

EDUCATION-BASED MERITOCRACY: THE BARRIERS TO ITS REALISATION

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Abstract: The idea of an education-based meritocracy (EBM) has evident political attractions. It suggests a basis on which the objectives of social efficiency, social mobility and social justice might be reconciled. However, the question is raised of its sociological viability. Three processes of change are identified, concerning the association between individuals' social origins, their educational attainments and their social destinations, each of which should be observed in any society that is moving towards an EBM. Results of analyses based on several different data-sets are then presented which indicate that in Britain these changes are not in fact in train. Similar results from other modern societies are noted. It is then argued that the barriers to the realisation of an EBM to which these findings point are of more than a transient kind. There are features of modern market-based economies and societies that are not consistent with the principles of an EBM and that could be modified, if at all, only through rather radical policy interventions.

The idea of 'meritocracy' originates in sociological fantasy: that is, in Michael Young's remarkable piece of social science fiction, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which was first published in 1958. In this book, Young tells the history of an imaginary society in which a meritocracy was created as a work of enlightenment: that is, in order to promote social efficiency, social mobility and social justice. However, he describes how, within a few generations, the operation of meritocracy had produced deepening social discontent and division that in fact culminated in mass rebellion and a forceful rejection of 'rule by the cleverest'.

Young meant his book to serve as a warning. At the most general level, it warns against the idea that rewarding individuals according to their 'merit' can, in itself, resolve issues of social inequality and its legitimation. But Young had also a more specific concern. He was disturbed by the way in which, in Britain, the purposes of the Education Act of 1944 were being interpreted by post-war governments. The 1944 Act established 'secondary education for all', and was intended to give all children a greater opportunity to develop their abilities, whatever form or level they might take. But, Young believed, the Act was being increasingly used in a purely instrumental fashion: that is, as a means of social selection - in the name of 'merit' - for different grades of employment with differing levels of reward in terms of both money and status. And in consequence, he feared, a new kind of social stratification might emerge that would be psychologically still more punitive than that which already existed - because, in a meritocracy, those who did badly could then be regarded, and might in fact regard themselves, as having deserved no better.

Young's book was a notable success. It attracted wide and generally sympathetic attention. It is, therefore, rather remarkable that, within little more than a decade of its

publication, one finds the term 'meritocracy' being used in social commentary and debate in a way that, for Young, must have been highly disturbing: that is, 'meritocracy' is used without any ironic or critical connotation, but rather in an overwhelmingly positive sense, in order to express a kind of progressive ideal, and one towards which all modern societies were in fact destined to move. This sudden transvaluation of the concept has to be attributed largely to the work of a group of American intellectuals, of what might be described as 'cold-war liberal' persuasion, among whom Daniel Bell was pre-eminent.

For these authors, it was evident that, in the context of modern, 'knowledge-intensive', economies, educational attainment was indeed to be taken as the prime indicator of merit. High-level qualifications were essential if individuals were to meet the requirements of professional and managerial employment within such economies. And the possession of such qualifications, and the exercise of the expertise and skills that they warranted, would then be associated with high incomes and generally advantaged social positions. But, provided that a greater equality of educational opportunity was created, through educational expansion and reform, then these high rewards could be regarded as merited - as properly and fairly achieved. They would be rewards that were gained within an increasingly 'open' form of society from which all unfair, ascriptive influences were being eliminated.

In other words, precisely what Young had sought to call into question was asserted: that educational systems *could*, and *should*, serve to determine merit, and that an appeal to merit could then legitimate the differentiation of rewards obtained in labour markets and the wider social inequalities that followed.

Subsequently, this positive conception of meritocracy, resulting from the American reception of the term, returned to Europe; and, more recently, it has become a key element in the ideology of various centre-left political parties, following the lead given in Britain by New Labour. Meritocracy, or, more precisely, education-based meritocracy, appears as a highly attractive 'progressive' goal to which centre-left parties can commit themselves, while entailing no radically redistributive measures of a kind that might threaten the 'median voter' electoral strategies on which these parties typically rely.

All this is by way of introduction and background. In what follows, my main concern is to examine the idea of education-based meritocracy (or EBM for short), not from the standpoint of its history or of its philosophical or ideological implications, but rather from the standpoint of its sociological viability.

[S 1]

Progress towards an EBM could be said to require *three* main processes of change:

- (i) the association between individuals' social origins and their educational attainment must increasingly reflect *only* their level of ability - as other factors that might prevent the full expression of this ability are removed or offset;
- (ii) the association between individuals' educational attainment and the level of employment they eventually achieve must *strengthen* - as a result of qualifications acquired through education becoming of dominant importance in employers' selection procedures; and

- (iii) the association between educational attainment and level of employment must become *constant* (or uniform) for individuals of differing social origins - as all considerations in social selection not relevant to the principle of EBM are discounted.

What I now want to show is that these three processes of change are not in fact going ahead in the way that those who would favour the idea of an EBM might wish to see. This I aim to do by drawing on research in which I am currently engaged, together with Michelle Jackson and several others. This research is confined to Britain; but findings of the kind I shall present are certainly not specific to Britain, as I shall from time to time indicate.

First, then, I consider the association between social - i.e. class - origins and educational attainment, and the extent to which this reflects *only* demonstrated ability. In this regard, I want to refer to results from research into class differentials in England and Wales in one crucial educational transition: i.e. the transition that may be made by students, at around age 16, to 'A-level' courses as against the alternatives of leaving full-time education for the labour market or staying on in school or college to take less academic, more vocational courses.

[S2]

This figure shows some results derived from the data of the NCDS, a cohort study based on all children born in Britain in one week in 1958. Look first at the three bell-shaped distributions. These are the distributions of demonstrated academic ability - i.e. of actual performance - of students from three different class backgrounds. They are based on (standardised and normalised) grades obtained in public examinations

in English and mathematics taken at around age 16. The distributions overlap a good deal; but students of salariat - i.e. professional and managerial - background show the highest levels of performance overall (the blue curve), followed by those of intermediate-class background (the green curve), and then by those of working-class background (the red curve). These distributions can be taken as expressing what we would call 'primary' effects in class differentials in educational attainment: i.e. effects that stem from the fact that children of different class backgrounds tend to do better or worse in school - on account, one may suppose, of a complex interplay of sociocultural and genetic factors.

But look now at the three S-shaped curves. These derive from binomial logistic regression analyses, in which academic performance is the explanatory variable in relation to the transition (or non-transition) to A-level courses. The curves thus show, for students from each of the three classes separately, their estimated probabilities of opting for A-level courses (the vertical axis) at each point on the performance axis (the horizontal axis). And what then is chiefly notable is that the curve for students of salariat origin (again, the blue curve) lies always above that for students of intermediate-class origin (the green curve) which in turn lies almost always above that for students of working-class origin (the red curve). In other words, students from more advantaged class backgrounds are more likely to take up A-level courses than are those from less advantaged backgrounds *at all levels of demonstrated ability*.

To gain some idea of changes over time, we can look next at the results of identical analyses, drawing this time on data from the Youth Cohort Study of 2001, which is based on a probability sample young people age 16 in England and Wales.

[S3]

As can be seen, the pattern of results in this Figure is essentially the same as in the previous one. The S-shaped curves start their sharp upward rise further to the left as increasing proportions of students from all class backgrounds and at all levels of performance continue to A-level work. But the gaps between the curves are little changed; and in 2001, as in 1974, the gap between the salariat and the working class curves is at its widest - at some 15-20 percentage points - at a little above the average level of performance.

The two figures I have shown thus illustrate how class differentials in educational attainment come about not just through 'primary' effects - i.e. class differences in actual academic performance - but, in addition, through what we may call 'secondary' effects: i.e. through class differences in educational *choices* that show up even when performance is held constant; or, one might say, that result from class-linked differences among young people in their 'take-up rates' of the educational opportunities that are formally available to them.

In so far, then, as secondary effects, in this sense, are present, a shortfall from the ideal of an EBM is implied. The ultimate distribution of educational attainment in the population will *not* reflect *only* demonstrated academic ability and the capacity of students to benefit from education. The presence of secondary effects indicates that among some students the full realisation of their academic potential is being prevented, and movement towards an EBM thus impeded. And secondary effects, I should add, are by no means a negligible factor. In the latest phase of our research, we have developed a method of moving from figures of the kind I have shown to quantify, at least approximately, the relative importance of primary and secondary effects.

[S4]

Using this method, we estimate that over the period we cover - i.e. the last quarter of the twentieth century - secondary effects account for at least a quarter, and possibly up as much as a half, of class differentials in the transition to A-level work as these differentials are measured by odds ratios. This is a result, we believe, that has significant theoretical and also policy implications.

Finally I should say that secondary effects are by no means a British peculiarity. They have in fact been found to contribute to class differentials in educational attainment in every modern educational system in which appropriate research has been carried out.

I turn next to the association between educational attainment and level of employment, as indicated by class position. In this case we analyse data from the NCDS and from a further birth cohort study which was based on all children born in Britain in one week in 1970. For men and women in both these cohorts, we run multinomial logistic regressions in which the class position they had achieved by their early 30s is the dependent variable and the two explanatory variables are their class origins and their highest level of educational qualification.

[S5]

In this figure we graph coefficients showing the effects of educational qualifications on the relative chances of individuals in the two cohorts being found in six different classes of destination, when class of origin is controlled.

The easiest way to understand the graphs is as follows. If education had *no* effect on class of destination, then all the points for the different classes of destination would be piled up at zero, together with that for the reference class, Class I+II, the professional and managerial salariat. Correspondingly, the more these points are strung out to the left, the more of a difference education makes. And, as you can see, education does indeed make a good deal of difference - the points *are* well strung out, and in a sequence of a kind that one might expect.

However, for present purposes, it is a further feature of the graphs that is of main significance: namely, that the points referring to destination classes are no more strung out in the graphs for the 1970 cohort than in those for the 1958 cohort and, if anything, rather less so. Or, in other words, there is no indication here that the role of education in determining class position, given class origins, is increasing over time. Rather, one might say, it has slightly decreased.

Again, therefore, these results would suggest that real difficulties stand in the way of the realisation of an EBM. In a society moving towards an EBM, the association between individuals' educational attainment and the level of employment that they achieve should be steadily strengthening, for individuals of all class origins alike. But, on this evidence, educational qualifications are *not* in fact becoming increasingly dominant in processes of social selection within labour markets and production units. In their personnel policies, employers appear not to be acting as the unswerving agents of an EBM. They are not, it seems, progressively increasing the weight that they give to the educational qualifications of employees, or potential employees, and to the exclusion of other attributes.

Again, I should add, there is nothing peculiar in these results for Britain. Findings on much the same lines as those shown - indicating an unchanging, or indeed a declining association between education and class position attained - have of late been reported for most other advanced societies for which relevant analyses have been undertaken.

I come then, finally, to the question of the strength of the association between educational attainment and level of employment for individuals of differing social origins. The results I have just presented show that, for individuals of all class origins alike, the association between education and level of employment has, if anything, weakened over recent decades. But we need now to ask whether this association differs in its strength *across* class origins. In an EBM it should not do so. Individuals' education should determine their class destinations to the same - i.e. quite dominant - extent, whatever their class origins might be. Qualifications should have the same 'pay off' for individuals of all class origins alike

To put the matter in more technical terms, what we are here concerned with is whether, in the three-way relationship between class origins, education and class destinations, there is an interaction effect. In fact, such an effect has been shown up for many national cases through loglinear analyses of appropriate three-way contingency tables. However, this effect has then usually been interpreted in a way that, for present purposes at least, is not, I think, the most pertinent.

[S6]

This figure shows the three-way relationship in question, and the interpretation of the interaction effect so far most commonly given is that indicated by arrow A: that is, the strength of the OD association is taken to vary with the level of E. And given the signs of the interaction parameters that are typically returned, it can then more specifically be said that the OD association is *weaker*, the *higher* the level of E. For example, Michael Hout has reported that among American university graduates, the association between origins and destinations completely disappears: all the association between O and D occurs at lower educational levels. Thus, from this standpoint, some, limited, support for the idea of a movement towards an EBM might seem to be provided. At least with those types of employment for which degree-level qualifications are required, selection does appear to occur according to the principles of an EBM.

However, there is an alternative interpretation of the OED interaction effect. Following now arrow B in Figure 3, one might say that the strength of the ED association varies with O. And, if this interpretation is taken, then the interaction parameters typically returned would allow one to say that the *more advantaged* the class of origin, the *weaker* is the association between education and class destination.

Furthermore, if one moves from the loglinear modelling of contingency tables to a logistic regression approach, then conditioning in this way on O, rather than on E, would seem the more natural. D is the dependent variable and O and E are the explanatory variables, with O being treated as an 'intrinsic' variable that is given, and E as the 'treatment' variable on which individuals could in principle take a different value to that they actually have. So one then asks how the effect of E on D varies across different levels of O.

Following such an approach, we use the General Household Survey data-set - which gives us the advantage of relatively large numbers - to investigate the part played by education in access to the professional and managerial salariat in Britain in the mid-1970s and again in the early 1990s. What we find is, first, that having a high-level qualification - a degree or equivalent - is in fact somewhat *less* predictive of access to the salariat in the 1990s than it was in the 1970s: i.e. we here confirm our finding from the two cohort studies of a probably declining effect of education on class position attained. But, secondly, we also find that, at both time-periods alike, the effect of having a degree is *less* for individuals who were born into the salariat than it is for individuals originating outside the salariat. In other words, education is more important in for *upward mobility into* the salariat than it is for *intergenerational immobility within* the salariat.

[S7]

This figure shows some probabilities estimated under our logistic regression models when all control variables are held constant at their mean values. From the two bars on the left of the figure, it can be seen that individuals with degree-level qualifications have around a 90 per cent chance of entering the salariat, regardless of whether they are of salariat origin or not - and that there is little difference in this respect between the 1970s and the 1990s. These two bars can then be taken as capturing the first interpretation of the OED interaction effect that I mentioned. However, from the two bars on the right the force of the second interpretation in turn emerges. It can be seen that for individuals with relatively low educational attainment - i.e. with no more than lower secondary qualifications - *their* chances of gaining access to the salariat do clearly differ according to their class origins. And note further that while poorly

qualified individuals of salariat origin still had almost a 20 per cent chance of being themselves found in the salariat in the 1970s, this then rises to as much as 35 per cent chance in the 1990s.

Once more, then, a lack of movement towards an EBM is indicated. Upward mobility into the salariat does appear to be largely mediated through high-level qualifications, according to the principles of an EBM. But education is clearly less important in maintaining intergenerational stability within the salariat; or, one might say, low educational attainment does not bring about the amount of *downward* mobility out of the salariat that an EBM would require.

I have then sought to show that three processes of change, essential to the creation of an EBM, are not in fact readily evident in present-day Britain, nor, it would seem, in most other advanced societies. By way of conclusion, I want to raise, if only briefly, the question of how, in general terms, this situation is to be explained.

One possible line of argument would be to the effect that progress towards EBMs is no more than stalled. Barriers may stand in the way of their realisation; but these are barriers of a largely contingent kind that will, sooner or later, be overcome - by the fact that, as Daniel Bell would have it, modern, post-industrial societies are destined to become meritocracies through their functional 'logic'. However, an opposing line of argument would regard the barriers to EBMs as being not merely contingent but in fact integral to any society with a market economy and in turn a class structure - so that these barriers cannot be expected to disappear simply, as it were, with the passage of time. So let me now indicate how these two rival arguments work out in

relation to each of the three processes of change that I have identified as crucial to the development of an EBM.

To begin with secondary effects in class differentials in educational attainment, it might be held that the failure of working-class students, especially, to take up opportunities for translating their ability into qualifications, in the same way as do students of more advantaged origins, simply reflects a low level of working-class aspirations, and also perhaps an inadequate appreciation on the part of working-class children of the economic returns that education brings. But, the argument would run, such difficulties are to be seen as only transient ones. In time - through, say, various demonstration effects - working-class aspirations will rise and more rational expectations of the returns to education will be formed.

However, in contrast to this, secondary effects could in fact be seen as the outcome of action that is already of a quite rational kind. As Richard Breen and I have argued in several papers, for students from less advantaged class backgrounds, taking up more ambitious educational options typically entails *a greater degree of risk*, in terms of potential costs and benefits, than it does for students from more advantaged backgrounds. It is therefore rational for, say, working-class students to require a relatively high probability of success before they pursue more ambitious options; and their previous academic performance is the obvious indicator of this probability. Consequently, to eliminate secondary effects will require not just changing aspirations and expectations but, more fundamentally, reducing inequalities in class conditions - in economic security, stability and prospects - or directly offsetting these inequalities through appropriate policy measures.

Second, as regards the persisting tendency for employers to attach importance to other attributes of employees, or potential employees, than their educational qualifications, it might be argued that this reflects 'traditional' attitudes or various prejudices or biases on the part of employers of a kind that cannot be indefinitely sustained - and especially not, given the rational, and highly competitive, character of modern economic life.

In this case, though, the opposing argument would be that in a market economy it must, in the end, rest with employers to determine what counts as merit - or at least as productive value - in the case of their employees; and, further, that in present-day economies employers may often have good reasons for *not always* giving formal qualifications the overriding role in their selection procedures.

In other work, in which we draw on analyses of several thousand job advertisements, that was carried out by Michelle Jackson, we show that the attributes of individuals to which employers attach greatest weight do in fact *vary*, in rather systematic and intelligible ways, with the type of employment for which they are recruiting. Thus, in the case of professional or ancillary professional positions, employers *are* primarily concerned with formal qualifications. That is what the advertisements ask for. But, in other cases, a concern with qualifications is clearly less marked - most notably, with positions, and including managerial positions, in the services sector of the economy, and especially in sales and personal services: for example, for positions in the hospitality, entertainment, leisure and travel industries, in public relations, in high-value retail and customer services. And it may well be that in such positions cognitive or technical abilities that are most readily certified by qualifications are in fact of less importance - at least above some threshold level - than are a whole range of other

attributes: for example, social and communication skills and 'up-market' personal characteristics, whether of a physical, psychological or subcultural kind, that involve 'looking good and sounding right'.

[S8]

Finally, then, as regards the greater part played by education in upward mobility into the salariat than in maintaining immobility within this class, it might once again be held that, even if this effect appears stable for the moment, it is still a residue of an earlier period. That is, of a period in which more advantaged families could protect their educationally under-achieving children against any radical downward mobility through such non-meritocratic means as nepotism, patronage, 'contacts' etc. - which must, though, in the context of modern, 'knowledge-intensive' economies, eventually lose their effectiveness.

However, the alternative view here follows on from what I have already said. Achieving high-level qualifications is indeed the surest way for children from advantaged class backgrounds to maintain their parents' position. But, even if these children do not do well educationally, they may still have more ascribed attributes that are of real productive value in the labour markets of the present-day: that is, precisely the 'soft' skills and the personal characteristics that employers appear to be looking for in what could be described as 'high-touch' rather than 'high-tech' kinds of work. From research in progress, we do in fact have indications that children of salariat background who have only low educational attainments but who still manage to remain within the salariat are disproportionately found in managerial positions in the sales and personal services sector. And it is in this sector - despite all talk of 'knowledge-intensive economies' - that the growth of employment tends today to be

greatest. In other words, modern economies provide widening rather than narrowing niches for individuals who can meet employers' requirements for attributes of a kind that are less likely to have been learnt in schools and colleges than acquired simply through socialisation within more advantaged family, community and peer-group contexts. And whether or not these attributes can be truly regarded as reflecting 'merit' is not a matter over which employers are going to lose much sleep

In sum, the idea of education-based meritocracy may well continue to have appeal for some social commentators and party ideologues, while - as is now in fact increasingly the case - drawing criticism from those who, like Michael Young himself, find the idea philosophically problematic and morally questionable. But, be this as it may, there is, I would suggest, little reason to believe that modern societies are in fact being transformed into EBMs; and not on account of, as it were, some stubborn though eventually surmountable sociocultural 'lag', but rather because there are features of structure and process within modern societies that are simply not consistent with the principles of EBM. Thus, to make progress in any respect towards a social order founded on these principles will be possible, if at all, only through policy interventions of a rather radical kind - as, say, in the creation of a more genuine equality of educational opportunity. And, even then, the idea of an EBM is likely to remain, in some large part merely utopian, or dystopian, according to taste. Consequently, if it is thought desirable to provide prevailing economic and social inequalities with a degree of moral legitimation, some other basis than that of educationally achieved merit will need to be found.

Figure 1: Graphical representation of regression of transition to A level work on academic performance 1974

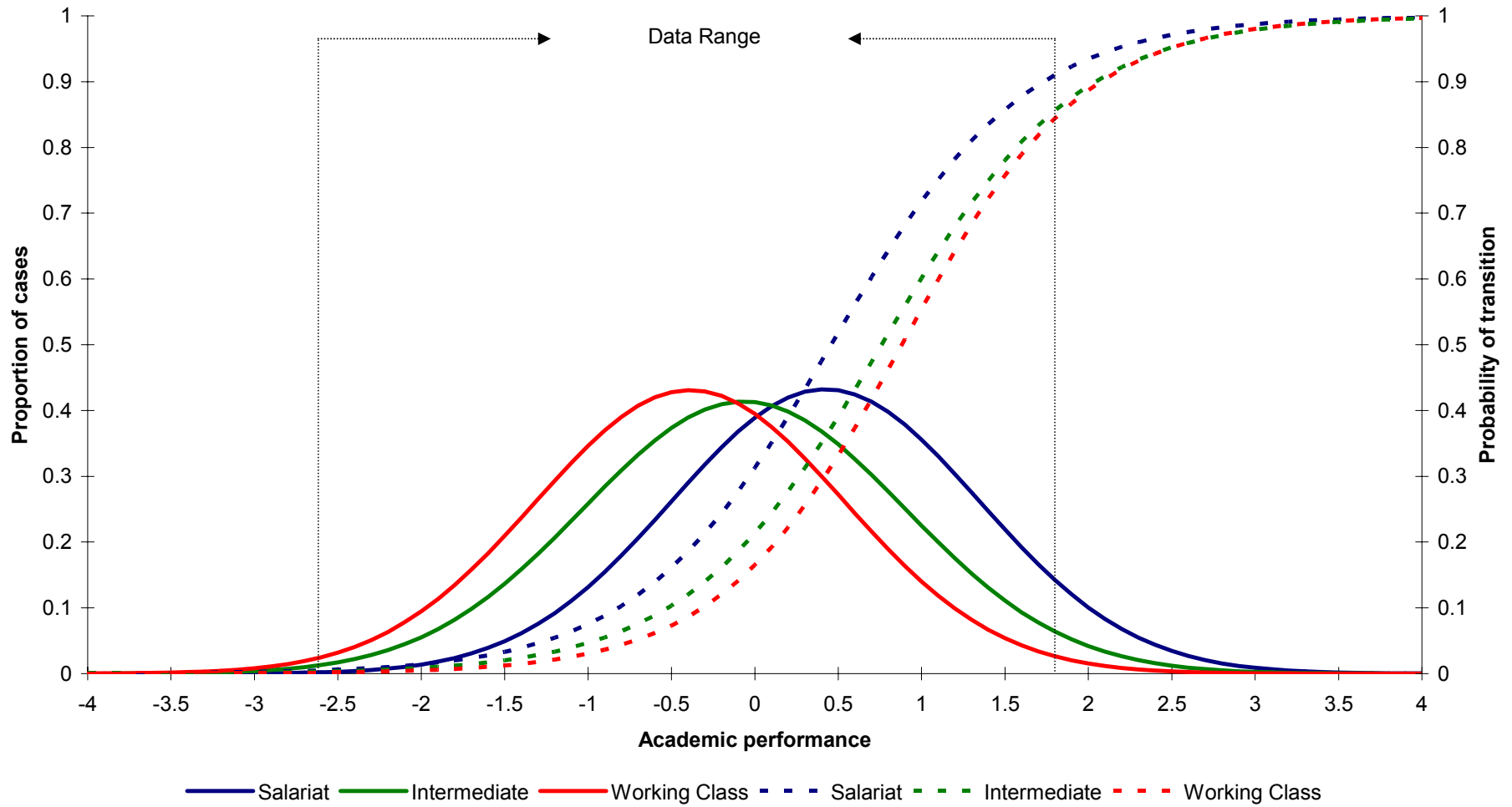


Figure 1: Graphical representation of regression of transition to A level work on academic performance 2001

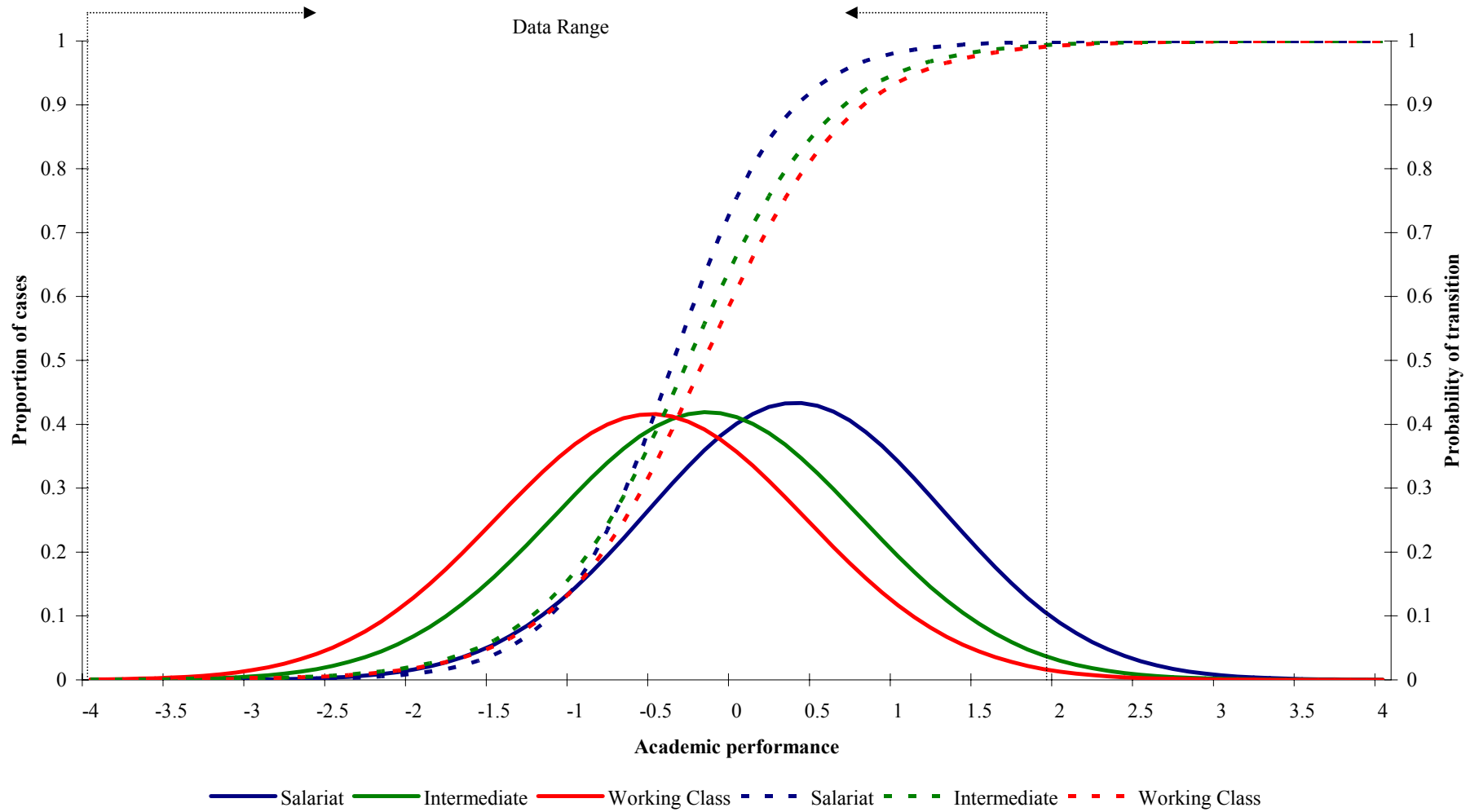
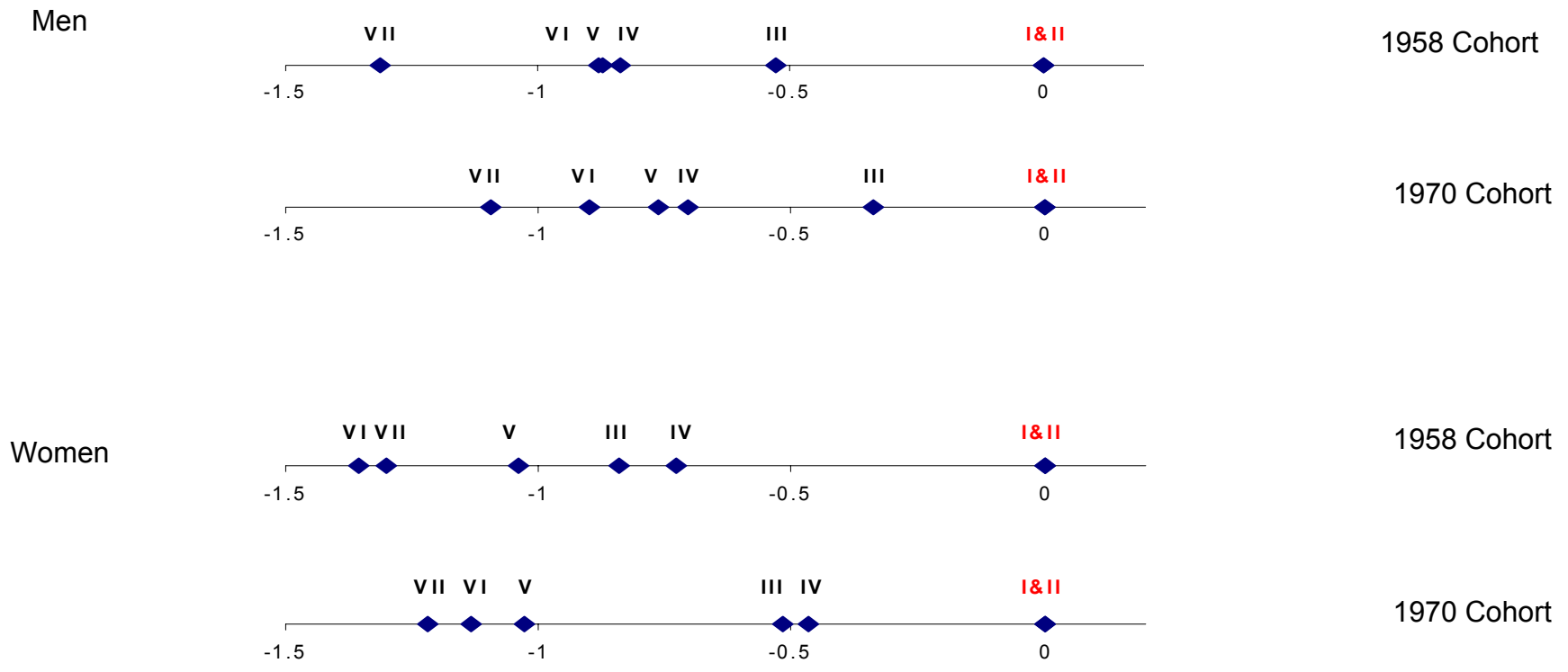


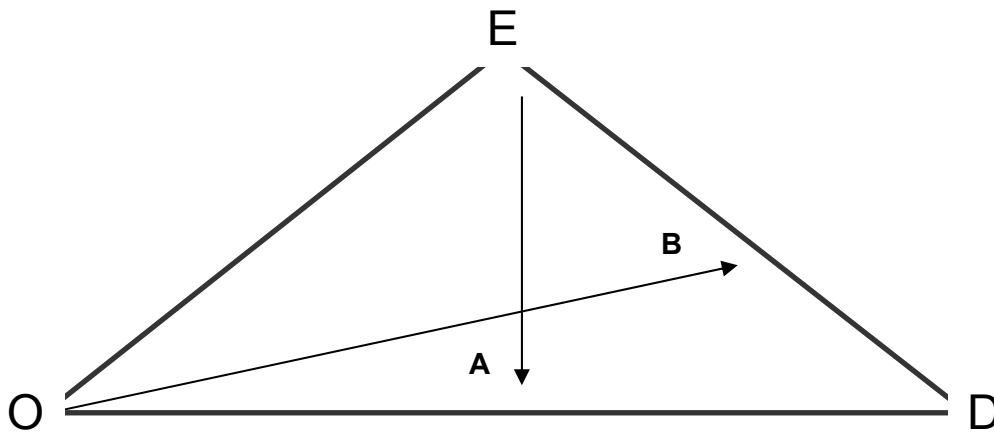
Figure 2: Coefficients for the partial effects of educational qualifications (6 NVQ levels) on the chances of being found in different classes of destination relative to being found in Class I+II, with class of origin held constant



Classes:

- | | | | |
|------|-----------------------------|-----|--|
| I+II | Professionals and Managers | V | Supervisors and Technicians |
| III | Routine Nonmanual Employees | VI | Skilled Manual Workers |
| IV | Self-Employed | VII | Nonskilled Manual Workers and Agricultural Labourers |

Figure 3: Two interpretations of the interaction effect in the OED relationship

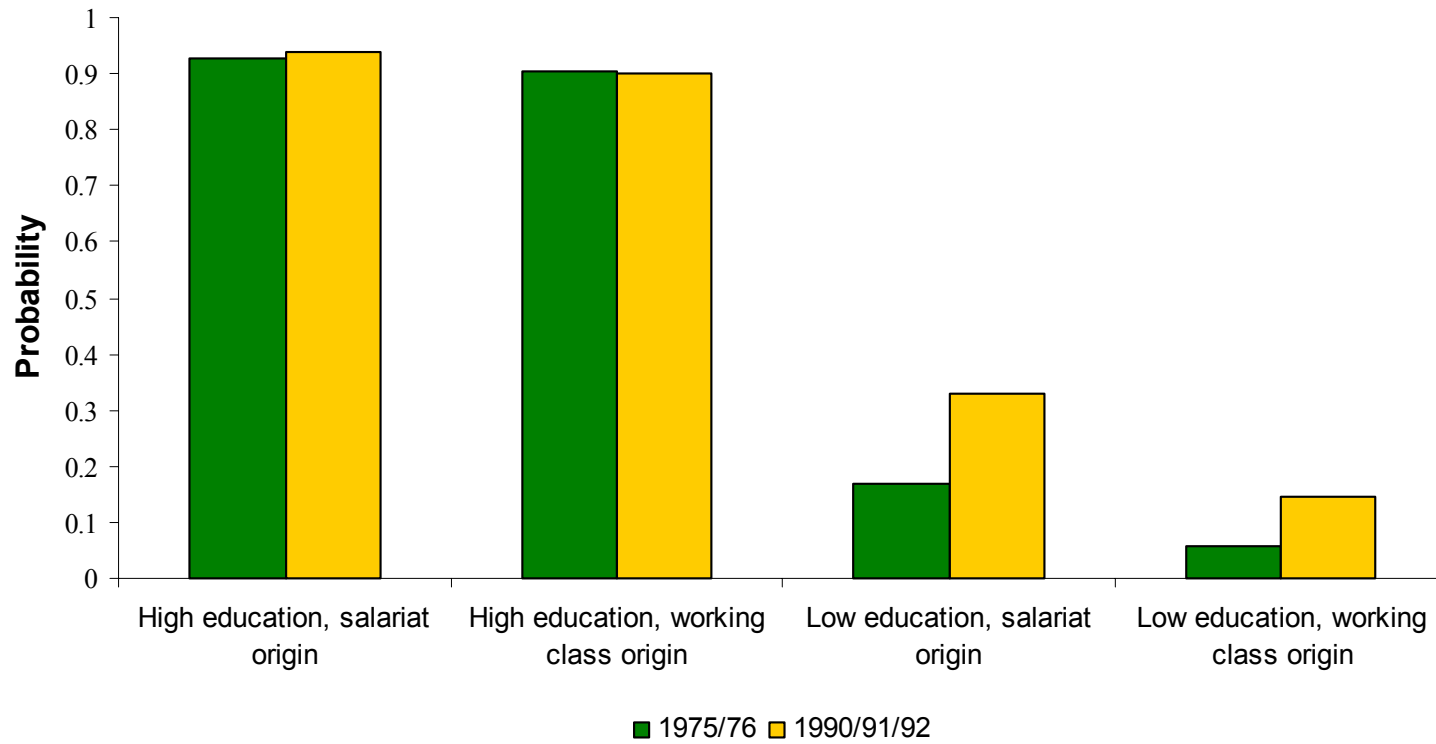


O = class origin

E = educational attainment

D = class destination

Figure 4: Estimated probabilities of entering the salariat for individuals of differing educational level and class origins



High education = Degree level and above

Low education = O level/GCSE or below