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The changing relationship between origins, education and destinations in the 1990s and 2000s

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This paper examines the changing relationship between origins, education and destinations in mobility processes. The meritocracy thesis suggests the relationships between origins and education and between origins and destination will weaken while the relationship between education and destinations will strengthen. Comparing data from the 1991 British Household Panel Survey and the 2005 General Household Survey, we test these associations for men and women. We find that the relationship between origins and education and origins and destinations has weakened for both sexes. While these findings are supportive of the meritocracy thesis, they are not, however, evidence of a secular trend towards merit-based selection. Contrary to the thesis, we also find the association between education and destinations has weakened for men and women. The relationship between education and destinations is more complicated than is often assumed and the role of meritocratic and non-meritocratic factors in occupational success needs to be better understood.

Keywords: social mobility; meritocracy; education; class; gender; life-chances

Introduction

There has been growing concern among politicians and policy-makers about whether social mobility is declining and what can be done to arrest this decline (Devine 2009; Payne 2012). In 2011, the Coalition government established a new Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, launched by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and led by Alan Milburn, the government's independent reviewer, which unveiled its Social Mobility Strategy. The strategic document accompanying the launch, 'Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility' (Cabinet Office: 2011), focused attention on intergenerational mobility and emphasised the importance of equal opportunities for all. The Commission has to monitor

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progress by way of a set of key indicators and report to Parliament on an annual basis. The strategy is based on a lifecycle framework that emphasises the importance of foundation years (ages 0–5), school years (ages 5–16) and transition years (ages 16–24) as crucial moments when social policy can make a difference to young people's life-chances in the labour market and adulthood (24 years and over).

In May 2012, various politicians spoke at a social mobility summit organised by the Sutton Trust to launch its latest report, 'Social Mobility and Education Gaps in the Four Major Anglophone Countries' (Carnegie Corporation of New York/The Sutton Trust 2012). The report noted that the United Kingdom and the United States are less mobile than Canada and Australia. It emphasised that the gap in educational attainment increases between children from poor and rich families as they move through the school system in the United Kingdom. In the same month, Alan Milburn published the first of three reports for the government, 'Fair Access to Professional Careers' (Cabinet Office 2012). He emphasised that not enough is being done to recruit people from poor backgrounds into professions such as medicine, law and journalism. Employers, for example, recruit from a small group of elite universities, who themselves recruit students from middle-class families. As a result, there have been only minor changes in the social composition of the professions and these practices are a barrier to more meritocracy in the professions.

In a recent paper, we considered the debate about whether social mobility is declining and suggested absolute upward mobility is declining among men (Li and Devine 2011; see also Lambert, Prandy, and Bottero 2008).¹ Here, we consider the role of education in the mobility process and examine the relationship between origins, education and destinations (OED) and the extent to which it has changed in current times. Firstly, we address the debate and previous evidence on meritocracy. Secondly, we draw on the 1991 British Household Panel Survey and the 2005 Household Survey to analyse this changing OED relationship. We explain the changing patterns in the association between OED in absolute and relative terms. We find that the association has declined between origins and education, between education and destinations and between origins and destinations. We suggest that further research is required on the role of meritocratic and non-meritocratic factors in inter-generational and intra-generational social mobility.

The debate on meritocracy

The term 'meritocracy' was first coined, satirically, by Michael Young in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870–2033* published in 1958. He described the growing importance attached to merit, defined as 'intelligence plus effort', in recruitment to high-level occupations. With less satire, American sociologists Talcott Parsons (1940) and Daniel Bell (1976)

advanced similar theories that as societies modernised, social selection would be based on achievement and not ascription. Educational attainment would determine occupational success and the social sorting of people into positions would be fair. Although politicians now see a meritocracy in aspirational terms, Young was aware of its dystopian aspects. He was concerned about what would happen to those people who were seemingly less able and less hard working. He feared they would be miserable and disaffected. A meritocracy would not necessarily, in other words, be legitimate.

More recently, the meritocracy thesis has been operationalised in terms of an ‘OED triangle’ (see Figure 1). The hypothesis assumes that the association between class origins and educational attainment (OE) will decrease, the association between educational attainment and class destinations (ED) will increase and the direct association between class origins and class destinations (OD) will decrease. The ‘OED triangle’ is a simple measure. Sociologists have noted that sophisticated research on the relationship between OED is required to either prove or disprove the thesis since it touches on issues of fairness and justice and the domains of philosophy and politics (Marshall and Swift 1993). Rather, empirical research has focused on the role of education in the ‘intergenerational transmission of class advantage and disadvantage’ (Marshall, Swift, and Roberts 1997, 70–71). These caveats apply in the discussion of the empirical evidence presented here too.

Previous research on the meritocracy thesis has produced mixed results. Data gathered on men in the Oxford Mobility Study in the early 1970s by Halsey, Heath, and Ridge (1980) found class origins were increasingly associated with educational attainment (OE), there was a closer association between education and destinations (ED) and a decreasing direct influence of class origins on class destinations (OD). Thus, while there was evidence of increasing merit selection in the labour market, this trend had been counter-balanced by decreasing merit selection in the education system. Education is ‘increasingly the mediator of the transmission of status between generations’, although there has been no reduction in the overall influence

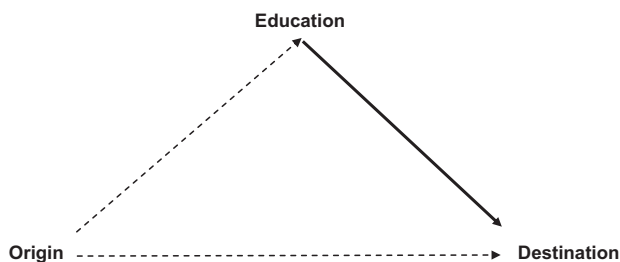


Figure 1. Stylised path diagrams on the changes in the OED relations.
Note: Dotted lines indicate weakening effects, solid line indicates strengthening effects.

of class origins on destinations. Ascriptive forces find ways of repackaging themselves as achievement. Halsey, Heath, and Ridge concluded there was little evidence of a secular trend towards meritocracy.

These conclusions – and those on social mobility (Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, and Payne 1987) – were contested by Saunders (1995, 1997, 2010; Bond and Saunders 1999). Saunders adopted a ‘strong thesis’ asserting that IQ, as measured through various intelligence tests, is the better predictor of occupational destinations than class or education. Drawing on longitudinal data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), Saunders found a child’s ability, as measured at aged 11, is the best predictor of occupational success. Saunders (2010, 84) concluded ‘that people in Britain are getting allocated to occupational class positions mainly according to meritocratic principles’. He does not ignore the fact that ‘a meritocracy can be an uncomfortable place in which to live, for it is inherently competitive, and it produces losers as well as winners’ (Saunders 2010, 124). The key is that the competition (equality of opportunity) is fair and transparent.

Saunders’ research was the source of much disagreement. Analysing the 1973 and 1985 General Household Surveys (GHSs), Heath, Mills, and Roberts (1992) found an unchanging relationship between origins and education (OE). They also found a weakening association between education and destinations (ED) and a slightly decreasing relationship between origins and destinations (OD). These findings were confirmed by Marshall, Swift, and Roberts (1997). In a series of responses, Breen and Goldthorpe; (1999, 2001) analysed the NCDS and found that neither merit nor education eliminate the association between origins and destinations. Class still has powerful effects on who gets ahead. Finally, Savage and Egerton (1997), also using NCDS data, found that although those who do well in ability tests from any social class background have reasonable chances of moving into advantaged jobs, class origins still have an independent effect on destinations, however.

The overall consensus is that education attainment is the major influence on occupational destinations although origins still have a direct and independent effect on destinations. Recent research has considered whether the changing relationship between OED in Britain exhibits general long-term trends or is the product of cohort-specific effects. Drawing, again, on the NCDS, Bukodi and Goldthorpe found that education has a strong effect on destinations although its effects have not increased over time. Origins affect destinations, although less strongly than education, and this association has not decreased over time. Uniquely, Bukodi and Goldthorpe look at work–life mobility and found the frequency of job changes has a strong effect, independent of both origins and education, on destinations. Thus, men in the 1958 birth cohort who entered the labour market in difficult times were affected by these difficult economic conditions in their subsequent occupational destinations.

Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011, 370) reject the ‘idea of education playing a steadily increasing role in the occupational attainment process or in mediating the influence of class origins in this process’. Cross-cohort differences ‘seem often better understood in the context not of some relatively benign transition from industrialism to post-industrialism but rather in that of what we can today readily recognise as the disruptive economic cycles endemic to capitalism’ (2011, 371). This examination of intra-generational work–life mobility is a welcome addition to the study of social mobility. In this paper, however, we return to the key question that informed the earlier debate on meritocracy and mobility. Has the association between class origins, educational attainment and occupational destinations changed over time? Is there any evidence that merit selection increased and the effects of class origins decreased on occupational success in the 1990s and 2000s?

Data and methods

We use the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) for 1991 and the General Household Survey (GHS) for 2005.² Both are nationally representative sample surveys for respondents resident in private households in Great Britain at the time of interview and both have large sample sizes. The BHPS began in 1991 as the premier British panel study, and had 5143 households and 9912 individuals with full interviews in that year, with a response rate of 92% at the individual level. The GHS is the longest-standing government annual survey, starting in 1972, with around 20,000–30,000 respondents each year. From 1972 to 1992 the GHS contained information on the respondent’s parents’ class, but this information was not collected in the subsequent 12 years. In 2005, because of the integration into it of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions Survey, information on parental occupation was collected again. It has a full sample size of 30,069. The overall response rate for the survey was 74%. We confine the analysis to men aged 25–65 and women aged 25–63. The age range was chosen because the GHS only collected data on parental occupation from respondents aged 25–65.

The two surveys are the only data sources currently available that have the respondents’ origin and destination classes consistently coded in the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SeC). For both origin and destination, we first constructed the 35-category-long version of the NS-SeC from the standard occupational classification, which was then coded into the seven-class NS-SeC schema (Rose and Pevalin 2003, 8–10). Following Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992, 241), men and women in lower intermediate classes were combined with the routine manual working class, which was done for both the parents’ and respondents’ classes. We also followed Erikson’s (1984) ‘dominance approach’ by using father’s or mother’s class (whichever is higher) as the family class. It better reflects changing social reality (Goldthorpe and Mills 2008, 86; Li and Heath 2010,

85). For the samples used here, 17.9% of mothers were in a higher class than fathers in 1991 but the proportion rose to 23.5% in 2005. It also increased the effective sample sizes (by 296 for the British Household Panel Survey and 651 for the GHS). After selecting respondents with valid origin and destination classes, we have 6060 respondents for the 1991 data and 9040 respondents for the 2005 data.

The seven-class NS-SeC schema we use for both origin and destination classes is as follows: (1) higher managerial and professional and large employers, (2) lower managerial and professional, (3) intermediate, (4) small employers and own account workers, (5) lower supervisory and technical, (6) semi-routine, and (7) routine. We also refer to the first two as ‘salaried’ classes, the middle three as ‘intermediate’ classes, and the last two as ‘working’ classes. With regard to education, we coded a six-category variable – (1) first degree or above, (2) professional qualifications below degree such as nursing and teaching, (3) A-levels or equivalent, (4) O-levels or equivalent, (5) primary-level qualifications, and (6) no formal qualifications – which is similar to that used in Breen et al. (2009). We use standard methods for the analysis. As we are concerned with changes in the OED relations over time, we shall assess such changes in terms of absolute and relative rates, a crucial distinction long used by social mobility researchers (Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, and Payne 1987; Halsey, Heath, and Ridge 1980; Heath 1981). The models will be explained in the analysis section. All analysis in the following is based on weighted data and conducted for men and women separately.

Absolute trends

First, we look at the association between origins and education (OE), between education and destinations (ED) and between origins and destinations (OD) for men and women. As the sevenfold class and sixfold education would yield large tables making interpretation difficult, we have put the full tables in Appendix 1 and base our analysis on a condensed version as shown in Tables 1–3. To aid interpretation, we focus on the differences in the most and least desirable categories in the outcome variables between the top and the bottom origin categories.

Looking at the origin–education (OE) association in Table 1, we find three features: educational upgrading, pronounced class disparities, but also signs of declining class differentials over time for men and women. Focusing on men first, the proportion with very low or no qualifications became smaller over time. This is shown in the rows for ‘all’. In 1991, 37% of men had low-level qualifications, which fell to 24% in 2005. Correspondingly, the proportion of men with secondary-level education level increased from 29 to 40% while the proportion of men with tertiary-level qualifications rose, more modestly, from 34 to 35%. The class differences are striking

Table 1. The origin–education (OE) association by sex and year (% by row).

	1991			2005		
	Tert	Sec	Prim	Tert	Sec	Prim
Men						
Higher salariat	68	23	10	64	29	7
Lower salariat	49	33	18	47	38	15
Intermediate	49	30	21	38	48	14
Small employer/own account	36	27	36	27	41	33
Lower supervisory/technical	28	32	40	26	43	30
Semi-routine	21	28	51	22	46	32
Routine	18	27	54	21	40	39
<i>All</i>	34	29	37	35	40	24
Women						
Higher salariat	61	26	13	64	29	7
Lower salariat	43	33	24	49	37	14
Intermediate	32	38	30	41	46	13
Small employer/own account	21	34	45	27	43	30
Lower supervisory/technical	19	31	49	23	42	35
Semi-routine	14	30	56	22	42	36
Routine	13	24	63	19	39	41
<i>All</i>	25	31	44	35	39	26

Notes: Tert = tertiary (professional qualification, degree or above); secondary = A/O-levels or equivalent; Prim = primary or no formal qualifications. Primary level of education refers to education below O-levels or equivalent or, more precisely, to commercial qualifications below O-level CSE, Grades 1–5, Scottish Grades 4–5, apprenticeships or other qualifications. Row margins in this and the following two tables are shown in the tables in Appendix 1. Source: British Household Panel Survey (1991) and General Household Survey (2005) (same below).

however. In 1991, over two-thirds (68%) of men from higher-salariat families had tertiary levels of education but less than one-fifth of their peers (18%) from routine manual families had tertiary education, with a gap of 50 percentage points. Thus, over one-half (54%) of men from routine manual families had only primary-level qualifications while 10% of their peers from higher salariat families had only primary level qualifications (a gap of 44 points). That said, a clear trend of declining class inequality in education is also in evidence. The gaps between the top and the bottom in tertiary education narrowed from 1991 to 2005, by seven points for men, and the reductions in primary/no qualifications went even further, falling by 12 points.

Turning to women, the proportion with very low or no qualifications also became smaller over time. In 1991, 44% of women had low-level qualifications, which fell to 26% in 2005. Correspondingly, the proportion of women with secondary-level education level increased from 31 to 39%. The proportion of women with tertiary-level qualifications rose from 25 to 35%. The class differences are striking for women too. In 1991, just under two-thirds

Table 2. The education–destination (ED) association by sex and year (% by row).

	1991			2005		
	SAL	INT	WC	SAL	INT	WC
Men						
Degree+	89	9	2	81	12	7
Sub-degree	58	29	13	64	24	12
A-levels	44	41	15	44	37	19
O-levels or equivalent	31	38	32	30	38	32
Primary	11	47	41	23	33	44
No qualifications	9	40	51	10	35	56
<i>All</i>	37	34	29	44	29	27
Women						
Degree+	84	11	5	80	12	8
Sub-degree	63	22	15	62	20	18
A-levels	26	48	26	34	33	33
O-levels or equivalent	21	45	34	24	31	46
Primary	11	40	49	18	36	45
No qualifications	8	27	65	8	21	71
<i>All</i>	29	32	39	39	24	37

Notes: SAL = salariat (Classes 1+2), INT = intermediate (Classes 3–5); WC = Working class (Classes 6–7).

(61%) of women from higher salariat families had tertiary levels of education but less than one-fifth of their peers (13%) from routine manual families had tertiary education. This is a gap of 48 percentage points and 2 points less than the gap between men from the two origin classes. Thus, nearly two-thirds (63%) of women from routine manual families had only primary-level qualifications while just more than one-tenth (13%) of their peers from higher salariat origins had this level of qualifications. The gap here is 50 points, which is six points higher than the gap between men. As with men, however, a clear trend of declining class inequality in education is also in evidence. The gaps between the top and the bottom in tertiary education narrowed from 1991 to 2005, by three points for women. The reductions in primary/no qualifications went even further, falling by 16 points.

Overall, the tables capture the continued improvements in educational attainment and the significant upgrade in levels of educational attainment, especially at degree level, for women already noted elsewhere (Devine 2010; Schoon 2010). The class differences in educational attainment for men and women in 1991 and 2005 confirm the earlier findings of critics of the meritocracy thesis (Heath, Mills, and Roberts 1992; Marshall, Swift, and Roberts 1997). That said, our *prima facie* evidence suggests that class differentials in educational attainment have declined over time. Class differences are still considerable but the decline in those differences is important to acknowledge. This finding suggests that the relationship OE remains

Table 3. The origin–destination (OD) association by sex and year (% by row).

	1991			2005		
	SAL	INT	WC	SAL	INT	WC
Men						
Higher salariat	70	19	11	68	18	14
Lower salariat	56	28	15	54	26	20
Intermediate	50	30	20	52	29	19
Small employer/own account	33	44	23	36	36	28
Lower supervisory/technical	32	35	32	38	32	30
Semi-routine	25	34	41	33	32	35
Routine	23	38	39	31	32	37
<i>All</i>	37	34	29	44	29	27
Women						
Higher salariat	61	25	14	56	23	21
Lower salariat	42	32	26	50	24	26
Intermediate	31	40	29	46	25	29
Small employer/own account	23	37	40	37	26	37
Lower supervisory/technical	24	35	41	31	26	43
Semi-routine	19	28	53	29	26	45
Routine	20	28	52	25	22	53
<i>All</i>	29	32	39	39	24	37

Notes: SAL = salariat (Classes 1+2), INT = intermediate (Classes 3–5); WC = Working class (Classes 6–7).

although it has weakened over time. Of course, the period under investigation is very short indeed – only 14 years – and it will be interesting to see whether this trend continues into the future.

Turning to the association between educational attainment and occupational destination (ED) as shown in Table 2, we note two main features here. The first is the time-honoured sociological finding of the crucial importance of education on occupational success. Thus, the overwhelming majority (89%) of men with tertiary qualifications were found in salariat positions in 1991, in sharp contrast to only 9% of men with no formal qualifications to be found in such positions (a gap of 80 percentage points). To put it another way, the majority (51%) of men with no qualifications were found in working-class positions while only 2% of men with tertiary-level education were found in such positions (a gap of 49 percentage points). The effect of education on destination is also obvious in 2005. Second, there is evidence of a declining association between education and destinations over the 14-year time period. For example, men with primary-level qualifications secured greater access to the salariat between 1991 and 2005, rising from 11 to 23%. At the same time, the class lead of those men with tertiary levels of education over those with no qualifications fell from 80 to 71 percentage points. Thus, while there has been a growth in educational attainment, there

has been no corresponding growth in educational returns in terms of access to the salariat.³

Similar findings pertain to women. The overwhelming majority (84%) of women with tertiary qualifications were found in salariat positions in 1991, in sharp relief to only 8% of women with no formal qualifications to be found in such positions. This picture is very similar to men. To put it another way, the majority of women (65%) with no qualifications were found in routine working-class positions while only 5% of women with tertiary qualifications were found in such positions. The picture is similar to men, with educational attainment having a major bearing on occupations destinations. These effects are also evident 14 years later. That said, the figures show a declining association between education and destinations over the time period under consideration. The percentage of women with primary qualifications to be found in the salariat increased from 11% in 1991 to 18% in 2005, for example. At the same time, the class lead of those women with tertiary-level education over those with no qualification fell from 76 to 72 percentage points. The declining association between education and destinations, therefore, is somewhat less pronounced for women than men.

In summary, educational attainment is a critical factor in determining occupational destinations and remains the case between 1991 and 2005. There is no evidence, however, that the association between education and destination has strengthened over time. In fact, the bond appears to have weakened over time for men and women to a greater or lesser degree. These findings concur with others who argue that the returns to education decline as education loses its position as an exclusive good over time (Heath, Mills, and Roberts 1992). Moreover, there is further evidence to suggest that other (arguably non-meritocratic) factors (such as personal attributes or social networks) (Jackson 2001, 2008; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005) can influence occupational life-chances in the labour market. Moving beyond individual attributes, the wider economic context at the time of labour-market entry and its subsequent effects on work–life mobility are also influential, as noted by Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011) and outlined earlier in this paper.

Finally, we look at the direct association between origins and destinations (OD) as shown in Table 3. Firstly, we see the familiar upgrading in the occupational structure as shown in the rows for ‘all’. Unlike the educational upgrading seen above, the class upgrading occurred at the higher rather than lower ends. In 1991, 29% of men occupied routine working-class positions, which fell to 27% in 2005. The proportion of men in intermediate class positions also fell from 34 to 29% and the proportion of men in the salariat increased from 37 to 44%. Again, the relationship between class origins and destinations is strong. In 1991, over two-thirds (70%) of men from higher salariat families were found in salariat positions but just under one-quarter (23%) were from routine working-class families, with a gap of 47

percentage points. Thus, 39% of men from routine working-class families were found in routine destinations while only 11% from higher salariat origins were found in the routine working-class positions (a gap of 28 points). This association is also evident in 2005 although there is a trend of a declining association between origins and destinations over 14 years. Working-class sons secured greater access to the salariat between 1991 and 2005, rising from 23 to 31%. As the same time, the class lead of the higher salariat over routine working-class families for men fell from 47 to 37 percentage points.⁴

Women are also more likely to be found in higher positions in 2005 than in 1991. In 1991, 39% of women occupied routine working-class positions, which fell to 37%. The proportion of women in intermediate class positions also fell from 32 to 24% and the proportion of women in the salariat increased from 29 to 39%. Starting from a lower base, this is a bigger increase than that of men (by three points) although women are still less likely (five points less likely) to be in salariat positions than men. Again, the relationship between class origins and destinations is strong. In 1991, nearly two-thirds (61%) of women with higher salariat origins were found in salariat positions but only one-fifth (20%) from routine working-class origins were found in such positions, with a gap of 41 percentage points. To put it another way, over one-half (52%) of women of routine working-class origins were found in the same class destination and only 14% of women from higher salariat families were found in working-class positions. The gap here is 38 percentage points. This association is also evident in 2005 although, as with men, there is evidence of a declining association between origins and destinations over 14 years. Working-class daughters secured greater access to the salariat between 1991 and 2005, rising from 20 to 25%. As the same time, the class lead of the higher salariat over routine working-class families for women fell from 41 to 31 percentage points.

In sum, the tables confirm the upgrading of the occupational structure that has been well documented for much of the twentieth century and how this has been experienced slightly differently for men and women who have long occupied different parts of the class structure (Goldthorpe and Mills 2008; Li and Devine 2011). The evidence also shows the continuing association of origins on destinations, which is direct and independent of education, in 1991 and 2005 as others have previously argued (Heath, Mills, and Roberts 1992; Marshall, Swift, and Roberts 1997). Even so, our *prima facie* findings show that the association between class origins and occupational destinations has declined over the period under investigation. Once again, however, it is important to be mindful that 14 years is a short period of time and it is not possible to indicate, at this juncture, whether this is a general or particular trend either in support or rebuttal of the meritocracy thesis.

Relative trends

The preliminary analysis in the foregoing shows that the inequalities in all three links (OE, ED and OD) were pronounced but there were also signs of some reduction of such inequalities over time for men and women alike. As noted earlier, the analysis focused on the most salient contrasts, such as possession of tertiary qualifications, or access to the salariat, between people from higher-grade professional and managerial families on the one hand, and those from semi-skilled or unskilled working-class families on the other. While such contrasts bring into sharp relief the most unequal aspects of social life in educational and occupational attainment, they pay insufficient attention to the differences and changes in other parts of the class and the educational structures and do not fully answer the question of whether there is constant, growing or declining fluidity in the net associations in the three interrelated domains, which has captured the imagination and research attention of sociologists for decades. We now turn to this latter kind of question in the following, using relative rates.

Relative mobility rates refer to the competition of people from one rather than another origin for one rather than another destination (in terms of educational qualifications or social class) and are expressed as odds ratios. Let us assume, for the sake of simplicity, a social structure with only two origins and two destinations: middle and working classes. If one-half of the people from each origin class are found in each destination class, we have an odds ratio of one. In such a scenario, there is no difference in class mobility. The closer the odds ratio is to one, the greater the equality in the origins–destinations association; while the further away the odds ratio rises above one, the greater the inequality. In similar vein, the further away the odds ratio fall below one, the greater the equality. Relative differences thus tap the net association between origins and destinations, independent of structural changes as reflected in the heterogeneous marginal distributions.

Two statistical models are usually used for the analysis of the overall social fluidity in the relative mobility rates: log-linear and log-multiplicative layer-effect (also called ‘uniform difference’ or UNIDIFF) models (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). The former is further divided into a baseline (conditional independence) and a constant social fluidity (CnSF) model.⁵ Briefly, the baseline model assumes that the distributions of both origins and destinations vary by time (survey year) but there is no association between them. In other words, all of the odds ratios or relative chances defining the origin and the destination classes are equal at a value of one. The CnSF model allows for the latter but not the three-way association, which would be a saturated model. The UNIDIFF model is a variant of the CnSF model that further allows for a uniform movement for the coefficient of one year to move above or below that of the other. In the present analysis, we use the first survey year (1991) as the reference point. The further away the

z coefficient for year 2005 rises above that of 1991, the more unequal the distribution of educational/occupational opportunities is becoming, and *vice versa*.

Table 4 shows the results of fitting the log-linear and the UNIDIFF models to the OE, ED and OD tables for men and women on the basis of the full data; namely, the seven-way class and six-way education categories as shown in Appendix 1 (Tables A1–A3) rather than the collapsed forms in Tables 1–3. Although the CnSF models provide an acceptable fit to the OE

Table 4. Results of fitting the conditional independence, constant social fluidity and UNIDIFF models to the OE, ED and OD relations for the 1991 and the 2005 data.

Model	df	G ²	p	rG ²	BIC	DI
OE						
<i>Men (n = 7252)</i>						
1. Cond. ind.	60	1119.7	0.00	−0.0	586.4	14.2
2. CnSF	30	52.1	0.01	95.4	−214.6	3.0
3. UNIDIFF	29	27.7	0.54	97.5	−230.1	2.2
2. – 3.	1	22.4	0.00			
<i>Women (n = 7848)</i>						
4. Cond. ind.	60	1380.6	0.00	−0.0	842.5	15.6
5. CnSF	30	42.4	0.07	96.9	−226.7	2.8
6. UNIDIFF	29	34.2	0.23	97.5	−225.9	2.3
5. – 6.	1	8.2	0.00			
ED						
<i>Men (n = 7252)</i>						
1. Cond. ind.	60	2803.8	0.00	−0.0	2270.4	24.8
2. CnSF	30	65.4	0.00	97.7	−201.3	2.8
3. UNIDIFF	29	61.9	0.00	97.8	−195.8	2.8
2. – 3.	1	3.9	0.06			
<i>Women (n = 7848)</i>						
4. Cond. ind.	60	3155.1	0.00	0.0	2617.0	26.0
5. CnSF	30	61.2	0.00	98.1	−207.8	3.0
6. UNIDIFF	29	57.8	0.00	98.2	−202.3	2.8
5. – 6.	1	3.4	0.07			
OD						
<i>Men (n = 7252)</i>						
1. Cond. ind.	72	721.5	0.00	−0.0	81.5	13.1
2. CnSF	36	44.0	0.17	93.9	−276.0	2.9
3. UNIDIFF	35	30.3	0.69	95.8	−280.8	2.3
2. – 3.	1	13.7	0.00			
<i>Women (n = 7848)</i>						
4. Cond. ind.	72	714.6	0.00	0.0	68.9	12.2
5. CnSF	36	61.1	0.01	91.4	−261.7	2.9
6. UNIDIFF	35	54.8	0.02	92.3	−259.1	2.9
5. – 6.	1	6.3	0.01			

link for women and the OD link for men, the UNIDIFF models give a statistically significant improvement in fit over the CnSF models for both men and women in both OE and OD links. As for the ED link, we find that neither CnSF nor UNIDIFF models fit the data satisfactorily and that the UNIDIFF models do not show statistically significant improvement in fit over the CnSF models. Thus some real changes were taking place in the net associations OE and OD but non-significant changes were discerned with regard to the link between education and class destinations.

As the fit statistics in the log-linear and UNIDIFF models are not intuitive, we show in Figure 2 graphic presentations on the direction and strength of change in the three links for men and women. The data on the arrows are derived from the UNIDIFF parameters, referring to changes in the net association in the odds ratios in 2005 as compared with 1991. Turning to men, we find that the OE link declined by a factor of 4.1, which is significant at the 0.01 level; that the ED link also declined by a factor of 1.8, which is significant only at the 0.1 level; and that the OD link, fell significantly too, by 2.3. The picture for women is similar although the magnitude is of a lesser degree. We find a highly significant decline (at the 0.01 level) in the OE link by a factor of 2.4, a notable decline (at the 0.1 level) in the ED link, and again a highly significant decline (at 0.01 level) in the OD level.⁶ The log-linear and UNIDIFF analysis thus confirms our analysis of absolute rates about the significant declines in origin effects in both educational and occupational mobility and the notable (albeit non-significant at the conventional 0.05 level) weakening in the education–destination links for both men and women over a 14-year period. Our findings in relative mobility via log-linear and UNIDIFF modelling thus confirm our *prima facie* analysis of the absolute rates in showing that there was a decline, albeit to varying degrees, in all

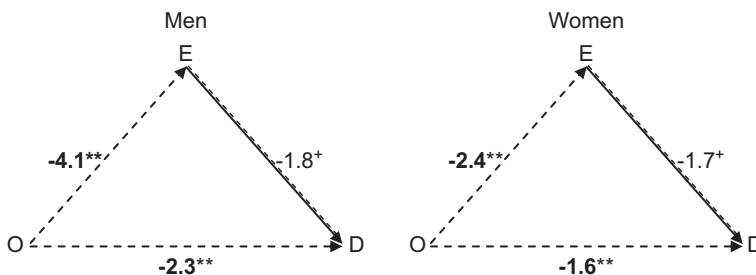


Figure 2. Changes in the OED associations (1991–2005).

Notes: dotted arrows indicate significantly weakening and solid arrows indicate uncertain effects. The figures on the arrows show the extent of changes that are derived from the UNIDIFF parameters in Table 4.

** $p < 0.01$; + $p < 0.10$.

three links (OE, ED and OD), and for men and women alike for the time period under investigation.

This analysis has been conducted at the ‘global’ level and we may wish to see whether this kind of decline in the three links occurred across the board or was confined to certain, more ‘local’, domains (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007). For instance, Breen et al. (2009) suggest that the significant decline in class inequality in education was due to welfare protection reducing the social distance (family resources) between social groups, such as between the higher salariat and the routine working class. This, accompanied by the expansion and reform of the educational system, explains how working-class children caught up with middle-class children. An opposite view is expressed by Blanden, Gregg, and Macmillan (2011) in seeking to explain the growing effects of origins on educational and income mobility. According to these authors, the use of father’s class as the family origin variable is unduly limited. Women are increasingly employed in the labour market and they bring incomes to the family. Given the increasing class homogamy (Garret and Li 2005) and the greater employment security and income stability of people in higher social positions (Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006), one could expect that middle-class families with dual and higher incomes would, over time, become increasingly more advantaged than working-class families, increasing social polarisation in class-based income disparities.

While the space limit does not allow us to engage in further explorations in this regard, we could turn to the ‘local’ effects in the three links; that is, changes in the effects of the same origin (class or educational) categories upon outcome variables. As our dependent variables (education and NS-SeC class) are fairly ordinal, we use ordinal logit regress analysis (we reversed the categories in the dependent variables so that higher values indicate higher positions). As our interest is in the possible changes in the ‘local’ effects, we also use the Wald tests⁷ to see, for instance, whether the coefficients for Class 5 families in their children’s education in 2005 are significantly different from, or similar to, those in 1991.

The data in Tables 5 and 6 show the coefficients from the ordinal logit regressions on the OE, ED and OD links for men and women, respectively. With regard to the ED links, we not only present the direct effects of education on class (under the ED columns), but also the indirect effects of origins on destinations; that is, the family effects on respondents’ own class positions controlling for education (under the OED columns) as indicated in the diagram paths of Figure 1. The coefficients can be understood as the extent to which people from certain family or educational backgrounds obtain more advantaged and avoid more disadvantaged positions in education and class positions. With regard to the data for men as shown in Table 5, we find three main features. Firstly, there are clear family class gradients in both educational and occupational attainment (as shown under the OE and OD columns), and even stronger educational effects on class attainment (under

Table 5. Ordinal logit regression coefficients on educational and class destinations for men ($n = 2955$ in 1991 and $n = 4122$ in 2005).

	Education (OE)		Class (ED)		Class (OED)		Class (OD)	
	1991	2005	1991	2005	1991	2005	1991	2005
<i>Parental class (routine = ref.)</i>								
Higher salariat	2.508***	2.080***			0.681***	0.602***	1.858***	1.565***
Lower salariat	1.629***	1.312 ***			0.525***	0.319***	1.299***	0.943 ***
Intermediate	1.531***	1.051 ***			0.383*	0.409***	1.061***	0.883***
Small employer/own account	0.821***	0.334 **			0.305**	0.197	0.642***	0.345**
Lower supervisory/technical	0.578***	0.377***			0.103	0.184	0.349***	0.324***
Semi-routine	0.143	0.222*			-0.079	-0.003	-0.017	0.099
<i>Education (none = ref.)</i>								
Degree			3.580***	3.193 ***	3.325***	3.022***		
Sub-degree			2.191***	2.408***	2.052***	2.333***		
A-level			1.661***	1.596***	1.528***	1.522***		
O-level			0.919***	0.933***	0.843	0.875***		
Primary			0.247*	0.510***	0.209	0.470***		
Pseudo R^2	0.043	0.039	0.096	0.095	0.100	0.098	0.026	0.021

Notes: Coefficients in 2005 that are significantly different (at 5% or above) from those in 1991 are in bold. The intercepts are not presented in the table but are available on request.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 6. Ordinal logit regression coefficients on educational and class destinations for women ($n = 2860$ in 1991 and $n = 4373$ in 2005).

	Education (OE)		Class (ED)		Class (OED)		Class (OD)	
	1991	2005	1991	2005	1991	2005	1991	2005
<i>Parental class (routine = ref.)</i>								
Higher salariat	2.623***	2.218***			0.644***	0.385***	1.896***	1.419***
Lower salariat	1.811***	1.547***			0.308**	0.400***	1.147***	1.112***
Intermediate	1.449***	1.296***			0.198	0.404***	0.847***	0.983***
Small employer/own account	0.760***	0.575***			0.094	0.368***	0.415***	0.560***
Lower supervisory/technical	0.571***	0.373***			0.161	0.179	0.388***	0.318***
Semi-routine	0.282*	0.305**			-0.061	0.107	0.065	0.230*
<i>Education (none = ref.)</i>								
Degree			4.037***	3.511***	3.817***	3.372***		
Sub-degree			2.654***	2.470***	2.534***	2.368***		
A-level			1.503***	1.509***	1.406***	1.416***		
O-level			1.225***	1.017***	1.160***	0.955***		
Primary			0.645***	0.974***	0.588***	0.930***		
Pseudo R^2	0.051	0.045	0.101	0.102	0.103	0.104	0.024	0.020

Notes: Coefficients in 2005 that are significantly different (at 5% or above) from those in 1991 are in bold.

The intercepts are not presented in the table but are available on request.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

the ED columns). For instance, men from higher salariat families had much more favourable chances of obtaining higher (and avoiding lower) educational qualifications and class positions than those from routine working-class families in 1991, with odds being ($e^{2.508}$ and $e^{1.858}$) 12.3 and 6.4 times as high in the two respects. Those with degrees were, as compared with people with no formal qualifications, around 39 times as likely to obtain more advantaged and avoid more disadvantaged class positions ($e^{3.58}$) in 1991.

The second feature, more relevant to our present purposes, is that the weakening class effects in the OE links did not take place for men from the higher salariat families but were confined to men from the middle ranges of class hierarchy. As shown in the bold-faced figures, the origin effects declined only for men from lower salariat, intermediate and small employer/own account families in the OE link.⁸ As for the ED link, we do find that it is the degree-level education that lost some of the occupational returns, a reduction of around 11% in terms of log odds. However, when origin effects were taken into account, as shown under the OED columns, there were no significant changes in any of the educational categories. Even after controlling for education, coming from more advantaged families was still associated with more favourable class positions with no significant change over time. In 1991, men from higher salariat families were nearly twice as likely to attain higher and avoid lower class positions ($e^{0.681} = 1.98$) as those equally qualified men from routine families. As noted earlier, social and cultural capital might well play a part in this regard. With regard to the OD link, there was rather little change, with only a significant decline for lower salariat sons.⁹

Turning now to the patterns for women as shown in Table 6, we find that, for the OE link, there was an overall declining class effect, although non-significant for any of the origin categories. As for the ED link, the effects fell significantly for degree holders but increased significantly for those with primary levels of education as we noted earlier. Yet when origin class effects were taken account of, there were no significant declines across the educational categories whilst coming from higher family classes still significantly affected access to more advantaged positions when the educational effects were held constant. Finally, with regard to the OD link, we find that only the higher salariat class effect was significantly reduced, from log odds of 1.896 to 1.419. Comparing men's and women's patterns, we find some similarities and some differences. For example, the degree effects were 3.58 (in terms of log odds) for men but 4.037 for women in 1991, and the coefficients were higher for women than for men at each of the corresponding educational categories (with the exception of A-levels) and that in both years. It is also noteworthy that the net origin effects (after controlling for education) were at a similar level for women as for men. It is notable that while the class effects were of a similar magnitude for men and women in

education and class attainment, education was obviously playing a more salient role on class attainment for women than for men.

To sum up the evidence on local effects, our analysis shows that the reduction of origin class effects upon educational attainment and occupational destinations was fairly mild, with only significant changes for men in the middle ranges of the class hierarchy and for women from higher salariat origins. The findings are somewhat different from the suggestions of a narrowing gap between the top and the bottom by Breen et al. (2009) and of a gaping chasm of the social hierarchy by Blanden, Gregg, and Macmillan (2011).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the changing relationship between OED and the role of class and education in mobility processes. We found that the relationship between origins and education and between origins and destinations have weakened between 1991 and 2005 for men and women. This is in line with two of the three assumptions underpinning the meritocracy thesis. Of course, we cannot say whether our findings are suggestive of a secular trend towards meritocracy. Such a definite statement would require data spanning a considerable time period. That said, the weakening association between origins and education and origins and destinations are interesting findings in themselves. When public anxiety about educational success is high (Devine 2004; Power 2003), the weakening relationship between education and destinations is interesting. Qualifications play a key role in social selection although more so for high-level rather than low-level occupations. Even so, the role of credentials in occupational success is more complicated than the meritocracy thesis assumes.

There are many aspects to this complexity. As Halsey, Heath, and Ridge (1980) pointed out years ago, while educational attainment is a major factor in occupational success, other non-meritocratic forces have not disappeared from view. There is strong evidence to show, for example, that non-meritocratic factors such as personality traits come into play in occupational selection and the reproduction of class inequality (Jackson 2001, 2008). Politicians, as noted in the opening remarks of this paper, are increasingly aware of the importance of social capital – individual connections and collective networks – in both educational and occupational attainment and thereby class reproduction. The extent to which education fades from view and other factors of a meritocratic (job performance) and non-meritocratic kind (developed networks) come into play over the life-course could be better understood. Describing and explaining ascription and achievement in inter-generational and intra-generational mobility could open up a very interesting research agenda indeed (Tampubolon and Savage 2012).

A research agenda of this kind could embrace many levels of analysis. The study of social mobility tends to focus on people moving between positions. Attention is directed towards individual mobility. In seeking to understand the relationship between OED, it is also imperative to understand wider institutional contexts, notably the education system and the labour market. The education system and labour market in Britain are ever changing with, for example, the growth of predominantly vocational credentials with relatively low labour-market value (Wolf 2011) and the trend towards educational qualifications becoming a declining asset in the labour market (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010). Moreover, these wider changes remind us that private worries and public anxiety about declining social mobility and the importance attached to education for occupational success are a reflection of the increasing competition for good jobs in Britain and around the world.

Notes

1. In an earlier paper, we considered the recent debate between economists (Blanden and various colleagues) and sociologists (Goldthorpe and numerous other authors) about whether social mobility is declining (Li and Devine 2011). The work of the economists and the considerable attention they enjoyed has been discussed in an earlier volume of this journal (Gorard 2008).
2. The reason for using the datasets is chiefly due to the quality and consistency of the data on parental and respondent's class. For further discussion of the matters in this regard, see Goldthorpe and Mills (2008, note 6) and Li and Devine (2011, notes 5, 6, 8 and 12). It is also noted here that after the analysis for the current paper was completed, information on parental occupation in the Understanding Society survey was released but the data from the latter survey are not used in the current paper.
3. A close look at the data in Table A1 of Appendix 1 shows *prima facie* support to Breen et al. (2009) in that the reduction of class effects occurred at the lower rather than higher levels of education, and this feature is apparent in both men's and women's profiles. It is noted here that for the British data they use the GHS 1973, 1975–1976, 1979–1984 and 1987–1992 for men, and that the GHS data they used do not allow the fine-grained class measurement for father's class because Classes I, II and IVa are collapsed.
4. Similar to education, the class reduction in occupational attainment occurred at the bottom rather than at the top. As Table A2 in Appendix 1 shows, there is no change in the gap between sons from Class 1 and 7 families in gaining access to Class 1, at 28% at both time points, and that for women actually increased by five points, from a differential of 10 points in 1991 to 15 points in 2005. The differences in avoiding routine positions fell by three and six points, respectively, for men and women.
5. The models can be written as: 1: baseline (conditional independence) model, $\log F_{ijk} = \mu + \lambda_i^O + \lambda_j^D + \lambda_k^Y + \lambda_{ik}^{OY} + \lambda_{jk}^{DY}$ 2: constant social fluidity model (CnSF), $\log F_{ijk} = \mu + \lambda_i^O + \lambda_j^D + \lambda_k^Y + \lambda_{ik}^{OY} + \lambda_{jk}^{DY} + \lambda_{ij}^{OD}$ and 3: log multiplicative or uniform difference (UNIDIFF) model, $\log F_{ijk} = \mu + \lambda_i^O + \lambda_j^D + \lambda_k^Y + \lambda_{ik}^{OY} + \lambda_{jk}^{DY} + \lambda_{ij}^{OD} + \beta_k X_{ij}$ – where O stands for origin, D for destination, and Y for year. In the UNIDIFF model, X_{ij} indicates the general pattern of

the origin–destination association, and β_k the direction and relative strength of the association specific to a year. Note that the O and D in the formula are represented in different ways in the OE, OD and ED links.

6. If we use father's (rather than the dominance) class, similar findings are obtained. The changes in the OE and OD links are -3.6% ($p < 0.000$) and -2.3% ($p < 0.000$) for men ($n = 6823$), and -3.7 ($p < 0.000$) and -2.0% ($p < 0.002$) for women ($n = 7269$), in 2005 as compared with 1991 in terms of the odds ratios.
7. The Wald test is written as $t = (b_1 - b_2)/(s_1^2 + s_2^2)^{1/2}$.
8. Another way of looking at the OE relationship is to see the changing effects of parental class on gaining more advantaged and avoiding less advantaged levels of education in the way the maximised maintained inequality (MMI) thesis proposes. We carried out such an analysis with five transitions: from no qualifications to primary education or above, from primary schooling to O-levels or above, from O-levels to A-levels and above, from A levels to professional qualifications, and from professional qualifications to first degree or above. The results show that there are significant declines in the class effects at certain transitions for men, and Classes 1 and 2 daughters' transitions from sub-degree to first degree also showed significant declines. What is noteworthy is that none of the transitions showed any increased class effects, rendering no support to the MMI thesis. We need to note, however, that our data were not well placed to test the thesis fully as we not have information on the types of higher education institutions attended by our respondents. Class privileges have long played a role in gaining entry into elite universities although whether they are *increasingly* important, given that people from advantaged class backgrounds have always sought to gain access to elite universities in Britain, has yet to be fully ascertained.
9. Breen et al. (2009, 1475) show a 'wide-spread decline in educational inequality' among men in eight European countries but the decline was rather limited in the British case. Their data show (1501) that only the distance between Classes I+II+IVa and VII in the first transition (from primary to O-levels or above) was slightly reduced from the first birth cohort (1908–1924) to the last (1955–1964) and that no clear reductions were in trend in the other two transitions (from O-levels to A-levels or above; from A-levels to tertiary education). We carried out a similar analysis of the transitions and found no significant changes over time for any category of the origin class in any of the three transitions in either men's or women's case. Data are not presented but are available on request.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Educational distribution by parental class, sex and year (% by row).

	1991							2005						
	Deg	Prof	A	O	Prim	None	N	Deg	Prof	A	O	Prim	None	N
<i>Men</i>														
1 Higher salariat	41	27	11	12	4	6	146	55	9	14	14	3	4	477
2 Lower salariat	22	28	16	17	6	11	548	36	11	17	21	5	10	1071
3 Intermediate	20	29	14	15	8	13	186	28	11	20	28	5	9	333
4 Small employer/own account	11	25	11	16	7	29	410	17	10	16	24	8	25	419
5 Lower supervisory/technical	5	23	12	19	11	29	606	16	10	16	27	9	21	681
6 Semi-routine	5	17	8	20	12	39	455	13	9	16	30	9	23	651
7 Routine	2	16	9	18	12	43	575	11	10	17	23	7	32	694
(All)	11	22	12	18	9	28		25	10	17	24	6	18	
<i>Women</i>														
1 Higher salariat	32	29	7	19	8	5	189	49	15	13	16	4	3	488
2 Lower salariat	17	26	10	23	10	14	614	33	16	14	23	6	7	1144
3 Intermediate	11	21	11	27	17	13	218	27	14	14	32	5	8	397
4 Small employer/own account	5	16	9	25	13	32	400	13	14	16	27	7	23	450
5 Lower supervisory/technical	4	15	5	26	13	36	653	12	11	14	27	10	25	752
6 Semi-routine	3	11	6	25	12	43	516	11	10	13	29	13	24	739
7 Routine	2	12	4	20	12	51	544	9	10	9	30	8	34	744
(All)	8	17	7	24	12	32		22	13	13	26	8	18	

Notes: Deg = first degree or higher; Prof = professional qualifications below degree; A = A-levels or equivalent; O = O-levels or equivalent; Prim = primary education; None = no formal qualifications.

Table A2. Class distribution by parental class, sex and year (percentage by row).

	1991							2005							N	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	1	2	3	4	5	6		7
<i>Men</i>																
1	36	34	4	8	7	4	7	146	39	29	5	8	6	5	9	477
2	24	32	5	12	12	6	9	548	24	31	5	12	9	9	11	1071
3	22	27	5	11	14	7	12	186	23	30	4	12	12	8	11	333
4	16	17	4	25	14	7	16	410	15	21	3	16	17	13	14	419
5	12	20	5	13	18	14	19	606	16	22	5	12	15	13	17	681
6	8	17	3	13	17	18	24	455	13	20	3	13	16	15	20	651
7	8	15	4	13	21	16	23	575	11	20	3	13	15	15	22	694
All	15	22	4	14	16	12	17		20	25	4	12	12	11	15	
<i>Women</i>																
1	11	51	16	8	1	5	9	189	19	36	14	5	4	12	9	488
2	6	35	20	7	5	15	11	614	12	38	14	7	4	15	11	1144
3	5	25	27	7	6	14	15	218	12	34	16	5	4	19	10	397
4	3	20	22	10	5	20	20	400	7	30	13	7	6	22	15	450
5	3	21	21	4	9	19	22	653	5	26	15	5	6	25	19	752
6	2	17	16	4	8	28	24	516	5	25	13	6	7	25	20	739
7	1	19	17	3	8	23	29	544	4	22	11	5	7	30	23	744
All	4	25	20	6	7	19	20		9	30	14	6	5	21	15	

Note: For class categories, see Table A1 in Appendix 1.

Table A3. Class distribution by educational qualifications, sex and year (percentage by row).

	1991							2005							N	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N	1	2	3	4	5	6		7
<i>Men</i>																
Degree	50	39	4	3	2	1	1	331	45	36	4	5	3	3	4	1073
Sub-degree	25	33	6	12	11	4	9	661	29	35	6	9	9	6	6	437
A-level	17	27	6	15	20	5	11	349	17	28	5	16	16	7	12	738
O-level	7	24	4	16	18	15	17	522	8	22	5	14	19	15	17	1024
Primary	4	7	5	17	26	16	25	278	5	17	2	18	13	17	27	283
None	2	7	3	18	19	21	30	785	1	8	2	17	16	23	33	771
All	15	22	4	14	16	12	17		20	25	4	12	12	11	15	
<i>Women</i>																
Degree	23	61	6	5	1	4	2	261	27	53	7	4	1	5	3	1016
Sub-degree	5	58	11	6	5	7	8	542	8	54	11	4	4	11	8	617
A-level	4	23	32	7	8	14	12	225	6	29	20	7	6	17	15	617
O-level	2	20	33	6	6	18	15	755	3	21	18	6	7	29	17	1248
Primary	1	11	30	7	4	23	25	386	4	15	23	7	6	28	17	370
None	1	7	11	5	10	31	34	965	1	6	7	6	8	37	34	846
All	4	25	20	6	7	19	20		9	30	14	6	5	21	15	

Note: For class categories, see Table A1 in Appendix 1.