

Educational Expansion and Social Class Differentials

Abstract

The past decade has seen an enormous expansion of further and higher education, and an increase in the proportion of students achieving school level qualifications. We examine the impact of this educational expansion on levels of social class and gender differentials in educational attainment and participation, using the Youth Cohort Study data for the period 1991-2000. At GCSE level, there has been a general trend for the percentage point gap in social class inequalities to decrease as overall levels of attainment have increased. However, increased participation in Higher Education has not led to any reduction in social class inequalities in participation rates. Overall, class differentials at any given level tend to diminish only when middle class attainment approaches saturation.

Full paper

In many ways, the Labour government elected in 1997 and re-elected in 2001 did not make a sharp break with the education policies of the previous Conservative administration (Jones, 2003). Many key policies represent continuity with the previous regime. Labour has maintained the focus on 'standards' and testing, extended targets for the expansion of further and higher education, and continued the promotion of selection and diversity in secondary schooling. However, other aspects of government policy do represent a break from the past. Education Maintenance Allowances, promote participation in further education for students from low-income families. Initiatives such as Sure Start, and Excellence in Cities are focused on disadvantaged areas. In addition, economic policies focused on reducing income inequality, and in particular those targeted at low-income parents, may be expected to have an impact on class inequalities in educational attainment. However, this paper will focus on the impact of policies of educational expansion, by which we mean the expansion of credentials awarded as well as the expansion of educational participation.

Educational expansion is generally seen as progressive, and as providing opportunities for groups of people who were previously excluded from educational participation. However, it is well documented that increased overall rates of educational participation do not necessarily lead to a reduction in the social class differential in participation (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). The gap between social classes can be expected to increase in the early stages of expansion, as the middle classes are able to take up the new opportunities at a faster rate. However, as the middle classes approach saturation point, the increase in their rate of participation will slow, allowing the working classes to catch up (Boudon, 1974). It has been pointed out that this process allows inequalities to be not so much reduced as displaced (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer, 2000, 2001). Education is a positional good, and as basic levels of educational attainment become near-universal, the real competition is pushed upwards to higher levels of qualification, where we can expect the class gap to be wider. For example, in the US, where a high proportion of the population attains undergraduate degrees, demand for post-graduate education has increased correspondingly. In a situation of educational expansion, inequalities are also likely to be expressed through greater differentiation at any given educational level. In this situation, factors such as institutional prestige and field of study become increasingly important (Van de Werfhorst and Kraaykamp, 2001). For example, if an increasing proportion of people are getting university degrees, it becomes correspondingly more important where one's degree is from, and what it is in.

Standards and Testing

'Zero tolerance of underperformance.' (Labour Manifesto 1997)

Labour has extended the national curriculum, introducing national literacy and numeracy strategies. The 'key stage' testing introduced by the 1988 Education Act has been extended. Schools have been asked to meet ambitious targets for improved performance at each key stage.

Although the drive for higher standards applies across the ability distribution, a key aim is to deal with Britain's 'long tail' of low achievement by raising standards at the bottom end of the distribution (DfES, 2001). For example, the literacy and numeracy strategies are aimed at achieving the necessary basic skills for all children. At GCSE level, the aim has been to dramatically increase the number of students gaining the 'benchmark' of 5 A*-C grades. To the extent that such initiatives are successful in raising performance at the bottom of the distribution more than it is raised at the top, we may expect social class inequalities to be reduced as a result. In addition, if teachers have an incentive to maximise the number of students they can push over a certain level (e.g. the 5 A*-C benchmark), it is possible that this will have a greater effect on those students whom teachers have previously had lower expectations for. This could potentially benefit working class students. However, as 'borderline' students benefit, students who are considered unlikely to make the A-C grade may be neglected (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

Schooling and Differentiation

'Every secondary school with a distinct ethos, mission and centre of excellence.' (Labour Party Manifesto 2001, p.17).

The expansion of educational credentials has been accompanied by increased differentiation of educational provision within the state sector.

David Blunkett famously promised at the 1995 Labour Party conference: "Read my lips: no selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government." The promise was later broken, and comprehensive schools dismissed as 'monolithic'¹, 'bog-standard'² and 'one size fits all'³. Diversity of provision and selectivity are now central to Labour policy on secondary schools, with the promotion of Beacon Schools, City Academies, specialist schools and faith schools. Specialist schools may specialise in technology, the arts, sport or foreign languages, and are able to select 10 per cent of their intake by examination and/or interview. It is envisaged that all secondary schools will become specialist. This attack on the comprehensive principle has led to concern that schools will become less socially and ethnically mixed, and social class inequalities will be exacerbated. New Labour has not favoured a return to the 11+, but has introduced a system of selection which, being more arbitrary and less meritocratic than the 11+, may be easier for middle class parents to manipulate.

Selection within schools is also being promoted. All schools are now required to identify 5-10 per cent of their pupils as 'gifted and talented'. (The language used is telling – the term gifted means 'endowed with *natural* talent or aptitude'. Whereas abilities may be acquired, giftedness is innate). The selected students are provided with a distinct programme by the school. The students are identified as 'gifted and talented' through a combination of test performance and teachers' subjective perceptions, and teachers are required to identify some 'gifted' students who are currently 'underachievers'. There is clearly a possibility that this form of selection will be

¹ 1997 manifesto

² Alastair Campbell, February 2001.

³ Estelle Morris, 2002.

discriminatory, not just in social class terms, but in terms of gender and race/ethnicity, as well as other, possibly less systematic, biases. The gifted and talented program goes well beyond ordinary setting and streaming. Instead of a continuous distribution of ability, the programme seems to reflect a belief that a small minority of students are categorically different from the rest. Students are singled out for special extra-curricular activities, as well as an accelerated and distinctive curriculum. In addition, participation in the programme is not necessarily compulsory for students identified as 'gifted and talented' and social pressures may lead to working class students being more likely to opt-out of being labelled as different.

Early differentiation into academic and vocational tracks is being encouraged, with the introduction of vocational GCSEs at age 14. It is likely that working class children will be more likely to 'self-select' into vocational routes, thereby limiting their future educational options.

Expansion of Further and Higher Education

'There is no pain free option of extending opportunity and building a quality higher education system for the many – not just the few – without someone paying for it' (Tony Blair, 14th January 2004, Speech given at IPPR conference on higher education reform).

The expansion of further and higher education are considered by policymakers across the political spectrum to be an economic imperative. The link between the growth of educational credentials and economic growth is rarely questioned (Wolf, 2002).

An increasing number of 16-18 year olds are staying-on in further education. Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs), introduced from 1999, aim to promote participation in further education among young people from low income families. The evaluation of the pilot of this scheme shows that is successful in increasing the level of educational participation among 16-18 year olds from low-income families (Dearden, et al., 2004)

Labour has stated that its target for 2011 is for 50 per cent of young people to enter higher education. In order to fund this target, tuition fees were introduced in 1998, although no fees are payable by students from families with incomes of less than £21,000. The proposal for the introduction of differential top-up fees, in particular, has led to concerns that social class inequalities in access to higher education will be exacerbated. In response to these concerns, student grants of up to £1,000 have been introduced for the poorest 30 per cent of students, and from 2006 up-front fees will be abolished in favour of fees to be repaid after graduation.

Clearly, there is no necessary link between educational expansion and class equality of access to higher education. Additional university places may be taken up at the same rate or at a higher rate by the middle-classes as by the working classes. Only when middle-class participation in HE nears saturation should we necessarily expect the working classes to benefit disproportionately from university expansion. One can argue that tuition fees are likely to act as a stronger disincentive to working class students than to middle class students, for various reasons. Working class students' parents are less likely to be able to provide them with financial support, and working class students receive lower financial returns to higher education (Conlon and Chevalier, 2003). In addition, cultural expectations may make middle class students relatively insensitive to the financial cost of attending university. It can be argued, that since students from the poorest families pay no fees, their participation in higher education should be expected to increase more than that of other students. However, students' with family incomes just above this threshold may face the strongest disincentives.

Increased levels of performance at A level, and increased levels of participation in HE have heightened competition for access to prestigious universities and courses. The demand for

postgraduate education has also increased. Higher Education performance indicators¹ show a general pattern for the most academically selective institutions to be most dominated by middle class students. Oxford and Cambridge only have 11% working class undergraduates. Wolverhampton, at the other end of the spectrum, has 52%. More selective institutions have substantially lower drop-out rates than less selective institutions – these vary from 1% at Cambridge to 37% at Napier. Degree subjects are also differentiated by social class, with medicine and dentistry the most socially selective of the major subject groups, and maths and computer sciences the least socially selective.

Trends in Social Class Inequalities in Education

Data

We use the *Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales* (YCS) to examine trends in social class inequalities in relation to education. The YCS aims to monitor the behaviour and decisions of representative samples of young people aged sixteen upwards as they move from compulsory education to further or higher education or to the labour market. The main aim is to examine and explain the factors that influence post-16 transitions. These may include educational attainment, training opportunities, and experiences at school.

To date the YCS covers ten cohorts and over twenty surveys. The questionnaires have aimed to be broadly comparable over time, although external changes and shifts in policy interest have necessitated some changes of various extent. The first survey was carried out in 1985 and the most recent in 2000. Initially the survey was carried out annually, but from 1992 it has taken place at two-yearly intervals. These characteristics are important for our analysis. Firstly, it is important that the surveys are comparable over time to prevent our results being affected by the style of question asked. Secondly, we require a reasonable time frame to examine change in academic performance and participation following *and* preceding New Labour's election victory in 1997. The analysis below focuses on the period 1991-2000 (cohorts 5-10). It would clearly be desirable to have more recent data but the 2002 round of YCS is not yet available for analysis. This will inevitably limit the conclusions that we can draw about the effectiveness of New Labour's policies, and it will probably be another decade or so before any definitive answers can be reached. In the meantime, we can merely offer an interim 'progress report'.

GCSE Results

Government targets for improved examination performance, combined with the publication of schools' results, has placed great pressure on schools to improve performance at GCSE, and a steady increase in passes has occurred since the introduction of the GCSE in 1988. Some have argued that this does not represent real progress; rather it is the consequence of consistent "grade inflation" to boost the number of passes. Nevertheless, it is of considerable importance to examine performance at GCSE, both because of public concern and because performance in these exams have considerable implications for students' subsequent educational and occupational careers.

We will therefore begin by examining changes in the social class gap in GCSE attainment. We will examine attainment at three benchmark levels; at least one 'good' (A*-Cⁱⁱ) pass, five or more good passes, and eight or more good passes. We will use a bivariate version of the official social class schema (the NS-SEC), treating employers, managers and professionals as 'middle class' and all other classes as 'working class'. This is a crude division, but it is necessary in order to give a clear graphical presentation of trends. (More detailed analysis with finer differentiations shows the same pattern of change over time.) We will divide each class by gender, in order to assess whether social class trends have differed for boys and girls.

Gaining 1 or more A*-C grades at GCSEⁱⁱⁱ

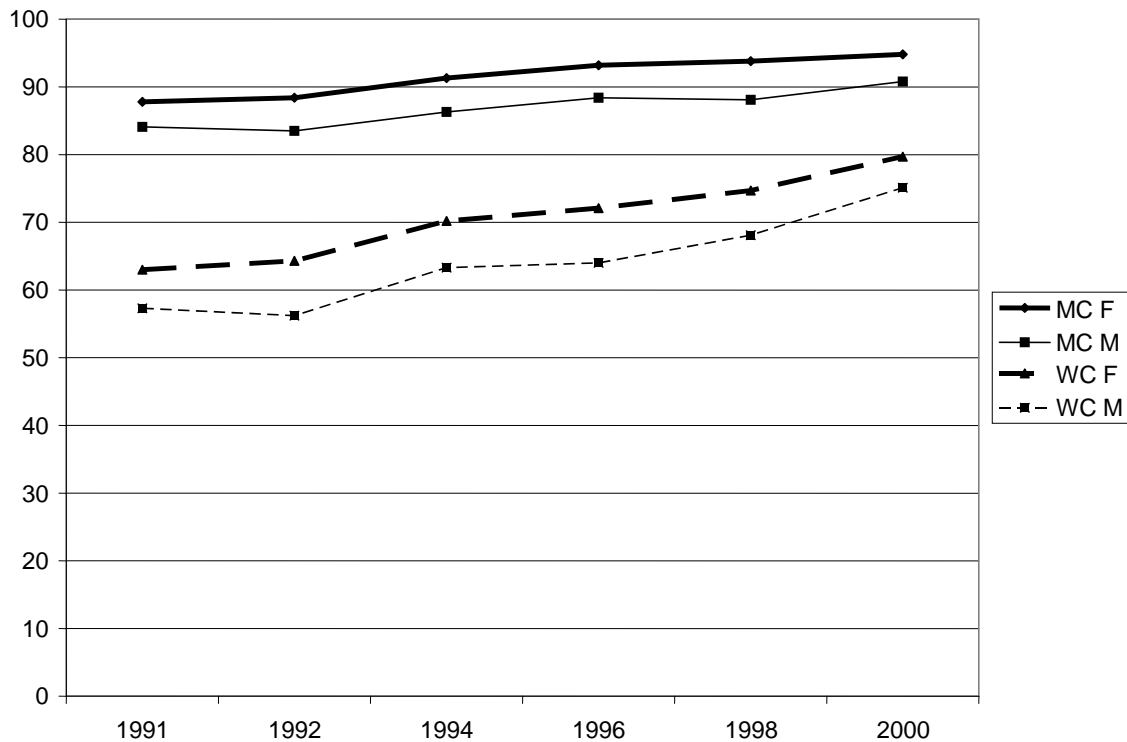


Figure 1: Percentage gaining 1 or more A*-C grades at GCSE
Source: YCS 1991-2000

The proportion of students gaining at least one GCSE pass at C or above increased steadily throughout the period 1991-2000. In 1991, 75 per cent of students gained at least one good pass, and by 2000 this figure had risen to 86 per cent. Throughout this period, girls of both classes have done better than boys, but the gender gap has remained very small in comparison to the social class gap. The attainment of the middle classes has plateaued as it approaches 100 per cent, while working class students have made steady gains. Therefore, the percentage point gap between the classes has declined. In 1991, the percentage point gap between middle class girls and working class girls was 25, and the corresponding figure for boys was 27. By 2000, the percentage point gap for girls was 15, and the gap for boys was 19.

Percentage point gaps are only one way of assessing inequalities. Gorard et. al. (2001) advocate the use of proportionate measures of attainment gaps. In a discussion of the changing pattern of academic attainment by gender, they point out that a percentage point difference of 10 represents a very large proportionate gap if it is a gap between 5 per cent of boys and 15 per cent of girls, and a much smaller gap if it is between 85 per cent of boys and 95 per cent of girls. So, as overall rates of attainment increase, percentage point gaps may narrow without a corresponding decrease in proportionate gaps^{iv}.

A simple proportionate way of representing the data is to ask, of those students gaining one or more A*-C grades, what percentage were from each social category. Equality would be represented by each group (middle class boys, middle class girls, working class boys and working class girls) getting 25 per cent of the total (assuming each group was of the same size). In other words, if middle-class boys make up a quarter of the school population, we would expect them to

obtain one quarter of the awards, if there were complete equality. Over time, our interest is to see whether the shares of each group gradually converge on this ideal of a 25 per cent share.

It is worth noting that educational expansion on its own can be expected to affect this proportionate measure, just as it affects the percentage point gap. Thus, starting from a hypothetical situation where all classes were equal but had no qualification, we would expect expansion to lead to a gradual divergence in class shares away from the 25 per cent ideal, and class inequalities would reach their maximum when half the cohort achieved a given qualification. Thereafter, further expansion would lead to a convergence on the 25 per cent shares for the four groups, reaching 25 percent for each group when all members of the four groups had obtained qualifications. In other words, there will be equality of shares when *nobody* has any qualifications and also when *everybody* has qualifications. Maximum inequality is to be expected when half the cohort have qualifications. (Technically we can say that our proportionate measure is not independent of the marginal distributions.)

Our proportionate measure is however useful in telling us how similar the classes are in their educational outcomes, and we can also use other statistical techniques such as loglinear analysis to tell us whether the changes over time are simply those that would be expected from expansion or indicate some diminution of class inequalities over and above those that would have been expected solely from expansion (that is from the change in the marginals). (See the appendix for further details.)

In practice, our four groups are not of exactly equal size, and we have therefore adjusted the figures, through iterative proportional marginal adjustment, to take into account changes in the sizes of the four groups (see appendix for full details). The table below shows the information for the 1+ A*-C benchmark.

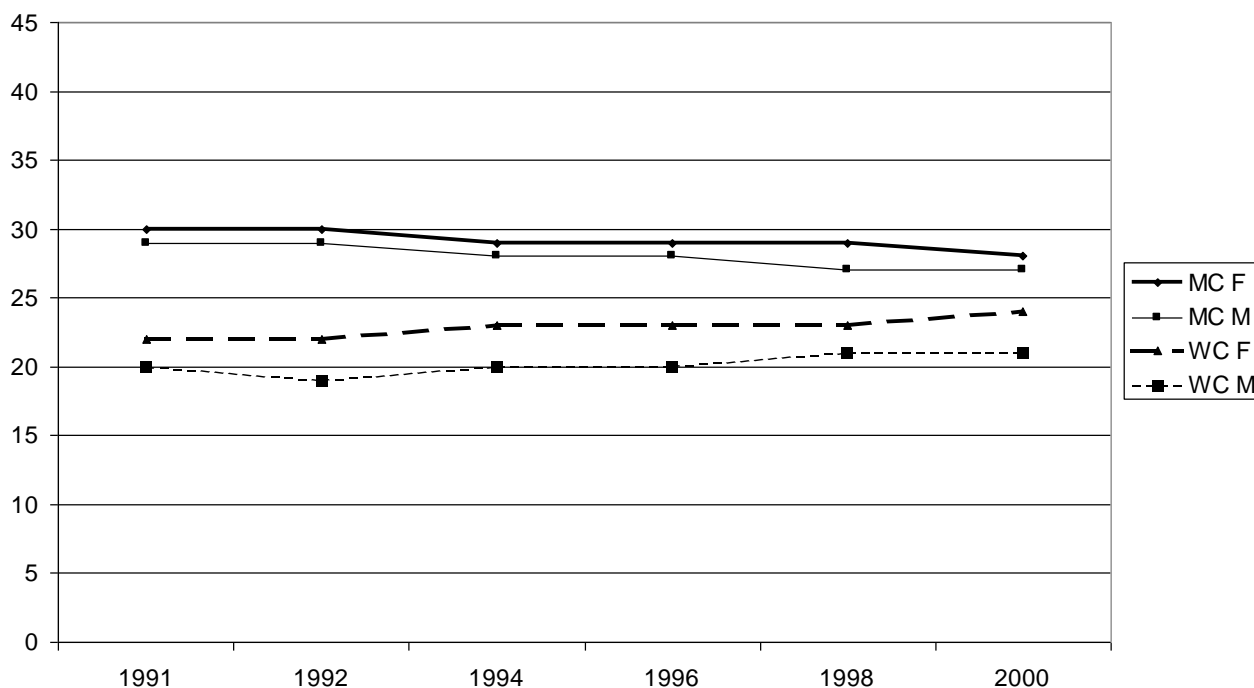


Figure 2: Percentage gaining 1 or more A*-C grades at GCSE: proportionate measure
Source: YCS 1991-2000

Overall, we can see that there has been a modest narrowing of social class inequalities over time. The proportion of 1+ A*-C awards going to middle class students has declined since 1991; the proportion of awards going to working class girls has increased correspondingly. The changes are

relatively modest in scale, but there does seem to be a long-run tendency for the inequality to decline. However, there is little sign that the rate of change has increased since New Labour came to power. (Most of the year-to-year fluctuations are well within sampling error. Further investigation indicates that the gradual convergence over time in class shares can largely be attributed to expansion alone (see appendix for full details)).

Gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE



Figure 3: Percentage gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE
Source: YCS 1991-2000

Turning next to the proportion of students getting five good GCSE passes, we see that this has increased from 45 per cent in 1991 to 64 per cent in 2000. The social class gap as measured by the percentage point gap in attainment has narrowed since 1996. In 1996 the percentage point gap between working class and middle class girls was 36 points, and the percentage point gap between working class and middle class boys was 35 points. In 2000 the class gap for girls was 28 points and the gap for boys was 31 points.

The table below then shows the proportionate measure of class inequalities. Perhaps the first point to note is that the class inequalities are substantially larger when we consider 5+ awards than when we considered 1+ awards. Secondly, the change over time at this higher level has been rather greater than it was at the lower level. As we can see, the share of 5+ A*-C awards going to middle class students has declined throughout the period 1991-2000. In the case of boys the share for the working class boys increased from 14 per cent to 17 per cent; for middle class boys there was a change of similar magnitude, but in the opposite direction, from 31 per cent to 30 per cent. In the case of girls there was an even bigger reduction in class inequalities over the period as a whole.

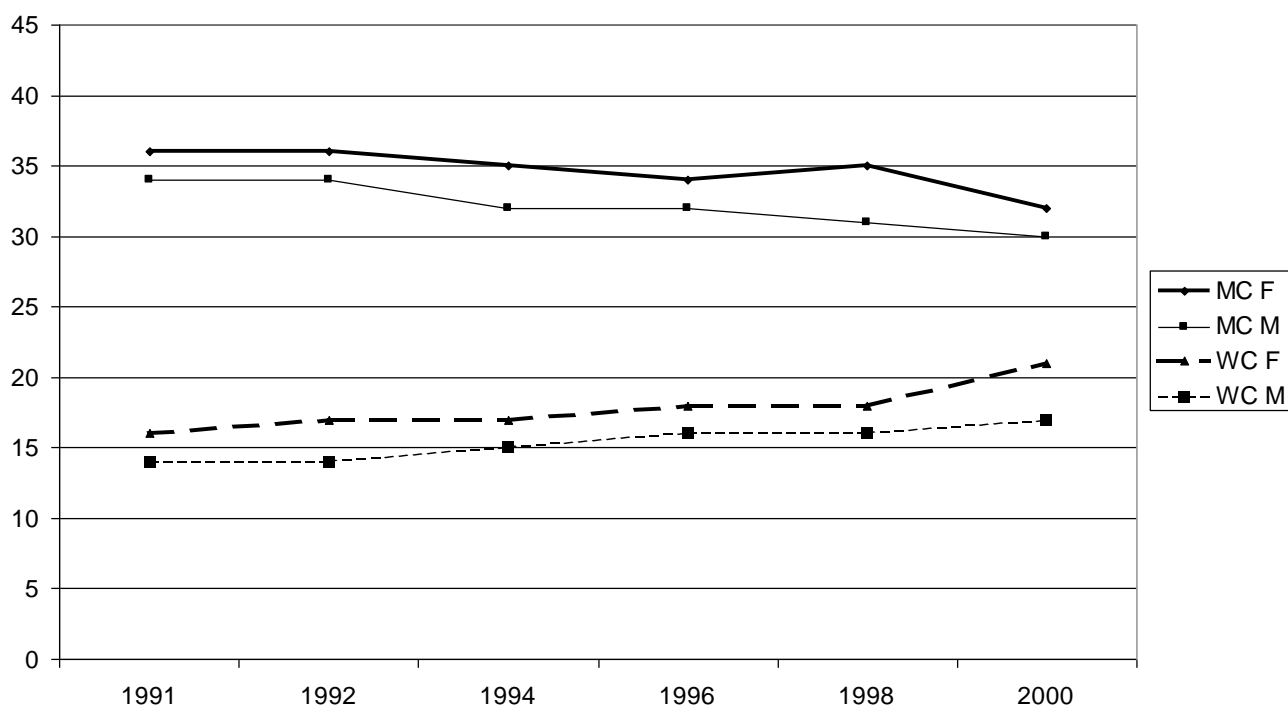


Figure 4: Percentage gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE: proportionate measure
 Source: YCS 1991-2000

Once again, however, more detailed analysis suggests that most of the reduction in class inequalities (as measured by our proportionate index) can be attributed to educational expansion. However, there are hints in the data that, particularly in the most recent period from 1998-2000, the convergence between the classes may have been somewhat greater than could have been attributed to expansion alone.

Gaining 8 or more A*-C grades at GCSE

It may also be of interest to look at the proportion of students getting 8 or more GCSEs at C and above since this is the kind of achievement necessary for students who hope to get into relatively selective universities. As we can see, the numbers achieving this level increased from 25 per cent in 1991 to 39 per cent in 2000 although the gap between the sexes increased substantially. In 1991, there was a gap of 2 percentage points between working class girls and boys, and a gap of 1 point between middle class girls and boys. By 2000, the gap between middle class girls and boys was 13 points and the gap between working class girls and boys was 9 points. The gap between middle and working class girls rose from 25 points in 1991 to 30 points in 2000, while the gap between middle and working class boys has stayed roughly constant at 26 per cent. The performance of middle class boys has been notably flat, compared not just with the rate of progress of middle class girls, but also compared to the progress made by working class boys and girls.

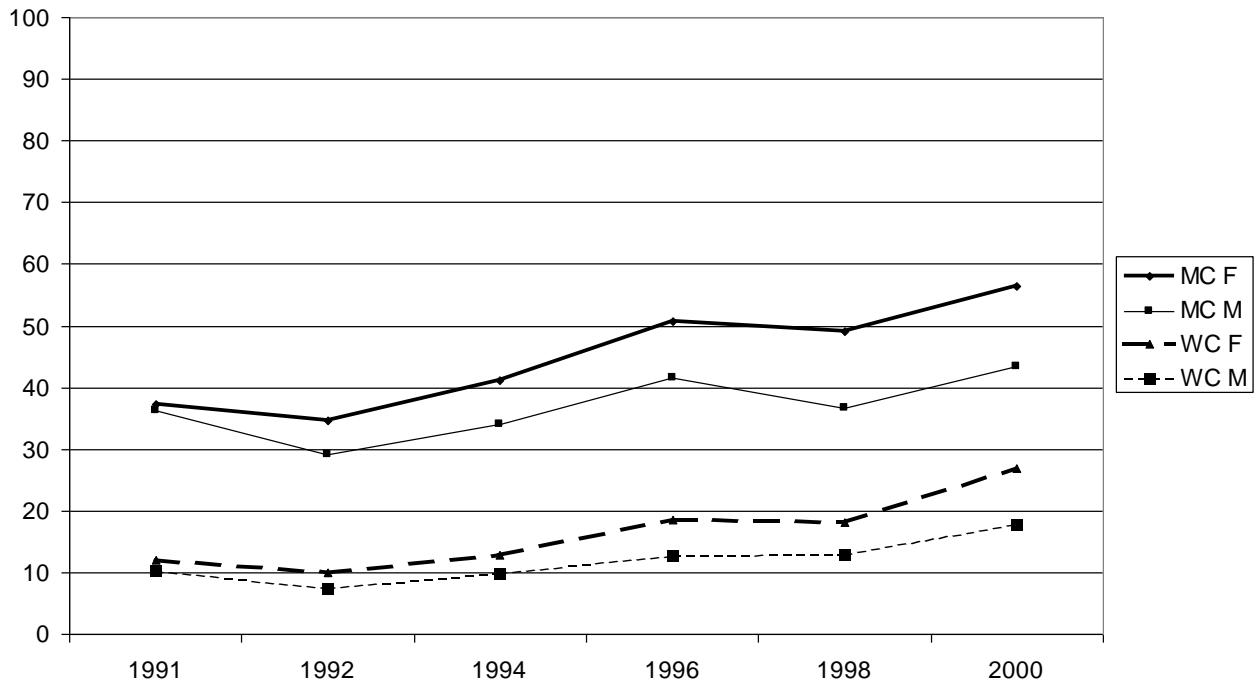


Figure 5: Percentage gaining 8 or more A*-C grades at GCSE
Source: YCS 1991-2000

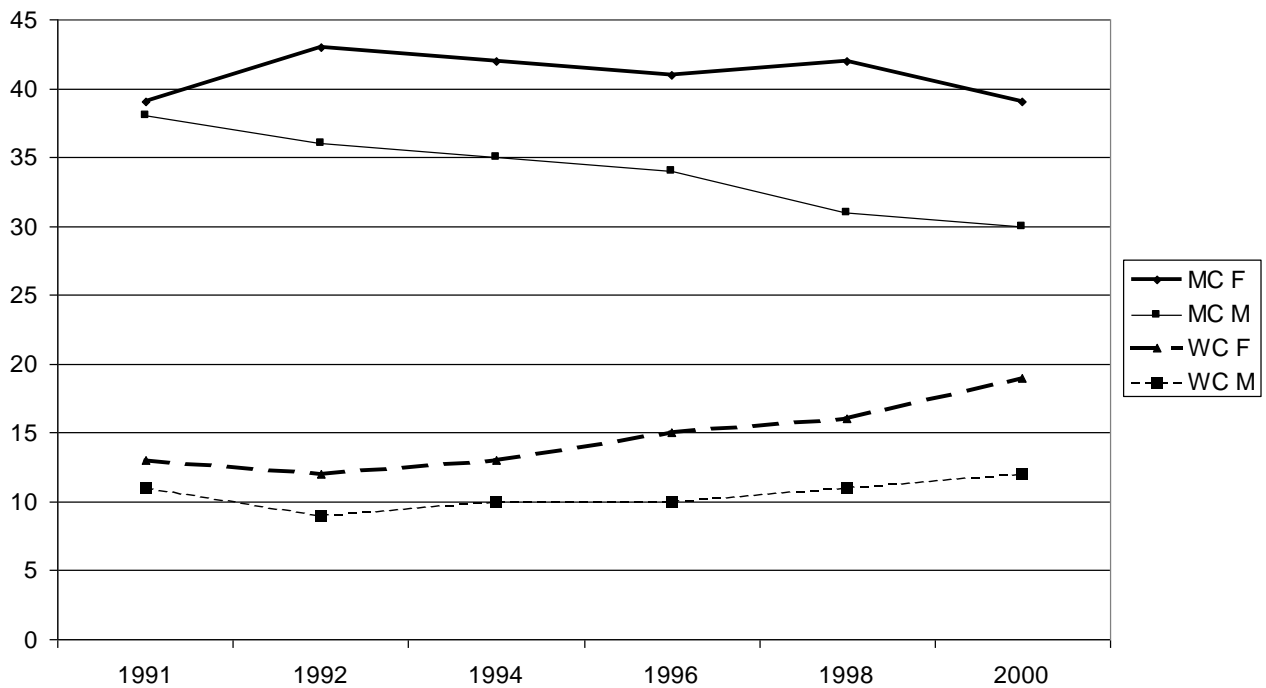


Figure 6: Percentage gaining 8 or more A*-C grades at GCSE: proportionate measure
Source: YCS 1999-2000

When the same figures are looked at proportionately, the difference in the positions of middle class and working class students is striking. Throughout the period middle class girls attain at least 39 per cent of the share, while working class boys never achieve a share of more than 12 per cent. The positions of middle class girls and working class boys have been quite consistent between

1991 and 2000. Middle class boys have a declining share of 8+ A*-C awards, while working class girls have improved their position. Therefore, the proportionate social class gap has declined, while the gender gap has grown.

In the case of eight or more good GCSEs, we cannot attribute the reduction in class inequalities purely to expansion. In fact, expansion might have been expected to lead to some widening of class inequalities since we have not yet reached a situation where half or more of the cohort achieve eight GCSEs. Detailed analysis confirms that there has been a real narrowing of class differentials even after taking account of educational expansion. While this is of considerable importance, there is no sign that has been specific to the period since New Labour came to office. It appears to be a continuing process that was already operating under the previous government.

The trends in social class and gender at the 8+ A*-C benchmark are particularly interesting, as they contradict two commonly held assumptions about the gender gap at GCSE. One assumption is that the gender gap is greatest at the bottom end of the spectrum of ability and qualifications. In fact, as we have seen, there is only a small gap between boys and girls in the proportions getting at least one GCSE pass. The gap is much greater at the top end of the academic spectrum. Another common misconception is that the gender gap is greater for working class pupils than for middle class pupils. In fact, the gender gap is greatest for the middle classes, due to the relatively flat progress over time of middle class boys.

It is difficult to explain the pattern of results seen here. In terms of the proportionate figures, working class boys have maintained their position, while working class girls have improved theirs, and middle class girls have maintained their position while middle class boys' position has worsened. These results do not seem to fit the claims of popular theories regarding the gender gap.

(Epstein, 1998) argues that male peer groups can impose a model of masculinity that leaves little room for academic work. A crude version of this argument is used by those politicians and media commentators who blame a 'culture of laddishness' for boys' low performance relative to girls. Fears about 'laddishness' in schools are often associated with a belief that the gender gap at GCSE is primarily a working class phenomenon. "*The fact that the biggest current gap in performance is between working-class boys and girls makes the problem more acute for a Labour government intent on creating an inclusive society*" (Guardian, 2000). Our research supports the view of (Gorard, et al., 2001), who point out that, since there is only a small gender gap at lower levels of attainment, the gender gap is likely to be larger among the middle classes.

The extensive use of coursework as a method of assessment within GCSE is often thought to explain the gender gap. It is often suggested that girls' are more diligent, and this gives them an advantage in coursework, while boys are just as good as girls at examinations^v. However, research suggests that coursework plays only a minimal role in explaining the gender differential in attainment at GCSE (Elwood, 1995). Fears that boys were falling behind girls due to coursework requirements were one of the reasons that John Patten (as education minister) introduced substantial reductions in the proportion of coursework assessment within GCSE in 1994. A limit of 20 per cent assessment by coursework was imposed on most syllabuses, and there was a return to 100 per cent exam assessment in mathematics. English GCSE was often assessed entirely by coursework prior to 1994, when the maximum coursework component for this subject was reduced to 40 per cent. This provides us with a convenient natural experiment. If coursework were an important factor behind the gender divide in A*-C passes, then the gender gap should have decreased after 1994. This evidently did not happen.

Explanations of the gender gap that are based on coursework or laddishness do not help us to understand why *middle class* boys should form a decreasing proportion of students getting 8+ good GCSEs. One possibility is that girls' greater intellectual and emotional maturity at age 16

means there is greater scope for them to improve their performance as compared to boys, so that middle class girls can continue to improve their performance, while the performance of middle class boys reaches a plateau sooner. Another possibility is that women’s relative dependence on educational qualifications to ensure occupational success provides middle class girls with an extra incentive to maximise their educational performance.

Further and Higher Education

Further Education

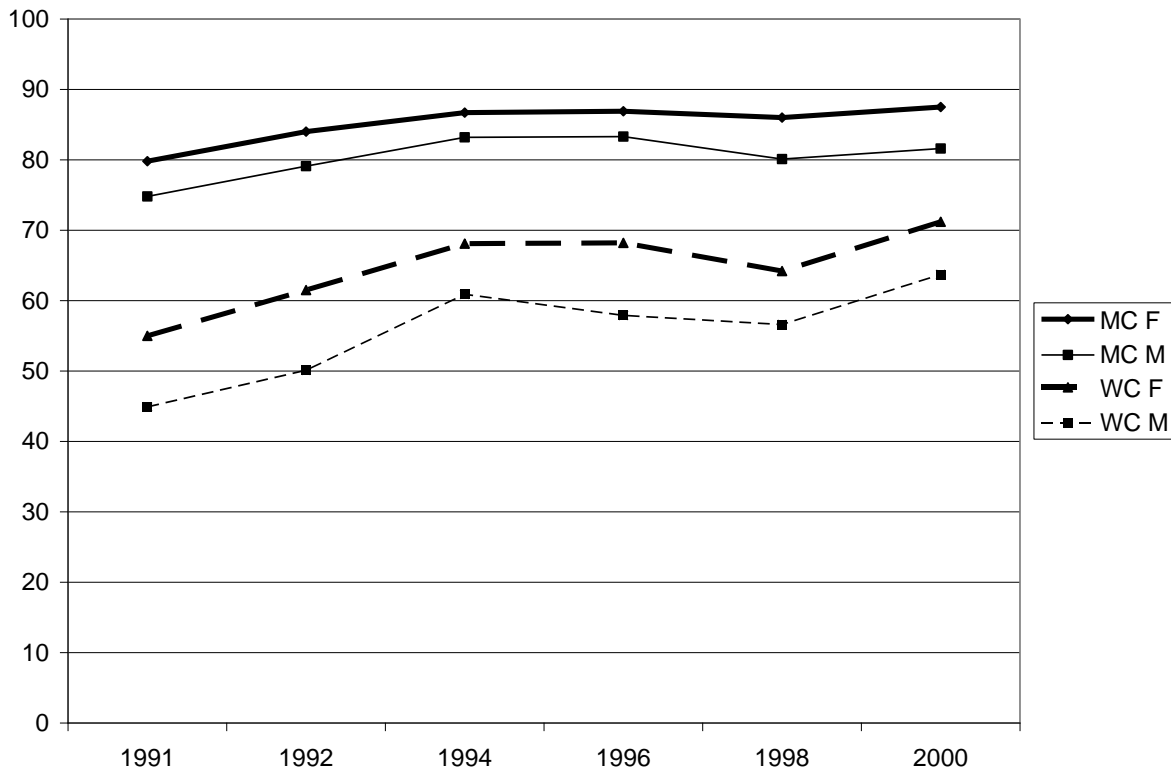


Figure 7: Percentage staying on in education post-16

Source: YCS 1991-2000

The proportion of students staying on in full time further education after leaving school increased sharply from 65 per cent in 1991 to 78 per cent in 2000. In 1991, the gap between working and middle class girls was 25 percentage points and the gap between working and middle class boys was 30 percentage points. By 2000, the gap between working and middle class girls had reduced to 16 percentage points and the gap for boys was 18 points.

Turning to the proportionate measure we find that the proportion of FE places going to middle class students declined slightly between 1991 and 2000. Working class boys increased their share of FE places between 1991 and 1994, and working class girls made significant progress from 1994 onwards. The gender gap disappeared in 1994 before re-emerging in later years – the 1994 figures may simply be a blip in the data.

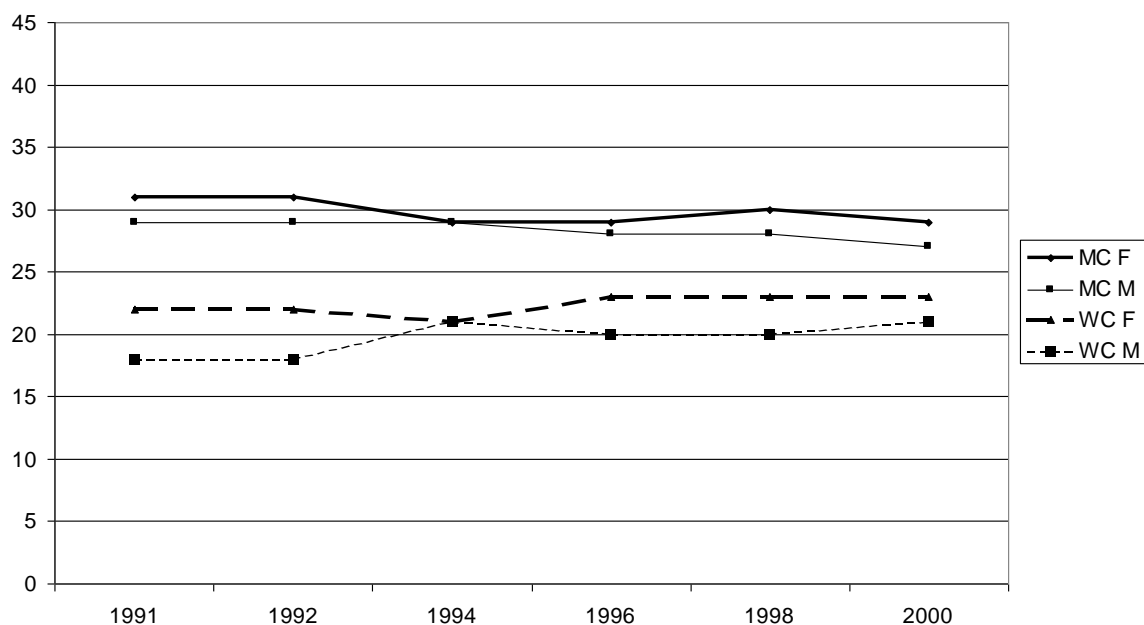


Figure 8: Percentage staying on in education post-16: proportionate measure
Source: YCS 1991-2000

Since the percentage entering further education is greater than 50, we would expect expansion to have led to some of the social class convergence. However, the decline in the proportionate measure of class inequality is rather greater than one might expect if the decline in inequality could be attributed solely to expansion. It is possible that the promotion of more vocational qualifications such as NVQs may have contributed to the trend.

Comparable data on the number of students taking A or AS levels is only available from 1994 onwards.^{vi} Between 1998 and 2000, rates of working class participation in A/AS levels rose more sharply than middle class participation. In 1994, the percentage point gap between working and middle class girls was 35 points, while the class gap for boys was 33 points. In 2000, the percentage point gap between working and middle class girls was 27, and the figure for boys was the same.

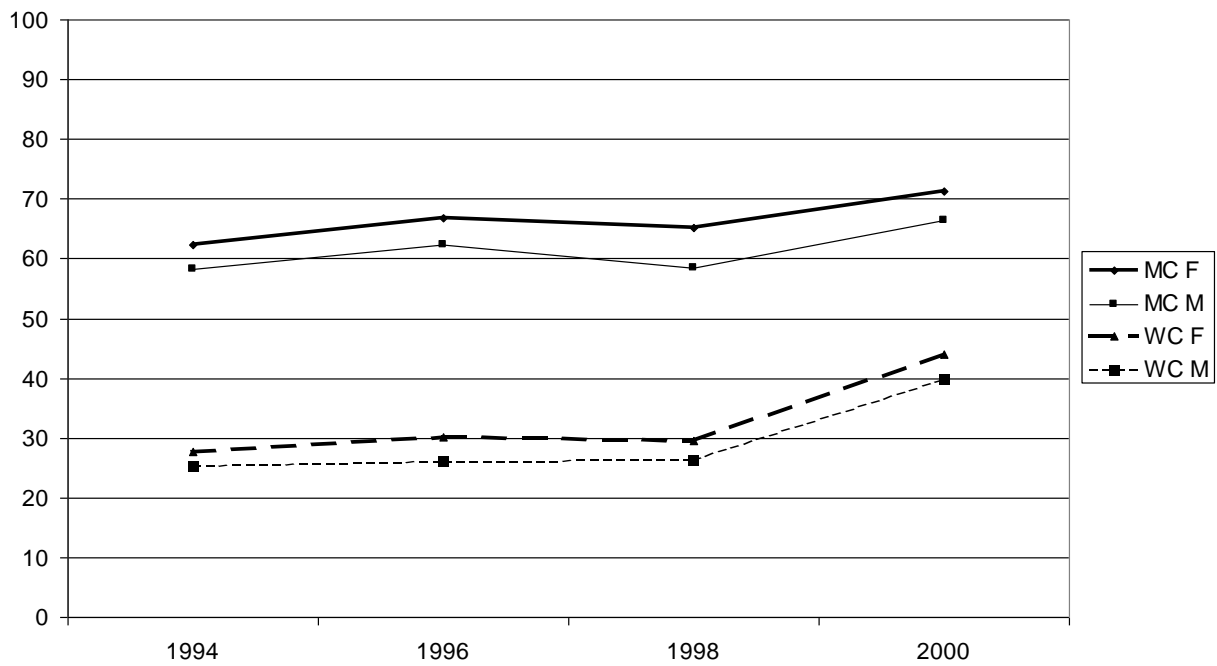


Figure 9: Percentage taking A or AS levels
Source: YCS 1994-2000

The proportionate figures show that the share of A/AS places going to working class students increased between 1998 and 2000, from 16 per cent to 20 per cent for girls, and from 15 per cent to 18 per cent for boys, indicating a substantial narrowing of social class inequality. There are hints that the reduction in class inequality in 2000 may have been rather greater than would have been expected solely from educational expansion. It will be interesting to see whether this trend is maintained in later sweeps of YCS.

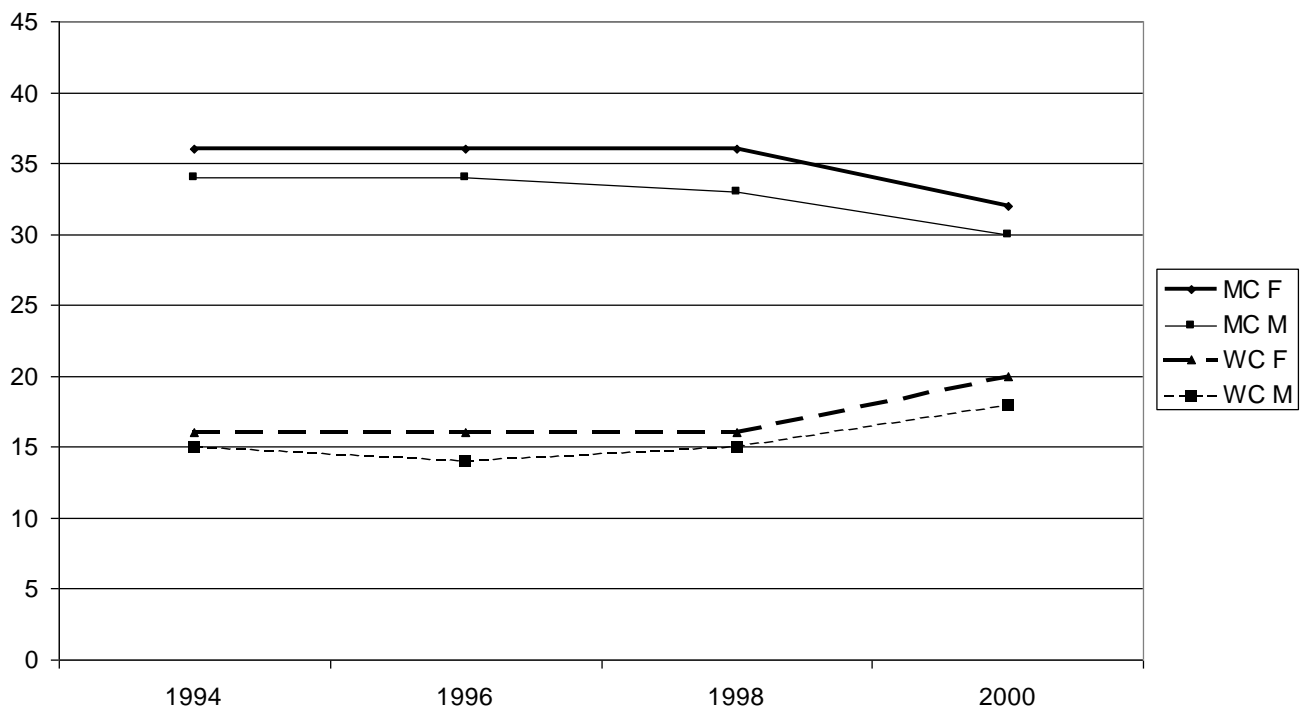


Figure 10: Percentage taking A or AS levels: proportionate measure
Source: YCS 1994-2000

Higher education

The charts below pertain to the pattern of participation in higher education by social class. The Age Participation Index (API) is based on British under-21 year old entrants to HE, as a proportion of the averaged 18-19 year old population. These figures must be treated with caution as: they reflect entry to a course of study, rather than completion (and completion rates vary enormously between universities, so the social class gap in completion rates would be expected to be greater than the gap in entry rates); students on non-degree level courses are included; and some students within Further Education institutions are included (Ramsden, 2003). The figures are from the DfES, and rely on SOC classes rather than on NS-SEC. Unfortunately, the figures are not broken down by gender^{vii}.

As participation in Higher Education has increased, the percentage point gap between the manual and non-manual class has increased from 24 points in 1991 to 31 points in 2001. These findings are in line with other research showing that the expansion in HE has been accompanied by increased inequalities between rich and poor individuals (Blanden and Machin, 2004) and between people from poor neighbourhoods and better-off neighbourhoods (Galindo-Rueda, et al., 2004).

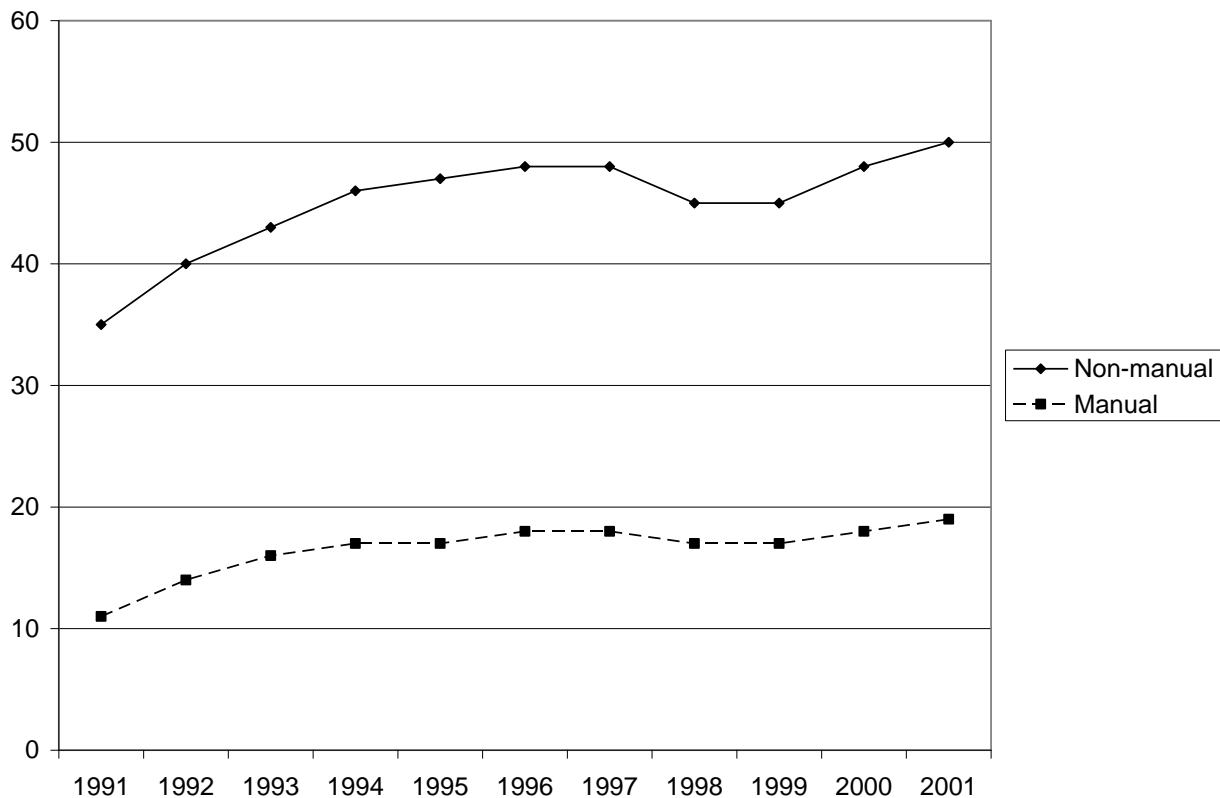


Figure 11: Percentage in higher education by social class

Source: DfES

The proportionate figures reflect what the student composition of Higher Education would be, assuming that the general population contained equal numbers of young people from manual and non-manual backgrounds. Since 1993, the distribution of HE places by social class has remained approximately constant, with around 73 per cent of places going to students from non-manual backgrounds.

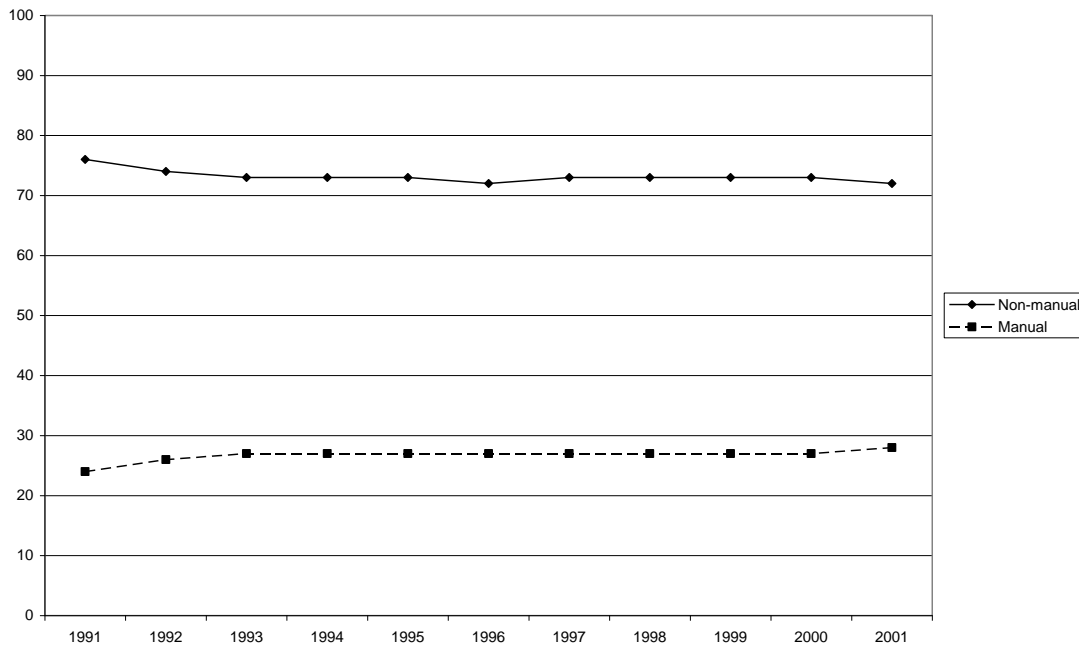


Figure 12: Percentage in higher education by social class proportionate measure Source: DfES

Conclusions

We should note that reducing social class inequalities in educational attainment is not an explicit aim of the current government. The government is happy to discuss differences in educational performance between the sexes and between ethnic groups, but social class has become a taboo, although it may be touched on through euphemisms such as ‘social exclusion’. Nevertheless, this paper has addressed the question of whether the current government’s policies of ‘raising standards’ and educational expansion have succeeded in reducing class inequalities in educational attainment and participation.

At GCSE level, there has been a general trend for social class inequality to reduce over time, as overall attainment levels have increased. For example, as the proportion of middle class students getting at least one good GCSE pass has approached 100 per cent, the middle class rate of improvement over time has slowed, and working class levels of attainment have caught up. This trend has been evident since the early 1990s, and is clearly not due to any new policies on the part of Labour, but simply reflects the continuation of the policy of raising performance at GCSE. This policy was not introduced in order to reduce social class inequalities in GCSE performance, but this is an unintended consequence of the policy.

There has also been a clear decline in class inequalities at the 5+ A*-C benchmark level and while most of this can be attributed to expansion, the recent level of equalization between the classes may be slightly greater than that which would be expected to result from expansion alone.

The picture is more complex at 8+A*-C passes. There has been a widening of the gender gap, and a narrowing of the proportionate class gap, as the relative position of working class girls has improved and the position of middle class boys has worsened. This pattern of effects is difficult to explain, but we would argue that this narrowing of the class gap cannot be entirely attributed to educational expansion but must reflect some other social or educational process. However, this seems to be a long-standing process that cannot be attributed to any initiative of the current government.

The higher the benchmark of attainment, the higher the level of social class inequality. For example, in 2000, 24 per cent of students getting at least one good GCSE pass were working class girls, 22 per cent of students getting five or more good passes were working class girls, and 19 per cent of students getting eight or more good passes were working class girls. (The figures for working class boys were 22 per cent, 18 per cent and 12 per cent respectively). This supports the view that, as lower levels of qualification become more common, inequalities are pushed upwards to higher levels of qualification.

Class inequalities in the proportions of students staying on in FE post 16 have declined as middle class participation rates have neared saturation, and working class rates have caught up. The social class gap in students taking A and AS levels is much larger than the staying-on gap, but between 1998 and 2000, working class students increased their participation in A and AS levels faster than middle class students, and the social class gap decreased accordingly.

One might conclude from these trends that increased total rates of attainment inevitably lead to a reduction in social class differentials. However, increased participation in Higher Education has not led to any reduction in social class inequalities in participation rates. The percentage point gap between the classes has increased, and the proportionate gap has remained roughly constant. This is likely to be because middle class participation in higher education has not reached anywhere near saturation point, so increases in the number of available places have benefited the middle classes just as much as the working classes.

If participation in Higher Education approached 100 per cent, then the social class gap in participation would surely decline. However, as HE expands, so students' experiences of HE become more diverse. Inequalities shift from access to HE to access to elite universities and prestigious fields of study. This raises a broader question about the devaluation of qualifications as they become more common, and whether reductions in inequality gained as a result of increased overall attainment should be seen as genuine.

By the devaluation of qualifications we do not mean 'falling standards' but simply that a credential loses value (both economic value and social value) when it becomes more common. Whether or not the credential has lost intellectual value is a separate question. It is clear that a school leaver with five GCSEs today is not in the same labour market position as a school leaver with five O levels twenty years ago, and a university degree does not put its holder in the same secure position it once did. As the supply of university graduates increases further, the return to graduates is likely to decrease. It might be a very good thing if all students were to leave school with at least one good GCSE pass, assuming that this does reflect a genuine improvement in standards in skills such as literacy and numeracy, rather than 'grade inflation'. But would this really make us a more equal society? In terms of access to labour market opportunities, the answer is almost certainly no, since a qualification that everybody holds gives nobody an advantage.

In summary, the drive for increased levels of academic credentials to be awarded is not a distinctive Labour policy, although it could be argued that this policy has been taken on with particular gusto by this government. Increased levels of attainment have led to reduced class inequalities as the progress of middle class students slows as they approach saturation point, and

working class students begin to catch up from a lower starting point. However, social class inequalities are higher the higher the level of qualification in question, and social class inequalities in participation in Higher Education have not declined at all. As lower level qualifications become near-universal, it is not clear that the resulting reduction in class inequalities in access to these qualifications will have any effect on wider social inequalities.

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Appendix

Iterative proportional marginal adjustment

The technique of proportional marginal adjustment was developed by (Mosteller, 1968). It is an iterative procedure in which the frequencies in a two-by-two contingency table are adjusted so that its desired marginal totals (in our case with each group constituting 25 per cent of the population) are achieved. For example, if the observed row total is 20 per cent, but the desired total is 25 per cent, the cell counts are multiplied by 25/20. In consequence, the column totals become different from the desired totals. The procedure is then repeated so that the column totals correspond to the desired value. In turn the row totals may need to be adjusted once again; successive iterations will lead to convergence. The procedure has the property of preserving the internal structure of the table ie. the odds ratios are unaltered.

Further analysis

Odds ratios

In order to test whether growing equality is likely to be due simply to general expansion over the last 10 years, or whether there may be additional causes, we calculated the *odds ratios* (θ) for each attainment level by year and gender.

The odds ratio is a measure of association for 2x2 contingency tables. It equals the ratio of the products of cell counts from diagonally opposite cells. So, for table A1:

$$\begin{aligned}\theta &= \frac{(2249)(2250)}{(740)(1593)} \\ &= 4.29\end{aligned}$$

	Did not gain 5+ A*-C grades	Gained 5+ A*-C grades
Working class	2249	740
Middle class	1593	2250

Table A1 Frequencies of boys attaining 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE

If the odds ratios remain more or less constant over time, we can assume that there is no association between greater equality and policy, and that any reduction in class inequality (as measured proportionately) should be attributed to expansion alone. A consistent decline in odds ratios over the period indicates that any movement towards greater equality is not through expansion alone, and that other policy initiatives might be responsible.

Table A2 summarises the odds ratios for each benchmark by gender and year. The odds ratios only drop consistently for the 5+ A*-C baseline for boys, for the 8+ A*-C baseline for both genders and for entering further education for both genders (with very slight fluctuations). For all other categories, the pattern is emphatically bumpy exhibiting ‘trendless fluctuation’.

Year	1+A*-C		5+A*-C		8+A*-C		FE		A/AS levels	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1991	3.94	4.23	4.29	4.11	5.00	4.31	3.64	3.24	-	-
1992	3.95	4.24	4.27	4.02	5.23	4.76	3.75	3.33	-	-
1994	3.67	4.46	4.20	4.43	4.74	4.77	3.11	3.38	4.12	4.33
1996	4.29	5.36	4.26	4.69	4.89	4.53	3.38	3.20	4.69	4.68
1998	3.71	5.10	3.85	4.67	3.94	4.33	2.87	3.26	4.70	4.67
2000	3.85	4.62	3.80	3.63	3.54	3.52	2.53	2.82	3.95	4.48

Table A2 Odds ratios for each attainment benchmark by gender and year

The logistic regression model

According to this model, the percentage reaching a given benchmark must be 50 before any increase in equality can take place, if changes in equality are due to expansion alone. If the percentage of respondents reaching the benchmark is lower than this, we would expect an increase in inequality. Findings contrary to this expectation suggest that factors beyond expansion might be responsible for the observed pattern.

Endnotes

ⁱ Published in the Times Higher Education Supplement 21/05/04, compiled from HEFCE and HESA figures.

ⁱⁱ The A* was introduced in 1994 in an attempt to differentiate to a greater extent at the top level.

ⁱⁱⁱ MC F = middle class females, MC M = middle class males, WC F = working class females, WC M = working class males.

^{iv} Gorard et. al.’s (2001) preferred measure of the gender gap is the ‘segregation ratio’ (defined (% successful girls- % successful boys) ÷ (% successful boys + % successful girls)). This measure expresses inequality as a single figure, and is asymmetrical, in that the gap in success in gaining a particular qualification differs from the gap in failure to gain that qualification. Our preferred proportionate measure expresses inequality as a gap between two figures, rather than as a single figure, and is symmetrical.

^v Cohen (1998) describes the way in which, historically, girls’ educational achievements have always been devalued and attributed to hard work or neatness rather than ‘real’ ability. In contrast, boys’ failures have been attributed to factors external to themselves, while their successes are seen as evidence of natural talent.

^{vi} It should be noted that the AS levels referred to here are “pre-2001”. These AS levels were generally taken alongside or instead of A levels in year 13. They should not be confused with those now taken by 17-year-olds in year 12 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

^{vii} Although DfES provides the APi disaggregated separately by gender and class, they felt unable to provide the figures broken down by both class and gender at once.