

EDUCATION-BASED MERITOCRACY: THE BARRIERS TO ITS REALISATION

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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 Britain in 1958. In this book, Young recounts the history of an imaginary society in which a meritocracy was created as a work of enlightenment - in order to promote efficiency, social mobility and fairness. However, he describes how, within a few generations, the operation of meritocracy had produced deepening social discontent and division that 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, serve to 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 Act established 'secondary education for all', and was intended to give all children the fullest possible 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 kind of social stratification might emerge that would be psychologically 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 to find that, within little more than a decade of its publication, the term 'meritocracy' is being quite frequently used in social commentary and debate in a way that, for Young, must have been highly disturbing: that is, 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 (see esp. Bell, 1972, 1973, 1980; also Kristol, 1970).

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. However, 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, it might be added, 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 goal to which such parties can commit themselves, in the pursuit of economic efficiency, social mobility and social justice alike - while entailing no radically redistributive measures of a kind that might threaten a 'median voter' electoral strategy.

All this is by way of introduction and background. In what follows, my primary 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.

[T 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 acquire 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* 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 have been engaged, together with Michelle Jackson and several other colleagues. 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. One other preliminary point should be made. In this research both social origins and eventual destinations in employment are defined in terms of social class, as indicated by versions of what are known in Europe as the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) class schema.

[T2]

First, then, I consider the association between social - i.e. class - origins and educational attainment, and the extent to which this reflects *only* individual ability. In this regard, I want to refer to results from research, with Michelle Jackson, Robert Erikson and Meir Yaish, into class differentials in England and Wales in one crucial educational transition: the transition that may be made by students, at around age 16,

to 'A-level' courses - i.e. the academic courses in schools or colleges that typically lead on to university entry (Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe and Yaish, 2005) The main alternatives to taking A-level courses are leaving full-time education for the labour market or staying on in school or college to take more vocational courses.

[T3]

Figure 1 shows results derived from the data of the British Youth Cohort Survey of 2002. 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 examinations in English and mathematics taken at around age 16. Although the distributions overlap a good deal, students of salariat - i.e. professional and managerial - background show the highest levels of performance overall, followed by those of intermediate-class background, and then by those of working-class background. These distributions can be taken as expressing what we would call 'primary' effects in class differentials in educational attainment: i.e. effects deriving 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 taken as the explanatory variable in relation to the 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 at each point on the performance axis. And what is chiefly notable is that the curve for students of salariat origin lies always above that for

students of intermediate-class origin which in turn lies always above that for students of working-class origin. 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*.

Figure 1 thus illustrates how class differentials in educational attainment come about not just through primary effects - through class differences in actual academic performance - but, in addition, through what we term 'secondary' effects: that is, 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 (cf. Boudon, 1974).

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 the full realisation of academic potential among some students is being prevented, and movement towards an EBM thus impeded.

[There are two further points that I might add here. First, in our research we are trying to determine the relative importance of primary and secondary effects on class differentials in the educational transition in question, and also whether this relative importance is changing over time. Our results so far would suggest that secondary effects account for somewhere between a quarter and a half of the differentials observed, and that their importance has weakened only slightly if at all over the last three decades, in a context in which these differentials themselves have also

changed little. But the second point then is that secondary effects can persist even while class differentials *are* being reduced. For example, in the Swedish case, Erikson and Jonsson (1996) have shown strong secondary effects in class differentials in the transition to academic courses in upper secondary schools in a context of declining class differentials in educational attainment overall.]

I turn next to the association between educational attainment and level of employment, as indicated by class position. Here, I draw on results from research with Colin Mills into the role played by education in mediating intergenerational class mobility in Britain (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2004). The data-set we use is that of the British General Household Survey, which allows us to carry out repeated cross-sectional analyses from the 1970s through to the 1990s.

[T4]

Figure 2 graphs coefficients, from multinomial logistic regression analyses, which show the effects of educational qualifications on the chances of individuals being found in seven different classes of destination, with class of origin being controlled. Educational qualifications are ordered according to an official, six-level classification.

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

of difference - the points *are* well strung out, and in a sequence 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 *less* strung out in the graphs for the 1990s than in those for the 1970s. Or, in other words, the role of education in mediating mobility would appear to be *decreasing* over time. Thus, if one were to translate from the log scale into multiplicative terms, one would find that the range of the estimated effects of education falls, for men, from well above to clearly below a twofold effect, and, for women, from over a threefold effect to less than a two-and-half-fold one (cf. also Breen and Goldthorpe, 2001).

Again, therefore, these results imply that serious 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 strengthening. But, on this evidence, the association is in fact weakening, and for individuals of all class origins alike. Educational qualifications are *not* becoming increasingly dominant in processes of social selection within labour markets and production units. In their personnel policies, employers seem not to be acting as the unswerving agents of an EBM. They apparently continue to attach importance to *other* attributes of employees, or potential employees, apart from their educational qualifications, and, if anything, to an increasing degree.

Findings such as those represented in Figure 2 are, I should add, by no means peculiar to Britain. In recent years, similar findings have been reported for several other European nations, including France, Ireland and Sweden (cf. Breen and Luijkx,

2004) and appear also to be emerging in the US, according to research currently being undertaken by Mike Hout.

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 discussed show that, for individuals of all class origins alike, the association between education and level of employment has weakened somewhat 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.

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 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 revealing.

[T5]

Figure 3 depicts 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, Hout (1988) 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 higher-level educational 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 that I believe is preferable. 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 returned would generally 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 loglinear modelling 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 (cf. Cox, 1984). So one then asks how the effect of E on D varies across different levels of O.

Following such an approach, Michelle Jackson has also used data from the General Household Survey to investigate differences in access to the professional and managerial salariat in Britain in the mid-1970s and again in the early 1990s. Consistently with the results I presented earlier, she finds that having a high-level

qualification - a degree or equivalent - is somewhat less predictive of access to the salariat in the 1990s than it was in the 1970s. But what she further finds is 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 mediating *upward mobility into* the salariat than it is in mediating *intergenerational immobility within* the salariat.

[T6]

Figure 4 shows some probabilities estimated under Jackson's regression models when all control variables - age, sex etc. - are held constant at their mean values. From the 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. This finding can be taken as capturing the first interpretation of the OED interaction effect that I mentioned. However, from the bars on the right the force of the second interpretation then emerges. It can be seen that for individuals with only low education - 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 in particular that poorly qualified individuals of salariat origin still have almost a 20 per cent chance of being themselves found in the salariat in the 1970s, and that this 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 *would* seem 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 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, that my colleagues and I have in various respects developed, 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 in, as it were, the normal course of events. So let me now indicate how these 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.

So, 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. These difficulties are, however, to be seen as only transient ones. In time, aspirations will rise and more rational expectations of the returns to education will be formed.

In contrast to this, following the theoretical approach that I have developed with Richard Breen (Goldthorpe, 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Breen and Yaish, 2005), secondary effects would be seen as the outcome of action that is already of a quite rational kind. For students from less advantaged class backgrounds, taking up more ambitious educational options typically entails *a greater degree of risk*, in terms of expected 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 pursuing more ambitious options; and 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 differences in class conditions - in economic security, stability and prospects - or directly offsetting these differences 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 in fact often have good reasons for *not always* giving formal qualifications an overriding role in their selection procedures.

In a paper just about to appear. Michelle Jackson, Colin Mills and I (2005) 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. But, in other cases, a concern with qualifications is clearly less marked - most notably, with many positions, and including managerial positions, in the services sector of the economy, and especially in sales and personal services: for example, 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 indeed of less importance - at least above some threshold level - than are a range of other factors: for example, social and communication skills and 'up-market' personal characteristics whether of a physical, psychological or subcultural kind.

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 they 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 Michelle Jackson's research that I earlier referred to, evidence is indeed emerging 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 what needs further to be stressed here is that 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 will 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 (e.g. Marshall and Swift, 1997; Swift, 2003). 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 - and that mean therefore that a social order founded upon these principles is likely to remain utopian or dystopian, according to taste.

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

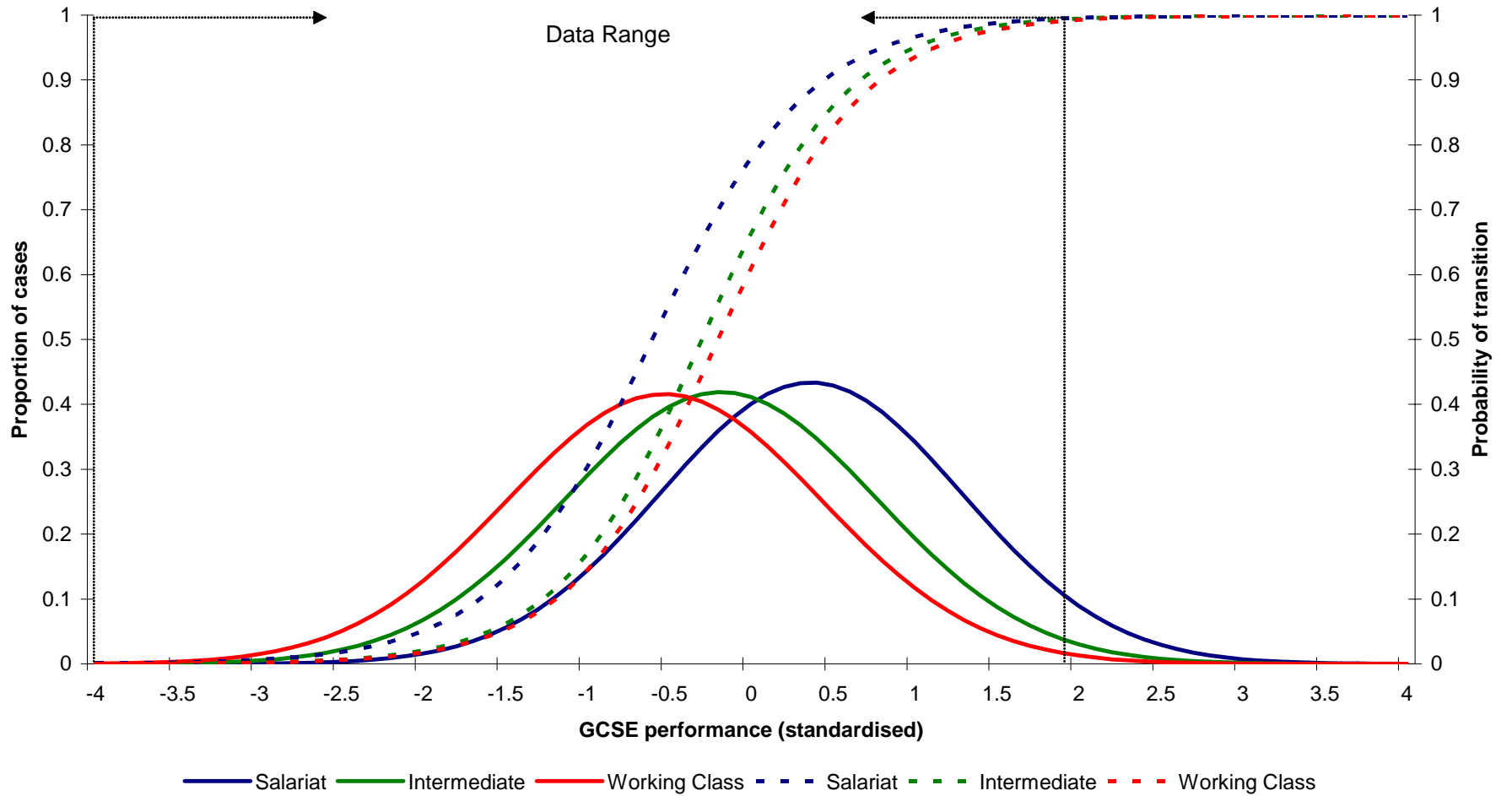


Figure 2: Coefficients for the partial effects of educational qualifications (6 NVQ levels) on the chances of individuals being found in different classes of destination relative to being found in Class I+II+IVa

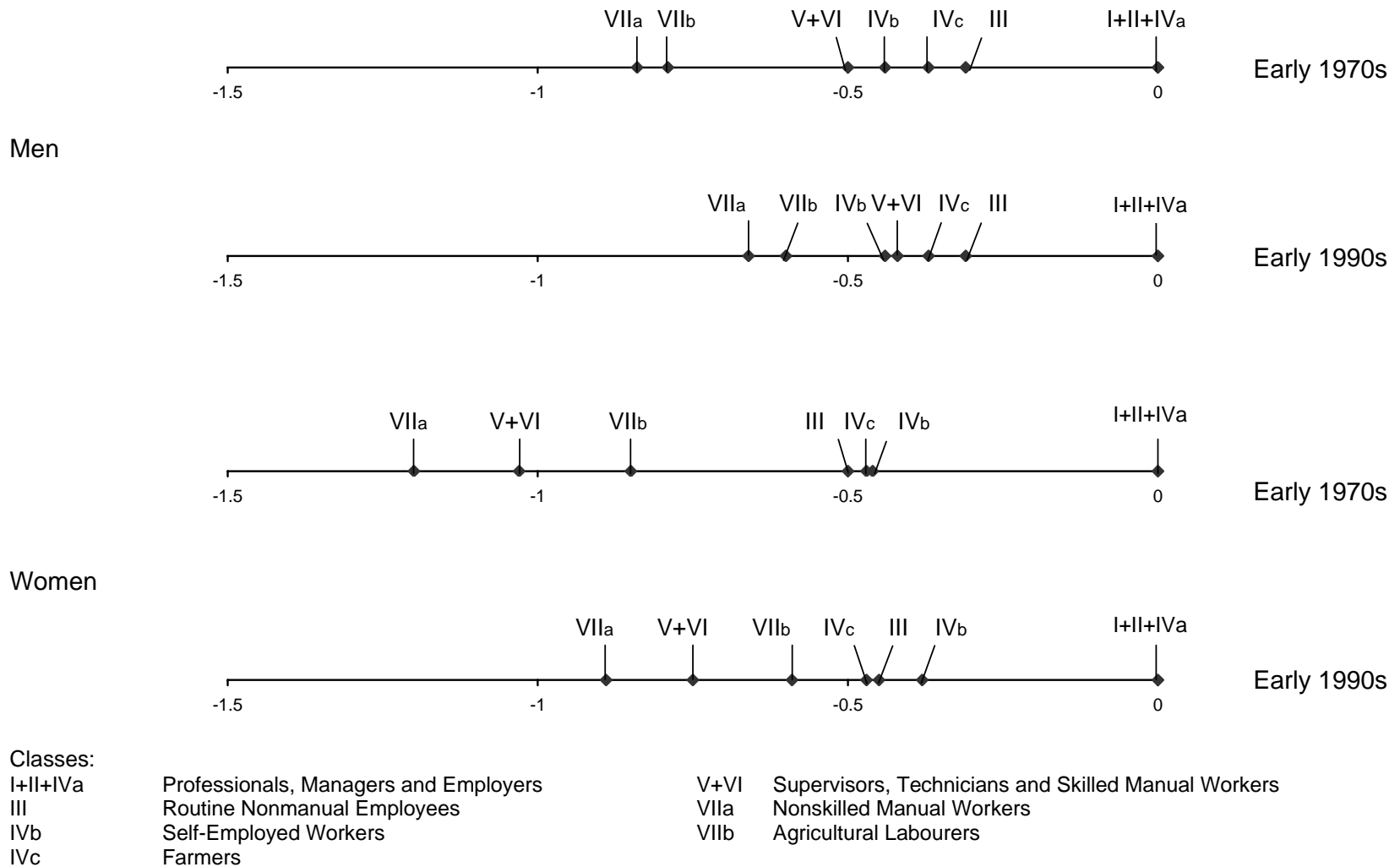


Figure 3 : Interaction effects in the OED relationship

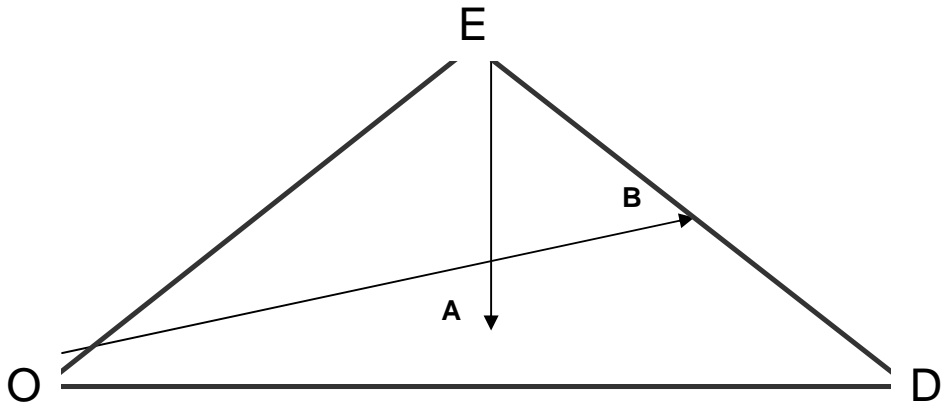
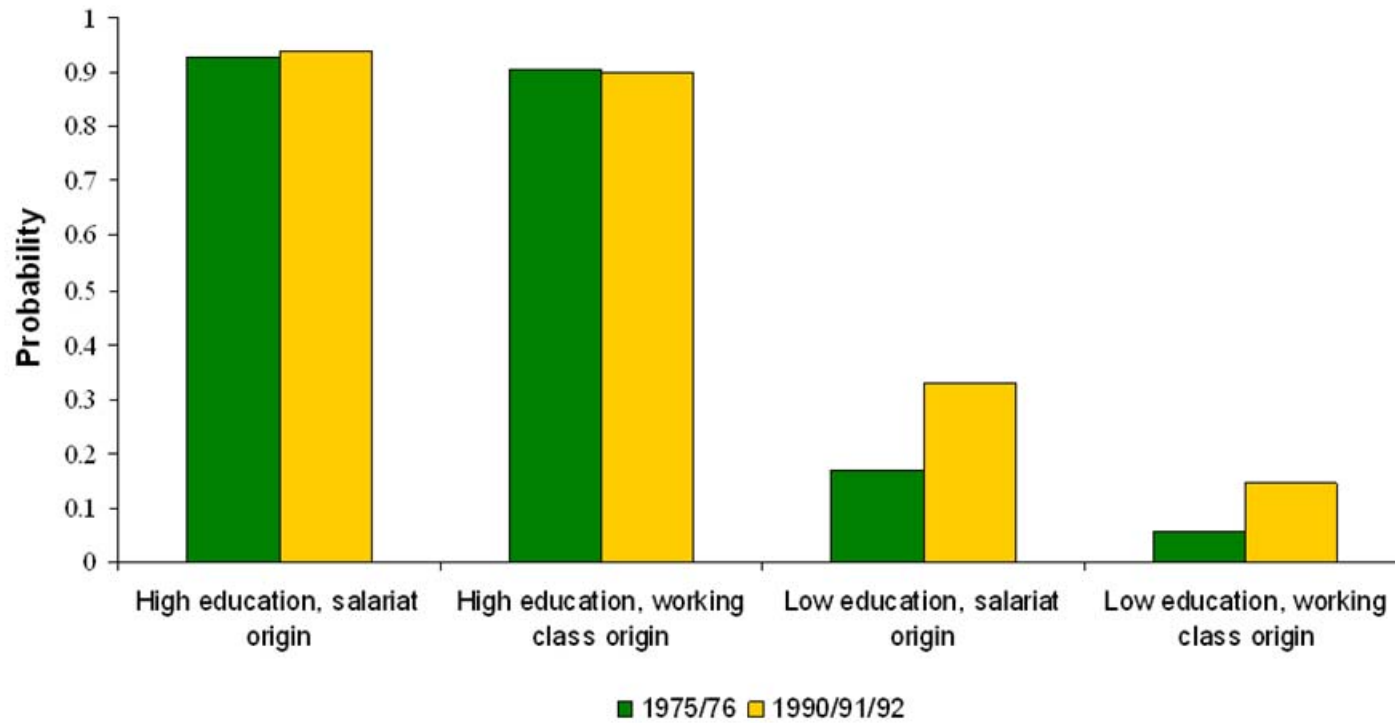


Figure 4: Estimated probabilities of entering the salariat for individuals of differing educational level and class origins



High education = Degree level and above Low education = O level/GCSE or below

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