

Social inequalities in education and the graduate labour market

- Institutional factors shape the way in which social inequalities are reproduced in education and the labour market
- Differentiation of curriculum and institutions are important factors in explaining the lower chances of entering HE among young people from lower social backgrounds
- High competition among graduates and weak links between higher education and the labour market in the UK provide space for social inequalities to emerge
- Policies aimed to widening access to HE need to address these structural issues

Summary

Findings from a number of recent AQMeN studies have shown that institutional factors i.e. school subject choice, differentiation of higher education (HE) institutions and degree of linkages between education and the labour market, play a key role in the educational and labour market outcomes for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In a study comparing the school and HE systems in Scotland and Ireland, AQMeN researchers found that there are significant social inequalities in access to Higher Education in both countries. However, the importance of subject choice in reproducing these inequalities varies in the two countries. **Researchers found that social inequalities in entry to HE are mostly explained by subject choice in Scotland. This is because, despite a largely comprehensive secondary system, young people from less advantaged social backgrounds are less likely to choose academic subjects that facilitate entry into HE.** By contrast, social inequalities are more strongly associated with academic performance in Ireland. It was also found that patterns of social inequality and the role of school subject choice varies by type of HE institution both in Scotland and Ireland: subject choices mattered more for entering prestigious universities than for entering other institutions.

AQMeN research has highlighted that education systems, such as the Scottish system, which allow flexibility in curriculum choices, offer another avenue for social inequalities to emerge because more socially advantaged parents have more information and resources for ensuring that their children make the best decisions leading to higher educational attainment and better jobs. This is especially true when HE institutions put a lot of emphasis on subjects as a

way of selecting people. **The researchers commented that choices are not inherently bad for equality of educational opportunities but they require careful management to ensure that they do not disadvantage pupils from a poor background.**

Comparative research looking at the UK and Germany found that graduates from advantaged social backgrounds are more likely to enter top-level occupations than graduates from less advantaged social backgrounds. This relationship has been found to be stronger in the UK than in Germany.

AQMeN researchers have argued that the higher competition among graduates and the lack of tight links between higher education qualifications and occupations in the UK leave more space for social inequalities to emerge, especially at the time of labour market entry.

Indeed, while graduates' differences in their first job are fully explained by the choice of field of study and HE institution attended in Germany, a considerable socio-economic gap remains unexplained in the UK. However, five years after graduation, differences among graduates from different parental backgrounds do not significantly differ in the UK once taking into account differences in HE experiences.

Background/Underpinning research

The research was conducted using a variety of both national and international data sets. The work on subject choices and HE entry was based on the *Scottish and Irish School Leavers Surveys* which covered the years between the end of the 1980s and the early years of the 2000s. The study on graduates'

occupations used data from *The flexible professional in the knowledge society* (REFLEX) which provided information on graduates' first job and their occupation 5 years after graduation. The techniques of data analysis included logistic regression models with the estimation of average marginal effects (AMEs) and linear probability models.

Impact

The findings have generated considerable interest in the spheres of both policy and practice and the evidence was fed into the recommendations of the Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access in 2015.

Throughout 2015 and early 2016, the research team, led by Professor Cristina Iannelli, held a number of dissemination events to share their findings with practitioners and policy makers.

This included an ESRC Festival of Social Science event, which involved several members of the Scottish Government Commission on Widening Access (COWA) as speakers and panellists, a series of targeted knowledge exchange events and a private meeting with representatives of the Scottish Government Directorate for Learning.

Iannelli and colleagues submitted written evidence to the Scottish Government Consultation on Widening Access in 2015 and Iannelli and Professor Lindsay Paterson have subsequently given oral evidence and attended private meetings with members of the Commission to discuss their findings. **Both the interim and final reports from the Commission on Widening Access cited Iannelli's findings regarding the role of subject choice.**

AQMeN also hosted an event with the Scottish Government Educational Analysis Division in June 2015 which brought government analysts and AQMeN researchers together to present on and discuss the future of education data in Scotland.

Next Steps

Engagement with representatives from policy and practice will continue through the organisation of dissemination activities to share our most recent research on inequalities in post-school destinations, in graduates' geographical mobility and in the labour market trajectories followed after leaving HE. In particular, we aim to continue providing research evidence to support the work of the newly appointed Commissioner for Fair Access, Professor Peter Scott, and the Scottish Government Cross-departmental Group on Inequality.

"This AQMeN research will help us greatly in thinking about how we deal with the needs of young people from different backgrounds and how we ensure they get a chance to maximise their potential to enable them to attend Higher Education if that's what they wish to do."

Dr Audrey MacDougall, Chief Researcher and Head of Education Analytical Services Division, The Scottish Government

Find out more about the AQMeN Education and Social Stratification research mentioned in this case study:

AQMeN research briefing 6: *Degrees of difference: Social inequalities in graduates' job opportunities in the UK and Germany*
Cristina Iannelli and Markus Klein <http://www.aqmen.ac.uk/RB6/Inequalitiesingraduatejobs>

AQMeN research briefing 7: *Subject choice and inequalities in access to Higher Education: Comparing Scotland and Ireland*
Cristina Iannelli and Markus Klein <http://www.aqmen.ac.uk/RB7/Subjectchoiceandinequalities>

Iannelli, C., Smyth, E. and Klein, M. (2016) 'Curriculum Differentiation and Social Inequality in Higher Education Entry in Scotland and Ireland', *British Educational Research Journal*. 42(4): 561–581.

Jacob, M., Klein, M. and Iannelli C. (2015) 'The Impact of Social Origin on Graduates' Early Occupational Destinations – An Anglo-German Comparison', *European Sociological Review*, 31 (4): 460-476.

For more information visit www.aqmen.ac.uk/research/education or email info@aqmen.ac.uk