

Middle class benefits the most from post-1992 university expansion

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Initiatives by successive governments to provide better access to higher education for young people from less-privileged backgrounds have failed according to Understanding Society, the world's largest longitudinal study. Findings show just a five per cent increase in degrees among children of routine and manual workers.

An analysis of the social backgrounds of almost 34,000 [adults](#) between the ages of 22-49, compiled by the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex, reveal that it is the children of the middle classes, and not the working classes, that have benefited the most from the expansion of higher education over the last 15 years.

Using new research from Understanding Society, a [longitudinal study](#) of 40,000 UK households, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), researchers examined two [age groups](#) within the study. Amongst 37-49 year olds, just over a quarter hold a degree; for the post-expansion generation, 22-34 year olds, over a third of this generation have a first degree – a rise between the two age groups of 8.6 per cent. However, an analysis of the socio-economic background of the respondents – measured as their parent's occupation at age 14 - reveals that this increase is not evenly distributed across social classes. It finds:

- For those with parents who held 'managerial and professional' jobs when the respondent was 14, the rise in participation in higher education is 10 per cent

- For those with parents who had 'intermediate occupations' (typically clerical and sales jobs or those running small businesses) the increase in the proportion with a degree shown between the two age groups is over 11 per cent
- For those whose parents that hold 'routine and manual occupations', the growth in the proportion with a degree is only five per cent.

It is the children of white collar workers that account for the major increase in people attending university in recent years. These are children of school teachers, nurses, administrative grade civil service jobs and high level technicians – jobs which did not require a degree 20 to 30 years ago but which are now regarded as graduate or middle class jobs.

One of the co-authors of the study, Professor Peter Elias, from the University of Warwick, comments: "The findings reflect in part the restructuring of the UK economy over the last 40 years, which has seen a decline in manual occupations and an increase in white collar jobs. Nonetheless, given the remarkable increase in the participation of young people in higher education that has taken place over the last 20 years, the brief analysis presented here reveals little evidence that the much vaunted policy ambition - to provide better access to [higher education](#) to those from less privileged backgrounds - has been successful."

More information: Peter Elias is a Professor at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick. He has acted as the Strategic Advisor for Data Resources to the ESRC since 2004. The findings above are taken from the article 'Higher Education and Social background' from 'Understanding Society: Findings 2012'.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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