MIT Economics

KARTIK VIRA

OFFICE CONTACT INFORMATION
MIT Department of Economics
77 Massachusetts Avenue, E52-301
Cambridge, MA 02139
kvira@mit.edu
https://economics.mit.edu/people/phd-students/kartikeya-vira

HOME CONTACT INFORMATION
97 Inman Street, Apt 2
Cambridge, MA 02139
United States
Mobile:
US: *+1 617-800-4821*
UK: *+44 7943 982891*

MIT PLACEMENT OFFICER
Professor David Autor
dautor@mit.edu
617-253-4669

MIT PLACEMENT ADMINISTRATOR
Mrs. Shannon Robinson
shmay@mit.edu
617-324-5857

DOCTORAL STUDIES

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
PhD, Economics, Expected completion June 2026
DISSERTATION: "Essays in Behavioral and Labor Economics"

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE AND REFERENCES

Professor Frank Schilbach
MIT Department of Economics
77 Massachusetts Avenue, E52-560
Cambridge, MA 02139
fschilb@mit.edu

Professor Daron Acemoglu
MIT Department of Economics
77 Massachusetts Avenue, E52-446
Cambridge, MA 02139
daron@mit.edu

Professor Parag Pathak
MIT Department of Economics
77 Massachusetts Avenue, E52-426
Cambridge, MA 02139
ppathak@mit.edu

PRIOR EDUCATION

Trinity College, University of Cambridge — *2018*
B. A. Economics *(double first)*

CITIZENSHIP United Kingdom **GENDER:** Male

FIELDS

Primary Fields: Labor Economics

Secondary Fields: Behavioral Economics, Economics of Education

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Behavioral Economics (graduate, MIT 14.160) — *2023*
Teaching Assistant to Professor Frank Schilbach

	Public Finance and Public Policy (undergraduate, MIT 14.41) Teaching Assistant to Professor Jonathan Gruber	*2022*
RELEVANT POSITIONS	Research Assistant to Professors Taha Choukhmane and Lawrence Schmidt	*2023-25*
	Research Assistant to Professor Daron Acemoglu	*2021*
	Research Assistant to Professor Frank Schilbach	*2021*
	Predoctoral Fellowship, Harvard University Research Assistant to Professors John Beshears, James Choi, David Laibson, and Brigitte Madrian	*2018-20*
	Summer Student, Institute for Fiscal Studies	*2017*
FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AND AWARDS	J-PAL European Social Inclusion Initiative Grant	*2025*
	NBER Global Math Talent Doctoral Fellowship	*2023-24*
	George and Obie Shultz Fund Grant, MIT	*2022-25*
	Carl (1976) Shapiro Fellowship, MIT	*2020-22*
	Senior Scholarship, Trinity College, University of Cambridge	*2017*
PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES	**Conference Presentations**	
	LSE Centre for Economic Performance Education Conference	*2025*
	IZA PhD Workshop in Labor and Behavioral Economics	*2025*
PUBLICATIONS	"The Rise and Rise of Women's Employment in the UK," (with Barra Roantree). IFS Briefing Note BN234, April 2018.	

RESEARCH PAPERS

"Friends in Higher Places: Social Fit and University Choice" (with Nagisa Tadjfar). (Job Market Paper)

Elite university access is highly unequal. Low-income students are less likely to apply to and attend than equally qualified high-income peers. Using UK administrative data, we exploit "breakthrough" events when a school first sends a student to a top university. Applications from that school to that university subsequently rise by 30%. Students induced into elite universities by a breakthrough are lower-income, but graduate at typical rates. Access induced by breakthroughs promotes upward mobility: marginal entrants earn £4,000 more annually than matched control students. Why were these students not applying previously? Using a field experiment in British schools, we show that the primary barrier is students' beliefs about social fit at top universities rather than beliefs about admissions chances or success at university. At baseline, low-income students are more pessimistic about their chances of fitting in at an elite university, but not about their chances of admission or graduation. Students randomly assigned to view short videos of undergraduates discussing their experiences are 6 percentage points more likely to apply to the speaker's university. While students' expectations of fitting in and making friends shift, beliefs about admission chances or graduation do not. Students randomly matched with mentors primarily discuss social life at university, and the most important factor participants raise with mentors is whether they would fit in and enjoy their time. Our findings highlight perceptions of the social environment at elite universities as a central barrier and

illustrate how scalable interventions can promote social mobility.

"Prediction or prejudice? Standardized testing and university access" (with Nagisa Tadjfar)
The use of screening algorithms such as standardized testing in university admissions is widely criticized for benefiting wealthy students and not accurately capturing the potential of low-income students. Does standardized testing inhibit opportunity? Our paper answers this question using a staggered elimination of pre-university testing requirements in favor of teacher-assigned grades in the UK. First, we find that low-income students become 3pp more likely to attend university, while enrollment among high-income students is unchanged. However, only 1 in 3 of these marginal students graduates on time. Despite this low graduation rate, students shifted into university see large private returns: they begin their careers at better firms and gain £50k—£100k in lifetime earnings, net of tuition fees. Second, we see upstream shifts beyond the university enrollment margin — affected low-income students are more likely to take academic-track subjects in high school and apply to university. Third, we show that standardized tests in our setting exhibit no calibration bias against low-income students, whereas teacher grades favor them. Taken together, our results indicate that switching from tests to teacher grades can expand opportunity for disadvantaged students even in the absence of calibration bias in tests. Our findings suggest that reducing testing barriers expanded educational investment earlier in the pipeline and delivered substantial long-run gains for marginal entrants.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

"On One Condition: The Welfare Effects of Unraveling in the UK College Admissions System" (with Phi Adajar and Nagisa Tadjfar)
The mid-2010s saw a rapid proliferation of offers to UK universities in which students were admitted regardless of their end-of-school test results, effectively shifting risk from students to universities. In this paper, we seek to understand the nature of this unraveling, with a focus towards universities' incentives and the effects on students' short- and long-term welfare using data from all UK college applications from 2012 to 2021. We find that these "unconditional offers" were given by lower-ranked universities and targeted towards higher-achieving students. Students with an unconditional offer are 4.5pp less likely to attend their top offer. This is consistent with students being shifted into lower-ranking universities and becoming "undermatched". Simultaneously, college attendance increases; students with an unconditional offer are 12.4pp more likely to be matched to a college when compared to students with similar test scores and teacher evaluations. On the university side, these unconditional offers improve university yields and student composition, and correlational evidence shows that a university's adoption of unconditional offers occurs in response to its competitors doing the same. We

estimate a structural model of university offers to evaluate the nature of this competitive response and the implications for student welfare.

"Heterogeneity in Intertemporal Substitution: Evidence from $2 Trillion in Retirement Subsidies" (with Taha Choukhmane, Cormac O'Dea, Jonathan Rothbaum, and Lawrence Schmidt)
The elasticity of intertemporal substitution is a key parameter in models in macroeconomics and public finance, but credible estimates of this parameter require exogenous variation in the intertemporal price of consumption. We use variation in the formula by which employers match their employees' retirement savings contributions in the United States to credibly estimate this parameter jointly with inertia in savings contributions. We link administrative data on earnings and retirement plan contributions for the US population with data on the retirement savings policies at over 100,000 firms. We make use of bunching at kink points in the budget set induced by employer matching, employee responses to moves across firms, employee responses to within-firm plan changes, and responses to automatic enrollment policies to separately identify inertia, risk aversion, and the elasticity of intertemporal substitution. We develop a life-cycle model to exploit these different sources of quasi-experimental variation to estimate the level and heterogeneity in the elasticity of intertemporal substitution across the population.