From Cambridge and Oxford to Harvard and Yale, elite universities are a feature of many education systems. **Andrés Barrios Fernández**, **Christopher Neilson** and **Seth Zimmerman** ask whether these institutions of higher education help to promote social mobility.

The benefits of elite universities are more social than academic

Consider two equally talented would-be students applying to elite university programmes in business, law or medicine: one comes from a modest background and attended a state-subsidised K-12 school (kindergarten to secondary education), while the other attended an exclusive private K-12 school. What happens when they're admitted to an elite university?

Research indicates that even when they attend elite universities, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face a disadvantage, as top jobs and top incomes go disproportionately to their peers from higher-status families (Michelman et al, 2022). Nevertheless, attending these institutions and interacting with high-status peers can still be a transformative experience that opens new educational and social opportunities for them and their offspring.

When we look at children whose parents attended elite universities, we see that regardless of the parents' social origin, they become more likely to attend elite private K-12 schools, live in high-status neighbourhoods, befriend high-status peers and enrol in elite universities themselves.

Remarkably, these changes in life trajectory occur even though their academic performance remains similar to that of children whose parents narrowly missed admission to an elite university programme. Neither their academic achievement as measured by grade point averages nor their scores in university admission exams are higher.

The key mechanism appears to be social rather than academic. When students from modest backgrounds attend elite universities, they enter new social circles. They become more likely to marry peers from privileged backgrounds and to build social networks that can later benefit their children. It is these social connections, rather than any increases in academic achievement or earning power, that appear to drive the intergenerational effects.

Building social networks

Our study brings new evidence to this debate by examining how elite university admission shapes social outcomes across generations in Chile. Why Chile? Three reasons:

- First, the country maintains detailed educational records spanning more than five decades, allowing us to track educational trajectories and link parents to their children.
- Second, it has a set of well-studied exclusive private K-12 schools that serve as clear markers of social capital. Loosely speaking, these schools can be thought of as Chile's equivalents of UK schools such as Eton and Harrow.
- Third, Chilean universities, including the most prestigious ones, have used a centralised admissions system since the late 1960s. Under this system, students submit ranked preferences for specific university-major combinations and are then allocated

Understanding the complex and long-lasting effects of elite education is increasingly important

to one of these preferences only based on their academic performance, measured by high school grade point average and national admission exam scores.

Many university programmes in Chile are oversubscribed, and this system creates sharp admission cutoffs. We look at groups of children whose parents were just above and just below the cutoff. By comparing what happens to these two groups after graduation, we can measure how attending elite universities shapes outcomes across generations. Since individuals just above and just below the cutoffs are similar in all other respects, any differences in their children's outcomes can be attributed to the effects of the parents' elite university admission.

Previous research has focused on the effects of attending an elite university on graduates' earnings or academic achievement. But looking at these outcomes alone misses crucial ways in which elite institutions shape society. They do not just affect graduates' incomes or knowledge. They transform their social networks, their marriage prospects and, ultimately, the social and educational opportunities available to their children.

These findings challenge conventional wisdom in two ways. First, it shows that these institutions can help talented students from modest backgrounds join the social elite, but this process takes more than one generation. Second, it highlights that the key features of elite education are more social than academic. Perhaps then, we should consider social fit alongside academic fit when designing educational policies.

But there is a notable tension. Elite universities can help some talented students from modest backgrounds join the social elite, but they simultaneously make it easier for elite families to maintain their position across generations (Bhopal and Myers, 2023). In fact, they strengthen the connection between academic achievement and social status, which becomes more persistent across generations.

Addressing barriers to applications

This creates a challenging policy trade-off. Policymakers can use admissions policies such as affirmative action to increase social mobility by giving advantages to applicants from less privileged backgrounds. But doing so could weaken the link between academic achievement and access to elite institutions.

Elite universities transform their students' social networks and marriage prospects

To avoid this trade-off, we need to address the achievement gaps that arise across social groups in K-12 education and reduce the barriers that prevent talented individuals from low socio-economic status backgrounds from applying to elite universities.

The impact of elite universities extends far beyond what we can measure when we look at graduates' salaries or human capital. These institutions shape the social fabric of society in profound and lasting ways, influencing not just who has access to top positions today, but who will have access to them generations from now.

As societies grapple with questions about inequality and opportunity, understanding these complex and long-lasting effects of elite education becomes increasingly important. While elite universities can help talented students from modest backgrounds join the social elite, realising this potential may require looking beyond traditional metrics of academic achievement and considering the crucial role of social capital in shaping long-term outcomes.

Children whose parents attended elite universities are more likely to live in high-status neighbourhoods

This article summarises 'Elite Universities and the Intergenerational Transmission of Human and Social Capital' by Andrés Barrios Fernández, Christopher Neilson and Seth Zimmerman, CEP Discussion Paper No. 2026. An earlier version first appeared on *LSE Business Review* (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2025/02/04/the-benefits-of-elite-universities-are-more-social-than-academic/).

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Further reading

Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers (2023) *Elite Universities and the Making of Privilege: Exploring Race and Class in Global Educational Economies*, Routledge.

Valerie Michelman, Joseph Price and Seth Zimmerman (2022) 'Old Boys' Clubs and Upward Mobility among the Educational Elite', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137(2): 845-909.