

Life-Chances Auction

Cambridge OCR A Level Sociology - Understanding Social Inequalities

A classroom auction for exploring Weberian life chances, market situation and unequal starting points

Specification area	Further activity: life chances, social inequality and difference
Core focus	Teams receive equal notional budgets but different starting resources. They bid for qualifications, housing, networks, credentials and political influence, then evaluate whether outcomes reflect effort or unequal life chances.
Assessment objectives	AO1: concepts and theory AO2: application to life chances AO3: evaluation of Weberianism and Marxism
Timing	50-60 minutes
Resources	Printed resource cards, budget tokens, auction rules, reflection sheet, concept guide



Teacher Guidance

This activity helps students understand that life chances are not simply the result of individual effort. Teams begin with the same notional budget, but they receive different starting resources such as family wealth, cultural capital, neighbourhood quality, networks or caring responsibilities. During the auction, students compete for resources that can improve social mobility. The debrief asks whether the final outcomes were meritocratic or shaped by unequal starting points.

Learning objectives

- Explain Weberian concepts such as market situation, status, social closure, credentials and life chances.
- Apply these concepts to education, housing, employment, social networks and political influence.
- Evaluate whether social outcomes reflect effort, unequal starting points or structural advantage.
- Compare Weberian explanations with Marxist explanations of class inequality.

Recommended lesson flow

Starter: Ask students: If everyone is given the same budget, will the auction be fair?

Set-up: Put students into teams of 3-4. Give each team a starting profile and equal budget tokens.

Auction round: Auction resource cards one by one. Teams decide which resources are worth bidding for and record their purchases.

Outcome calculation: Teams add up life-chance points from purchased cards and starting profile adjustments.

Debrief: Students complete the reflection sheet and compare Weberianism with Marxism.

Plenary: Students write a judgement: Were the outcomes fair, or did inequality shape the result?



Auction Rules

- Each team begins with 20 budget tokens.
- Each team also receives one starting profile. These profiles give hidden advantages or disadvantages.
- The teacher auctions resource cards one at a time. Bidding starts at 1 token unless the card says otherwise.
- Teams can buy as many cards as they can afford, but they must keep a record of what they buy.
- Some cards are more valuable when combined with others. For example, elite networks may increase the value of high-status credentials.
- At the end, teams add up their life-chance score and discuss whether the outcome was fair.

Teacher auction script

1. Give teams their profile card face down. Ask them to read it privately.
2. Give each team 20 budget tokens.
3. Explain that each auction item represents a resource that may improve life chances.
4. Auction cards quickly. Allow 30-45 seconds per item so students must make decisions under pressure.
5. Reveal hidden profile effects after the auction. This creates the debrief moment.
6. Use the reflection sheet to link the experience to Weberian theory.

Scoring guidance

Each card contains suggested life-chance points. Teams add these to their starting profile adjustment. The highest score does not automatically mean the most sociologically valid strategy; it provides evidence for debate about market situation, credentials, status and unequal opportunity.

Budget Tokens

Print and cut out, or replace with counters, scrap paper, mini whiteboard tally marks or coins. Each team starts with 20 tokens.

1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN
1	1	1	1	1



TOKEN	TOKEN	TOKEN	TOKEN	TOKEN
1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN
1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN

1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN
1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN
1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN
1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN	1 TOKEN



Starting Profile Cards

Give one profile to each team. Profiles should be kept private until the debrief. They create unequal starting points while all teams appear to have the same budget.

Profile A: High inherited advantage Starting resources: stable housing, family savings, professional parents, high expectations. Hidden advantage: add +6 life-chance points at the end. Special rule: if you buy Elite Networks or High-status Credential, add +2 more.	Profile B: Strong education, low money Starting resources: high grades but limited family wealth. Hidden advantage: add +2 life-chance points. Special rule: housing cards cost you +1 token because you have no deposit support.
Profile C: Insecure housing Starting resources: frequent moves, overcrowding and limited quiet study space. Hidden disadvantage: subtract -3 life-chance points. Special rule: qualifications cost you +1 token because study time is restricted.	Profile D: Caring responsibilities Starting resources: you provide unpaid care for family. Hidden disadvantage: subtract -2 life-chance points. Special rule: training or work experience cards cost +1 token because time is limited.



Starting Profile Cards continued

Profile E: Strong community networks

Starting resources: supportive community, local knowledge and informal help.

Hidden advantage: add +3 life-chance points.

Special rule: if you buy Political Voice or Local Contacts, add +2 more.

Profile F: Social closure barrier

Starting resources: high motivation but weaker access to elite networks.

Hidden disadvantage: subtract -2 life-chance points.

Special rule: Elite Networks cost you +2 tokens because entry is restricted.



Auction Resource Cards

Cut out these cards. Auction them one by one. Each card has a suggested starting price and life-chance points. Teachers can adjust prices to increase competition.

High-status Credential Cost: starting bid 4 tokens Effect: +6 life-chance points Examples: degree from an elite university, professional qualification, recognised technical credential.	Vocational Skill Cost: starting bid 2 tokens Effect: +3 life-chance points Examples: trade qualification, apprenticeship, practical training, workplace certification.
Stable Housing Cost: starting bid 4 tokens Effect: +5 life-chance points Examples: secure tenancy, low stress, study space, access to better local services.	Elite Networks Cost: starting bid 5 tokens Effect: +6 life-chance points Examples: contacts who offer internships, advice, work experience or references.
Local Contacts Cost: starting bid 2 tokens Effect: +3 life-chance points Examples: community support, local job knowledge, informal childcare or transport help.	Private Tutoring Cost: starting bid 3 tokens Effect: +4 life-chance points Examples: exam coaching, application support, confidence in interviews.
Work Experience Cost: starting bid 2 tokens Effect: +3 life-chance points Examples: unpaid internship, volunteering, shadowing or placement.	Political Influence Cost: starting bid 5 tokens Effect: +5 life-chance points Examples: lobbying power, local representation, ability to shape decisions.
Cultural Capital Cost: starting bid 3 tokens Effect: +4 life-chance points Examples: confidence with institutions, interview style, valued language and tastes.	Health Security Cost: starting bid 3 tokens Effect: +4 life-chance points Examples: reliable healthcare access, good mental health support, time to recover.



Transport Access Cost: starting bid 2 tokens Effect: +3 life-chance points Examples: car access, reliable public transport, ability to reach jobs and college.	Financial Cushion Cost: starting bid 4 tokens Effect: +5 life-chance points Examples: emergency savings, ability to take risks, lower stress during unemployment.



Auction Record Sheet

Team name: _____

Resource bought	Tokens spent	Life-chance points	Why did you buy it?

Final score calculation

Points from resource cards	
Starting profile adjustment	
Combination bonus or penalty	
Total life-chance score	
Rank in class auction	



Weberian Concept Guide

Life chances	The opportunities people have to access valued things such as education, income, housing, health and status.
Market situation	A person or group's position in the labour market, shaped by skills, qualifications, property, demand and bargaining power.
Credentials	Formal qualifications or certificates that open access to higher-status roles.
Social closure	The way groups protect advantages by restricting access to jobs, networks, status or qualifications.
Status	Social honour or prestige. Status can shape respect, confidence and access to opportunities.
Power	The ability to influence decisions, rules and outcomes. Political influence is one form of power.
Class	For Weber, class is linked to market situation rather than only ownership of the means of production.
Social mobility	Movement up or down the social hierarchy. Weberians ask what resources make mobility more or less likely.

Quick application prompts

- Which cards improved market situation most strongly?
- Which cards acted as credentials?
- Which cards represented social closure?
- Which cards improved status but not necessarily income?
- Which teams had better life chances before the auction even started?



Student Reflection Sheet

Complete this after the auction. Use sociological vocabulary wherever possible.

1. Which resource was most valuable in improving life chances?

2. Did the final outcomes reflect effort, strategy or unequal starting resources?

3. Which Weberian concept best explains your team's outcome?

4. How did credentials, networks or housing affect market situation?

5. Did any group experience social closure? Explain how.

6. Was the auction meritocratic? Give one reason for and one reason against.

Judgement statement

Overall, the life-chances auction shows that inequality is...



Debrief: Weberianism versus Marxism

Use these prompts for discussion or as a written comparison task.

Issue	Weberian explanation	Marxist explanation
Why do some teams do better?	Different market situations, credentials, status and power.	Capitalist class inequality and unequal ownership of wealth/resources.
Why do networks matter?	Social closure protects advantage.	Ruling-class connections reproduce class power.
Why do qualifications matter?	Credentials improve market position.	Education may reproduce class inequality and ideology.
Why is housing important?	Housing shapes life chances and access to services.	Property ownership and class wealth create inequality.
Main limitation	May underplay capitalist exploitation.	May underplay status, credentials and non-class barriers.

Debrief questions

- Would Weber say the auction was mainly about class, status or power?
- Would Marx say the auction hid unequal class resources behind a false appearance of equal competition?
- Which theory better explains inherited advantage?
- Which theory better explains the value of credentials and networks?
- How could gender, ethnicity, age or disability change the auction outcome?

Exam-style follow-up

Evaluate Weberian explanations of social inequality.

Students should use the activity as evidence by referring to market situation, credentials, social closure, power, life chances and comparison with Marxism.



Teacher Debrief Guide

Key teaching point: equal budgets do not produce equal outcomes when students have unequal starting resources. This is the central sociological insight of the activity.

- High-status credentials and elite networks usually produce the strongest Weberian explanation because they show how market situation and social closure shape opportunity.
- Housing, health and transport help students see that life chances are produced outside the labour market as well as inside it.
- The hidden starting profiles show that outcomes are not simply meritocratic, even where everyone appears to have an equal budget.
- A Weberian answer should stress class, status and power as separate but connected dimensions of inequality.
- A Marxist comparison should stress wealth, property, class power and the unequal structure of capitalism.

Possible plenary sentence starters

- The auction looked fair at first because...
- The biggest hidden advantage was...
- Weber would explain the result by focusing on...
- Marx would criticise the auction because...
- This activity shows that life chances are shaped by...

Useful References

- Weber, M. (1978) Economy and Society. Useful for class, status, party and life chances.
- Weber, M. (1948) From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology. Useful for status groups and power.



- Parkin, F. (1979) *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*. Useful for social closure.
- Goldthorpe, J. H. (1980) *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*. Useful for mobility and class analysis.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) *The Forms of Capital*. Useful extension for cultural and social capital.
- Savage et al. (2013) *A New Model of Social Class?* Useful for contemporary class resources and capital.

