



For immediate release
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Young people from poorer backgrounds are missing out on a secure future

Research by The University of Edinburgh has shown that social background is an important factor in preventing young people from entering higher education and finding a professional or senior managerial job.

Addressing the stark inequalities in access to higher education (in Scotland) is the key aim of the new Scottish Government Commission on Widening Access, chaired by Dame Ruth Silver. The remit of the Commission, which was set up in June this year, is to ensure equality of access to higher education for all children in Scotland and to understand the barriers that currently stand in their way.

“The need to tackle this issue has never been so important and now, through the remit of the Commission on Widening Access, is Scotland’s time to really address it and make a real difference for (the life chances of) our future generations. I am so grateful to the work of experienced researchers within the sector for their knowledge and insight into the reasons behind these inequalities and the impact of differentiation,” says Dame Ruth Silver.

This renewed focus on widening access has been widely welcomed in light of the recent research at The University of Edinburgh – which shows that social background is a critical factor. The study found that inequalities emerge at several crucial points in a young person’s life, from entry into higher education through to securing a professional career.

“Higher education provides a route into highly paid and secure jobs, but many young people from deprived backgrounds are missing out by not getting to university,” says Professor Cristina Iannelli, Co-Director of the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) research centre at The University of Edinburgh.

In many countries curriculum choices have a marked influence on young people’s future prospects. In a comparative study of the education systems in Ireland and Scotland, Professor Iannelli and Dr Markus Klein, in collaboration with Professor Emer Smyth (the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin), found that social inequalities in entry to higher education in Scotland are mostly explained by subject choice. By contrast, in Ireland they are more strongly associated with academic performance.

“This is because under the Scottish system young people can opt to take fewer academic subjects at upper secondary school, thereby effectively excluding themselves from higher education, especially at the most prestigious universities. In Ireland, young people have more restricted choices, so those who gain access to college and university are therefore those with the best exam results. The findings also show that the patterns of inequality vary according to the type of educational institution,” says Professor Smyth.

These findings will be shared at an all-day [event](#) organised as part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science on Wednesday 11 November in Edinburgh. **There are places still available at this free event which is open to the public. Visit <http://bit.ly/AQMENFOSS2015> to register.**

This important event, which will be opened by Dame Ruth Silver, will bring together policymakers, academics and representatives from the education sectors in the UK, Germany, Ireland and the US to discuss how the structure of the education system, curriculum content and the timing and nature of subject choices can influence social inequality in different national contexts. “Understanding the relevance of these institutional factors is an essential step towards designing suitable policy interventions,” says Professor Cristina Iannelli.

“As a Commission we also have so much to learn from the excellent initiatives that are already in place in Scotland and from the work and research by our other home nations in

the UK and our international colleagues. This event is an excellent opportunity to explore those issues with the professionals in the field,” says Dame Ruth Silver.

In another study comparing graduate labour markets in the UK and Germany, Professor Cristina Iannelli, Dr Markus Klein and Professor Marita Jacob from Cologne University found that graduates’ chances of securing professional or managerial positions in their first job were more dependent on their social background in the UK than in Germany. This is partly due to different higher education choices or experiences, but the research concludes that significant social inequalities still remain among UK graduates.

The researchers argue that the greater expansion of the higher education sector and the lack of a close connection between university qualifications and the requirements of the labour market in the UK can leave room for inequalities to emerge after graduation: ‘In a competitive market graduates’ families may have useful networks as well as social skills that help more privileged children on to the employment ladder,’ says Professor Iannelli.

The study calls for stronger links between educational qualifications and jobs, and warns that ‘policies in the UK promoting the expansion of higher education to more disadvantaged groups may not be enough to promote social mobility if the job market does not operate on a purely meritocratic basis.’

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Notes for editors

1. The 13th annual Festival of Social Science takes place 7-14 November 2015 with over 200 free events nationwide. Run by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Festival provides an opportunity for anyone to meet with some of the country’s leading social scientists and discover, discuss and debate the role that research plays in everyday life. With a whole range of creative and engaging events there’s something for everyone including businesses, charities, schools and

government agencies. A full programme is available at www.esrc.ac.uk/festival. You can also join the discussion on Twitter using #esrcfestival. Logos for the festival can be downloaded here: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/public-engagement/festival-of-social-science/organise-an-event/>

2. The research findings will be shared at an event, [Social inequalities in higher education](#), on Wednesday 11 November hosted by [AQMeN](#) (The Applied Quantitative Methods Network) from 9am – 4.30pm at the Royal College of Physicians, 9 Queen Street, Edinburgh. To find out more and register visit <http://bit.ly/AQMENFOSS2015>

3. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest funder of research on the social and economic questions facing us today. It supports the development and training of the UK's future social scientists and also funds major studies that provide the infrastructure for research. ESRC-funded research informs policymakers and practitioners and helps make businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective. The ESRC also works collaboratively with six other UK research councils and Innovate UK to fund cross-disciplinary research and innovation addressing major societal challenges. The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government. In 2015 it celebrates its 50th anniversary. <http://www.esrc.ac.uk>