	Level 3
	vs No qualifications	vs Level 1	vs Level 2
Cohort (Ref.: 1970)			
1989/90 cohort	1.21 (0.351)	0.19*** (0.046)	5.89*** (2.086)
Female	1.35*** (0.081)	1.10 (0.083)	1.03 (0.075)
Female*1989/90 cohort	1.27* (0.167)	1.46*** (0.136)	1.27** (0.124)
Parental Class (Ref.: Routine occupations (VII))			
Semi-routine occupations (VI)	1.12 (0.125)	1.04 (0.152)	0.56*** (0.125)
Lower supervisory occupations (V)	1.14 (0.161)	1.08 (0.198)	0.73 (0.193)
Small employers and own account workers (IV)	1.39** (0.202)	0.99 (0.179)	1.09 (0.254)
Intermediate occupations (III)	1.51*** (0.156)	1.25* (0.166)	0.88 (0.164)
Lower managerial and professional occupations (II)	1.95*** (0.232)	1.54*** (0.232)	1.34 (0.248)
Higher managerial and professional occupations (I)	2.81*** (0.479)	1.76*** (0.367)	1.48* (0.298)
Semi-routine occupations (VI)*1989/90 cohort	1.12 (0.236)	1.11 (0.217)	2.13** (0.631)
Lower supervisory occupations (V)*1989/90 cohort	1.30 (0.317)	0.94 (0.213)	1.36 (0.450)
Small employers and own account workers (IV)*1989/90 cohort	1.55 (0.452)	1.55* (0.354)	1.33 (0.406)
Intermediate occupations (III)*1989/90 cohort	1.78* (0.528)	1.37 (0.273)	1.50 (0.415)
Lower managerial and professional occupations (II)*1989/90 cohort	1.19 (0.337)	0.97 (0.202)	1.01 (0.275)
Higher managerial and professional occupations (I)*1989/90 cohort	0.87 (0.336)	1.18 (0.315)	1.31 (0.385)
Family social status	1.00 (0.030)	1.09** (0.042)	1.12*** (0.042)

	Level 1 and higher	Level 2 and higher	Level 3
	vs No qualifications	vs Level 1	vs Level 2
Family social status*1989/90 cohort	1.15* (0.091)	1.11** (0.060)	1.04 (0.062)
Parental education (Ref.: No qualifications)			
Level 1	1.01 (0.081)	1.32*** (0.132)	1.08 (0.157)
Level 2	1.28*** (0.106)	1.86*** (0.196)	1.95*** (0.241)
Level 3	1.90*** (0.241)	2.68*** (0.420)	1.97*** (0.282)
Level 4 and higher	2.43*** (0.327)	5.17*** (0.919)	3.70*** (0.483)
Level 1*1989/90 cohort	1.43* (0.266)	0.65*** (0.096)	0.64** (0.140)
Level 2*1989/90 cohort	1.59*** (0.278)	0.78* (0.111)	0.41*** (0.077)
Level 3*1989/90 cohort	1.36 (0.343)	0.86 (0.163)	0.57*** (0.119)
Level 4 and higher*1989/90 cohort	1.24 (0.379)	0.95 (0.207)	0.46*** (0.096)
Family income (Ref.: I group (7%))			
II group (30%)	0.81 (0.114)	1.18 (0.195)	0.98 (0.227)
III group (34%)	1.02 (0.144)	1.17 (0.193)	0.94 (0.214)
IV group (29%)	1.08 (0.164)	1.23 (0.219)	1.25 (0.288)
II group (30%)*1989/90 cohort	1.71** (0.418)	0.99 (0.205)	0.95 (0.279)
III group (34%)*1989/90 cohort	2.06*** (0.531)	1.09 (0.225)	1.09 (0.315)
IV group (29%)*1989/90 cohort	3.01*** (0.903)	1.68** (0.370)	0.92 (0.268)
Constant	1.66*** (0.248)	1.91*** (0.346)	0.16*** (0.039)
Observations	15,466	13,524	9,797

Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

1 The social class attainment gap had a prevailing pattern of stability: there is no clear
 2 indication of reducing inequality, although it widened somewhat for specific groups
 3 at certain transitions. The differentials between class VII (routine) and class III
 4 (intermediate) in attaining at least level 1 qualifications have widened across cohorts;
 5 there is no support for a change in the gap between class VII and other classes at that
 6 transition. At transition 2, the gap between class VII and class IV has widened. At
 7 transition 3, only the attainment gap between class VII and class VI (semi-routine)
 8 has widened across cohorts.

9 The social status attainment gap appears to have slightly increased across the three
 10 transitions, reaching statistical significance only at transition 2.

11 With respect to parental education, the gap in the first transition has become wider
 12 when comparing children of parents with levels 1 and 2 qualifications with those
 13 of unqualified parents. The pattern is reversed at the next transition (to O-level),
 14 where the differentials between no parental qualification and parental qualifications at
 15 levels 1 or 2 are significantly narrower. Similarly, at the transition to A-level, among
 16 those qualified to level 2, the trend over time is equalising for all parental education
 17 categories.

18 Household income: the attainment gap between the least affluent income group
 19 and the (two) more affluent income groups enlarged at transition 1. At transition 2,
 20 the progression gap in academic qualifications has widened in a significant way only
 21 between the two extreme income groups. At transition 3 there is no evidence of a
 22 significant change inequality in attainment over time.

23 In summary, the most salient patterns of changes in inequality are that at transition
 24 1, from no to any qualifications, there has been a widening or persisting attainment
 25 gap between children from families with different socio-economic resources, while at
 26 transitions 2 and 3 there has been a reduction regarding the role of parental education.
 27 This means that the different socio-economic groups have taken advantage of the
 28 expansion of the access to and attainment of academic qualifications at different paces.
 29 The later-born cohort experienced a generalised increase in the rates of completion
 30 of the first transition: the proportion of children without any qualification at age 20
 31 declined from 23% to 7% roughly (Table 2). Yet, children from advantaged parents
 32 have experienced a more rapid decline, indicating that the expansion of educational
 33 attainment at the first transition has benefited the advantaged groups more than
 34 the disadvantaged. At transition 2 (attainment of at least O-level-type academic
 35 qualifications at age 20), there does not appear to have been expansion and, at face
 36 value, the proportion of children completing this transition declined from 64%
 37 to 58% (Table 2). This decline may be overstated or even artefactual, given the
 38 possible biases noted above of ~~overstatement of GCSEs reported in BCS70~~ **[[should
 39 this read 'reported by [or in?] BCS70'? It reads at present as if something
 40 is missing]]** (Shepherd, 2001) and a possible small downwards bias to records of
 41 Level 2+ qualifications in Next Steps. Even considering this caveat, many of the
 42 Next Steps cohort still found the second transition beyond their reach. Assuming
 43 that the overstatement of GCSEs reported in BCS is not systematically related to
 44 cohort members social origin's indicators, we argue that the results regarding the
 45 variation of inequality of opportunity in educational attainment are not affected by
 46 the likely upwards bias in level 2 qualifications in BCS70. At the third transition
 47 another major expansion has occurred, which more than doubled the proportion
 48 of children who have attained an A-level academic qualification, which increased

1 from 17% to 38%. At this point, the expansion was accompanied by a reduction of
2 inequality associated with parental education and by stable inequality in relation to
3 social class, social status and family income.

4 5 **Conclusions** 6

7 This article addresses a vexed question about change or stability in social inequalities
8 in educational attainment. We compared two British age cohorts born in 1970 and
9 1989/90. We argue that the controversy regarding trends in social inequalities arises
10 partly because parental social class or income should not be the sole indicators of
11 social origins. A multidimensional conceptualisation of social origins should embrace
12 social class, social status, parental education and family income. Each of these factors
13 shows independent associations with offspring's educational attainment, suggesting
14 independent mechanisms by which growing up in different families leads to diverging
15 educational outcomes. When social class is used as the sole indicator of social origins
16 the extent of social inequality in educational attainment is underestimated and the
17 extent of social class inequality is overestimated. The findings also suggest that omitting
18 family income from a more differentiated and comprehensive conceptualisation of
19 social origins would still lead to incomplete conclusions, in that family income has
20 an independent effect on educational attainment.

21 The multidimensional treatment of social origins has not only methodological
22 implications but also substantive ones, advancing the interpretation of the social
23 processes generating educational inequalities across generations. Educational
24 attainments in the two cohorts are associated in different ways with parental social
25 class, education, family income and social status. Overall the results regarding social
26 class provide support for a stable trend of inequality across the three transitions. The
27 role of family income strengthened at transition 1 and 2, while remaining stable at
28 transition 3. Social status has become more important over time for educational
29 attainment only at transitions 1 and 2. Parental education shows different patterns of
30 influence at different transitions. It has become somehow more important at transition
31 1, and less important at transitions 2 and 3. This latter pattern is the only clear sign
32 of declining inequality over time.

33 The stability – in the case of parents' social class – or even strengthening – in the case
34 of family income – of the association between social origins and educational transition
35 1 and 2 are at odds with previous research showing an improvement of equality of
36 opportunity in the attainment of GCSE qualifications (Gregg and Macmillan, 2010).
37 A reason may be differing the definitions of social background. Gregg and Macmillan
38 use either family income or class. The use of a single indicator of social origins is
39 likely to capture the trend of inequality of opportunity in respect to social origins
40 in general, hiding potentially diverse trends for each dimension of social origins.

41 The findings point to the importance of specifying each transition when analysing
42 trends in inequality in social origins indicators. The increase or persistence in social
43 inequality at transition 1 and 2 can potentially be explained by the large proportion
44 of underachieving students in the UK context. The so-called 'tail of poor achievers'
45 is a persistent problem in the UK and is particularly relevant in the discussion around
46 inequality because it is particularly pronounced among the poor and disadvantaged
47 students (Brooks et al, 1996; Machin and Vignoles, 2005; Marshall, 2013). This
48 aspect is clearly shown in our data, with about 42% of young people in the 1989/90

1 cohort leaving education with below level 2 qualifications. Indeed, our findings
2 suggest that the importance of early educational transitions should not be dismissed
3 especially when they are quite selective. While government policy since the late 1990s
4 is focused on getting more disadvantaged students into tertiary education, it might
5 be even more important to ensure that young people have more equal chances to get
6 level 2 qualifications. Our findings point to the importance of improving support for
7 achieving lower level qualifications, which are a springboard for later achievements.

8 The reforms discussed in the section ‘Changes in the educational system’ probably
9 did little to reduce social inequality in poor achievement. The introduction of
10 market-oriented mechanisms might have even exacerbated it. It is plausible in fact
11 that advantaged and more educated parents benefit the most from increased choice
12 in the provision of education. They have better information on, and understanding
13 of, school performance, via league tables and, in general, provide better guidance in
14 navigating the education system (i.e. making intelligible the examination procedures
15 and helping to distinguish between the high number of courses and qualifications
16 to take and the institutions to attend; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; Bukodi and
17 Goldthorpe, 2013). The persistence over time of large strata of low achievers among
18 disadvantaged children is a plausible explanation of the persistent inequality at the
19 first transitions. Other plausible explanations of the strengthened impact of family
20 income at the first two transitions is the marked rise in income inequality (Johnson
21 and Webb, 1993) and child poverty in the UK during the 1980s (Department of
22 Social Security, 1998, 1999; Gregg et al, 1999).

23 The stable impact of social class indicates that the advantages that the concept of
24 class captures have changed little during the time period considered. Relating this
25 finding to the results from Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013) regarding the stability
26 of class-related inequality for older cohorts, a long-term trend emerges indicating
27 that the social class inequalities in educational attainment have not changed since
28 the 1950s up to the 2000s. The increasing gap across cohorts in attainment at the
29 second transition associated with social status might reflect the increasing return to
30 information associated with social status. It might also indicate that social networks
31 have become more important in facilitating access and progression in the educational
32 system.

33 Among our four aspects of social origins, only parental education had a generalised
34 expansion and equalisation, due to the educational expansion at the secondary and
35 higher level that occurred since the late 1960s. The parents of the 1990 cohort
36 benefited from the rapid increase in participation in secondary and higher education
37 that was determined by this expansion. Other dimensions of social stratification have
38 not changed in this equalising and expansive way. This is probably the reason why
39 inequalities in relation to parents’ education have reduced over time at transition 3,
40 while there has been no reduction in inequality in relation to other factors. Another
41 aspect to be considered is that the students who have passed level 2 qualifications
42 are a selected group with relatively high skills. At transition 3 part of the effect of
43 parents’ education on skills is captured by previous attainments; once past the hurdle
44 of obtaining at least level 2 qualifications, the expansion of education among the
45 parental generation can finally lead to an improvement in equality of opportunity.
46 By contrast, at transition 1, the expansion of education participation has mostly
47 benefited advantaged children from well-educated parents because of the persistent
48 inequality in the long tail of low achievement.

In summary, the results suggest that social class, social status, education and income all have independent effects on educational attainment. Furthermore, their effects can vary in different ways, i.e. they show different patterns of stability or variability over time and for different qualification levels. When they vary, they can trend in either direction. What is needed for a better understanding of these independent effects is to hypothesise and test the specific social processes or mechanisms that underlie the observed associations.

Conflict of interest

Please provide a conflict of interest statement

Data availability statement [where appropriate]

Please provide a data availability statement

[[Data availability statement: If the article reports the use of data, please declare that the author(s) take(s) responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. Please also state whether the data is available to other researchers and, if so, where or how it can be accessed.]]

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