



Research Briefing 2: Higher Education

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Impetus

Impetus transforms the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by ensuring they get the right support to succeed in school, in work and in life. We find, fund and build the most promising charities working with these young people, providing core funding and working shoulder-to-shoulder with their leaders to help them become stronger organisations. In partnership with other funders we help our charities expand and we work to influence policy and decision makers so that young people get the support they need.

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Our work with Impetus is part of NIESR's ongoing research in the Centre for Vocational Education Research (CVER). CVER was launched in March 2015, funded by the Department for Education, to create a research institution that will advance our understanding of the requirements for vocational education in the UK today, identify the challenges in provision of vocational education, and develop and strengthen the knowledge-base to enable a more agile, relevant and needs-based vocational education sector to become a driving force for economic growth and social mobility, as it is in other countries.

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Executive Summary

Higher Education is one of the most topical issues in domestic politics, with the government's post-18 education and funding review due to report back imminently and yet more reforms expected in the early 2020s, after a full decade of change.

This briefing analyses the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data to paint a clearer picture of disadvantaged young people and their access to higher education than ever before, including differences between different regions in England. Differences at a local authority level will be explored further in a future briefing.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do worse than their better-off peers. Just 27% of disadvantaged young people between the ages of 20 and 25 in 2017 – those who left school between 2007 and 2012 – accessed university in the subsequent decade, compared to 44% of their better-off peers. The disparity is even more stark when looking just at top third institutions, where disadvantaged young people make up just 6% of students. And just 71% of disadvantaged young people who started a degree had completed it, compared to 81% of their better-off peers

Even when looking at similarly qualified young people, disadvantaged young people still do worse. Among those young people with five A*-Cs at GCSE, disadvantaged young people are four percentage points less likely to go to university than their better-off peers. Again, this disparity is wider when looking at top third institutions. 26% of disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs who go to university go to a top third institution, compared to 36% of their better-off peers. And while 82% of disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs had passed a degree, 87% of their better-off peers had done so.

Finally, we also see that this is not inevitable. In London, disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged young people are equally likely to go to university. In fact, a disadvantaged young person from London with top grades is more likely to go to university than a similar non-disadvantaged young person anywhere else in the country.

There is much uncertainty about what the government's higher education policy will be in 2020, but it looks unlikely that social mobility will be the central goal. Given significant disparities between young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers, in access and success, this would be a missed opportunity. London shows that better is possible.

Introduction

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are widely known to do less well at school – they are half as likely to achieve good GCSEs by age 16 as their better-off peers.¹ And as a result they are less likely to progress to A-levels and go on to university. Tackling this issue has been a priority for successive governments.

It is also a priority for Impetus. Working with brilliant charities like IntoUniversity and The Access Project, we know that this discrepancy is not inevitable if you reach young people from a young age to make sure they know that university can be for them, and support them to achieve the grades they need.

Policymakers face significant choices, with the potential to make substantial impact on the success or failure of charities and others working on this challenge. From tuition fees to maintenance support to vocational education, the Augar review looks like being the start of a debate, not the end. Our views on some of the key policy questions faced are set out in [Funding for the future](#).

This report outlines new findings on access and success in higher education for disadvantaged young people. Our definition of disadvantage, eligibility for Free School Meals during the years of secondary education, is common in pre-18 education, but less widely used as a metric in higher education, although it has been used in previous research based on administrative data.² We think it's an effective individual level measure of disadvantage in schools, and the higher education sector would benefit from making more use of it as it is the currently best available measure of family disadvantage.

In Chapter 1, we look at access to university, simply those young people who start a higher education course. In Chapter 2, we explore access to the “top third” of universities, the most prestigious and selective institutions. Finally, in Chapter 3, we look at university pass rates – after all, the point of going is to graduate.

This is the second of a series of briefings taking advantage of the new Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset to explore questions around life chances for disadvantaged young people in detail, following on from a report looking at the numbers of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) released in April 2019.³ Subsequent briefings will explore what is happening in the regions, how long-term NEET young people are faring and which young people are managing the move from NEET back into EET.

LEO links administrative data from schools and universities, along with further education data and job outcomes. This enables us to investigate the relationship between qualifications, disadvantage and university with data of highest quality. Because it's administrative data, it covers almost everyone.

The approach is summarised on the inside back cover, and full details of the methodology used can be found in the accompanying document *Methodology for the Youth Jobs Gap*. The *Methodology* document includes extensive discussion of the caveats associated with the new LEO dataset. As with government reports based on LEO, it is important to say that these are experimental statistics and feedback on methodology is welcome. Nonetheless, LEO is the best data available, offering better insight into the situation than any previous data set. Contributions, engagement and comments are encouraged via info@impetus.org.uk.

The levels of disadvantage and qualification in each region are summarised in the following tables:

Table 1: Levels of disadvantage in each region

Region	Proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
East Midlands	11%
East of England	9%
London	24%
North East	17%
North West	17%
South East	9%
South West	9%
West Midlands	17%
Yorkshire and the Humber	15%

Table 2: Levels of qualification in each region

Region	Proportion of young people without good GCSEs	Proportion of young people with top GCSEs
East Midlands	40%	47%
East of England	37%	51%
London	36%	51%
North East	42%	45%
North West	39%	48%
South East	36%	52%
South West	37%	50%
West Midlands	41%	46%
Yorkshire and the Humber	43%	44%

“Without good GCSEs” refers to young people with fewer than five GCSEs at grades A*-C, and missing at least one of English and maths, at age 16. “Top GCSEs” refers to young people with five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and maths, at age 16. For more details, see the inside back cover.

Table 3: Levels of qualification and disadvantage in each region (major groups)

	Proportion of young people who are			
	Without good GCSEs		With top GCSEs	
	Non-disadvantaged		Non-disadvantaged	
Region	Disadvantaged		Disadvantaged	
East Midlands	33%	7%	45%	2%
East of England	31%	6%	48%	2%
London	24%	12%	43%	9%
North East	31%	12%	41%	3%
North West	28%	11%	44%	4%
South East	31%	6%	50%	2%
South West	31%	6%	48%	2%
West Midlands	30%	10%	42%	4%
Yorkshire and the Humber	33%	10%	42%	3%

I: Access to higher education

The main focus of attention in higher education policy is a simple one: who goes, and who doesn't?

Over time, ever more young people are accessing university. Government figures show that just 31% of those young people who were 19 in 2005/06 had entered by age 19, compared to 41% of those aged 19 in 2016/17. This increase has benefitted young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as their better-off peers, but without closing the gap between the two by much – it stood at 19.2 percentage points in 2005/06 compared to 17.7 percentage points in 2016/17.⁴

But we also know that thousands of young people aged 19+ participate in higher education every year. The LEO data picks up anyone starting higher education by 2016/17 in any of our six cohorts of secondary school leavers with GCSEs between 2007 and 2012. For the 2012 cohort, this means we pick up anyone entering higher education by age 20. For the 2007 cohort, we see higher education entry up to age 25.

The National Picture

Overall, across the six cohorts, 42% of young people had at least enrolled at university by 2016/17 (many will have graduated – not all these young people are still enrolled at this point). The rate is slightly higher for the 2007 cohort (43%) than the 2012 cohort (41%), reflecting the additional time young people from that cohort have had to transition to higher education. For the same reason, these figures are higher than the figures for university access by age 19.

Of course, university enrolment depends on family disadvantage: just 27% of disadvantaged young people have progressed to university compared to 44% of their better-off peers. This gap of 18 percentage points is the same as the gap at age 19 in the national figures in most years (except for one year when it dipped to 17 percentage points), suggesting that university starters age 20+ have not historically helped close the gap.

This access gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers is also consistent looking at each cohort in isolation. This is in line with nationally published figures at age 19. Given that tuition fees affected some cohorts more than others, there is no evidence here of an impact on university enrolment rates.

As well as looking at disadvantage, we can also consider which qualifications are correlated with university enrolment. Universities are designed to be academic, and almost invariably require A-level or equivalent qualifications for entry, so it is no surprise to see significant differences in entry rate by qualification. While 68% of those with top GCSEs (five A*-C including English and maths at age 16) eventually enrol in university, just 13% of those without good GCSEs do so.

When comparing disadvantaged young people to their similarly qualified, but better-off peers, we see very small gaps in enrolment rates. Among those with top GCSEs, 64% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds enrol in university, compared to 68% of their better-off peers with the same qualifications. Among those without good GCSEs, there is no gap at all. This is in contrast to previous findings around NEET rates in previous [Youth Jobs Gap](#) reports.⁵

This is an important finding from the perspective of widening participation – the work to be done in equalising access rates among similarly qualified young people is small; the majority of the access gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers is to do with differences in attainment at 16. This should be a clear focus for widening participation work – universities cannot simply chase after the very small pool of disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs, who make up only 2-4% of the population outside of London.

Looking at the student population

As well as looking at the likelihood of different types of young people enrolling at university, we can look at the makeup of those young people who have enrolled at university.

Consistently across all six cohorts, 10% of young people who have enrolled in university are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, 79% of university enrolled students achieved top GCSEs, compared to 12% who did not secure good GCSEs at 16. (The remaining 9% of students achieved either five GCSE passes, or A*-C in English and maths, but not both; this minority of students will be considered in more detail in subsequent briefings).

Finally, we can look at the intersection of these two variables. Overall, 74% of university enrolments are by non-disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs. There are more enrolments by non-disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs (9% of enrolments) than disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs (5%). Overall, almost 90% of young people starting university comes from one of these three groups.

Variation by regionⁱ

One of the things we can do with LEO data is break these figures down by the region and local authority that young people went to school in. As we found in [Establishing the Employment Gap](#), variations within the regions are generally greater than variations between them, and these will be explored in reports later in the *Youth Jobs Gap* series. In this section, we have removed the young people with no qualifications at 16, who do supply a few thousand university enrolments from each cohort nationally, but not enough for robust analysis at a regional level. This is <1% of overall university enrolments.

ⁱ In this section, we have removed the young people with no qualifications at 16, who do supply a few thousand university enrolments from each cohort nationally, but not enough for robust analysis at a regional level. This is <1% of overall university enrolments.

Looking first at the overall enrolment rate of young people in each region, there's one region that stands out for sending more young people to university than any other (Table 4).

Table 4: Young people from London are significantly more likely to enrol in university than young people in any other region.

Region	Enrolment rate
London	55%
West Midlands	43%
North West	43%
South East	42%
East of England	42%
East Midlands	40%
South West	39%
North East	38%
Yorkshire and the Humber	38%

London stands out for having the best performance by a considerable margin; indeed, a young person in London is almost 50% more likely to go on to university than a young person from the North East or Yorkshire. Outside London, all other regions are within five percentage points of each other. London is such an outlier it's actually the only region with an enrolment rate above the national average.

This is not the only way in which London is an outlier. While overall we don't see a higher level of university enrolment among the 2012 cohort than the 2007 cohort because of the timing difference, this is not true for London – already, over 56% of young people from the 2012 cohort have progressed to university, compared to just under 56% of the 2007 cohort who have had five years longer to do so. London is unique in this regard.

London's uniqueness extends into looking at the gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers. (Table 5).

Table 5: Disadvantaged young people from London are more likely to enrol in university than non-disadvantaged young people in any other region

Region	Enrolment rate (non-disadvantaged)	Enrolment rate (disadvantaged)	Gap (% pts)
London	57%	49%	8
West Midlands	46%	30%	16
North West	41%	22%	19
South East	42%	21%	21
East of England	44%	23%	21
East Midlands	46%	25%	21
South West	41%	19%	22
North East	42%	19%	23
Yorkshire and the Humber	45%	20%	25

As well as having the smallest gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers – eight percentage points, half that of the second lowest gap in any other region – disadvantaged young people from London are actually more likely to enrol in university than their better-off peers in other parts of the country, and more than twice as likely to enrol as their disadvantaged peers elsewhere.

It is often the case when looking at different parts of the country that London stands out; but the scale of these differences is significant. The causes of these differences are things that the data can't tell us, but the sheer number of universities within a commutable distance of where young people live is likely a major factor – disadvantaged young people are known to travel less far to university than their better-off peers.⁶

Differences in university enrolment by qualification are similarly pronounced (Table 6).

Table 6: London students without good GCSEs are particularly likely to go on to university

Region	Enrolment rate (without good GCSEs)	Enrolment rate (top GCSEs)
London	25%	77%
West Midlands	15%	70%
North West	12%	69%
East of England	11%	66%
East Midlands	11%	66%
Yorkshire and the Humber	10%	65%
South East	10%	67%
North East	10%	66%
South West	9%	64%

A higher proportion of Londoners in both qualification groups enrol at university, but young people without good GCSEs are the group where London's performance is especially noticeable, with these young people around twice as likely to go to university as average.

Finally, we can bring together both qualification and disadvantage at the regional level, which presents a fascinating picture (Table 7).

Table 7: The gap in enrolment at university is non-existent – or even negative – in London

	Without good GCSEs			Top GCSEs		
	Non-disadvantaged			Non-disadvantaged		
Region	Disadvantaged		Gap (%pts)	Disadvantaged		Gap (%pts)
London	24%	27%	-3	77%	77%	0
West Midlands	15%	15%	0	70%	65%	5
Yorkshire and the Humber	11%	9%	1	66%	59%	7
North West	13%	11%	2	69%	61%	8
East Midlands	11%	9%	2	67%	57%	10
East of England	12%	9%	2	67%	56%	10
North East	11%	7%	4	67%	55%	12
South West	9%	7%	2	64%	51%	13
South East	11%	8%	3	68%	54%	13

Disadvantaged young people in London with top GCSEs are just as likely to go to university as their better-off peers. Those without good GCSEs are more likely to go to university. And headline national rates, no gap for those without good GCSEs and a four percentage point gap for those with top GCSEs, disguise the fact that outside London, the picture is a lot less rosy.

Again, disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs are about 10% more likely to enrol in university than their better-off peers in any other region. This could be caused by a number of things, such as different choices in post-16 education, different family preferences for higher education compared to labour market entry, and the fact London in particular has many universities well connected to other parts of the region by public transport.

Looking at the student population

Having looked at the proportion of each group progressing to university, we can also turn the question around to see what percentage of those young people who enrol in university have a particular characteristic. For example, what proportion of young people who enrol at university are from disadvantaged backgrounds? (Table 8)

Table 8: A large minority of university students from London are from disadvantaged backgrounds, but in some regions fewer than one in 20 students are

Region	Proportion of university starters from disadvantaged backgrounds
London	21%
West Midlands	12%
North West	10%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8%
North East	8%
East Midlands	6%
East of England	5%
South West	4%
South East	4%

These findings are unsurprising – we know London has a high level of disadvantage compared to other regions, so it follows that the group of young people that goes to university is also particularly disadvantaged. But how much are disadvantaged young people underrepresented among university enrollers? (Table 9)

Table 9: There are fewer than half the number of disadvantaged young people attending university in some regions as there are overall

Region	Extent to which disadvantaged young people are underrepresented among university enrolments
London	0.87
West Midlands	0.68
North West	0.57
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.57
East of England	0.54
East Midlands	0.53
South West	0.48
North East	0.48
South East	0.47

In this table (and indeed throughout this report), underrepresentation reflects the extent to which disadvantaged young people are less prevalent among a particular group – in this case, university enrolments – than they are among young people overall.

Disadvantaged young people are underrepresented among university starters in all regions of England. In several regions, there are only around half as many disadvantaged young people enrolling as there are in the overall population.

We know that differences in qualification outcome are a significant factor in this, as young people with top GCSEs make up the lion’s share of university starters. Indeed, as we saw earlier in this chapter, 79% of university enrolled students achieved top GCSEs, compared to 12% who did not secure good GCSEs. While there is some variation in these figures at a regional level, the real value comes from combining them with disadvantage (table 10).

Table 10: Disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs make up very small proportions of university starters

	Proportion of university starters			
	Without good GCSEs		Top GCSEs	
	Non-disadvantaged		Non-disadvantaged	
Region	Disadvantaged		Disadvantaged	
London	11%	6%	61%	12%
West Midlands	11%	4%	70%	6%
North West	9%	3%	73%	6%
North East	9%	2%	74%	5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	9%	3%	74%	5%
East Midlands	9%	2%	77%	3%
East of England	9%	1%	79%	3%
South West	8%	1%	81%	3%
South East	8%	1%	81%	2%

The rows in this table don't add up to 100%, as approximately 10% of young people at university do not fit into one of these two qualification groups

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and without good GCSEs make up very small proportions of university starters. In some respects, this is unsurprising. Disadvantaged young people are in the minority. And universities set a high academic bar, leaving young people without good GCSEs in a minority. But this group is particularly underrepresented in higher education (Table 11).

Table 11: Outside of London, disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs are particularly underrepresented among university starters

	Over/underrepresentation of different groups among university starters			
	Without good GCSEs		Top GCSEs	
	Non-disadvantaged		Non-disadvantaged	
Region	Disadvantaged		Disadvantaged	
London	0.45	0.51	1.44	1.44
West Midlands	0.35	0.35	1.67	1.55
North West	0.32	0.26	1.67	1.47
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.29	0.26	1.78	1.60
East Midlands	0.28	0.23	1.72	1.46
East of England	0.28	0.22	1.63	1.37
North East	0.30	0.20	1.79	1.47
South East	0.26	0.18	1.63	1.30
South West	0.24	0.18	1.68	1.33

This final table shows two important things. Firstly, disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs are generally overrepresented among university starters. This highlights the extent to which qualifications are crucial for access to higher education.

Secondly, disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs are very much underrepresented, even when compared to similarly qualified but better-off peers. Given that universities require Level 3 qualifications, for which good GCSEs are prerequisite, this highlights the extent to which the group that doesn't achieve this by 16 tends not to catch up.

2: Access to top third universities

As well as a focus on who goes to university in the round, there is also a focus on who goes to the top third of universities. These are most prestigious universities, generally most strongly linked to higher lifetime earnings⁷ – and with the largest access gaps between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers.⁸

Over time, an increasing proportion of young people are accessing more selective universities.⁹ This is partly a reflection of government reforms, which effectively lift the cap on the number of places available to young people with A-level grades.

As before, the LEO data picks up anyone starting higher education by 2016/17 in any of our six cohorts. For the 2012 cohort, this means we pick up anyone entering higher education by age 20. For the 2007 cohort, we see higher education entry up to age 25.

The National Pictureⁱⁱ

Overall, across the six cohorts, 30% of young people who enrol in university at all have enrolled at a top third university by 2016/17. The rate is slightly higher for the 2012 cohort (34%) than the 2007 cohort (29%). It probably reflects the fact that young people who need additional time to transition to higher education are probably less likely to attend a top third institution.

Of course, this varies based on disadvantage. Just 19% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who progress to university access a top third institution, compared to 32% of their better-off peers. This is a 13 percentage point gap in access to top third universities among those who do access university.

The numbers in the previous paragraph can also be expressed in terms of young people overall. Just 5% of disadvantaged young people progress to a top third institution, compared to 14% of their better-off peers. This is a nine percentage point gap in access to top third universities. All numbers in this report could be rebased in this manner, but in general we look at the share of university starters accessing a top third institution.

This access gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers is also consistent looking at each cohort in isolation. Given that tuition fees will have affected some cohorts more than others, there is no evidence here of an impact on enrolment rates at top third universities.

ⁱⁱ In this section, we have removed the young people with no qualifications at 16, who do supply a few hundred top third university enrolments from each cohort nationally, but not enough for robust analysis at a regional level. This is <1% of overall top third university enrolments.

Table 12: Over 40% of young people from the South East who go to university go to a top third university, compared to a quarter in the North East

Region	Enrolment rate in top third universities among those with top GCSEs
South East	42%
London	42%
East of England	41%
South West	34%
West Midlands	33%
East Midlands	32%
North West	31%
Yorkshire and the Humber	29%
North East	25%

London is still near the top, but no longer stands out for having by far and away the best performance. Since London sends such a large proportion of its young people to university overall, it’s also sending the largest proportion to top third universities overall. In some respects, it is impressive that London is still so highly rated – London is managing to send a very good share of university students to top third universities, even though it is sending a large proportion of students.

The North East stands out, and at the opposite end of the table. Only a quarter of young people from the North East with top GCSEs goes to a top third institution.

When breaking enrolment in top third universities down by disadvantage, we see that London stands out again (Table 13).

Table 13: Disadvantaged young people enrolled in university from London are around twice as likely to attend top third institutions as those from the North East

Region	Enrolment rate (non-disadvantaged)	Enrolment rate (disadvantaged)	Gap (%pts)
South East	42%	29%	13
East of England	41%	29%	13
London	44%	31%	12
South West	34%	22%	12
Yorkshire and the Humber	30%	19%	11
North West	32%	21%	11
East Midlands	33%	22%	11
North East	26%	16%	10
West Midlands	33%	27%	7

First, the gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers is varied. The West Midlands has noticeably the smallest gap at just seven percentage points, compared to almost twice that in the South East and East of England.

But behind the gaps, London re-emerges – the highest enrolment rate for disadvantaged young people, and the highest enrolment rate for non-disadvantaged young people. The only reason it didn't come above the South East in Table 12 is because of the high levels of disadvantage. Indeed, nearly twice the proportion of disadvantaged young people from London go to a top third university as the North East, where only 16% do.

We have already restricted our view to only those young people with top GCSEs and going to university. That such a small minority of this already small minority go to a top third institution highlights how many hurdles young people must overcome to achieve this. Indeed, in the North East, only 26% of non-disadvantaged young people go to a top third university, a figure bettered among disadvantaged young people in several other regions.

Looking at the student population

Having looked at the proportion of each group progressing to a top third university among those who enrol at university, we can also turn the question around to see what percentage of those young people who enrol in a top third university have a particular characteristic. For example, what proportion of young people who enrol at a top third university are from disadvantaged backgrounds? (Table 14)

Table 14: Six times as many students at top third universities from London are also from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to other regions

Region	Proportion of top third university starters from disadvantaged backgrounds
London	13%
West Midlands	7%
North West	5%
North East	4%
Yorkshire and the Humber	4%
East Midlands	3%
East of England	3%
South West	2%
South East	2%

Here we see the findings about London so far combining in the most striking finding yet. London has a larger number of disadvantaged young people compared to other regions; they are more likely to get top GCSEs; they are more likely to go to university than similarly qualified disadvantaged young people in other regions; and they are more likely to go to top third universities than disadvantaged university enrollers in other regions. This means overall one in eight young people from London at a top third institution is from a disadvantaged background, compared to one in 50 in the South East.

We can of course compare these proportions to the share of young people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, to see how underrepresented disadvantaged young people are at top third universities (Table 15).

Table 15: Disadvantaged young people are much less underrepresented among top third enrolments in London than in most other regions

Region	Extent to which disadvantaged young people are underrepresented among top third university enrolments
London	0.51
West Midlands	0.39
North West	0.27
East of England	0.27
East Midlands	0.26
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.25
South West	0.24
South East	0.23
North East	0.23

This is underrepresentation compared to the overall population of young people. There are only around a quarter as many disadvantaged young people among top third university starters from the North East as there are in the North East population overall. The same is true for almost every other region. In London, there are half as many – a rate twice as good, or perhaps half as bad. The West Midlands stands out as best of the rest – noticeably unlike all other regions, but still a long way short of London.

3: Pass rates

There is a growing focus on what might be the most important question in higher education – who gets a degree? After all, the greatest economic benefit comes from achieving the qualification, not just attending the university. It is welcome in this context that policymakers such as the Office for Students are increasingly focussed not just on access but student success.

There are two substantial challenges in assessing pass rates.

First, how to think about those who have not passed? In some cases these will be people who have dropped out or failed exams. But in other cases, people will take longer to pass. For part-time and Open University students, this may well have been part of their plan. The opposite of “pass” in this data isn’t “fail”, it’s “not yet passed”.

Second, how to account for the fact that our approach to the data means we only know whether people have passed their degree by 2016/17 – regardless of when they have started it? For example, those who only started a degree in 2015/16 will not have passed by 2016/17 – and there are more of these people in the 2012 cohort than the 2007 cohort. This has a significant impact on the data. For simplicity, we look only at the 2007 cohort, who have had longest to access university and longest to pass a degree. Further observations on these points can be found in the accompanying methodology document.

The National Picture

81% of those from the 2007 cohort who have accessed university have passed their degree by 2017. Of course, this varies based on disadvantage. Just 71% of disadvantaged students have passed their degree, compared to 82% of their better-off peers. This 11 point success gap is too large to be explained by methodological quirks.

As well as looking at disadvantage, we can also consider which qualifications are correlated with university success. While 87% of those with top GCSEs who enrol in university subsequently pass a degree, just 59% of those without good GCSEs do so. Part of this gap will be explained by the latter group being disproportionately likely to have started university later.

When comparing disadvantaged young people to their similarly qualified, but better-off peers, we still see small gaps in enrolment rates. Among those enrolled at university with top GCSEs, 82% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds pass, compared to 87% of their better-off peers with the same qualifications. Among those without good GCSEs, the equivalent figures are 57% and 60% respectively.

Looking at the student population

As well as looking at the likelihood of different types of young people passing a degree, we can look at the makeup of those young people who pass degrees.

Overall, 8% of degrees passed by young people are by those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, 80% of degrees are passed by young people who achieved top GCSEs, compared to 11% by those who did not secure good GCSEs 16. (The remaining 9% of degrees are passed by students who achieved either five GCSE passes, or A*-C in English and maths, but not both; this minority of students will be considered in more detail in subsequent briefings).

Finally, we can look at the intersection of these two variables. Overall, 75% of degree passes are by non-disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs. There are more degree passes by non-disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs (9% of all degree passes) than disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs (5%). Overall, almost 90% of degree passes is by a young person from one of these three groups.

Variation by regionⁱⁱⁱ

As in previous chapters, we can break these figures down by the region and local authority that young people went to school in. As we found in [Establishing the Employment Gap](#), variations within the regions are generally greater than variations between them, and these will be explored in reports later in the [Youth Jobs Gap](#) series.

Looking first at the overall pass rate of young people in each region, London sits right in the middle (Table 16).

Table 16: University students from the south are slightly more likely to pass their degrees than students from the north

Region	Pass rate
East of England	84%
South East	83%
East Midlands	82%
South West	82%
London	81%
Yorkshire and the Humber	80%
West Midlands	80%
North West	80%
North East	79%

ⁱⁱⁱ In this section, we have removed the young people with no qualifications at 16, who do supply a few thousand university passes from each cohort nationally, but not enough for robust analysis at a regional level. This is <1% of overall university passes.

There is something of a North–South divide in terms of pass rates, with the three southern regions (outside London) in the top four, and the three northern regions in the bottom four. London sits in the middle of the table (and in line with the national figure), but in its own way this is still impressive: London sends such a large proportion of its young people to university overall, and it is also sending the largest proportion to top third universities overall; and yet pass rates are average.

When breaking these figures down by disadvantage, however, London reclaims its place as the stand out performer (Table 17).

Table 17: Disadvantaged students are more likely to pass their degrees if they’re from London than anywhere else

Region	Pass rate (non-disadvantaged)	Pass rate (disadvantaged)	Gap (%pts)
London	83%	75%	8
North West	81%	70%	10
East Midlands	83%	71%	12
Yorkshire and the Humber	81%	69%	13
East of England	84%	71%	13
West Midlands	81%	68%	13
South East	84%	70%	14
North East	80%	67%	14
South West	83%	66%	16

As well as having the smallest gap between disadvantaged young people and their better-off peers – eight percentage points, half that of the South West – disadvantaged young people from London are more likely to pass a university degree than disadvantaged young people from any other region.

There is also no North–South divide in this version of the table, which effectively means the divide seen in table 16 is mostly a disadvantage effect. Differences in pass rates by qualification instead of disadvantage are similar in scale and also lack this simplistic geographical split (Table 18).

Table 18: There is no north-south divide when looking at pass rates for young people without good GCSEs

Region	Pass rate (without good GCSEs)	Pass rate (top GCSEs)
East of England	62%	88%
London	62%	88%
North West	59%	85%
South East	59%	88%
North East	58%	85%
East Midlands	58%	88%
West Midlands	58%	86%
Yorkshire and the Humber	57%	86%
South West	57%	87%

Finally, we can bring together both qualification and disadvantage at the regional level, which presents a fascinating picture (Table 19).

Table 19: The gap in university pass rates for disadvantaged young people and similarly qualified but better-off peers varies significantly by region

	Without good GCSEs			Top GCSEs		
	Non-disadvantaged			Non-disadvantaged		
Region	Disadvantaged		Gap (%pts)	Disadvantaged		Gap (%pts)
South West	57%	52%	5	87%	75%	12
East of England	62%	59%	3	89%	80%	9
North East	59%	55%	4	85%	77%	8
Yorkshire and the Humber	58%	54%	4	87%	80%	7
West Midlands	59%	53%	6	87%	80%	7
East Midlands	58%	58%	1	88%	81%	7
South East	60%	51%	8	88%	82%	6
North West	59%	58%	2	85%	80%	5
London	62%	60%	2	89%	85%	3

There are two things that stand out in this table.

First, in one region the gap is actually bigger for young people without good GCSEs than top GCSEs. This is a unique feature of the South East. The data cannot tell us whether this reflects an interesting truth about the region, or is just a quirk of the data.

Second, the difference in the gap between top and bottom is wide. For young people with top GCSEs, it's 3.5 times larger in the South West than London. Among young people without good GCSEs, it's around 14 times larger in the South East than the East Midlands.

Looking at the student population

Having looked at the proportion of each group passing a degree, we can also turn the question around to see what percentage of those young people who are awarded a degree have a particular characteristic. For example, what proportion of young people who pass a degree are from disadvantaged backgrounds? (Table 20)

Table 20: A large minority of degrees awarded to young people from London are awarded to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, but in some regions fewer than one in 30 are

Region	Proportion of university passes from disadvantaged backgrounds
London	19%
West Midlands	9%
North West	9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	7%
North East	7%
East Midlands	5%
East of England	4%
South West	3%
South East	3%

These findings are unsurprising – we know London has a high level of disadvantage compared to other regions, the group of young people that goes to university is also particularly disadvantaged, and as such, we end up with lots of disadvantaged graduates. But how much are disadvantaged young people underrepresented among university enrollers? (Table 21)

Table 21: Barely a third as many graduates from some regions are from disadvantaged backgrounds as there are disadvantaged young people in the region overall

Region	Extent to which disadvantaged young people are underrepresented among university passers
London	0.80
West Midlands	0.55
North West	0.50
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.48
East of England	0.44
East Midlands	0.42
North East	0.38
South West	0.38
South East	0.37

Disadvantaged young people are underrepresented among university graduates in all regions of England. In several regions, there are barely a third as many disadvantaged young people graduating from university as there are in the overall population.

We have already seen that young people with top GCSEs make up the lion’s share of university passers and combining qualification with disadvantage at the regional level reveals what the graduate population looks like (Table 22).

Table 22: Disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs make up very small proportions of university graduates

	Proportion of university starters			
	Without good GCSEs		Top GCSEs	
	Non-disadvantaged		Non-disadvantaged	
Region	Disadvantaged		Disadvantaged	
London	12%	6%	70%	12%
West Midlands	11%	3%	80%	5%
North West	10%	3%	82%	5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	10%	2%	84%	4%
North East	10%	2%	83%	4%
East Midlands	10%	2%	85%	3%
East of England	9%	1%	87%	3%
South West	8%	1%	89%	2%
South East	8%	1%	89%	2%

Disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs make up very small proportions of university graduates, although they are twice the share of graduates in London as any other regions. In some respects, this is unsurprising. Disadvantaged young people are in the minority. And universities set a high academic bar, leaving young people without good GCSEs in a minority. But this group is particularly underrepresented in higher education (Table 23).

This final table shows two important things.

First, disadvantaged young people with top GCSEs are overrepresented among university pass rates. This highlights the extent to which qualifications are crucial for success in higher education. This is even more true than for university access in the first place.

Second, disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs are very much underrepresented, even when compared to similarly qualified but better-off peers. Given that universities require Level 3 qualifications, for which good GCSEs are prerequisite, this highlights the extent to which the group that doesn't achieve this by 16 tends not to catch up

Table 23: Outside of London, disadvantaged young people without good GCSEs are particularly underrepresented among university passers

	Over/underrepresentation of different groups among university passers			
	Without good GCSEs		Top GCSEs	
	Non-disadvantaged		Non-disadvantaged	
Region	Disadvantaged		Disadvantaged	
London	0.49	0.53	1.64	1.44
West Midlands	0.38	0.32	1.92	1.37
North East	0.34	0.20	2.01	1.23
North West	0.34	0.26	1.87	1.38
East Midlands	0.31	0.22	1.90	1.32
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.30	0.23	2.01	1.55
East of England	0.30	0.21	1.79	1.20
South East	0.27	0.14	1.78	1.17
South West	0.25	0.15	1.85	1.11

References

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3. Impetus, [*Youth Jobs Gap: Establishing the Employment Gap*](#), April 2019
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Methodology

reference notes

The following is a summary of the terminology used in this briefing for reference. We have published in parallel a full methodology document, [*Methodology for the Youth Jobs Gap*](#).

Cohort – a group of students who all sat their GCSEs in the same year, from 2007 to 2012 (six cohorts), included in our analysis.

Disadvantage – eligible for free school meals (FSM) in year 11.

Local authority and region – where young people went to school. This briefing only covers young people who were in mainstream English schools in year 11, and about whom disadvantage status is known.

Qualification – Young people are split into five categories based on highest qualifications at age 16. The categories are:

1. No qualifications
2. Some qualifications, not enough for groups 3, 4, or 5
3. A*-C in English and maths GCSEs, but NOT five A*-Cs in total
4. Five A*-C GCSEs, but missing at least one of English and maths
5. Five A*-C GCSEs, including English and maths (usually referred to in this report as “top GCSEs”)

In each case, the qualifications are GCSEs or equivalents. The second and fifth categories are by far the largest groups of young people.

Access to Higher Education – based on whether there is any recorded enrolment in Higher Education between academic years 2009/10 and 2016/17 inclusive.

Access to top third universities – based on which top third list

Pass rates – for those who enrolled in higher education, based on whether they are recorded as having completed the qualification by academic year 2016/17



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