

Does Education Promote Social Mobility?

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There has been a significant increase in participation in education in Scotland over the past half century. The question remains, however, whether this expansion has helped to reduce social inequalities in educational attainment and contributed to greater social mobility. Many studies have shown that education and the acquisition of educational qualifications are important means through which middle class families pass on their social and economic advantage to their children. In these circumstances, education, rather than promoting greater social mobility, may in fact reduce it. This *Briefing* considers these issues, drawing on the main findings from the ESRC-funded research project “Education and Social Mobility in Scotland since the Middle of the 20th Century”.

- ▶ Educational attainment has increased among all social classes in Scotland over the past half century. Nevertheless, social class differences in educational attainment have not significantly reduced.
- ▶ Education explains part of the relationship between parental social class and individuals’ own social class but not all. There is still a strong direct effect of parental class on individuals’ achieved class that is not mediated by education.
- ▶ The relation between family background and the chances of gaining a degree or sub-degree changed over time for women but not for men. This may be linked to institutional changes within the tertiary sector which may have affected women more than men.
- ▶ Among people who gained upper-secondary or tertiary qualifications, their parental social class was less of a factor in determining their entry to higher social class positions than among less educated people.
- ▶ Overall the expansion of professional jobs together with the expansion of education has led more people from working class backgrounds to occupy top-level occupations but this has not reduced the gap between social classes in the chances of entering top-level occupations.

Introduction

The role of education in promoting social mobility is among the central issues in contemporary sociological and political debate. In modern societies, education has become an increasingly important factor in determining which jobs people enter and in determining their social class position. This has led some scholars to believe in the advent of open and meritocratic societies but the empirical evidence has cast doubts on this. In many countries the relationship between family background (ie social origins) and educational opportunity is still strong: people from more advantaged social classes have higher chances of embarking on a long educational career and gaining higher level qualifications than those from less advantaged classes (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). The acquisition of higher educational qualifications results in a clear advantage when they enter the labour market. Indeed, education has been found to be a crucial intervening link between the social background of individuals and their later class destination (Müller and Shavit, 1998), and this may reinforce social inequalities and reduce social mobility.

Educational institutions and their admission, selection and certification processes may play a significant role in reducing or maintaining social inequalities. Over the last century Scotland has experienced very important and radical changes in its education system which have marked the transition from a selective system to a comprehensive one. Much research has shown the positive effect of the introduction of the comprehensive system in Scotland in reducing social inequalities in education (McPherson and Willms, 1987; Gamoran, 1996; Croxford, 2001). These studies, however, do not tackle the issue of whether the reduction in educational inequalities has brought any reduction of inequalities in individuals' subsequent occupational outcomes.

The research presented here examines the link between parental social class (ie individuals' social class of origin), educational attainment and individuals' own class position (ie class of destination). It analyses whether educational expansion and the development of a comprehensive educational system have reduced inequalities and led to greater social fluidity. The key questions are:

- Has the association between class of origin and education changed over time?
- To what extent is the association between class of origin and destination mediated through education? And has the intermediary role of education increased or decreased over time?

We used data from the 2001 Scottish Household Survey and we selected four birth-cohorts in relation to different periods of educational reforms but also to changing labour market opportunities. For the purpose of this study the main interest is in changes which may

have occurred between the two oldest birth-cohorts (1937-46 and 1947-56) who experienced a selective education system, and the two youngest birth-cohorts (1957-66 and 1967-76) who experienced a comprehensive education system.

Educational expansion

As is well documented by official statistics, educational attainment has grown considerably over time. In our sample the percentage of people who did not acquire any qualification has sharply declined from 40% in the oldest cohort to 12% in the youngest cohort (table 1). With the exception of the youngest cohort, a decline is also visible in the percentage of those who achieved lower-secondary education (O grades and Standard grades and similar qualifications). On the other hand, the proportions of people acquiring the highest educational qualifications have increased remarkably. Thus, the percentage of people with degrees has risen from 15% to 26%.

Table 1: Educational attainment by birth-cohort (percentages)

	Birth-cohorts			
	1937-1946	1947-1956	1957-1966	1967-1976
No qualification	39.6	24.2	19.0	11.9
Lower-secondary	28.3	25.4	23.8	26.9
Upper-secondary	13.0	18.9	23.5	23.0
Sub-degree	3.8	7.1	9.2	12.1
Degree	15.2	24.4	24.4	26.2
<i>No of cases (unweighted)</i>	<i>2088</i>	<i>2303</i>	<i>2701</i>	<i>2363</i>

Source: 2001 Scottish Household Survey

Social class of origin and educational attainment

Social class differences in educational attainment are striking (table 2). Among people from an unskilled manual background, more than 1 in 3 people aged 25-64 had no qualifications, compared to 1 in 16 of those from a professional and managerial social class. On the other hand, almost half of the people with parents in professional and managerial occupations attained a degree compared to 1 in 12 people with parents in unskilled manual occupations.

Over time there has been an increase in the proportions of people from all social classes of origin who reached the highest educational qualifications (that is upper-secondary and tertiary education). However, further analysis, which focused on changes in the association between social class of origin and educational attainment, showed that class differences have not significantly changed over time. This means that nowadays people from middle class families are still significantly more likely to gain an upper-secondary qualification or a degree than people from working class families. Overall, the gap has not changed: educational expansion has benefited all social classes equally without reducing social inequalities.

Table 2: Educational attainment by class of origin (people aged 25-64) (percentages)

	Class of origin				
	Profes/ Manag	Rout non-man	Petty Bourg	Skilled Man	Unskil Man
No qualification	6.0	13.5	19.5	25.8	37.1
Lower-sec	16.0	25.8	25.9	28.9	31.8
Upper-sec	20.2	25.1	21.4	21.3	17.0
Sub-degree	10.6	9.2	8.6	8.1	5.7
Degree	47.2	26.3	24.7	15.9	8.4
No. of cases (unweighted)	1980	1285	784	1904	2346

Source: 2001 Scottish Household Survey.

Note: The class schema used in this study is a reduced form of the EGP 7-class schema (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 38-9).

We found, however, an interesting gender difference in relation to tertiary education. The relationship between individuals' social class of origin and the two types of tertiary education (sub-degree and degree) has changed over time for women but not for men. The differences in the chances between women from professional families and women from non-skilled manual backgrounds of gaining a degree reduced in certain cohorts but increased in others. However, the social class inequalities among women in the odds of gaining a sub-degree level of education increase in the cohorts in which there is a decline in social inequalities at degree level. This may be due to the fact that the different phases through which the non-university sector passed (such as the expansion in the 1980s and the increase in the proportions of degrees awarded) have affected women to a larger extent than men. This is because women (especially from working class origins) were more likely to attend the non-university sector than men. It may also have been because girls of all classes benefited from the introduction of comprehensive secondary education, so that working-class girls benefited more from this reform than working-class boys (Croxford, 1994; McPherson and Willms, 1987).

The limits of education as a mediating factor

To what extent does education mediate the relationship between the individuals' social class of origin and their current social class position? Our analyses showed that education plays an intermediary role between origin and destination but it does not account for most of the association between class of origin and class of destination. The effect of individuals' social class background on entry into the professional and managerial social classes is strong and significant. The highest educational attainment of people originating from middle class families only explains part, not all, of their advantage in entering occupations with the greatest prestige. This means that there is still a strong direct effect of social class of origin on people's class of destination - even after taking educational attainment into account.

The analysis of the trends in the intermediary role of education showed that, over time, class effects have been increasingly mediated by educational attainment but this trend seems to have stopped in the youngest cohorts. Thus, for entry to the professional class, we found that the intermediary role of education grew from the first cohort to the second cohort but then fell in the final cohorts (table 3). In light of these results we could say that apparently meritocratic recruitment to the professional and managerial classes (in the sense of being based on acquired credentials) may indeed have been growing for people entering the labour market between the 1950s and the 1980s but we might now be seeing a reduction in this.

Table 3: The extent to which education explains the relationship between parental social class and individuals' chances of entering professional/managerial social class (vs unskilled manual class)

Class of origin	Cohort 1937/46	Cohort 1947/56	Cohort 1957/66	Cohort 1967/76
Professional/ managerial	57%	65%	61%	52%
Routine non- manual	42%	45%	39%	32%

Furthermore, the association between parental social class and class of destination is weaker for more highly educated people than for less educated people. This means that, once a person has reached an upper secondary or tertiary qualification, the effect of social class of origin is less important in determining their later social class than for a person who had no qualification or only compulsory education. The same result can be interpreted in a different way: if middle class children do not reach the highest educational qualifications, they have other family resources (eg financial support or social networks) that enables them to maintain their social class of origin.

Conclusions

The findings presented must be read in conjunction with those which relate to the general patterns of social mobility (presented in the Briefing 33, May 2005). In line with studies in other countries, we found in our previous work that the second half of the 20th century was characterised by high absolute rates of mobility which were driven by structural change in the labour market, most notably the expansion of professional occupations. The expansion of professional jobs and the contraction of manual jobs, together with educational expansion and comprehensive reforms, have enabled a large number of working class children to enter professional and managerial occupations. Education has facilitated upward mobility. However, education has not increased social fluidity: that is, it has not reduced the gap between social classes in the chances of entering the top-level occupations. This is because the highest social classes continue to maintain

an advantage in the acquisition of the highest educational credentials. The two most recent cohorts in our dataset have witnessed a halt in upward mobility; this has been led by a stagnation in the number of professional and managerial occupations available and by a “natural” limit reached in the possibility of being upwardly mobile, given that their parents have already reached, to an unprecedented extent, the top of the class ladder.

There are two possible scenarios for the future. One is that educational expansion continues so that inequalities do start to fall significantly. This would happen if attainment among the most advantaged classes reached a plateau with little room for any further rise. So any overall expansion in education at this level would be likely to benefit people of lower class origins disproportionately, and hence inequality would fall. If recruitment into the labour market remains broadly meritocratic, then that would, in due course, lead to an increase in social fluidity.

That would be the optimistic scenario. The pessimistic one would concern what might happen to educational policy in these same circumstances. There might also be political pressure to differentiate attainment at the top end. An example of this would be differentiating between the status of particular higher education institutions, perhaps by charging differential fees: the best labour market rewards might then go to graduates from the highest-status universities, populated by the most middle-class students. In such circumstances, social fluidity would at best remain unchanged and could start to worsen for the first time in at least half a century.

References

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Further Readings

Iannelli, C and Paterson, L. (2004) Education and Social Mobility in Scotland, Working Paper 5, Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

Further information

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About this study

This research draws on work conducted as part of the ESRC-funded project *Education and Social Mobility in Scotland in the 20th Century* (www.ces.ed.ac.uk/SocMobility/mobility.htm). The project uses the new data on social background collected in the 2001 Scottish Household Survey (funded by the Scottish Executive and the British Academy), and other survey data including the Scottish enhanced sample of the British Household Panel Study (1999), and the Scottish Mobility Survey of 1974. The research analyses trends in the rate and patterns of social mobility, gender and religious differences in these patterns, and the effects of institutional (especially educational) changes on the processes of social mobility during the 20th century.

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