

Turning the Tide? Higher Education Outcomes & Access in the Mass Era

‘Access & geopolitics: Next steps in tackling the
equity crisis in global higher education

June 3rd, 2025

Golo Henseke, UCL

(g.henseke@ucl.ac.uk)

Roadmap

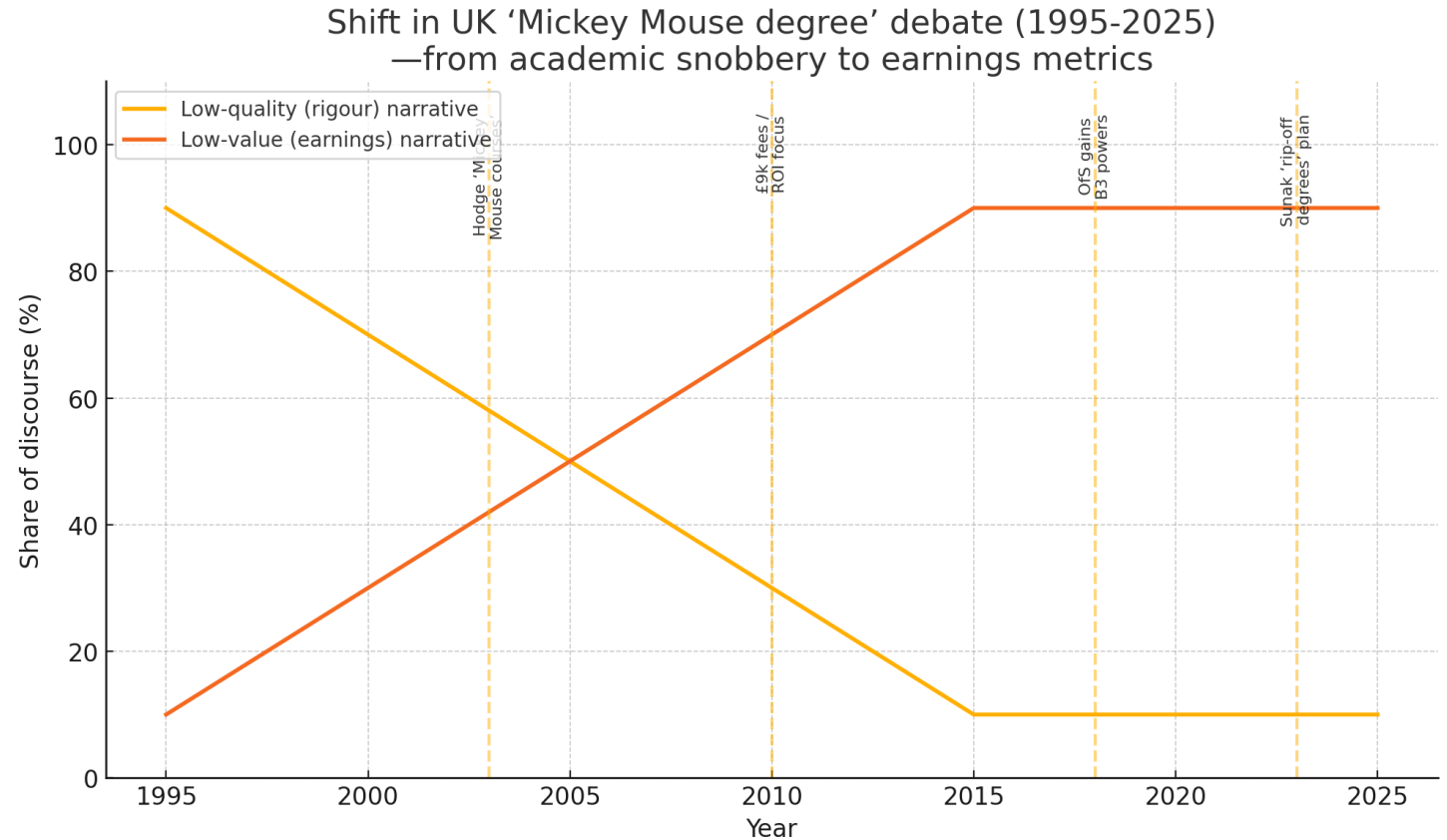
- The turning tide against HE
- Mass expansion & its paradoxes
- Extrinsic outcomes: evidence & contingencies
- Inequalities in access & destinations
- So what? Research & policy agenda

Situating the Talk in the Literature

- Massification & global expansion: Trow (1973); Marginson (2016)
- Human capital vs. signalling: Becker (1993); Spence (1973); Caplan (2019)
- Credential inflation & positional competition: Collins (1979); Brown, Lauder & Cheung (2020)
- Social Inequality: Lucas (2001); Bukodie & Goldthorpe (2022)
- Graduate outcomes & overeducation: Tomlinson (2017); Britton et al. (2022)

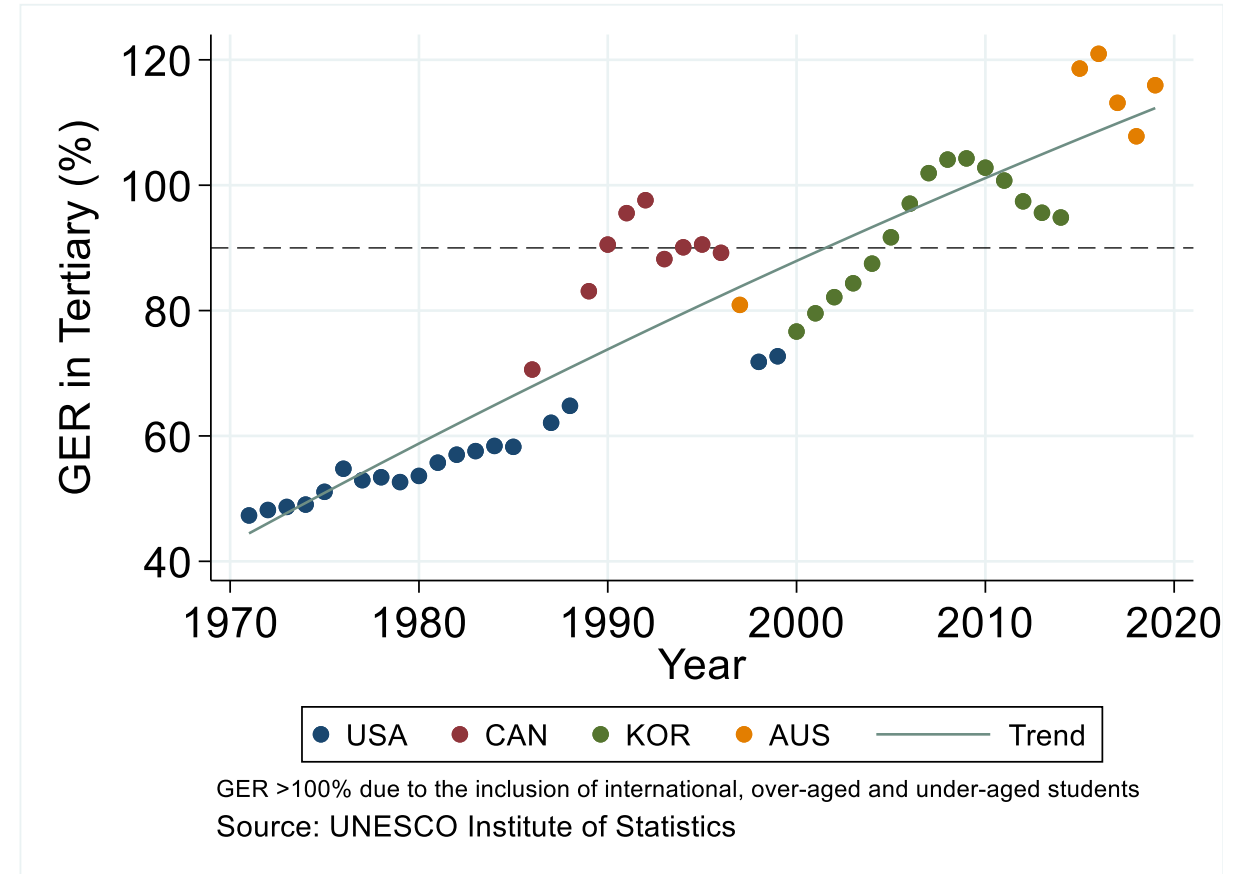
The Turning Tide?

- Public & policy discourse shifting to 'value for money'
- Rising tuition, debt & mismatch fuel skepticism
- Need to look beyond salaries to wider societal pay-offs



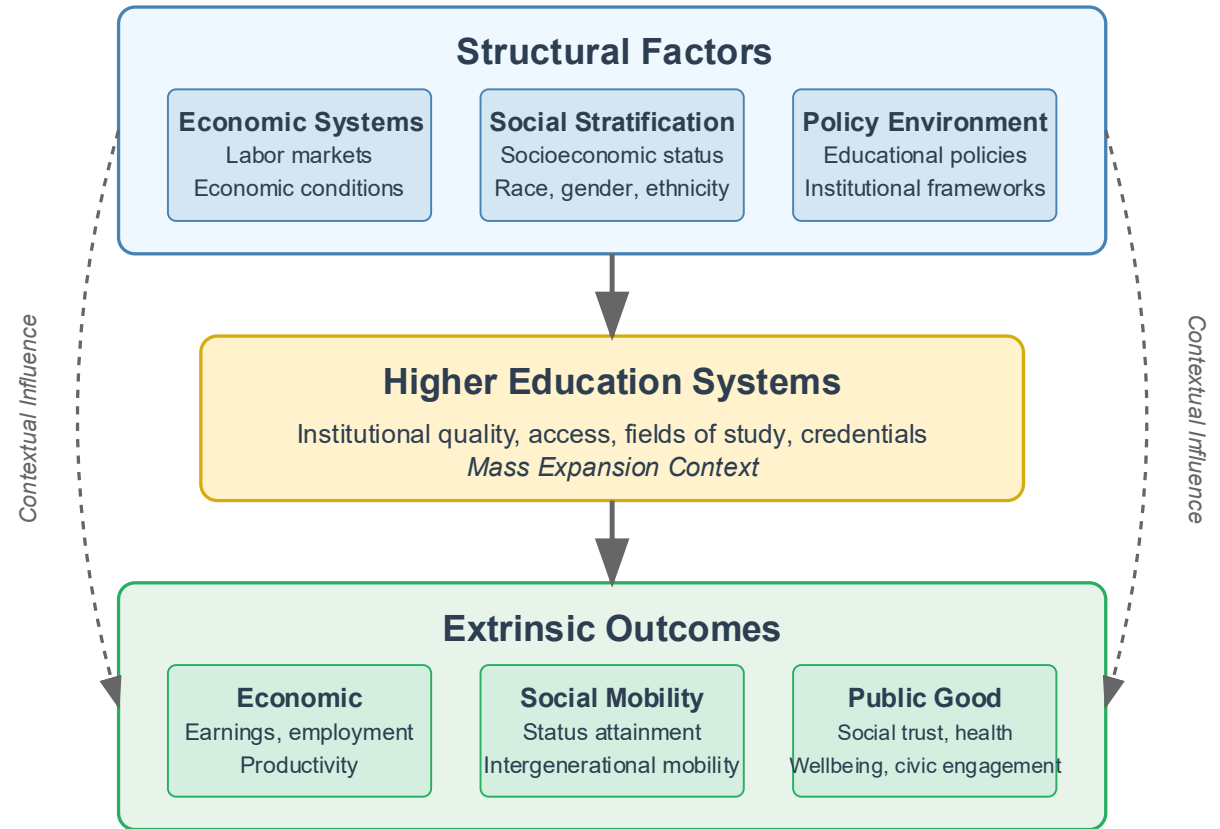
Mass Expansion – The Numbers

- Global tertiary enrolment 19 % (2000) → 43 % (2023)
- 254 m students enrolled in 2024
- ≥ 90 % access already in 15+ systems (e.g., Australia, S. Korea, Spain, Turkey)
- Growth often reproduces stratification



Extrinsic ≠ Intrinsic

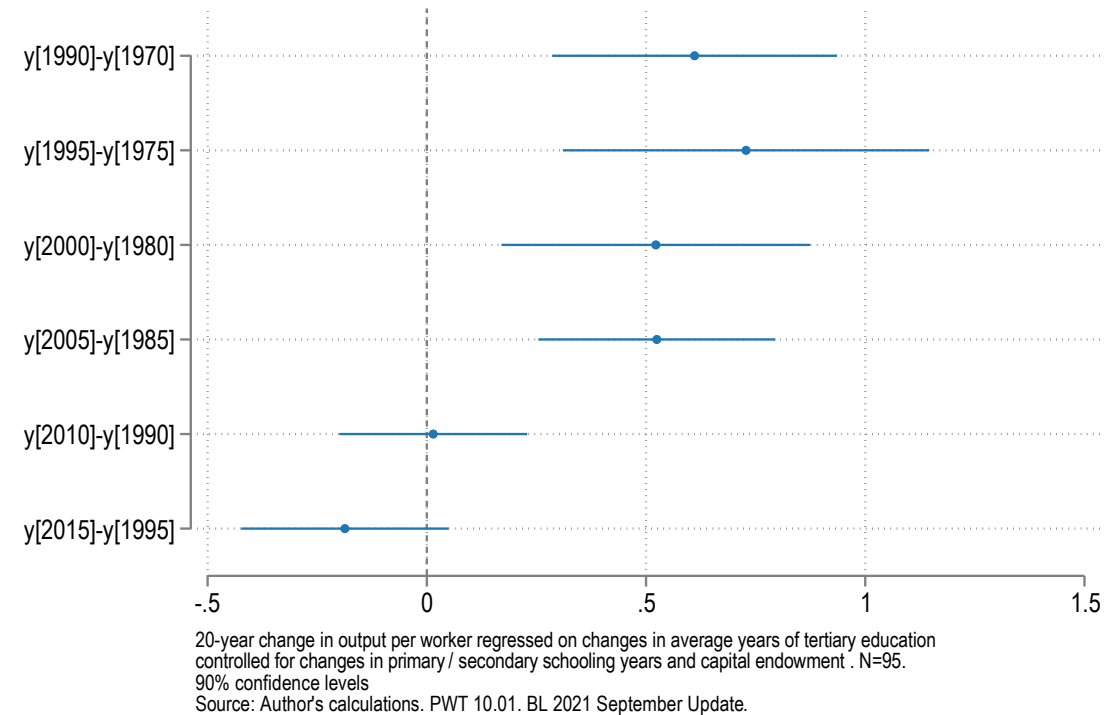
- Extrinsic outcomes: productivity, mobility, civic trust...
- Co-produced with labour markets & societies
- Dynamic, uneven, context-dependent



Productivity Pay-off: Conditional

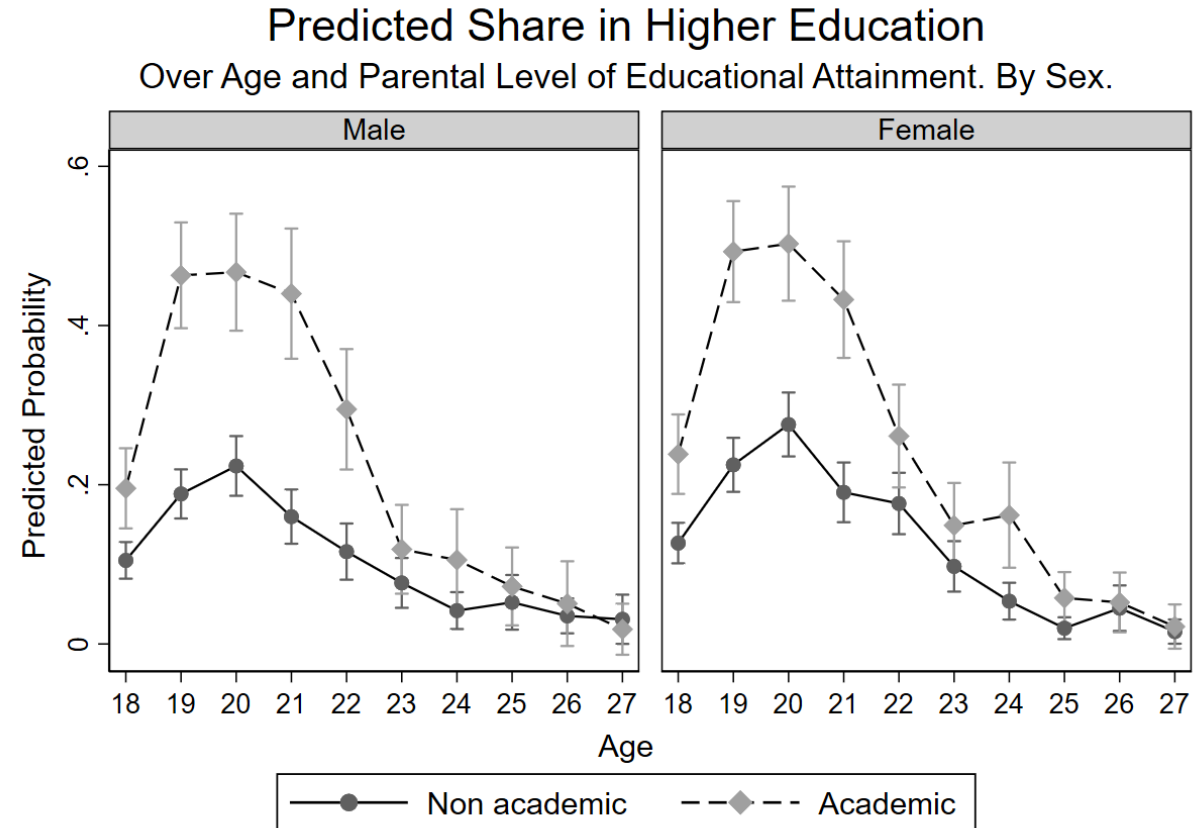
- +1 yr university in workforce
→ +47 % output per worker
(pre-2005)
- Effect fades post-2005
- Growth contribution
strongest where school
quality is high – foundations
matter

Contribution of tertiary education to economic growth over time.



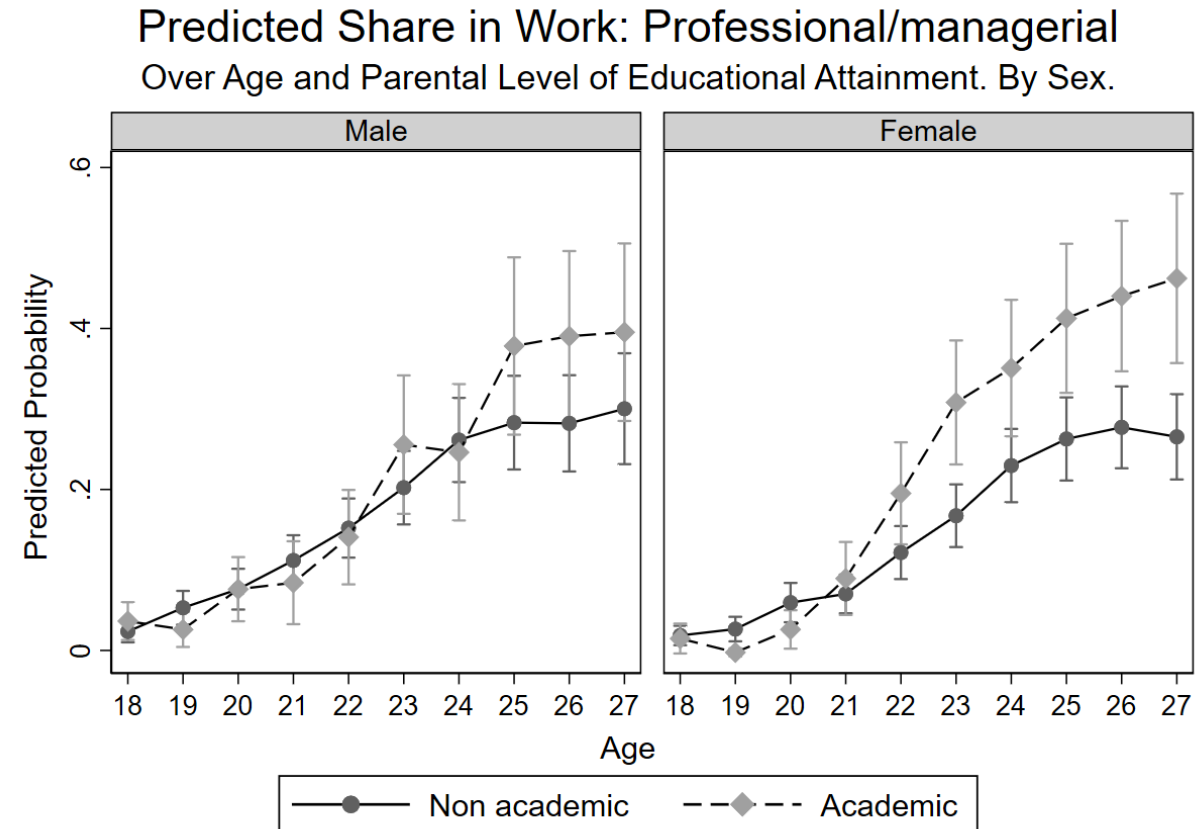
Access Gap Remains Wide (UK, AUS, GER)

- Non-graduate parents ↓ university access: –13 pp UK, –17 pp AUS, –24 pp GER
- Vocational route compensates in AUS (+5 pp) & GER (+7 pp)
- AUS women +7 pp university; negligible gender gap in UK and GER



Destinations Inequality

- Non-graduate background \uparrow NEET risk (e.g., +8 pp UK)
- Lower entry to professional roles, higher routine/service work
- Latter holds in the UK, AUS and GER



Measuring What Matters

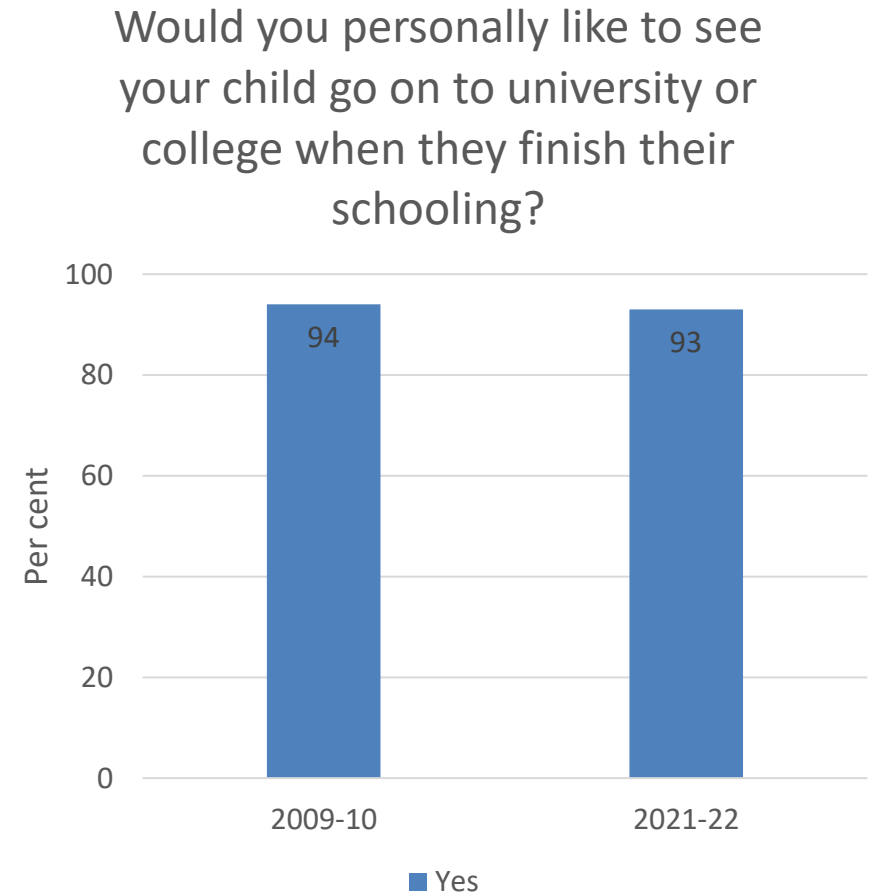
- Earnings ≠ the whole story – job quality, trust, public good matter
- Over-reliance on earnings metrics drives narrow policy
- Need longitudinal, cross-national lenses & richer indicators

Special Issue Contributions

- [Graduate job quality & meaningful work](#) (Brophy et al.).
- [Sustainability curricula & regional labour markets](#) (Cattani et al.)
- [Transnational education & skills](#) (Chen)
- [Work experiences & stratified graduate outcomes](#) (Luchinskaya, Tzanakou)
- Collective aim: recalibrate metrics, tackle inequity

Key Take-aways

- Massification without equitable outcomes challenges legitimacy
- Extrinsic outcomes are not deterministic – context matters
- Closing access & outcome gaps demands systemic change
- How do we recalibrate value & justice in low-growth contexts?



Sources: Understanding Society Waves 1 and 13. The author's calculations

Thank You

- Questions?
- Contact: g.henseke@ucl.ac.uk