The role of education and skills in driving social mobility: an overview

Claire Crawford, Managing Editor of Fiscal Studies
What is social mobility?

- Link between circumstances of parents and children as adults
  - Strong link: low social mobility
  - Weak link: high social mobility
- Of concern to policymakers because it suggests that children who are raised in poor families will often end up poor themselves

What is the role of education?

- Education is a plausible *transmission mechanism* between the circumstances of parents and their children:
  - Children from richer backgrounds tend to do better at school
  - Adults with higher qualifications tend to earn more
What does this special issue contribute?

• Mostly concerned with the first stage of the mechanism:
  – Provides new evidence on the link between family background and educational attainment and how this has changed over time in the UK
  – Investigates the role of specific characteristics and policies in driving this relationship

• Also considers how returns to education have changed over time

• Together will hopefully provide new insight into:
  – Whether social mobility is likely to increase or decrease in future
  – Policies that might help the government to increase social mobility
Key findings (1)

- Evidence of strong links between family background and educational attainment in England
  - Qualification acquisition has increased rapidly over the last 30 years; more so for those from richer backgrounds
  - The brightest 15 year olds from poor backgrounds are two years behind their peers from rich backgrounds in terms of reading skills; this link is twice as strong as in some other developed countries
  - Young people from the richest fifth of families are nearly three times more likely to go to university and nearly six times more likely to attend a Russell Group university than those from the poorest fifth
Key findings (2)

• What drives these relationships?
  – Socio-economic gaps in HE participation are largely explained by application decisions, which are in turn explained by early exam results
  – The new HE funding regime should not make this worse; in fact it is more progressive than the current system
  – But the recession might: children whose fathers lost their jobs in the 80s did less well at school and were less likely to be in work themselves

• How does this relate to social mobility?
  – Increased acquisition of educational qualifications amongst the rich together with the fact that wage returns have been stable or rising suggests that the expansion of educational opportunities has hindered rather than helped social mobility over the past 30 years
Policy implications

• What about future prospects for social mobility?
  – Evidence paints a somewhat bleak picture
  – But recent evidence (not in issue) suggests link between family background and attainment may have weakened in recent years

• Emphasises the need to improve educational attainment amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
  – Increasing bursaries or providing internships is unlikely to be sufficient

• Reduce complexity of student support system, or at least ensure clear information is provided on costs and benefits