

Reducing the skills gap in further education

The single biggest impact on economic growth is the widening gap between the lower middle class and poor households compared to the rest of society, according to research. A key mechanism to reduce inequality is to strengthen education opportunities and skills development for people from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Skills inequality is one of the drivers of income inequality, which reduces growth and undermines social cohesion. Previous research has shown that England has very high levels of skills inequality compared to other developed countries, particularly in numeracy and with younger age groups.

Research from the ESRC-funded LLAKES Centre shows that the skills gap continues through secondary education, up to the age where most pupils complete their formal education. The findings indicate that England's post-16 education and training system is failing to reduce skills inequality in literacy and numeracy.

The researchers used data from the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills to compare changes across 24 countries in skills inequality for the age group in upper secondary education. They also looked at what types of upper secondary education and training system are most successful in narrowing the skills gap.

Key findings

- Levels of skills inequality change substantially between ages 15 and 27.
- There is considerable variation between countries in how far skills inequalities are reduced or increased during this phase.
- The post-16 systems in England and other English-speaking countries (including Ireland, Northern Ireland, USA and Canada) are relatively poor at closing skills gaps in numeracy and literacy after age 15, compared to most other developed countries.
- The skills gaps close most substantially in countries which have Dual Systems of Apprenticeship (three-year apprenticeships combining workplace training with education), and in countries with high completion rates from full upper secondary education (two years or more) which includes mandatory Maths and the national language.
- A greater recognition of vocational qualifications as being of equal value to general qualifications also seems to reduce skills inequality.

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Policy relevance and implications

- The learning of Maths and English should be mandatory for the duration of all upper secondary education and training programmes, including apprenticeships and publicly funded private training provision.
- These subjects should, at least in part, be taught in dedicated sessions and not be part of other subjects; and carried out by teachers trained to teach the subject, at least in colleges and sixth forms.
- The current regulation for colleges which requires the continuing study of Maths and English only up to level 2 should be amended so that there is no upper ceiling. Reaching an appropriate level 3 standard in literacy and numeracy skills should be a requirement for all level 3 qualifications.
- Upper secondary education and training programmes, including apprenticeships, should be more standardised in study duration. Two years should be the minimum for both general and vocational programmes (three years for those taking a route via level 2 courses and intermediate vocational qualifications).
- An increase in classroom/workshop hours associated with full-time programmes should be considered. Currently, full-time further education students in England are often spending less than half the time in the classroom or other formal supervised teaching environments compared with their peers in many other European countries.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Professor Andy Green and Dr Nicola Pensiero used data on numeracy and literacy skills from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Survey of Adult Skills (SAS) surveys to compare changes in skills inequality across 24 OECD countries. They found substantial changes in skills inequality, with the English post-16 education and training system increasing inequalities in both skills outcomes and skills opportunities.

LLAKES briefing: *The Effects of Upper Secondary Education and Training Systems on Skills Inequality*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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The ESRC-funded Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) investigates the role of lifelong learning in promoting economic competitiveness and social cohesion. The centre is hosted by UCL Institute of Education, University College London. Web: www.llakes.ac.uk

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.

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