

LIFETRACK POLICY BRIEF
ENGLAND

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The education system in England

England's education system is often characterised as one of the least formally tracked systems in Europe. Following the shift from a selective to a comprehensive education system in the late 1960s, most pupils in England attend non-selective primary and lower secondary schools where they follow a national curriculum leading to nationally standardised examinations taken at age 15/16. Despite this shift to a comprehensive model of schooling, the contemporary education system in England remains characterised by multiple forms of tracking, including:

1. **within-school tracking** by ability group at primary and lower secondary level, especially for Maths and English;
2. **between-school tracking** by ability at lower secondary level, with around 5 percent of all state-educated pupils continuing to attend academically selective grammar schools left over from the pre-comprehensivization era;
3. **curriculum and qualifications tracking at upper secondary level**, with some pupils following an academic curriculum in pursuit of A-level qualifications, traditionally the gold standard for entry to university, and others pursue a more vocationally oriented curriculum leading to NVQ or BTEC qualifications, sometimes in combination with an A-level.

The England component of the LIFETRACK project explored the implications of these three forms of tracking for the reproduction of social inequalities in education and the labour market.

1. Within-school ability grouping in primary education

Advocates of grouping pupils by measured ability for instructional purposes claim that ability-homogeneous classrooms increase the attainment of high-ability pupils without detriment to the attainment of pupils judged to be of lower ability. Opponents of ability grouping, in contrast, argue that high-ability pupils do at best only marginally better in ability-homogeneous classrooms than they would have done in mixed-ability settings, whereas low-

ability pupils do significantly worse. One mechanism posited by the critics of ability grouping is that this practice causes psychological harm to those labelled low-ability, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy of low attainment. This has important implications for the reproduction of social inequality in educational attainment, since pupils from lower social class backgrounds are more likely to be placed in a low ability group than their middle-class peers, even when they have comparable ability test scores. Drawing on data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), which is following a nationally representative sample of children in the UK born between 2000 and 2002, we find that primary school pupils' enjoyment of Maths, English, and school generally, diverge between the ages of 7 and 11, depending on ability group placement (Boliver & Capsada-Munsech, forthcoming). Academic enjoyment is a relevant dimension of students' identities, as those who like school and specific subjects are more likely to engage and improve their learning outcomes, enhancing attendance and inclusion in compulsory and post-compulsory education. [This finding adds further weight to the balance of evidence indicating that ability grouping, at least as currently practiced in England, disadvantages pupils placed in the low ability group.](#)

2. Academically selective and non-selective lower secondary schools

Government policies promoting selection based on measured 'ability' in lower secondary education have re-emerged in England, as indicated by the 2018 launch of a £50 million Selective Schools Expansion Fund to support the expansion of grammar schools in England. Contemporary advocates claim that academically selective grammar schools lead to better educational and labour market outcomes for those who attend, and argue that grammar school expansion policies would mean more opportunities for higher ability pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to access superior schools, leading to a more socially mobile society. These claims are at odds with the existing evidence, which indicates that grammar school pupils do not perform better in national exams than pupils of comparable ability and social background attending non-selective state-maintained schools. At most they only enjoy a modest attainment gain that comes at the expense of an attainment loss for those attending non-selective state-maintained schools (Boliver & Capsada-Munsech 2020). Beyond secondary education, the evidence also suggests that grammar school pupils are no more

likely to attend the UK's most academically selective universities, nor to be socially mobile, than non-selective state school pupils of comparable ability and social background. Importantly, the evidence also points to the severe historical and contemporary under-representation of socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils in grammar schools in England, even after taking into account differences in measured ability. Our research adds to this literature by exploring the impact of grammar school attendance in the hey-day of the selective system on earnings across the life-course. Drawing on data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which continues to follow a nationally representative sample of children born in 1958, we find only modest earnings returns to attending a grammar school, totalling just £39,000 across the life course (Birkelund et al 2021). [Our findings question the wisdom of expanding grammar schools when they appear to do little to improve earnings or increase social mobility.](#)

[3. The academic and vocational tracks in upper secondary education](#)

While all pupils follow a common national curriculum at primary and lower secondary level, upper secondary education consists of two distinctive tracks: the academic track leading to A-level qualifications and the vocational curriculum leading to qualifications such as NVQs or BTECs (taken by some pupils together with an A-level). Previous research has shown that young people from working class backgrounds are much less likely than their middle class peers to enrol in academic upper secondary education, partly but not wholly because eligibility to pursue A-levels requires a certain level of prior achievement in GCSE qualifications taken at age 15/16. A-levels have long been held to be the 'gold standard' when it comes to entry to higher education, but comparatively little is known about the labour market returns to A-level relative to vocational upper secondary qualifications, either before or after controlling for subsequent participation in higher education. Drawing on data from the Next Steps longitudinal survey, which follows a nationally representative sample of young people in England from age 13/14 in 2004 through to the present day, we examine the impact of upper secondary track on early labour market outcomes. Our results show that, compared to those with vocational upper secondary qualifications, those who followed the academic upper

secondary track were more likely to be in a professional/managerial occupation by age 25, even after controlling statistically for other relevant factors including prior attainment at GCSE, sociodemographic characteristics and higher education participation (Capsada-Munsech & Boliver 2021). This finding indicates that more needs to be done to promote access to the academic upper secondary track, particularly for pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Publications

Birkelund, J., Capsada-Munsech, Q., Boliver, V. & Karlson, K.B. (2021). [Lives on track? Long-term earnings returns to selective school placement in England and Denmark](#). *British Journal of Sociology*

Boliver, V. and Capsada-Munsech, Q. (2020) Selective secondary education and progression to higher education. In: Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (eds.) [Social Mobility and Higher Education: Are Grammar Schools the Answer?](#) Series: HEPI occasional papers (22). Higher Education Policy Institute: Oxford, pp. 25-30.

Boliver, V. and Capsada-Munsech, Q. (forthcoming) Does ability grouping affect UK primary school pupils' enjoyment of Maths and English? *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*.

Capsada-Munsech, Q. and Boliver, V. (2021) [The early labour market returns to upper secondary qualifications track in England](#). *Longitudinal Life Course Studies*, 12(3): 299-322.

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Further information

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