



Project report

Education pathways: Equality gaps in earnings and employment

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The [analysis](#) was commissioned by TASO and carried out by State of Life and Mime.

NATIONAL STATISTICS

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Educational qualifications are clearly and unambiguously associated with both increased earnings and likelihood of being in employment, compared to no qualifications beyond Key Stage 4 (KS4) qualifications (for example, GCSEs).
- However, there are variations in how different higher education qualifications increase earnings and likelihood of being in employment, with the greatest economic returns from earning a degree at a higher tariff (or 'top third') university.
- While educational qualifications generally generate greater earnings, there are also differences in earnings by free school meal status, gender and race.
- Notably, gaps remain whatever qualification people gain, particularly by free school meal status. This may suggest other factors explain or drive these gaps, and that education alone cannot address them. This indicates that additional measures or policies will also be needed to address the wider drivers of inequalities in the labour market.
- Students from free school meal backgrounds have stronger labour market returns across every level of qualification. This indicates the importance of ensuring they have equal access to higher level qualifications as a priority for improving social mobility. This will require addressing inequalities in prior attainment in schooling.
- Some Level 5 and Level 6 qualifications in further education institutions (FE institutions) generate strong employment and earnings premiums. The supply of Level 5 and 6 qualifications in FE institutions is relatively low. Policymakers should understand the drivers of these positive outcomes, and consider if or how their provision could be expanded while still retaining their earnings premiums.

This report focuses on the economic returns of educational qualifications. Higher education has other individual and societal benefits. At the same time, there is a case for further information and guidance for those considering higher education, to ensure they are better informed about the labour market as well as other benefits that flow from higher educational qualifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- This research contributes to the existing literature on the value of education in addressing inequalities, providing particularly rich insights on the breakdown of earnings and employment by gender, free school meal status and ethnicity. Future research should seek to build on this approach by replicating and extending this work with more recent data as it becomes available, sustaining a clear focus on inequality.
- Higher education providers should note the size and scope of the equality gaps discussed in this report and consider their own performance on similar metrics. The existence of similar, or even wider, gaps in earnings or employment for other education pathways should not be a cause of complacency. Higher education can and should be transformative, and providers should seek to diagnose and address the source of such gaps in outcomes where these are under their control.
- In particular, higher education providers should foreground equality considerations in their work with graduate employers to seek to boost outcomes for groups who have fewer existing advantages in the labour market.
- Work should be undertaken to improve the quality and coverage of administrative data, such as the LEO dataset, to mitigate the limitations outlined in this report.

1. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Ethnic minority	Any ethnicity other than White British
FE	Further education
FSM	Free school meals
Full Level 2	Achieving passes in at least five GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent)
Full Level 3	Achieving passes in two A levels (or equivalent)
HE	Higher education
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
ILR	Individualised Learner Record
KS	Key Stage
LEO	Longitudinal Education Outcomes
Level 3	A level or equivalent vocational and technical qualifications
Level 4	Advanced vocational qualification, such as a CertHE or a HNC, which usually takes one year to complete
Level 5	Advanced vocational qualification, such as a DipHE, HND or a foundation degree, which usually takes two years to complete
Level 6	Undergraduate degree (or equivalent vocational qualification)
NPD	National Pupil Database
ONS Secure Research Service	A secure research service, operated by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), that allows accredited researchers access to de-identified, unpublished data for research
PAYE	Pay as you earn (HMRC's system for collecting income tax from most employees in the UK)
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
Top third providers	The 52 most selective HE providers in the UK (based on the A level UCAS tariff score of entrants)

2. INTRODUCTION

A belief in the value of higher education for disadvantaged students underpins the vision of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) to close equality gaps in higher education (HE).

Higher levels of education are good for the individual and society. Higher education has the potential to drive social mobility, providing a possible route for students from all backgrounds to achieve labour market success and higher earnings. Research has also shown that graduates enjoy non-financial benefits too, such as better health and longer life expectancy.

How students convert their education qualifications in the labour market is an important question for students, parents and policy makers alike. To better understand the various benefits of HE, TASO commissioned research to understand the individual and societal impacts of disadvantaged young people graduating from higher education courses.

This research involved the below stages:

- A.** An initial rapid evidence review to expose the gaps in the existing literature.
- B.** Analysis of publicly available UK Households Survey data to fill some of those gaps.
- C.** Further research and analysis, through an application to the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset.

The findings from parts A and B of this project are presented in our [previous report published in May 2023](#).

Via the rapid evidence review, gaps were identified in the existing literature in terms of how outcomes for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups vary by the specific education pathway pursued.

Therefore, further research was undertaken to understand the following:

- 1.** Does attending HE narrow the gap in labour market outcomes between men and women?
- 2.** Does attending HE narrow the gaps in labour market outcomes between people who were eligible for free school meals at school compared to their peers?
- 3.** Does attending HE narrow the gaps in labour market outcomes by ethnicity?
- 4.** What are the gaps in labour market outcomes by the intersection of our markers of gender, disadvantage and ethnicity?

This publication summarises the results of the analysis undertaken to help answer these questions. Full results details are available in the [accompanying analysis report](#).

The report only addresses the question of labour market outcomes from higher education. It does not address the wider individual and societal benefits of attending higher education, benefits that TASO recognises as important for social mobility, individual wellbeing and wider societal benefits.



3. METHODOLOGY

First, a person-level longitudinal dataset was constructed from National Pupil Database (NPD), Individualised Learner Record (ILR), Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data.

Two cohorts of learners who had undertaken Key Stage 4 (KS4) qualifications (for example, GCSEs) were combined to form a total sample of over one million individuals. These cohorts had completed KS4 representing the two earliest cohorts available to allow tracking earnings and employment outcomes for the longest period of time possible with this dataset.

These individuals were then matched to their records across all four linked datasets. While not all individuals could be matched across the board, there was a large degree of success with well over 95% matched to their individual characteristics, such as gender and prior attainment.

Two labour market outcomes – **employment earnings and employment status** – were used as the outcome measures for this research. The two data collection points were set at nine and 16 years post-KS4.¹

Outcome measure	Data collected
1. Earnings	Reported total PAYE UK earnings in relevant tax year, from the LEO dataset. This includes everyone with any PAYE earnings reported, and therefore will include both part-time and full-time employees. However, this does not include any earnings from self-employment or outside the UK.
2. Employment	Person recorded as being employed in the UK at any point in the relevant tax year, from the LEO dataset. This includes any record of employment regardless of length or nature of employment.

These outcomes were then analysed by the individuals' education pathway. Education pathways were defined as the highest level and type of qualification obtained by the individual by nine years post-KS4.

For further detail on our methodology, see the [analysis report](#).



¹ Nine years after KS4 was chosen as the earliest time point in which a large majority of those who had attended HE or FE will have subsequently entered the labour market. Those in the sample will be around 25 years old at this time point. When the application for access to this data was made, 2018-19 was the latest year of available LEO data. This meant that 16 years after KS4 is the latest possible time point to observe the labour market outcomes of the half of the cohort who completed KS4 in 2003. Those in the sample will be around 32 years old at this time point.



The aim of the analysis was to understand the 'gaps' in outcomes between groups.

We looked at two different types of gaps:

- **Raw gaps** – the raw difference in outcomes between groups (for example, men compared to women), not taking into account any other differences that might exist between those groups (for example, differences in prior attainment).
- **Conditional gaps** – the gaps which still exist when we take into account (or 'control') for other things we know about students (namely gender, ethnic group, disadvantage, SEND status, KS4 attainment and region).²

The analysis focuses on the following gaps:

- Differences in outcomes between men and women
- Differences in outcomes between people who were eligible for free school meals at school compared to their peers who weren't
- Differences by ethnicity

The full analysis report provides a breakdown of the gaps at nine and 16 years after KS4, for each of the groups outlined, for all of the education pathways outlined and further split by prior attainment. For concision, this summary report focuses on:

- The gaps at 16 years after KS4 as this represents the longest-term view of the data available at the time of analysis
- How the gaps in outcomes for HE pathways compare to gaps by other pathways.

Because prior research has found large differences in outcomes between people attending the most selective universities compared to other providers, we break HE down into:

- **Top third providers:** The 52 most selective HE providers in the UK (based on the A level UCAS tariff score of entrants)
- **Non-top third providers:** institutions outside this group

² Regression models were built to analyse the labour market outcomes by education pathway, with a set of key demographic control variables (gender, ethnic group, disadvantage, SEND status, KS4 attainment, region). Additionally, split-sample and interaction regression models were produced, splitting the sample by gender, ethnic group, disadvantage status, and combinations thereof, to reveal how outcomes differ across these subgroups, while controlling for other demographic characteristics available in the data.

4. KEY LIMITATIONS

There are a number of important limitations inherent in the dataset used for this analysis:

- The cohort does not include those who were educated outside of the England state-funded schools.
- Education pathways below Level 3 were banded together. This means that the 'nothing beyond KS4' group includes those with Level 2, Level 1, and no qualifications.
- Similarly, qualifications above Level 6 were not considered. This means that the Level 6 groups will include people who have gone on to achieve a Level 7 or higher qualification, for example a postgraduate degree.
- Due to limitations with the LEO data, the earnings data reports PAYE earnings only, not earnings declared by those who are self-employed. This may skew the results as certain professions are more likely to be associated with self-employment.
- The LEO data does not allow researchers to identify whether employment is full-time or part-time. This means that the employment variable is a combination of both. It also means that, in certain groups where part-time employment is more likely (for example, for women), the average earnings may be lower – because the earnings are expressed as an annual salary, rather than a per-hour or per-day rate.
- The LEO data does not allow us to distinguish between individuals who are not in employment and those who have left the UK and may be in employment elsewhere. This may skew the results for groups who are more likely to have emigrated following KS4.
- There are additional factors, such as sector of employment or subject of degree, that have not been included in this analysis but are likely to influence labour market outcomes.
- The study is limited to the time periods for which data is available, meaning, for example, that this research cannot tell us about labour market outcomes beyond 16 years post-KS4. This may miss important long-term patterns.

It is also important to note that the analysis only reveals correlations between education pathways and outcomes, but it does not provide evidence of [causal impact](#). This is because the methods used cannot rule out the influence of other factors which might affect both the propensity for people to undertake different pathways and their earnings/employment outcomes.

For example, coming from a wealthier family may make one more likely to attend university, but also make it easier to get a higher-paid job in the future (such as through the parents' connections). Therefore we should be cautious about the extent to which we attribute higher earnings/rates of employment to the specific pathways.



5. FINDINGS

Overall labour market value of education qualifications

- Educational qualifications are clearly and unambiguously associated with both increased earnings and likelihood of being in employment, compared to no qualifications beyond KS4.

Earnings 16 years after KS4

- Looking at raw outcomes, average earnings for those with no post-KS4 qualification were around £19,500, compared to:
 - nearly £28,800 for those attending non-top third provider (a difference of more than £9,300)
 - nearly £40,600 for the group graduating from a top third provider (a difference of more than £21,100)
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics:
 - those attending non-top third HE providers earn almost £5,900 more than those with no qualification beyond KS4

- top third graduates earn the most by a large margin; almost £14,000 more than those with no qualification beyond KS4
- Looking at raw gaps, those with a Level 5 qualification gained from an FE institution earn £2,000 more on average than graduates from non-top third HE providers; this gap reduces to approximately £1,400 when controlling for KS4 attainment and demographics.
- It should be noted that those with Level 5 qualifications from an FE institution constitute around 3,000 people in the data, compared to more than 200,000 going to a non-top third HE provider. These findings are statistically significant, but given there are such relatively few Level 5 qualifications available, they tend to be focused on particular sectors of the labour market, and there may be limits to how far or quickly such qualifications could be expanded.

Figure 1: Those with higher levels of education generally earn more, particularly those who attended top third HE providers

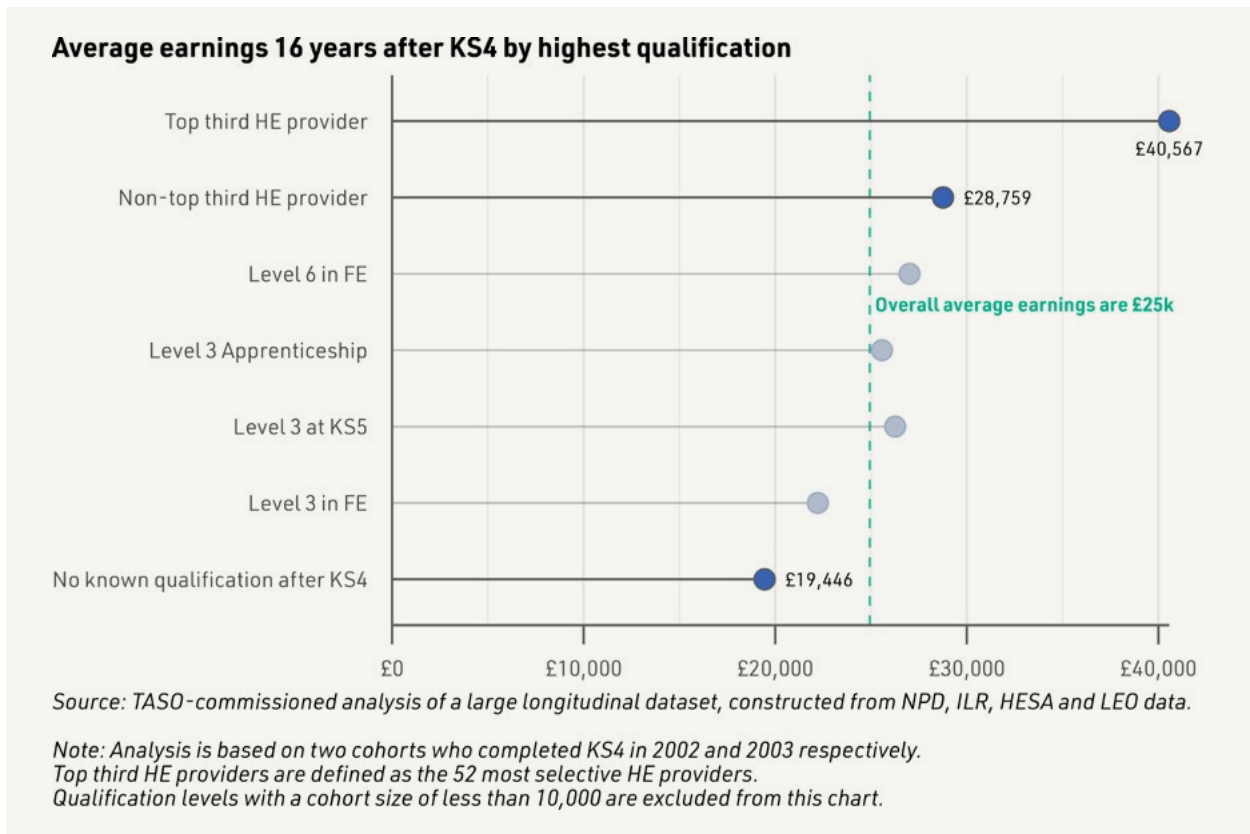
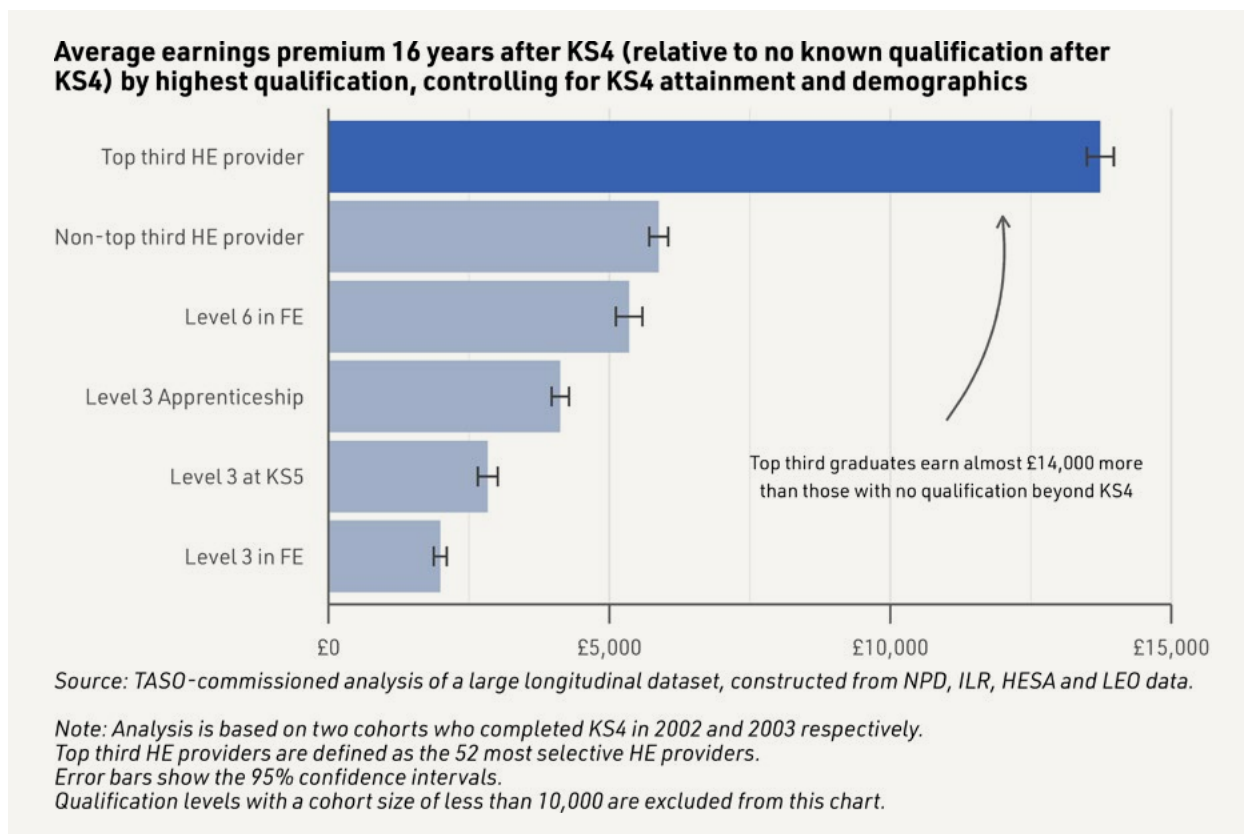


Figure 2: When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, top third HE provider graduates earn the most by a large margin



Employment 16 years after KS4

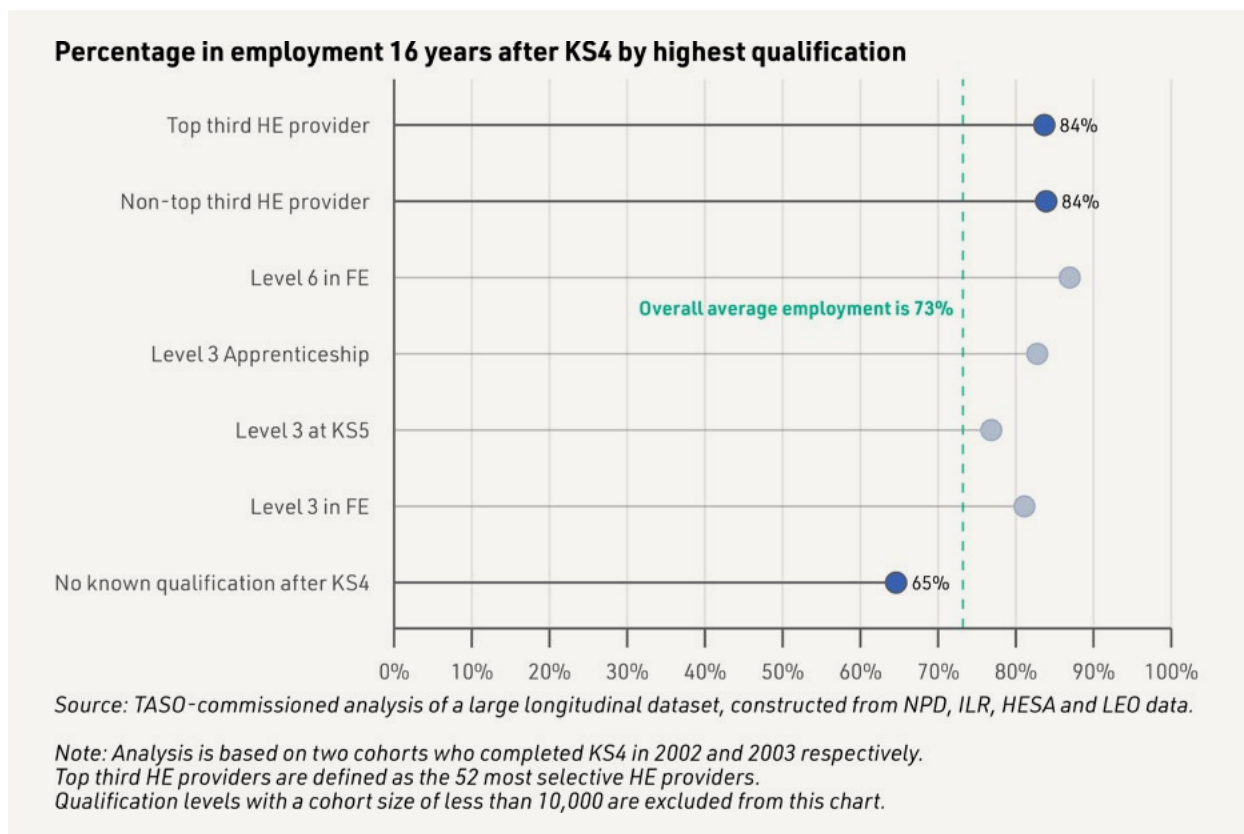
- Looking at raw gaps, average employment for those with no post-KS4 qualification is around 65%, compared to around 84% undertaking HE qualifications at any type of provider. Employment is highest for those earning Level 5 and 6 qualifications in FE (around 87%).³
- The gaps get smaller when we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, though the

associations between the different education pathways and employment rates remain.

- However, it should be noted that the employment figures do not include those who are self-employed, or who are pursuing further study, which may skew employment data for those with a higher level education pathway.

³ It is also worth noting the lower rates of employment among the group who undertook level 4 and 5 qualifications in an HEI. Some of these courses are preludes to further study, such as a foundation degree. Therefore, this group are more likely to be studying in higher education institutions for a longer period of time than others, and therefore less likely to be in employment.

Figure 3: Employment is nearly 20 percentage points higher for those with qualifications in HE compared to those with no known qualification after KS4



Gaps by gender

Earnings 16 years after KS4

- Men earn more than women across the full range of education pathways. Gender gaps in earnings are large, and larger than equivalent free school meal (FSM) or ethnicity gaps.
- Looking at raw outcomes, there are gender earning gaps (with men earning more than women) across all areas:
 - A gap of around £8,800 among those with no known post KS4 qualifications
 - A gap of around £8,300 for those attending a non-top third HE provider
 - A gap of almost £13,500 for those who attended a top third HE provider.
- The gap is even wider for other education pathways:
 - A gap of around £15,500 for Level 5 in FE institutions
 - A gap of around £15,000 for Level 3 Apprenticeships
 - A gap of between £10,000 and £12,000 for other pathways in FE institutions
- We controlled for KS4 attainment and demographics to assess the premium attached to these pathways compared to having no post-KS4 qualification. This highlighted the below points:
 - Attending a top third HE provider is clearly associated with a bigger earnings increase for men (an increase of almost £14,400 for men and almost £13,000 for women).
 - Attending non-top third institutions is associated with a bigger earnings increase for women (an increase of around £6,600 for women compared to around £5,000 for men).
 - Pre-degree (or equivalent) level qualifications and apprenticeships are associated with higher earnings for men than women; for Level 3 apprenticeships we see an increase of around £5,900 for men compared to around £1,400 for women; for Level 5 in FE institutions we see an increase of around £8,700 for men compared to around £3,300 for women.

Figure 4: Attending HE does not appear to narrow the gaps in earnings between women and men

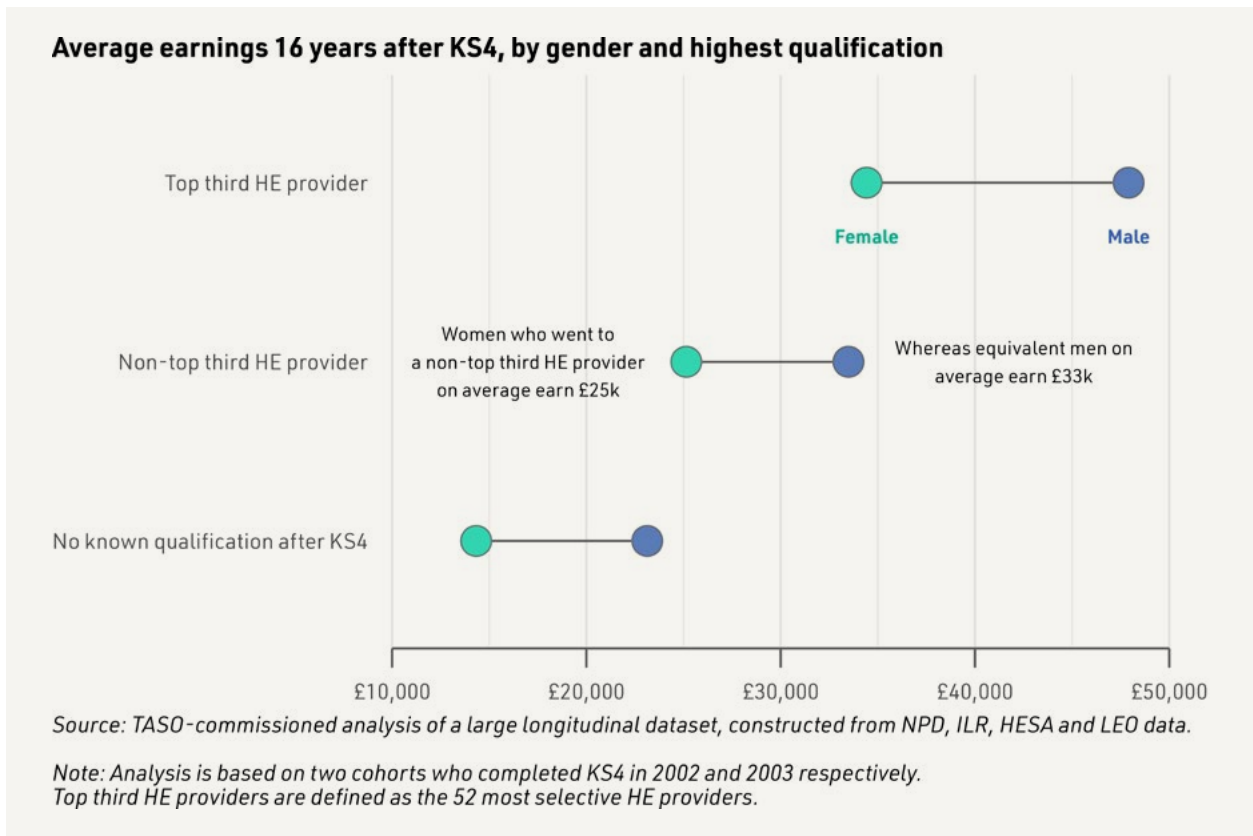
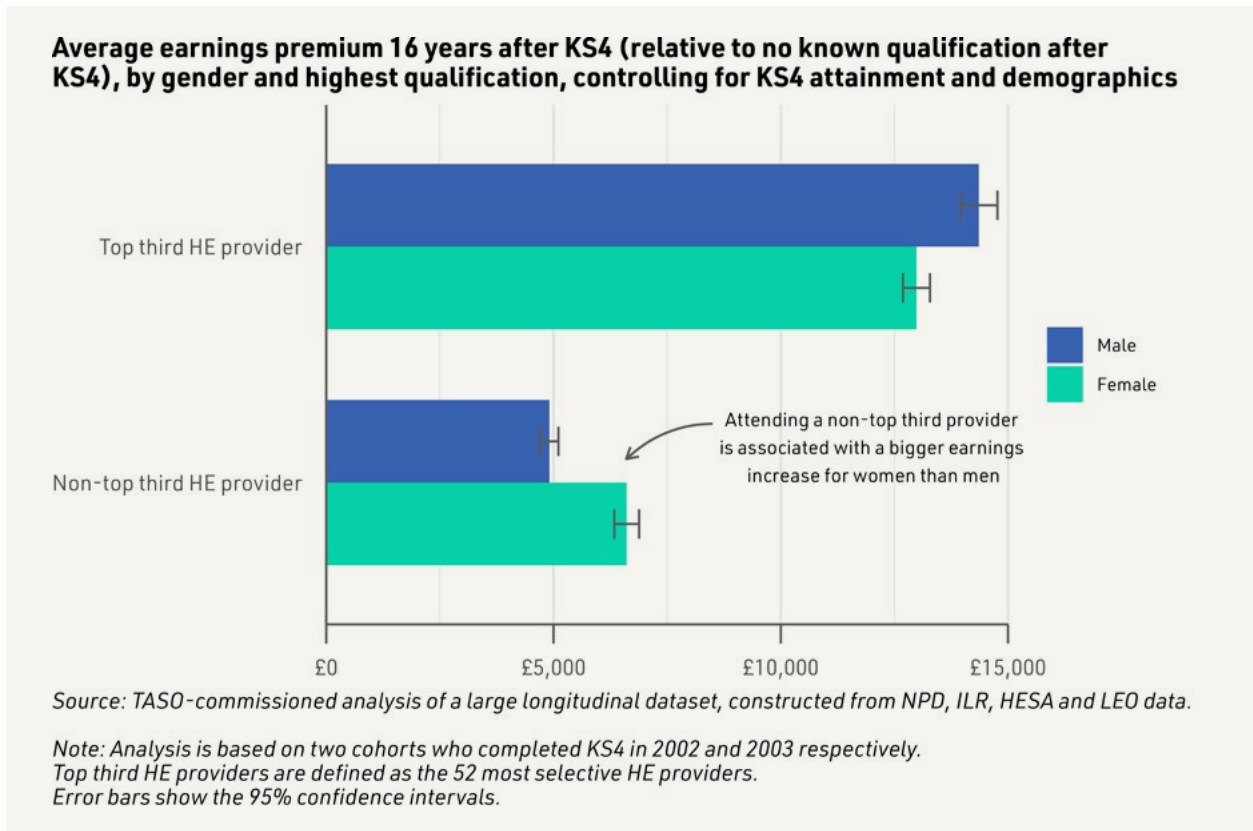


Figure 5: When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, attending a top third HE provider is associated with a bigger earnings increase for men than women

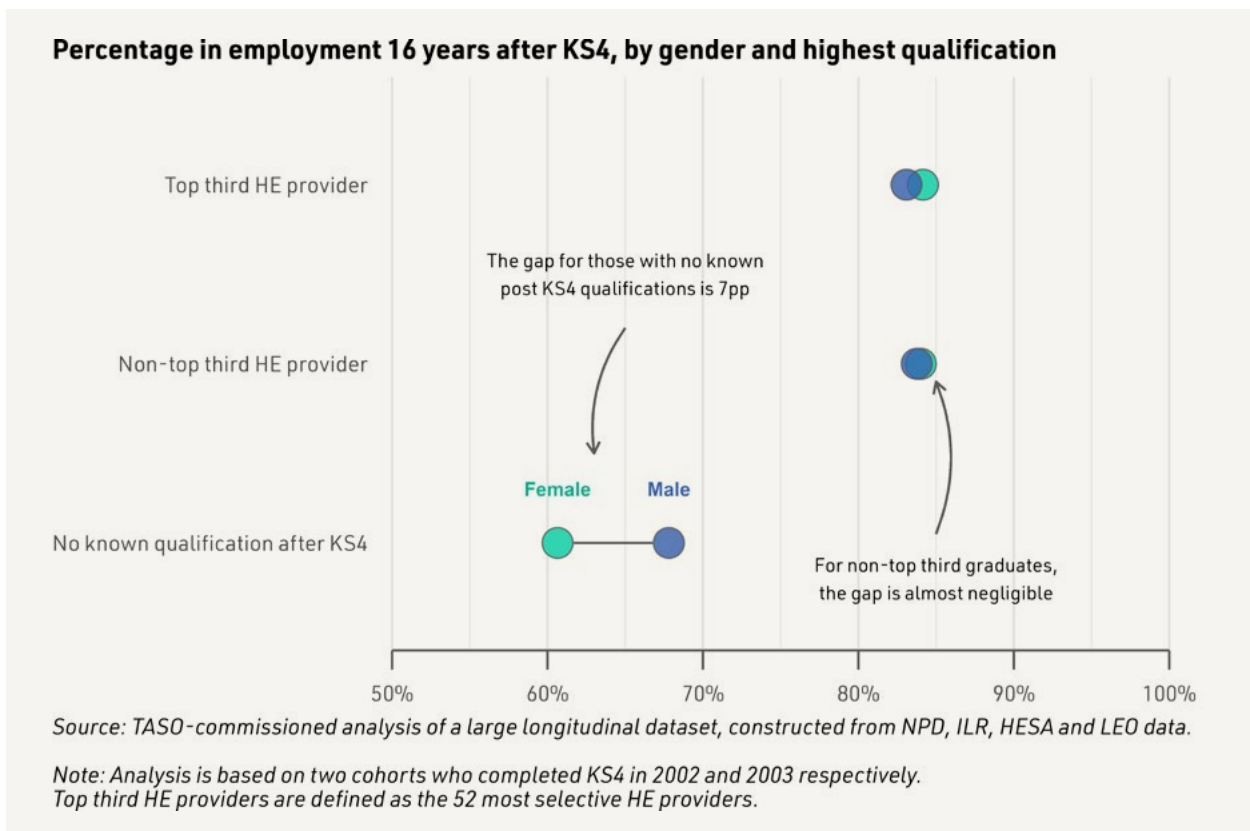




Employment 16 years after KS4

- Looking at raw outcomes:
 - Among those with no known post KS4 qualifications the gender employment gap between men and women is around 7 percentage points (pp), with men more likely to be employed than women (67.8% compared to 60.7%)
 - This gap narrows and even reverses for HE:
 - For those attending a non-top third HE provider, the gender employment gap between men and women is almost negligible (0.3pp), with women slightly more likely to be employed than men (84.0% compared to 83.8%).
 - For those attending top third HE providers, the gender employment gap between men and women is around 1pp, with women more likely to be employed than men (84.2% compared to 83.1%).
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics:
 - For women, earning a degree is associated with a bigger increase in employment than any other of the pathways examined (an increase of more than 9pp compared to having no post-KS4 qualification).
 - For men, university degrees are associated with a 7-8pp increase in employment rates, compared to a 8-9pp increase for Level 4-6 qualifications in FE institutions.

Figure 6: The gender employment gap narrows for those attending HE



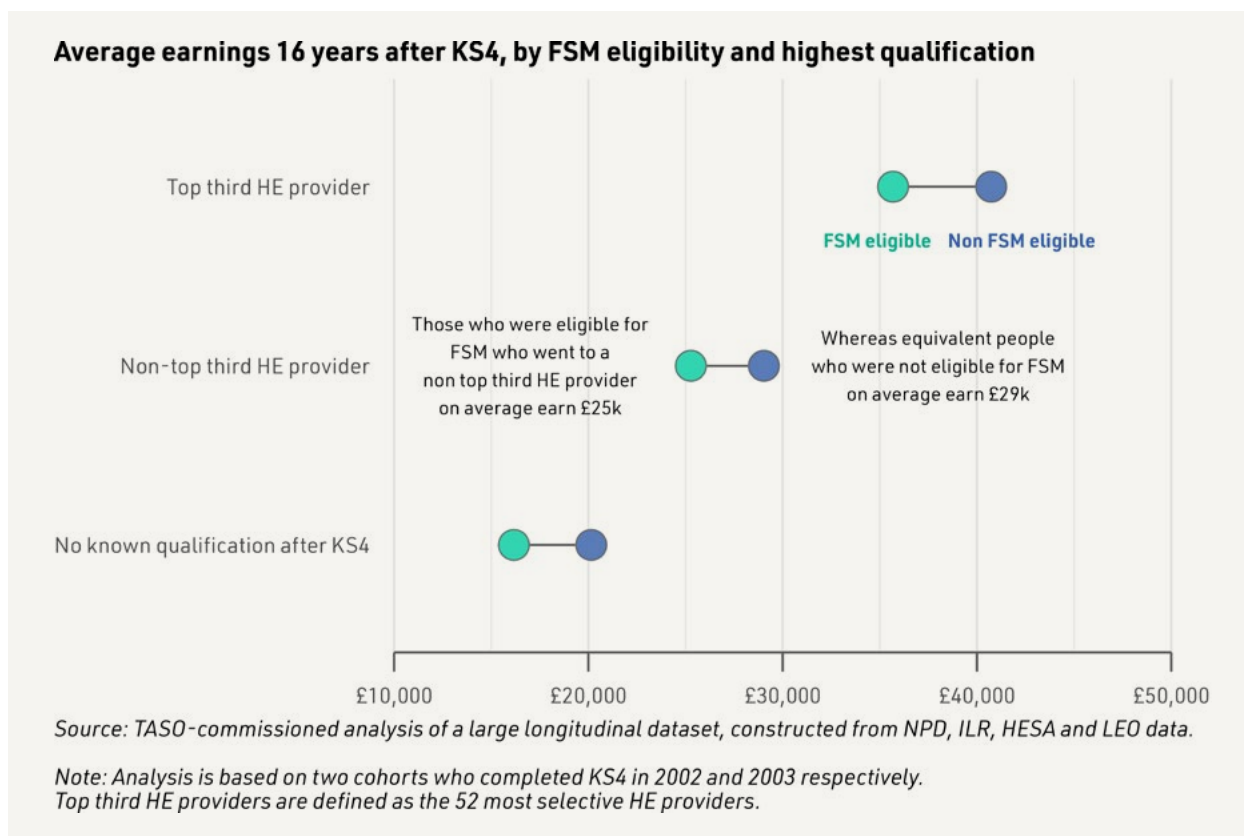
Gaps by free school meal (FSM) eligibility

Earnings 16 years after KS4

- A clear disadvantage earnings gap exists, with earnings consistently higher among the non-FSM eligible cohorts compared to their FSM eligible equivalent cohorts.
- Looking at raw outcomes, there are FSM earning gaps across all areas:
 - A gap of around £3,900 among those with no known post KS4 qualifications
 - A gap of around £3,800 for those attending a non-top third HE provider
 - A gap of around £5,000 for those who attended a top third HE provider.
- The gap is even wider for other education pathways
 - A gap of almost £8,900 for Level 4 in FE institutions
 - A gap of almost £6,200 for Level 5 in FE institutions

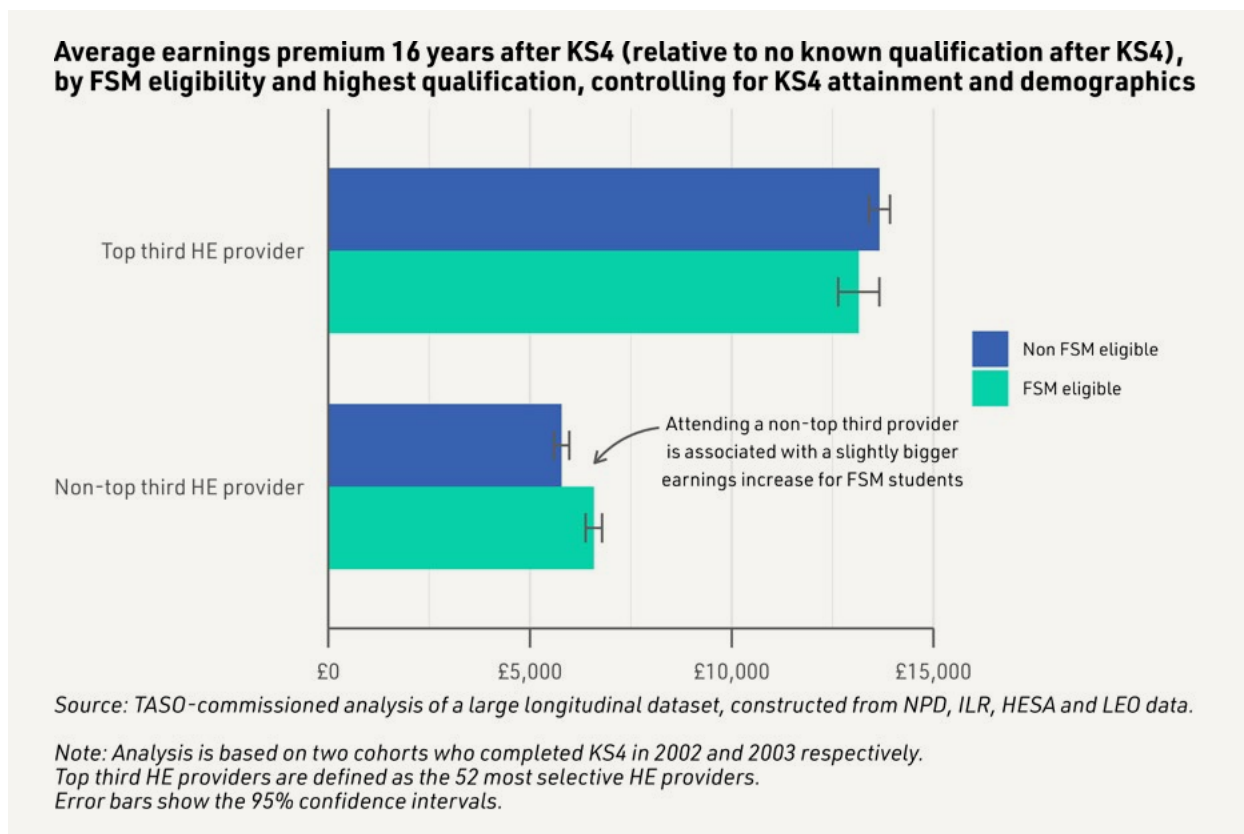
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics to assess the premium attached to these pathways compared to having no post-KS4 qualification, the increase in earnings associated with attending HE is roughly comparable for the FSM and non-FSM cohorts:
 - Attending a top third HE provider is associated with a slightly bigger earnings increase for non-FSM students (an increase of almost £13,700 for non-FSM and almost £13,200 for FSM cohorts).
 - Attending non-top third provider is associated with a slightly bigger earnings increase for FSM students (an increase of around £6,600 for FSM students compared to around £5,800 for non-FSM students).

Figure 7: There is an earnings premium from HE for disadvantaged students, but gaps in earnings persist



⁴ It is worth noting the relative sizes of the FSM and non-FSM eligible graduate cohorts. There were just over 20,000 FSM eligible graduates compared with almost 300,000 non-FSM eligible graduates. Even accounting for the differences in cohort size, this reflects a much larger proportion of the non-FSM eligible cohort entering HE, likely driven by the higher average prior attainment among this group.

Figure 8: When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, the HE earnings premium is roughly comparable for FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible cohorts

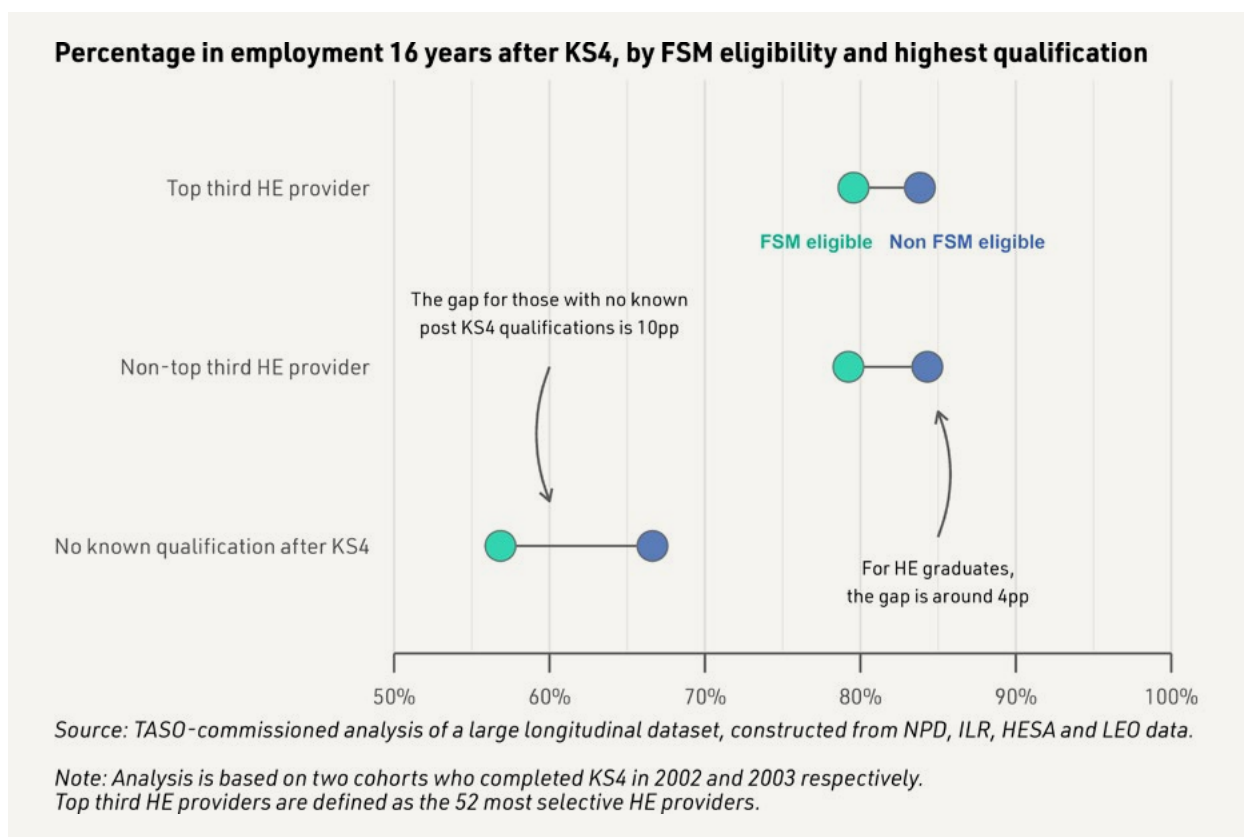


Employment 16 years after KS4

- Looking at raw outcomes:
 - Among those with no known post KS4 qualifications the FSM employment gap is around 10pp, with non-FSM groups more likely to be employed than FSM groups (66.6% compared to 56.8%).
 - This gap narrows for attending HE, although FSM-eligible students remain less likely to be employed for both types of HE provider examined:
 - For those attending a non-top third HE provider, the FSM employment gap is around 5pp (84.3% compared to 79.6%)
 - For those attending top third HE providers, the FSM employment gap is around 4pp (83.8% compared to 79.6%)
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics:
 - For FSM-eligible students, earning a degree in a university is associated with among the biggest increase in employment among the pathways examined (an increase of more than 10.7pp for non-top third providers, and 9.5pp for top third providers, compared to no post-KS4 qualification).
 - For non-FSM eligible students, degree level qualifications in a university are associated with around an 8pp increase in employment rates compared to no post-KS4 qualification.



Figure 9: Although a gap remains, the FSM employment gap narrows for those attending HE



Gaps by ethnicity

Earnings 16 years after KS4

- Analysis of earnings by ethnicity tells a more mixed story than for gender and FSM status.
- Looking at raw outcomes:
 - Among those with no known post KS4 qualifications, Minority Ethnic cohorts earn around £1,700 less than White cohorts.
 - This gap narrows slightly at non-top third HE providers to around £1,500.
 - This gap reverses at top third HE providers, with White graduates earning around £3,000 less on average.
 - When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, the earnings premium of HE is higher for Asian, Mixed and Other graduates than for White graduates, but lower for Black graduates.

Figure 10: Minority Ethnic people who did not go to a top third HE provider earn less on average than equivalent White British people

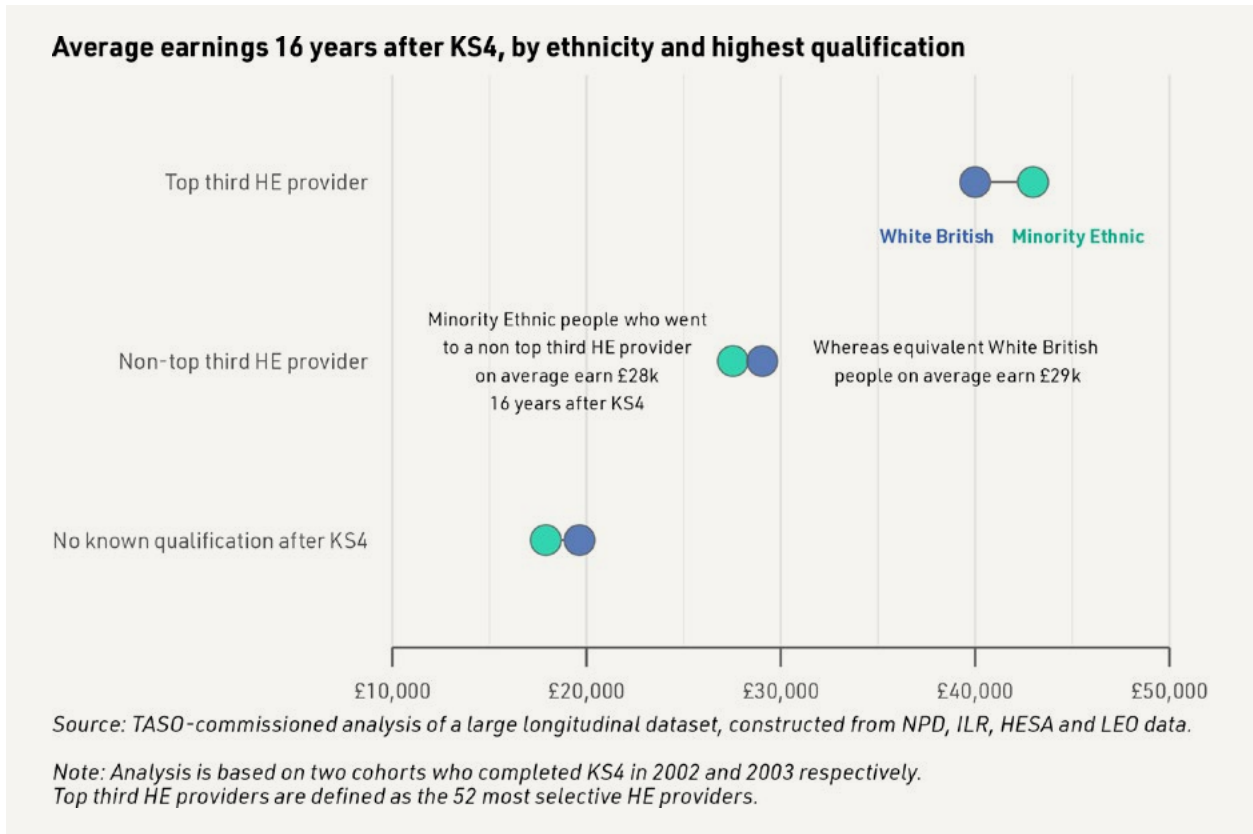


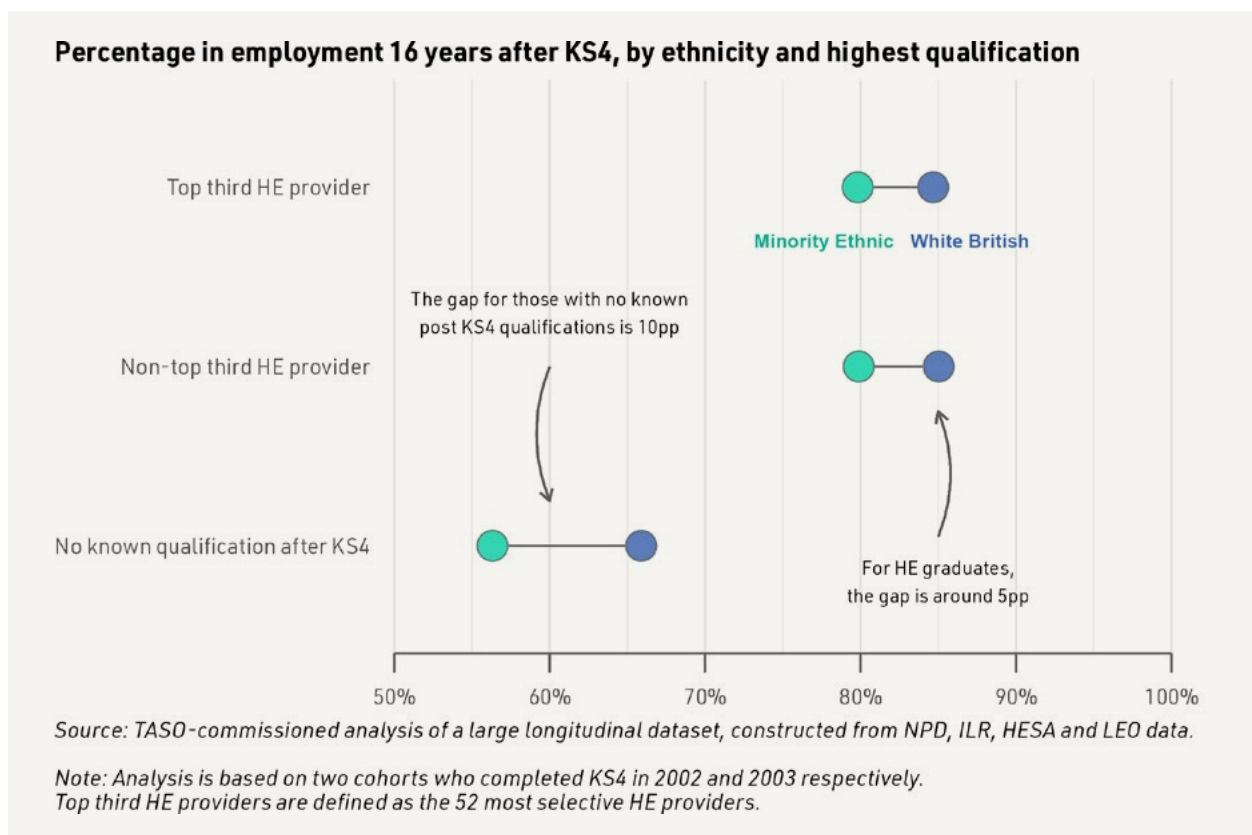
Figure 11: When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, the earnings premium of HE is higher for Asian, Mixed and Other graduates than for White graduates, but lower for Black graduates.



Employment 16 years after KS4

- Looking at raw outcomes:
 - Among those with no known post KS4 qualifications, those identified as White in the data are more likely to be employed (65.9%) compared to those identified as Minority Ethnic (56.3%) – a gap of almost 10pp.
 - This gap narrows for degree level qualifications in HE, although Minority Ethnic students remain less likely to be employed for both types of HE provider examined:
 - For those attending a non-top third HE provider, the ethnicity employment gap is around 5pp (85.0% compared to 79.9%).
 - For those attending top third HE providers, the ethnicity employment gap is around 6pp (84.7% compared to 79.8%).
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, for those identified as from Asian, Black or Mixed backgrounds, degree qualifications in HE are generally associated with a bigger increase in employment rates than for White students.

Figure 12: The Minority Ethnic employment gap narrows for those with degree level qualifications in HE





6. EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF CHARACTERISTICS

The full analysis report provides a detailed breakdown of how earnings and employment vary by the intersection of gender, FSM eligibility and ethnicity. Key findings include:

- Degree-level qualifications in HE seem to have the highest earnings premiums for FSM eligible women from Mixed and Other ethnic backgrounds, as well as FSM eligible Asian men.
- For subgroups incorporating several categories – FSM eligible females, FSM eligible ethnic minorities

(particularly the Asian and Black subgroups), FSM eligible ethnic minority females – HE is associated with a bigger increase in employment than the average across the whole sample.

However, it should be noted that some subgroups, particularly those which are the intersection of a less common education pathway and several demographic criteria, have small sample sizes. This means that the results of the analysis can be volatile and limits some of the conclusions that can be drawn based on these results.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In answer to our original research questions, attending HE does not close equality gaps in earnings and employment. HE is associated with better outcomes on these metrics, and in many cases disadvantaged and underrepresented appear to get a bigger 'boost' from attending HE than other groups, when we take into account their background and prior attainment. However, stubborn equality gaps in terms of gender, FSM status and ethnicity persist for nearly all of the pathways examined, particularly in relation to earnings. Our results demonstrate how, although education, including HE, can seek to redress such inequalities, they are entrenched in society and broadly present regardless of the pathways undertaken. This may suggest that addressing inequalities will require a focus on areas other than education, or that education alone cannot improve social mobility.

Overall value of HE

- Educational qualifications are clearly and unambiguously associated with both increased earnings and likelihood of being in employment.
- This research aligns with previous studies which find significant financial benefits of attending HE, particularly the most selective institutions. However, some qualifications in FE institutions appear to be associated with higher earnings than studying at less selective HE providers.

Gender

- Men earn more than women across the full range of education pathways. Gender gaps in earnings are large, and larger than equivalent FSM or ethnicity gaps.
- Education qualifications do not seem to narrow this gap, and are actually associated with bigger gaps in some cases, including degree or equivalent (Level 6) at selective institutions, Level 5 in FE and Level 3 apprenticeships. The gap is marginally smaller among those who studied at less selective HE providers, but still sizable.
- In contrast to earnings, degree-level qualifications in HE are associated with a narrowing and even reversal of the gender gap in employment. For women, earning degree-level qualifications in HE is associated with a bigger increase in employment than any other of the pathways examined.

Free school meal (FSM) eligibility

- A clear FSM earnings gap exists, with earnings consistently higher among the non-FSM eligible cohorts compared to their FSM eligible equivalent cohorts.
- For people who were eligible for FSM at school, degree-level study in HE is associated with a bigger increase in their earnings, but a sizable FSM earnings gap remains; among those who attended non-top third institutions this is slightly smaller than for people with no post-KS4 qualification, but for those who attended the most selective HE providers the gap is even wider.
- University degrees do help reduce the gap in rates of employment between those who were and weren't eligible for FSM at school; for people who were FSM-eligible at school, attending HE is associated with among the biggest increase in employment among the pathways examined.

Ethnicity

- Analysis of earnings by ethnicity tells a more mixed story than for gender and FSM.
- Among those with no known post KS4 qualifications, Minority Ethnic cohorts earn around £1,700 less than White cohorts; this gap narrows slightly for degree-level qualifications at non-top third HE providers to around £1,500, and reverses at top third HE providers, with White graduates earning around £3,000 less on average.
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, the earnings premium of degree-level HE is higher for Asian, Mixed and Other graduates than for White graduates, but lower for Black graduates.
- When we control for KS4 attainment and demographics, for those identified as from Asian, Black or Mixed backgrounds, degree-level HE is generally associated with a bigger increase in employment rates than for White students.



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