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Introduction

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As we step into 2024, CEPEO acts to guide policymakers towards a Britain with more equal opportunities.

2023 has been another exciting year for CEPEO in many ways. We have made important evidence-led contributions to major policy debates. This spring, we published our evidence-led policy priorities, ranging from low-cost changes to ambitious reforms tackling long-standing inequalities.

We had the pleasure of hosting Professor Joshua Goodman from Boston University for our Annual Lecture, fresh from his spell on President Biden's Council of Economic Advisors. We also hosted a panel at Labour Party Conference with Shadow Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, and Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel De Souza.

We have continued to publish new research in peer-reviewed journals, working papers, briefing notes, and blog posts. We have also hosted speakers from across the world in our highly successful seminar series, attracting attendees from the academia, policy, and education.

A huge thank you to all of our followers and every single person who has read, shared or supported us and our mission.



We are incredibly proud of our team and the response to our work continues to motivate us.

We have continued to grow and change as a team this year. We were sad to say goodbye to our researchers, Asma Benhenda, Xin Shao, and Alice De Gennaro and our centre communications officer, Naomi Yohendran; but delighted to be joined by new members of the team, including Oliver Anderson, Fabien Petit and Paul Martin.

From all of us in CEPEO, we wish you a joyful holiday season and we look forward to working with you in 2024!

Professor Lindsey Macmillan

Director of the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO)

Who we are

UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities

is a research centre based in the IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. We create cutting-edge research focused on equalising opportunities across the life course. Our work seeks ways to improve education policy and wider practices to achieve this goal.

Inequalities in educational attainment open early and widen throughout school, and this inequality has consequences for adult outcomes. But childhood circumstances still remain an important predictor of adult success, over and above educational attainment. Our research explores how the education system, and the wider practices of universities and employers, can be improved to equalise opportunities.

Our Research Themes

Early years

Our work in early years seeks to understand and evaluate how children and families can be best supported to develop their skills.

Schools

Our schools research explores how and why educational inequalities widen through the school years.

Tertiary

Our tertiary work stream focuses on the role of universities and further education providers in providing opportunities for all young people.

Adulthood

Our adulthood work stream aims to understand the nature and extent of inequalities in adult outcomes.

2023 in review

The unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's education and wellbeing: the first wave of the COSMO study



Dr Jake Anders presented the findings from the newly released Wave 1 of COSMO focusing on inequalities in young people's experiences during and since the pandemic at University of Oxford

CEPEO published 14 priorities for evidence-led education policy, ranging from low-cost changes to ambitious reforms tackling long-standing inequalities.



The centre highlighted eight immediate low-cost priorities, readily attainable and materially important, mindful of the challenges of competing priorities amid high public debt. These eight are complemented by six more reforms to address long-standing inequalities, equalise opportunities and create a fairer, more productive society

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Dr Oliver Anderson presented his paper titled "Walking the line: Does crossing a high stakes exam threshold matter for labour market outcomes?" at the RES conference



The paper offers new insight into the link between success in high stakes exams and subsequent education and labour market outcomes

Using Food Banks Linked To Poor Mental Health In Teens - And Lower Grades



The COSMO study, led by Jake Anders (CEPEO) and, UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, and the Sutton Trust featured in various news outlets

Dr Claire Crawford discussed on BBC Newsnight on how to bring down the cost of childcare in the UK, raising the possibilities of both regulatory reform and greater investment in childcare infrastructure

Maths@Home app developed by Professor Jo Van Herwegen & Dr Laura Outhwaite released on Apple app store

Dr Jake Anders, spoke at the House of Lords as part of the Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into digital exclusion and the cost of living.

Why should we invest in early childhood education and care?



This article by Dr Claire Crawford & Dr Laura Outhwaite featured on Economics Observatory, looks at the negative effects from low-quality provision



2023 in review

Autumn Seminar Series begins



Our Autumn Seminar Series began with Dr Angharad Butler-Rees discussing "Disability, social class, and educational transitions". CEPEO hosts a research seminar series where guest speakers present cutting edge research. We are joined by policymakers, researchers and practitioners to explore the pressing questions of our time in education policy and equalising opportunities.

CEPEO partnered with Education Policy Institute over a panel discussion at the Labour Party Conference to discuss our recent policy priorities report on how education policy can be used to combat disadvantage and inequalities.



CEPEO are partnering with Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK to offer free courses on "Introduction to the National Pupil Database and its linked data (LEO, GRADE, GUIE)".



Inaugural Annual Lecture

Professor Joshua Goodman who was on leave from Boston University to serve as Senior Economist on President Biden's Council of Economic Advisers (until 14 July 2023), joined us for CEPEO's 2nd inaugural annual lecture. He presented his and others' research, as well as his experiences at the White House's Council of Economic Advisors, and discussed where we are now and what we should be worried about going forward.



Does Higher Education affect inequality?

Professor Lindsey Macmillan discussed inequalities in the sector at the Levelling Up Commission in an inquiry session on education and skills, and the different outcomes for disadvantaged students when they leave university and seek employment.

CEPEO organised a joint workshop with DfE analysts and policy makers from a range of teams - part of our strategy as a centre for co-production of research plans and knowledge exchange



UCL CEPEO Annual Lecture 2023

Post-Pandemic Schooling Challenges: Lessons from the Research and Policy Worlds

With Professor Joshua Goodman
 - Associate Professor of Education and Economics at Boston University
 - Senior Economist on President Biden's Council of Economic Advisers (until 14th July 2023)



Outreach and engagement

To deliver our aim of identifying and reducing inequalities in opportunities across the life course, UCL CEPEO disseminates its research and analysis to the general public, as well as researchers, policy makers, school and university leaders.

In 2023:

8

working papers

Our working papers demonstrate our research in progress. They are multidisciplinary, reflecting CEPEO's broad research themes.

19

blog posts

This blog is a forum for staff, students and affiliates to write about CEPEO's four thematic areas of research and engagement.

9

briefing notes

Our briefing notes aim to facilitate evidence-led policy-making and practice by providing accessible guides to research topics.

Some of Our Blog Posts



The path to a more socially diverse and inclusive workforce

This blog focuses on socio-economic inequalities in the workplace and how employers can use data to create more socially diverse and inclusive organisations

Claire Tyler



Making maths count in early childhood

This blog looks at the need to raise standards in maths attainment from early childhood, and how this can be achieved through a new campaign to support parents' engagement

Laura Outhwaite



Using targeted pay uplifts to reduce teacher shortages

This blog looks at the reasons why we have a shortage of teachers in England and outline the evidence for using targeted bonus payments to mitigate the problem

Sam Sims



Evidence-Based Solutions to the Post-Covid Absenteeism Crisis

This blog addresses the post-covid persistent absenteeism, which includes effectively engaging parents through automated text messages & addressing underlying factors

Asma Benhenda

Outreach and engagement

In 2023:

52

media
engagements

UCL CEPEO is regularly featured in major media outlets including articles, TV, radio and podcasts. This year our researchers were featured in The Guardian, The Times, The Telegraph, THE, T & F Online, Bloomberg, Schools week and many more.

52

policy and
community
engagements

Our researchers regularly engage in public lectures and panel discussions featuring experts from around the world. They participate in international conferences and work closely with local communities.



Some of Our Briefing Notes



Attainment and Assessment

This paper highlights some important findings about young people's experiences of assessment during COVID-19.

Jake Anders, Carl Cullinane, Alice De Gennaro, Erin Early, Erica Holt-White, Rebecca Montacute, Xin Shao and James Yarde



Understanding the impact of Childcare Ratios on Children's Outcomes

This paper looks at the impact of childcare ratios and the need for more high quality evidence.

Claire Crawford and Laura Outhwaite



AI and Employment Opportunities: Fostering skills development for a prosperous future

This paper looks at the meaning of AI for the future of skills and jobs, AI's potential and challenges for the economy and for equalising opportunities.

Fabien Petit



Education Recovery and Catch Up

This paper highlights concerns of many students missing a large amount of school time during the pandemic, and after schools re-opened nationally.

Jake Anders, Rebecca Montacute, Erica Holt-White, Carl Cullinane, Alice De Gennaro, Erin Early, Xin Shao and James Yarde



Who uses government - funded early education in England, and what explains the variation in take-up?

Summary

The government currently funds access to 15 hours a week of early education for all 3-4 year olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds in England. However, a substantial minority of children - especially from disadvantaged backgrounds - do not access all of their entitlements.

Families face a range of barriers to accessing the early education entitlements, particularly for disadvantaged 2-year-olds, including a complicated application process, a lack of available places, and a lack of awareness of their eligibility for support.

While there is some emerging evidence of potentially promising approaches to support take-up of the early education entitlements, there is a clear need for more robust evidence of what works in this area.

Recommendations

Rigorous evaluations are needed to assess the effectiveness of promising approaches to supporting take-up of the early education entitlements. This will enable greater evidence-informed action to be taken to support take-up, particularly amongst under-represented groups.

Enhanced monitoring efforts are needed to understand how the availability and take-up of existing early education entitlements are affected by the extension of entitlements to younger children in working families from April 2024. This will be important before, during and after the roll-out has occurred, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. Action should be taken to address any emerging negative effects.

Prepared by



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The Issue

In England, the government currently funds 15 hours a week of early education for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds for 38 weeks of the year. 2-year-olds are entitled to the early education offer if they come from a low income family, for example if their parents are on Universal Credit with a household income of less than £15,400 per year (in 2023), or if they are looked after by a local authority, have an education, health, and care plan, or receive Disability Living Allowance. 3-4-year-olds in working families are also currently entitled to an additional 15 hours of government-funded ECEC per week, but we do not focus on these additional entitlements here.

In an earlier briefing note, we summarised the evidence on the benefits of high-early education, particularly for disadvantaged children (Outhwaite & Crawford, 2023). The early education entitlements were originally introduced with the aim of supporting children's development and reducing inequalities in access to and participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Some success has been achieved in this regard with around a 30-percentage point increase in the use of early education amongst 3-4-year-olds since their introduction (La Valle et al., 1999; DfE, 2023).

However, a substantial minority of children, especially disadvantaged children, miss out on some or all of their 15-hour entitlement (Archer & Oppenheim, 2021). For example, in 2023, just 74% of eligible 2-year-olds took up their place (DfE, 2023), and amongst 2- and 3-year-olds taking up a place, less than 90% were registered to attend for the full 15 hours to which they were entitled each week (DfE, 2023). The percentage of eligible families taking up their entitlement also varies hugely across areas, from less than half to more than 90% (DfE, 2023).

There are also widespread concerns in the early years sector that the forthcoming roll-out of up to 30 hours of government-funded ECEC per week for children aged 9 months to 2 years in working families could further exacerbate inequalities in access to early education. This is because children from non-working, likely lower income, families will not be eligible for these additional hours of funded care, and that the availability and take-up of the existing offer could potentially be harmed by the introduction of these new entitlements.

This raises the question of why not all children take up their 15-hour entitlements, why this varies across areas, and what can be done to maintain or increase take-up amongst disadvantaged families over the coming years, to reduce inequalities in ECEC participation and prevent inequalities in child development from widening further?

This briefing note summarises the current evidence on who is less likely to take-up the 15-hour early education entitlements in England and the associated barriers to take-up for these groups of families. Emerging evidence on potentially promising activities to increase take-up is also discussed.

Summary and Implications

The government currently funds part-time access to early education for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds in England. The objective of these entitlements at the time of introduction was to reduce inequalities in access to and participation in early education and hence child development.

While there is evidence that the policy has been successful in increasing the use of early education, there remain important barriers to take-up. These barriers are more evident for 2-year-olds than for 3-4-year-olds, and relate to the design of the policy, the accessibility of the offer, families' awareness of the offer and their eligibility, as well as parents' perceptions of the availability, and cost and benefits of early education. These barriers are higher for families with poorer English skills, and for those living in certain areas, such as where the early years market is more likely to be driven by the needs of working families.

While there is some emerging evidence of potentially promising approaches to increase take-up, there is a clear need for more rigorous evidence of what works in this area. It will also be important to monitor the potential impact on the availability and take-up of these existing entitlements, particularly amongst disadvantaged families, before, during and after the new entitlements for working families have been rolled out.





New Opportunities CEPEO Evidence-Based Policy Priorities

Summary

Britain is one of the most unequal countries in the developed world, in terms of outcomes and opportunities. One of the most important drivers of the gap in adult incomes between children from richer and poorer families is differences in their education and skills. Inequalities in education – the fact that those from poorer families do less well at school than those from richer families – drives over half of the inequality in opportunities experienced in this country. This is unsurprising: education is one of the most important predictors of life chances, and those with lower levels of education are less likely to find employment or get a high-paying job. While progress had been made over the past decade in reducing achievement gaps in education between children from richer and poorer families, unequal experiences during the recent Covid-19 pandemic have eradicated this.

The aim of our Policy Priorities is to offer evidence-led, practical steps to move towards a society of more equal opportunities from early years to adulthood. In the battle to overcome severe skills shortages and waning productivity growth, there is a strong economic case for major investment in education and skills throughout life, from early years through to tertiary education and in-work training. The benefits of investments in education and skills are often found to outweigh the costs in the long run, meaning spending in these areas is a relatively low-risk choice for politicians concerned about future debt. Yet mindful of the challenge of competing priorities and high public debt, we present eight immediate priorities that are low cost, grounded in evidence, readily attainable, and materially important, and six more ambitious evidence-led reforms to address long-standing inequalities, equalise opportunities and create a fairer, more productive society.

Immediate priorities – simple, low-cost change

1. Improve communication and simplify applications for childcare subsidies.
2. Launch a new campaign to support children’s early maths skills.
3. Improve communication with parents to reduce pupil absenteeism.
4. Retain external examination as the primary means of assessment.
5. Reform apprenticeship levy rules to ensure that apprenticeships are a gateway into skilled employment for young people.
6. Expand accountability on attendance and outcomes to all providers of post-16 education.
7. Introduce an annual “Social Mobility Scorecard” for universities.
8. Introduce entry and pay gap audits by socio-economic background.

Ambitious reforms to address long-standing inequalities

1. Ensure access to high-quality early years provision for children from disadvantaged backgrounds
2. Reform school admissions policies to weaken the link between family income and school quality
3. Invest in the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers.
4. Introduce a post-qualification applications (PQA) system for post-18 education.
5. Invest more in Further Education (FE).
6. Adopt a more generous and holistic approach to incentivising adult learning.



Promoting academic debate

The Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) hosts a seminar series where guest speakers present cutting edge research. We are joined with policymakers, researchers and practitioners to explore the pressing questions of our time in education policy and equalising opportunities.

Causes and Consequences of Inequalities in Children's Executive Functions

Dr Emma Blakey (University of Sheffield)

Educational Pathways and Work Outcomes of Disabled Young People in England

Dr Angharad Butler-Rees (The University of Warwick)

The Role of Parent Educational Attainment on Parenting and Achievement Outcomes

Professor Pamela Davis-Kean (University of Michigan)

Are Public Sector CEOs Different? Pay for Performance and Salary Inequality in Schools

Professor Shqiponja Telhaj (London School of Economics)

Inequality impacts of an education reform in Sweden

Professor Dennis Petrie (Monash University)

Intergenerational mobility of women (and men) across working ages: the role of partnership and participation

Professor Jo Blanden (University of Surrey)

When non-native speakers compete for top schools

Assistant Professor Elisa Facchetti (Institute for Fiscal Studies)

Can mentoring alleviate family disadvantage in adolescence

Professor Ludger Woessmann (University of Munich)

How does testing young children influence educational attainment and well-being?

Professor Colin Green (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

Racial inequality, minimum wage spill overs and the informal sector

Dr Claire Montialoux (Sciences-Po Paris)

Race, sex, class and educational achievement at age 16

Professor Steve Strand (University of Oxford)

Traditional and Progressive approaches to teaching: New empirical evidence on an old debate

Dr Sam Sims (University College London)

The effects of affirmative action on targeted and non-targeted students

Professor Julien Grenet (The Paris School of Economics)

Mismatch in the time of crisis

Professor Gill Wyness (University College London)

Research highlights

Binwei Lu, Jake Anders, Nadia Siddiqui & Xin Shao (2023) How do academic selection systems affect pupils' educational attainment? New evidence from an analysis of large-scale data on England, *Educational Review*, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2023.2240977

John Jerrim, Sam Sims & Mary Oliver (2023) Teacher self-efficacy and pupil achievement: much ado about nothing? International evidence from TIMSS, *Teachers and Teaching*, 29:2, 220-240, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2022.2159365

Christian Bokhove, John Jerrim & Sam Sims (2023) How Useful are Ofsted Inspection judgements for Informing Secondary School Choice?, *Journal of School Choice*, 17:1, 35-61, DOI: 10.1080/15582159.2023.2169813

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Adamecz, A., Jiang, Y., Shure, N. & Wyness, G. (2023). Intergenerational educational mobility and the COVID-19 pandemic (CEPEO Working Paper No. 23-08). Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, UCL.

Adriene M. Beltz & Dominic P. Kelly (2023) Daily Gender and Cognition: A Person-Specific Behavioral Network Analysis, *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, DOI: 10.1080/00273171.2023.2228751

Our community

We would like to acknowledge and thank all those in our CEPEO community who have contributed to our work in 2023.

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