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## Educational attainment - relative or absolute - as a mediator of intergenerational class mobility in Britain



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### ABSTRACT

In recent years much research has been concerned with the patterns of association that exist between individuals' class origins, their educational attainment, and their eventual class destinations – the 'OED triangle'. In particular, interest has focused on the possible role of educational expansion and reform in weakening the net association between class origins and destinations or, that is, increasing social fluidity, and thus countering other tendencies, such as increasing inequalities of condition, likely to reduce fluidity. In this paper we examine trends in the OED triangle in Britain on the basis of data from three successive birth cohort studies. We advance on previous research in measuring individuals' educational attainment not only in absolute but also in relative terms – i.e. in this latter respect treating education as a 'positional' good. We show that measuring education in these two different ways leads to significantly differing results. In general, when education is measured in relative terms, associations within the OED triangle show a greater stability over time.

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### 1. Introduction

In research into intergenerational social mobility a focus of interest has for some time been on the pattern of association that exists between individuals' social origins, their educational attainment, and their social destinations – or on what has become known as the origin-education-destination (OED) 'triangle'. One approach to analysing these associations that has proved rewarding has been through log-linear (and log-multiplicative) modelling. As a leading example, one may cite the work of Vallet (2004). Studying intergenerational class mobility on the basis of surveys of the French population carried out in 1970, 1977,

1985 and 1993, Vallet first establishes that social fluidity within the French class structure has increased – i.e. across the four surveys, the origin-destination (OD) association steadily weakens – and he then seeks to determine the role of education in this change. As a basis for his modelling, he usefully postulates, with reference to the OED triangle, three different ways in which education could be involved (2004: 138–142).

- (1) The origin-education (OE) association could weaken – i.e. there could be a decrease in inequalities in educational attainment linked to individuals' class origins.
- (2) The education-destination (ED) association could weaken – i.e. there could be a decrease in the advantage afforded by education in the labour market and thus in accessing more desirable class destinations.
- (3) Given the existence of a three-way OED interaction, a 'compositional' effect favouring greater fluidity could

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occur as a result of more individuals being educated at those levels where the OD association is weakest (see further Hout, 1984; Breen, 2010).

Vallet also recognises that an increase in social fluidity could of course come about in ways unrelated to education: that is, as would be indicated by a weakening in the 'direct' OD association in the sense of that part of the total OD association not mediated through E.

In the outcome, Vallet finds evidence for both men and women (2004: Tables 5.10, 5.11) of change as in (1), (2) and (3) above, with particular importance attaching to (3), while the direct OD association appears constant. He therefore concludes (2004: 142) that in the 'opening up' of the French class mobility regime, education did in these several ways play a 'central' part.

In the present paper, relating to the British case, the analyses that we present are in their essentials the same as those undertaken by Vallet and treat the same question: the role of education in intergenerational class mobility. However, we aim to go beyond Vallet in one major respect. As well as measuring the educational attainment of individuals in 'absolute' terms, as does Vallet, we also measure educational attainment in 'relative' terms; and the main focus of our attention is then on the extent to which different results are thus produced.

Our reasons for taking up this issue are the following. In the economics of education it has for long been recognised that education can be regarded both as a consumption good and as an investment good (see e.g. Blaug, 1968). As a consumption good, education can then also be regarded as an 'absolute' good: that is, in the sense that the extent to which it is consumed by one person has no direct implications for the value, or utility, of its consumption by other persons. If, say, by taking a university degree, one discovers the joy of knowledge and expands one's intellectual and cultural horizons, this outcome is little affected by the number of others who have the same experience. However, if education is regarded as an investment good – attained by individuals with an eye to their economic futures – there is a strong argument for regarding it also as a 'positional' good in the sense of Hirsch (1977). What this means is that the value of an individual's particular level of educational attainment will be dependent on the levels of attainment of others. If, say, one has a university degree, its value as an investment good – that is, in the labour market – will be greater if one is among 10 per cent who have a degree than if one is among 30 per cent. In other words, what matters in this case is not how much education individuals have in absolute terms but how much relative to others, and especially relative to those others with whom they will be in most direct competition in labour markets.

In analyses of the role of education in social mobility the standard practice so far has been to measure education in absolute terms: for example, according to number of years of education completed or according to level of educational qualifications attained – as in Vallet's analyses. It may, however, be observed that in such analyses education is for the most part interpreted – implicitly if not explicitly – more as an investment good than as a consumption good. It is on the implications of different levels of education for

individuals' chances of accessing more or less advantaged class positions that interest centres. There would therefore appear to be grounds for querying the standard practice and for asking if it might not be more appropriate at a conceptual level to treat education as a positional good and in turn to measure educational attainment on a relative rather than an absolute basis. Although this issue has been raised in some earlier work, the focus has then usually been only on the ED association: specifically, on the question of whether, if education is measured relatively, a stronger association is shown up between education and occupational level as determined by income or skill (see e.g. Ultee, 1980; Wolbers, de Graaf, & Ultee, 2001). The only previous attempt of which we are aware to treat education in relative terms in regard to both the OE and the ED sides of the OED triangle was that made by Sørensen (1979) in the context of 'status attainment' research. However, while producing some suggestive findings – in fact, ones broadly consistent with those we report below – this work attracted little attention and was not followed up.

If in empirical analyses of relations within the OED triangle, education is measured in both absolute and relative terms, it might be asked what theoretical expectations could be formed as to the results of such an inquiry – and especially as regards changes over time. At the most general level, we would say that when education is treated in relative terms, there are grounds for supposing that both the OE and the ED associations *will tend to show more stability*, at all events in the sense of being less likely to show any steady weakening, than when education is treated in absolute terms.

First, in analyses of the OE association that are based on an absolute measure of education, a weakening in this association implies that among children of differing social origins there is a greater equality in their chances of benefiting from the opportunities that are formally provided by the educational system and from any changes in these opportunities – typically in modern societies an expansion of the system at the secondary and tertiary levels. Thus, the weakening of the OE association that is reported by Vallet for France, and by other researchers elsewhere (e.g. Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollak, 2009; Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollak, 2010), is seen as the outcome of reforms aimed at facilitating a greater equality in the take up of educational opportunities, especially at higher levels, as well as of generally rising living standards and social aspirations.

However, where a relative measure of education is used, whether or not any weakening in the OE association is to be expected becomes a more complex issue: that is, one of how far there is any change in the chances of access of children of differing origins to educational levels that are not treated as fixed in their position within the educational system but rather that may change in position as this system evolves. And in this regard it is important to recognise that *parents and children may themselves view education in relative terms*. They may recognise that as with educational expansion the number of individuals attaining some higher level of qualification increases, the relative position of all lower levels will decline, and in turn, they may believe, so too will the value of these qualifications in the labour market. In this case, then, any potential weakening in the

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