



Institute for Fiscal Studies

IFS Report Summary

**Christine Farquharson
Ellen Greaves**

**An evaluation of the impact
of the Social Mobility
Foundation programmes on
education and employment
outcomes: summary of
findings**

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Copy-edited by Rachel Lumpkin

The Institute for Fiscal Studies

Published by

The Institute for Fiscal Studies

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Printed by

Pureprint Group, Uckfield

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ISBN 978-1-80103-044-1

Preface

This work was primarily funded by the Social Mobility Foundation, courtesy of a grant from J.P. Morgan. The Social Mobility Foundation is a charity that aims to address inequality in access to professional occupations for high-achieving disadvantaged pupils. Co-funding was from the Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy, hosted at the Institute for Fiscal Studies (grant number ES/M010147/1).

Data from the National Pupil Database, the Higher Education Statistics Authority student record, and the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey were kindly made available by the Department for Education and Higher Education Statistics Authority. The data creators, depositors, copyright holders and funders bear no responsibility for the analysis or interpretation of the data presented here.

The authors would also like to thank the SMF programme participants for responding to follow-up surveys about their educational and employment choices.

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Summary

While there is broad agreement in the UK on the importance of social mobility, current evidence suggests that social background is more strongly related to outcomes in the UK than in many other developed countries. Educational attainment, university choices, occupation, and earnings are all influenced by socio-economic background. These effects show up at each stage of the lifecycle: graduates who attended state schools are less likely than their privately educated classmates to enter a professional occupation, even when they earn the same grades on the same degree at the same university (Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles, 2015). And within a profession, workers from disadvantaged backgrounds still earn less than their colleagues (Laurison and Friedman, 2016).

In response to these challenges, the Social Mobility Foundation (SMF) was established to make a practical contribution to social mobility in the UK by encouraging access to high-status universities and professional occupations for high-attaining pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. They offer programmes involving mentoring, internships, support with university applications, and access to skills development workshops.

The SMF's current programme, the Aspiring Professionals Programme, offers young people support across four key areas: mentoring, university application advice (including tailored visits to universities, and assistance with personal statements, interviews and admissions tests), skills sessions and internships. Young people join a City, Residential and, more recently, Online strand of the programme by application aged 16–17 and, if successful, are supported throughout their education, until graduate employment. The programme is open to academic young people predicted to achieve ABB at A-level (or equivalent), and who are eligible for Free School Meals, or are the first generation in their family to attend university in the UK or attend a school with a higher than average number of pupils eligible for Free School Meals.

University participation, and especially participation at a high-status institution in a relevant subject, is a potentially important intermediate step towards accessing the type of professional occupations the SMF targets. One Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) report therefore evaluates the impact of the SMF programmes on university participation overall and at high-status institutions (Farquharson and Greaves, 2021a). This report also assesses its effect on subject choice (although this is not explicitly targeted by the SMF programmes). The evaluation compares the education outcomes of SMF participants (collected by SMF via participant questionnaires and online searches) with outcomes for a group of pupils with similar observable characteristics (such as performance at secondary school and neighbourhood context), observed in administrative data. This report focuses on the education outcomes for six cohorts of participants with the SMF: the cohorts that entered the programme between 2009 and 2014. Results for the cohort entering in 2013 and 2014 are new. Results for earlier cohorts update findings contained in an earlier IFS report (Crawford, Greaves and Jin, 2015).

To study the eventual goal of increasing participation in professional occupations, a partner IFS report evaluates the impact of the SMF programmes on participants' employment outcomes, including their overall employment rate and the sector and skill level of their first job after graduation (Farquharson and Greaves, 2021b). The outcomes of SMF participants are compared with a matched control group of graduates who have similar observable characteristics, including performance at A-Level and parental

background. This report focuses on the employment outcomes for two cohorts of participants with the SMF: the cohorts that entered the programme in 2009 and 2012.

We can interpret the difference in education and employment outcomes between SMF participants and our suitably chosen 'comparison' group of young people as the causal impact of the SMF programmes, under some assumptions, as follows.

- Participants do not choose to be part of the SMF programme on the basis of characteristics that are not observable to the researcher, and that also influence education/employment outcomes. Examples of such factors could be pupils' motivation and professional aspirations, conditional on academic performance.
- The sample of participants for which we observe education/employment outcomes is a representative sample of SMF participants.
- These two assumptions are highly unlikely to be met in full. Nevertheless, by accounting for a wide range of important observable characteristics (such as prior attainment, subject choice and disadvantage) we are able to move 'closer to causal' and provide a better sense of how the SMF programmes have affected the outcomes of otherwise-similar students.

We find that pupils who participated in the SMF programmes were substantially more likely to attend university in the two years after they finished their A-levels (or equivalent). The biggest impact – 18 percentage points – was for the 2009 cohort (when the programme was smaller and more selective), but even in the 2013 and 2014 cohorts SMF participants were around 9 percentage points more likely to attend university than other similar students. This is a very significant impact in a context where around 80% of comparison students attended university.

In addition, among students who did go on to university, there is some evidence that SMF participants were more likely to attend Russell Group universities (though they were not any more likely to attend the universities that were most visited by employers). The size of the estimates for Russell Group participation – around 5 percentage points and statistically significant for most cohorts – would eliminate the difference in Russell Group participation between white students with at least three A grades at A-level, eligible or not for Free School Meals.

The research conclusions for employment outcomes are limited by a very low response rate to the employment survey of SMF participants (which led to just 16% of SMF participants being included in our analysis of employment status) which is not such a concern for education outcomes. The employment report therefore focuses on how charities can use and maximise the value of evaluation in their work, rather than the specific research findings.

SMF participants were less likely than similar graduates to be in employment, but more likely to be in postgraduate study. Compared with a group of graduates with similar parental background and A-level results, SMF participants who have graduated were 19 percentage points less likely to be in work six months after graduation, but 16 percentage points more likely to be studying for a postgraduate degree.

Key findings

SMF participants are more likely to attend university in the two years after A-levels (or equivalent).

Compared with a group of pupils with similar background and prior attainment, SMF participants were substantially more likely to attend university in the two years after they finished their A-levels (or equivalent). The estimates are large (ranging between 8 and 18 percentage points across cohorts), in a context where around 80% of comparison students attended university. The impact of the SMF programmes on increasing university participation is roughly equivalent to increasing attainment for all students to at least three A* grades at A-level from at least three B grades.

SMF participants who attend university are more likely to attend Russell Group universities.

Conditional on attending higher education, the SMF programmes had a positive impact on the chances of attending a Russell Group university, but these effects are only statistically significant for the 2010, 2013 and 2014 cohorts, with other cohorts aside from 2012 close to statistical significance. The size of the estimates would eliminate the difference in Russell Group participation between white pupils with at least three A grades at A-level, eligible or not for Free School Meals. However, there is no evidence that participation at a university most visited by top employers increased.

SMF participants were less likely than similar graduates to be in employment, but more likely to be in postgraduate study.

Compared with a group of graduates who have similar parental background and A-level results, SMF participants who have graduated were 19 percentage points less likely to be in work six months after graduation, but 16 percentage points more likely to be studying for a postgraduate degree.

For those in employment, there is no strong evidence that the SMF programmes changed the skill level or the industry of participants' first job after graduation.

SMF participants are less likely than a comparison group of employed graduates to be in highly skilled occupations, and slightly more likely to be in one of the SMF's 11 priority sectors. However, we cannot be confident, statistically, that these effects are different from zero.

Limitations of this study are those common to non-experimental research designs.

We construct a credible comparison group of students whose education/employment outcomes act as the counterfactual for SMF participants' outcomes in the absence of the programme. The crucial but untestable assumption is 'selection on observables': that is, there are no differences between the SMF participants and comparison group in unobservable characteristics, such as motivation or aspirations. Our estimates also rely on the outcomes we observe for SMF participants being representative of SMF participants as a whole. This is most problematic for employment outcomes where the response rate is low, leading to just 16% of SMF participants included in our analysis of employment status. In addition, by analysing short-run employment outcomes, we leave out SMF participants who had not yet graduated or had enrolled in postgraduate study. Looking at longer-term employment and earnings would give a better picture of the overall impact of the SMF.

External quantitative evaluation of programmes has the potential to be beneficial to future participants, charities and other organisations and funders, but can be limited by low response rates.

The benefits of external quantitative evaluation include independent estimates of the programme's effectiveness and hence reflection, comparison with other organisations, and demonstration of effectiveness to external funders. These benefits are limited to the internal validity of the evaluation and, for comparison, the actions of other organisations.

Other comparison groups may be useful.

Alternative comparison groups may be useful for charities and organisations that need timely, but coarser, information to benchmark the success of their programme. Each report presents average outcomes for different groups, for example students with at least three A* grades at A-level. Organisations can choose which is the most comparable to their participants to act as a 'rough and ready' counterfactual group.

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