“Patterns and differences in Subject Choices at 14 & 16 in England: Intersections of gender, ethnicity & social class” - Dr. Morag Henderson & Catherine Dilnot

In the first half of this seminar Dr. Morag Henderson will look at Subject Choices at 14. Does the school curriculum generate educational inequalities? This paper reports on initial findings from a major ESRC project on social mobility. We identify patterns of subject and qualification choices made at age 14. This topic is particularly important for England as the school curriculum encourages specialisation at a relatively early age compared with other European countries.

This curriculum differentiation is typically framed in terms of ‘choice’, but in practice young people’s choices are constrained by their schools. In addition, adolescents are likely to lack the information needed to foresee the long-term consequences of options taken as young as age 14. Yet most past research on ‘subject choice’ has focused on the later stages of educational trajectories, particularly Higher Education. The choices made at early branching points can limit pupils’ subsequent options, potentially contributing to educational inequalities.

We examine the roles of social class, parental education, income, gender and ethnicity in determining these curriculum clusters. We also examine the role of the intersections of these variables, for example, the different role of gender for working and middle class youth. Using measures of prior attainment at 7 and eleven, we address the question of whether curriculum differentials simply reflect differences in prior attainment or whether they actually exacerbate inequalities.

In the second half of the seminar Catherine Dilnot goes on to consider Subject Choice at 16. The reasons why students from lower socio-economic groups are under-represented at high status universities are not yet entirely understood, but evidence suggests that part of the gap may be a consequence of differential choice of A-levels by social background. The Russell Group of universities has since 2011 published guidance on A-level subject choices, describing some A-levels as ‘facilitating’ in that choosing these helps keep the largest number of Russell Group degree courses open. Numbers of students gaining AAB in facilitating subjects has subsequently been developed as a performance measure for individual schools and sixth form colleges, and, in aggregate, as a government Social Mobility Indicator. While it is clear that there is a gap between the proportions of students in maintained and private schools achieving this measure, there is little other work to date on how social background is related to the take-up of facilitating subjects, or to a more fine-grained categorisation of all the large number of ‘non-facilitating’ subjects. Catherine develops a taxonomy of all 96 A-levels certified for English students in 2014/15 beyond the facilitating/non-facilitating dichotomy and uses it to analyse the A-level subject choices of three A-level cohorts (2010-2012), using National Pupil Database data. She finds that large differentials in subject choice exist by social background, particularly for facilitating subjects. Much of this differential is accounted for by the characteristics of schools and colleges attended by students from different social backgrounds, and by prior attainment, although a small but significant relationship of subject choice with social background remains. This suggests that there is an important role for appropriate subject choice guidance at age 16+, which perhaps is a particular challenge if students are changing school.

Wednesday 16th December
12.30 - 1.45pm

UCL Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL

If you have any queries please contact
Anna Leamon anna.leamon@ucl.ac.uk

Dr Morag Henderson is a Senior Research Officer and Co-Investigator at UCL Institute of Education. Her main research interest is to explain educational inequality. She is a quantitative sociologist and uses secondary datasets such as Next Steps (formally the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) to conduct my analysis.

Catherine Dilnot is a lecturer in accounting and finance at Oxford Brookes University, where she continues to work part time whilst undertaking an ESRC funded doctorate at UCL IOE, in the department of Quantitative Social Science. Catherine’s research interest is in fair access to universities & leading professions.

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