



Rethinking inequalities in post-school destinations

‘Poverty of aspiration’

There are inequalities in young people’s post-school destinations in Scotland¹. Some have diagnosed this as a problem of ‘poverty of aspiration’, however no such thing exists². ‘Poverty of aspiration’ has nevertheless remained a politically sticky term used to justify policy interventions that shift the blame for systematic inequalities on individual people.

Instead of continuing to debunk ‘poverty of aspiration’, I propose shifting our focus to the aspiration-realisation rates for different groups of young people.

The ‘aspiration-realisation gap’

This means, we are able to identify which groups of young people are least likely to achieve their aspirations, and tailor careers support to meet their needs.

Rural boyhood

I used ‘Growing Up in Scotland’ data³ to examine the aspiration-realisation rates for young people by combinations of gender, social class, and rurality. Aspiration-realisation rates ranged from 30% to 75%. Regardless of social class, rural boys were consistently among the least likely to realise their post-school aspirations. These findings point to the need for targeted careers support sensitive not only to social class but also to the particular circumstances of rural boys in Scotland.

References: (1) Scottish Government, 2025, ‘Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations no. 6: 2024 edition.’ (2) Spohrer, 2018, ‘The problem with ‘raising aspiration’ strategies: social mobility requires more than personal ambitions.’ (3) ScotCen, 2026, available from the UK Data Service.