

Expansion and Social Selection in Education in England and Scotland

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There is little controversy in the educational and sociological literature over the fact that individuals' educational achievement is still shaped by the family in which they grow up. However, it is still widely debated whether the expansion of education, which has characterised all modern societies, has brought about a reduction of social class inequality or has simply moved the inequality to a higher level.

This paper examined trends in social class inequalities in young people's educational attainment and higher education entry between the mid-1980s and the end of the 1990s in England and Scotland. Using time-series data derived from the Scottish School Leavers Surveys and the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study, changes in both absolute and relative social class differences within and across the two countries were analysed through a series of ordered logit models. The use of these models allowed us to estimate the effect of social class of origin on educational inequalities independently of the marginal distribution of education.

Since education participation rates are different (higher) in Scotland than in England, the ordered logit models enabled us to measure country differences in social class inequalities independently from these differences. Separate ordered logit models for each year and each country were also run to analyse both the expansion of education and changes in social class inequalities within each country. In these analyses changes in the thresholds captured the structural education changes which affected all social classes (absolute changes in participation), while changes in the coefficients of social class of origin measured real changes in social class inequalities (relative changes).

The results, presented in the table below, showed that young people from all social classes, but in particular from a middle class background, were more likely to reach higher levels of education in Scotland than in England. However, social class inequalities were found to be higher in Scotland than in England. Furthermore, trends in social class inequalities were different in England and Scotland. While in England social class

inequalities at A-level and higher-education level declined over time, in Scotland no evidence of such trend was found.

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>England</i> (ref. Scotland)	-0.43 (0.01)	-0.62 (0.02)
<i>Class of origin</i> (ref. service class)		
Intermediate	-0.80 (0.01)	-0.94 (0.03)
Working	-1.59 (0.01)	-1.86 (0.03)
Unclassified	-1.69 (0.02)	-2.12 (0.05)
<i>Country interactions</i>		
England*Intermediate		0.17 (0.03)
England*Working		0.39 (0.03)
England*Unclassified		0.61 (0.05)
<i>Thresholds</i>		
t1	-4.30 (0.02)	-4.44 (0.02)
t2	-2.92 (0.01)	-3.06 (0.02)
t3	-1.13 (0.01)	-1.28 (0.02)
t4	-0.04 (0.01)	-0.19 (0.02)
-2Loglikelihood	1453.147	1294.105

The thresholds refer to the different levels of educational attainment (the ordinal dependent variable), from the lowest (no qualification) to the highest (higher education entry).

Levels of inequalities declined at compulsory level in Scotland but this reduction was not carried over at the following educational stages. The conclusions highlighted that possible explanations for these patterns reside in the different features of the two education systems and in the remarkable educational success of the Scottish middle class. The education system in Scotland favoured a large expansion in educational participation which benefited all social classes bringing many young people, irrespective of their social background, into the higher levels of education.

However, social class inequalities remained larger (and steady) in Scotland due to the consistently higher proportions of middle class people who achieved upper-secondary qualifications and entered higher education than in England. Explaining the reasons why the Scottish middle class invest more in the education of their children than their English counterparts could be the subject for future research.

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Original article: Iannelli, Cristina (2008) 'Expansion and Social Selection in Education in England and Scotland', *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(2): 179-202.