



ESRI Research Bulletin

*Higher education selection:
implications for social inequality*

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Higher education selection: implications for social inequality¹

***Emer Smyth, Cristina Iannelli, Markus Klein**

INTRODUCTION

Supporting the transition from school to higher education (HE) has been a focus of the Irish educational policy agenda in recent years, with changes in the nature of Leaving Certificate grading and many HE institutions moving to more general entry routes (rather than highly specialised courses). How best to select students for different courses and institutions is an important dimension of this debate. This bulletin documents new analyses which use the different approaches to HE selection in Ireland and Scotland to yield insights into this important policy issue. The findings are based on data from the Irish and Scottish School Leaver Surveys over the period 1987 to 2005. The subsequent discontinuation of both national surveys means that we cannot analyse patterns over the past decade. However, while the level of participation of different social groups will have changed, the underlying social processes are unlikely to have altered fundamentally.

COMPARING IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

Ireland and Scotland provide interesting bases for comparison, differing in both the structure of upper secondary education and in the selection mechanisms used for HE entry. At upper secondary (Highers) level in Scotland, there are no compulsory subjects and no restriction on the number of subjects taken, with the average being five. The application process for HE entry is centralised through the UCAS system but each university independently selects its students, taking into account their grades and, for entry to certain disciplines, also the subjects taken. The more élite, 'ancient' universities have identified eight academic subjects ('facilitating subjects' such as English, Maths, History, Physics) which they require or prefer in determining access to their institutions. In contrast, in Ireland students are de facto required to take three subjects (Irish, English and Maths) and generally take three or four other subjects for the Leaving Certificate. As in Scotland, entry to HE is centralised (through the CAO system) but admission is based on grades in the best six exam subjects, with subject choice playing only a minor role. As a consequence of these institutional structures, the number of 'facilitating subjects' taken varies significantly by social class background in Scotland. In contrast, in Ireland only relatively minor class differences are found

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in the number of ‘facilitating’ academic subjects taken, although there is some social class variation in the take-up of individual subjects.

ANALYSES

Multivariate analyses were used to explore the size of the social gap (that is, the difference between upper middle-class and working-class young people) in HE entry in both countries over time. These analyses looked at the gross social gap, then at the gap net of subject choices, and finally the gap net of subject choices and grades. This allowed us to examine the extent to which social inequality in HE entry was due to the subjects taken and/or the grades received at the end of upper secondary education. Subject choice at upper secondary level explained more of the social gap in HE entry in Scotland than in Ireland while the grades achieved explained more of the social gap in Ireland than in Scotland. By 2005, differences in grades and subject choices accounted for all of the gap in HE entry rates between upper middle-class and working-class young people in Ireland and Scotland.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The comparison of the Irish and Scottish systems illustrates the unintended consequences of different choice structures and entry mechanisms for equality of access to higher education. A number of Irish commentators have called for more prescriptive subject requirements for HE courses because of the variation in the subject knowledge young people bring to their third-level courses. However, the Scottish example points to the potential implications of such a measure for social inequality. Middle-class young people whose families have greater insider knowledge of the educational system are more likely to choose the subjects which lead them to valued pathways while working-class young people are more dependent on school-based guidance, which has been affected by changes in funding levels. More prescriptive subject requirements for HE entry may improve ‘preparation’, though this could and should be empirically tested, but this may be at the expense of reducing access for those young people who have taken the ‘wrong’ courses or changed their minds about their career direction over the course of senior cycle.